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The Memory of Janusz Korczak in the Latest Literature for Children¹

Pamięć o Januszu Korczak w najnowszej literaturze dla dzieci

Abstract: This text has been inspired by the undying memory of Janusz Korczak, a pedagogue, a reformer of education and an informal ombudsman for children's rights, which is vivid in many areas of social life in Poland and the world. Since 2012, which was declared the Year of Janusz Korczak by the Sejm of the Republic of Poland, the problem of understanding and interpreting children's rights in reference to Korczak's pedagogy has been increasingly discussed on the Polish children's book market. I attempt to answer the questions: how does the selected literature tell contemporary children about Korczak and what elements of his pedagogy are particularly emphasized? Which of Korczak's ideas and practical pedagogical solutions are and should be relevant today? The theoretical basis of the text is Korczak's theoretical works and memoirs as well as interdisciplinary literature on his work. I use the content analysis method applied in a qualitative research methodology. It covers the following books, addressed especially to children finishing the first stage of education, but also to older ones: *Jest taka*

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historia. Opowieść o Januszu Korczaku [There is Such a Story: The Story of Janusz Korczak] by Beata Ostrowicka (2012), *Zwyczajny dzień* [An Ordinary Day] by Katarzyna Zimmerer (2012), *Po drugiej stronie okna* [On the Other Side of the Window] by Anna Czerwińska-Rydel (2012) and *Bohater dzieci* [Children's Hero] by Tomasz Bogacki (2021). In the analysed literature, I point to selected excerpts (so-called words of wisdom) that can serve as inspiration in pedagogical work for educators, guardians and people who care about protecting the individuality of a child.

Keywords: Janusz Korczak, children's literature, children's rights, dialogue, subjectivity.

The memory of him surges like a flooded river... – the memory of Janusz Korczak among his contemporaries

*Where are you going with your children, you modern Socrates?
You who invented fairy tales have become a legend yourself.
You who deceived the children that they would not die soon,
Goodness and courage spin your deadly shirt.
And the memory of you flows like a flooded river.*

Włodzimierz Słobodnik, *Tren ku czci Janusza Korczaka*
[Threnody in His Honour of Janusz Korczak] (1975)

I have made a poem by Włodzimierz Słobodnik the motto of this text. Even though over a century has passed since Janusz Korczak worked in children's orphanages and his first scientific and literary works were published, the memory of him does not fade away. Quite the contrary, it spreads and surges like a flooded river.

Nowadays, it is difficult to count how many schools, cultural institutions and non-governmental organizations are named after Korczak. Similarly, there is a significant number of monuments, patronages and organizations dedicated to his activity. For example, UNESCO recognized the year 1978, which was the 100th anniversary of Korczak's birth, as a memorable date in the history of humanity. This time was celebrated solemnly with significant conferences and competitions. In the artistic competition aimed at adapting Korczak's works, first place went to the outstanding poet and teacher Joanna Kulmowa. Her theatre play entitled *Wielki, mały król (moralitet w trzech aktach)* [The Great Little King (a Morality

Play in Three Acts]) was addressed to children around eight years old and, as the title indicates, it was based on Korczak's book *King Matt the First*. This morality play warned against the brutality and absurdity of war. In 1979, the International Janusz Korczak Association was founded. It is currently represented by members from over 20 countries, including: France, Lithuania, Brazil, Japan, Australia, the United States. In 1993, the Korczakianum Centre for Documentation and Research was established. By a resolution of the Sejm of the Republic of Poland, the year 2012 was also declared the Year of Janusz Korczak. It is impossible to enumerate how many public and private primary and secondary schools, kindergartens, orphanages, hospitals and even housing estates in Poland are named after Korczak. There are also schools named after this pedagogue abroad, including the Janusz Korczak Polish School in Chicago and the Janusz Korczak Polish School at the Embassy of the Republic of Poland in Dublin.

These facts show that educational, research and publishing activities related to Korczak's pedagogical achievements are still implemented. Barbara Smolińska-Theiss asks why his work continues to be so important and relevant in various places around the world today. One of the answers is that Korczak was among the first to raise the value of a child and their status in social, cultural and religious life.² The 'Old Doctor' dispelled the myth of a child as a miniature adult and argued for the value of a child from the very beginning of their life. He is remembered as a pedologist who established an interdisciplinary framework for knowledge about children, obliging educators to use the results of paediatric, psychological and sociological research to accurately diagnose children and provide them with adequate help.³ He is one of the most interesting thinkers and social practitioners, a moral authority,

2 B. Smolińska-Theiss, *Korczakowska spuścizna – między znakiem Holokaustu a prawami dziecka*, „Pedagogika Społeczna Nova”, 1 (2021) No. 2, p. 58, DOI: 10.14746/psn.2021.2.03.

3 The word 'pedologist' comes from the word 'pedology', which means knowledge and science about children. Pedology as a science developed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, covering issues related to the mental and physical development of children. Korczak described himself primarily as a pedologist as he was interested in everything related to childhood and children, so: '... infant speech,... children's games and toys – junk, but in fact treasures – nails, strings, cloths, coloured glasses, pebbles'; A. Ungeheuer-Gołąb, *Korczaka archipelag dzieciństwa*, in: *Janusz Korczak – pisarz*, ed. A. M. Czernow, Warszawa 2013, p. 146.

an altruistic role model, a friend of all children and the first informal spokesman for their rights.

This text has been inspired by the undying memory of Janusz Korczak, which is vivid in many areas of social life in Poland and the world. The subject of this article is the latest children's literature whose hero is Korczak and whose content has educational and upbringing value. Since 2012 – which was declared the Year of Janusz Korczak – several books have been published on the Polish (and global) children's and youth book market. They introduce the youngest citizens to the figure of the doctor, his 'children' from the Orphan Home and the tragedy of war. The problem of understanding and interpreting children's rights in reference to Korczak's pedagogy has become present and important in children's literature. This text answers the following questions: How does selected contemporary literature talk to children about Janusz Korczak and what elements of his pedagogy does it particularly emphasize?; and which of Korczak's ideas and practical pedagogical solutions are and should be relevant today? The theoretical basis of the text is children's literature and Korczak's memoirs, as well as interdisciplinary studies on his work. I use the content analysis method applied in a qualitative-research methodology. It covers the following books, addressed especially to children finishing the first stage of education, but also to older ones: *Jest taka historia. Opowieść o Januszu Korczaku* [There is Such a Story: The Story of Janusz Korczak] by Beata Ostrowicka (2012), *Zwyczajny dzień* [An Ordinary Day] by Katarzyna Zimmerer (2012), *Po drugiej stronie okna* [On the Other Side of the Window] by Anna Czerwińska-Rydel (2012) and *Bohater dzieci* [Children's Hero] by Tomasz Bogacki (2021). In light of the analysed literature, it becomes important to reflect on the role of education of young generations in connection with the memory of difficult, traumatic events of the past, all the more so because violence and human rights violations are still present in the world. In the face of the war in Ukraine that has been going on for over a year, questions about the condition of humanity are recurring. How to educate and raise young generations to be aware of the consequences of regime ideologies? How to shape sensitive, attentive young people who respond to terror and callousness, oppose passivity in the face of acts of human rights violations, and disobey all fanaticism? I point to deliberately selected excerpts of the analysed literature (so-called words of wisdom) that can serve as inspiration in pedagogical work for educators, guardians and anyone who cares about protecting the individuality of a child – a human being.

... How much did you defend, what did you fight for? Korczak's obligation to be responsible for the world, others and children

In his book *Disobey!*,⁴ Frédéric Gros points out in an interesting way that disobedience is a human right and that the problem is not disobedience, but obedience understood as mindlessly following the orders of leaders. The unresolved 'philosophical riddle' is not why people rebel, but why they do not rebel. The author writes, 'Monsters exist, but they are far too few in number to be truly dangerous; the most dangerous monsters are ordinary men, functionaries ready to believe and obey without discussion.' How true this quote is in the context of Russia's armed aggression against Ukraine. How dangerous is the virus of callousness and ignorance and the lack of Korczak's creative 'I do not know',⁵ how drastic the consequences are of not appealing to one's conscience and responsibility, to 'insights that can be born only of your own pain, and they are the most precious.'⁶

The philosopher of dialogue, Józef Tischner, points out that man needs to have good will, conscience and consciousness⁷:

... there is one conscience... Conscience is an independent reality in a human being, a bit like reason and will. A human can exercise will and reason, but can also neglect exercises, similarly, they can listen to their conscience, drown it out or renounce it. Conscience is the voice that calls inside a human. What does conscience call for today? First of all, for making a human be willing to have a conscience.⁸

Korczak reminds us of conscience throughout his work, his altruistic attitude and his life, which had a social dimension. In various ways he asked himself and others: 'How have you lived? How much land did you till? How many

4 Primo Levi as quoted in F. Gros, *Disobey!*, trans. D. Fernbach, London 2020, p. 3.

5 J. Korczak, *How To Love a Child*, in: *Selected Works of Janusz Korczak*, Warsaw 1967, p. 93.

6 *Ibidem*.

7 J. Tischner, *Etyka wartości i nadziei*, in: *Wobec wartości*, eds. D. Hildebrand, J. A. Kłoczowski, J. Paściak, J. Tischner, Poznań 1984, p. 103.

8 J. Tischner, *Etyka solidarności oraz homo sovieticus*, Kraków 2005, p. 17.

loaves of bread did you bake for men? How much seed did you sow? How many trees did you plant? ... How much did you defend, what did you fight for?’⁹

He also wrote:

Free man seeks an order and payment for its fulfilment – they seek in themselves, give and pay themselves, reward themselves and assign themselves punishments – being grateful, they thank for a pure and free life to God and parents – joyful in a clear and free conscience.¹⁰

He read *Prawa dziecka jako jednostki* [Children’s Rights as Individuals] at courses of the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, addressed to employees of care and educational institutions. He also gave lectures at the Institute of Special Pedagogy and the Free Polish University and served as an appraiser at the juvenile court in Warsaw. These are examples of his pure altruism.¹¹ In their memoirs, Korczak’s pupils wrote that ‘He was a man worthy of this name’, by which they understood the doctor’s good conscience and the fact that he helped others. They appreciated that ‘... he forced us to reflect and get to know ourselves. We became different, better (supposedly) – like plants that mature faster and become more luxuriant under the influence of heat.’¹²

Many years later, Emmanuel Levinas argued that our being is constituted through work and helping others. The other person, the Other, can realize our freedom by calling us to responsibility. He wrote: “Attention to other, and consequently, the possibility of counting myself the among them, of judging myself-conscience is justice”.¹³

Similarly, Korczak’s pedagogical thoughts do not exist without understanding the category of responsibility. His message is to be responsible for a human

9 J. Korczak, *Pisma wybrane*, vol. 4, Warszawa 1978, p. 283.

10 Janusz Korczak w *getcie*. *Nowe źródła*, ed. A. Lewin, Warszawa 1992, p. 262.

11 M. Łobocki, *Janusz Korczak wzorem osobowym altruisty*, „*Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska. Sectio J*”, 11 (1998) pp. 151–158; J. Korczak, *Prawa dziecka jako jednostki*, ed. M. Ciesielska, „*Przegląd Krytyczny*”, 2 (2020) No. 1, pp. 121–129, DOI: 10.14746/pk.2020.2.1.08.

12 B. Sieradzka-Baziur, *Rozwój duchowy dziecka w pedagogice Janusza Korczaka*, „*Horyzonty Wychowania*”, 21 (2022) No. 58, pp. 11–21, DOI: 10.35765/hw.2022.2158.03.

13 E. Levinas, *Difficult freedom: essays on Judaism*, trans. S. Hand, London 1990, p.100.

being, learn sensitivity and make the daily effort of (self-)observation to be able to illuminate the world for children so that they can then shape a culture of peace in the world.

The Old Doctor cannot be assigned to one role as he was a doctor, a writer, an educator and a social activist. He was outside, among children and the sick, on the streets, walking along Smocza and Nowolipie, among others. All this multitude of areas in which he acted as well as his zeal, commitment and concern can be seen in his texts. His work remains just as open to this day, encouraging internal dialogue in line with Hannah Arendt's metaphor of standing in the 'wind of thought.'¹⁴

Modern childhood seems so different from the one Korczak knew, full of opportunities, offers of various activities and drawing on the benefits of modern technology. So, how can we present the precursor of the movement for children's rights to youngsters today, not creating a cult about him that children do not understand, but building sensitivity and openness of thought through stories about him? Moreover, Korczak is associated with fervour, enthusiasm and commitment to others, rather than worship and homage. Likewise, children do not need a saint, but a system that, knowing how a child develops, will provide them with an educator who can see suffering and will allow them to live, and therefore make mistakes and learn from them. As Korczak wrote, 'It is not the duty of those around me to help me, but I have the duty to take care of the world, of people.'¹⁵

As I believe in the special role of literary education and the importance of children's books in their development, I think that it is safe to introduce children to the difficult issues through books addressed to their age group. Korczak's character will undoubtedly always be associated with the tragedy of war. Fiction, often using metaphors, hyperbole and understatement, helps pose questions and seek answers. As Korczak wrote, 'Each time you put aside a book to spin the thread of your own thoughts, it means that the book has served its purpose.'¹⁶

14 H. Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgement*, New York 2003, p. 175.

15 J. Korczak, *Memoirs*, in: *Selected Works...*, p. 475.

16 J. Korczak, *How to Love a Child: And Other Selected Works*, in: *Selected Works...*, p. 93.

Numerous writers who lived and worked after Korczak's death expressed their concern for the fate of children in their works addressed to them. Astrid Lindgren, the winner of international literary awards (including the Hans Christian Andersen Award), awarded the Order of the Smile for her outstanding work for children and young people, wrote "There are so many abandoned children in the world, but in reality, I cannot help so many, but the fact that I can take care of them, even if only in fantasy, gives me some satisfaction."¹⁷ Doing what you do best to serve others is very Korczak-style. The prose of Astrid Lindgren, but also of many other writers, such as Tove Jansson, Roald Dahl and, in Poland, Danuta Wawiłow and Joanna Kulmowa, whose books are becoming outstanding classics of children's literature, is an echo of Korczak's pedagogy. Through their works, these authors boldly chose the side of the youngest, weaker ones, and did not agree with their child heroes enduring the injustice and 'blindness' of many adults. To write for children, you must not forget what it is like to be a child, you must not lose '... your childish stupidity', as another winner of the Order of the Smile, Joanna Kulmowa, said jokingly.

How to learn a child from a child or Korczak's 'educational moments' today. Analogies in the books: *There Is Such a Story: The Story of Janusz Korczak* and *An Ordinary Day*

In Beata Ostrowicka's novel entitled *There Is Such a Story: The Story of Janusz Korczak*,¹⁸ Jaś's great-grandmother Frania talks about the old doctor and his original system of working with children, based on partnership and not on giving orders. The perception of the work is facilitated by the perspective of a modern child – a third-grader. Jaś listens to a real, 'living' story first-hand, which is told by his grandmother, with whom he is strongly emotionally connected. It is important, while listening to the story, that he looks for common elements coinciding with his life. The grandmother's story lives on thanks to her grandson's interest.

17 M. Stromstedt, *Astrid Lindgren. Opowieść o życiu i twórczości*, trans. A. Węglińska, Warszawa 2002, s. 291.

18 B. Ostrowicka, *Jest taka historia. Opowieść o Januszu Korczaku*, Łódź 2020.

Grandma Frania was one of the children living in the Warsaw orphanage established and run by Korczak and Stefania Wilczyńska, where 'he was the children's father and she was their mother'.¹⁹ It is not the first time that the grandson asks his grandmother to tell him a story about when she was a little girl, 'had no grey hair, only two black braids', climbed trees and was 'all alone'.²⁰ The grandmother tells the story once again, and the reader – a modern child – learns the simple, yet incredibly effective educational principles implemented in the orphanage at 92 Krochmalna Street in Warsaw:

1) The children had duties, everyone worked and had to do something at 'home'. Having duties meant learning independence and responsibility. Children had duties that they supervised and decided about on their own.

2) There was a box for children's letters – their grievances, requests, apologies and questions were all read in the evenings and discussed together with Dr Korczak.

3) There was a notebook in which exchanged items, as well as fights and bets, were recorded. In this way, children learned to be honest, respect property rights, be conscientious and have strong will. The children set their own challenges, which was part of self-education. When they decided to fight, they knew that it was supposed to be a fair fight, never between the stronger and the weaker.

4) Older children took care of younger, new residents of the orphanage, thus developing their empathy and sensitivity towards other people.

5) The pupils edited their own newspaper *Tygodnik Domu Sierot* [The Orphans' Home Weekly] and also wrote to the newspaper *Mały Przegląd* [A Little Review], which supported their right to vote and speak publicly about matters important to them.

6) Everyone in the orphanage could appeal to the children's court, which gave its residents a sense of security and was also aimed at learning justice and, above all, forgiveness. '... we learned to forgive each other, reflect on our own behaviour and the behaviour of others'.²¹

7) The children could establish holidays that were important to them.

19 Ibidem, s. 9.

20 Ibidem, s. 4.

21 Ibidem, s. 41.

These examples of pedagogical practice used in the orphanage at Krochmalna Street were an expression of the subjective treatment of children and respect for their individuality. The pupils called this place home: 'It was more of a home than a care facility... children started to smile there,'²² recalls the grandmother. You could confide everything to Mister Doctor because he listened with all his heart and wanted to understand children, she further recalls. She also remembered how he was trusted and perceived by his pupils as one of them. 'He took our problems and our affairs seriously. You could tell him anything. But inside, in his heart, he was probably a boy.'²³

Telling contemporary children about Korczak is telling a story about the idea of self-governance and guiding a child. The doctor knew that it is not enough to listen to a child, it is necessary to listen intently and so he wrote down his observations and 'educational moments' when he learned about a child from a child. Grandma Frania recalls Korczak's message:

Mister Doctor considered childhood to be very important, probably the most important part of the entire life. He said that if it is happy and cheerful, then the adult will have a good life... And a child has the right to dignity, respect, safety and love. To everything that adults are entitled to. A child has the right to demand this from them. And it must not be underestimated.²⁴

The special value of the book is that the grandson compares the story told by his grandmother with his own experience as a pupil in a modern school, such as the unpleasant behaviour of a day-care teacher who made fun of a school-girl.²⁵ Thus, children's human rights do not become an abstraction for readers. The third-grader reaches back to his school experiences and tries to look for analogies. 'Mister Doctor liked children and understood them,' Jaś imagi-

22 Ibidem, s. 12.

23 Ibidem, s. 20.

24 Ibidem, s. 33.

25 Ibidem.

nes. Then comes the reflection: 'He's like our gym teacher. We feel that he likes us, although sometimes he makes threatening faces.'²⁶

The book's presentation of childhood images spanning several generations develops intergenerational bonds. The grandmother's unhurried story, which gives the curious grandson time to ask questions and draw conclusions, shows the beauty of a relationship based on dialogue, curiosity about the fate of another person, and respect for their memory. Korczak, who cared about children's physical development and their frequent exposure to nature, considered it equally important to cultivate a child's sense of being part of a family composed of ancestors. These two complementary perspectives – that of the grandmother and of the grandson in Ostrowicka's story – transfer another of Korczak's ideas into the life of a modern child.

It should also be noted that grandparents often appear in the latest Polish, but not only, contemporary literature for children, playing numerous roles, including those of master guides, playmates and links with the past as they survived World War II.²⁷ (Great)grandparents, as the few living witnesses of the distant past, can pass on their difficult testimony to their grandchildren and emphasize the importance of memory – both the good and the difficult (bad) ones, which, as Mirosława Nowak-Dziemianowicz claims, constructs us and makes us who we are. Grandma Frania's memories of being Korczak's ward are part of this good, important memory, which was her 'existential capital', 'condition of ontological security'.²⁸ As Elizabeth Cole argues, understanding history enables society to come to terms with its difficult past, which is the basis for building a more just future.²⁹

Korczak's selected thoughts are also brought to life by Katarzyna Zimmerer in her book entitled *An Ordinary Day*.³⁰ This author also refers to the everyday

26 Ibidem, s. 21.

27 A. Józefowicz, *Obrazy dzieciństwa w polskiej prozie XX wieku. W poszukiwaniu kontekstów edukacyjnych*, Białystok 2020, pp. 164–186.

28 M. Nowak-Dziemianowicz, *Pamięć i czas a (nie)bezpieczeństwo ontologiczne współczesnego*, „Edukacja Dorosłych”, 80 (2019) No. 1, p. 21, DOI: 10.12775/ED.2019.001.

29 E. A. Cole, *Transitional justice and the Reform of History Education*, „The International Journal of Transitional Justice”, 1 (2007) No. 1, pp. 115–137, DOI: 10.1093/ijjt/ijm003.

30 K. Zimmerer, *Zwyczajny dzień*, Warszawa 2012.

situations that a modern child faces in their family, school and peer group. Difficult child emotions, such as sadness, misunderstanding, disappointment and a sense of injustice seem to be the characters of the stories. Children are just learning these emotions and so Korczak's message, which has been included as the book's motto, is very clear:

You say, 'We get tired of dealing with children.' You are right. You say, 'Because we have to strain to lower ourselves to their level. To stoop, tilt, bend and shrink.' You are wrong. That is not what bothers us. But – that we have to raise ourselves to their feelings.

Eight-year-old Szymon, whose emotions are described in the book, seems to make an average adult parent and teacher realize how much it hurts him when he is criticized, shamed and ridiculed. 'How often do grownups say without thinking: "No," and then forget; and how much misery do they impose – they don't know at all.'³¹ One may wonder whether the publication should not be obligatory reading for conscientious parents and teachers. It emphasizes how important it is to pay attention to a child's world of emotions, to stop and observe them doing numerous activities, playing and being bored. It becomes clear how much the lack of sensitivity and empathy of educators who focus on punishment and admonishment, extinguishes a child's enthusiasm. 'It's the same everywhere – at home and at school. You pose a question... they laugh and scoff at you. Everyone wants to be the smartest and only waits to ridicule and humiliate you.'³² Szymon asks us, using Korczak's words, to be attentive to other people:

Look into our thoughts when we're walking quietly to and from school, when we're sitting quietly during a lesson, when we're talking in a whisper or in a quiet voice, or when we're lying in bed at night.

Korczak's words quoted by the contemporary children's book hero have many meanings. The category of rebellion that appears here is worth con-

31 Ibidem, p. 17.

32 Ibidem, p. 32.

sidering as creative and uplifting. The one who disagrees too easily searches, is curious, is 'on the way', and being on the way is a process of building oneself, one's identity. However, some teachers in Polish schools still have problems with students' 'independent thinking', so the tradition of education based on a behavioural model sticks tightly to closed, ready-made transmissions.³³ Korczak would observe a 'disobedient' pupil rather than judge them. Maybe the person is a little hero who fights against falsehoods, conventions and poses, and therefore our task is to help them 'change the world'.³⁴ When beginning his *Momenty edukacyjne* [Educational Factors], he asked educators to observe, not judge: 'What a fever, a cough or nausea is for a physician, so a smile, a tear, or a blush should be for an educator...'³⁵ Korczak's words resound increasingly loudly in the words of educators trying to change the culture of education. Children should not be objects to be trained as they are endowed with natural curiosity and require the prudent support of a sensitive and attentive adult. Monika Wiśniewska-Kin notes that 'a student is not an ignorant person, an empty vessel, but a being capable of reasoning, discovering and constructing meanings'.³⁶ Moreover, a child – a minor – needs to be accepted, understood and be seen as a value in themselves. The slow living trend that is present in many areas of contemporary culture and advocates mindfulness, moderation in consumption, slowing down, 'downshifting', taking time to notice oneself and the world around, becoming 'someone' better rather than having 'something' more³⁷ can be treated as a distant echo of Korczak's observation and ability to hear and see a child.

- 33 D. Klus-Stańska, *Mentalne zniewolenie nauczycieli wczesnej edukacji – epizod czy prawidłowość*, „Problemy Wczesnej Edukacji”, 1 (2007) No. 1, pp. 55–66.
- 34 J. Korczak, *Spowiedź motyla*, in: *Pisma wybrane*, vol. 2, Warszawa 1958, p. 80.
- 35 J. Korczak, *Educational Factors*, in: *Selected Works...*, p. 33.
- 36 M. Wiśniewska-Kin, *Krytyczna refleksja o stanie współczesnej edukacji wczesnoszkolnej – ujęcie porównawcze*, „Studia Edukacyjne”, 38 (2016) p. 129.
- 37 C. Honoré, *In Praise of Slow: How a Worldwide Movement is Challenging the Cult of Speed*, London 2004. A. Józefowicz, *Obecność motywów slow life w literaturze dziecięcej XXI wieku. Kilka uwag w kontekście edukacji dziecka*, „Kultura Współczesna”, 1 (2022) pp. 150–164, DOI: 10.26112/kw.2022.117.11.

Building a reflective, sensitive and rebellious personality: the main ideas of the educational biographies of Janusz Korczak *On the Other Side of the Window* and *Children's Hero*

On the Other Side of the Window by Anna Czerwińska-Rydel³⁸ is a biographical novel, the first in a series entitled *Biographies of Famous Poles* by the same author. It lacks illustrations, but has several collages of photos of Korczak, his pupils and pre-war Warsaw, a small format and font and the content is presented on 164 pages, which indicates that this story is addressed to older and even adult readers. The third-person, omniscient narrator reports selected moments from the protagonist's life and recalls fragments of his works. Readers learn about Korczak's family home from his birth until his death, the social and moral background of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, authorities (for example, Chekhov, who was a doctor, yet became famous as a writer), significant figures in Korczak's life (Stefania Wilczyńska whom he described as his soul mate) and his plans to 'reconstruct the world'³⁹ based on the equal rights of children – human beings. The book's form also resembles a diary owing to handwritten notes in the margins and so-called secrets in the folded corners of the pages. Among them are important quotes from Korczak's works, including 'We are obliged to make the world a better place than it was when we first entered it'⁴⁰; 'Children! Take pride in your intentions, dream lofty dreams and strive for fame – some of your goals will surely be attained.'⁴¹ The book consists of two parts: in the first, we learn about Korczak's childhood and youth, and the second is devoted to his teaching work.

Readers get to know little Henio Goldszmit [Janusz Korczak is the penname of Henryk Goldszmit] who is a curious boy, observes, thinks a lot and constantly asks himself numerous questions: 'He does something very useful. He looks out the window and wonders what is happening on the other side. For exam-

38 A. Czerwińska-Rydel, *Po drugiej stronie okna*, Warszawa 2012.

39 Ibidem, p. 13.

40 Ibidem, p. 132.

41 Ibidem, p. 13.

ple, the rain. Why is it raining?'⁴² We observe a human who is shaped by careful observations, original ideas (for example, throwing away money) and bold questions. He cannot accept situations of social injustice, including the lives of poor people, children being beaten, insulted and not allowed to speak out, '... why is poverty so different and some children are cleanly dressed, washed and smiling, while others are dirty and neglected?'⁴³ Hence, young Goldszmit is called a wise, sensitive and good boy, a little 'philosopher' by his grandmother, whom he treated as the confidant of many of his thoughts. We meet him when he is maturing to fight for children's rights, boldly showing with his words and attitude how the role of an educator should be understood. He wrote, 'Man is born in pain and then gains every new experience in pain. It's bad for children in the world. They need help. And this is the educator's task.'⁴⁴ Hence Korczak, who called himself a 'stubborn boy'⁴⁵ from his earliest years, 'was constantly looking for new ways to change what he considered the most important: the attitude of a person to a small person, to a child'.⁴⁶ How to love a child? – he asked this question all the time. And he often thought:

This is the most important issue. It is so easy to neglect, but it is also easy to pet. Treat a little person as an uneducated person who will one day be a real person, or turn them into an idol who is entitled to everything. To love wisely. This is the key to everything.⁴⁷

The need to build a reflective, rebellious and inquisitive personality, who reaches for dreams, asks questions, refers to their inner self-conscience and gives testimony through hard work, study and self-discipline seems to be the thesis and the message of this biography. The author points to certain moments and events that shaped the personality of little Henio, then of Dr Korczak, and fuelled his interest in literature, medicine and pedagogy.

42 Ibidem, p. 6.

43 Ibidem, p. 36.

44 Ibidem, p. 113.

45 Ibidem, p. 143.

46 Ibidem, p. 144.

47 Ibidem, p. 46.

This biography is composed of notes, records, diagnoses and rhetorical questions that Korczak asked himself, but also of the memories of his pupils about him. We meet Korczak – a storyteller,⁴⁸ a guardian at summer camps organized for the most neglected Jewish children,⁴⁹ a secretary and a defence lawyer in a children's court.⁵⁰ We can imagine how he vowed to live with the children in peace, work and truth,⁵¹ how he gave the children a chance to correct their faults, vouching for them and taking responsibility,⁵² how he understood that boys sometimes had to fight, but when they had to fight, they should do it in a chivalrous, honourable manner: 'boys have to fight, but you have to make sure they do not go too far. Tripping others up is unchivalrous.'⁵³ We see how he obliged children to judge and reflect on themselves: 'Are you going to judge us? Like at school? NO. It is YOU who will judge yourselves... Everyone says for oneself how much they deserve because each of you knows how they behaved.'⁵⁴ He emphasized that everyone can pray in their own way, in moments of doubt or sadness, go to a room of silence⁵⁵ or observe nature.⁵⁶

The quoted ideas oblige us to 'think like Korczak' today, to encourage students to think narratively during classes and weave free narratives so that they can use the acquired knowledge in contexts outside school. Korczak noted, 'He may have been taught to take notes of someone else's lectures and ideas but never of his own endeavors.'⁵⁷ Developing narrative competences in children and creating self-narratives is a difficult way of looking at oneself, but at the same time this is the beginning of a very important path to openness to other people. Dr Korczak repeatedly encouraged children to self-reflect, write down their thoughts and keep a diary. He wrote:

48 Ibidem, p. 34.

49 Ibidem, p. 56.

50 Ibidem, p. 41.

51 Ibidem, p. 150.

52 Ibidem, p. 80.

53 Ibidem, p. 89.

54 Ibidem, s. 43.

55 Ibidem, s. 94.

56 Ibidem, s. 126.

57 J. Korczak, *Educational Factors*, in: *Selected Works...*, p. 34.

Only by getting can one give, only by growing in one's own spirit can one collaborate in the development of others. In notes lie the seeds from which forest and cornfield grow, they contain drops which become spring... Notes are the entries you use to draw up the balance sheet of your life.⁵⁸

The title of the novel definitely aptly refers to Korczak's slowly emerging innovative pedagogical ideas, as if from another world, from another side... of the window. The entire concept of this biography is based on the symbol of the window. Looking for a key to present Korczak, the author uses the metaphor of a window through which we look at the world and which also becomes a metaphor of dreams and freedom. Hence, the book begins with Korczak's words: 'a child needs movement, air and light – I agree. But also something else. A look into space, a sense of freedom – an open window'. It ends, however, with the following words: 'On the other side of the (train) window, the cloudless August sky was shining.'⁵⁹ Adult readers know that the Holocaust was the final station.

It is worth emphasizing that the world of art, literature and fairy tales that the doctor created helped Korczak's pupils move into an imaginary, better world in these last moments of their lives in the ghetto. He claimed that in times of danger, a story becomes '... a cocoon protecting the child's sensitive psyche from a reality that is endlessly naked'.⁶⁰ In this way, the drama of the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore entitled *The Post Office*, which he staged with his children just a few weeks before the Holocaust, became '... a metaphysical plane of reality, allowing us to save our inner freedom'.⁶¹ This performance is discussed in a separate book entitled *Ostatnie przedstawienie panny Esterki* [The Last Performance of Miss Esterka] by Adam Jaromir and Gabriela Cichowska, which – like the analysed biography – emphasizes how deeply humanism was embedded in Korczak's thoughts and activity.⁶² Caring for children in an impossible

58 Ibidem, p. 35.

59 A. Czerwińska-Rydel, *Po drugiej stronie okna*, p. 163.

60 D. Kubicka, *Odpowiedź odpowiedzialność*, „Filozofia Publiczna i Edukacja Demokratyczna”, 6 (2017) No. 1, p. 239, DOI: 10.14746/fped.2017.6.1.12.

61 Ibidem.

62 K. Rybak, „Zupełnie inne miasto”. *Obrazy warszawskiego getta w polskiej literaturze dziecięcej XXI wieku*, „Dzieciństwo. Literatura i Kultura”, 3 (2021) No. 1, Pp. 67–84, DOI: 10.32798/dlk.634.

situation was a fight to show them a human world in a dehumanized reality. Unable to save their lives, he could only save the good name of a human being in their eyes.⁶³ This attempt to save at least some of children's dreams, games and fairy tales resulted from the educator's highest responsibility and sensitive soul, capable of extraordinary creations.

It is worth recalling another type of art here – the poetry of Joanna Kulmowa, Korczak's 'spiritual' student. In one of the interviews, the poet admitted that she could not imagine that '... a person without a sense of aesthetics, imagination and sensitivity could teach others.'⁶⁴ Urszula Chęcińska, who has been studying the poet's work for years, notes how she 'drew from Korczak' and how, in the pedagogy she developed, she put emphasis on conversation with a student, their individual personality and work and how 'she brought out the strength in them through poetic thinking'.⁶⁵

In his educational biography of Korczak entitled *Bohater dzieci* [Children's Hero], written for readers finishing early school education, Tomek Bogacki has used the words of the main protagonist as the motto: 'My life has been difficult but interesting. In my younger days I asked God for precisely that. God, give me a hard life but let it be beautiful, rich and aspiring.'⁶⁶ The memoirs that Korczak wrote in the last years of his life, and from which this quote comes, serves as the main source material for this biography. At the beginning, the author tells the readers that this is a story about an extraordinary boy who, when he grew up, devoted his life to children. The author heard about Korczak many times from his grandparents, which he has emphasized in the author's note, thus stressing he remembers them well. The figure of his grandmother was significant for Korczak, which is also reflected in this publication. With her, he began to dream about a different, better world. Korczak is shown as a sensitive, surprised boy who asked about poverty, the reasons for hard work, hunger and

63 Korczak's idea of saving the good name of man as a homo sapiens species, a humanistic being, can be seen in R. Benigni's film *Life Is Beautiful* (1997).

64 *A ja jestem epigonką siebie*, z Joanną Kulmową rozmawia Urszula Chęcińska, „Polonistyka”, 9 (1993) pp. 564–566.

65 U. Chęcińska, *Pedagogika żartobliwa według Janusza Korczaka i Joanny Kulmowej. Prolegomena*, in: *Janusz Korczak pisarz*, ed. A. M. Czernow, Warszawa 2013, p. 157.

66 J. Korczak, *Memoirs*, in: *Selected Works...*, p. 489.

the difficult lives of the children he observed while walking in the Powiśle district in Warsaw. He went to school during the partitions of Poland, where children were punished for the smallest misdemeanours. This sense of injustice gave rise to his objections and outrage. This picture book, with incredibly nostalgic illustrations – paintings, emphasizes moral issues. We see naturalistic images from the life of the lower social classes, and Korczak as a person who actively cared for people and opposed harm with his social and writing activity. From the early years of his youth, hard work, constant learning, consistent striving ‘to make the world a better place than it was when we first entered it’ was his daily bread. He wrote, ‘A purpose in life makes for happiness and such purpose of life can only be work for others.’⁶⁷

The book *Children’s Hero* shows how the orphanage was based on Korczak’s innovative working methods: he initiated a children’s parliament, a court, duty hours and an internal newspaper. These forms of activity were intended to support the children in self-education and self-control. His pupils emphasized the role of self-governance and individual and group responsibility for their behaviour and the actions taken.⁶⁸

The story seems to accelerate when the orphanage moves within the ghetto walls. The drama of the illustrations is very suggestive: they show walls, smoke, planes, crowded children, numerous rows of cots and all are images of poverty and the primitive conditions in which the children and their caregivers had to live. No words are needed and, indeed, there are few of them in the illustration that shows Korczak walking through the streets of the ghetto, with a bag on his back, into which he put food obtained for his pupils. In these unimaginably difficult conditions, as the author of the book emphasizes, he did not chicken out, did not run away and did not give up. He tried to give the children as much love as possible and devoted a lot of time to watching over them and writing his famous diary. The tragedy is manifested by the simplicity of the book’s last illustrations. We see children marching after the doctor; they are deeply serious and peaceful as they trust him – their ‘steadfast defender and guardian’.

67 J. Korczak, *Dzieła*, vol. 3: *Na mównicy, publicystyka społeczna (1898–1912)*, Warszawa 1994, p. 211.

68 B. Smolińska-Theiss, *Korczakowska spuścizna*, p. 48.

Korczak's uncompromising defence of children's rights – to love, care, development and learning – inspires people all over the world. This is also why this book was created and which was first published in English in New York in 2009. It came out in Polish only in 2022.

Final reflections

An intercultural discourse continues to this day about Janusz Korczak as a teacher who transcended all divisions, building a meeting platform for people of different cultures, religions and generations. Korczak, who recognized the role of the media in education, managed to create it in the pages of *Mały Przegląd*.⁶⁹ The latest children's literature, which is the research subject of this article, can also be treated as an attempt to connect generations through the memory of Korczak – a supporter of children's emancipation, who clearly inspired the creation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, finally signed on 20 November 1989 by the Assembly General of the United Nations.

At this point, it is worth asking the question of whether it is possible to talk to children about their rights and obligations without reaching back to the origins, including Korczak's activity. In this way, we return to 'Korczak-style thinking' without which it is difficult to imagine the current state of democratic pedagogy. Ewa Jarosz claims that a Korczak's child is already a citizen, a member of the community entitled to a social life. In postmodern times, Korczak's thoughts inspire a discourse about children who are equal partners in relationships with adults and their opinions on making decisions about themselves are equally important.⁷⁰

The analysed books prove that contemporary authors are committed to the creation of culture for children, emphasize how important it is to know their experiences, feelings and dreams and stress the need for determining clear rights and obligations. Although it may seem that these books were created

69 M. Filiciak, P. Toczyski, *Korczak aktualizacja*, „Dwutygodnik”, 11 listopada 2021.

70 E. Jarosz, *Szkic do wielowymiarowego obrazu partycypacji dzieci w życiu społecznym*, in: *Środowisko uczestnictwa społecznego jednostek, kategorii i grup (doświadczenia socjalizacyjne i biograficzne)*, eds. J. Modrzewski, A. Matysiak-Błaszczak, E. Włodarczyk, Poznań 2018, p. 373–389.

on the occasion of the Year of Janusz Korczak, they present, probably coincidentally, a complementary narrative.⁷¹ *There is Such a Story...* points to the need to build intergenerational bonds, making the co-protagonists of the book the generation of great-grandparents, who in their narratives mention Korczak and how he built a child's subjectivity in the orphanages he ran. Conversations between the grandmother and the grandson are an example of creating Buber's relationship of reciprocity between the interlocutors, giving each other presence, the desire to get to know the other person and 'touching you... without appropriating'. In the book *An Ordinary Day...* we come across a very accurate idea of transferring and assigning Korczak's thoughts to the everyday situations of a modern child who, just like their pre-war peers, feels injustice, sadness, anger and fear. The contents of the two books help us understand the world of children's experiences, reminding us that the best way to 'learn a child' is through observation and dialogue. The next two books, *On the Other Side of the Window...* and *Children's Hero*, presenting Korczak's biography, point to the need to build a reflective, sensitive and rebellious personality. Showing significant individuals, precursors of thoughts that change the course of history, should be an element of civic elementary education in today's difficult times when moral authorities decline it.

The contemporaries' memory of Korczak continues to bring results in the form of subsequent books addressed to both children and their guardians. There is a wealth of children's literature dealing with the problem of (lack of) knowledge and (lack of) respect for children's rights in reference to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. These include *Moje prawa ważna sprawa* [My Rights Are Important] (2014) by Anna Czerwińska-Rydel and Renata Piątkowska, *Mam prawo i nie zawaham się go użyć!* [I Have the Right and I Won't Hesitate to Use It!] (2014) by Joanna Olech, *Kuba i Buba w szpitalu, czyli o prawach dziecka – pacjenta prawie wszystko!* [Kuba and Buba in Hospital, or About the Rights of the Child: Almost Everything About the Patient's Rights!] (2015) and *Tegoż Mam prawo? Czyli nieomal wszystko, co powinniście wiedzieć o prawach dziecka, a nie macie kogo zapytać* [Am I Entitled to This?

71 M. Wójcik-Dudek, *Konieczność śladu: kanony literatury dla dzieci i młodzieży*, „Narracje o Zagładzie”, 1 (2015) p. 105.

Almost Everything You Need to Know about Children's Rights, but You Have No One to Ask! (2017) by Grzegorz Kasdepke, *Która to Malala?* [Which One Is Malala?] (2015) by Renata Piątkowska and *Malala i jej czarodziejski ołówek* [Malala and Her Magic Pencil] by Malala Yousafzai (2018). The content of the books is undoubtedly interesting material for further research in the field of humanities and social sciences.⁷² The books *Pamiętnik Blumki* [Blumka's Diary] (2011) and *Jak ciężko być królem* [How Hard It Is to Be a King] (2018) by Iwona Chmielewska may also attract attention as they speak through symbolic images. In her picture books, using sophisticated techniques of artistic expression and surprising collages, the artist reinterprets Korczak's thoughts. Research on the hypnotizing form and message of her picture books, which I call empathetic manifestos, is now being conducted increasingly often.⁷³

The struggle of existence and communication are particularly visible in art, including belles-lettres. Even if Korczak's conversations with his pupils are an unrivalled model of dialogue, it is important that many people concerned about the condition of the modern world undertake them. I am convinced that those who set a good example should be promoted in the media. Unfortunately, this seemingly obvious statement is no longer that obvious nowadays. Korczak's message addressed to the generation of young people in the literature dedicated to them is a request to develop self-reflection and responsibility to be able to cope with the threats of the modern world, which is full of enigmatic and capricious trends, promotes kitsch and poses and is increasingly deprived of humanitarianism. It is good to remind ourselves about the content of the analysed books when numerous media are shamefully making money from sensationalism, selling the war as a media spectacle, when young people 'kill each other' in computer games and increasingly younger children carelessly play 'bombing'.

72 K. Zabawa, *Prawa dziecka w utworach literackich dla najmłodszych*, „Horyzonty Wychowania”, 14 (2015) No. 31, pp. 205–220, DOI: 10.17399/HW.2015.143111.

73 M. Cackowska, *Współczesna książka obrazkowa – pojęcia, typologia, badania, teorie, konteksty, dyskursy*, in: *Książka obrazkowa. Wprowadzenie*, eds. M. Cackowska, H. Dymel-Trzebiatowska, J. Szyłak, Poznań 2017, pp. 11–48.

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