



INSIGHTS

Dr Janusz Korczak: paediatrician, children's advocate and hero

Eleanor J. Molloy¹

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"Life levels all men; death reveals the eminent" George Bernard Shaw.¹

It is just over 140 years since the birth of Dr Janusz Korczak (1878–1942), the Polish paediatrician and children educator. Janusz Korczak was the pen name of Henryk Goldszmit, who was a Polish-Jewish children's author, paediatrician and child pedagogue. His heroism and selflessness in life and death are his most unforgettable legacies. He gave his life at Treblinka in World War II so that his child patients from his orphanage in Warsaw might not die alone. During his life he was a renowned advocate for children rights and independence. He developed children's ability to self-direct and make their own decisions to promote resilience.² His philosophy is valid even today, especially for children trapped in conflict, either domestic or international, who have no voice.³

He also worked as a paediatrician and became the director of the orphanage for Jewish children in Warsaw. There he created a children's court and allowed children to make complaints against each other and then defend these decisions in a "court" run by the children. He encouraged children to make their own decisions and develop autonomy and resilience. His work and ideology is embedded in the Geneva Convention from 1989.⁴ He maintained that "children are not future people, because they are people already ... whose souls contain the seeds of all those thoughts and emotions that we possess ... [and] as [they] develop, their growth must be gently directed." "children should be fully understood ... must be respected and loved, treated as partners and friends ... [and that] one ought to behave towards [each child as] a respected, thinking and feeling human being" from his book *How to love a child*.⁵ These concepts have formed the basis of modern social pedagogy.⁶

He was famous in Poland for his children's books such as *King Max* (1932), *Bankruptcy of Little Jack* (1924) and *Kaytek the Wizard* (1935). The latter describes an intrepid boy who develops powers of magic and wizardry, but unlike Harry Potter does not attend a school of wizardry, instead travels the world as he explores his powers.⁷ He was renowned in Poland as the "Old Doctor" for his radio show for children. He further included children by publishing a children's newspaper, "The Little Review", with key roles for children in the organisation and writing. His many books also included books and advice for adults—for example, in his book "How to love a child".⁵ These books remain especially relevant today as children and families become more involved and empowered in their healthcare and in paediatric research.

In the 1920s he had suggested a Declaration of children's rights as he called them "the race of children, the nation of the little-grown, the class of serfs" and looked for equality with adults. His philosophy and writings have been incorporated in the Geneva convention for children's rights. He noted that children "represent one-third of mankind" and should have a proportional share of resources.

His Ghetto diaries give insight into the despair and terror in the Warsaw ghetto and the constant battle to find food and hope.⁸ In August 1942, the children were collected for transport to Treblinka. The children were dressed in their best clothes, and each carried a favourite book or toy. Although Goldszmit was offered refuge on several occasions before and after this fateful day, he refused.² It was reported that his response was: "You do not leave a sick child in the night, and you do not leave children at a time like this." Szpilman's memoir "The Piano" describes these events:

"One day, around 5th August, when I had taken a brief rest from work and was walking down Gęsia Street, I happened to see Janusz Korczak and his orphans leaving the ghetto. The evacuation of the Jewish orphanage run by Janusz Korczak had been ordered for that morning.

The children were to have been taken away alone. He had the chance to save himself, and it was only with difficulty that he persuaded the Germans to take him too. He had spent long years of his life with children and now, on this last journey, he could not leave them alone. He wanted to ease things for them.

He told the orphans they were going out into the country, so they ought to be cheerful. At last they would be able to exchange the horrible suffocating city walls for meadows of flowers, streams where they could bathe, woods full of berries and mushrooms. He told them to wear their best clothes, and so they came out into the yard, two by two, nicely dressed and in a happy mood. The little column was led by an SS man who loved children, as Germans do, even those he was about to see on their way into the next world. He took a special liking to a boy of twelve, a violinist who had his instrument under his arm. The SS man told him to go to the head of the procession of children and play—and so they set off.

When I met them in Gęsia Street, the smiling children were singing in chorus, the little violinist was playing for them and Korczak was carrying two of the smallest infants, who were beaming too, and telling them some amusing story. I am sure that even in the gas chamber, as the Zyklon B gas was stifling childish throats and striking terror instead of hope into the orphans' hearts, the Old Doctor must have whispered with one last effort,

¹Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland

Correspondence: Eleanor J. Molloy (eleanor.molloy@pedres.org)

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'it's all right, children, it will be all right'. So that at least he could spare his little charges the fear of passing from life to death."—*The Pianist*, pp. 95–96⁹

His legacy remains his heroism in protecting the children under his care and staying with them. However, his extensive work in advancing advocacy and autonomy for children is remarkable and relevant to all children today.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

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