

# Pani Stefa and the Orphans

## *Out of the Shadow of Korczak*

Magdalena Kicinska

Translated by Sean Gasper Bye

Emmanuel Ringelblum (one of the orphans) wrote: 'They cooperated all their lives. Even death did not separate them. They went to death together. Everything related to the person of Korczak – boarding school, promoting love for children – everything was the joint achievement of both of them.'

At a moment when communists were engineering a New Man, and Zionists a New Jew, a doctor and a teacher devoted themselves to a social experiment: raising a new child.

Their orphanage is set amidst the desperate poverty of Jewish Warsaw; often the children are not orphans, but rather children of mothers unable to care for them, making their way out of rat-infested rooms with dirt floors or frozen cellars. In this polyphonic work of literary non-fiction, Magdalena Kicinska shifts the gaze from the legendary Dr. Korczak to the inscrutable Pani Stefa.

Artfully – in a style reminiscent of Hanna Krall and Agata Tuszynska – the author pieces together a story of a life: a Polish Jewess who spoke French but not Yiddish; a pedagogue who was as demanding as she was self-sacrificing; a lonely woman who rarely in her life had a moment of privacy. In doing so, Kicinska shows us how it is sometimes the drama of history's minor characters, which can cast the most penetrating light on their world.



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