

Janusz Korczak: living with children

Janneke de Jong-Slagman

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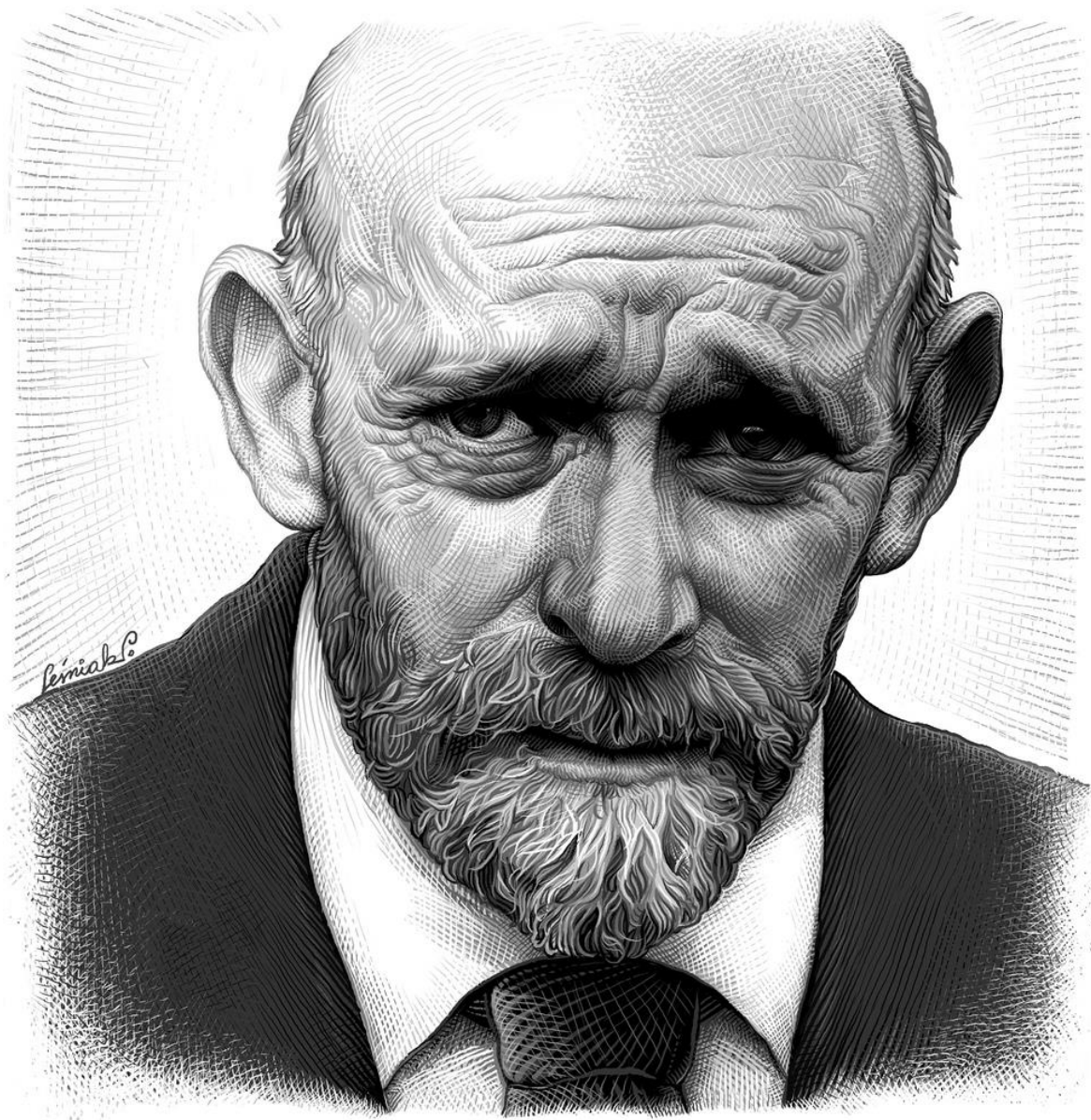
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1. Passport

Janusz Korczak

born as Henryk Goldszmit

Poland



Ill.: <http://kpfu.ru>

Born: Warsaw, 22 July 1878

Died: Treblinka, 6 August 1942

2. Narrative element

“Henryk, do you really want to ask that of me?” Mrs Goldzmit looked at her son with wide eyes. She always expected a lot from her intelligent, hardworking and promising son. After the tragic death of her husband and the financial troubles that went with it, she depended on Henryk - and it paid off. Mrs Goldszmit was attached to her position in the Varsovian bourgeoisie and scared to death of poverty. With all kinds of side jobs, Henryk strived to maintain the family income.

That was way back: after long an intensive training as a doctor, Henryk specialised as a paediatrician in Berlin. He was appointed at a clinic in Warsaw and at the same time also ran his private practice in the city of his birth. Mrs Goldzmit was proud of him: paediatrician and author, her son had made a name for himself. It was so nice having him back, in the home of his parents and seated at her table every day.

When Henryk came home earlier than usual one evening in November 1904, the welcome from his mom was much chillier than usual – because Henryk was not alone. With him was a boy of about six, a child of the people, dirty and dishevelled. He even ventured as far as introducing the child to his mother: “Mother, this is Misha. Misha, this is Mrs Goldzmit, my mother.” She looked at the boy and nodded, but she did not touch him and was reluctant to offer him a chair. Once he had dropped himself onto a little corner of the armchair Henryk showed him, she noticed that he kept scratching. Lice, she thought. Or fleas. The chair should be thoroughly cleaned just now.

“Mother,” Henryk started, “this is Misha – we are going to help him”. Henryk gave a detailed description of the struggles the boy faced: his parents were dead, his uncle and aunt would have taken care of him, but Uncle died of typhoid two weeks ago and Aunt had gone missing since then; Misha roamed the streets for a week but could not find shelter anywhere. Cold, scared and hungry, he would be doomed to a life as a petty thief to survive, especially since winter was around the corner. He had no-one. “And in this house, there is still an empty room, with a decent bed, and there is water and food. He will stay with us.” From under his cap, Misha glared at Mrs Goldzmit.

“With us?” she shrieked, “No, Henryk, do you really want to ask that of me? The neighbours have told me before that you concern yourself with the commoners, and that is your own choice, but I am adamant not to become involved with that.” Misha cowered, and Henryk felt the rejection as if it were him and not the boy. He stood up and left the room, with Misha in tow, without saying goodbye. The boy dragged behind him and out the door. Madam still wanted to escort them out, but before she could reach the door, Henryk had already banged it shut. From then on, she ate her meals alone and no-one slept in Henryk’s bed.

No more, he thought. Writing scripts for the high society, making small talk and taking care of their spoilt brats who look a little pale. There are others who need me more. Determined, he grabbed Misha’s hand and left the neighbourhood, and his wealthy life.

Questions

1a Put yourself in the role of the mother. How would you react?

1b Put yourself in Misha's shoes. What would you be expecting?

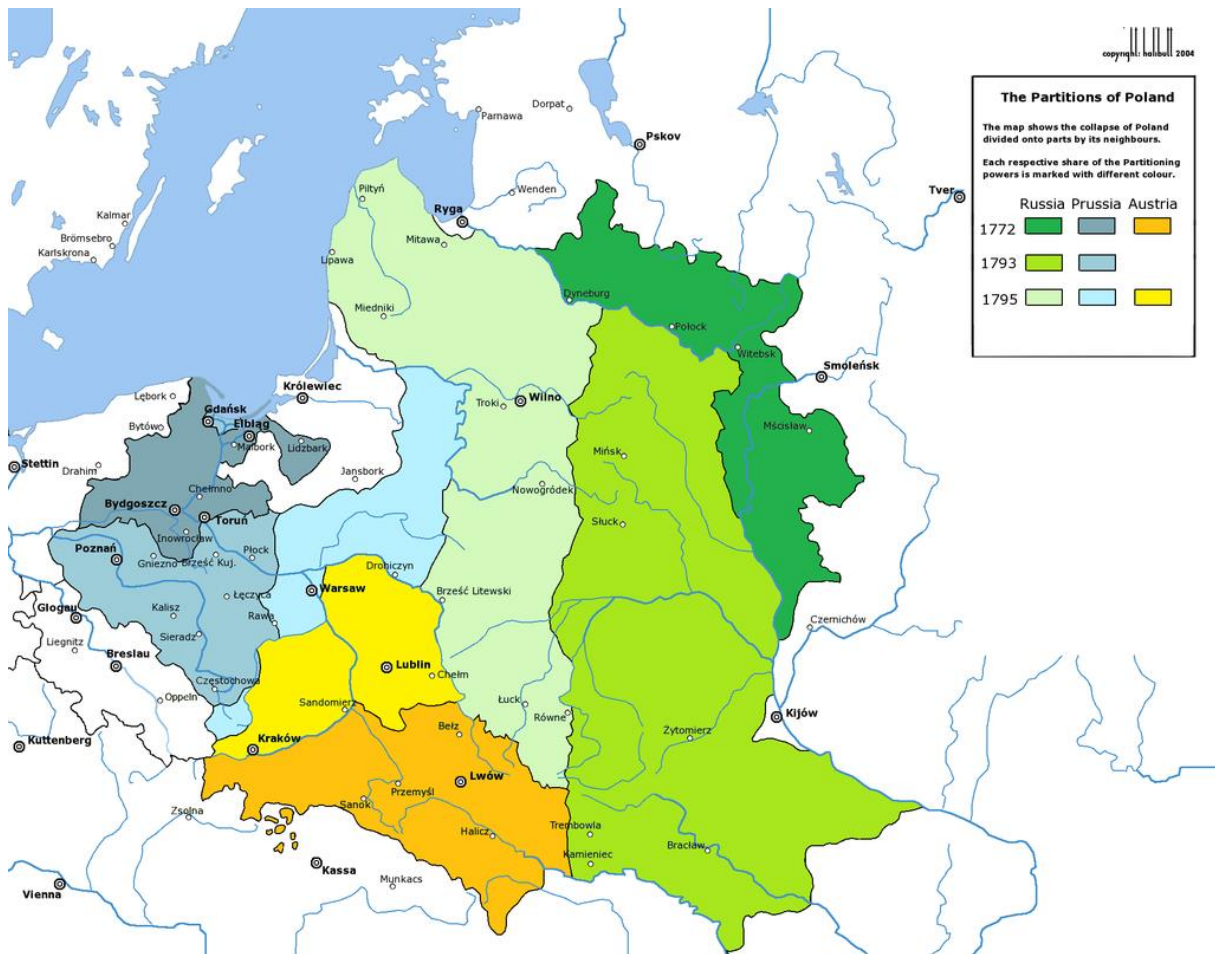
1c Now imagine you are Henryk Goldzmit / Korczak. What do you want? What are the consequences of your choice?

3. Historical context

To understand Korczak, it is necessary to know a few things about Polish history. It strongly influenced Korczak. The Jewish identity also played an important part in his life. Finally, his profession as doctor and orphanage house father is extremely relevant: all of this combined to make him a pedagogue living with and writing about children, helping teachers through lectures, publications and a radio programme. In this section, these three aspects (Polish history, the Jewish identity and the profession) are discussed.

Poland

Janusz Korczak's Poland had constantly been threatened by Russia, Germany and Austria in the past. Between 1792 and 1795 it was literally wiped off the map: Polish territory was annexed by the three aforementioned superpowers. Dating back to the 18th century, the so-called 'Partitions of Poland' is an historical concept.



Save for a few individual territories that remained independent during a certain period, such as for example the Duchy of Warsaw (1807-1813/1815) and the Republic of Kraków (1815-1846), Poland was ruled by Russia. Poland only became an independent state again in 1919, following the Eastern Front of World War I.

Korczak experienced the consequences of this far-reaching history first-hand. Korczak identified as Polish and was proud of the identity of his country and his people, but he lived in a part of Poland that had been annexed by Russia and had to serve in the Russian army during the war. He for instance, served as a medical officer in the tsarist army from 1904-1905 (Engel, 2013, p. 120). In Manchuria he was struck by the suffering experienced by children as a consequence of war and became convinced that: ‘no war was worth depriving children of their natural right to happiness. Children should come before politics of any kind (Lifton, 1989, p. 42)’. At this time, he also realised that there can be natural interactions between an adult and a child. More than once was in awe of the ability of children to help each other and also to help adults: a fourteen-year-old girl taught him Chinese in a candid way, like you would help someone who does not know something or cannot do something, and without any feelings of superiority (Waldijk & De Boo, 1987, p. 16; 31).

During World War I, Korczak again served as a military physician in the Russian army. This time, he was stationed in Kiev for four years. Again, he was under the impression of the suffering of children during the war. He wrote *How to love a child*, which would become his

most well-known book. Shortly thereafter, he wrote *Magna Charta Libertatis*, which later became the first declaration of children's rights, the Declaration of Geneva of 1924. In this text, Korczak emphasises that adults should be willing to see the child as it is and guide and support the child where necessary to develop their own spirit and identity. This approach implied that adults would never refuse the child the things that pose risk or always grant what the child wants. They acknowledge the child as a unique and independent human being with whom they live.

Engel emphasises the link between *Magna Charta Libertatis* and World War I: 'Out of the disillusionment that followed in the wake of World War One came the belief that a new education could address the failures in the human spirit that the War exposed. Under the right circumstances, a new democratic order would emerge out of a new education (Engel, 2013, p. 130).'

Jewish identity

Korczak became the director of a Jewish orphanage in Warsaw in 1912 – more about this later – and it became his life's work: he shared his life with orphans.

The role anti-Semitism played in Korczak's life should not be underestimated. As a child, he had some minor experiences of being-different-from-the-others. Most of the children from his immediate surroundings were Roman Catholic, but because his family had been assimilated and were not religious, his Jewish identity most often did not emerge as particularly problematic. He did not experience antisemitism as a big problem then; it became pronounced in the 1930s.

After World War I, Poland became independent: the Polish militarist and statesman Józef Piłsudski (1867-1935) founded the Second Polish Republic in 1918. Piłsudski knew to guarantee the Jewish community and other minorities some autonomy. He did not want to make Poles of the Jews; their identity did not have to be assumed in the Polish nationality but could be an element of it.

Korczak was proud of the culture of his country and, during the years in which Poland seemed to have disappeared forever, he regularly attended gatherings of the so-called Flying University. It was an underground organisation determined to keep Polish history and culture alive. Since the tsar banned these gatherings, the participants constantly had to change locations – hence the name *Flying University* – to evade police surveillance (Lifton, 1989, p. 35).

Korczak would take a keen interest in history and culture (and literature in particular) for the rest of this life and also wanted to instil this in children. Korczak wanted children to understand what independence meant, how their country had been gobbled up by three greedy neighbours, what was being decided at the Peace Conference in Paris, how elections were held, and a parliament formed (Lifton, 1989, p. 98).

The 1930s

A relatively peaceful period came to an end again when Piłsudski died in 1935: at this point,

Germany and Poland came to an agreement of friendship. Through this pact, Germany wanted to secure its eastern border – Poland would join forces with Germany against Russia – but it meant Poland was dependent on Germany, with all the consequences this would have.

In 1934 and 1936, Korczak travelled to Palestine. There he visited numerous kibbutz, which fascinated him greatly: besides and instead of the conventional family he saw the possibility of a community emphasising social justice, the importance of the child and the dignity of human labour (Lifton, 1989, p. 202). Korczak considered staying in Palestine but felt responsible for his orphans in the institute that he founded to such an extent that he gave up his own desires and returned to Poland.

In 1937 the Polish Academy of Literature awarded him the Golden Laurel for outstanding literary achievement. It meant a lot to him to know that he was still valued, despite reigning antisemitic sentiments (Lifton, 1989, p. 223).

His recognition would be short-lived. In Warsaw, the lives of Jews – and thus of Korczak and his orphans – were drastically limited. Korczak's radio programme was banned, as was the work he did for the Polish orphans. The Jewish orphanage was defaced with graffiti, and the orphans were scolded and insulted. In September 1939 the drama began: Poland was occupied by the Nazis. The orphanage moved to the ghetto. That was sealed at the end of 1940 (Berger, 2006, p. 140).

Korczak strived for a settled life with as little hunger and as few discomforts as possible, with reading, singing, making music and theatre and receiving guests (from the ghetto, of course) who told stories about their professions, and in this way he tried to show the children different elements of life in the ghetto to keep their morale up. He also presented lectures on teaching and education to teachers in the ghetto – there were numerous schools.

The historical context formed Korczak as a person and marked his philosophy: the fate of the Polish people, the wars he witnessed first-hand, the Jewish identity and the antisemitism that was tied up with it, with the Holocaust its lowest point. It characterised his life and determined his death.

Questions

2a. Polish history greatly influenced Korczak's life. Are (or were) there aspects of the history of your home country that have influenced your life or your family's life?

2b. Korczak was impressed by life on a kibbutz, where children carried responsibilities just like adults. Do you know of a place or organisation where this happens? Have you yourself had a similar kind of experience?

4. Theme

Transforming society: social justice, diversity and tolerance

'Contemporary life is shaped by a powerful brute, homo rapax. He dictates the mode of living. His concessions to the weak are a lie, his respect for the aged, for the emancipation of

women, for kindness to children – falsehoods’ (Korczak, 1998, p. 376). That society i.e. *homo rapax* (that is: predatory human) had to change was clear for Korczak.

His personal experiences as a Jewish boy played a part in this realisation. He was *a part* of the Polish society but often felt *apart* from Polish society. The majority of Poles were Roman Catholic, and belonging to a minority group was a vulnerable position. The phenomenon of exclusion was a first-hand experience for him. In an extreme way this form of exclusion, antisemitism and persecution, determined his life. That Korczak strived for an inclusive society with every fibre in his body goes without saying.

Korczak’s family set-up contributed to his awareness of the strong social differences between the classes. His family was in danger of impoverishment through his father’s illness and death. Korczak had to contribute to the family’s income. He worked at summer camps, where he met some of Warsaw’s poorest children. There he met the children of commoners, with whom he was not allowed to play before, on his mother’s orders (Waldijk & De Boo, 1987, p. 13). Being in such close quarters with these children convinced him that street children had to be given a good education, and upper-class children nothing less. They were neither to be neglected nor spoilt but had to be given a loving education that matched their ability and opportunity, so that they would become responsible people.

After his experience during the war, it was clearer than ever for Korczak that society had to change. ‘Korczak believed that the only way to reform humanity lay in reforming the method of bringing up children (Kulawiec, 1986, p. 69)’. He himself shaped this philosophy of bringing up children in a way Silberman calls *radically inclusive* and *radically consistent*. The population he dedicated himself to comprised neglected, ignored and repressed children, mostly from the lower social classes. He gave them his ‘unqualified respect, tireless support, care, and love’. His radical inclusivity included ‘every suffering being’ (Korczak, 1998, p. 357). He maintained this to the extreme: he was radically consistent and repeatedly made moral choices in the interest of his beliefs. Practice and preaching were one: he was indefatigable in his efforts to improve the world (Silverman, 2017, p. 84). ‘His death was a moral declaration as were his life and his educational vision (Efron, 2005, p. 54)’.

3a. As young Jewish boy, Korczak belonged to a minority; he often felt apart from Polish society. Are there minorities in your teaching context? Which ones? How can you prevent discrimination and promote respect?

3b. How can diversity enrich teaching? Is it possible to live together well with various cultures and religions in your country? How?

3c. What role does the school and the teacher play in practising tolerance? How can you contribute to this in your school? Think of a small step you can take.

5. Professional biography

Janusz Korczak was born in 1878 as Henryk Goldszmit. He grew up in an assimilated Jewish family in Warsaw, which fell under Russia at the time. His father was an attorney, his grandfather a well-known doctor. In their own sphere of influence through their profession and relationships and through what they wrote, both men played an important part in Polish nationalism, which went underground since the third Partition of Poland in 1795.

The family was wealthy. Until he was seven, Korczak was educated by a governess. Thereafter he went to a Russian school for primary education, where the Polish language and history were forbidden subjects. The teachers were strict and corporal punishment was common. The school was 'strict, boring and oppressive' (Lifton, 1989, p. 25). The high school Korczak attended thereafter was equally strict and boring. Reading became his saving grace: "The world vanished, only the book existed" (Lifton, 1989, p. 26).

Korczak's family was strongly assimilated: they did not stand out from the Roman Catholic Polish culture. Nevertheless, Korczak got to know antisemitism during his childhood. Gradually, he engaged with the Jewish community.

When he was twelve, his father started suffering psychologically. He became quite unstable and experienced bouts of depression and became aggressive at times. That was a tough time for Korczak, his mother and his sister Anna. His father was finally admitted to a psychiatric ward. All of these things had significant financial consequences. As a schoolboy and, later, as a student, Korczak had to give extra lessons because he had to support his family for a large part (Waaldijk & De Boo, 1987, p. 15). When Korczak was 18 years old, his father passed away. He was terrified that his illness was hereditary, which is one of the reasons why he did not want to get married and have children of his own.

In 1898, Korczak went to study medicine and travelled to Berlin, Paris and London for his studies. In between he participated in summer camps for poor children from Warsaw. Through trial and error, he learnt basic education skills by working with big groups of children. He discovered that it is no easy task to engage well with children and learnt that he had to speak *with* them instead of *to* them. During youth camps, he started closely observing children. He would continue doing so for his entire life. These camps brought about a lasting change in Korczak: besides a physician, he also became a pedagogue (Berding, 2004, p. 12).

While studying, he also started writing. He used the name Korczak when he took part in a writing competition. He knew that with the Jewish name Goldszmit, his chances were low, so he picked a name of a character from a novel by Jozef Ignacy Krszewski, *The Story of Janusz Korczak and the Swordbearer's Daughter* (Lifton, 1989, p. 31). He became famous by this name (a letter was swapped in error back then). His competition entry was awarded a literary prize.

In his stories and books, Korczak incorporated a number of experiences with children. He loved literature and knew the power of good stories. The well-known author Anton Chekhov (1860-1904), who was also a doctor, was a good friend of his. Both physicians and authors need to be able to diagnose and analyse.

His studies piqued Korczak's interest in socio-pedagogical matters. He became involved with literary and political groups and criticised social injustices. For example, he wrote about the

arrogance of the rich bourgeoisie of the day. In 1901, he penned the socio-critical *Children of the streets* (Korczak, 1901). Children who wanted for everything also had questions, needs and individuality like the children from his own environment! In 1906, *Child of the drawing room* followed, which contains many autobiographical elements. Here he criticises the educational practices of the rich, who completely separated the child from daily reality. They damage the personality of their child through full control, in this way preventing the child from developing any individuality (Korczak, 1906).

After completing his studies, he was appointed as a doctor in 1905 in a Jewish hospital that welcomed children of all denominations. He had hardly taken up his position before being called up to the frontline. This was because the Russo-Japanese War broke out in 1904. (During this time, Poland was still part of the Russian Empire.) In the Far East, he came under the impression of the suffering of children as a result of war. It was at this point that he suggested that no war is worth robbing children of their happiness. Children come before politics (Lifton, 1989).

After the Russo-Japanese War, Korczak set up as a private general practitioner in 1905, but he did not see any future for himself in this set-up. Shortly thereafter, his engagement with children in need and the desire to offer them a better future led to his decision to dedicate himself to them. He became director of the orphanage for Jewish children Dom Sierot (Home of orphans). By raising funds, the Jewish philanthropic society managed to set itself up in a lovely spacious property in 1912. Korczak became the director and also moved in; he slept on the fourth floor, in an attic room between the girls' and boys' dormitories.

For Korczak, this was perhaps the most important decision of his life. He exchanged a life in science or a successful career as a famous paediatrician for guiding an orphanage, with which he would remain involved for the rest of his life. He himself said this was the best way to combine the two disciplines of pedagogy and medicine.

Despite his many activities outside of Dom Sierot – such as teaching at the university, taking care of courses for parents and orphanage staff members, his collaboration with numerous magazines and his radio shows about education – Korczak always managed to find time to spend with the children and eat with them, read to them, put them to bed at night, and of course care for those who were ill.

From the start, he worked closely with Stefania Wilczyska (Miss Stefa). Like Korczak, she was from Warsaw, was also Jewish and had enjoyed a pedagogical education in Belgium and Switzerland (Berger, 2006, p. 138). Stefa was Korczak's permanent partner; with her enormous talent for administration, she organised the daily affairs at Dom Sierot.

The orphanage was an ideal place of observation to get to know children for Korczak. By living with them and making up a part of their daily life, he obtained all kinds of data in an organic way. As physician and pedagogue, he constantly strived to see and understand the whole of the child – the 'great synthesis of the child'. Thereby he integrated biological, medical psychological and pedagogical details (Engel, 2013, p. 122). By being in a position to observe a child as they carried out various tasks and activities and analysing these observations, he could constantly amend his pedagogical practice (Rotem, 1997).

After the Jewish orphanage, he established, with others, a second orphanage in 1914: a home for homeless children. The latter was popularly known as the Polish orphanage (to distinguish it from the Jewish one). This orphanage, *Nasz Dom*, was financed by the unions. Korczak was involved particularly in the management of this orphanage. The educational system was based on Korczak's experiences at *Dom Sierot* (Kość, 1986, p. 8).



Orphanage Dom Sierot 1928. © Fundacja Korczakowska Warszawa

During World War I, Korczak had to serve four years in the military again, this time in Kiev. During this time as a military doctor he wrote his best-known pedagogical book: *How to love a child*. After the war, he returned to Poland and immediately poured heart and soul into the cultural revival of his country. He did so by publishing, speaking and teaching at the Institute for Special Pedagogy.

Korczak was critical of society: it had to change radically. In a better world, he saw a bigger place for the child. After all, children were uninhibited, creative and spontaneous, which fit with the zeitgeist in Europe after the war. He then started spreading a fundamental optimism regarding human nature and strongly believed in the power of education. The Swedish pedagogue Ellen Key (1849-1926) already argued in *The Century of the Child* (1900) that the personality of the child had to be fed and their ability to do good had to be cultivated. Accordingly, education had to be transformed.

This opinion has also been attributed to pedagogues such as Pestalozzi, Montessori, Dewey and others (Berger, 2006, p. 138; Engel, 2013, p. 120). If the school career were based on the physical, social and mental development of the child, this education could result in an improvement of society as a whole (Engel, 2013, p. 121). Korczak also believed in this. Although he did not teach, he applied the principles of good healthy, physical, social and mental development in the daily running of his orphanage.

In the orphanage, Korczak endeavoured to truly bring the rights and responsibilities of

children into practice. He subsequently organised a children's parliament and a children's court, tasks and assignments, assistance among each other, and so forth. The children who ended up in the orphanage often had a long history of neglect and violence behind them and could be particularly egocentric and aggressive. Korczak knew that exercising power had little effect and rather addressed their social potential. Thus, all children had a vote. This idea mainly took shape in the children's parliament and the children's court. In this way, children became active participants in their own community, and that gave them hope. They could also call the doctor and other staff members before their tribunal (De Winter, 2017).

The great importance Korczak attached to history, culture (and particularly literature) could also be seen at the orphanage. It took shape in, among other things, letting the children read, reading to them and through organising celebrations with music and theatre. In the summer of 1942, he studied the play *The letter from the king* with the children. This text from Bengali poet and philosopher Tagore (1861-1941) is about Amal, an ill orphan, who dies among his friends. Korczak selected the sensitive, layered text to help the children to be calm in the face of death.

Faith played an important part in reading, theatre, music and celebration; Korczak was completely religious. Temporary life, in his opinion, lacked something fundamental. This was also evident in his diaries and prayers. Very convincingly, Ina Vandewijer articulates a conversation between Korczak and the traumatised orphan Ester. In truth, Korczak and Ester communicated through texts from the Psalms. In the youth text *My silence* Vandewijer depicts it as follows:

‘You may hold the pen, and the book. I would like you to use the pen and the ink well. It is war and then nothing goes without saying. Everything is different, but that is not fault of the pen, the paper or the ink. They have nothing to do with it. But they are still there. You write an account of your day. What you remember about it. Write without judgement. Purely. Judge for yourself whether what you write is true. Then you will have something to fall back on later. Write down what you have done today, Ester. It starts with the date of today. 24 July 1942.’ (THE DOCTOR)

Diary

Friday 24 July 1942

With his wicks he will bar access to you
and under his wings you will seek refuge.
His truthfulness will be a large shield and stronghold.
You will not be afraid of something fearsome in the night,
nor for the arrow that flies by day

Psalm 91, written by doctor Janusz Korczak for Ester

Save me, God, because the waters have risen all the way to my soul.
I have grown tired of calling out. My throat is hoarse.

Psalm 69, Ester

The doctor gave me this book. And the pen. I can always write, day and night. After the chores, I write at night, like the doctor. This book is only mine. No-one is allowed to read it if I do not want them to (Vandewijer, 2008, pp. 15-17).

The orphanage was a space to become still before God, to pray and celebrate the Jewish festivals. This did not mean that the orphans in Dom Sierot were obligated to exercise their faith. Korczak knew that he could not give his students faith in God but that they had to obtain this themselves through a battle with God. He resented imposing a morale and also in this regard respected the choices of the child. Yet he did his best to make the Sabbath a festive day.

Children were free to pray and were not forced to do anything. Prayer and song could give way to an emotional connection, an affective dimension that Korczak found vital (Görtzen, 2003, p. 68). Religious celebrations had a consoling effect. Candles during the Hanukah festival, matzo during Pesach, guests at a carefully laid table contributed to the joy as is prescribed in Deuteronomy 16:14. Years later, many children would still remember the joy of the Sabbath, in particular the special Seder evening. During these evenings, they were given a beautiful hour of life (Lifton, 1989, p. 298).

Toward the end of the 1920s, Korczak's orphanage earned him fame, both locally and internationally. His orphanage became known as 'Republic for children'. In the '20s, Korczak published his best-known works. The children's books *King Matt the first* and *Little King Matty... and the desert island* appeared in 1923. The meaning of the former title was compared to *Emile* by Jean Jacques Rousseau: 'it traces Matt's moral development from an innocent trusting orphan who can neither read nor write, to an idealistic young reformer who must learn the disparity between dream and reality before he can rule either his country or himself (Lifton, 1989, p. 107).'

Although the book can be read as a novel about a very young king, it is in a deeper sense a philosophical treatise about spiritual and secular power.

A psychological novel, *When I am little again*, followed in 1925. Also in this book, Korczak's pedagogical ideas can also be traced back.

During this time, Korczak proposed a children's page that appeared as a weekly supplement to the well-known Polish newspaper *Revue*. This page was mainly filled by children and was exceptionally popular in Poland. For the first time, children were taken seriously, and they were paid for their contributions. The weekly radio shows Korczak hosted about education – 'The old doctor explains' – became a roaring success. In 1928, he wrote the essay *The child's right to respect*, the point of departure for his play for children's rights.

At the beginning of the 1930s, when a wave of antisemitism washed over Europe, Korczak was no longer allowed to host his radio talks. It completely disillusioned him. It was the death

of his ideal of a Polish-Jewish tolerance. During this time, he travelled to Palestine. In 1936 he seriously considered permanently settling in Israel, but his connection with the children in Warsaw saw him return to Poland.

In 1939, the Nazis took Poland by storm. One of the first measures was to transfer all Jews, including the orphanage, to a large ghetto. Outside the ghetto, Korczak went to a lot of trouble to try and raise funds from wealthy Poles for the almost 200 children in the orphanage. He was captured a few times but was released again with the help of friends.

On 6 August 1942, the children and management of the orphanage were taken away to the 'Umschlagplatz'. Korczak asked them to take something along that they cared for, a book or a toy. In a dignified procession, with the flag of King Matt and the Star of David, proceeded to the assigned location. The oldest children carried the smallest ones to the freight wagons.

Korczak had another chance at escape but did not leave his children alone. Two days later, all died in the Treblinka gas chambers.



The Children's Monument in Yad Vashem. © J. de Jong-Slagman

Questions

4a. Korczak could not have foreseen what the consequences were of his radical choices for the child. Acting morally was for him the only way of living. Do you have to make troublesome moral choices? What is the value of getting along with others?

4b. Korczak cherished rituals and celebrations, based on his religious conviction. How important are these moments for you? Can you (adequately) express them in your teaching?

4c. Korczak was of the opinion that imposed faith creates slaves of people, while religion is actually a matter of the heart. For this reason, the children in his care were free to choose if they wanted to participate in 'religious chores' or not. What do you think of Korczak's vision?

4d. Korczak loved literature and introduced the children to stories that stimulated the imagination, such as that of Tagore about the ill, dying Amal. That really spoke to the children in their endangered existence. Which story – other than those from the Bible – would you read to your students? Why this story?

Suggested action i

Korczak himself had bad experiences at during primary school. Respect for the students was thoroughly lacking. What do children expect from a teacher? In the magazine *Didaktief* four students are asked this question.

“What do you consider a good teacher and why?”

Yasper (15): ‘Teachers who do not simply blame you but first look to see who did it. I have ADHD and sometimes test the boundaries with talking, whistling and making noises. My social studies teacher does not breathe down my neck. He gives many chances; he knows that I can do it. During a previous incident he said: “Move a little to the front.” The gym teacher came to me after the lesson to compliment me. It is also good to hear that you are doing something well.’

Anne (15): ‘A teacher who is well prepared. He does not only explain and does not make you work silently for the entire lesson. He or she mixes things up during the lessons, like a Kahoot! Quiz or an extra PowerPoint presentation. I also have a teacher who still does not know our names. He cracks jokes and explains well, but if he sees me walking the corridors, he does not know I am his student. Pity.’

Mijs (12): ‘We have two good teachers this year. Master Jos is kind; he's pretty loose. You don't have to have completed everything. He does not get angry quickly and calmly asks what is wrong. Miss Helma gives you a second chance; if someone is not so good at math she gives

extra tutorials. She is also friendly, and we can laugh with her. She has the class under control. She counts to five and then claps her hands. Then mostly everyone is quiet.’

Yelda (11): ‘She also does not send anyone out but talks it out. She says: “you belong in the class and do not leave the class as something does not go well.” Miss Helma understands you and trusts you. If she herself needs to leave the class for a but, she says: “You are Group 8, so I know you can do it well.” Some children cannot handle that; they start talking and shouting the moment she leaves.’”

5. What can be done in your school for teachers to teach in the ‘spirit of Korczak’?

6. Source text

Korczak did not write a pedagogical theory; his ideas about education must be distilled from his stories, diaries and notes. For this reason, texts were chosen from three different sources.

Source text 1

This text was taken from Korczak’s *Memoirs*. That is the name given to the loose notes that were preserved after Korczak’s deportation. Korczak linked memories from his youth with the daily experiences in the orphanage. He reflected on these and contemplated the future and possible publications.

It appears that even then I confided to granny in an intimate chat my scheme for remaking the world. No less, no more — simply get rid of all money. How and where to be rid of it, and what to do next, I probably had no idea. No need to be too stern a judge.

I was only five then, and the problem was perplexingly difficult: what could do away with dirty, ragged and hungry children with whom one is not allowed to play in that same courtyard where under a chestnut tree in a candy box, wrapped in cotton, was buried my dear and beloved dead, for the time being only, canary? Its death brought up the mysterious question of religion.

I wanted to put a cross on the grave. The housemaid said no, because it's only a bird, something much lower than man. Even to cry over it was a sin. So much for the housemaid. It was worse that the caretaker's son had decided that the canary was a Jew. Me, too.

I was a Jew, and he — a Pole, a Catholic. Paradise for him. As for me, if I did not swear and submissively stole sugar for him from the house, I would end up, when I died, in a place which, though not hell, was dark. And I was scared of a dark room.

Death — Jew — hell. The black Jewish paradise. Certainly something to consider.

(Legacy, 2019)

Source text 2

The excerpt below comes from Under four eyes with God. Prayers of those who do not pray. Korczak wrote the text after the death of his mother, when he was deeply depressed.

Prayer of a teacher

27-IV-1920

I bring no long prayers, oh God. Do not send you many sighs. I do not bow down with deep humility, do not bring rich offerings to praise and honour you. I do not desire to participate in Your grace undetected, do not compete for superior gifts.

My thoughts have no wings to carry a song to the heavens.

My words have neither fragrance nor colour, nor flower. Tired I am and sleepy.

My view is marred, and my back is arched under the heavy burden of my duty. And yet I send you a heartfelt request, oh God. And yet I own a gem that I do not want to entrust to my fellow human being. I fear that humankind does not understand it, does not feel it, does not notice it, that they laugh about it.

Although I am bleak humility before You, oh Lord, I stand before you with my request – as a flaming call. Even if I whisper softly, this request I utter with the voice of an unyielding will. A commanding glance I fire off beyond the clouds.

With head raised, I demand, because it is no longer for myself.

Be favourable to the fate of the children, support their efforts, bless their endeavours.

Do not lead them along the most comfortable path but along the most beautiful.

And take as down payment for my request my only gem: my sorrow.

Sorrow and work.

(Korczak J. , 2003, p. 50)

Source text 3

The excerpt below comes from Korczak's well-known work *How to love a child*.

I watch a child open and shut a box, put a pebble into it and take it out, shake the box and listen attentively. A one-year-old drags a stool along, the unsteady legs bend under the weight of the child's body. A two-year-old when they tell him that the cow says "moo," adds: "adamoo," and "ada" is the name of the pet dog: it makes prelogical linguistic mistakes which should be recorded and published.

I see among the odd belongings of a youngster, nails, a length of string, bits of cloth and pieces of glass because it all "might come in handy" for an infinite number of projects. Contests as to who can jump further are staged, a child does some work, busies himself or organizes a social game. He asks: "When I am thinking of a tree, do I have such a tiny tree in my head?" To placate the gods, a boy offers an old beggar not a penny, but his whole fortune of twenty-six cents because the man is so old and poor, and will die soon.

A teenager uses spittle to stick down his hair because his sister's girl friend is coming. A girl writes to me in a letter that the world is wicked, and men are beasts,- and keeps silent as to why it is so. A youth haughtily throws off a rebellious, though long trite, bitter thought, a challenge.

Yes indeed, I salute those youngsters with my eyes and thoughts and with the question: what are you, what wonderful mystery is there deep inside you? I salute you with my determination: how can I help you? I salute them in the same way as an astronomer salutes a star that always has been, is and will be. That salutation should hold a place somewhere in between the scientist's ecstasy and a humble prayer. But he who in quest of freedom has lost God along the way, will not feel the spell of it.

(Korczak, 1986, p. 44)

Questions

- 6.1 Korczak's childhood sorrow about a dead canary was not taken seriously. What would have been the suitable reaction from the housekeeper?
- 6.2 A small incident can lead to many anxious thoughts: 'death – Jew – hell'. What did this incident bring about in Korczak's life?
- 6.3 Korczak prayed to God for the children. How does he see himself?
- 6.4 What could be a comfortable path for a child, and what does Korczak mean by the most beautiful path?
- 6.5 Young children, teenagers and adolescents have their own difficulties. Korczak relates what he sees, their behaviour. He omits an interpretation after the observation. What do you think of this? Are you also equally friendly in your teaching practice?
- 6.6 Korczak recognises a scientist in himself who wants to explain, but also one who prays. What does he mean by the spell? And what place does God have in it?

7. Influence and effect later on: children's rights

Korczak firmly believed in a better society. His optimism came from the set conviction 'that in order to change the world, the educational systems must be changed first (Berger, 2006, p. 142). Children had to be educated in such a way that they would already be – and not have to yet become – responsible human beings from an early age. They deserved to have a voice, and they should be listened to. The child after all does not become a person, but he or she *is* already a person (Kosc, 1986, p. 13). That means a child has dignity, deserves respect and has rights. Compared to the rigid education and constraint Korczak himself experienced during his time at school, these were enormous changes, and he was ahead of his time. Korczak wrote the rights of the child in capital letters. The influence and effect of his work is also particularly relevant in this area.

Korczak took note of and supported the Declaration of the Rights of the Child, which appeared in 1924. It argued that 'mankind must give the very best to the child'. In order to make the formal language of the Declaration accessible, Korczak wrote a short, clear text about it (Berger, 2006, p. 137).

In 1959, the Declaration of 1924 was expanded in ten points by the United Nations. Korczak's statements, distilled from his publications *How to love a Child* (1919) and *The Child's Right to Respect* (1926), formed the basis of this expansion. Lifton compiled all Korczak's statements that have been taken up in the Declaration (Lifton, 1989, pp. 355-356). The most famous have been set in bold type.

The child has the right to love.

("Love *the* child, not just your own.")

The child has the right to respect.

("Let us demand respect for shining eyes, smooth foreheads, youthful effort and confidence. Why should dulled eyes, a wrinkled brow, untidy gray hair, or tired resignation command greater respect?")

The child has the right to optimal conditions in which to grow and develop.

("We demand: do away with hunger, cold, dampness, stench, overcrowding, overpopulation")

The child has the right to live in the present.

("Children are not people of tomorrow; they are people today.")

The child has the right to be himself or herself.

("A child is not a lottery ticket, marked to win the main prize.")

(...)

The child has the right to fail.

(“We renounce the deceptive longing for perfect children.”)

The child has the right to be taken seriously.

(“Who asks the child for his opinion and consent?”)

The child has the right to be appreciated for what he is.

(“The child, being small, has little market value.”)

The child has the right to desire, to claim, to ask.

(“As the years pass, the gap between adult demands and children’s desires becomes progressively wider.”)

The child has the right to have secrets.

(“Respect their secrets.”)

(...)

The child has the right to education.

The child has the right to resist educational influence that is conflict with his or her own beliefs.

(“It is fortunate for mankind that we are unable to force children to yield to assaults upon their common sense and humanity.”)

The child has the right to protest an injustice.

(“We must end despotism.”)

The child has the right to a Children’s Court where he can judge and be judged by his peers.

(“We are the sole judges of the child’s actions, movements, thoughts, and plans... I know that a Children’s Court is essential, that in fifty years there will not be a single school, not a single institution without one.”)

The child has the right to be defended in the juvenile-justice court system.

(“The delinquent child is still a child... Unfortunately, suffering bred of poverty spreads like lice: sadism, cries, uncouthness, and brutality are nurtured on it.”)

The child has the right to respect for his grief.

(“Even though it before the loss of a pebble.”)

The child has the right to commune with God.

The child has the right to die prematurely.

(“The mother’s profound love for her child must give him the right to premature death, to ending his life cycle in only one or two springs... Not every bush grows into a tree.”)

Questions

In Polish historiography, Korczak was Christianised: Korczak had ‘a Christian soul through and through’, or even more emphatically ‘a Christ soul’ (Piotrowski, 1946, p. 48). Piotrowski, who knew Korczak and interviewed him as associate of the Polish radio, states that Korczak, like Christ, ‘had a particular love for children and victims. It seemed he took Christ as an example for his humility and the simplicity of his actions and morale (Piotrowski, 1946, p. 48).’ Later readings of Korczak’s work was more nuanced. He did have a ‘Franciscan sacrificial attitude’, but he was no Christian (Dautzenroth, 1989, p. 75). Today, incorporation into Christianity raises a certain suspicion: it is perhaps a symptom of hidden antisemitism and suggests that one would not be able to learn from the *Jewry* or learn less from them. Görtzen concludes that Korczak was shaped by Polish-Christian values and norms *and* through the Jewish faith, but perhaps even more by Jewish tradition and Jewish thought. Korczak found himself between two religions and two cultures, and these were not to be divorced or distinguished in his life and work (Görtzen, 2003, pp. 52-63).

5a. Does Korczak set an example for you? Do you find his religion important? What does the Bible say about a life like the one Korczak lived?

5b. How can children’s rights contribute to a better society?

5c. Which rights do students at your school have? Are they satisfied with these?

8. Realisation

Citizenship education

Citizenship education has been compulsory in the Netherlands since 2006. School has to be a training ground for engaging with diversity. The role of the teacher is extremely important here, argues Sophie Verhoeven.

‘Teacher has to find balance between giving responsibility and intervening

The development of a democratic training ground is possible. This emerged from my thesis, for which I evaluated a programme for civic education applied widely throughout primary schools. After one academic year, this programme seemed able to have a positive influence on the democratic and socio-emotional class climate. For instance, by allowing students to participate in conversations about arrangements and rules, by allowing them to structurally engage with each other in conversation and by teaching them to take responsibility themselves for resolving conflict.

The role of the teacher is crucial here. They have to be able to have a conversation with their students, be aware of their own attitude with regards to society and of their role as model; they need to guard the democratic climate and intervene if it is threatened. If they do not, there is a danger that the one with the biggest mouth calls the shots. That demands a lot of

teachers' flexibility and reflexive abilities. They have to find the right balance between giving students responsibility and intervening when equal opportunities are threatened. But they should also reflect particularly on spontaneous incidents that happen. Tough situations, such as conflicts, should not be shunned here, but should on the contrary be seen as springboards for discussion and practising problem-solving skills. Only then does civic citizenship become part of students' daily experience and can they also truly learn to understand (Verhoeven, 2013).

Questions

8a. From a Christian worldview, which arguments promote attention to citizenship?

8b. Are you and your colleagues in a position to provide Christian citizenship education as good role models? What is needed in order to grow in this direction?

Child courts

Korczak's prediction that there would within fifty years be child courts in every school and every institute was not realised. But there are twelve youth courts at all continuing education schools in Netherlands in the twenty-first century.

'Juvenile court Panta Rhei set up'

On Friday 15 February, thirteen students from the Amstelveen School Community Panta Rhei completed their training as youth judges. The certificate was issued by the Amsterdam District Court, and they were deployed as juvenile judges. In the Court they re-enacted a case from beginning to end, demonstrating what they had learnt. In a festive setting, led by Judge Meta Vaandrager, our students proudly took the oath under the watchful eye of judges, attorneys, members of the council, project leaders, school leaders, teachers and parents.

After this official inauguration they are qualified to assume the role of judge, prosecutor and attorney and preside over cases at school. It concerns violation of the rules of engagement and conflicts at school, which are settled by the juvenile court in consultation with the school, police and parents. The outcome is mainly aimed at repairing what went wrong so that the parties involved can continue together again after the incident.

(...)

Training

The students were trained as juvenile judges during which time they visited a police station and trained with a judge, a lawyer and a public prosecutor. In this way they learnt about criminal law and restorative law, gained more insight into the work of the police, and there was focus on victim care. Every year, a new group of Panta Rhei students volunteers for the training and is sworn in by a judge from the Amsterdam District Court. The parents must give their permission for the child's involvement in the project.

Characteristics of the juvenile court

The most important principle for cases before the Juvenile Court is that the student concerned wants to take responsibility for what he or she has done. With the parents, the person

concerned opts for the case to be submitted to the juvenile court for assessment. Instead of the school leadership or teacher imposing a measure, or the incident being reported in more serious cases, the juvenile court is first given this authority. The aim of the juvenile court hearing is to reach a good outcome, together with all the parties directly involved, focused on repairing what went wrong. That is, resolving instead of (only) punishing. In this way the focus is on what is needed and fair in order to be able to continue together at school following the incident (Vreugdenhil, 2019).

8c. Would a similar court be a possibility at your school? Explain your answer.

9. Key concepts

Dialogue

Parents and other educators need to take the child seriously and consider them as a conversation partner. They need enter into a conversation with the child instead of talking about the child.

Children's rights

Korczak considered the rights of the child to be of utmost importance. The three most important children's rights are:

- The child's right to die: a child has right to their own life. Risks are a part of that; as parents who want to avoid making the life of their child more comfortable or bearable, they may prevent the child from leading a normal life.
- The child's right to the current day: a child should not focus too much on 'later'; they live now.
- The child's right to be as they are. Even in their childish state a child can make a contribution to society (Korczak, 1986, pp. 54-56).

Participation

Parents and other educators should see the child fully and consult them in decisions. Adults can also learn a lot from children.

Respect

Parents and other adults should have respect for the child and for the problems they could experience in the process called growing up.

10. Suggestions for further reading

For an introduction with the life and work of Korczak, Lifton's biography is recommended.
Lifton, B. (1989). *The king of children*. London: Pan Books Ltd.

As has been noted, it is not simple to get a good yet comprehensive image of Korczak's philosophy. The most accessible text is
Korczak, J. (1986). *How to love a child*. Utrecht: Bijleveld.
This work is available in many translations.

There are numerous texts about him: articles in the large databases typically focus on one aspect of his work. About spirituality, see Efron and Sagberg:

Efron, S. (2005). Light in the Midst of Darkness: Janusz Korczak's Spiritual Yearning. *Journal of Curriculum & Pedagogy*, 2(2), 54-59.

Sagberg, S. (2017). Taking a children's rights perspective on children's spirituality. *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, 22(1), 24-35.

About school, see Engel:

Engel, L. H. (2013). The Democratic School and the Pedagogy of Janusz Korczak: A Model of Early Twentieth Century Reform in Modern Israel. *International Journal of Progressive Education*, 119-132.

On his general vision of education, see Berding, Berger and Trub:

Berding, J. W. (2004). Janusz Korczak: What it Means to Become an Educator. *Encounter*, 17(4), 11-16.

Berger, S. (2006). The Children's Advocate. *American Educational History Journal*, 33(2), 137-142.

Trub, L. (2005). Educating from within. *Encounter*, 18(1), 35-41.

Besides such scientific articles there are also the following works of fiction available:

Korczak, J. (1983). *Little King Matty...and the Desert Island*. Amsterdam: Van Goor.

Korczak, J. (1983). *King Matt the first*. Amsterdam: Van Goor.

These works of fiction have been translated in many languages.

According to Kosc these books are also highly recommended for adults as satirical commentary on education (Kosc, 1986, p. 8).

Furthermore, the young adult novel *Shadow of the Wall* and the exquisite picture books *A hero and the Holocaust* and *Mister Doctor: Janusz Korczak and the Orphans of the Warsaw ghetto* are particularly suitable to introduce children to Korczak at school. The beautiful full-page illustrations and the simple texts of both these picture books make for a penetrating evocation of Korczak's biography.

Laird, C. (1999). *The Shadow of the Wall*. London: Random House Children's Publishers UK.

Adler, D. A. (2002). *A Hero and the Holocaust. The Story of Janusz Korczak and His Children*. New York: Holiday House.

Cohen-Janca, I. (2015). *Mister Doctor: Janusz Korczak and the orphans of the Warsaw ghetto*. Toronto: Annick Press.

For more information about the children's books that include Korczak *Kinderkunstenaars*, pp. 26-50 (De Jong-Slagman, 2017).

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Suggested action

Children's Rights

Millions of children have no access to education, work long hours under hazardous conditions and are forced to serve as soldiers in armed conflict. They suffer targeted attacks on their schools and teachers or languish in institutions or detention centres, where they endure inhumane conditions and assaults on their dignity. Young and immature, they are often easily exploited. In many cases, they are abused by the very individuals responsible for their care. We are working to help protect children around the world, so they can grow into adults (Høgsholt, 2010).

Children's Rights Day is celebrated annually on 20 November. Go to the website of Human Rights Watch – www.hrw.org – and check out the topics that concern children. Select an article that speaks to you. What would you be able to do in your educational context on Children's Rights Day every year?