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Korczak – our teacher on the rights of the child

Janusz Korczak is said to have once described himself “a doctor by training, a pedagogue by chance, a writer by passion, and a psychologist by necessity”.

He was well known at the time in his native Poland in all these capacities, but what has made him a legend is his desperate struggle to shield the Jewish orphans from the atrocities in the ghetto. He refused to leave them when the Nazis decided in August 1942 that they were to be executed, rejecting offers to save his own life. He died in Treblinka together with the 190 children and his co-workers from the orphanage.

Janusz Korczak is remembered by many for the way his life ended but by some also for how he lived and what he said and wrote. Some of his writings have been translated to other languages, there are Janusz Korczak societies in several countries and child rights activists refer often to his writings.

The Polish Parliament has decided that there would be a series of activities during 2012 – in Poland, in Europe but also in other parts of the world - aiming at informing people about his great example and message. This is, in fact, a second *Year of Korczak*. To mark the centenary of his birth UNESCO organised similar activities in 1978-79.

The UNESCO year coincided with the UN Year of the Child during which it was agreed that a UN Convention on the Rights of the Child would be drafted. No doubt Korczak’s thinking influenced this process.

Still, I feel his teaching deserves more attention. Korczak was one of those thinkers who was ahead of his time. Some of his ideas are still not fully understood and they are absolutely relevant in the work for children’s

rights today. This is why the initiative of the Polish Parliament is so highly relevant.

Janusz Korczak, whose original name was Henryk Goldszmit, was born in a Jewish, assimilated middle class family in Warsaw. His first years appear to have been happy, his father was a successful lawyer and there were no economic problems. This changed when Henryk was eleven and his father had a serious mental break down which ruined his family.

In spite of poverty he managed to write novels already in his early twenties and get them published. This was when he started using his pen name, Janusz Korczak. However, when concluding that “writing is only words, medicine is deeds”, he focused on his medical studies. Already at this stage he became more and more committed to the fate of destitute children.

From 1904, he acted regularly as supervisor at summer camps for poor children. He focused increasingly on child psychology and pedagogy. While spending more time on teaching and giving lectures, he continued his medical practice. He was known to demand high fees from wealthy patients and treat the poor free of charge.

At the age of 34 he was asked to become director of a Jewish orphanage - a position he would keep until his last day. As a doctor he cared for their physical well-being, weighed and measured them and gave them medicine. Seeing that the deeper wounds related to broken families, poverty and other social ills, he redefined the very concept of health care. There, he would develop his talents as medical doctor, teacher but also as author and therapist to support children and promote their rights.

He saw the importance of child-friendly learning methods, arguing that ethics was more important than pure facts. He introduced a democratic spirit in the orphanage in which the children themselves had a say in the decisions – but also had to carry the burden to ensure that decisions were enforced. This “children’s republic” had a parliament and a newspaper.

Most well-known is his experiment with a system of justice. A constitution was written in the orphanage and a court established among

the children to deal with alleged injustices. Also Korczak himself was charged a couple of times for mistakes. The punishments after these trials were regularly to ask for forgiveness and be excused.

With an extra-ordinary capacity to listen and relate, Korczak had entered into a life-long study of children's reactions, emotions and behaviour. He filled his notebooks with observations, reflected upon them and formulated aphorisms addressed to parents and other adults, many of them in poetic form. He became an interpreter between the world of children and the grown-ups.

He was dismissed from the radio after several years as the popular "Old Doctor" – answering questions from listeners. His colleagues at the broadcast station wrote a letter of protest in which they described how he could "talk with children as they were adults and with adults as if they were children". His books for children, and not least *King Matt the First*, are indeed demanding and do not hide conflicts and sorrow – in this being similar to the later writings of Astrid Lindgren. Korczak's messages to adults are written with a great portion of child-like clarity.

Korczak became the first and most radical campaigner for children's rights. For him two rights were particularly important: the right to receive love and the right to respect. He developed these in two longer texts for parents and teachers. *How to Love a Child* was prepared on the battlefields of World War I and *The Child's Right to Respect* written in the nineteen-twenties.

Korczak pleaded for equality between children and adults:

*People speak of the old with weighty respect.
They speak of the child patronizingly and condescendingly.
This is wrong, for the child too deserves respect.
He is still small, weak.
He does not know much, he cannot do much as yet.
But his future – what he will be when he grows up
commands us to respect him as we respect the old.*