

“We don’t know the child”

This statement was made by Janusz Korczak, one of the foremost thinkers and writers in the education field.

What did he mean?

*Text Heiko Schulz and Isabel Bonifert-Manig
Illustration Michael Kröger*

Janusz Korczak’s life was both very moving and sad

He was brought up in a well-to-do, integrated Jewish family. His father Josef was a respected lawyer who later in life started gambling and soon ran up ruinous debts. Josef died in 1895 having brought the whole family to disgrace. At this stage, Janusz was 17 years old and was living with his sister Anna and mother Cecylia in cheap rented accommodation (along with the stigma of living among the lowest of the low). While he was a grammar school student in Warsaw, corporal punishment was the norm. In 1898, Korczak started studying medicine at Warsaw University and graduated in 1904. He wanted to become a paediatrician to relieve some of the suffering in the city. He also dedicated himself to activities involving young people in Warsaw and acquired valuable experience in this sector. As a young doctor he used the money he had earned from rich patients to treat poor children free of charge. His first teaching experience came from working as an assistant in the so-called “summer colonies” (summer camps). Although these camps were rather depressing, they stimulated his interest in teaching. For Korczak 1911 was a decisive year. He closed his surgery and became director of the Jewish orphanage at number 92 Krochmalna Street. His theory of “respect for children” grew from his daily work. He created rules and regulations that allowed both adults and children to live together and share equal rights. He also wrote children’s stories like “King Matt” (1922) and “King Matt on the desert island” (1923), inspired by his years of experience in the orphanage. Korczak was a keen writer and story teller and was well known as a teacher who also organised conferences and sat on public assistance committees as well as writing articles for the press. Between 1934/35 and 1939 he produced a radio programme under the pseudonym “the old doctor” and never left his beloved Warsaw. On the 1st of September 1939, the Germans attacked Poland; in the autumn of 1940 Janusz Korczak and his female colleagues and children were “transferred” to the hell known as the Warsaw ghetto. Korczak looked after 200 children there and took charge of running a second orphanage. In 1942, he decided not to let his children and colleagues go alone to Treblinka concentration camp and, although under no obligation to do so, went there with them. On the 5th or 6th of August 1942 he was put to death in a gas chamber.

To all education experts

Janusz Korczak developed a theory on education that to this day would put many teachers to shame with his concrete ideas about the qualities that any teacher should possess. Korczak thought highly of broad cultural training as well as manual dexterity and musical talent. He placed little stock in formal educational training, certificates, and examinations. “Old nannies or bricklayers are often the best teachers.” What every teacher needs is the willingness to have the same sensitivity as children and this means reaching children’s sensitivity. Children are in fact children and for Korczak this meant not seeing them as blank sheets or delicate creatures but as complete human beings with all their positive and negative sides. “A hundred children, a hundred individuals who are people – not people-to-be, not people of tomorrow, but people now, right now – today.”



Ever conscious about the reality of childhood sensitivity, Korczak asked his colleagues to think constantly – especially about themselves. He wanted them to observe the children and absorb everything that is going on around them and always think about their way of education. They should classify opinions and always doubt themselves and their self-conferred authority. What could be more modern? Needless to say, a practical man, Korczak disliked those that set norms and concealed rules. Teaching for him was a complete profession that took up 16 hours a day and was like a doctor’s job. “Fevers, coughs, and vomiting are for a doctor what smiles, tears, and blushes are to a teacher. There is no such thing as symptoms without meaning. We have to see all, take care of it, forget about chance, connect related things, and find a sense of order”.

The defender of children’s rights

For the first time in the history of education, Korczak drew up a charter of children’s rights. There were three very rigid (for an indulgent man like him) main themes:

1. A child’s right to die prematurely

This might seem highly controversial and provocative but on closer inspection is absolutely reasonable and addresses educational environments dominated by fear. Korczak wanted to remove the idea of the excessive protection and care taken by over-zealous parents. “For fear that death will take away our children, we deny them life; to protect them from death, we don’t let them live life fully.” This should never happen. In the permanent haste of protecting our children, we deprive them of important experiences in life (like climbing a 40 foot tree!).

2. A child’s right to live in the present

Children should not be seen as tomorrow’s beings and future citizens that must become socially effective people. In the orphanages, Korczak put into effect his ideas of “More today, please!” There were also special days in the orphanage; on the shortest day of the year for example, everybody could sleep as long as he or she wanted to (it wasn’t worth getting up for). On the 22nd of June (the shortest night of the year) nobody had to go to bed and could play all night if he or she wanted. On the “slovenly” day nobody had to wash etc.

3. A child’s right to be himself or herself

Korczak believed it nonsense that education formed human beings in a set manner. He agreed with Schopenhauer for whom it was crystal clear: “Man’s character does not change. It remains the same throughout life (...).” To see children as we want them to be and then to label them (“Johnny is difficult” or “Mary is good”) is both ignorant and dangerous. One of Korczak’s main tenets was: “We don’t know the child.” When we admit to this lack of knowledge, we find ourselves in the company of thinkers that give priority to loyalty, versatility, and receptiveness. Among other things we acknowledge Socrates.

The opposite of the romance of education

In many ways, Korczak was even more forthright than his reputation. He strongly believed that children's rights should not only be respected but written into law. He saw this as fundamental to offering them order, regulations, and laws as important components of living together, and, in both orphanages developed and tried out differing tools for democracy. Apart from traditional components like "kitchen rotas" and "looking after the youngest", these tools included:

A parliament with a court of peers

The concept behind these two tools is highly plausible: to provide binding but clear limitations for all. To protect children from the deprivation of their rights and from the judgements and despotism of teachers. To give them a healthy awareness of their rights.

The code

With the underlying principle of: "If someone does something wrong, the best thing to do is to forgive him."

The little newsletter (and other ways of expressing opinions)

This appeared as an insert in the Polish Jewish daily newspaper "Unsere Rundschau" (Our Newsletter) and from 1926 to 1938 there was a children's paper that involved not just the children in the orphanage but all the children in Warsaw. The public orphanage too regularly issued its own newsletter. There were also other forms of communication like a "notice board" that allowed children to express their concerns, fears, and hopes free from peer pressure.

The "Röschen" holiday camp

Korczak acquired a holiday home near Warsaw where the children could feel completely relaxed. This was a rare event in those times. "Röschen" means "adventure holiday" and the camp was full of children all year round.

Korczak has the last word

Korczak should not be brushed aside as a "holy man" of teaching. Quite simply he found children the most interesting, mysterious, and most worthy human beings. He found it both consistent and intelligent to dedicate himself to them for his entire lifetime.

You say:

"Relationships with children tire us out."

You are right.

You say:

"Why should we lower ourselves to their way of seeing things.

Lower ourselves, kneel before them, bend over backwards, and make ourselves smaller."

You are wrong.

It isn't this that tires us. It is the fact that we have to reach their feelings – we have to climb, stretch, and stand on tip toes to get there.

So as not to harm.



JANUSZ KORCZAK

1878 Born in Warsaw on 22 July as Henryk Goldszmit. Parents: Cecylia and Josef Goldszmit.

1899 Won a writing competition under the pseudonym Janusz Korczak. Kept this pseudonym.

1898–1904 Studied medicine in Warsaw. Took care of children in the poor quarters of Warsaw. First job in teaching. Graduated in medicine.

1904–1906 Military doctor in the Russian-Japanese war.

1906–1911 Worked in a children's hospital in the poor quarters of Warsaw. Instructor in "summer camp" for children and adolescents.

1912–1914 Director of the "Dom Sierot" (= Orphans' home) Jewish orphanage that he set up at number 92 Krochmalna Street in Warsaw.

1914–1918 Military doctor. First fundamental teaching publication "How to love a child".

From 1919 again director of Dom Sierot. He also set up and ran an orphanage for Polish children (Nasz Dom = Our house). Children's story "King Matt I". Story "If I come back little".

1926 Set up the first newsletter for children by children "Maly Przegląd" (= Little newsletter).

1928–1931 Second fundamental teaching publication: "The child's right to respect".

1940 Enforced transfer of Dom Sierot to the Warsaw ghetto.

1942 Korczak refused different offers of safety and together with Stefania Wilczynska, his colleague since 1911, the remainder of the orphanage staff and about 200 children went to Treblinka concentration camp.

08.05.1942 The (presumed) day he died.

For better understanding: Important components of the history of reformist educational theory.

1889–1904 Foundation of the "Deutsche Land-Erziehungsheime" (Schools in the German countryside) by Hermann Lietz.

1900 Publication of "Das Jahrhundert des Kindes" (The century of the child) by Ellen Key.

1907 Maria Montessori opens the "Casa dei bambini" in Rome.

1919 Foundation of the first Waldorf school.

1920 Anton S. Makarenko sets up the Gorky colony.

1924 Alexander S. Neill founds Summerhill.