Who Was Janusz Korczak?

Joseph Arnon

On a Wednesday, the 5th of August, 1942, in the midst of the Second World War, a tragic incident that was to become legendary took place in Nazi-occupied Warsaw.

Led by a bent, weary figure with a child in his arms, 200 children marched in calm, orderly ranks down the streets that wound from the Jewish ghetto to the *Umschlagplatz,* the assembly point from which Jews were shipped off to the death camp at Treblinka. At the rear of the "parade" strode a stocky, dark-eyed woman. The column passed before the eyes of the streets' inhabitants, who stared at the elderly doctor, famous author, and renowned pedagogue conducting his homeless children to the gas chambers. Nothing happened. Not a cry went up toward heaven, to say nothing of toward one's fellow man.

Since that day, in the absence of any reliable eye-witness, various accounts and versions have sprung up of the last mile walked by Janusz Korczak and his assistant Stefania Wilczyńska, who had faithfully worked by his side in the children's home for forty years.

Of all the many people who knew Korczak in his lifetime, who worked with him or were under his tutelage, only a few elderly individuals are still with us today. It behooves all of us who knew him, therefore, as well as all those who wish to memorialize for future ages the outstanding educational figures of our own, to investigate the legend surrounding this extraordinary man while we still can. Let it be said that this is no easy task. Not only were Korczak's writings, both in content and form, suffused with a surrealistic atmosphere that combined the most realistic regard for exactitude and detail with the most dreamlike, imaginative and suggestive states, but his whole life was similarly incomparable and unique. No description of his highly spiritual, visionary world can avoid seeming one-dimensional. Despite these difficulties, however, we must try.

In a story called *The Tale of Hershke* that he wrote shortly before the outbreak of the war, Korczak portrays a crazed rabbi who tells a Jewish boy the story of the destruction of the Temple.

"Then there was a great fire and all the Torah scrolls burned. Yes, they did. No, no, they didn't. Only the parchment burned; the letters flew up to heaven and were saved. Yes, they were. God was angry at the Jews. He wanted to kill them. He took a pen and ink and sat down to write their sentence. Yes, He did. He sat down to write that the Jews must be killed."

"All of them?" asks the frightened boy.

"Yes. He wanted to wipe out every last one of them. Yes, He did. He didn't mean to spare a soul . . . But the letters wouldn't let Him. They flew away and hid so that He couldn't write. . . ."

The written word would not allow it. We too must make use of the written word to perpetuate the memory of Korczak so that it may not be lost to coming generations.

Childhood and Youth

The name of Janusz Korczak was adopted by its bearer in 1899. A young man named Henryk Goldszmit, who had been born on the 22nd of July, 1877, was copying out an entry he had written for a literary competition. By chance, he happened to glance at a novel by the Polish author Kraszewski whose hero was called Janasz Korczak. The young writer decided to use the name for the purpose of the competition, and due to a typesetter's error "Janasz" became "Janusz." Thus, the student Henryk Goldszmit, the son of the Warsaw barrister Josef Goldszmit, an assimilated Jew, took on a new name that was to last him for life.

Young Henryk's childhood, which passed in an atmosphere of culture and refined abundance, was a pleasant one. He was a bashful boy who preferred entertaining himself with his own private dream world to playing with friends. Only his grandmother, his favorite confidante, sensed that he would some day be a "philosopher" and believed in his future greatness.

Toward the end of his life, at the age of 64, Korczak wrote in his ghetto diary: "I had an investigative rather than an inventive mind. I tried to find out what the essence of the children, the adults, my toy blocks, were. I never broke my toys, or took apart my doll to see why its eyes were closed when it lay down. It wasn't the mechanism that mattered but the essence, the thing in itself."

He knew next to nothing about his Jewishness. His Polish environment distinguished him from the Jewish children of Warsaw. He wrote in his ghetto diary:

> When I was about five I was bothered by the thought of what I could do that there should be no dirty, hungry, ragged children like the ones with whom I was not allowed to play in the yard, where under the chestnut tree, in an old tin candy box lined with absorbent cotten, lay the first corpse of someone I cared for and loved — my canary. Its death first raised the mysterious problem of religion. I wanted to put a cross over its grave, but our maid told me that I mustn't because my canary was only a bird, a creature of far less importance than a man. Even to mourn for it, according to the maid, would be a sin. Worse yet, however, was my being told by the gatekeeper's son that the canary was Jewish. I too was a Jew, whereas he was a Polish Catholic. For him there would be a place in Paradise, while I, if I watched my language and obediently stole a sugar candy for him from my home every day, might be lucky enough after my death to be sent to a place that wasn't Hell, though it was awfully dark there. I happened to be afraid of dark rooms. Death — Jews — Hell — Paradise — Darkness: there was plenty to think about.

At the time that he attended elementary school and high school, Poland was still part of the Czarist Empire and Russian influences prevailed. These were unable, however, to prevent a rebellious underground flow of Polish national feeling and culture, which the Czarist authorities sought to suppress. The language of instruction was Russian, but young Henryk's first experiments in writing were in Polish. Though he was by now well aware that he was a Jew, he felt thoroughly a Pole and part of the rebellious spirit of young Poland.

When he was a boy of eleven, his family suffered a heavy blow that left a scar on his sensitive soul. His beloved father experienced a mental breakdown and had to be institutionalized.

Of this Korczak wrote in his diary:

When I was seventeen I began to write a story called "Suicide," the hero of which couldn't stand to live because he was afraid of going mad. I was deathly scared of the asylum to which my father had been committed. I had to face the fact that I was the son of a madman. . . . For decades, and even to this day, the thought has never ceased to occasionally trouble me.

The death of his father when he was eighteen was another blow to the young man's spirit. He was now expected to help support his family (which he did by giving private lessons) at the same time that he continued to drive himself in his studies and literary endeavors. By day he studied and worked, while by night he wrote stories, satires, and poems.

Author and Doctor

During his last year in high school, Henryk summoned up the courage to pay a visit to the editor of a literary and political weekly, to whom he read his poems aloud. The young student read his work with due solemnity, but when with great pathos he declaimed the final lines

Let me feel, let me live,
Let me go to the dark, dismal grave . . .

the editor curtly informed him: "You have my permission." "From that day on," Korczak related years later, "I never wrote poems any more."

In 1898, when he was twenty years old, he was awarded first prize in the Paderewsky literary competition. Together with his new name, Korczak now advanced rapidly in the literary world. His first book, *Street Children (Dziecko Ulicy),* which appeared in 1901, was a realistic description of slum youngsters. Its vignettes, the notes for which were jotted down "on the back of cigarette packs," marked a milestone in Korczak's spiritual development and in his ability to identify psychologically with suffering in any form.

In 1903, he received his medical diploma and began to practice in the Warsaw Children's Hospital on Sliska Street. This did not prevent him, however, from publishing yet another book in 1904, *Salon Children (Dziecko Salonu),* which further guaranteed his literary reputation in Poland.

Among the many reviews of Korczak's work that appeared at this time, it is worth quoting from one written by Stanislaw Brzozowski, the author, social critic, and member of "Young Poland":

The inner experiment that Korczak has attempted in this series of complaints and of painful and ironic lamentations bearing the title of *Salon Children,* whose passion derives more from their own content than from any deliberate manipulation on the author's part, sums up in great measure the history of all of us who have spent our youths in Warsaw during the last fifteen years. The book's subject is the devastating and perfectly conscious meaninglessness of our lives within the lines laid down by our current existence. . . . It was at this time that Korczak undoubtedly began to dream his great dream of the compassion that heals all wounds and brings balm to the troubled and dejected. . . . At the same time, there is in Korczak a humorist as well. . . . His psychological analysis frequently reminds one of Oscar Wilde.

Salon Children made an impact on the Polish intellectual public. Its readers eagerly looked forward to the author's next work — except that he, meanwhile, had disappeared. In 1904, he entered the Czarist army to serve as a medical

officer during the Russo-Japanese War. His line of duty brought him past the Urals and to the vicinity of the Chinese border near Lake Baikal. However, despite the waves of strikes and rebellions which he encountered while in service, and which culminated in the Revolution of 1905, Korczak's thoughts remained with the problems of children. Once, at the front, he gave a lecture to the soldiers on childhood in which he explained that "One must think first of the child before making revolutions."

After returning to the Jewish hospital in Warsaw, Korczak embarked on a journey of post-graduate study and observation in a number of Western countries. He spent a year in clinics in Berlin ("I learned there to consider what we have already accomplished, and how to advance cautiously and systematically from there"); half-a-year in Paris ("There I was taught to think about how much we still don't know, want to know, must know, and some day will know"); and a month in London ("discovered what true social work was — a great achievement!"). Dr. Henryk Goldszmit, the successful children's doctor, seemed to have gotten the upper hand over the author Janusz Korczak, whose intellectual and literary contributions were already a matter of record.

Between 1901 and 1909, Korczak volunteered to head two summer camps run for Warsaw's poor children. One was for Jewish children and one for Catholic. These years, it would seem, marked a turning point, for henceforward his life was devoted entirely to children. His experience in the summer camps led to the publication of three books: *Mośki, Joski, Srule* (1910), dealing with the adventures of children in the Jewish camp; *Józki, Jaśki, Franki* (1911), about his observations of the children in the Catholic camp; and *Slawa* (1912), a work of fiction about children in a Warsaw slum, in which a constant note of humor accompanies an atmosphere of positive optimism.

The Orphanage

By 1912, the pedagogue in Korczak-Goldszmit had emerged "victorious" over both the doctor and the author. In this year he became director of a Jewish orphanage whose well-equipped building at 92 Krochmalna Street he personally designed and planned. As house mother and chief assistant, he appointed Stefania Wilczyńska. Korczak's plunge into this new existence brought with it a series of uncompromising moral demands which he unsparingly drove himself to meet, it being his firm belief that even the truest conception was of value only when actively practiced. From now on he gave himself over entirely to the children in his charge.

In later years he was to explain the reason for this decision. It did not satisfy him, he said, merely to take care of sick children. He wished to deal with the physical and intellectual world of healthy children too in all its aspects, with their developmental processes and their interrelationship with the environment. He felt only too keenly — and expressed it in print more than once — how helpless medicine was to deal with social factors: "A spoon of castor oil," he wrote, "is no cure for poverty and parentlessness."

They seemed to complement each other: the loneliness of the child, of the homeless child especially, and the creative and intellectual loneliness of Korczak the man.

Thus began the thirty-year saga of Korczak the "father" in his children's home.

The children in the orphanage came from the slums, from prostitute mothers, from the harshest and most humiliating backgrounds. Such children brought with them a wide range of fears, anxieties, defense mechanisms against

adults, general distrustfulness, and a system of values based on deceit and outward bluff.

It has long been an accepted fact in social psychology that the condition of parentlessness can easily bring about the "disease" of delinquency. The homeless child lacks the emotional support of a father or mother and finds difficulty in internalizing prevailing social values. As a result, he is likely to assert himself on the basis of anti-social norms.

Korczak's approach was geared to preventing such a development along with its moral consequences. Underlying his methods was the determination to resocialize the children who entered his home. These children were already deeply infected with pathological patterns. Korczak sought to keep such patterns from being further internalized into anti-social personality structures by means of an organized way of life and original forms of discipline which might teach the child new values and instill in him a sense of positive selfhood. The process of socialization within an organized children's world was designed to foster aspirations that might strengthen the powers of self-discipline and self-restraint in the face of egocentric desires.

It must be remembered that at the turn of the century in Poland, and especially at the end of the First World War, the children's homes were full of socially "lost" youngsters who lived in a state of constant friction with accepted social standards. These children frequently harbored unconscious memories of abused parental authority, which colored all their attitudes toward authority with fear and wistful fantasies. Memories of this sort invariably had their effect on the child's trust in the adult world.

The homeless child knows no family life, has no routines or traditions connected with work day or holiday, has never experienced the effect of parental influence on the numerous details of daily life at the table, in one's studies, at one's work. Korczak made it his supreme pedagogical goal to return to his children the very thing that adult society had deprived them of. His basic premise was *pedagogical* love, which is a different thing entirely from that romantic and sentimental love of the child that generally stems from an attraction/rejection ambivalence. The latter approach to the child, Korczak was all too well aware, is doomed to failure in advance, especially with the homeless child. The romantic-sentimental educator is too often motivated by his need to overcome his own lack of self-esteem. Children, especially homeless ones, Korczak believed, need an adult who can be objective about both himself and them. Children need to be able to depend on grown-ups, and to rely on them intellectually, aesthetically and organizationally. Love should be an accompaniment to the educator's activities, but it must always be expressed concretely and through personal example. "The lower the teacher's own psychological level, the less moral authority he commands. Too much worrying about one's own peace-and-quiet or convenience leads to a proliferation of orders and prohibitions that are only ostensibly issued for 'the good of the child.'" Both in theory and in practice, Korczak was always careful to refrain from any arbitrary or impulsive use of his absolute power as an adult. The good pedagogue, he believed, is always seeking to improve and instruct himself in his work and is thereby able to preserve and renew his links with the child. "Before he asks a child to wash the floor, the teacher must do it several times himself and must observe how the other children do it and what they say about it. It is more important to teach them how to wring out a mop or how a straw mattress is made than to order that their beds be made spotlessly as though it were a military barracks."

Educational Philosophy

Pedagogical love, Korczak asserted, is attained when the adult is respected and accepted by the child because he creates a happy atmosphere and refrains from the compulsive use of authority — which is something that children can never understand. It is the very opposite of that biological fatalism which Korczak as a scientist and doctor might psychologically have been expected to embrace. Such fatalism is the negation of the consciousness of personal responsibility; it is the consciousness of being governed by fate. Korczak demanded a full sense of responsibility and of the realization of social and ethical values both in others and in himself.

Pedagogical love, he explained, rejects all authority that is merely imposed from above. The relation it envisions between the teacher and his charges is not handed down by fiat but is a product of mutual understanding. Unlike other proponents of "free education" in the early years of the century, Korczak was totally supportive of the psychologically neglected child whose social and moral misbehavior was a predictable result of his abandonment. In his concern for creating the conditions for "the happy childhood," he warned against the educational "predator" who only seemed to be devoted to the child. "Take careful note: a new tyrant is on the loose in contemporary life. This is the predatory man with his obligatory ways. His concessions to the weak, his show of equal rights for women, his seeming kindness toward children — all are mere pretext and sham."

It was his very pedagogical love, in fact, which forced Korczak to close the doors of his institution to hundreds of slum children. He knew the enormous demands he was making on himself. "I simply haven't the strength," he would say, "to properly look after even the handful of the children here already." He was pedagogically, lovingly, aware of his own limits.

Like other proponents of "free education," Korczak was opposed to all compulsion and regimentation. He was close to the naturalistic school of pedagogy which holds that the well-balanced child is naturally "self-correcting," yet unlike such educational theorists as Rousseau and Tolstoy, he never believed in the unlimited powers of education. For all his enthusiasm for what could be accomplished in an educational setting, he repeatedly stressed the fact that there were occasionally "bad" children just as there were "bad" adults. All varieties of human behavior could already be found in the world of the child. Children naturally imitated the talk, the ambitions, and even the passions of adults. Nothing was potentially foreign to their nature.

He considered heredity an important factor, one which does not in itself establish educational parameters but which must be taken into account in fixing them. It is in this light that we must read the outcry of one of his characters in a play that he wrote in the 1930s, when the bestial Nazi shadow had already fallen over Europe:

> I insist: without eugenics we shall all sink hopelessly into the swamp, forever. Everyone of us gives birth as he pleases; no matter how malevolent or indifferent, we let him bear children and forget them. It's time that we asked: to whom does the right to bear children belong? Every soda stand needs a license, documents, operating capital, periodic inspection ... but there isn't anyone, the most dubious character, who can't become a father if he wants, and so assure himself of an immortal future. Instead of hanging meaningless phrases over our school buildings like "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity," we should put up something realistic like "Be a good father! Be a good mother!" To think of how many fathers should not be called "papa" at all, but rather, "you bandit!"

In his approach to the child, Korczak rejected the "statistical man" approach who can be scientifically measured according to some objective, universal ideal which society must pursue by equally imposing it on all. Korczak's starting point was not "pure-philosophical" but rather essentially empiric. It considered four distinct factors: heredity, environment, the independent personality of the child, and the educational process. His educational method was to create an appropriate life-situation in which education could grapple with the individual's problems, thus leading to the desired formation of what he called "the decent person."

Over and over, Korczak was made aware of the weighty role assigned the teacher in any educational method. "Whoever wishes to educate slum children must always remember that medicine distinguishes between *praxis pauperum* and *praxis aurea*. Let him remember too that there are unusually creative children who are also braggarts and unusually good children who constantly use gutter language. One must always be mindful of the background such children come from."

It was with this pedagogical credo that Korczak constructed his children's kingdom at 92 Krochmalna Street, Warsaw.

World War I

With the outbreak of World War I in 1914, Korczak was again called up to the medical corps of the Russian army. The children's home remained under the guidance of Stefania Wilczyńska.

The more one writes about Janusz Korczak and pays homage to his rare genius, the more unjustifiable it seems to pass in silence over the role of his foremost pedagogical companion. Why speak only of him who conceived the idea and not also of her who helped fulfill it in practice and enabled its future transmission? For thirty years Stefania Wilczyńska worked with Korczak in his Jewish children's home; for hundreds of months she fought the uphill battle in anti-Semitic Poland on behalf of the defenseless and weak; for eleven-thousand days and nights she was constantly with her charges. Born to a well-to-do, assimilated Warsaw Jewish family in 1886, she was twenty-five years old when she came to live at 92 Krochmalna Street. Previously she had finished high school in Warsaw under the Russians and studied toward the degree of natural sciences at Liège University in Belgium. If Korczak was for the children a father figure who was continually coming and disappearing again, it was Stefa, as they called her, who provided the dependable daily presence. The two were the perfect team, for Korczak's imaginativeness and creativity found their complement in Stefania Wilczyńska's practical abilities. He provided the original thrust, and she the administrative detail and continuity. Korczak would comment, give instructions, ruminate, while she was endlessly willing to listen and to put things into effect. Korczak's responses were quick and immediate, whereas Stefa saw things in the context of the long-run. He had no memory for people and barely remembered their faces, while she, years later, would recall everyone she had known down to the smallest detail.

Korczak's relationship with the teachers who worked under him was generally intellectual and impersonal; it was Stefa who actually came in daily contact with them. It was she who organized and carried out the ideas that Korczak formulated, a task that demanded great skill, pedagogical tact, personal integrity, and an unshakable faith in the child's right to self-respect.

During the world war Stefa had to get up every morning at six o'clock to start the day in the infirmary, and was still on her feet late at night making the

rounds while the children slept. The self-sacrifice of the war years strengthened the bonds of affection between her and the children.

Korczak spent the four years of the war at the front, somehow finding time to write his most comprehensive work on the subject of *How Does One Love a Child?* Had the doctor-major in the Russian army fallen by chance on one of the fields of East Prussia, among his few possessions would have been found a lengthy manuscript on the education of children. Korczak wrote these pages, which contain the synthesis of his experience as a pediatrician and pedagogue, under the most hostile conditions of intellectual isolation and continual bombardment in the field hospitals where he worked. All his accumulated wisdom and powers of intellectual discipline went into the task.

Korczak has frequently been compared with the Swiss educational reformer Johann Pestalozzi, and indeed, he always considered Pestalozzi's volume *How Gertrude Teaches the Children* to be a great pedagogical work. It hardly needs to be added that just as this book is one of the classics of 19th-century pedagogical literature, so Korczak's *How Does One Love a Child?* is one of the educational masterpieces of our own century.

The war ultimately brought Korczak as far as Manchuria. This was his second experience of military defeat, and he wrote: "War isn't murder. It's the victory parade of insane men coming home drunk from a Walpurgisnacht."

In 1918 he returned to Warsaw. It was a different city from that which he had left. Warsaw was now the capital of an independent Poland, and a mood of social and moral rejuvenation had been aroused by the creation of the new state.

Among the many public activities to which Korczak now lent himself was the *Nasz Dom,* the new home for working-class children that had been organized by the Polish social worker Maryna Falska. He now spent two days a week with these Polish Catholic children while continuing to devote the rest of his time to his Jewish children on Krochmalna Street. In both places he employed the same methods and enjoyed the help of dedicated assistants.

Both the *Nasz Dom* and the Krochmalna Street home were islands of happiness for the children in their care compared to the various other municipal, ecclesiastical, or philanthropic institutions that existed in Warsaw at the time. Nowhere else in Poland were educational theories and methods of so advanced a nature being practiced.

If one were to briefly survey the great tide of progressive, humanistic education that washed over Europe and the United States in the first half of the 20th century, one would have to mention such names of Hugo Gaudig (1860-1923) in Germany, who insisted that schools did not exist for the sake of the self-expression of the teacher but rather to develop the personality of the pupil; Ovide Jean Decroly (1871-1932) in Belgium with his school of "toward life, by life"; Maria Montessori (1870-1952) of Italy, who developed an educational system based on free activity and aiming at the creation of a self-regulating, autonomous child through movement and work; Celest Freinet (1896-1966) in France, who believed in the development of the child's personality through the fostering of an environment that encouraged his creative forces; and C.D. Washbrune, founder of the Winnetka School, and Helen Parkhurst (1887-1957), founder of the Dalton School, in the United States. Though it can be said of Korczak that he himself did not invent a single idea or concept that was new, his importance lay in the fact that it was he above all who introduced this fresh pedagogical spirit into Poland, and who adapted it specifically to the needs of the abandoned child.

The brief war that broke out in 1919 between Poland and Bolshevik Russia once again forced Korczak to don military garb, but this time as a Polish patriot. He remained, however, in Warsaw, where he was put in charge of combating contagious diseases in the hospitals. In the course of his work, he himself fell ill with typhus, and so as not to expose the children to infection, he had himself taken to his mother's apartment. Eventually he recuperated, but his mother took sick and died. His deep sorrow at her passing was to find its expression in his religious work *Alone with God (Sam na sam z Bogiem),* which he referred to as "the prayers of those who will never pray."

At last Korczak returned to his children.

Pedagogical Methods

What exactly were the goals and techniques of Korczak's pedagogical method?

Korczak believed that the future hope of society rested not on the improvement of governments but on the improvement of the human being. This he hoped to attain neither by compulsion, nor by imposing the pedagogue's views from above and nor by breaking the individuality of the child. What every child did need, he held, was his own moral backbone, that necessary minimum of humanity without which life in unlivable.

Korczak's method can be divided into its prophylactic and therapeutic aspects, though it is not always easy to mark the division between them.

Among the prophylactic or preventive techniques that he used was one that might be called "the freedom to fight." The children in the home were granted the right to "solve" certain quarrels and minor conflicts by fisticuffs, but this "solution" was subject to certain procedural rules. Among these was the requirement that the combatants "register" on a bulletin board, where they were expected to write whom they wished to fight with and why. This was supposed to be done before the fight, but in cases where a spontaneous battle broke out, it was done when it was over. Fairness was a requirement at all times: the combatants had to be equally matched, no weapons or dangerous blows were allowed, etc. The sanctioning of the right to fight practically eliminated all unsupervised vendettas. This near-suppression of violence by a recognized "social contract" made things much easier for both teachers and children and improved relationships among all. It was a solution that simultaneously strengthened the mechanism against violence in the child while preserving an outlet for hostile energies that had accumulated.

Another custom in the home was that of the "thank-you notes." Whenever one child did another a favor, or a child a teacher, or a teacher a child, the beneficiary was expected to publicly express his appreciation. This was not done over every minor matter, but when some special service had been performed — as when one child had agreed to fill in for another at work, or a teacher had told an especially good story, or the gardener had protected some children from a band of toughs in the street. The "thank-yous" were recited every Saturday at a general assembly.

The "lost-and-found box" was another institution. Since everything had its rightful owner, great stress was laid on returning all lost objects. A glass box was set aside for this purpose, which was constructed in such a manner that things could be dropped into it but not easily taken out. On a given day, the finds would be divided or returned. Korczak recognized the natural desire of the child — of everyone — to acquire things. He evaluated the "private property" of his children not according to its objective worth but according to their subjective feelings about it.

"The educator must see to it," he wrote, "that every child has something that is not the anonymous possession of the institution but belongs to him, privately and exclusively. . . . The less sensitive educator, who doesn't understand or is impulsive, is likely to be angered at the sight of bulging pockets, drawers that don't shut, quarrels that break out over things that are stolen or lost. In a fit of exasperation he may assemble all these 'treasures' in a pile and dump them in the garbage or the incinerator. This, however, is an act of indescribably barbaric vandalism. How can you in your ignorance destroy somebody else's property? And how can you then expect the child to love anything again? You're not burning paper but the most precious traditions and life's most ideal aspirations."

No amount of explanation or detail can possibly give the full picture of what Korczak's method of individualized education for the prevention of social disharmony among homeless children was like.

In describing the therapeutic aspect of his work, we must also limit ourselves to a few meager examples.

First and foremost was his attitude toward *work.*

All the children in the home performed chores according to a system of rotation, which generally was broken up into three-month periods. In exchange for every half-hour of work, each child received one "work unit." Each child kept track of how many work units he had to his credit. 500 work units entitled him to one "commendation card." Whoever managed to earn 12 such "commendations" in the course of two or three years was granted the honorary title of "worker," a rank that bestowed on its bearer various special privileges.

Among the functions of work was to instill in each child a belief in his own powers. Better work-attitudes led in the course of time to the child's being given first choice as to what chores he wished to perform.

Korczak paid special attention to the abilities of the sickly, weak, or "unsuccessful" child. "Perhaps," he commented, "such a child needs more time in which to become accustomed to such things; perhaps, too, he should be excused from work altogether." And he went on: "The truly talented child is not hardened by having to struggle with difficulties, does not boast of every small success, and does not waste his abilities. The prideful child, on the other hand, thinks that the world owes him everything, makes fun of other people's steady and modest efforts to gradually reach some goal, and thinks highly of his own capacities but never of anyone else's." Korczak's children were expected to perform their jobs honestly and to show respect for the work of others, and were in turn encouraged to improve their own performance. Working in teams taught them mutual aid and solidarity. And yet Korczak was far from idealizing work for its own sake. He simply considered it a social catalyst whose importance was not to be exaggerated.

Another example of Korczak's therapeutic techniques is that of the "bet" or private agreement. Such "bets" served the purpose of convincing the child that he was capable of changing his habits and exercising his will power in order to restrain himself from acting or behaving in ways he felt ashamed of. "Bets" were not mentioned publicly or committed to writing. They took place solely between Korczak and the child in silent intimacy. A child might request or be requested to make a "bet" that he would overcome some particular difficulty within a specified period. If he won, Korczak would owe him candy; if he weakened and lost, he would Korczak. Frequently Korczak would have to dissuade the more ambitious "better" from setting himself some impossible

goal, so as to prevent him from feeling frustrated when he failed. Sometimes a child might ask Korczak to underwrite a secret bet without telling him what it was. If the child later claimed victory, he would be given his candy with no questions asked, just as he was expected to pay up if he felt that he had lost. It was all a gentleman's agreement.

Mention should also be made of such techniques as the "plebiscite," in which the children were asked to vote on matters of communal concern; the "challenge," in which the child was asked to perform a certain task in order to better his social standing; the weekly newspaper, which served for both information and self-appraisal; and the institution of "guardianship," whereby a "veteran" child was made responsible for a newcomer in need of help. Nor does this exhaust the list.

Korczak felt personally involved with the efforts of each single child to achieve and build character. Unlike certain other educational theorists and reformers, he strongly believed that all the child's positive words were of no value at all without a real willingness on his part to share responsibility.

The details of his educational method depended to a great extent on the success of the autonomous judicial system that he worked out with the children, and which occasionally led to eleaborate court decisions whose clauses ran into the hundreds. Korczak himself once commented:

> If I put so much emphasis on the children's court, this is because of my belief that it can be a real source of emancipation for the child and that it can teach him respect for law and individual rights. Every child has the right to a serious consideration and a just handling of his grievances. In the past such things have always depended on the disposition and good graces of the teacher. The child had no right to protest. It is time to put an end to such tyranny.

The opening paragraphs of the legal code stress the importance of keeping verbal commitments, provided that they are made after due deliberation, are understandable to the child, and reflect the rules of the children's society. In the preamble Korczak wrote:

> When someone does something bad, it is best to forgive him and to wait for him to mend his ways. But the court must at the same time protect the quiet ones and see to it that they are not bothered by bullies; the court must protect the honest ones and hard workers and make sure they are not taken advantage of by those who don't care or are lazy; the court must maintain order, because disorder harms good, honest, peaceful people the most. The court is not justice itself, but it must always strive to be just; it is not the truth itself, but it must always search for the truth. Judges can make mistakes, but it is disgraceful for a judge to deliberately support the wrong side.

The teachers and the children were equal before the court. Korczak himself was once convicted of violating Paragraph 100 for putting a small boy on top of a high closet and leaving him there as a practical joke. The satisfaction was visible when the court announced its verdict that, "The court finds the defendant guilty as charged and refuses to dismiss the case." From then on, Korczak was teasingly called *Setka* ("one-hundred" in Polish) by the children.

Korczak's method was based on the need for such social contracts between the weak and the strong, between the child and the adult, for he strongly believed that there could be no double standards of morality in education. It was not enough, he held, to pay lip service to justice and keeping the peace, for the former was generally taken to be the interest of the weak and the latter the interest of the strong, so that the two parties could never agree without the rule of law.

The educational methods practiced at 92 Krochmalna Street created a living experimental laboratory which drew pedagogues, parents, and social workers from all over Poland. Today, when we look back at Korczak's techniques from the vantage point of the educational accomplishments of the 1970s, it is hard not to feel that his method was ultimately too sophisticated, personal and precise, too dependent on his own unique genius, to be easily adaptable to general conditions. When, on the 30th anniversary of his death, I convened a meeting of several former wards of his at 92 Krochmalna Street who are now themselves the parents of children in the State of Israel, one commented: "Korczak made my life difficult, because he educated me — successfully — to believe in justice, whereas we live in a world where brute force prevails."

Another said: "If I'm a decent person today, it's because of Korczak. True, I haven't elbowed my way to great power or wealth, but at least I can look my own children in the eye with a clear conscience."

A third response was: "Whatever I've made of myself can be considered Korczak's personal triumph. God only knows what would have become of me without him."

Korczak would not have been surprised.

When bidding good-bye to the children when they left the home, which was generally at the age of 14, he used to say: "We're giving you only one thing to take with you — the dream of a better life, a life that doesn't exist anywhere in the world today, but that someday will: a life of justice and truth."

And he would add: "But this is no little thing. Truth and justice are things which everybody must learn to embody in himself as best he can. No one can do it for him. It's up to each one of you!"

In 1932, Korczak published a follow-up study of the children who had graduated from his home in its first twenty years (1912-1932). In listing their fields of employment he wrote: "I hesitate to add that — out of 455 children! — two have become beggars, two prostitutes, and three have been convicted of theft. Only those who have lived with them will understand what this means."

Publications

Side by side with his pedagogical activities, Korczak continued to write. In 1922 he published his famous children's book *King Macius the First (Król Maciuś Pierwszy)*, which is about a utopian kingdom of children led by a reformer-king whose program and philosophy can be said to approximate the author's own. In this volume, Korczak's experience in the children's home was retold in a marvelously lyrical fashion that has continued to captivate thousands of readers to this day.

In 1925, he published a half-lyrical, half-theoretical psychological work entitled: *If I Were Small Again*. The hero of the story is a grown-up man who once more becomes a boy. In 1926 he published a children's book called *The Bankruptcy of Little Jack (Bankructwo Malego Dzeka)*, about a boy in the United States with wonderful organizational powers who was able to establish a co-operative in his school because he learned from those older than himself. The same year Korczak published several brief dialogues of satiric social criticism of Polish life under the title *Unabashedly In Short (Bezwstydnie Krókie)*.

Another project that was also begun in 1926 was the founding of a weekly children's newspaper, "Children for Children," which was published as a supplement to the Jewish-Polish daily *Nasz Przaglad*. Its editors, reporters, and contributors all received a salary for their work. Korczak himself wrote for

it only rarely, but every Thursday he presided over a weekly meeting of the paper's correspondents, which was an unforgettable experience for them all. In the course of time, the newspaper developed a network of correspondents all over Poland, and numbered among its contributors many Polish-Catholic boys and girls despite the anti-Semitism of the times.

In 1929, Korczak published a summary of his psychological and pedagogical views entitled *The Child's Right to Respect (Prawo Dziecka Do Szacunku)* in which he strongly stated the case for the child who is the victim of adult deprivation and disregard. The book was followed by another volume in 1930, *The Rule of Life (Prawidla Zycia),* a guidebook to living for children and adults alike whose intimate, uncondescending tone bears the mark of much personal suffering. A typical passage reads: "I have witnessed three wars. I have seen wounded men with their hands blown off, with their stomachs split open and their intestines hanging out. I have seen the faces of soldiers, adults and children scarred for life. But I want you to know that the most terrible thing that I have ever seen has been the sight of a drunkard beating his defenseless child, or of a child tugging at his drunk father and pleading, 'Papa, papa, come home!' " Many of the passages in the book have a personal, almost confessional tone, such as the following: "I was wealthy as a small boy, and subsequently I became poor, and knowing both conditions I can say for a fact that it is possible to be a good, decent person in either. It is also possible to be rich and miserable. A person must know a great deal and be very familiar with himself, and even then it is possible to be frequently mistaken and in the wrong."

In 1931 Korczak's play for adults *The Senate of Madmen (Senat Szaleńców),* which he called "a black farce," was staged in Warsaw. Its action, which is set in a mental hospital in a world run by psychotics, seems to prophetically presage the insane human slaughter of the years to come that was already lurking over Europe. And yet despite its frightful existential vision, the overall tone remains one of positive lyricism. Korczak's atitude toward life in the play is perhaps best expressed in a tale that an old man tells to a boy: "When God abandons the human race and goes back up to heaven, he returns in a rain of pearls that falls right into the hearts of children." The child is humanity's hope!

Personal Memories

It was during these years of literary productivity (1929-1932) that I first came to know Janusz Korczak as a young teacher in his children's home. At this point, therefore, I would like to say a few words about the man as I knew him.

It is hard to be objective about Korczak. When I think of him today, when I try to picture him once more among the children, I see him as a towering, creative, yet ultimately lonely figure. He was a man of great spirituality and an unusual sense of humor, conscientious to a fault, an artist with an original, highly fertile and almost childlike imagination. He was prey to frequent emotional extremes and often went from elation to depression. Such psychological crises are commonly referred to in his writings and his letters to his friends, yet in his daily work, among his children and his staff, I always remember him as balanced, temperate, thoughtful, and supremely self-disciplined. Never once in all the long period I spent working with him do I recall him "losing control."

His pedagogical conscience forbade him to make work-demands on anyone unless he had first tried them out on himself. This was why one often found him engaged in the most surprising tasks: polishing shoes, for example (so that the children would see how to do it), cleaning tables in the dining room (so as to find

out how hard it was, how long it should take, how much breakage should be expected), polishing the furniture (was it a chore to which the smaller children could be assigned, how high a "finish" should be required?), cleaning up the bathrooms (the broom was as important as the book) — in all these things one had the impression of great meticulousness in a man who was by nature not meticulous at all.

"The truth about children," he used to say, "is not something learned just from books, but even more, from life. And life is so terribly short."

This was the spirit in which he directed his staff. Let me give a few examples.

Once, in the backyard of the home, a girl came up to a young staff-member who was absorbed at that moment in watching a group of children at play. When she touched the teacher on the back, the latter, without turning around to look, absent-mindedly patted the girl's head. A few minutes later I heard Korczak say in a nonchalant, unruffled voice: "Young lady, be so kind to turn around and look. That's a human being you're petting, not a dog."

The child's right to respect was not just some kind of theory.

At night Korczak often used to make the rounds of the sleeping children's beds with the young staff-members and instruct them on "the symphony of a sleeping child's breathing." In a pensive whisper he would point out the difference between a "nervous" and a "bronchitic" cough, or call our attention to a bed-wetter. On one such occasion I heard him reflect aloud: "How important it is for us to understand the positions of a child when he dreams."

Another time, in the main room of the home, a little boy came up to a staff-member and asked her to help him undo a shoelace which he couldn't loosen himself. The staff-member, a recent arrival, bent over, untied the shoelace, and received the thanks of the boy, who then went on his way. Only then did the "doctor" (as we used to call Korczak) approach her and ask a trifle heatedly: "Tell me, young lady, do you plan to make education your career or just a temporary pastime?" When the new teacher looked up at him in amazement, he stopped and gave her a practical lesson on how a shoelace should be untied.

Ida Merzan, an educational worker of many years' experience in Poland, tells this story: "It was as a staff-assistant of Korczak's that I learned to think and to write. It was there that I first realized the possibilities for working with abandoned children, and that I learned to trust my own talents and strength. All this I owe to Janusz Korczak, whose personal example and concrete work techniques made an unforgettable impression on me."

In his personal relations he was reserved, and he was never emotional over others' misfortunes. The sorrow that he felt was expressed only in lyrical form in his writing. For this very reason it was comic, almost to the point of tears, to see him play the role of an old cynic.

And of course, there was always his wonderful humor, which seemed to banish all depression and relax all tensions, and to turn work itself into a kind of a game whose light-hearted pranks were the talk of many of his Warsaw acquaintances.

Recently I came upon two articles which appeared in the children's newspaper of the Krochmalna Street home in the early 1930s. Both complain about Korczak for his lack of support for the pro-Communist views of a number of his older charges. Their content brought back to me the atmosphere of those days. Korczak was aware of such views among the children and used to ask: "From which lamppost do you plan to hang me after the revolution?"

Korczak was sure of himself and utterly committed to the introspective vision of life that he had made his own. Self-education came first with him. "You can't teach others," he used to say, "unless you can teach yourself."

On the calendar that stood on the table of his attic room I once found a number of red-penciled "Xs." In response to my query, he told me, "These mark the days on which I've taken a resolution to cut down on smoking." Yet despite his great self-control, one had the feeling in certain situations that Korczak the author and lyricist was getting the better of Korczak the pedagogue. Such moments were not always helpful in getting through the grey routine of everyday work, a fact that Stefania Wilczyńska was especially sensitive to. Often Korczak seemed to be under the visible pressure of thoughts and ideas which would not let him be. He managed to write down only a fraction of them. Even then, the rapidity of their arrival and his own associative facility forced him to frequently jot them down in merely fragmentary, aphoristic, or outline form.

Korczak tried as often as he could to set time aside for quiet contemplation. Though his intellectual curiosity was continually being fed by whatever was going on around him, he was essentially a lonely man; yet he was that rare type of individual for whom loneliness is not an enemy but a friend, a creative ally, a refuge not an escape. Korczak pitied contemporary man for his inability to be by himself. His spiritual loneliness enriched even those who worked at his side. Like the Stoics, he believed that the best part of life was the freedom in being master of one's own mind and soul. The rest was but vanity.

We loved the man Korczak for both his greatness of spirit and his warmth and depth of emotion.

Palestine

On July 24th, 1934, Korczak arrived in Haifa. He had come to Palestine for only three weeks, but his program was ambitious: to immerse himself in the past, to find stimulus for reflection on the present, and perhaps to catch a glimpse of the future.

He took care in the course of his visit not to squander his time or to try to see "everything." Rather, he wished to familiarize himself thoroughly with at least one area that he might compare with what he already knew. In the end he decided on the kibbutz, for the city, he felt, was in a sense too "easy": he had lived in one all his life, and cities were more or less the same the world over. Even on the kibbutz, he carefully avoided small talk or tea parties and spent most of his time observing the native-born Palestinian children.

At about this time, it would seem, Korczak felt that he had come to a watershed in his life. It was the period of the German-Polish friendship treaty (1934) and the death of the Polish president Pilsudski (1935), whom Korczak had looked upon as a great Polish patriot and statesman. The pro-fascist right was on the ascendance and the country was flooded with a wave of anti-Semitism. Everywhere Jews were being pushed out of economic, social, and cultural life. Here and there vigilante groups and anti-Jewish riots had already appeared. Korczak sensed that the Jews of Poland were sitting on a tinderbox and began to take an interest in Palestine.

He had been preceded in this by Stefania Wilczyńska, who had come to Palestine in 1932 to visit her friend Feige Lifshitz and had worked for a while in the children's home at kibbutz Ein-Harod. Full of admiration for the commune's educational system, she urged Korczak to go to see for himself. As far back as October 1932, nearly two years before he came, he had written to me:

If there is a country anywhere the child is honestly granted his dreams and anxieties, his longings and conflicts — perhaps it is Palestine. It is there that a monument should be erected to the unknown orphan. When you see one of these children at work in the fields, under your true skies, imagine them too for a moment at some address in Warsaw or Lvov. The child you reach out your hand to may live at 17 Pawia Street or at 30 Franciszkańska. Perhaps he attends school on Grzybowska Street in a dirty, smelly classroom of fifty children. I still haven't given up hope that I may get to spend my last years in Palestine, from where I can always yearn for Poland.

In May 1933, after Hitler's rise to power, he wrote:

It's enough for me to have met some ten or fifteen emigrants to Palestine here to know what the people are like there: like people everywhere. Perhaps, inside and out, they are a little more bitter, a little more yearning. People can intellectually be divided into two categories: Those who rebel against life and those who accept it as it is. If I should some day be fated to come to Palestine, I would not be coming to the people there, but simply to the thoughts that might occur to me there. What do Mount Sinai, the Jordan, the Holy Sepulchre, the Hebrew University, the graves of the Maccabees, the Sea of Galilee, even Purim in Tel Aviv and the Jewish orange groves mean to me? My experience, after all, is of two-thousand years of history in Europe and Poland, of Jewish wandering. And now that so many German Jews are going to Palestine, I'm afraid that I'll have even less of a feel of things there. . . . What the world needs is not physical labor and orange groves, but a new faith, a faith in the future and in the child as the sources of all hope.

In December 1933 he wrote again:

If only I had the means, I would like to spend a half-a-year in Palestine to contemplate the past, and half-a-year in Poland to keep things going there. . . . For years I've been observing the helplessness and silent sadness of sensitive children, on the one hand, and the brazen antics of adult animals, on the other. I'm afraid that we're simply witnessing the meaningless destruction of everything honest and kindly, the massacre of the sheep by the wolves. I have no illusions — in Palestine it's bound to be the same. Perhaps, given the unfamiliar conditions there, my lack of connections, ignorance of the language and remoteness from all people, I might be able to make myself a little monk's cell, but to go under contract to perform this or that job — no, never. It's too much for me to contract myself out.

Meanwhile, things were getting steadily worse in Poland. The Polish children on Krochmalna Street had begun to harass the Jewish children in the home and to shout "dirty Jews!" and "Jews back to Palestine!" at them. "Jews to the ghetto!" began to appear in graffiti on the walls. One day two drunks frightened the children with a cry of: "Hitler is coming!" The situation of Polish Jewry was becoming precarious. Korczak began to take an interest in the Zionist youth movements and agreed to become a member of the non-Zionist representation on the board of the Jewish Agency. In March 1937 he wrote to me: "Palestine, if I'm not mistaken, should be a second League of Nations. Let the League in Geneva continue to be the parliament for worldy matters, for wars, massacres, work, hygiene and mass education, and let Jerusalem be the world center for the life of the individual. Let the spirit be its destiny and its raison d'être."

At times Korczak took an almost mystical, messianic view of the Jewish rebirth in Palestine. He simultaneously admired the Zionist experiment and had high hopes for the new horizons and possibilities that it promised, and skeptically wondered whether it wouldn't be rank desertion to leave his children in Warsaw in order to start a new life there. When I pointed this out to him in a letter, he wrote back: "You say I'm an optimist. Yes, it's true, there's nothing

that doesn't matter in this world, everything is grand and sublime. . . . Wasn't it the child that brought you to Palestine? And the kibbutz too is a child, as is every new tree or new house or new piece of road. Neither fire nor locusts nor earthquake can destroy your common effort, which shall prove eternal — but perhaps we shall yet get a chance to chat about this in Palestine itself." This was written in July 1938, but there were still other difficulties in the way of his coming, as he hoped, for a visit. In November 1938, he wrote to me: "The whole trip will cost me some 1000 zlotys. I simply don't have them."

In 1939 I still received from him a copy of his new book, *Pedagogy in a Comic Vein (Pedagogika Zartobliwa),* a collection of talks that had been given over the Polish radio; some artful stories about education, meant for children and grown-ups alike; and a final letter, written a month before the outbreak of World War II, in which Korczak looked forward in high spirits to spending summer in camp with his children. And he added: "I've spent this past month writing a Palestinian story, though one only in the sense that it take place in the form of a conversation between a father and his son in Palestine: a conversation about children. Only the last part of it will really need the feel of Palestine."

World War II and the Ghetto

On the 1st of September, 1939, the Germans invaded Poland. At the age of 61, Korczak put on his uniform again. It was his fourth war.

The great madness, which he had imaginatively foreseen eight years before in his play *The Senate of Madmen,* had begun. Following the lightning defeat of the Polish army, Korczak rushed back to Krochmalna Street to be with his children. Instead of the usual 100 he found — it was early in 1940 — that he now had 150. The entire burden of keeping up the home now fell on him and Stefania Wilczyńska. Korczak refused to accept the new reality. He disdained to comply with the German order that every Jew wear a white ribbon with a Star of David on it, nor did he take off his Polish army uniform, which he wore without insignia. In further protest, he designed a new "flag" for the children's home. On one side it had embroidered a blossoming tree against a green field as a symbol of Poland, and on the other — the Jewish star. In the Warsaw ghetto diary of Adam Czerniakow, Korczak is mentioned several times. In the entry for December 25, 1939, we read: "All communal services are shut down on the 24th and 25th. . . . Only the cemetery and collection offices are running as usual. . . . I spent the day visiting the hospital on Czysta Street, in the clinic for convalescents and undiagnosed arrivals. . . . I had to ask for extreme precautions to be taken in the anti-lice campaign. The patients under surveillance for typhus were shooting craps. . . . Korczak came for lunch. . . ."

Had I not known the tie between the two men, I would scarcely have paid any attention this passing reference, or of many such in the diary. The entry was written three months after the outbreak of the war. Under the Nazi occupation, maintenance of the orphanage became infinitely more difficult. Philanthropic support fell apart, and Korczak was forced at first to actually go begging from door to door in order to raise money for the children. His techniques of "fund-raising" are described in Czerniakow's diary in the entry for December 5th, 1940:

It's nine degrees today. I was at the ghetto offices. The Joint doesn't have a penny. . . . The workers are causing trouble because they haven't been paid. . . . Korczak tells me that whenever he buys kasha in a grocery store he tells the lady behind the counter, I can't get over how you look like my eldest granddaughter; she blushes all over and wraps it especially nicely. . . . He asked Wedel (the owner of a chocolate factory) to

sell him fifty kilograms of beans. When Wedell apologized that he was forbidden to sell to Jews, Korczak answered: 'in that case, let me have them as a gift.'

From the moment war broke out, Korczak had one obsession: to keep his children alive and well-nourished.

Korczak lived through the years of the ghetto in Warsaw from day to day, entirely in the present tense, for the daily struggle for physical survival blotted out the perspectives of future and past. All that mattered was to get through each hour, each minute — and to get 150 children, and then 200, through with him. As the area of the ghetto was continually narrowed, Korczak was forced to move with his children from the Krochmalna Street address, first to 33 Chlodna Street, then to 48 Sienna Street, and finally to 9 Sliska Street. In each of these places, life among the children went on with the same mutual respect, the same daily tolerance and good manners, as always, at a time when in the ghetto streets outside human beings mercilessly turned on each other and robbed one another in the struggle to stay alive, and Death sent men, women and children packing to the gas chambers. The children listened to their teachers' stories, played their usual games, and continued to convene their "court" — all with the appropriate seriousness and concentration. Korczak was there beside them, and the children felt his presence without it weighing on them or they on him. He saw to it that the children should at least continue to study reading, writing and arithmetic, and even invented a new system of "self-study cards." Occasionally he invited well-known Jewish scholars who were now trapped within the ghetto to lecture on subjects of a historical, social or literary nature. The art education program was kept up too. The singer Romana Lilian-Lilienstein, who was invited to attend a "concert" at the home shortly before Passover, 1941, relates:

The building was spick-and-span, though to this day I can remember the threadbare air of its auditorium and halls. The children were dressed in their best, as were we, and sat attentively waiting for the program to begin. Stefania Wilczyńska had everything organized down to the last detail. Dr Korczak began the recital with a few spoken words that were enough to create a mood both festive and calm. The children seemed all ears. We, the performers, were quite literally hungry, and I imagine our audience was too. Yet I'll never forget the excitement and the feeling of all those many eyes turned on us. It's hard to explain what that concert meant to us, performers and children alike, at that time.

On the 18th of July, 1942, during his last days in the ghetto, the 64-year-old Korczak wrote in his diary, which was later smuggled out to bear tragic testimony to the plight of the Jewish children of Poland: "Yesterday we had a performance. Tagore's The Mail. Afterwards, thank-you's from the audience, handshakes, smiles, attempts to start a friendly conversation (perhaps all this will help me next Wednesday when I have to lecture on 'Illusions: Their Role in Human Life')." Another day Korczak wrote in his diary about the spector of death stalking the ghetto streets together with life:

A boy is lying by the sidewalk, still alive, or perhaps already dead. Three other boys were playing nearby. The rope they were playing with got caught on the body on the ground. Furious at him for interfering with their game, they began to kick him where he lay. Finally one said, "Let's get out of here, he's just in the way," and off they went, still trying to untangle the rope.

And in another passage:

I came back crushed from "making the rounds." Seven visits — conversations, flights of steps, interrogations. The result: five zlotys, and a plege of five others every month. And on that I'm supposed to keep 200 souls alive!

I lay in bed in my clothes. It was the first really hot day. I couldn't fall asleep. My bed is in the middle of the room. A bottle of vodka is under it, and on the table, a pitcher of water and a rye bread.

To get up means to sit up in bed, to reach out for my underwear, to button them, if not all the buttons, at least one. and my shirt, too. Then I have to bend over to get on my socks, and there's the suspenders too ... I've started coughing again. It's hard work, to get up and down off the floor.

He was now suffering from a malfunctioning heart muscle, swellings in his legs, and a chronic eye infection.

Korczak thought much at this time about euthanasia, but the ethics of his profession as expressed in the Hippocratic oath won out in the end and he wrote: "Even when things have been at their worst and I've actually thought of putting the little child and old people in the ghetto who are doomed out of their misery, I couldn't but see it ... as the murder of innocent souls." And elsewhere he wrote: "Life is so hard and death so easy!"

The Last March

From the "Aryan" side there was no lack of attempts to get him to agree to be smuggled out of the ghetto and have his life saved. He spurned them all disdainfully. The children would not be abandoned; he was not a deserter.

The 5th of August, 1942, arrived.

We are told by an eye-witness who worked at the first aid station in the *Umschlagplatz:*

It was an unbearably hot day. I put the children from the home at the far end of the square, near the wall. I thought that I might manage to save them that way at least until the afternoon, and possibly until the next day. I suggested to Korczak that he come with me to the ghetto officials and ask them to intervene. He refused, because he didn't want to leave the children for even a minute. They began loading the train. I stood by the column of ghetto police who were putting people in the boxcars and watched with my heart in my mouth in the hope that my stratagem would succeed. But they kept packing them in and there was still room left. Urged on by whips, more and more people were jammed into the cars. Suddenly Schmerling — the sadistic ghetto police officer whom the Germans had put in charge of the *Umschlagplatz* — commanded that the children be brought to the cars. Korczak went at their head. I'll never forget that sight to the end of my life. It wasn't just entering a boxcar — it was a silent but organized protest against the murderers, a march like which no human eye had ever seen before. The children went four-by-four. Korczak went first with his head held high, leading a child with each hand. The second group was led by Stefa Wilczyńska. They went to their death with a look full of contempt for their assasins. When the ghetto policemen saw Korczak, they snapped to attention and saluted. "Who is that man?" asked the Germans. I couldn't control myself any longer, but I hid the flood of tears that ran down my cheeks with my hands. I sobbed and sobbed at our helplessness in the face of such murder.

In 1965 I travelled to Poland to encounter the shades of the past in the same streets of Warsaw where I first had met my great teacher. I revisited the house where I had worked at his side many years before.

I walked down the lanes of the ruined Jewish quarter until I reached the *Umschlagplatz.* I stood before a memorial tablet which stated in three languages that thousands of our martyred brothers had been sent from this place to Treblinka. In my mind's eye I saw him, and I thought, too, that above his unknown grave, beyond the black hatred and the poisonous vapors of death, I could see — his understanding, forgiving smile.

I thought to myself: He was a good doctor. He was a good philosopher. He was a good pedagogue. He was a good writer. He was a good poet. He was a good man.

Note:

Joseph Arnon (1911-1978) was born in Poland. While he was in high school, he became interested in Korczak's writing and educational philosophy and, later, worked with Korczak as a teacher/counsellor at the Orphanage in Warsaw.

In 1932, Joseph Arnon joined Kibbutz Ein-Hamifratz in Israel. One of the founders of the collective education system of the kibbutz, he also edited journals on kibbutz education, and was a founding member of the Korczak Association in Israel.

The above article was translated from Hebrew by Hillel Halkin.