

The Old Doctor, Father to the Children of Others **- Understanding the Phenomenon of the Janusz Korczak Figure**

Janusz Korczak in a Moral-Ethical Crisis

2012 was the year commemorating the anniversary of the death of Doctor Janusz Korczak - Henryk Goldszmit, also known as *Stary Doktor (the Old Doctor)*.

Who was he?

He was an excellent doctor, a educator, a social reformer and founder of an orphanage. He demonstrated that children were of the highest social value, irrespective of “who” they are. Głosił prawdę o wartości nadrzędnych jego podopiecznych, których nie oszczędził los. He delivered the truth about the overriding value of his charges whom fate did not spare. Within them, he could see the greatest values of humanity and love. He gave them what their parents should have given them – a love for one’s neighbour. In his characteristic words, he said:

I am not here to be loved and admired in order for me to act and love. Those around me have no obligation to help me, but I have a duty to the world, to humanity¹.

And so it is possible to describe Dr. Janusz Korczak as – an idealist, a community worker, passionate, moral, a doctor – the “Dr. Tomasz Judym” of his time. I called him so because it is not possible to add more aspects to his personal character which raise him above the average. Caring for children, he passionately wanted to more for them than he could. He allowed himself one other aspect – that of writer. Some of his bestselling works were:

Król Maciuś Pierwszy (King Maciuś I)² – the author portrays a young boy, under the care of his father, the king. The boy wants for nothing. Unfortunately, the boy’s father soon dies, leaving to him the country for which he must now be responsible. This boy, who would have liked to experience childhood, must now become an adult, responsible not just for himself, but also for the whole country. As the king, he wanted learn what was hidden on the other side of the walls of the castle and how his subjects lived. Unfortunately, he was unable to do so. His adult ministers helped him to see the reality of the world, but according to their vision. Corruption then appears when his administrators cheat King Maciuś I, considering him only as a young boy capable of being manipulated. A world, such as that being prepared for children, is full of cynicism and egotism. King Maciuś I then, for the first time, faces a dilemma – whether to go to war or not. As a child, he makes a brave decision. He leads his army into battle with the enemy and wins. The reforms which he wished to introduce into his country were met with resistance. Shortly after, he must make a similar decision, but this time with negative results. The situation in which he finds himself was humiliating and he was driven out of his country. Children’s problems are not only dilemmas for themselves, but also for their parents. Decisions, such as adults make regarding their children, are identical to the behaviour of Maciuś’s enemies. After all, children are subjects, and not objects, and also wish to participate in the building of the world.

¹ Aleksander Lewin, *Korczak znany i nieznan (Korczak – the Known and the Unknown)*, Warsaw, 1999, p. 54.

² Janusz Korczak, *Król Maciuś Pierwszy (King Maciuś I)*, Warsaw 1923.

Kajtuś czarodzie (Kaytek the Wizard)³ is a piece of classic children's literature about a small boy with wonderful ideas, who loved to play pranks and to fantasise. Through his grandmother's stories, he discovers his own ability to cast spells. In the beginning, it was a game, but then it turned into making the world a better place. For him, magic was something positive with which he can identify his life. The young boy's ideas cross the boundaries of real life, linking charms, goodness and love. Sometimes, fantasies slip out of the wizard's control, inside his house and in his external surroundings. Today, irrespective of age, we often escape into a fantasy world of charms – because, deep down, we are still always children. The ideas of a small boy roam around in our heads. Often, within a negative world, we search for the possibility of casting spells and of changing our surroundings for the better. Laughter, joy, sensitivity and charms are all curiosities which, when joined to the spiritual sphere from the outside world, arouse the imagination. Often, a child's imagination contains illusory fantasies to which the small person aspires in his outlook on life. For the world to be a better place, we should look at it through a child's eyes.

For this reason, in his diary, Janusz Korczak wrote about what most inspired him. Knowing that his dreams might inspire others, he directed his words at adults, urging them to understand children:

Apparently even then, I confided, during intimate conversations with my granny, my daring plan to restructure the world. Throw away all the money – no more and no less. How to throw it away, and what to do afterwards, I probably didn't know. At the time, I was five years old and the task was embarrassingly difficult-what to do so that there were no children who were dirty, ragged or hungry, whom I was not allowed to play with in the courtyard [...]. Dad called me a featherbrain and a dope and, in more stormy moments, even an idiot and a donkey. Only grandma believed in my stars.

Bankructwo małego Dżeka (The Bankruptcy of Little Jack)⁴ tells the story of the many failures of men, including those of children. Little Jack was responsible for two bicycles, the property of his school community. The responsibility which this little man encountered surpassed his expectations. A lack of business experience led to his bankruptcy. It is a story which still applies. Economics and business encroach into every part of our lives, even education. They make life the most difficult for those who are not yet mature enough to cope with such situations – children. This book tells the story of man unprepared for a ruthless life. The damage cause is irreparable. Life cannot turn on timeless values when there is consistent brutality and ruthless cruelty. Economics ends in either profit or bankruptcy.

The story describes the various levels in a man's development, revealing both his positive and negative characteristics. A child in a man's role is only a matter of differing tendencies. Janusz Korczak was a good observer of children who inspired him to write his stories, writing carefree imaginary scenes for children, giving them a sense of warmth and joy. He fought for children who had no one and who were burdens to society, demanding the restoration of their dignity and humanity. He considered them as the greatest of value to families and society, explaining, in his stories that a child is subject to socio-educational conditions.

For this reason, he wished to make people aware that “they are not children, they are people – but on another scale of awareness, with differing experiences, differing and other active emotions”⁵.

³ Janusz Korczak, *Kajtuś Czarodziej*, Warsaw 1935.

⁴ Janusz Korczak, *Bankructwo małego Dżeka*, Warsaw 1924.

⁵ Hanna Kirchner, *Janusz Korczak, pisarz - wychowawca – myśliciel (Janusz Korczak – Writer, Educator, Thinker)*, Instytut Badań Literackich (Institute of Literary Research), 1997, p. 18.

Despite being a Jew, Janusz Korczak, never stressed that he was different. He tried to integrate into the society which gave him the eternal values of an educator-doctor.

What was important to him was *to be a man with a crystal clear morality, an unlimited tolerance, a passionate work ethic and a constant desire to replenish his education by helping others.*

The love for his fellow man, which emanated from him, enabled him to overcome the difficulties which he came across in realising his life's passions. Despite being able to have everything and be surrounded in luxury, Janusz Korczak, abandoned luxury for other values brimming in sadness and the suffering of others. The inspiration which influenced him to help others was the suffering of Jewish children. For him, children were the most important. He desired that other people should understand this.

Every educator should know these words:

A good educator, who doesn't force but frees, who doesn't pull along but raises up, who doesn't flatten but shapes, who doesn't dictate but teaches, who doesn't demand but requests – will experience, together with the children, many moments of inspiration⁶.

Children, hurt by fate, suffer more than adults because they are conscious of the fact that they have been robbed of love and family warmth. For this reason, he desired that children not be dumped into the margins of society or even chased away from their local environment. Janusz Korczak wanted children to be treated in this manner:

No one will say to an adult, "Go away", but this is often said to a child. Always, when an adult is busy, a child becomes confused, an adult jokes but a child clowns around, an adult cries but a child blubbers, an adult is lively, a child fidgets, an adult is sad, a child sulks. An adult is pensive, a child stares. An adult does something slowly, a child dawdles. Even spoken in a humorous manner, it is still tactless, to say nipper, kid, little one, crab –even when not angry but in good humour. It is hard, because we've got used to it. But, sometimes, it is unpleasant and shows disrespect⁷.

Recalling that person with a timeless sensitivity, we are, today, in that same place as Janusz Korczak. In a time of globalisation and economic migration, we have that sense of a child's unresolved problems. Orphans, social orphans, euro-orphans, in various forms, demand of us to look at their situation, or else, who will today give them that feeling of security, love and familial warmth? Let us look for their place in society so that we can say that they are our children. Janusz Korczak renounced everything for children, giving them that love and that substitute for familial warmth. Let us look for the Janusz Korczak inside of ourselves, who will rip powerlessness out of society.

Janusz Korczak, come to Częstochowa and live amongst us, talk us through your values. Be a modern-day "Judym", an initiator of social action for children. In order to commemorate the anniversary of the death of Janusz Korczak, let us remember his words:

See your own road. Get to know yourself, before you try to know others. Understand what you, yourself, are capable of before you begin taking rights and obligations from children. Above all, you, yourself, are still a child whom you must understand, raise and develop⁸.

⁶ Edyta Wolter, *Korczak o wychowaniu przedszkolnym* „Wychowawca” (“The Educator”) No.3 (135)/2004

⁷ Janusz Korczak, *Kiedy znów będą mały* (*When Will They Be Small Again*), W: Excerpts, Warsaw 1978 p.181.

⁸ *Myśl pedagogiczna Janusza Korczaka* (*The Thoughts of the Educator Janusz Korczak*) – New source, M. Fałkowska, Warsaw 1983

If we wish to bring ourselves closer to the figure of Janusz Korczak, we need to study his literary achievements and that which inspired him to his communal work. In order to better understand, one needs to stimulate the imagination. Dear friend Janusz Korczak, even though you lived in another age which to me is history, I am happy that I found, in it, a ray of hope for a new approach to humanity. In those times, you were one of many people who helped the young. You found, within yourself, the strength and lifted up those who most needed the understanding of family warmth. The world did not know enough about you then to notice you. You desired to teach people to live according to the words of the poet Rev. Jan Twardowski: *"Hasten to love people, because they quickly depart from us"*⁹.

The love which exists within man confirms the desire for good. This life corrupts, harms and anaesthetises those for whom we should provide guiding lights. What sort of world are we showing to our young people as an image of community life and what do we expect from them in exchange? Janusz Korczak was conscious of the role he had undertaken in his life, dedicating himself entirely to caring for abandoned children within a spirit of love. Children, who lived in his orphanage, described Janusz Korczak as someone exceptional:

We weren't afraid of Korczak, we loved him. When I sat on his knee, he was more to me than a father. I grew up in my grandma's house, amongst aunties, but without a father. I remembered Korczak as a gentle man, with whom you could talk about anything. I saw the whole world in him. He talked with us and we made our comments too. He read chapters of his books to us. I didn't always have the courage to speak to him. It was easier for me to write what I thought. I preferred to show him my diary. We knew that he was a Jew¹⁰.

Janusz Korczak, for those times, was an altruist. His work in caring for the children preoccupied him entirely. All the money, which he earned from the publication of his books or from the articles which he wrote for magazines, he applied to looking after the children in his care. He prepared them to live an independent life within society, as intellectually fit, young graduates of his institution. Observing younger generations, he wrote many books based on those observations.

A man such as was Janusz Korczak became a symbol of humanity. Being in a difficult economic situation, he experienced both being an orphan and poverty. Knowing the effort required in supporting oneself within an economic system, he fought those negative values. His priority was the welfare of his family and, later, for those in his care, for whom he committed his time and his money. His social and professional activity, as a doctor, is inscribed into the mood and image depicting contemporary in Poland at that time. Much can be written about Janusz Korczak, raising his positive characteristics, putting him forward as the model of a big-hearted human being, but that is not the extent of what can be written about his worth. What Janusz Korczak did prior to the War and during the occupation has inspired many writers. His words become the entire essence of his love for children. In this way, Janusz Korczak wanted to instil love and empathy towards children throughout the whole of society, creating a new life history in which empathy and love strengthen the desire to help the children in one's care. Korczak's commitment to his ideals outshines the greyness in life. Until the end of his time here on earth, he never abandoned his charges, sharing in the fate that the world of that time dealt them. He instilled in his children a way of dealing with life. He taught them to be sensitive to evil and suffering. War sent them on a collision course with cruelty. At that time, death accompanied one's every step. Without any scruples, the occupying army murdered civilians, particularly Jews, irrespective of age or gender. There came a time, when the occupiers entered his orphanage to take everyone, especially the children. However, when Janusz Korczak is offered freedom, he rejects it in unity with his defenceless small individuals.

⁹ Jan Twardowski, *Wiersze o nadziei miłości wierze (Verses of Hope, Love and Faith)*, Białystok 2000 p.551

¹⁰ *Wspomnienia o Januszu Korczaku (In Memory of Janusz Korczak)*, ed. Lewin A., Warsaw 1981. p. 103.

He led that tragic march from the front. He held the youngest child in his arms, and held the hand of another little one [...] It should be remembered that the road from the Orphanage to the Umschlagplatz was long. It took four hours. I saw them as they turned into Leszno from ulica Żelazna. The children were dressed festively in blue drill uniforms. They marched in fours, with a spring in their step, rhythmically and with dignity to the Umschlagplatz – to the square of death! Who had the right to hand down such a sentence? [...] And the world was silent! And silence sometimes means consent to what is happening¹¹.

The death of Janusz Korczak was voluntary and definitive. Through dying in such tragic torment, he showed his children that was with them and would never leave them. As he died, he was proud that he could hug his little ones, those who had never known warmth and love. For Janusz Korczak and his charges, the external world was a hostile place. What he had instilled in his young people to that time could not be transferred into reality. Death and cruelty were life's reality. Unconditional love for children had led him to a place from which there was no return.

Today, we can continue Janusz Korczak's vision as an altruist, Humana or Judym. Our time is similar to that in which Janusz Korczak lived, perhaps even more cynical, egotistical or brutal. Who, today, will seriously protest against the suffering of children, their privations or other of their lives' problems? Intoxicating slogans about children do not help. Deeds and acts provide children with more joy than do words. We should see the entire wealth of our lives in children. We live for them, we rejoice in them as they grow within the love of a family. Let us wholeheartedly help children, loving them unconditionally, as though we are helping God in his plan for world salvation. On this issue, the Lord Jesus says this:

Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. (Matthew 18:1-5)¹²

Let us never repeat events like the ghetto, the Holocaust, the death camps, deaths in gas chambers, war or egotism – as well as the expression of negative acts to man – especially to the child. And we should learn to promote whatever builds love, humility, understanding and the greatest good. Where is our philosophy of life or ethics? Have we already forgotten? Let everyone answer this question for himself. Man's wisdom never forgets what bad things man has caused man.

¹¹ Anna Mieszkowska, *Dzieci Ireny Sendlerowej (Irena Sendler's Children)*, WWL MUZA SA, p. 134, wiersz 5-19.

¹² *Pismo Święte Starego i Nowego Testamentu w przekładzie z języków oryginalnych, Biblia Tysiąclecia (The Old and New Testaments in translation from their original languages, the Millenium Bible)*, 5th Edition, Poznań - Warsaw 2000.