

Taking Root:
My life as a child of
Janusz Korczak
–the father of children’s rights–

The biography of
Shlomo Nadel



Lea Lipiner

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Translated by Ora Baumgarten

Edited by Nicole Ptinis

Coordinated by Jerry Nussbaum



THE JANUSZ KORCZAK
ASSOCIATION OF CANADA

Provincial Advocate
for Children & Youth

L'intervenant provincial
en faveur des enfants & des jeunes

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Korczak uncharacteristically complied with the request of the photographer, Shlomo Nadel, to be photographed with his children and one of the group leaders in the courtyard of the orphanage. It was impossible to take photographs inside the building, due to poor lighting conditions. In the background you can see the lilac trees that lent their distinct smell to the orphanage. Photographed in 1934.

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Introduction

It was written somewhere above that I should stay alive despite all the bombings and that I should save the photographs [of life in the orphanage] in order to tell their story..

Shlomo Nadel

I have never met Mr. Nadel. I plan to. When I do, I will thank him sincerely. He has done the world a service by sharing the story of his photographs – his story. It is incomprehensible to imagine what it took within him to comb his memory so completely to tell the history. We owe Mr. Nadel a debt of gratitude. His remembrance, shared in this powerful biography, is a tool for change. He has gifted his experience, and the wisdom that it embodies, to children today.

Make no mistake, his memoirs are entirely relevant to us all. The portrait, in photographs and words, which the reader will soon encounter, is a portrait of what is possible. It is a story of hope. Hope for those who find themselves in the shadow of seemingly insurmountable struggle. Hope for those children living in residential care today. Hope for those responsible for children in care.

If under circumstances of incredible oppression and Nazi occupation, the children of Korczak's orphanage found a home that provided them with the nurturance that they needed and an opportunity to use their voice, then surely today we can find it within our collective selves to provide children with the same. For this to take place we must read and learn from this book.

It was in a children's home, an orphanage really, in Kobe, Japan, where I first heard the name, Janusz Korczak. Never in my studies in Canada and never in my years of professional experience had I ever heard reference to him. Today as Ontario's Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, an Officer of the Legislative Assembly of Ontario, I am mandated to elevate the voices of children and youth in care of the child protection system – Wards of the Crown. I have had the

opportunity, the privilege, of meeting and listening to thousands of children and youth who were removed from their families by the state for their own protection. In their stark and often blunt way they have described experiences which clearly demonstrate that those caring for them need to find the spirit of Janusz Korczak in their work with children.

Young people living away from home due to the intervention of the state relate that they feel “left out of their own lives”. From the abusive circumstances that brought them into state care, to life in the system itself, they more often than not feel that life careens outside of their control and influence. They feel powerless, isolated and alone – sometimes invisible. It takes great strength for them to push past to become actors in the world and regain their humanity. Many do. For others, life remains a difficult struggle.

Dr. Korczak’s work tells us it does not have to be so. “A hundred children, a hundred individuals who are people – not people-to-be, not people-of-tomorrow, but people now, right now – today,” Korczak said. He organized his institution with this thought at the centre of his pedagogy. Mr. Nadel’s story demonstrates how this manifested itself. Mr. Nadel himself, in his remarkable strength and dedication to the world, is the evidence that life for children in care today does not have to be as brutal as it is.

A former Crown Ward sums up how well-meaning institutions often miss the mark when it comes to fostering a sense of belonging. “You guys are always trying to solve human problems with institutional solutions,” he says. He points to an example of youth in foster care packing their belongings in garbage bags to move to a new home. “People thought that was demeaning. So the agency’s solution was to buy us luggage. Don’t get me wrong, I appreciated it, but it doesn’t solve the real problem. The real reason we feel demeaned isn’t because we don’t have suitcases. It’s because, sometimes, we feel rootless. We want a home, a place where we feel comfortable and where we belong.”

Janusz Korczak provided us with a path to a “human solution”. A path which is so necessary for children in our care today. When legislators or policy makers tell me “we can’t legislate love” or “it is so complicated to create human solutions” or “you want to boil the ocean”, I think of Korczak and I think of what is possible. Shlomo Nadel, in sharing his story, has shown us that path.

If the reader has heard of Dr. Janusz Korczak they most likely have heard the story of his walk to the trains to the gas chambers of Treblinka with “his children”. It was a journey he did not have to make, having been spared by the Nazis if he chose. An eyewitness described the event:¹

Forced into tight formation, body against body, driven by guards wielding whips on all sides, the solid mass of humanity was forced to run toward the train platform. Suddenly the Commandant ordered the Secret Police to pull back. ...

At the head of a thin line was Korczak! No, how could it be? The scene I shall never forget. In contrast to the mass of humanity being driven like animals to slaughter, there appeared a group of children marching together in formation. They were the orphanage children walking four abreast in a line behind Korczak. His eyes were lifted to heaven. Even the military personnel stood still and saluted. When the Germans saw Korczak, they asked, “Who is that man?”...

Yet while this hauntingly inspires, the work and deeds described in this book are the lasting legacy of the great Doctor. It is so entirely fitting that a former young person in Korczak’s care brings the light of his experience to the world. I dare the reader to attempt to read this book dispassionately. Our world can be different – if we choose.

Irwin Elman

*Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth of Ontario
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
July 21, 2015*

¹ <http://chgs.umn.edu/museum/responses/hergeth/bio.html>

Dr. Janusz Korczak

In memoriam

The memorial flame ignited many years ago, still burns for a man whose entire life was dedicated to the welfare of children, and who set an example for the world on, "*How to love a child*".ⁱⁱ

The man was Dr. Janusz Korczak — his Jewish name, Henryk Goldszmit. In this book the author writes, "what characterized him most were his love of mankind and his ability to penetrate into the depths of a child's soul, to understand the child's vulnerability and emotional needs."

On a personal level, I remember the time in the Warsaw Ghetto when I was a little girl. I went to a secret school because we, Jews, weren't allowed to learn. One day the school was boarded up and the sign said "Schule Verboten". I cried, so my father told me about a Dr. Korczak who loved children and was good to them. He told me how the old doctor kept an orphanage in the Warsaw Ghetto where he was ordered to move when the Ghetto wall was erected and all Jews were forced to live inside this enclosure. There, in the Nazi devised prison, he toiled, begged and borrowed to make the orphans' lives easier. And despite the hate for Jewish people that enveloped the society of those times, Korczak persisted in teaching the children the tradition and culture of their Jewish heritage and created for them a place where democracy and human rights flourished.

My father stopped his telling as we arrived at a building which I was told was the Korczak orphanage in the Ghetto. We walked in and I saw the children. Some were playing, others writing, or reading. I knew they were orphans. We were greeted by a kind woman and asked to sit with the children. I clutched my father's hand, thankful that he was with me, and after a while we left. I felt better.

Now in retrospect, I think how much richer and better our society would be if we had more human beings like Korczak in our midst, to nourish a child's soul. Too many children in the world today are

ⁱⁱ J. Korczak, "How to love a Child", in *Selected Works of Janusz Korczak*, ed. M. Wolins (Washington D.C.: National Science Foundation, 1967). Originally published 1919.

traumatized by raging wars, displaced and often deprived of parents who have been murdered by bigots.

I did not meet Dr. Korczak that day, but on the way out looking up, I saw red flowers blossoming on the orphanage balcony. My father told me that Dr. Korczak cultivated them. From that day on, after my father, Dr. Korczak became my hero.

In his *Warsaw Ghetto Diary*, Korczak wrote, “I am watering flowers.” Despite the barren landscape of the Warsaw Ghetto, filled with fear, hunger, disease and death, Korczak cultivated flowers on the balcony of the orphanage. This is symbolic of how this man cultivated the minds of the orphaned children. Like the trees he wrote about, Korczak nourished the roots of children’s lives so they could grow into healthy and decent young people.

When, in August of 1942, they came to the orphanage to deport the children to Treblinka, Korczak got a reprieve. But he refused by saying that he hated desertion and that his children need him. He then proceeded with the children, his flowers, in that famous and tragic march through the Warsaw Ghetto to Umschlagplatz,ⁱⁱⁱ then on to Treblinka Concentration Camp, where they all perished.

*And he marched with them,
the children – his flowers,
beneath the stars of Bethlehem and David
warming them with his heart’s flame.
And the flame still burns,
Among the ashes*

Lillian Boraks-Nemetz
Member of the Board
Janusz Korczak Association of Canada
Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada
July 21, 2015

ⁱⁱⁱ Umschlagplatz was the square in the Warsaw Ghetto where, under German occupation, Jews were gathered for deportation from the Ghetto to the Treblinka extermination camp as part of Operation Reinhard during genocides in Poland.

Acknowledgements

It was my good fortune to be educated by Dr. Korczak and Stefa (Stefania) Wilczyńska, to whom I owe my entire life. Both of these two dear people lived and lost their lives heroically. Their characters and pedagogical approach contributed to the formation of my personality and to all the achievements of my long life. More than words can describe, I am immeasurably indebted to those two people who gave me a whole world.

Throughout my life, I have strived to remember and publicize the work of these two beloved people. I dedicate this book to them, first and foremost. The story of my life as I have laid it out here, is an example of the story of one child in thousands, one who had the privilege of experiencing paradise on earth at the orphanage established by these two people. This was at the time in Poland between the two wars, when childhood innocence was roughly trampled underfoot by adults.

I dedicate this book to my beloved mother, Gila, and to my dearest brother Simcha (Samek), who both lost their lives in the Holocaust. I am sorrowful about the bitter fate of my mother who never had a home of her own and could never raise her two sons herself. I regret that my brother never experienced a family life and did not live long enough to raise his own children and grandchildren.

I wish to thank my wife, Frieda, for making a home for me and my children, a home built on solid foundations. I am grateful that she was always at my side and was a full partner to me in everything that I ever accomplished.

To my dearest sons who have given me so much joy and pleasure in their childhood and adulthood. Thanks to my wonderful granddaughter and sweet great-grandchildren.

I appreciate the work and efforts of Lea Lipiner for writing my

biography, and for this, I thank her. I also thank her colleague, Michal Schwartz for her assistance.

Many thanks to Batia Gilad, the Chairperson of the International Korczak Association, for urging me to have my memoirs written, for holding the torch, and maintaining the legacy of Dr. Janusz Korczak's pedagogical theory.

I wish to thank Yad Vashem and the Ghetto Fighters House for their assistance in preserving the memory of my teachers, Janusz Korczak and Stefa Wilczyńska.

Shlomo Nadel

*Ramle, Israel
February 2013*



Shlomo Nadel in 2011.

This world of ours – how strange it is! Strange as the life of a tree. Strange as small insects whose lives are so short. Fish, too are strange; human beings drown in the water in which they live and breathe. Strange as insects that jump or fly; grasshoppers, birds, butterflies. Strange as animals; a cat, a dog, a lion, and an elephant. Human beings are strange too; an entire universe is contained in each and every person.

When I look at a tree, it is as if I see two trees: first the actual tree and then the image of it in my head and my thoughts. As soon as I move away, I forget about it, but then I recognize it again the next time I see it. This is how that tree becomes entrenched in my thoughts. Everything has a double existence: once as the thing itself and then as its imaginary existence in my head and my thoughts.

Dr. Janusz Korczak





The front of the orphanage, one of Shlomo's first photographs, taken in his childhood.

1. Gates of Heaven



trangely enough, I remember very little about my life before I first set foot in the orphanage in Warsaw. I was seven years old, fatherless and poverty-stricken, having undergone many experiences in my short life. “Shloymaleh, you’re a lucky boy,” said my mother Gila, leaving me that morning in 1927 in the trusty hands of the principal of the institution, Dr. Janusz Korczak, for the next eight years. I had no clue what she meant.

There I remained — open-mouthed opposite the imposing building with its high windows, wide open to the street. To me, it seemed like a fairy tale palace. Transfixed, I entered the gates. Only then my eyes first beheld the parquet floor, the wide stairs going up to the top floor, and the huge hall in whose corner stood a grand piano.

The fascination that encompassed me mingled with a sensation that the seemingly gigantic and sparkling white walls were closing in on me. Seeing no familiar faces around me, I felt trapped inside this strange and foreign building, afraid and deserted, fearful of what was yet to come.

Slowly, I raised my eyes — only to meet Korczak’s smiling eyes. Immediately I felt much better, his warm smile restored my feeling of safety. Holding out his hand, he led me to his room in the attic. There he spoke to me, calmed me down as much as possible, all the time giving me a thorough medical examination. After this first encounter my suspicion waned, and was soon replaced by curiosity about this man and the place.

At this point, Korczak introduced me to Felek Grzyb, one



of the older children at the orphanage. He was in charge of taking care of me and, in the local tradition, of ensuring that I fit in with the other children. All new children had such a mentor, called an Apotropos,¹ who accompanied them in their first steps, taught them the ways of the orphanage, its rules and codes of behaviour, introduced them to the other children, and was in charge of their smooth integration into the institution.

Felek managed to gain my trust from our first meeting. This is a fact not to be taken for granted. Here I was, a newly-arrived seven-year-old that had already had his fill of hardships. Felek led me to my assigned place in the dining room, showed me my bed in the immense hall in which the children slept, gave me a tour of the many rooms in the orphanage, and explained my new duty. This



The children at the orphanage entrance, 1932.

¹ The term for "Guardianship", in Jewish Law. It means the guardian or custodian of another's affairs.

was dusting the black grand piano which I'd noticed earlier on. I realized a couple of weeks later that if I had not carried out my job faithfully, Felek would have had to stand trial in the children's court of the orphanage.

Later that day I was to meet Stefa Wilczyńska, Dr. Korczak's assistant and co-director of the orphanage. She seemed strict and firm, sending out a clear message of, "Nobody messes with me!" I was afraid of the large mole adorning her face, her black apron, and the huge bunch of keys permanently hanging from a belt around her waist. Stefa seemed like a prison guard to a child who had never experienced authority or been controlled by anybody. I had not even been afraid of being beaten with my stepfather's belt, but now I was afraid that Stefa would be able to stifle me inside her kingdom, inside these walls. I was sure that she was going to turn me into a submissive prisoner forever.

My first day at Doctor Janusz Korczak's orphanage ended with mixed feelings. My encounters with Stefa and Felek made it clear that there was no room for freeloaders in this place. I feared that I would not acclimatize to the demands of this institution with its extremely clear rules. Until the age of seven, I had been as free as a wild bird and I had no concept of responsibility or duty. My thoughts ranged from, "Who has given them the right to force me to work?" to "Let's wait and see what happens later on. I can always run away from here." I made a decision that I would never be a prisoner and that street life was preferable to life in confinement.

Over the coming months, I discovered the positive aspects of the orphanage. I realized that, in addition to a roof over my head, I had gained the advantage of good care and a unique education in one of the best institutions of all times.

The very next day, I found myself on my way to the school on Grzybowska Street with a group of children from the orphanage. The school was about a twenty-minute walk for us. This was the first time I ever sat in a proper classroom and I was overjoyed. It was especially

wonderful to have a full stomach. Every day, Stefa would provide a basket full of sandwiches for us to eat during our morning break. We never left the orphanage without having a nourishing breakfast. I was soon to learn that here, in the orphanage, I would never be hungry.

On our return from school, we would do our homework and play. To the modern reader, this schedule might seem trivial, but it was not to be taken for granted by a poverty-stricken boy, Jewish or Gentile, in Poland at the beginning of the twentieth century. Although compulsory education was in force, many poor children had to help support their families through hard physical labour and did not have the privilege of attending school. Neither did they have any time to play games. They did not bathe for weeks and months on end, rarely changing their clothes, living in overcrowded conditions, and going to bed on an empty stomach. Children born to families similar to mine did not enjoy a childhood comparable to the one I was fortunate enough to have at the orphanage.

I was always dressed in clean and tidy clothes when I went to school. We bathed once a week. The older children washed themselves, while the doctor himself bathed the younger ones. This is when he had a chance to examine our physical development in a discreet and unthreatening manner. On wash day we changed our underwear and clothes. Other children in Poland at that time did not even have running water. Only wealthy families could bathe in public baths or at the “mikva”.²

This was a real change for me, a comfort that is hard to fathom today. This wild and penniless boy, having no framework, almost abandoned, with a constantly rumbling stomach, suddenly discovers that his childhood has completely changed direction! I slowly gained the assurance that from now on I would be in a sheltered educational setting, with a full stomach, clean clothes, in a clean bed, and enjoying the comfort of life-long friends.

² Ritual bath

I was born in Warsaw in 1920, a first-born to my father Josef Rotbard. It was my uncle Leib, my father's brother, who told me when I grew up that the name Rotbard signifies belonging to a family of "kohanim".³ My parents were married by a Rabbi in a traditional Jewish wedding. Jews at that time did not usually register their marriages with the Polish authorities and, therefore, Jewish children often bore their mother's family name in official documents. This is how I came to bear my mother's family name, Nadel, which means "needle" in Polish, signifying a family of tailors. After the Holocaust, when I developed more of an awareness of the world around me, I decided to keep this name. While the name Rotbard is perpetuated in my uncle's family, my mother's whole family died in the Holocaust, and I am the only one left today to bear the name Nadel.

My oldest son is called Josef after my father who died when I was four years old and my brother Samek was a baby. My father's death was an unbearable event for my mother who was left penniless. She had to go out and work as a maid in the home of wealthy people who did not permit her to keep her children with her. I was taken to the home of distant relatives who were childless, in a town called Mszczonów. My "aunt" loved and pampered me but her husband often beat me with a thick belt which he had on hand all the time for his work as a shoemaker. This was his "educational" response to my many pranks.

My plight finally improved when I was moved to Janusz Korczak's orphanage. Unfortunately, I cannot say the same for my younger brother Samek who, despite my mother's attempts, was not accepted to the orphanage, apparently due to its policy of not accepting more than one child from the same family. In desperation, she was obliged to leave Samek to his fate in the streets, knowing that he would be taken in by people from the Jewish community.

My terrified brother was, in fact, taken in by people from the Jewish community and he was sent to an orphanage at 7 Twarda Street. A man called Frankel managed that institution in a completely

³ Cohen/Kohen, or high priest in Hebrew.

different way to how Korczak's orphanage was managed. That orphanage accepted only boys and the conditions were extremely harsh for the children. The boys received basic care and were sent to school, but they were treated in a cold and indifferent manner and their conditions bordered on criminal negligence. I heard, for example, that one of their dinners consisted of burnt rice porridge with milk. The children refused to eat it and as a punishment, it was served to them again the next day for breakfast. Although they were very hungry, the children again refused to eat the burnt porridge and declared a hunger strike. Two of the people working with the children at the orphanage informed the Jewish community about this and it resulted in a huge scandal.

I remember one of the workers who worked at both orphanages once accusingly said to me, "How could your mother have abandoned your brother in the street?" What was I, a small boy, to do about this? I remember her question to this day, as if I were somehow guilty that fate had been kinder to me than to my brother.



Samek Nadel, brother of Shlomo, when he was a ward at another orphanage in Warsaw, 1932. Samek, first on the left, is holding the hand of a young ward, who is holding the hand of one of the orphanage's group leaders, Stella Gutman (later Fitek). Stella survived the Holocaust and was living in the U.S.A. She posted a notice in the Polish newspaper "*Nowiny Kurier*" (published in Israel), in which she announced that she was planning on visiting Israel and would like to see anybody she knows. I answered the notice and we established a connection which lasted many years. Since I did not possess a photograph of my whole family, I asked her if she by any chance had a photograph of my brother. To my surprise, she answered in the affirmative and stated that she had two photographs, which she would gladly give me. It is needless to express my great excitement at that moment.

I had two grandmothers whose names I do not remember, but who both were called “Bubbe”.⁴ My father’s mother emigrated to Argentina a short while before the Second World War. My mother’s mother, my beloved grandmother, worked as a live-in maid at the homes of wealthy people in Warsaw all her life, just as my mother did. When she became too old to do housekeeping work, my grandmother was fired from her job and became penniless on the streets. To this day, I have no idea how she survived. Perhaps she begged for money on Zelazna Street, nearby the convent that gave her a meal each day. During the cold nights she must have taken advantage of the local church which kept its doors open to homeless people.

When I was about ten years old, I was walking on the street one day and my grandmother recognized me. She ran after me shouting, “Shloymaleh, Shloymaleh!” I heard her voice echoing and tried to think of what to do. How could a young boy like me, dependant on the mercy of other people, help her? I too could have been among the homeless people if an invisible hand had not brought me to Korczak’s orphanage.

I faced a cruel dilemma. Should I stop and deal with my grandmother’s distress for which I had no solution, or should I disregard her calls and run away? I decided to ignore her and continued on my way. But I was not running away from her, since I loved her. I was running away from the pain of facing her distress. This was too heavy a burden for my young shoulders to bear. My instinct for survival overcame my emotions and to this day I still hear her cries, “Shloymaleh!” in my dreams. Today I am surrounded by my children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren, and find it difficult to fathom the cruel fate of my grandmother.

The above encounter with my beloved grandmother illustrates the helplessness of my family and their sheer inability to take care of us boys. In retrospect, this story represents our departure from that social class of people who worked all their lives simply to eke out a meager living, yet lived a life of incredible poverty and misery.

| ⁴ “Grandmother” in Yiddish.

2. Wild Children, Apotropos, and Bursists



Dr. Korczak was distressed by the number of homeless children wandering around the streets of Polish cities. These were the wretched victims of the major economic crisis in the aftermath of the Russo-Japanese War. After his release from the Russian army, Korczak decided to establish an orphanage for homeless Jewish children. He accomplished this with the assistance of philanthropic Jews who purchased land in Warsaw for this purpose at 92 Krochmalna Street. The house was opened on October 7th, 1912.

This was a very trying period. Besides the sparse wealthy class, many people were unable to support their own families. They had an endless, ineffective and almost hopeless battle to provide for even their most basic needs. A large section of the city's population was poor and most people did any work they could but were mainly occupied with seeking employment. Their children were forced to go out and participate actively in supporting the family, or else walk the streets aimlessly. Attending school was a privilege reserved only for the wealthy class. This harsh economic situation affected the sanitary conditions in which the children grew. The children were the weakest and most vulnerable sector of the population. Lack of food led to poor health and diseases like rickets, tuberculosis, and various skin diseases, which today are characteristic of the third world.

Most of Dr. Korczak's residents came from poor families living under severely neglected and deficient conditions, having only one or no parents at all. As a result, many

of those children displayed marked behavioural difficulties. My rebellious profile prior to reaching the gates of the orphanage characterized many of my peers. The adult world as we knew it seemed threatening and unreliable. One of the first lessons we learned as neglected street children was to avoid or ignore any structured framework imposed upon us at all costs. The entry age into the orphanage was officially seven, an age at which it was difficult to penetrate the invisible walls we had erected between ourselves and our environment. There had been no place for rights or duties in the daily routine of our lawless lives.

It was Janusz Korczak who believed that, through correct education, one could rectify our world views, rebuild our trust in people and equip us with the tools with which to make the right choices in life, tools that would enable us to be integrated into society in a positive and creative manner. Korczak's theory held that one could be a contributor and receiver simultaneously. He established the orphanage to this purpose and shaped it not only to supply our



Pictured are the older boys at the orphanage. They are holding shovels in order to shovel the sudden snow of 1935. The janitor, Piotr Zalewski, who was in charge of the shoveling, is sitting in the first row, second from the right.

material needs, but also as a home in which a community of children would be created. This community would be a miniature reflection of the world outside — in Korczak’s naive imagination.

Dr. Korczak believed that a sound education did not overlook any minor details and that the rules and customs of the place should be simple and structured for every child. This approach was evident in the strict daily routine of Korczak House. At the orphanage, I learned the meaning of the words “order” and “organization” for the first time in my life. I learned that games and having fun went hand in hand with work, responsibility, and rules. Stefa was the figure in charge of our strict and regular daily routine.

We were constantly infused with notions of personal responsibility and contribution to society. One of the methods of implementation was by including all the children in the maintenance of the place, with the exception perhaps of the youngest or weakest ones who could not fulfill any duties. Thus, besides preparing food for which the cooks were responsible, or housekeeping which demanded better professional skills than the children were capable of displaying, all the chores in the orphanage were performed by the children themselves, according to a roster of duties.

Korczak devised a system of work credits, or merits. We could do anything towards the maintenance of the home or help one of our friends to earn merits. A half hour’s work was considered a work unit. For every 500 merits we accumulated, we received a picture postcard, similar to the “commemoration” cards we received as merits for waking up early.

As I mentioned before, my first duty at the orphanage was dusting the grand piano, a job which I did not really enjoy. However, through this, I learned what the concept of duty meant, and was very glad to carry out what I was asked to do. I had other responsibilities too, such as distributing food at meals, collecting dishes and cleaning tables. I sometimes scrubbed the parquet floor in the bedroom, and the floor monitor would check to see that I had done my work

properly. In this way, we learned that no work was shameful. We learned that anyone who contributes to society is of worth, that there is no place for parasites and that they should be condemned. I am not exaggerating when I say that most of Korczak's children almost certainly reached adulthood having a high level of work ethics. In my professional life as an adult, I was always commended for my serious attitude to anything I undertook. I believe that it is this trait that saved me more than once from starvation and doom.

Korczak's burning belief in the power of education stemmed, to my understanding, from his belief that most children are "social animals". He therefore thought that children were able to bear social judgment, grasp the concept of their own welfare versus the general welfare, and conduct themselves according to social laws. Korczak's theory holds that children who display anti-social or aggressive tendencies should be educated using clear and unambiguous tools until they are able to adapt to the social framework.



The group leaders at the orphanage, as photographed by Shlomo in 1934.
Felek Grzyb is seated second from the right.

And who were these teachers who were designated to implement Korczak's doctrine? Korczak was of the opinion that a young teacher could have a stronger influence than any adult pedagogue or psychologist. He therefore established two institutions. One was called the "Bursists",⁵ the young apprentice teachers who monitored the children's behaviour in the home and made sure that it was actually managed according to the rules. The second institution was that of the "Apotropos", or guardians, of whom Felek, the young man that I met when I was accepted to the orphanage, was an example. Apprentice teachers, the Bursists, were students who, in exchange for food and lodging, were employed as group leaders of the children at the orphanage. They spent four hours a day working with the children, and were free for the rest of the day.

This system was an excellent example of Korczak's understanding the soul of any child at the orphanage. He knew that the only way to penetrate the barriers these children had built around themselves during their short lives was to use other children from their peer group to help them in their transition. He understood that he had to provide his new charges with a close companion during their first months at the orphanage. In this way, veteran children were in charge of the integration of newcomers to the orphanage.

The children who had the role of guardian worked voluntarily for three months, a period they could extend for another three months or shorten. They were selected by the other children through a secret ballot. Males usually mentored boys and females mentored girls. Guardians introduced the children to the place and the routine, just like Felek, my guardian, did on the day I entered the orphanage. They explained the rules of behaviour and the rights and duties of the children in the orphanage and explained the democratic institutions of a children's society, which I will discuss later.

The main role of the Bursists, or apprentice teachers, was to listen, give advice, and protect the children when necessary. Bursists also made notes in a special notebook and reported the characteristics and nature of the new children to the doctor. These notes referred to

⁵ The "Bursa" (stock exchange) was the nickname for the apprentice educators' program in Korczak's institution, where they taught and counselled the children in exchange for room and board.

events that happened in the orphanage after a child was admitted, and included the Bursist's impression of the child's behaviour and personality.

The educational message for the young children of these two institutions was that their behaviour was their very own responsibility, and that they had to bear any consequences for such behaviour. The Bursists, or apprentice teachers, who worked at the orphanage were instructed that if they wanted to ensure the educational success of their work, they were obliged to ensure that the orphanage would be a warm, positive, and constructive place for the children.

Korczak strongly criticized parenthood of the time. If you wanted to



After leaving the orphanage, Shlomo returned to visit in 1935. He was accompanied by an amateur photographer who requested to photograph the children together with Korczak who, as usual, refused to be photographed. Most of the young children in the photograph met their fate with Korczak in the camp at Treblinka. Shlomo is standing in the fourth row on the far right, with a peaked cap on his head.

become a shoemaker, carpenter, or tailor, he reasoned, you first and foremost needed to work as an apprentice. First observe the work of the professional and only after a period of training will you, under the master's keen supervision, be able to perform the work itself. Parenthood, on the other hand, meant nurturing the young child and turning him into a worthy adult. Korczak was of the opinion that preparation and training for parenthood was essential. This approach was revolutionary in those days as it is today, to a certain extent.

Over the years, there was criticism that we, Korczak's children, were used as guinea pigs to prove his theories. Needless to say, how happy I am that I served as one of the guinea pigs and how successful his "experiment" was! Most of my time is spent trying to prove to everyone how we, his children, are the eternal proof of the successful education we received; it is not surprising many of the surviving children of the orphanage are involved in cultural and educational enterprises.

3. Formal and Informal Education

The school I attended was located in an old apartment building. Some of the apartments were converted to classrooms. The school was a Jewish institute intended for boys at first, later becoming co-educational. We played inside the classrooms during our breaks because the yard belonged to the residents of the site. We studied mathematics, literature, geography, history, physics, chemistry, music, and bible. My favourite subjects were physics and chemistry, owing to my interest in photography, my future profession.

Unlike the Gentile schools, there was no school on Saturdays. The school operated according to the compulsory education law from age seven to fourteen. However, as I already mentioned, many poor children were unable to enjoy the benefits of this law. There were also poor families who refused to give up on a good education for their children. I remember the two children from the Last family who were in my class. The brothers had only one pair of shoes between them and therefore took turns attending school on alternate days.

Most of the children of the orphanage ended their studies at the end of elementary school. Children of wealthy families carried on to the Gymnasium.⁶ There was usually a light lunch served at the school, a donation bestowed by wealthy Jews who wished to encourage children to gain a basic education. The meal usually included a glass of warm milk and a roll — often the only meal of the day for many of the poor children.

⁶ The name used for “middle school” in the local education system.



We walked the twenty minute walk to school every day, through the dirty and sooty Wola neighbourhood, Warsaw's industrial area. The city's underprivileged class lived in this area, characterized by rampant anti-Semitism. On our way to school, we often encountered neighbourhood children who had been brought up hating Jews. On identifying us as Jews, they stoned us on our way. The more reckless ones amongst them did not hesitate to chase after us and then punch us. The doctor was aware of this phenomenon and advised us to take another longer route to school so as to avoid meeting up with these Gentile hooligans. That is exactly what we did. We left the orphanage in groups, the older children taking responsibility for protecting the younger ones. We did the same on our way back from school.

I mainly remember the Bible teacher, Margolis, whom I absolutely admired. He told us stories from the Bible and told us to be proud of our Judaism. He also tried to infuse in us respect for our Jewish heritage and roots. We often asked him to carry on through our break even after the bell had rung.

Stefa served as the liaison between the orphanage and the school. The principal addressed any letters concerning our pranks at school to Stefa, who dealt with any problems and sometimes even punished us in the garden. Indeed, the principal sent more than one letter of complaint to Stefa about my pranks and I was required to return Stefa's response to the principal.

Stefa was indirectly responsible for one of those pranks. She had given me a broken alarm clock and the large spring I found inside it ignited my imagination. I took the spring, broke it into a few pieces and placed the pieces between the two boards of my desk at school in such a way that they were unnoticeable. When the music teacher struck the metronome (for setting the tempo), I pulled the springs and they sounded a screeching noise totally unrelated to the musical topic of the lesson. The teacher soon understood that the sounds were not coming from the metronome, and became very angry that he could not identify their source. As a punishment he made us stay in the classroom during the long break, saying that he would revoke

the punishment only if he found out who was responsible. I had no choice but to admit to my guilt. The teacher was very interested in hearing how I had created those sounds but I clearly refused to let him in on my secret. He became more and more frustrated and therefore sent a letter of complaint to Stefa, demanding a response. I was found guilty for this incident in the children's court and was sentenced to 500 labour units, a punishment which was considered harsh.

Another punishment I received was at the hands of one of the teachers at the school. I had to fill 100 pages with one sentence which I cannot remember. This punishment was impossible to fulfill so I devised a scheme. I bought carbon paper and wrote the sentence on one page, copying it several times onto other pages. This made the punishment much easier to fulfill "properly". However, the incident did not end there.



Shlomo's class in his last year of study, 1935. The teacher is standing second from the left and Shlomo is to the right.

One of the Bursists at the orphanage, Ms. Tzuk⁷ noticed what I had done and said to Dr. Korczak, “I want you to see for yourself how Shlomo the liar has deceived his teacher. Instead of writing out the sentence on a hundred pages, he used carbon paper.”

The Doctor burst out laughing which angered the apprentice teacher even more.

“Why are you laughing?” she asked.

“You don’t see what’s funny? This child is more clever than his teacher who gave him such a punishment. Doesn’t the teacher realize that the punishment is unrealistic and unfeasible? What’s so terrible? What’s all the fuss about?”

I know for a fact that the Bursist complained after this incident to the Doctor, saying that he was more considerate and supportive of the children than of the apprentice teachers.

The field of informal education was unknown in those days, but Korczak recognized its value alongside formal education and supplied us with as much informal education as possible. He strove to create an educational system at the orphanage to complement the formal knowledge that we acquired at school. A piano teacher came to the orphanage once a week to teach all the children who wanted to learn. Another teacher established a mandolin orchestra, the mandolins having been a donation from the Jewish community. Yet another teacher by the name of Basia Abramov, established a children’s choir for the orphanage. Janusz Korczak brought us closer to literature by reading his stories and books to us. We were exposed to the visual arts through visits to museums. All of these stimuli contributed towards us having an appreciation of culture.

Stefa and Korczak requested financial assistance from the leaders of the Jewish community for our participation in cultural activities outside of the orphanage. The orphanage received such donations, including 20 cinema tickets every week as a gift from Jewish cinema

⁷ Ms. Tzuk is Janka Lubraniecka, a teacher at the orphanage from 1930 – 1933. She married Jakob Kutalczuk who was a teacher at the orphanage from 1920 – 1936. They both moved to Israel in 1946. Together they managed an institution in Sha’arayim in Rehovot, Israel in the spirit of Janusz Korczak.



The mandolin orchestra at the orphanage. In the center: Mr. Fabian, a Bursist (apprentice teacher) who was also the music teacher at the orphanage. Photographed by Shlomo in 1934.

owners in Warsaw. Similarly, we received tickets to the circus, the theater, and various exhibitions which we visited on weekends. I especially remember a sculpture exhibition at the Warsaw Museum of Arts. A bronze sculpture of a man made a particularly strong impression on me. The figure was sitting on some rocks, chained to one of them, while birds were pecking his eyes. I asked the doctor, shocked, “What does this sculpture mean? Why is this happening to the man? Who is he and what did he do? Why is he being punished?”

Korczak explained to me that the sculpture was of Prometheus whose story is told in Greek mythology. Prometheus was punished by Zeus, father of the gods, for stealing fire from them and delivering it to human beings. I found this story very disturbing and had a long discussion with the doctor about the injustice that the man had suffered. I asked him, “Why does someone who helped humankind deserve such a terrible punishment?”

Korczak answered, “You’ll understand when you grow up”, but did not explain further. He did not try to make the world look any rosier. The topic of injustice obviously bothered me from an early age.

Cultural events of this sort were intended for wealthy families, only they could enjoy the cultural prosperity in the Polish capital in those times, while most of the population of Warsaw were undergoing a daily struggle for survival and had no money for cultural activities. Needless to say, we originated from that socio-economic environment and would never have had the chance to participate in cultural events. Korczak proved once again to be an innovator in that he stressed the importance of enriching the cultural world of the child. He stressed the importance of culture because he understood that, besides the aesthetic experience, culture also provides an intellectual stimulus for increasing one’s knowledge and developing curiosity and thinking skills.



The kayak was built by the children with Igor Newerly, Korczak’s secretary and later a renowned Polish writer and activist for preserving the legacy of Janusz Korczak. His hobby was building and carving in wood. At the children’s request, he voluntarily gave a woodwork course. Holding the oar in the center is the group leader, Felek Grzyb. At its launching we called the kayak “Cheevy”, as in the popular Shirley Temple film. This magnificent watercraft did not last very long. The oarsmen lacked experience and sailed it on the Wisła River (that crosses Warsaw) straight into the poles of the bridge. The kayak collapsed and sank, but luckily the oarsmen escaped to safety.

4. The Child Within the Doctor

Fanasz Korczak's room in the orphanage was tailored to his modest needs. Of the whole spacious house, the man chose to live in the smallest room in the attic, simply furnished and bare of any unnecessary items. It had a bed, closet, night reading lamp, sofa, and a large desk which he had inherited from his father. There was a bookshelf laden with books behind a table.

His room also held "sub-tenants", lovingly invited inside. These were the sparrows which he almost succeeded in taming by giving them meals on his windowsill. The flock of birds would land there every time the doctor entered his room, guests waiting for a meal, never to be turned down. Korczak always kept breadcrumbs in his pocket, which he distributed generously to, "my dear friends, residents of my home", as he used to call the sparrows. The breadcrumbs were also meant for the relatives of the sparrows which he spotted while walking about the streets of Warsaw.

The other "sub-tenants" of Korczak's room were white mice. Nobody knows how they arrived there in the first place, but everybody knew that they were "protected tenants". The doctor cared so passionately for their well-being that before he opened the door of his room he would knock to warn them and avoid injuring them by suddenly opening the door. The sofa in the room served as a playground for the mice and the doctor treated them with care and warmth.

One day, three older boys who were protégés at the orphanage entered Korczak's room in his absence and the



mice came out fearlessly to greet them. The boys' reaction, however, was simply to kill them. The rest of the children were absolutely shocked. How could anyone educated by Korczak carry out such a cruel deed? Needless to say, the doctor was very sad at the death of his "tenants" and the cruelty of his wards. I do not remember what the consequences for the boys were.

A long staircase with a wooden banister joined the two floors of the orphanage building. The children, especially the boys, loved to slide down it secretly — a potentially harmful and mischievous deed. This was discovered after the laundress complained that she often found unexplained tears in the crotch area of the boys' trousers. The doctor finally found out the reason for the tears and tried to convince the children that sliding down was dangerous, since they could fall off the stairs and injure their heads. This explanation did not affect the more mischievous ones among us, and the pleasure of sliding became stronger than the fear of any resulting punishment.

I do not know what went on in Korczak's mind when, certain that nobody was watching, he decided one day to conduct a close investigation of the staircase issue. Perhaps he wanted to understand more about it for one of the characters he was creating in his books, or perhaps it was the mischievous child hiding in an adult personality. After the deed, Korczak discovered that he had been caught red-handed as his misconduct had been observed. He did not wait to be brought before the children's court, rather he placed his name on the list of candidates for the next trial. He explained during the discussion that his punishment should not be too harsh, since he only wanted to check from close-up how dangerous it was to slide down the banister. On hearing his explanation, the judges smiled to each other and thought, "Who is he trying to fool? It's obvious that he enjoyed it as much as we do." Since we forgave him his weaknesses, and exposing him made him one of us, he was only sentenced to 100 units. The reasoning for this verdict was that his arguments were convincing.

Another of the mischievous doctor's recognizable weaknesses

was connected to the consumption of cakes. Once in a while, on a Thursday, when he returned late from the children's newspaper "*Maly Przegląd*",⁸ he would pop into a pastry shop and buy himself some Turkish bread with raisins. Then he would quietly slip into our bedroom when we were already in bed, walk around, break off pieces of bread, and leave a piece for each of us. While he was doing this, he signaled to us to eat quietly and not to make crumbs, so that Stefa would not discover what we had done. He knew, of course, that eating in bed was forbidden, but allowed himself to behave like a child and have some fun. I will never forget that sweet taste of the secret bread and the pleasant feeling of the moment when we chewed it. I felt a powerful closeness and love for Korczak, just like a younger brother feels towards his older sibling.

On birthdays, each one of us would find a packet of sweets and cakes waiting at his place in the dining room. Most of the children did not remember their dates of birth because they were so young and nobody celebrated their birthdays where they came from anyway. But Doctor Korczak was pedantic about checking up the dates in the office records and bought the sweets out of his own money at one of the expensive pastry shops in Warsaw.



A bedroom in the orphanage, photographed for documentation purposes. Shlomo purchased the photographs with small change that he saved up whilst at the orphanage.

⁸ *Little Review*

There were two bedrooms on the second floor of the orphanage. One of them contained beds for fifty-one boys and the other was populated by fifty-six girls. Every bed had a small locker beside it in which we kept our school equipment. There was a narrow room with a radio and gramophone player between the two bedrooms. We would fall asleep to the sounds of music, or the doctor telling us one of his stories. Our clothes for the next day were folded next to our beds, ready for the morning.

There was central heating in the building most of the days during winter, which made waking up easier and more pleasant during the cold Warsaw days. The heating was welcome during our wake-up time each morning at six o'clock, when we would wash our faces in the communal shower room. Korczak knew that waking up early was trying for us and so he announced a prize for anyone who could wake up earlier. The prize was a picture postcard of faraway places that we could only dream of ever visiting. The magical attraction of the postcards was not powerful enough for me and I believe I am the only child who never won any of them. Waking up in the morning was the most challenging part of my day, since I found it so hard to part with my warm bed at the orphanage. Later in my life, especially during the Holocaust, when I was hungry and cold, my exceptional sleeping skills afforded me an escape from harsh reality and an ability to deal with the hardships awaiting me.

Bath time at the orphanage. The photograph was taken by Forbart, a well-known photographer in Warsaw, documenting the institution for its 25th anniversary.



After waking up, dressing, and washing, we would go downstairs to a small table with little cups containing cod liver oil, right next to a small first aid room on the middle floor of the building. We were forced to drink that vile-smelling liquid under the watchful eye of the doctor or Stefa. The doctor explained that the oil would safeguard our health for many years. Indeed, I have no doubt that it strengthened me for the terrible time of starvation I experienced during the war. The doctor taught us a “trick” to help us swallow the formidable oil and promised us that it would not be so awful if we followed his instructions meticulously. So, according to his instructions, we would pinch our noses so as not to smell it. He put stale salted bread in each of our mouths, and then we swallowed the oil without tasting it.

After our “vitamin D ceremony”, we gathered for morning exercises. In the summer we exercised outside, while in the winter we remained in the big hall which also served as the dining room. The serving monitors also met there before each meal. The orphanage kitchen was in the basement. Two cooks, both called Lonia, orchestrated the cooking of all the dishes with an iron fist. Each of them weighed at least 120 kilos and we, the children, were sure that this weight was essential for anyone carrying out the job. The



A typical summer's day at the orphanage, 1931. After drinking the cod liver oil, the children, dressed in their school uniforms, would line up for morning exercises. Shlomo is in the middle of the last row. The photograph was taken in the front courtyard of the orphanage.

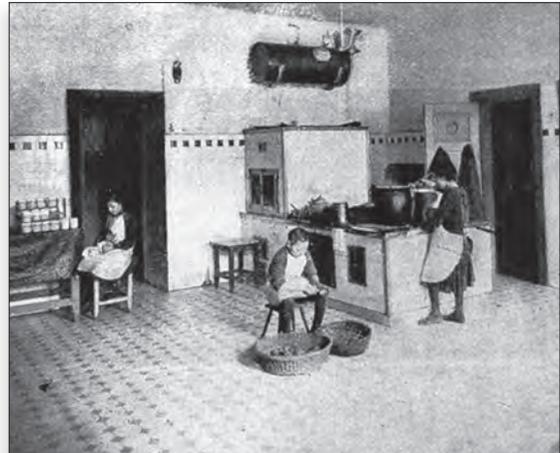
two of them resembled large ballerinas, gracefully dancing between the pots and pans. I still remember the smells coming up from the steaming dishes in the kitchen of the two Lonias. We loved doing kitchen duty with them, perhaps because they reminded us of home or of the scents from our mothers' homes.

Dishes and food were transported between the kitchen and the large hall by means of a manually operated elevator. Breakfast consisted of cheeses, smoked fish, bread, and basic vegetables grown by the older children in hothouses on our farm, Rozyczka, outside Warsaw. There was cocoa for anyone who wanted it, while others received plain milk which was plentiful from the five milking cows tended by a Gentile farm woman at Rozyczka Farm.

The hall had thirteen tables. Bursists sat at the head of each table and their roles were to serve the food which was placed in the center of the table and to make sure that all the children were eating. If a child refused to eat, the doctor sat next to him and persuaded him to eat together. "One spoon for you and one spoon for me," he would say. At the end of the meal we went out to school, every child holding a sandwich in his hand.



Peeling potatoes on kitchen duty. For safety's sake, only the older girls were called to do this job. Photographed for documentation purposes.



Kitchen duty. Lonia the cook is in the background. Photographed for documentation purposes.

We gathered again in the dining room for lunch which typically consisted of soup, meat, meatballs, barley, potatoes, and fruit. We ate as much as we liked at meals, but we did not usually eat anything between meals.

In the afternoon we would go to the Quiet Room where there really was always silence with an atmosphere conducive to learning. We could always go there to concentrate quietly on doing our homework. There was a small room adjoining the Quiet Room, a type of storeroom, which we called “Stefa’s Store”, because that is where she kept pencils, notebooks, and erasers which we received according to our needs. Dr. Korczak’s house also contained a well-stocked library at our disposal. I loved reading the books, even those that were meant for older children, such as books by Victor Hugo. Only when I read them again at a later age did I really understand them.

After the group leaders were satisfied that we had done our homework properly, we were allowed to go out and play. We played



The dining room and assembly hall. Photographed for documentation purposes.

in the courtyard of the orphanage during the spring and summer months, since Korczak understood the importance of being outdoors and the benefits of the sun on our young bones. My favourite outdoor game was volleyball while other boys preferred football. A real football was donated to us by the President of the United States, making the orphanage one of the only places in Warsaw where children could kick a real football. We, the children, wrote him letters of thanks and the Ambassador of the United States visited the orphanage to collect the letters in person.

The girls played hopscotch or skipping games. Other games that the boys and girls played together were ping pong, which we set up by placing two tables together and putting up a net between them. We also played croquet, for which we had special croquet balls. We enjoyed playing “klippa” the most, which was a variation of baseball. We used a small log, sharpened at each end, for batting and we ran between stations. This game was known in Israel as “hakafot”. There was an animal corner in the backyard, where we looked after rabbits and pigeons.

When autumn came and we could not play outside anymore, the games moved inside into the big hall. This is when I wished with all my heart that the approaching winter would be cold enough for the nearby lake to freeze so we could skate on it. Skating was my favourite pastime during the winter months. When the time came, we took out the skates that had been waiting patiently in the storeroom, and went out to skate with Dr. Korczak himself, who also greatly enjoyed skating. Just like all of us, he also found himself falling on his behind, getting up and then falling again, joining the chorus of children laughing at his skating shortcomings. I loved situations such as these, when all the barriers were down and the childlike qualities in the doctor were revealed.

The day ended in the dining room where we were served dinner that was largely the same as breakfast, without the smoked fish, so as to prevent too much drinking and then bed-wetting at night. We received cake on special occasions.

5. In the Children's Republic



lowly, Korczak House began to resemble an autonomous children's republic. Everything that transpired there was almost entirely generated by a well-formulated constitution. The representatives of that constitution were members of the republic — the children. The children had a "Senate" and a "Court" supported by a sophisticated disciplinary system. In addition, we ran a local newspaper, called *Dom*, or *Home* in English, written by hand and partly edited by the doctor.

I have already mentioned the unique children's court and its considerable involvement in our daily lives. I am unaware of anything like it in another part of the world. One of the main aims of the court was to allow a child who had been wronged to list his case and summon the offender to face the court. I believe that the court succeeded in drastically decreasing the amount of violence inside the walls of the orphanage. Very rarely did we witness fights between two children. Even then, Korczak would not interfere, but rather observe from the side to make sure that the violence did not go beyond reasonable conduct and that nobody got hurt.

Trials usually took place on the weekends, in a room in which Korczak would also read the news aloud from the *Home* newspaper. The children's court consisted of five child judges elected weekly by other children. The judges changed every week as Korczak did not want to create a class of judges. He wanted every child to experience both perspectives of being a judge and a defendant in a trial. The judges were democratically chosen by the orphanage children on weekends in an organized procedure which



took place in the dining room after breakfast. At first, each child received three ballot slips. One had the plus sign, which meant “yes”, one had the digit zero, which meant “indecisive”, and one had the minus sign, which meant “definitely not”. On each of these slips the children wrote his or her choices for candidates for judges that week. Once every child had suggested candidates, a group leader would go around the tables holding a box collecting all the notes from the children into the box. The group leaders immediately counted all the votes and then the judges were chosen for the trials that would commence later that day.

The subject of the trial, the defendant and the accusation were announced on the notice board prior to the trial. The accused defended himself despite the fact that the judges could have been his own friends, posing a problem for children who were obliged to sentence a friend. Stefa was present at every trial, but she did not have the right to vote. She had the authority to give guidance and advice in difficult cases, but the judges were not obliged to accept her opinions and could even reject them.

A trial between friends became a known phenomenon all over Poland at that time. Janusz Korczak devised the constitution, consisting of one-thousand articles or judgments the judges could give out. This became the basis for the discussion of the court. In the introduction to the constitution, there was an explanation of how to treat an “accused” person, how to relate to the incident, and how to specify the functions and limitations of the court. Arie Buchner, an apprentice teacher at the orphanage while he was a student in Warsaw, elaborated on this point in his Hebrew translation of Korczak’s book *At the Summer Camp*.⁹ There, he explained the constitution and its rationale. Among other things, he listed the rules of conduct expected from a child who wished to bring charges against a friend. Some of the points were:

If a person wronged you, the best thing is to forgive them.

If they wronged you because they did not know better, they already know this.

⁹ Janusz Korczak, *At the Summer Camp [Moski, Joski i Srule]*, trans. Arie Buchner, (Warsaw: Yesod Publications, 1978). A tale describing poor Jewish children at a summer camp in one of Poland’s forests.

If they wronged you unintentionally, they will be more careful in the future.

If they wronged you because they find it hard to adjust to norms unfamiliar to them, they will try harder to adjust to them in the future.

If they wronged you because they were tempted by others, from now on they will not pay attention to them.

If a person wronged you, the best thing is to forgive them and wait for them to mend their ways in the future.

It is the duty of the court to protect the quiet, the weak, and the conscientious ones. Furthermore, the court is required to administer justice, as it is those who suffer most through lack of law and order. The law court itself is not justice, but it aspires towards realizing it; the law court is not truth, but its goal is truth. Judges may make mistakes. They may punish for acts which they themselves are guilty. But it is shameful if a judge consciously hands down an unjust verdict.

The basic premise was that a child brought before the court had made an unintentional mistake. Anyone who admitted their misdemeanour, requested forgiveness, and promised they would not



The Children's Court.
Stefa Wilczyńska is
in the center of the
photograph, 1932.

do it again, was sentenced to between 100 and 300 penalty units, according to the severity of the act. Details of relatively severe cases and their outcomes were posted on the bulletin board.

A child who was sentenced to 500 penalty units was obliged to inform his guardian about this. The guardian had to promise to supervise his charge and report his behaviour to Stefa or the doctor. Anyone penalized by 600 units was punished by his family being notified that his future stay at the orphanage was conditional to an improvement in his behaviour. A child fined 700 units was not permitted to go to the cinema for one month. A fine of 800 or 900 units meant that the child had to find a mentor to vouch for him and accompany him throughout the specified period of improvement in his behaviour. The maximum penalty of 1000 units meant that the child was expelled from the orphanage, stripped of the right to appeal or be forgiven. Unlike methods used in those days, a child at Korczak's orphanage was never deprived of food as a punishment. Food was out of bounds as a means of punishment.

For their first six months at the orphanage, new children were subject to a special procedure. During this period, guardians were responsible for the deeds of their children as far as the children's court was concerned. A child that broke the rules was not summoned to court, but his guardian was. They were blamed for inadequate supervision of their children and for allowing them to commit the misdemeanour. If the guardians proved that they had supervised their children properly but that the children had not listened to their advice, charges against them were dropped but the child still benefited from the doubt. This responsibility created a strong commitment of the guardian towards a new protégé.

I remember the case of a boy who became known as "Piekowek", which in Polish means "little hell". Piekowek was a bright, sharp-witted, and street-wise red-head, involved in everything. His behaviour was far from what was generally acceptable at the orphanage and it seemed that he was impossible to tame or have the rules of the orphanage imposed on him. His inner anger caused him

to swear and strike out at others, to become unruly, and damage property. On more than one occasion, he was summoned to the children's court, where he promised to improve his behaviour.

One morning, when we entered the toilets at the orphanage, we discovered that the drains were blocked and the showers flooded. Stefa took care of the repair with an iron fist, but the problem repeated itself a couple of times until Korczak discovered the reason for the blockages. It was a bar of soap that somebody had inserted into the draining pipe.

The doctor created an ambush early the next morning and finally caught Piekowek red-handed and spanked him on his behind. The red-headed saboteur responded cleverly and said to Korczak, "I know why you beat me, and I promise not to do that again."

The doctor replied, "You promise, but you don't keep your promises." We were amazed to hear that the doctor had raised his hand against Piekowek, since this went against the message of non-violence that we were taught. We could not imagine that the doctor would raise a hand against anyone, and this exceptional behaviour made a deep impression on our memories. The delinquent Piekowek committed other bad deeds and caused many of his friends to be summoned to the court. Eventually, he was simply expelled from the orphanage. The reasoning behind Piekowek's expulsion was that his individual welfare was less important than the good of society. Piekowek had harmed other children through his own behaviour which was beyond repair, despite endless attempts to help him mend his ways. A few other children were expelled from the orphanage over the years. These children, like Piekowek, went back to being wild street children, hungry and filthy. I doubt that they were ever delivered from the streets.

After becoming a parent myself, I one day discovered that one of my sons had taken money from my wallet, without permission, to buy spinning tops for himself and his friends. I could not stop myself from raising my hand against him, although I had been brought up

not to do so. Tormented by feelings of guilt that night, I was unable to fall asleep. I went out for a walk with my wife Frieda. I could not forgive myself for my harsh reaction to what my son had done, however bad it was. That night I remembered Korczak's behaviour towards Piekowek, and for the first time understood how human weakness could lead to impulsive responses.

The court was not only reserved for children. Adult employees of the orphanage could also find themselves on trial following a child's appeal. Even Korczak himself who devised the laws was not above the law and could be tried. Not to mention, the adult group leaders risked being placed on trial if they broke the rules. Only Stefa was never tried, although legally she could have been. Nobody dared to make her stand trial.

I remember a day when the doctor himself stood trial in the children's court. It was quite a difficult case concerning the adjustment problems of a girl named Lecha. She was extremely frightened during her adjustment period at the orphanage and all attempts to integrate her into the children's society were in vain. Lecha refused to speak to anyone and played alone with her dolls all the time. Even the doctor's attempts to get her to speak failed. One day Korczak took the girl and sat her, against her will, on top of the tall bookcase opposite the grand piano. He sat next to the bookcase so as to protect her from falling. The frightened girl begged him to let her down. The doctor pretended not to hear her pleas.

He timed this incident to coincide with the time the older girls from the orphanage would be around and in fact, they heard Lecha's cries and came running to see what had happened. To their surprise, they saw the girl sitting on top of the bookcase, begging to be let down, the doctor totally ignoring her pleas. Almost shouting, they cried out to the doctor in unison, "What are you doing? You can't do such a thing to a small girl!" They demanded that he immediately let her down from the bookcase. When Dr. Korczak understood that a support group had formed around the new girl, he did as they requested.

At this point, the girls explained to the stunned Lecha that she could bring charges against the doctor for his behaviour towards her. The girl could not believe her ears. She joined the group of girls, and together they posted a court summons for Doctor Korczak on the bulletin board. The doctor admitted to his wrongdoings in the children's court and asked for forgiveness. He also explained that the motivation for his actions was his wish to speed up Lecha's social absorption at the orphanage. In the end, he was fined only 100 units. From that trial on, Korczak was called "Setka" which means "one hundred" in Polish.

Thinking about this incident many years later, I finally understood the high level of insight into child psychology with which this man was endowed. His actions stemmed from his understanding that the children could not relate naturally to Lecha's original distress. However, he assumed that they would easily be able to relate to a concrete and seemingly "cruel" deed that he, Korczak, committed towards her. The consequence of this incident was that Lecha finally found her place in the children's society and succeeded in creating a support group around her.

The other institution operating under the children's rule was the Senate, the local House of Representatives. It was not parallel to a Senate we are familiar with in modern democratic governments. Instead of formulating laws, the Senate acted as a kind of "treasury" for the children, and controlled a half percent of the orphanage's budget, intended for various activities for the children.

Four or five of the older children of the orphanage served in the Senate, according to a mandate they had received for a defined period of time. They had the authority to decide what activities would be funded, generally choosing activities for enrichment and entertainment. I remember visits to the circus and art exhibitions funded by the Senate. Some of the games we played in our free time were also purchased through the Senate's decisions.

Following Stefa and the doctor's trip to Israel and due to the atmosphere in Poland with Hitler's rise to power in the 1930s, the

Senate decided to donate some of the money to the “Lot” division of the Polish army, which was responsible for the anti-aircraft defence of Warsaw, and to the Jewish National Fund for Israel. The donation was 150 zloty to each organization, quite a considerable amount for those days; the Senate transferred a part of its budget to these two organizations.

I was chosen for the children’s Senate in 1934, my last year at the orphanage. It was then that we, the members of the Senate, decided to decrease the amount of the donation to each of the two organizations. When Stefa heard about this, her face went red with rage and she said, “What impudence! How dare you? After all, this is not your personal money, and who are you to decide the amount of the donation? I visited ‘Eretz Israel’¹⁰ and with my own eyes, I saw your group leaders and guardians who have become ‘halutzim’¹¹, working so hard to build the homeland. While they shed blood and sweat to grow a tree in the dry and barren rocky ground, you want to decrease the little you can do to help them. How will the Polish government react when it hears that you are reducing your donation to the ‘Lot’ organization? After all, we in Poland are obliged to contribute our share for the war effort!”

When she had reached the end of this speech, Stefa announced decisively, “I am hereby closing down the Senate until further notice. I am disbanding it and holding new elections!” This was the end of my career as a member of Senate.

I am not sure whether it was this or a similar event that created the need for a watchdog for the Senate. I am referring to the orphanage’s newspaper *Home* which Korczak would read aloud to his children every Saturday morning, in the same room in which the local court sessions took place. The contents of the newspaper reflected life at the orphanage and aroused much interest not only among the children and the group leaders, but also among educational figures outside the orphanage.

¹⁰ The Land of Israel.

¹¹ Pioneers in Hebrew.

The main article of the newspaper was written by the doctor and it dealt with current affairs inside or outside of the orphanage. Other issues in the newspaper were Korczak's thoughts about education, written in simple and easily understood language for the children. The newspaper included information about the various courses and activities at the orphanage, such as sports, choir, and drama. There were announcements regarding decisions of the Senate. The newspaper published children's reviews of films, plays, exhibitions, or other cultural activities we had participated in. There was a section entitled "What's New at the Orphanage" in which Stefa often outlined past events, plans for future programs, such as an organized visit to an exhibition or film, or impending visits to the orphanage by important personages. There was also a section for greetings and acknowledgements. We would search for the names of children who had stood trial and look for the sentence they received. After the doctor had read aloud selected parts of the newspaper, it was posted on the bulletin board for everyone to read.

I was among those who shared an item through the newspaper. It was a sad incident that left a marked impression on me. One day, on my way back to the orphanage from school, I noticed a commotion in the street. Out of curiosity, I drew nearer, making my way through the many people who had crowded there. I discovered that somebody was making a film and that is why street traffic had been stopped. The scene that was being filmed was of passenger tram cars being pulled on the tracks by work horses, just like the way public transport worked at the beginning of the nineteenth century. When I was a child, these tram cars were called Tramway and worked on electricity. They still exist today in Warsaw. While watching this scene, I noticed that one of the horses slipped and broke its leg. I saw how they tried to get the horse up from the ground, and then understood that they had decided to put it out of its misery. Shortly after that I observed a policeman draw his pistol from his belt and kill the horse by shooting two bullets in its head.

I froze to the ground; I could not take my eyes off that formidable sight. I started thinking sad thoughts about how insensitive humans

could be towards animals. I could not reconcile myself to the idea that the horse had paid with its life so that humans could enjoy a film in which it was “taking part”. The horse had not asked to participate in the film. When I returned to the orphanage I told nobody about the incident, but I had a sleepless night. I finally decided to share the incident I had witnessed with the other children at the orphanage through the newspaper.

If I am not mistaken, the story was even published in *Maly Przegląd*,¹² the children’s newspaper edited by Korczak and published all over Warsaw. *Maly Przegląd* was a supplement to the Zionist Polish newspaper *Nasz Przegląd*. The owner of the paper was Apenszlak. The orphanage received a few copies of the newspaper every week and we read them or were read parts of it.

Another democratic procedure in the orphanage was the “Publikacja”,¹³ which was similar to what today would be called a socio-metric examination. It took place in the dining hall after meals. First there was a poll about newcomers to the orphanage at the end of their guardianship period, about six months after they arrived at the orphanage. Once in a while, the poll concerned veteran children and its purpose was to let every child know what the others thought of him. The poll was usually for one child at a time, but sometimes a group was chosen.

Voting was held anonymously and the doctor managed it in a direct manner. Similar to the process of choosing judges for the court, each child received a note on which he had to mark “plus” next to the name of the child in question if he thought that child was a positive member of the community, “minus” if he judged him severely, or a “zero” if he had no opinion. The group leaders counted the votes straight after the ballot and the results were posted on the bulletin board. Any child who received support and positive feedback was overjoyed. One can only imagine how hard it was for a child to receive negative feedback. Some of the children managed to restrain their anger, while other went wild with frustration and settled their

¹² *Little Review*

¹³ Expression of opinion.

accounts verbally or physically with those whom they thought voted against them.

The educational idea behind this referendum was that peer pressure exerted on the child would change his behaviour. This idea was a bit naive, implying that a child lacking in social skills could, by means of willpower alone, change his behaviour. The proof was the same Piekowek, whose incorrigible behaviour continued to harm others despite any attempts to help him.



Shlomo aged about 10 (1930). The photograph was taken by Poznanski (a well-known photographer in Warsaw) who voluntarily photographed the orphanage children and told them stories. Shlomo showed an interest in photography thanks to him. Shlomo was given the photograph by Stefa with the dedication, *"To Shlomo Nadel, Congratulations on being the best mailman in the orphanage."* Unfortunately, the dedication was written in pencil and was erased over time.

6. Apotropos and Betting

Felek Grzyb, who was my guardian when I first arrived at the orphanage, progressively became one of the dominant figures in my education. The effect he had on my life did not end there. I really loved the fellow, and I have no doubt that he had a significant influence over me while I was at the orphanage and later in my choice of profession. He took me under his wing and helped me through my adjustment to the place. He gained my trust and gradually became my role model.

Felek was a few years older than me and proved to be extremely talented. He was avidly interested in photography and also noticeably musical. I still remember his marvellous harmonica playing. He later became a Bursist at the orphanage while still a student, by virtue of his outstanding academic achievements and many talents. Following his studies, he continued to work at the orphanage as a group leader. Janusz Korczak's recommendation and a special



Janusz Korczak with orphanage workers at a summer camp. The photograph was taken by Shlomo in 1934. Shlomo had the orphanage's camera when Felek was busy. Behind Korczak is Kutalczuk, one of the group leaders of the orphanage.

grant given to him by the leaders of the Jewish community enabled the gifted Felek to further pursue his studies. He was one of the few graduates who remained at the orphanage after the age of fifteen.

It soon became obvious that Felek and I shared certain interests; we were both interested in machinery and we both loved taking devices apart and then reassembling them. I remember how we became the pride of the orphanage when we built a radio together, a rare and expensive gadget in those days,

Felek chose to study photography as a profession and, to my delight, he shared his knowledge and expertise with me, letting me in to the secrets of the world of photography. He taught me how to develop film, the delicate process in those days was performed using a red light, and then later on using panchromatic¹⁴ film in darkness. I asked him to teach me how to convert a negative of the film to a positive during the printing stage. He was later employed by a photographer who owned a film processing laboratory, while I served as his assistant photographer. In this way, over time, I became the house photographer of Korczak's orphanage and later, a professional photographer.

My first photographic subjects were the orphanage children, the doctor, and other figures. I photographed various events using cameras which had been donated by several philanthropists. One of these cameras worked using the roll-film method for eight pictures, while another used glass plates. I also became popular with the girls who loved being photographed. What is important is that I have the photographs to this day. They survived the war thanks to a series of incidents which I will explain later.

After leaving the orphanage, I heard that Felek had married Bronka, one of the Bursists who also worked there and that they had a daughter. I presume that this daughter was the young child Korczak was seen carrying in the last famous photographs taken on the way to the train station and from there to Treblinka with his children from the orphanage. There is documentation to the effect that Felek,

¹⁴ A method of developing colour photographs.

Bronka, and their daughter were murdered together with Korczak. In my humble opinion, if fate had not played out, Korczak would have chosen Felek to carry on his pedagogical enterprise.

I was also among those chosen to be a guardian during my time at the orphanage. I remember, for example, a boy called Nussbaum. I was asked to be his guardian on his arrival at the orphanage. He was not a good student, to say the very least, but he had excellent manual skills and loved handicrafts. I tried to carry out my role as his guardian in the best possible manner. Later, during the war, I inquired after him and discovered that he had managed to escape to Russia. I could not locate him but finally learned that he had volunteered for the Russian army and had fallen in action at the front.

There was another incident in which the mother of a boy, Yankel Szeinberg, tried to persuade me to become his guardian. I refused point blank since Yankel was quite a ruffian. He did whatever he liked and was known for being a thief. He was sentenced to 800 units in the children's court and was a candidate for expulsion from the orphanage. A letter was sent home to the parents or legal guardian of any child who received such a severe punishment, informing them that the child would be expelled. In Yankel's case, I was sent to his mother's home with the notification, as part of my duties as a postman. She asked me to help her son despite his misdemeanours and wanted to know why I had refused to become his guardian at the orphanage. However difficult it was for me, I was quite honest with her in my answer, saying that I did not want to get into trouble because of his behaviour. Like me, nobody else volunteered to vouch for Yankel's unacceptable behaviour.

Yankel was one of the children who reached the orphanage after his character had already been moulded by his life on the streets. He was an extreme case as no teacher, let alone a child, could get him to change his behaviour patterns. I met him once on the street in Warsaw, when he was peddling boot polish and shoelaces. I wondered then what the future held for him and again felt so fortunate to be in such a protected and warm place that afforded

me the opportunity of breaking free from the terrible cycle of poverty. Although Yankel noticed me on that occasion, he tried to ignore my presence and I felt sure that he was ashamed that I had noticed him. I did not wish to bother him since I knew I had no way of helping him in the past when he was at the orphanage and I certainly could not help him now.

Some of the excessively sympathetic “bleeding hearts” might wonder at this story about Yankel. How could Janusz Korczak have abandoned a child with difficulties who may have been saved from his fate? I have one answer for them: it was not Korczak who gave up on him or decided to expel him from the orphanage. It was the children at the orphanage through the institution at their disposal, namely the children’s court. The court voted democratically and decided that they did not want Yankel in their midst. Yankel was



Group leaders of the orphanage through the lens of Shlomo’s camera in 1934. In that year, Shlomo was the photographer of most of the pictures since he sometimes had use of the camera. Sitting second from the left: the group leader Felek Grzyb. His wife to be, Bronka is standing in the center. The couple and their baby daughter were deported to Treblinka together with Korczak.

tried and warned several times, to no avail. He was sentenced by the children, not by the doctor, although it was the doctor who devised the constitution. It should be noted that Korczak House declared itself to be a replacement home for orphaned children, a pedagogical institution, and by no means a correction facility. We, the children of the institution, underwent many difficulties, but unlike those who dropped out of the orphanage, we were equipped with tools for our adjustment to society and acceptance of its rules.

Like many of us, another child was on the streets before coming to the orphanage. Unlike most of us, however, one child, Stasiak,¹⁵ continued to behave under the influence of his previous place of residence in the Praga neighbourhood of Warsaw, where he maintained his connections with his Gentile friends. And yet, unlike Yankel, Stasiak succeeded in growing roots in the orphanage. He had an exceptionally independent personality and was highly familiar with the various parts of the city. I have a memory of one particular Saturday morning in the colourful animal market in the Kiercelak neighbourhood of Warsaw. The market was run by peddlers who would colour sparrows yellow and sell them as canaries. The customers would discover the fraud later on once the “canaries” washed the colour off and showed their true grey colour.

Stasiak had a special love of animals and stood beside a cage of goldfinches. He had a couple of coins saved up from his pocket money and the peddler convinced him that he could teach the goldfinch to talk, just like the more expensive parrot. Stasiak left the market with empty pockets, happily holding the goldfinch in the cage. A policeman stopped him on his way out, asking him where he had money to buy the bird. Stasiak explained that he lived in Korczak’s orphanage and the policeman, wishing to verify this fact, accompanied him back home. Luckily for Stasiak, the doctor, and not Stefa, was in the courtyard when they reached the orphanage. The doctor asked the policeman what had happened and the latter told him that he suspected that Stasiak had stolen the bird. He went on to say, “This boy told me that he is your protégé and I came to make sure it was true.” The doctor promised to investigate what Stasiak had been up to in the market.

¹⁵ Israel Zyngman

After the policeman had left, Korczak said to Stasiak, “I love birds myself and identify with you, but why did you choose a goldfinch?”

Stasiak replied, “I want to teach it to talk. The man in the market told me that it could be done.”

Korczak said, “You poor boy, you’ve been cheated! The goldfinch is a wild bird and all it wants is to go free. It will never become a parrot! It’s cruel to keep it in a cage.” The doctor pointed out that the goldfinch was not chirping because it was sad to be in captivity. He asked Stasiak, “If you were put in a cage, would you be happy?” to which Stasiak answered, “No.”

Dr. Korczak knew that since the boy had bought the bird with meticulously saved-up money, it would be difficult for him to let it free at once. So he suggested, “Keep the bird in the cage for two weeks and then let it free. Let’s see where it goes. Perhaps it will want to stay in the cage.” And so it was. The two weeks passed and Korczak sat by the windowsill with Stasiak. They opened the goldfinch’s cage and the bird flew out to freedom. Korczak concluded the matter by saying to Stasiak, “Don’t you see? The bird didn’t like being in the cage. You should be happy that you gave the bird its freedom and now it’s in its natural habitat.” I reminded Stasiak of the goldfinch incident when he later wrote his memoirs *Janusz Korczak Among the Orphans*.¹⁶

“Betting” was Korczak’s other tool for modifying children’s bad behaviour at the orphanage. Betting occurred once a week in Korczak’s small room and the idea was for the children to place a bet on overcoming a bad habit or a vice. Children would place a bet, for example on their academic studies, or to stop swearing, using bad names, lying, bullying, or neglecting their studies.

A child who wished to stop swearing, for instance, would set himself a goal of gradually reducing the amount of times he swore. This would be a week by week process until he was totally rid of the bad habit. Some of the children tried, but did not succeed. Others

¹⁶ Israel Zynngman, *Janusz Korczak Among the Orphans [Sifryat Poalim]*, (Tel-Aviv: Library Workers, 1979).

came back to repeat a bet that had not succeeded. There is no doubt in my mind that the children gained a sense of control and trust with the knowledge that they could strengthen their will and modify their behaviour.

Betting was the initiative of the children themselves. Nobody forced them to do it. Korczak's role in the process was to encourage the child to help himself, or to break free of his own complicated situation. The doctor would "bet" with the child on achieving a certain goal. The bet actually took place between the child and himself, with Korczak merely fulfilling the role of a witness. A week after placing a bet, the child would return to Korczak and report whether he had succeeded or not. If he succeeded, he received two candies but if he failed he was given nothing. Reporting was based on full trust between the doctor and his protégé, and he never checked up to see whether the child was telling the truth.

I was once witness to one of these bets. A young boy stood before the doctor and seriously announced his decision never to swear again. Korczak told him that this was a serious promise but in order to carry it out, the child should promise to swear only three times. The child returned after one week and told the doctor that he had not sworn even once the whole week. The doctor took out candies and gave the happy boy his prize. He never checked whether that child had actually fulfilled his promise.

I later understood that the main idea of "betting" was the process itself and not only the resulting behaviour modification. In other words, the system of betting was aimed at developing the child's self-awareness, his self-judgment, and motivation to try to change behaviour patterns. The child learned how to create tools for himself for behaviour modification and social adjustment.

7. Woman of Contrasts



ne fine day, shortly after I first came to the Korczak orphanage, I was playing with my friends in the courtyard when a familiar female figure appeared at the orphanage gate. The woman was wearing shabby, simple clothes. She was holding her shoes in one hand and a basket in the other. Her wretched appearance attracted the attention of the children since it was unusual to see someone walking barefoot in the city. It did not take long for me to recognize her. It was my “aunt”, in whose home I grew up in Mszczonów.

The woman called out to me and I went over to the gate. She asked me to let her in to the orphanage so that she could give me the food she had cooked especially for me, my favourite dishes. She was obviously concerned that I was not getting enough to eat as rumours had spread throughout the Jewish community that orphanages were not treating their charges properly. I presumed that she was checking up on my condition, or perhaps she even regretted the decision to place me in the orphanage.

Stefa appeared just as I was considering allowing the woman in through the gate. She demanded to know who this woman was and what she was doing there. I answered that she was the woman at whose house I used to live. Stefa ordered me to tell her that visiting the children in the orphanage was permitted only on Saturdays, and that she had to leave the premises at once. I refused point blank since I knew what physical and financial efforts had been involved in this visit. Stefa then went up to her in her typically strict manner and told her she could not come inside. Ignoring my aunt’s pleas, Stefa bluntly refused to take the fruit she had brought for me. My aunt turned around and went away in shame.



I later learned that my “aunt” had a heart attack and died one week after the incident. Her husband died two weeks after that. Once again, my narrow shoulders were burdened with news of the cruel fate of those who were supposed to take care of me. I was angry with Stefa for a long time after that. I still think that things would have turned out differently if the doctor had been in the courtyard and not Stefa. With his humane and compassionate approach, he would undoubtedly have spoken to my relative as an equal, shown more flexibility and allowed her to enter.

Stefania “Stefa” Wilczyńska (1886 – 1942) was Korczak’s partner in the establishment of the orphanage and the education of the children, and she was his mainstay in its management. Stefa was born to a wealthy and educated Zionist family, well known in the Jewish community of Warsaw. At the end of her teens, she was sent to Switzerland to train as a nurse and a child-caregiver. It was there that she first heard about Dr. Janusz Korczak, his unique pedagogical theory arousing her curiosity. She thought that she should return to Warsaw to meet him and work with him in order to acquire practical, and not only theoretical, experience. This meeting was extremely fruitful and the two decided to manage the orphanage together. To this purpose, Stefa discontinued her studies.

During the first half of the twentieth century, there was a very clear division of labour in the traditional family. The father figure was dominant in most families. He was the figure of authority that made the house rules,



Stefania Wilczyńska. I received this photograph from a friend who was with me at the orphanage.

administered punishments when necessary, and was responsible for the family's livelihood and financial matters. In short, he held the reins. The father usually kept a certain distance from his children in order to maintain his authority over them. On the other hand, the traditional role of the mother was that of a warm and nurturing figure, managing the household as well as the physical and emotional needs of the children.

Contrary to this model of the typical family, we did not regard Korczak as a distant father figure or Stefa as the caressing and protective mother. This is not the way the roles were divided at the orphanage. Dr. Korczak took care of our emotional needs while Stefa was the one to take care of all our physical and material requirements. She was far from the dependant wife in her husband's shadow; Stefa was a strong woman with a powerful and assertive presence. Unlike the captivating Korczak, Stefa was the dominant figure of the two; she displayed a strict and distant personality, and was not at all likeable or sociable.

Undoubtedly, the orphanage was run according to Korczak's educational doctrine, but it was Stefa's day-to-day activities that put this doctrine into effect. She managed the practicalities of the household around the clock and devoted herself to the most demanding tasks. Stefa screened the children before they were accepted to the house, maintained constant contact with the schools in which the children learned, hired the workers for the orphanage, and allocated the new teachers to their roles. She was also in charge of fundraising and managing the finances. Stefa fulfilled all these tasks capably, at the same time supervising everything that transpired in the orphanage and monitoring the academic and personal progress of each and every child. Korczak once told us in a direct manner that he could not have managed the place if it had not been for Stefa's support.

In fact, Korczak was not in the least interested in trivial details. As an educator, he tried to implement his revolutionary ideas regarding the needs of the child as those of an individual in a democratic

society. In this he succeeded, thanks to Stefa's efficient management of the orphanage. Stefa did not object to the doctor's lack of involvement in the day to day running of the orphanage, since this actually left her a free hand to do whatever she liked. She was not in anybody's shadow, not even that of the well-known doctor, writer, educator, and reporter, Dr. Korczak. This was true only as long as Stefa's decisions did not hamper Korczak's educational concepts.

However, hiding behind the rules often prevented Stefa from showing empathy and consideration for the people with whom she was dealing. It made no difference to her whether this was a child or an adult that she was dealing with, for her, rules were rules — whatever the price or the circumstances were. This is why we the children, and sometimes the orphanage workers, often disagreed with her. Korczak's mischievous behaviour only emphasized our feelings towards Stefa. The doctor was unperturbed by this division of labour. He would take our side against Stefa, for example when he secretly allowed us to eat bread in bed.

Korczak would always side with the children when teachers or youth leaders complained about their behaviour. Stefa, on the other hand, would judge the children harshly, standing behind her authority and going against Korczak's approach that no adult had an advantage over any child, not because of his age, his experience, or his position. The incident involving my "aunt" was an excellent example of this. I am certain to this day, that Korczak would have behaved differently towards the woman who came to visit me. He would have said, "Of course you can come in. I understand that you have come a long way and that you don't know the rules of the orphanage." He would then have let her inside for a short while.

Whenever I was under the impression that Stefa behaved too strictly, I would try to imagine what the doctor would have done in the same situation. Aware of the gentle and sympathetic side of his personality, I was always certain that he would have avoided hurting the person with whom he was dealing, even if it meant bending the rules slightly. While the doctor would sometimes participate in our

games as if he were one of us, Miss Stefa would always observe from the side. The doctor was readily available when she was not. She represented authority while he was the nurturing father figure and friend. She was present and responsible for the children and the orphanage staff around the clock but he divided his time between us, the orphanage of Maryna Falska, and the children's newspaper he edited.

The contrast between the two of them was similarly apparent in their perception of children. According to the doctor, the child was always in the right unless otherwise proven. According to Stefa, the child was guilty until he proved his innocence. The doctor was not ashamed to admit his mistakes to us. Stefa, on the other hand, would indirectly modify her behaviour if she understood that she was wrong, while we the children did not always understand what she was doing. It seemed as though Stefa worshipped Korczak and his pedagogical theories, but found them difficult to apply when it came to the more subtle areas requiring empathy and patience. But even if there were differences of opinion between Stefa and Korczak, we were not aware of them. It seemed to us that she took great care of him. He was a disorganized person and Stefa would always remind him to take a handkerchief or a scarf or to dress warmly so that he would not catch a cold. If there was any additional intimacy between them, we were not aware of it.

I have already mentioned my initial feelings of suspicion and aversion towards Stefa right from my first meeting with her. These were mainly related to her physical appearance and the first impression that she made on me, which I soon discovered were indeed an expression of her strict and uncompromising character. One of the mysteries of Stefa's character that still remain with me, concerns her keen awareness of everything that went on in the orphanage without having been present. She seemed to have radar or a hidden camera before these were even invented.

Besides the unforgettable incident regarding my aunt's visit, there was another painful incident between Stefa and myself. I was a neat

and tidy boy and always took good care of my clothes, and therefore Stefa decided that I was to receive a newly tailored suit for Passover. She sent me to the orphanage sewing workshop for a fitting. When the suit was ready before the Passover festival, she called me and said, "You may wear the new suit and walk around in it." Dressed in my finery, I went down to the courtyard. As expected, those who did not receive new clothes were naturally envious of me. I was no more than an annoyance to those children that day.

What was the reaction of the other children? There was a barrel in the courtyard, intended for collecting rain water for doing the laundry. The children asked me, "Do you want to see how fine you look in your new clothes?"

I was still small and naive and excitedly answered, "Yes!"

"Look inside the barrel and you will see your reflection," they told me. As I bent over the barrel, one of the children threw a large stone inside and the water splashed out onto my new clothes. Unfortunately for me, Stefa was in the sewing workshop and she had opened the window. She saw my wet clothes and I knew I was in trouble.

She shouted at me saying that I did not know how to look after my new clothes. I told her that it was not my fault. She was not interested in what I had to say and all she said was, "Who told you to keep company with those children?" The worst part was that she took my new clothes away from me. I think that she should have been summoned to the children's court for doing that to me, but Stefa, as I have already mentioned, was immune to judgment in the court owing to the distance she kept and the fear she created.

I became less and less afraid of Stefa as the years went by. The more I was acquainted with her, the more I realized how powerful and strong-willed a woman she was. I also held an appreciation for her outstanding educational abilities. Her approach was somewhat different from that of the doctor but no less effective. When she came across a child who was in need of special attention, she was always

there to give it. I often came down with tonsillitis and received gentle and patient care that I did not know she was capable of giving. She would approach my sick bed every hour to see how I was feeling and what I was doing.

During my first year at the orphanage, I visited the big circus in Warsaw accompanied by Stefa and a group of the other children. These visits to the circus were made possible through periodic donations of circus tickets by Jewish philanthropists. I enjoyed the animal acts but was extremely afraid of the acrobatics. I felt terrified watching a woman hanging upside down from a rope, holding a device in her teeth on which another acrobat was swinging. I was afraid that her teeth would fall out any minute. The safety net below them might have calmed the performers, but it did not calm me at all. I was so afraid that I could not control myself and wet my pants. Stefa, noticing my distress, calmed me down and told me not to worry and that it could happen to anybody. Her behaviour helped me to get over my shame and the incident was forgotten.

Stefa was the one who noticed my motor and technical skills and gave me broken items to repair. For example, she gave me mercury that had leaked out of a broken thermometer and told me, "I trust you with this." My special expertise, however, was repairing watches. I knew how to take them apart and repair them. I replaced the broken parts with working ones and the watches began to tick once again. I was also responsible for checking all the new toys that came to the orphanage before they were passed on to all the children.

One day, Stefa surprised me when she took me and a girl called Temcia to the one and only large department store in Warsaw, located at the Square of the Three Crosses. We went there by tram unaware of the purpose of the ride. Stefa gave me a candy that looked like a piece of marble. I said, "Do you want me to break my teeth on this?" to which she answered, "Try it." I soon discovered that the "marble" was actually sweet and tasty. The department store was huge with several floors. This was my first time in such a large building and I was beside myself with amazement.

I eventually understood what our purpose was when we reached the toy department. There were trucks, trains and cars built from Meccano, a construction set that included steel boards with holes in them, screws of various sizes, and nuts to hold the screws. I was astonished by a huge apparatus made of steel parts and held with screws, standing in the middle of the display hall and almost reaching the ceiling. It was undoubtedly an amazing construction. My eyes almost popped out of my head as I stood in wonder looking at this piece of work. Stefa asked me, "What do you think of this?"

I laughingly said, "This is wonderful! How can anyone build a thing like this? It is probably very expensive."

Stefa answered, "You are right. We can't build this one, but we have received a small one as a gift and I wanted you to see what could be built from it." I cannot describe how much I loved her at that moment.

Another ray of light in Stefa's character

The *Maly Przegląd* newspaper that Korczak edited. The article "Our Private Cinema" describes Shlomo Nadel's skills as a "talented inventor", April 29, 1932.



was her keen sense of humour. She used to say that there was a reason for the mole on her face — it was there to hold up the glasses on her nose.

It was at the Hanukah celebration at the orphanage that I was exposed to Stefa's emotional side. Jonasz Beler, one of the children at the orphanage, performed at that celebration. Jonasz was a gifted violinist and could play full pieces without sheet music. He won awards at a very early age, including awards from the Palestine Philharmonic Orchestra (which later became the Israel Philharmonic). Jonasz played a Mazurka¹⁷ by the Polish composer Henryk Wieniawski. I was standing in the audience, not far from Stefa. Our eyes met for a moment and I was surprised to notice that her eyes had tears in them. Here stood the tough Stefa, unable to hide her joy and emotion at hearing Jonasz playing the violin. I do believe that she felt like a proud mother at that moment. As for Jonasz, I have no idea what became of him. I am sure that he would have had a bright future ahead of him, had it not been for the Holocaust. Jonasz was younger than me and therefore remained at the orphanage after I had already left.



Jonasz Beler playing his violin. Photographed by Shlomo in 1935.

¹⁷ A lively Polish folk dance, or the music that accompanies the dance.

8. Toys and Packages



uring my time at the orphanage, I fulfilled many duties as part of the work required of every child. I remember that Stefa put me in charge of all the toys of the house, perhaps due to my proven technical skills. Most of the toys had been donated as charity. In fact, I was in charge of the orphanage's play room and had a key to the storage cabinet. My duty was to remove the toys from the cabinet and then put them back in their places. I had a huge table onto which I placed all the toys, explaining to the children how to play with each game. If anything did not work, I would repair it myself and if necessary, I would seek assistance from the janitor of the orphanage, Piotr Zalewski.

On one occasion, I discovered at school how to operate the slide projector, a device that had always intrigued me. During a lesson in which the teacher showed photographs of plants, I sat in the front desk so as to see how the film was inserted into the projector. This did not satisfy my curiosity, so I decided to remain in the classroom during the break in order to investigate the instrument close up. This is how I discovered that there was a bright light bulb inside the projector. Light passed through the camera film and a magnifying lens so that the photograph could be projected onto the wall.

When I returned to Korczak House after school that day, I informed my friends that we would build a similar machine, much to their enthusiasm. One friend volunteered to donate his pocket money to buy the cardboard box we required. Another offered a magnifying glass that he owned. We cut the cardboard box at both sides so as to insert the film through the slits and covered the whole apparatus with black paper. Now we needed glass plate negatives commonly used for photography in those days. Ada, one of the group leaders

whose brother was an amateur photographer, came to our assistance. She supplied us with slightly damaged negatives discarded by her brother. At this stage, we needed to draw something on the glass plate negatives. I found a picture of a girl feeding birds on a window sill in a Polish anthology. I copied the picture onto the glass plate negative and projected it onto the wall.

After successfully projecting the picture, competing photographic teams started sprouting up in order to build new projectors. These children drew single pictures and even pictures in sequence that told a story. The most successful were “Kroch-film”, a play on words combining the name of the street Krochmalna instead of the word “chrome” and the word “film”. The “Kroch-film” team paid the price of 50 “grosz”¹⁸ and seven injured fingers to build the largest projector which projected the clearest pictures. The first screening was on Friday night with a large, joyful, and supportive audience from the children of the house.

Another duty I had during the latter years of my stay at Korczak House was to deliver internal mail from the orphanage to the Jewish leaders. This task was given only to responsible older children as it involved traveling in the city and knowing one’s way around. The delivery person was sent with a letter to someone and would return with a response, if necessary. The person could be a donor wishing to send a parcel containing a donation to the orphanage.

Since I was considered to be a responsible child, Stefa often sent me on such errands and even praised me for doing my job so well. She awarded me with a photograph of myself including an inscription, “To Shlomo Nadel, Congratulations on being the best mailman in the orphanage.”

Unfortunately, she wrote these words in pencil and they were erased over the years so that I am left with only the photograph. Stefa would give me money for the tram ride when there was a delivery far away from the orphanage, but I preferred to keep the money and walk wherever necessary. Of course I needed more time to do the job and

¹⁸ Pennies

if it rained I returned soaking wet. I am sure that Stefa knew what I was up to but she chose to ignore it. I credit her with that and was happy with the money that I saved up from these deliveries.

Disagreements between Stefa and me occasionally erupted around the mail deliveries. On one occasion, I was sent to fetch a parcel of toys from one of the donors. On reaching my destination, the donor asked me who I was and what I was doing there. He was obviously impressed by my good manners. This philanthropist then handed me two parcels instead of only one. I returned to the orphanage, smug at my success in performing the task with which I had been entrusted. Stefa opened both the parcels and understood that one of them had been intended for me alone. It was a miniature merry-go-round, painted in bright colours, which rotated by means of a spring inside it. Without any warning, I became the target of a flood of reprimands and insults instead of the praise I expected. "You probably asked for this toy for your brother. How could you, such a big boy, not be ashamed to ask for toys just like a beggar? What will people think of us?" she scolded.

I choked for a minute, unable to say a word. I finally plucked up the courage to deny her accusations that I had asked for the toy. I said, "You can check up on the telephone."

Her answer was, "I don't need to telephone, I know it is true." Her lack of trust in me was hurtful and I felt as if I was being wrongly accused. She softened after a while and then said, "If you construct a toy just like this, I will allow you to keep the original one and send the copy to your brother." Did she sense that she had been too harsh on me? I did not understand it then but, in retrospect, I think that was the case.

I am not sure whether Stefa's instruction to build an identical toy to the one I received from the donor was a punishment or a reward. In my distress, I approached Piotr Zalewski, the janitor of the orphanage. Piotr was not very fond of Stefa and winked at me, saying, "We will show her. We'll succeed in this challenge and prove to her that we can build the exact same toy." We worked on this for a long time, finally producing an almost perfect copy.

When I brought it to Stefa she said, “What, did you think I didn’t know you could do it?” Despite these words, I still feel how much she hurt me to this day.

Zalewski was responsible for the physical maintenance of the orphanage. He was a childless Christian Pole, considered by everyone in the orphanage as having “hands of gold”. His job included the maintenance of the building and everything that was in need of repair. One of his many duties included supplying coal to the central boiler in the cellar. I spent many hours with him in his enchanted kingdom, the workshop in the courtyard of the building. Following his steps, I learned many skills. It came as no surprise that Piotr appointed me as his unofficial assistant. I helped him to repair broken toys and he taught me how to join planks of wood without the use of nails.

Zalewski’s wife was in charge of cleaning the house and the children helped her a lot. Zalewski’s attitude towards us sometimes seemed strange, perhaps owing to the fact that he and his wife had no children of their own. He loved pulling our noses, which hurt a lot. Despite his special relationship with me, I always suspected that he was an anti-Semite who hated Jewish children. I was proved wrong later on when I learned that his loyalty to the doctor and the children cost him his life.

In the spring of 1942, when the Germans ordered the orphanage employees to load all the orphanage belongings onto wagons so as to move them into the Ghetto, it was Piotr who insisted on loading his luggage, announcing that he, too, would be moving to the Ghetto. The S.S. guard in charge of the evacuation could not understand Piotr’s behaviour and asked him, “How can you, a Pole, want to move into the Ghetto with the Jews?” The Germans were suspicious of him and interrogated him at the Gestapo headquarters. A month after he was released, he died as a result of the torture he had endured at the hands of the Germans. A tombstone was erected in the orphanage courtyard in his memory, close to where his workshop was.

The tombstone of the janitor, Piotr Zalewski, in the orphanage courtyard which he lovingly took care of during all the years he worked there.



9. Stories for Children



esides being a pediatrician and educator, Korczak was a writer, journalist, and philosopher. His ability to concentrate on several demanding topics simultaneously was admirable and impressive. He was a humanist, a man of ideas, and an adventurer. He was both creative and innovative. But what characterized him most of all were his love of mankind and his ability to penetrate into the depths of a child's soul, to understand the child's vulnerability and emotional needs. I believe that it was due to these abilities that he was able to communicate so effectively with the children at the orphanage and gain their full trust. Korczak was my teacher and my counsellor, my physician, the main storyteller of my childhood, my spiritual father, and my older brother with whom I could get up to mischief. Even after I left the orphanage, he always found time for me when I was in need of advice.

Our meetings with Korczak never involved moral preaching but rather discussions about what was the right or wrong thing to do. He imparted moral values through his stories and through raising moral or educational dilemmas. He would tell us the stories and then start up a discussion around the characters of the story and their behaviour. Many of the stories were inspired by real events at the orphanage or from the children's own lives. With time, many of these stories became an integral part of both the Polish, Jewish, and Israeli cultures.

Korczak wrote his most popular story, *King Matt the First*, in 1925, two years before I reached the orphanage. During my stay there, he also wrote *Kaytek the Wizard*,¹⁹ translated into Hebrew under the name “*Yotam Hakasam*”, which

¹⁹ Janusz Korczak, *Kajtus Czarodziej [Kaytek the Wizard]*, (Warsaw, 1934).

enchanted generations of readers long before Harry Potter was published. Korczak was in the habit of reading his stories to us before we went to sleep. He learned how the stories affected the children through their responses. Korczak would sometimes take the children's advice. For example, if they told him that the event in the story was implausible or too unrealistic, he would immediately call up Mortkowicz, his regular publisher, asking him to stop the press. I met Mortkowicz several times through my deliveries to and from the orphanage. Mortkowicz sometimes complained that he was going bankrupt because of Korczak. He would reprimand Korczak and ask him if he knew what it meant to stop the press. Korczak would answer that it did not interest him, and that if the text was not corrected, the book could not be published. This was how, unknown to us, we became partners in writing his books.

One of the stories was called *Esterel's Secret*.²⁰ The heroine of this story was a young girl who encountered a group of Gentile boys on her way to school. These boys hit her and pushed her into the mud. Incidents like this periodically happened to the children from the orphanage. The doctor would give us practical advice which was intended to supply a solution to the problem. *Esterel's Secret* was meant to equip us with tools on how to perceive the world and the people around us and to supply us with a multi-layered framework from which the problem arose. The story taught us that the world was not black or white and that there were no clear conclusions to be drawn. Esterel's grandfather expresses Korczak's approach in the story when he says to his hurt granddaughter, "When you go to school, count how many children you pass who do not attack you. You will see that there are more decent children than you thought."

The girl applies her grandfather's advice and realizes that indeed most of the children did not hurt her except for one Polish boy who called her a "dirty Jew" but did not beat her. When she told her grandfather about it, he answered, "A naughty boy will always find an excuse to hurt somebody. He'll hurt one girl because she is Jewish, another because she is a girl, and a third because she is poor and dressed in torn clothes. Children think it the way to behave.

²⁰ Janusz Korczak, in *Stories for Children*, trans. B. Pomeranz, (United Kibbutz Movement [*Hakibbutz Hame'uchad*], 1966).

Even some of the Jewish children are wild.” Today, I can understand that this story and others gave us confidence as a Jewish minority within a Gentile population. Korczak divided people into good and evil, regardless of their descent, religion, economic or social situation, or even age.

I did not play any part in the writing of *King Matt the First*. It underwent several adaptations and was even performed at the Habima Theater in Tel Aviv. Like many of my friends, I identified with King Matt, the hero of the story who, like us, was an orphan. We knew about his pain and loneliness. I actually mourned for my own father through King Matt’s grief. Today, I understand that it was not by chance that Korczak wrote about an orphan attaining greatness when he decided to take fate into his own hands. This is a powerful message to orphans whose childhood had been maimed through an experience with death.

Matt was a child-king. Although he possessed the authority to command, he was also subject to many commands just like any other child in the world. Matt expresses his limitations as a child when he says, “I am, after all, a king. So I have the authority to give commands, but in the meantime I have to brush my teeth just like all the other children.” King Matt wanted to do good for the children, and so he made laws such as exemption from school or receiving a slab of chocolate every day without having to give anything in exchange for these rights. His laws resulted in failure, chaos, and his banishment from the kingdom when he was only fourteen years old.

Matt’s greatest crime against the children was that he ignored the effects of his laws on their future. As Korczak used to tell us, “You, the children, must know that there is a basic law that says you cannot simply take from society, you must give and contribute as well. A society that consists only of takers cannot survive.” Korczak wanted to instill in us a belief in our own strength to construct our own futures filled with hope. In *King Matt the First*, Korczak introduces us to Matt who makes wrong choices in his life,

mainly owing to his tender age and lack of experience. His failure is also due to his choice of unsuitable advisors. Matt pays for these mistakes by losing his kingdom and endangering his life. Korczak's message through Matt was loud and clear: you are responsible for your choices in life and you alone will bear the consequences, for better or for worse. As in the book, Korczak allowed the children to manage their own lives to a large extent in an autonomous and democratic way while assuming responsibility for limitations and duties. For young readers, the character of King Matt embodies possibilities of what might happen if we lived in a society where children were free to do whatever they wished.

When the doctor finished reading us *King Matt the First*, we asked him, "Why did you sentence Matt to banishment at such a tender age? Why did you terminate his career at the age of fourteen?" Korczak explained that a boy is responsible for his actions after the age of thirteen²¹ and that is the time when Matt had to bear the consequences for his deeds. We discussed this with him and compared Matt's path to our lives from the day we reached the orphanage until the day we were to



Shlomo's classmates on the day they left the orphanage. The boys have a forelock which they were only allowed to grow before leaving, but not while they were at the orphanage, for hygienic reasons. Shlomo is on the right in the front row. Photographed by Felek Grzyb.

²¹ Bar Mitzvah

leave it — from Matt's becoming a king until his banishment. We also pointed out the similarities between Matt, who tried to fulfill all the dreams of the children of his kingdom, and Korczak, who established the home which became our kingdom and made all our childhood dreams come true. We mentioned to Korczak that we were required to leave the orphanage at the age of fifteen, which could be compared to the age at which Matt was banished.

Korczak attempted to tone down these suggestions of ours by pointing out our ability to stand on our own two feet. I admit that we did not find his explanations fully soothing, especially the older children among us, who were so fearful of leaving the orphanage. I later came to the realization that the doctor had no choice. He had to accept younger children who needed a home and therefore the older ones had to leave. I am certain that it was difficult for the doctor too, when the children left the home.

The doctor demonstrated his creative prowess at the Jewish holidays. He would pay special attention to Hanukah, perhaps as a result of his fascination with the heroism of the Maccabis against the large number of Greeks. Every year, we would perform in a play about the Maccabis written by Korczak and another one by him which was in fact a dialogue between a regular candle and a Hanukah candle. I took part in one of these plays, but not having been born with any particular dramatic skills, I was given only a small part. However, I am still able to quote lines from that Hanukah play to this day.

Ms. Basia, our music teacher, taught us songs for the choir and the group leader Jakob Tzuk taught us Hanukah songs in Yiddish. Guests were invited to the orphanage to celebrate Hanukah eve with us. These were family and relatives of the children and the group leaders, our school teachers and principal and even leaders of the Jewish community who donated money for the upkeep of the orphanage. We lit candles, made the blessings, and sang the songs we had learned beforehand. The festive dinner included pancakes and doughnuts, together with other choice dishes.

On Hanukah we played a game we called “Tarneczke”, similar to the game Bingo which is played these days. The game was organized in such a way that every child could win something. We were allowed to swap with other children if we did not like the prize we won. However, there were clear educational rules about how this exchange of prizes was to be carried out fairly, so as to protect the weaker and less experienced children. There was a special notebook in which every child wrote his or her name, the item they had switched, and what they had replaced it with. The rule said that once the exchange had been made, there were to be no regrets and the deal had been closed by both sides. Like in any society, however, several shadowy transactions took place in which the younger children among us were at a disadvantage. Very often, the younger children would burst out crying after discovering that they had given away something valuable in exchange for something worthless.

In one of these “Bingo” games, I once won a miniature chess set concealed in a leather case similar to a small wallet in which there were black and white squares of a chess board. The wallet also contained a pocket with tiny ivory chess figures. The set was small enough to fit into the pocket of my pants and everybody envied me for this prize. I kept the tiny chess set for many years until it was finally stolen from me.

On Purim, we would dress up as anything we imagined. Ms. Saba Leizerowicz worked in the sewing workshop and even taught the girls how to sew. She sewed some of the Purim costumes and we were also able to obtain remnants of the materials from her so as to make Hanukah costumes for ourselves.

Despite the doctor’s liking for the Hanukah festival, Passover remained the principal festival of the orphanage. The “Seder”²² night was a magnificent event, attended by important guests such as the head of the Jewish community in Warsaw and various philanthropists who supported the orphanage over the years. We read the “Haggadah”²³ and sang the songs which one of the group leaders had taught us beforehand. Since 107 orphanage children

²² Seder, a festive holiday meal that marks the beginning of Passover, means “order”. The meal happens in a prescribed order in which the story of the Exodus from Egypt is retold.

²³ Telling the story of the Exodus from Egypt.

participated in the Seder, the “Afikoman”²⁴ ritual demanded a creative solution. This led to a tradition in which the Afikoman was won by the child who found a walnut in one of his “kneidelach”.²⁵ The winning child received five “zloty”²⁶ which was then enough to feed a small family for a whole week.

I do not recall whether it was 1932 or 1934 when I found the walnut in my “kneidel”. I still have the walnut wrapped in a pouch to this day and I regard it as my lucky charm. I kept it with me throughout the war, through thick and thin. Not much of it remains today, eighty years later. I have carried this walnut in my trousers, covered in a handkerchief and today, at the age of 94, I am afraid to open the handkerchief and find only shards. The walnut gives me a feeling of the essence of the orphanage; its replacement for my mother’s home; and the man Janusz Korczak, who was like a father to me. Despite the many years that have passed since then, the walnut connects today’s Shlomo to Shloymaleh of the orphanage (although they called me Shlamek in Polish to differentiate between me and another boy who was called Shlomo). The walnut is the concrete memory of the happy childhood I had, thanks to the wonderful man who offered me and many other children like me, a warm, respectful, and loving home.

“Lag Ba’Omer”²⁷ was marked by a huge meeting of children from all the Jewish orphanages in Poland.

Shlomo Nadel with the walnut he received from Korczak, kept safely to this day in his pocket and wrapped in a handkerchief. When it started to disintegrate, he moved it into a box. The walnut has become part of Shlomo over the years. Photographed in 2000.



²⁴ The piece of matzah (unleavened bread), hidden for the children. The finder receives a prize.

²⁵ Dumplings

²⁶ Unit of currency in Poland.

²⁷ The anniversary of the death of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, a Mishnaic sage and leading disciple of Rabbi Akiva in the 2nd century.

It was held in the area of Burakow which we accessed by boats and rafts on the Wisla River. The main purpose of this gathering was apparently to connect us to Eretz Israel. We heard lectures about its history and I especially remember the story of the Bar Kochba uprising. We heard about what was happening in Israel, updates about youth leaders and teachers who had worked in Jewish institutions in Poland, including ours, and later immigrated to Israel. David Ben Gurion participated at one of these meetings and addressed us in his talk.

We would play with bows and arrows during our free time, shooting into boards which we had built beforehand together with the janitor, Zalewski. We built the bows from soft and flexible branches, attaching a string at both ends. We made the arrows from small branches, sharpened at both ends.

On Shavuot, we played the game called “I have green, I have green” whose aim was to demonstrate the meaning of the festival of the harvest. If we were caught without something green in our hands, we had to pay a forfeit.



Lag Ba'Omer on the lawn of the orphanage, 1932. Shlomo is wearing a hat and is sitting next to the group leader Bolek Drukier.

10. Swollen Tonsils and an Ivory Palace



There was an enormous advantage to Korczak's being a pediatrician in his role as head of the orphanage. We received medical attention such as only children of wealthy families could afford to receive at the time. Adjacent to his private room in the attic of the orphanage were two other rooms. In one of these rooms, Korczak examined the children and the other was an isolation room for children who required close surveillance. The doctor would regularly monitor the children's health and development and record all his notes in a separate medical file for each of us.

We received the best medical attention whenever necessary due the high esteem in which Dr. Korczak was held by Warsaw's medical community. When Dr. Korczak was unavailable at the orphanage, another doctor would be summoned. Korczak would consult with other medical experts when he required a second opinion regarding the treatment of a child. If the child was bedridden, these doctors would visit him at the orphanage. When necessary, the child would be sent to an infirmary.

Korczak refused to charge medical fees for treatment administered to patients outside the orphanage, as he was highly aware of the financial hardships these poverty-stricken children faced. He would give them a prescription for medicines and send them to a certain pharmacy which he dealt with on a regular basis. He would later pay for the medicines he had prescribed. Although the other doctors highly respected Korczak, they could not forgive him for this behaviour which actually jeopardized their good

name and livelihood. As a result, certain doctors from Warsaw demanded a revocation of his medical licence and membership in the Medical Association. They asked him, "How does this make us look to our patients when we ask them to pay for the treatment we give them?" To this, he had no reply.

There was an outbreak of mumps a year after I joined the orphanage. The isolation room was too small for the many infected children in the orphanage and I was therefore sent to be looked after by my grandmother, my father's mother, until my recovery. Like the rest of my family, my grandmother and her three adult daughters lived in poverty and, following my grandfather's death, they survived on small amounts of money sent to them from my grandmother's son in Argentina. There was no National Insurance or any other social services.

My grandmother had only a very limited capability of supporting herself due to her advanced age and the fact that she was a woman. Unemployment was rampant owing to the economic crisis of that time. None of her adult daughters were married nor could they find employment. Needless to say, the forced appearance of an ill child in their house added a burden to their already difficult plight. It was difficult for these women to feed an additional mouth.

My grandmother's house contained only one room in which everybody slept, ate, and cooked. The three daughters slept in one bed, which they were obliged to share with me when I arrived. They argued who would sleep next to me, not because they were not fond of me or because they refused to take care of me, but because I had the mumps and it was simply overcrowded in that bed, to say the least. I loved my grandmother dearly, but I could not help longing for my former conditions at the orphanage: my clean bed which I shared with no one and the nutritious and satisfying meals. I was afraid that I would not be accepted back to the orphanage after my recovery.

Luckily for me, the mumps lasted only ten days, and when I was finally out of quarantine and there was no risk of me infecting the other children at the orphanage, I was welcomed back with open arms. I am sure that Korczak monitored my recovery during the period I was away. Returning to the orphanage after my additional encounter with the wretched fate of my family made me grateful to be living in this home again.

I had never been treated by a physician prior to my joining the orphanage. This was a privilege reserved only for children of wealthy parents. However, this was not the first time in my short life that I had to deal with a serious illness combined with poverty and deprivation. As a small boy, I continuously came down with tonsillitis, which resulted in a high fever and pus spots in my throat. Before the discovery of penicillin, physicians treated tonsillitis by smearing iodine on the swollen tonsils. Not only was this treatment extremely unpleasant, but it was generally ineffective. My tonsils were later removed surgically and that was the end of that problem.

Unlike the orphanage children who received proper dental care, children from deprived families commonly suffered from weak and rotten teeth, owing to poor nutrition, unhygienic conditions, and the family's inability to finance visits to the dentist. I suffered from an aching tooth during the summer camp in which we participated outside Warsaw. One of the senior boys took me to a professional dental clinic in Warsaw and the doctor extracted the sore tooth using an anesthetic, so that I did not suffer too much. The dentist marveled at the size of the tooth and called his colleagues to see it. Everyone agreed that this resembled the tooth of a horse rather than that of a small boy, saying they had never seen anything like it. At the end of the visit, I happily took possession of the tooth and went back to join the other children at the summer camp, Rozyczka farm.

A child with a loose tooth was generally sent to the doctor who painlessly extracted it. Korczak gave the child a half a "zloty" in exchange for the extracted tooth, which he kept. Needless to

say, the lucky children who received this treasure were beside themselves with joy while the other children envied them and impatiently waited for their own teeth to loosen. The doctor did not discard the teeth, but fastened them onto a sculpted palace in his room. Thanks to all of our milk teeth, the stark structure became an “ivory palace”.

For this reason, I was so happy to have the huge tooth in my possession and as soon as I arrived at the camp I hurried over to the doctor. He was indeed impressed by the size of the tooth, but still gave me only a half a “zloty” in return. Disappointed, I said to Korczak, “Mr. Doctor, I think that I deserve a bit more than a half a ‘zloty’ because the tooth is so large.”



Children from the orphanage in front of the camp huts at Rozyczka farm.
Photographed by Shlomo in 1934.

He answered blankly, "A tooth is a tooth and nowhere is it written what size it should be." I was disappointed at not having been successful in my attempt to bargain with the doctor.

Dr. Janusz Korczak would tiptoe around the sleeping halls late at night, checking to see if all the children were sleeping. He covered a child whose blanket had fallen off. He would sit next to a child who had woken up from a bad dream and could not get back to sleep, gently calming the child in a whisper so as not to wake up the others. He would stay at the child's side until he fell asleep again. If a child was ill or had any sort of pain, the doctor would bring a sedative. Before meeting the doctor, we had never known the taste of such tender care, which we imagined was the care of a father for his children.

Korczak occasionally shared his concerns regarding certain subjects with us, including the physical or emotional condition of children in the orphanage and we assisted him with solutions. I remember the case of one battered boy who used to walk in his sleep. The doctor ordered us to remain quiet and not call out his name if we saw him walking in his sleep. The reason was not to wake him up, alarm him, and possibly cause him to fall. "Sleepwalking is very dangerous," he explained, "because the sleep walkers are not aware of their surroundings and may bump into objects, climb onto windowsills or banisters, and hurt themselves. One must find a way to wake the sleepwalker up as soon as he gets out of bed and starts walking around." So what did the doctor do? He placed basins of cold water on both sides of that boy's bed so on getting out of bed, he stepped into the cold water and immediately woke himself up.

11. Growing Vegetables and Budding Love



Jewish philanthropist named Cohen lived in Warsaw at that time. He was a millionaire and had a daughter whom he loved with all his heart. As fate would have it, the daughter died at a young age. Shattered, Cohen decided to donate money to underprivileged Jewish children in her memory. To this purpose, he donated a plot of land in a rural area near Warsaw called Goclawek. There he built a modest farm which he called Rozyczka in memory of his beloved daughter Rozia. The farm contained a few bungalows surrounded by gardens.

During the two month school holiday, the orphanage children moved to Rozyczka. This was a type of summer camp with the doctor or Stefa staying with us, either simultaneously or separately. I was beside myself with happiness at this camp and have vivid memories of the activities in which we participated during these wonderful times. However, this was not merely a time of idleness and enjoyment. Although our



Gardening at the summer camp. Photographed by Shlomo in 1933.



regular routine at the camp differed to that of the orphanage, we still had to abide by our commitments and various work schedules.

The older children tended the fruit trees and worked in the greenhouses in which we grew vegetables. These were covered with glass boards which we closed up during the cold Polish summer nights, reopening them in the morning. The work was not easy; lifting the boards required great physical strength. We, the older boys, were extremely proud of our masculine ability to fulfill these tasks. The produce of these greenhouses was at the disposal of the camp's kitchen and we gorged ourselves on the vegetables until our stomachs hurt. Nobody could convince me that a tomato or cucumber one has cultivated oneself has the same taste as one purchased from a store.

By the end of the summer, some of the produce from the greenhouses was used to stock up the orphanage kitchen. We produced so many vegetables and fruits that we had more than enough for consumption at the orphanage. Excess produce was sent to the Warsaw farmer's market with the help of the wagon driver who worked at the summer camp. Like some of the other children, I was occasionally sent to

Picking fruit at the summer camp, Rozyczka farm, with youth leaders, children, and local staff.

On the left is Franciszka, a Polish farmer who was in charge of the small cowshed in the area. Rumour has it that she earned only one zloty for her work at first. When they offered to pay her thirty zloty, she became insulted and refused. Photographed by Felek Grzyb in 1934.



accompany him on the trip to the market. This was an extremely enjoyable experience. The earnings from our sales were deposited into the orphanage's account and this was a huge help for Stefa, who had to deal with its upkeep throughout the year.

Nevertheless, Rozyczka was after all a summer camp and we were engaged in all sorts of activities other than the work we were required to do. In 1932, for example, Korczak organized an Olympic Games event for the children, inspired by the Olympic Games held in Los Angeles that year. We competed in high-jumps and long-jumps, sack races, and races with eggs held on a spoon in our mouths.

I remember another summer when, during an exceptionally hot August, we could not fall asleep due to the heat and the mosquitoes in the bungalows. Doctor Korczak suggested to the older children to take a nocturnal walk in the forest on condition that we swore to keep it secret. We crept out of our beds in the middle of the night and dressed ourselves in total silence. When we pointed out to the doctor that we did not have any food for the trip, he suggested that the smallest boy among us steal into the camp's pantry through a little window and bring us something to eat on our way. The harvest of this little break-in was superb: five loaves of bread, two packages of butter, and two jars of plum jam which we had cooked from the fruit we picked in the camp.

In high spirits, we assembled outside the forest equipped with our stolen food. When we stealthily stepped into the dark and forbidding woods, we were amazed to discover that the lights flickering ahead of us were those of fireflies. The doctor explained that fireflies produce light through electrical signals which prevent them from colliding in the air. He said that there was a superstition that fireflies are impure spirits looking for a place to rest in the world.

We marched through the dark woods to the accompaniment of the sounds of leaves being trampled, the calls of night creatures hurrying along their way, and the flapping of the wings of birds whose sleep we had disturbed. Joining this chorus were the wind in the trees,

cracking branches and the snapping of bark off the trees due to the change in temperature between the day and the night. In the total darkness, we suddenly noticed a purplish light. When we reached a little clearing in the forest, we sat around the doctor in a tight circle. He explained, "Some trees contain phosphorus, and when they disintegrate they produce flashes of light, just like the purple light you noticed on the way. I want you to know that the forest is a friendly place even at night, and that you can survive in the forest if you understand what happens in it. There are no ghosts conspiring against us." The doctor's explanation often helped me in my many wanderings during the time of the Holocaust, when I found myself in the thick Russian woods.

After a long walk in the forest we stopped for a break. We sat and ate our food which somehow tasted more delicious than usual. At sunrise we returned to the camp, a column of thirty children, led by a trumpeter so that everybody in the camp would witness the return of the heroes of the night. To our surprise, the camp was in turmoil due to a theft that had occurred there. Nobody could understand who would break into the pantry and steal food from the mouths of children. Korczak calmed everybody down by disclosing the truth.

"While you were all sleeping in your beds, we, the heroes, walked through the woods. We had to equip ourselves with food for sustenance during the night. Since a crime has been committed here, instigated by none other than myself, I propose I be judged in the children's court." Korczak wanted us to understand that nobody was above the law, despite the circumstances. The judges apparently accepted his arguments and he was fined only 100 units in the children's court.

Graduates of the orphanage were also invited to visit our summer camp. I have a distinct memory of one of those visits which I like to call "The Rebellion of the Oppressed Workers". The visitors were active communists and they incited us against Korczak for forcing us to work during our summer vacation. Among the grievances revealed during the resulting conflict between ourselves and the doctor were

that the work was too strenuous for us, that we had worked enough during the rest of the year, and that we deserved a lighter work load. The doctor responded by explaining, "I have no easier work to offer the older children, unless you prefer to collect garbage in the courtyard using a stick with a nail attached to its end." Korczak was referring to a duty commonly performed by the young children. The doctor added, "I know who stirred up this rebellion — those youngsters who have been intoxicated by Communist concepts and view the Soviet Union as a paradise. I was a Russian citizen when Poland was ruled by the Soviet Union and I clearly remember the conditions of the Russian workers and farmers. Do not deceive yourselves for a minute by thinking that the workers sit there idly while roasted pigeons fly straight into their mouths. They work very hard there for their livelihood and I hope you will never be in that position." I will add, in parenthesis, that the doctor's wish for us never crystallized. In fact, I experienced the Communist enslavement system first hand when I escaped into Russia from Poland during the Nazi occupation.

Korczak's reasoning did not satisfy us. When we informed him of our insistence on receiving the "employment" solution he had suggested, he was sitting on the porch of one of the bungalows with a huge smile on his face. He knew very well that this episode would not last for very long. While performing the duties he had suggested, we, the "big mobsters," were observed by him and the younger children who all had a good laugh. This situation was not at all to our liking and we retreated to the thorny raspberry bushes in shame. After a while, we submissively returned to Korczak, announcing that this work was unsuitable for us. His answer was that regrettably he had no other work to offer us.

We decided to find ourselves busy work. There were gravel paths in the camp area between the bungalows. Since we generally walked barefoot, walking there was unpleasant. We took asphalt from a brick factory not far from the camp. We added sand and water to the asphalt and poured the mixture onto the gravel, creating fine paths for the bungalow area. We worked hard and perspired but later were delighted to see that the material hardened and we ran along the paths. All was

fine until the first rains fell. The paths became a soggy mixture into which our feet sank when stepping on it. The doctor congratulated us on our initiative. Even if our endeavours had failed, he did not use this against us. This taught us that without knowledge and expertise, no initiative can succeed. He compared this failed initiative to our work in the greenhouse which brought us satisfaction and financial gain.

When the summer was over, we were usually quite content to return to the orphanage. There were also romances at the orphanage, like any place where boys and girls are together. Courtship in those days included going out to a film together, discreet meetings, holding hands, and even stolen kisses. Romance in those days was characterized by innocence, shyness, and modesty. However, Korczak was ahead of his times by recognizing the need for sex education. I do not know what he discussed with the girls. The boys heard explanations about menstruation and human reproduction organs. He also explained about nocturnal emissions and told us not to be concerned about them since they were perfectly natural. He delicately told us, "If you wish to cause yourselves pleasure [he was referring to sexual intercourse], and you have enough money, go to a prostitute. But you must make sure that that prostitute receives medical care. It is your responsibility to make sure that you are not infected with venereal disease." Korczak, like others of his generation, was of the opinion that prostitution was legitimate for



Paving the paths between the bungalows at the summer camp.
Photographed by Shlomo in 1934.

us, the men, in order to maintain the purity of our girlfriends.

I was mischievous, rather good looking, and clean-cut. Being the orphanage photographer also proved to be an advantage. Although I was only a beginner, the others thought that I was a certified photographer. The girls showed interest in me, if only to have their photographs taken at any opportunity. My first love's name was Fela. I still have her photograph with an inscription to me. I met Fela once again on my return to Poland at the end of the war. She was already married by then.



The orphanage children in 1933. Shlomo Nadel is in the middle row, second from the right. Fela, the object of his love, is in the third row, second from the right. Photographed by Felek Grzyb.



The graduation party at the summer camp in 1932. A play about a Polish wedding enacted by girls. Photographed by Adek Poznanski, an amateur photographer.

12. Paradise Lost



The summer of 1935 when I was obliged to leave the orphanage, was for me similar to the expulsion from the Garden of Eden — a painful uprooting. I had originally reached the orphanage from a background of abject poverty with a very slight chance of surviving in the world. No words can express how significant Korczak’s orphanage was for a child like me. Korczak and Stefa were responsible for my having taken root, built my identity, acquired an education, and widened my horizons. Equipped with all these tools, I left the protective gates of the orphanage, accompanied by my dream to become a professional photographer. This was, in fact, the end of my wonderful childhood.

By necessity, I stood on my own two feet at the age of fifteen so as to face the rough realities of life awaiting me beyond the orphanage gates. I was homeless and had no profession in a cruel and harsh battle for survival. Dr. Korczak recommended me for work as an apprentice at an amateur photographic lab, run by a Jewish Zionist and philanthropist named Gorman. I actually worked as Gorman’s messenger boy and I was responsible for his supply of photographic paper. I earned very little from this work, but my primary disappointment was that I was not in fact involved in any photographic work at all.

I had hardly enough money to rent a room with a folding bed for a couple of hours a day, sharing these meager lodgings with two other people during the other hours. Every time I lay on this bed, I received a “reminder” of its other occupants — the bedbugs. Instead of a toilet, there was a box under the bed. I had to search for beds to rent

several times over the years. There was no comparison between these conditions and those I had enjoyed at the orphanage. I pined for the clean and nurturing environment of the orphanage.

My physical hardships were minute in comparison with my traumatic encounters with types of behaviour and values which were quite foreign to me and for which I was totally unprepared. I had grown up in the utopia which Korczak, the author of the story *People are Good*,²⁸ had created. I am unsure whether it was Korczak's naivety or his educational considerations which spurred him to infuse in us the belief that people were basically decent. On leaving the orphanage, I was totally unprepared for my encounter with human evil.

The bug-ridden bed was actually my second encounter with human evil. The first was in the home of Ms. Lonia, the cook at the orphanage. She had two children from her first marriage, a son my age and a slightly older daughter. Her husband, a policeman, had shady dealings; at night he would shut all the blinds, draw all the curtains in the house, and transform the place to a gambling club. The games were roulette, cards, and dice with huge amounts of money changing hands. Food and drink were generously served.

Shocked at what I saw, I asked Lonia's children, "Do you realize that everything going on in your home is illegal, and that your step-father is sub-human?" Although I asked them not to mention what I had said to anyone, the "policeman" approached me the next day with a murderous look in his eyes.

He said, "You are lucky to be associated with Dr. Korczak. Otherwise, I would make sure that you won't be able to recognize yourself in the mirror." He threw me out of the house. I gathered up my meager possessions and immediately found a similar "palace" with the permanent fixture of bedbugs in the bed. The incident in Lonia's house left a deep scar in my heart. Not only had I had a close encounter with evil, but I realized that evil existed among Jewish people and representatives of the law.

²⁸ Janusz Korczak, *Ludzie sa dobrzy* [*People are Good*], (Poland: Keren Kajemet Leisrael, 1938).

I visited the orphanage one Sunday, on my first free day from the photographic lab. Thinking that I might save sixty pennies, I planned my visit to coincide with lunchtime. To my disappointment, nobody took any notice of me. Stefa was there to greet the children returning from school but she totally ignored me. I was not angry, but felt alienated and hurt. I told myself, "Shlomo, you have received what you had to receive. Another orphan has taken your place. You have nothing to complain about." This is one of the great differences between leaving your own home to leaving an orphanage. The umbilical cord tying me to the orphanage had been severed. For Stefa and Korczak, I was merely one of many.

In retrospect, I can imagine that the separation from the children was difficult for Stefa and Korczak too. From my acquaintance with them, I know that they had developed defence mechanisms so as not to have to deal with continual separations. However, they could not possibly develop sentiments for these numerous separations and still keep the orphanage going for the other young orphans who would have been lost without this home. I am sure that both Stefa and Korczak were emotionally encumbered with the fact that the orphanage could only hold a limited number of children at a time.

Leaving the orphanage was a slap in my face in more than one way. I had a dream during those years at Korczak House, related to my brother Samek who was three years younger than me. I imagined the two of us each having a profession, working and saving up for our mother to stop working as a live-in maid at wealthy people's houses. I dreamed about us living together as one happy family. We would support our mother and she would take care of us. This was a wonderful dream about closing a circle, a dream shattered by the cruel war that broke out in September 1939.

My brother left his orphanage one year before the war broke out. Having demonstrated distinct creativity and excellent manual skills, he was accepted at Ort, the trade school, in Piotrkow, Trybunalski. Following his studies, he worked as an apprentice in a carpentry workshop where he made great strides. At the beginning of the

war, he contacted me and we decided to go to the train station in Warsaw together, under heavy German bombing of the city. Out of sheer fear, my brother's stomach began to ache terribly and he had uninterrupted diarrhea. I ran with him to the hospital, but they were helpless there and could not treat him because of all the wounded people who were arriving. I took him to my place, but we spent most of the time in the underground shelter, which was actually a cellar in which we spent our time during the massive German bombings of Warsaw.

I decided to turn to Korczak for advice as to whether I should escape from Poland before the Germans arrived. I knew that Korczak had served as an officer in the Polish army during the First World War and he knew about the horrors of war. He seemed to be very clear about the future of the Jews in Poland, although he certainly did not foresee that the impending war would far outdo the first one, resulting in the annihilation of Polish and European Jewry. Indeed, Korczak encouraged me and supported my decision to leave Poland while the Russian border was still open.

As soon as I had made my decision, I wished to have my brother Samek join me. However, my mother refused to let him go, arguing that he was the youngest — frail, thin, and small. She was afraid of what might happen to him on the way. She said, "At least one son must remain with me." And so it was. We parted without knowing that we would never see each other again.

Through letters I received from my mother and brother over the next few years, I learned that, like the rest of Polish Jewry, they had been forced to move into the Ghetto soon after my departure. I had escaped into the part of Poland that was under Soviet rule. I was able to communicate with them during the first few years and I also sent parcels into the Ghetto. I have kept their letters to this day. It is chilling to see the postage stamps, the seals, and the deletions by Nazi censors.

April 16, 1941

Dear Shlomo!

Mother is terribly worried that she has not heard from you for so long. Perhaps you did not receive my postcard? Much has changed with us. Mother is still working at the same place, but without being paid and that is a good thing. [This comment was intended for the Nazi censors, so that they would not delete what he had written.]

I am now a Bursist with Doctor Korczak. His orphanage is on 33 Chlodna Street. I run a carpentry workshop from nine in the morning till four in the afternoon. After that, I read or sometimes go out. [Intentional description of daily routine in the spirit of the Nazi propaganda.]

We are in the middle of fall now. We celebrated Passover with bread but we conducted a Passover Seder. I sometimes earn a few coins [The rest of this sentence was deleted by the Nazi censors.]

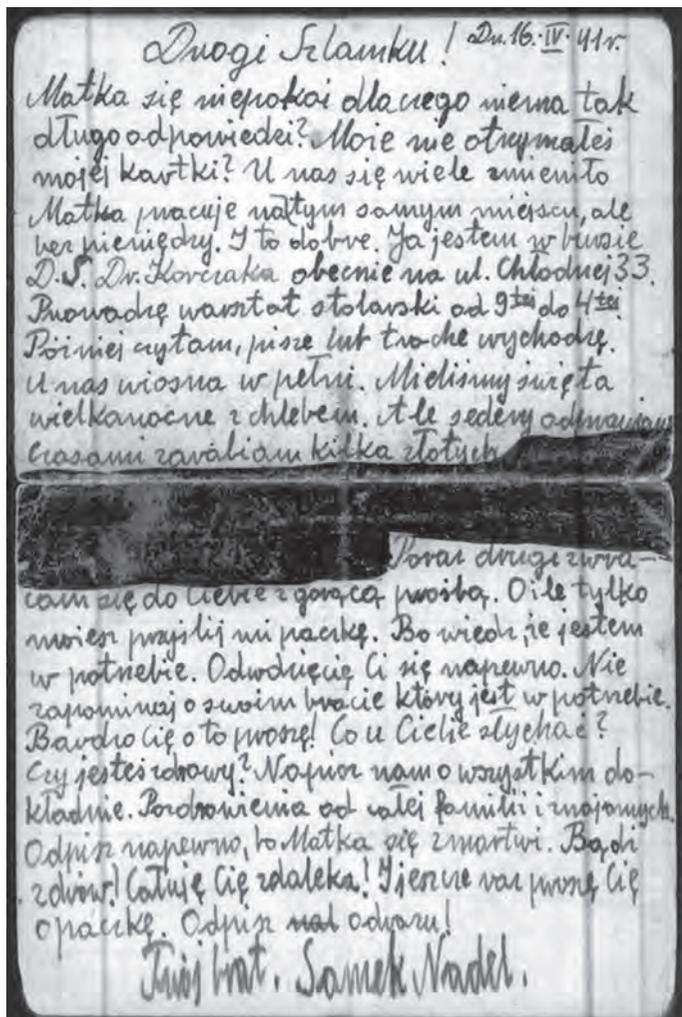
Again, I'm asking you to urgently send me a parcel which I need. I promise to reimburse you for it. I beg of you, please do not forget your brother who is in such great need. How are you? Are you healthy? Please write everything in detail. Best wishes from us to the whole family and from all your acquaintances. Please answer us, as Mother is so worried! Be well! I send you kisses from afar! And again, please send a parcel. I will pay you back for it!

Your brother, Samek Nadel

As he wrote in his letter, my brother found work for the next few months as a group leader at Korczak House, which had in the meantime been moved into the Ghetto. This is how fate was closing a circle for my brother after not having been accepted to the orphanage as a child. In one of his letters, my brother told me that he was teaching the children wood-carving in exchange for food. At night he went back to where our mother was living to sleep.

In one of the letters, my brother and mother begged me to do everything in my power to help them leave the Ghetto and come to me. Again my hands were tied and I had no means or capability of helping my loved ones. This had been the case when I was child, being asked to help my grandmother and aunt and now it was the case again, in which I had no way of acting or assisting.

To this day, I do not know what the fate of my brother and mother was, besides the fact that both of them died in the war. If my brother went with Korczak and the children, he probably died at Treblinka. If not, both he and my mother were killed before or during the Warsaw Uprising.



The original letter of Simcha (Samek) Nadel from the Ghetto. The black marks in the center of the page are the work of the Nazi censors, 1941.

13. Shattered Images



In 1939, three months after the German invasion of Warsaw, I decided to escape while the Polish-Russian border was still open. I took a small haversack containing my only treasure — photographs which I had taken at Korczak House at the age of fourteen. I was accompanied by Kubus Kolb, a friend from the orphanage with whom I had kept in contact. I had no choice but to leave Warsaw, my mother, and my brother for the future unknown.

At first we tried to cross the border in the Malkinia area, on the banks of the Bug River which formed a natural border between the two regions of Poland. Poland was then divided following a non-aggression pact signed between Germany and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on August 23rd, 1939. One of the clauses of that document determined the borders of the spheres of influence that were divided between Germany and the Soviet Union. Eastern Poland, Estonia, Finland, and southeast Europe were regarded as Russian spheres of influence. Western Poland and Lithuania were subject to German rule.

On our way, we heard horror stories of Germans ambushing Jews on the bridge over the Bug River. Those who were in good physical shape were sent to labour camps but the weak and frail ones were simply thrown into the raging river. We therefore decided to avoid that area and walk through the villages towards the Russian border. While we were walking, a wagon driven by two Gentiles passed us. They stopped and said, “Get into our wagon. That way you’ll cross the border faster and more safely. It won’t cost you a lot of money.”

We climbed into the wagon and I removed my haversack

from my shoulders. I sat down, allowing my aching body to rest after the long walk. After some distance, I noticed that the wagon driver was straying from the paved road into the woods. I started shouting to him, "What are you doing? This is not the way to the border! You're a liar and a thief!" I stretched out my hand to take the haversack, and immediately felt a lash, like a whip slicing my arm. The second Gentile had a flick knife. My mind flashed to the grim stories of border smugglers robbing and murdering people trying to get into the Soviet Union. I was paralyzed with fear. I was concerned about the photographs, but the knife being waved at me stopped me from grabbing them and I had to jump off the wagon in order to save my life.

As if from nowhere, a convertible car pulled up opposite us with a German officer and his driver. From his uniform, I noticed that he was a high officer in the German army. He asked, "What is going on here?" and I, in my broken German, tried to explain what had happened.

He abruptly cut me off and said, "Stop breaking your teeth in German. I can see you are not fluent," and started speaking to me in fluent Polish, as if he had just completed a course in Polish linguistics. In retrospect, I suppose that he was either from Lower Silesia, which was inhabited by Germans, or else he was an intelligence officer who knew Polish by virtue of his office.

I explained that I had been robbed by those wagon drivers, who in the meantime had retreated from their vehicle. The officer's driver urged him to be on his way, reminding him that they had an important meeting. He said, "Are you allowing yourself to be delayed because of these two 'Jids'?"²⁹ In those days, our lives were not worth a cent. He could have shot us and nobody would have asked any questions. The driver impatiently sounded his horn and signaled to the officer to come back to the car, but the officer showed no sign of hurry. He shouted to the two Gentiles, ordering them to stop, but they ignored his calls. He drew his pistol from his belt and shot in the air. The wagon driver stopped and came back to the car.

The driver tried to explain his version of the story to the officer,

²⁹ Derogatory term for Jews.

saying, “You do not know who these people are. They are Jewish Communists escaping to Russia.”

The officer answered, “I did not ask you who they were or what they were doing. I am asking you what you are doing. Who gave you the right to rob them?” There I stood, totally stunned and unable to comprehend what was transpiring. To this day, I cannot explain what then seemed to be a scene from a surrealistic play. Shocked, I was unable to say a word. The officer commanded us to remove our belongings from the wagon. We told him that the wagon driver had taken our money too. The wagon driver claimed that the money was with his friend who had, in the meantime, managed to escape. The officer told us to report the matter at the local police station.³⁰ He told the wagon driver threateningly, “Don’t try to escape because I will find you. Get back here with the money in your hand.” The German officer got into his car and drove off, while the wagon driver threatened to find us later and kill us.

On our way again to the Russian border, we passed a building which was either a military police station or a German border police station. In our naivety, we approached a sturdy young sentry and tried to report the robbery, as suggested by the German officer. The sentry started to swear at us and said, “Get away from here, filthy Jids, before I shoot you.” I thought I had not explained myself clearly and repeated my attempted complaint. The sentry went so red with rage that I could see the freckles on his round face disappear into the redness of his face. He screamed, “Don’t you understand what luck you had with that officer? You are worth nothing to us, get away from here!” He kicked me so hard on my tail bone with his heavy boot that I almost fainted. I could not sit properly for the next two weeks. My friend and I eventually understood our naivety in thinking we would get any help from the police.

Frightened, we moved away and continued on our way. At a certain point, we joined up with a large group that was crossing the border, which gave us a certain feeling of confidence. It was a miracle that the photographs were saved. To this day, I am sorry that I did not ask for the name of the German who rescued the photographs from the wagon driver.

³⁰ Gendarmerie

I had many experiences in Soviet Russia. I managed to work and eat a little in some places, but in other places I became ill, suffered, and starved. My life, like that of millions of others, was a difficult struggle for survival. I wanted to participate in the war but the Russians would not accept me into their army. Firstly, I was not trained for the required functions in the army and secondly, the Russians were suspicious of all Poles and Jews that had crossed the border.

The first time I fulfilled my dream of being recognized as a professional photographer was in Vitebsk in Soviet Russia, following the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact in 1939 which opened the Russian frontiers. After several failed attempts at joining the Russian army, I started to seek employment. I found myself at a photographic laboratory belonging to a Jewish cooperative of photographers in Vitebsk. The cooperative offered its members attractive conditions, including a salary and lodgings. Some of the applicants chose this work having no other work options. Others remained in the cooperative for a short time only since they longed to return to their homes, unaware of the events that were about to transpire in Poland and Germany. Thus, the members of the cooperative were suspicious of me when I applied for employment.

One of the members of the cooperative, Shmerling, who was in Warsaw before the First World War, asked me whether I knew certain well-known photographers in Warsaw. I admitted that I recognized those names as artistic photographers with whom I had not had the privilege of working. During the lunch break, the photographers left me to myself with the task of developing six negatives. The product of my work was far from perfect, but my professional explanations for the flaws impressed the photographers, and I was consequently admitted into the ranks of the cooperative.

Besides the enjoyment I derived from working in my dream profession, I also earned a decent wage which enabled me to help my brother and mother in the Warsaw Ghetto by sending them packages whenever I could. At the outbreak of the war between Germany and Russia, with the rapid German progression towards Russia, I decided to

escape to Tashkent, now in Uzbekistan. My career as a photographer was interrupted until I returned to Poland after the war.

The massive recruitment of men to the Russian army at that time resulted in a severe shortage of manpower in Soviet Russia. Stalin solved the problem by exploiting the refugees who had entered the gates of Russia. He decided to use this cheap labour force by supplying them only with food and lodging, in short, a type of slavery. The Jews had a worse fate awaiting them outside Russia, and therefore did not complain about these poor conditions.

I was among the hard labourers in the Ural Mountains, repairing the railroad tracks that were destroyed by the German bombings. We transported rails, each weighing 500 kg. Five men would hold each side of the rail on their backs. The main difficulty was unloading the rails into place. They were made of steel and, despite their weight, were flexible and springy when thrown onto the ground. We were therefore required to place them gently in coordination. The rails would often fall off the backs of their bearers, injuring the people standing close by. Many lost arms or legs as a result of falling rails.

Our lodgings were at first empty train carriages at the railway station of the town of Danu where trains from 40 destinations congregated. The Germans were only 25 kilometres away. The work was endless; we repaired the tracks and the Germans bombed and destroyed them again. We would be woken-up in the middle of the night to repair the tracks so that the trains would be able to pass under cover of the night, before being bombed again. It was hard physical labour but luckily food was relatively abundant compared to other places during those times. I have no doubt that this is what sustained us. Our daily diet was varied thanks to our bartering transactions with local farmers from the neighbouring “kolkhozes”,³¹ we exchanged the herring we received for potatoes from the farmers.

Since the train carriages served as our sleeping quarters, we were often bombed. We were therefore relocated to huge tents which had apparently been supplied to the Russians by the Americans through

³¹ A collective farm of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

one of the pacts signed between them. Fifty men slept in each tent, located according to bombing conditions. One day, on returning from work, I discovered that the tent in which I had been sleeping had disappeared. At first I thought we had been moved, but when I drew closer I discovered signs of burning in place of the tent. I found the charred bunk on which I had been sleeping; the rest of my belongings had vanished. An investigation revealed that the person who had been in charge of guarding the equipment had decided to heat the tent in preparation for our return from work. It was a freezing cold winter in the mountains. There was a stove in the center of the tent, in which the man lit such a huge fire that the whole tent burned down.

I do not know what made me take my photograph album with me to work that day. I surely did not intend to look at the photographs during my ten-minute break. I later consulted “Kabala” experts, who explained that I should not ask too many questions. They believe that it was written somewhere above that I should stay alive despite all the bombings and that I should save the photographs in order to tell their story. This was the second miraculous survival of the photographs from the orphanage. They finally did reach Eretz Israel and are

presently on display in Washington, D.C. at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.



Top: Bari Jakovicz and the object of his love, Gucia, photographed by Shlomo in a moment of embarrassment in 1934.



Bottom: The Quiet Room where the children prepared homework with the help of the group leaders. The library can be seen in the background. Photographed for purposes of documentation.

14. The Korczak Legacy



fter the war, in 1946, I returned to Dzierżoniów³², where some of the Jewish survivors of the Holocaust in Russia had gathered. At that time, group leaders from “kibbutzim” in Israel were sent to various Jewish refugee centers throughout Europe to establish training courses for settlement in Israel. I too joined one of these courses and it was there that I fell in love with Frieda, who later became my wife. We were married in 1946 and in 1948 our oldest son, Yossi, was born.

Until I met Frieda, I had been completely self-sufficient and nobody was dependant on me. Like a cat, I always seemed to land on my two feet, regardless of the force of the fall, struggling to survive on my own. It was only after my marriage and the birth of my sons that I experienced the taste of a real family.

We immigrated to Israel in 1950. This young country had barely recovered from the War of Independence and was dealing with the absorption of refugees like ourselves. Although our absorption into Israeli life was difficult, we experienced the sensation of returning to the safety of our own home, a haven, a secure place where we could stand on our own two feet.

Over the next few years, I was busy making a livelihood for my family and occupied with my activities in the Korczak Society. My wife Frieda assumed responsibility for raising and educating our children. The boys and I are indebted to Frieda for educating them according to Korczak’s educational approach, with which she fully identified.

³² The city formerly known as Reichenbach.

The Janusz Korczak Society in Poland invited me several times to Poland to represent the Janusz Korczak Association in Israel. I adamantly refused to visit Poland as it would have entailed applying for a visa from the Polish government. This anger against the Polish government stemmed from my having to waive my Polish citizenship on immigrating to Israel. After all, I was born in Poland and lived there for thirty years before immigrating to Israel. The thought of having to apply for a visa annoyed me.

In October 1997, I was once again invited to participate in the International Conference on the 85th anniversary of the establishment of the Janusz Korczak Orphanage in Warsaw. That year my granddaughter, Vered, was unable to join her classmates on a trip to Poland, due to a heart condition. I accepted her offer to accompany me, knowing that this visit would be extremely difficult for me and might even affect my health.

The trip began in Krakow. I fainted twice in the street due to sheer stress and emotion. My nervousness increased when we arrived in Warsaw, especially when I stood outside the Korczak orphanage, my granddaughter at my side. The building had not changed on the exterior and remained just as I had remembered it. I was filled with a powerful longing to observe all the nooks and crannies inside the building. At the time, it was an institution for children at risk, and was inhabited by twenty children with forty staff members caring for them. For years, the authorities did not permit any visitors inside the building. Therefore, when I was asked to lead a tour inside the building for the participants of the conference, I jumped at the opportunity.

I began the tour in the cellar where the same central heating system still worked. I had spent so many hours down there with the janitor, Zalewski, who would load the coal into the huge iron stove. On the ground floor, I stood in the spot where I was accepted into the orphanage by Stefa. From there we went up to the first floor, to Janusz Korczak's office, where he examined me for the first time. We continued into the Quiet Room where we did our homework. The

wall looked so deserted without the photographs of Pilsudski, an admired Polish statesman between the two wars, and of Hoover, the American President. I made a speech in this room, translated below into English:

Dear Guests, and Friends of Dr. Korczak,

I am honoured to participate in the 85th anniversary of the establishment of Dr. Janusz Korczak's orphanage on 92 Korchmalna Street. I am joined here by my granddaughter who is extremely interested and involved in the organization for commemorating Janusz Korczak. Exactly seventy years have passed since I took my first steps into this splendid, white building.

The office of the orphanage on the left side of the building was occupied by Ms. Nacia, Ms. Stefa, and of course Dr. Korczak. After taking care of the administrative details, my mother left me here alone. Dr. Korczak examined me, and, sensing my discomfort, tried to set me at ease... I was actually frightened by the figure of Ms. Stefa, by her black dress and the keys hanging from her belt intimidating me into thinking that I would never come out of this place again. Eventually, I knew I was mistaken. This house and its people accepted me open-heartedly and unconditionally and I am grateful to them for making me into who I am today.

I remember the 50th anniversary celebration of the orphanage in 1932. The Polish Minister of Education and Culture was among the many guests. Each child received a box of candies and we sat in the gallery and watched the ceremony. One of my friends, Karolek, handed flowers to Miss Judea, the Jewish beauty queen, who was also among the guests. She kissed his cheeks and sat him on her lap. We made fun of him for a long time after that, telling him that he still had lipstick marks on his cheeks.

I remember my first turn of duty at the institution. I was seven years old, and my task was to dust the grand piano. Ms.

Stefa's "store" was next to the hall in which the piano stood. My friend Ichu,³³ who is present today, remembers her well. There were eleven to thirteen tables in the hall which served as our dining room. During the winter months, we played games in the hall. Behind the office, on the ground floor, there was a sewing workshop. To the right there was a room in which we did our homework. There was an additional room where the children's court took place and where the orphanage newspaper, "Dom"³⁴ was read aloud to us. This room was also for children who wanted to say "Kaddish"³⁵ for one of their parents. There were two photographs in this room. One was of Pilsudski and the other was Hoover, the American President. The latter bore an inscription thanking the President for sending us a football after the First World War.

Next to this room was the shaft of a manual elevator with which food was sent from the kitchen below. There was a huge library containing hundreds of books next to the sewing workshop. This is the historic bookcase upon which Dr. Korczak placed a little girl named Lecha in his attempts to get her to make friends with the other children. He was fined 100 units in the children's court for doing this.

Time does not allow me to tell you all the experiences I had at this beautiful place. I will now address a few words to dear Dr. Korczak, in his absence:

Our beloved old Doctor, you were an exceptional spiritual father to me. You gave me a warm home that fulfilled all my childhood needs. You taught me how to behave in life. Your lessons, guidance, and advice all helped me through my most difficult times. You taught me that people are good. I believe that to this day. However, you were naive. Who would have believed that after many years, people who had never met you, would draw distorted conclusions from your writings and publish them in their books? In my opinion, they act out of envy and their wish to feed their own personal egos.

³³ Ichu is Yitzchak Belfer, one of Shlomo's friends at the orphanage. He survived the Holocaust and immigrated to Israel, where he had a family. He is a painter and preserved the Korczak heritage.

³⁴ *Home*

³⁵ Prayer for the Dead.

Dear Doctor, if you were alive today, I would advise you not to take any notice of those words. This is because we, your children who received so much from you, will always be on guard. We will preserve your memory and will never let anybody darken it.

*Your protégé,
Shlomo Nadel
Herzl 7, Ramle, Israel*

N.B. The doctor did not die a natural death. He was sent to the gas chambers in Treblinka and his body was burned to ashes. I remember one of the doctor's stories, Hershko's Trip to the Land of Israel. The story includes an episode about Titus who destroyed and burnt the Temple. Holy scriptures were burnt, but the letters of the alphabet rebelled and refused to be burnt; they escaped and went up to heaven. This is what I think happened to Korczak's soul. His body was burnt by the Germans, but his spirit and soul are still with us, his children, wherever we meet each other.

While I was a member of the Janusz Korczak Association in Israel, I heard criticism of Korczak to the effect that he was accepted into the Polish intellectual elite because he was an assimilated Polish Jew, an atheist without any connections to his Jewish roots. I disagree with that claim. Simply because the Poles chose to ignore his being Jewish does not mean that he disregarded his culture and religion.

Although daily life in the orphanage was secular and excluded prayer, Korczak certainly did not dismiss the Jewish calendar and traditions. For example, if a child wished to say "Kaddish" for his parents, Korczak would wake up early with that child and join in the prayer. The Sabbath was respected by means of a festive meal and a break from studies. It was the weekly visiting day for the relatives of the children. We celebrated all the Jewish holidays as I explained in this book. Children could go to the synagogue on Rosh Hashanah and fast on Yom Kippur. Our favourite holidays were Hanukah, Purim, and Passover.

I regret that today there is insufficient appreciation of Janusz Korczak's educational theories. It does not matter to me that some people disagree with these theories. It hurts me that there is no debate about them in Israeli teacher training colleges, while colleges in other parts of the world do teach the pedagogy of Janusz Korczak. There is a new generation of educators, intellectuals, and philosophers in Israel that has never heard of Korczak. They write about theories which Korczak expressed and wrote about, without even mentioning his name or being familiar with that heritage.



The famous monument of Janusz Korczak at the Jewish cemetery of Warsaw, showing Korczak with his children, on their final way.

Epilogue

In retrospect, the children's home was not only a shelter but also a basis for my personal development. It was there that all my physical needs were taken care of — a roof over my head, a bed to sleep in, nutritious food, clothing, and medical care. None of these was to be taken for granted, especially for an orphaned Jewish boy at the time.

I left the children's home with a bag full of values, such as honesty, decency, responsibility, truth, loyalty, good citizenship, mutual respect, initiative, and a work ethic. I have no doubt that my open and egalitarian view of humankind is a product of the seeds sown in us at the children's home. I am proud of my ability to associate with all of mankind, rich or poor, educated or ignorant, Jewish or Arab, child or adult. During the war, I worked shoulder to shoulder with various people, not necessarily Jews, from all over the Soviet Union. On immigrating to Israel, I settled in Ramle, a mixed city, and I have been there ever since. My photographic store was adjacent to a garage owned by an Arab family and I easily befriended them. I made friends with people regardless of their education, economic situation, or age.

I remember the orphanage as being warm, loving, and understanding, a place where I could discover myself and take roots in a nurturing climate and firm ground. When I arrived at the orphanage, I was like an uprooted plant. I did not know who I belonged to and where I was going. I was a wild and insecure child, seemingly independent and willful. Nobody had provided a stable framework for me nor educated me towards responsibility or commitment. Looking back, I realize that the clear rules and routines at the children's house provided me with confidence and peace of mind. It was as though Shloymaleh the child no longer needed to be on the defensive. From then on, I had a clear head for other things that developed and moulded my character.

To my total amazement, I discovered that there are good, honest, and decent people in the world. Until then, the world seemed like

a threatening and frightening place, where children were either neglected or abused. I could not imagine that a child was equal to any human being, deserving of respect from adults. I became absorbed in an egalitarian society which accepted the young, the weak, and the other. A society that receives but also knows how to give and in other words, a society with rights and duties.

Appendix: Selected Writing of Dr. Janusz Korczak

*Pedagogical Writings of Janusz Korczak*³⁶

- ✂ We learn very early in life that an adult is more important than a young person.
- ✂ The market value of the very young is small. Only in the sight of God's Law is the apple blossom worth as much as the apple, green shoots as much as a field of ripe corn.
- ✂ We rear, shield, feed, and educate the child. Without having to worry, the child receives all he requires.
- ✂ Our attitude is that we know the paths to success. We, the educators, give instructions and advice. We develop the virtues of the children, suppress their faults. We are the guides who improve and correct the ways of the children. The child is nothing and we are everything. We hold all the knowledge and wisdom. We order the children about and demand obedience.
- ✂ The child's poverty and material dependence on us, the adults, have warped the attitude of adults to children.
- ✂ We look down upon the child because he still has many years ahead of him.
- ✂ Years of work with children have made it increasingly obvious to me that children deserve respect, confidence, and kindness. It is important to raise children in a cheerful atmosphere of sensitivity and laughter.
- ✂ We hide our own faults and dubious actions. Children are

³⁶ Janusz Korczak, *Pedagogical Writings of Janusz Korczak*, trans. D. Sadan and S. Meltzer (Israel: Hakibbutz Hame'uhad, 1954).

expected to not criticize, or notice, our bad habits, addictions and ridiculous peculiarities. We assume the pose of perfection. Under the threat of being deeply offended, we guard the sacred secrets of the ruling clan (of adults) whose duties are sublime. Children do not criticize this clan, although it may expose the child naked and severely degrade him.

- ✘ Through disdain, distrust, and resentment, we do not allow children to organize themselves. With regard to our treatment of children, we do not consult the experts, who are the children themselves. Children account for a considerable portion of mankind, of the population, of nationals, residents, and citizens. They were always, are now, and will always be, our companions. They are the future.
- ✘ The child is like a stranger who does not understand the language, the map, the laws and customs of the adult world. Occasionally, he likes to go sightseeing on his own and might ask for directions and advice. He should be answered politely. Respect the ignorance of a child!
- ✘ Show respect, if not humility, before the fair, immaculate, and holy face of childhood.

The Rules of Life³⁷

- ✘ When children enter my room, I place the lamp and the alarm clock in a safe place. I do not want them to be sorry for any damage done. This is what I recommend: It is better to place the ink far away from a child than to be angry once the ink has spilled.
- ✘ Young newspaper sellers or shoelace vendors understand the rules of life better than their happier peers who know nothing of these secret rules. They know how to take care not to have accidents, or to beware of shady characters. There is no shortage in this city of deceivers and thieves.
- ✘ We must be sensitive to both just and evil people, to humans and animals, to the little broken tree and the pebbles.
- ✘ Children are equal to us in value.

³⁷ J. Korczak, "How to love a Child", in *Selected Works of Janusz Korczak*, ed. M. Wolins (Washington D.C.: National Science Foundation, 1967). Originally published 1919.

Pedagogy through Entertainment

- ✘ When I am with children, I am their companion and they are mine.
- ✘ Whether we are talking to each other or not, our time spent together is measured on the clock all the time we are together. This is excellent time for me and them together, time that will not return.
- ✘ I am not fond of confrontations, but as an educator I must know what they are about. My approach is not to judge or to boycott anyone. I agree and conciliate.
- ✘ Do not gorge the child with too much sleep. This causes him to be nervous and irritable. How many hours should a child sleep? The answer is — as many hours as he sleeps.
- ✘ When you start recounting a tale, do not try to get to the end of it. A tale can be the beginning or a part of a discussion. The tale will continue on demand. One tale can be repeated several times.
- ✘ We are used to adults' lives being in the margin of children's lives and vice versa. I ask, "When will the happy moment arrive when adults' and children's lives exist side by side?"
- ✘ An educator once asked me how I answer provocative questions. In my opinion, there is no such thing as a stupid or provocative question if the answer is given in honesty and moderation. Of course, the condition is that we know the answer to the question.
- ✘ The longer a person lives and the more he sees, the less confident he is about his own opinion.
- ✘ People of the same age can have a great effect on each other. Adults are strict and angry although they are the ones who teach and influence others. Their work is from the top to the bottom enforcing their will on others. There are instances in which the wise, experienced, and moderate advice of adults is useful, but warm and excellent advice of a peer is useful at all times.

The Child as the Field of the Tree

A Note from the Author

When you observe a tree, you see only the exposed parts: the trunk, the branches and the leaves. You cannot, however, see the roots branching out underneath. You cannot estimate their depth or strength, for these are hidden from our view. We all know how important roots are to a tree, securing it firmly to the ground and supplying it with nourishment. Roots ensure its growth and its ability to flourish and prosper. Like a tree, a child's character is partly visible and partly concealed.

True educators see their professions as a mission. They believe in the power of education and learning. They are sensitive to the depth of the souls of their pupils and believe in the potential concealed within each and every child. They create optimum conditions under which their pupils can develop strong roots and thrive in a nourishing and fertile environment, towards their own personal development and success.

Janusz Korczak was truly such an educator.

Janusz Korczak has always been my hero, both because I read his books as a child and through my acquaintance with Shlomo Nadel, whom I have known since I was a child. Through Shlomo's life-story, I have become acquainted with this wonderful man.

I was eight years old when I came to live in Israel in 1957. Two months after my arrival, my younger sister and I spent our first summer vacation in the home of Shlomo, Frieda, and their sons Yossi and Reuven. My sister and I have wonderful memories of this period and the hospitality we received there.

Shlomo and Frieda are close friends of my parents and I regard them as my uncle and aunt. They immigrated to Israel in 1950 and stayed in close contact with my parents throughout the seven years of absence from each other. When we came to Israel, Shlomo and Frieda made

every effort to make our absorption easier despite their own difficult financial situation.

I have become very attached to Shlomo over the years. When I was younger, he included me in his meetings with children and youth-leaders from Korczak's children's home, who were then living in Israel. I am certain that my decision to embark on a profession in the field of education began with my introduction to Janusz Korczak through Shlomo's stories.

I was privileged to learn about Janusz Korczak through my teacher, Sima Golan at the Kaye College in Beersheba. She taught us selected chapters from his pedagogical writings. The more I heard and learned, the more ardent an admirer of Korczak I became. Throughout the thirty-five years of teaching young children in various places in Israel and abroad, I often found myself behaving according to Korczak's pedagogical methods. As a teacher and educator, I attached importance to the principles of respecting the child and preserving his rights without exempting him from his duties.

Through writing Shlomo's memories from the orphanage, I became more familiar with the practical side of Korczak's theories. During my work at various schools, I came into contact with former children from the orphanage, like Shlomo and his friends. I could not help but think about Korczak's ideas for solving the problem of children living on the fringe of society. I am sorrowful that, other than his heroic death together with his children, Korczak's life and enterprise have virtually been erased from Israeli consciousness.

My mother reinforced the need to tell the story of Janusz Korczak since, like Shlomo, my aunt Elka Gombiner was a protégé of his when the orphanage moved into the Warsaw Ghetto. To my sorrow, she was among the children sent to the gas chambers with Korczak.

I was extremely flattered, albeit unsure of myself, when Shlomo requested me to write his memoirs. I thought, "Who am I to write about such personal and precious matters?" Both my close relationship with

Shlomo and my admiration for Korczak, his teacher, convinced me to enlist for the task.

Shlomo regarded recounting the story of the orphanage as a personal mission. He had had several opportunities to do so as member of the Janusz Korczak Association in Israel. He was interviewed by the press from various countries, representatives of archives and educational organizations all over the world and by private people simply knocking at his door. He did not refuse anyone. He met people from many countries, including Israel, Finland, Germany, Japan, South Africa, Holland, France, the United States, and others.

Although I had already heard some of Shlomo's lectures and I was sure that I had heard everything he had to tell, I was most surprised to discover how wrong I was. The memories raised in this book emphasize several aspects which could not have been specified in any impersonal interview or lecture. His memories describe his life at the orphanage in Warsaw of that time with other poor children his own age. The significance of the orphanage for the children who lived there is illuminated and magnified through the contrast between what Shlomo received from that wonderful institution and the frightful fate that awaited him outside the orphanage.

The story stresses the close partnership between Korczak and Stefa, without which the children's home could not have run smoothly. Shlomo the adult understands and appreciates the personal sacrifices these two people must have made in order to provide the environment in which the children could develop into decent people.

Until our meetings in which Shlomo narrated his story, I had never heard about Shlomo's harsh personal experiences which he shares with the reader. I believe that my special relationship with Shlomo enabled him to share an emotional aspect that he had not revealed in previous years. Through his descriptions of their everyday behaviour at the orphanage, Shlomo stresses Korczak's vast understanding of the souls of the young children of whom he was in charge. Similarly, he describes how the education he received at the orphanage moulded his character

later in life and tools with which he was equipped on leaving the orphanage, tools that helped him to survive the war and to reach a ripe old age.

The significance of this book, I believe, lies in the renewed interest it arouses in the distinguished man, Janusz Korczak, whose educational theories hold true to this day. Shlomo's memories from the orphanage comprise a direct encounter with Dr. Korczak's educational theories and practical ways of implementing them. In my humble opinion, contemporary teachers and parents can apply ideas and approaches mentioned in this book.

In conclusion, this book would not have been published without the constructive criticism, assistance, and support of my family and friends. I especially thank Alon Treitman for his assistance and guidance in setting about this project. Thank you my friends Malka Vesely and Tova Horesh who helped me with the writing. Thank you my dear husband Dov for your patience and assistance in the layout of the photographs and for helping me with technology. Thank you Chaya, my sister-in-law, for spending time guiding and assisting me with the computer.

Thank you my children, Liat, Mayan and Aviad for being my first critics, for your encouragement and youthful and fresh view of my work. My children were my yardstick for the importance of this project. Thank you, Elana, my sister, and Ricky Levi, for your enthusiasm and for encouraging me to persist. Thank you my friend Ella Nesher, for translating the documents from Polish into Hebrew. Thank you Vered Alon, for your encouragement and professional look at the book cover. Thanks to the author Uri Orlev³⁸ for his warm and encouraging words. Thank you Yossi and Reuven, Shlomo's sons, who were partners in producing this book. Thank you, dear Frieda, Shlomo's wife, for your wonderful hospitality during my many conferences with Shlomo.

Lea Lipiner
February 2013

³⁸ Author of children's books and translator of Korczak's writings, who received the Anderson Award for his book *The Island on Bird Street*.

Right: The Nadel family, second, third, and fourth generations in 2007. Shlomo's oldest granddaughter, Reuven's daughter, Adi, is married to Kfir Yacobson, and they have two children, Yuval and Peleg. The second granddaughter, Yossi's daughter, Vered, is married to Lior Shirazi and they have two children, Uri and Noya. The third grandchild, Reuven's son, Amit is unmarried. The fourth grandchild, Yossi's daughter, Keren Mamuka, has two children, Yarin and Omer.

Bottom Left: Shlomo, his wife, Frieda, and their grandchildren in 2010.

Bottom Right: Leah Lipiner, the author, interviewing Shlomo when he spoke at Levinsky College in 2013.

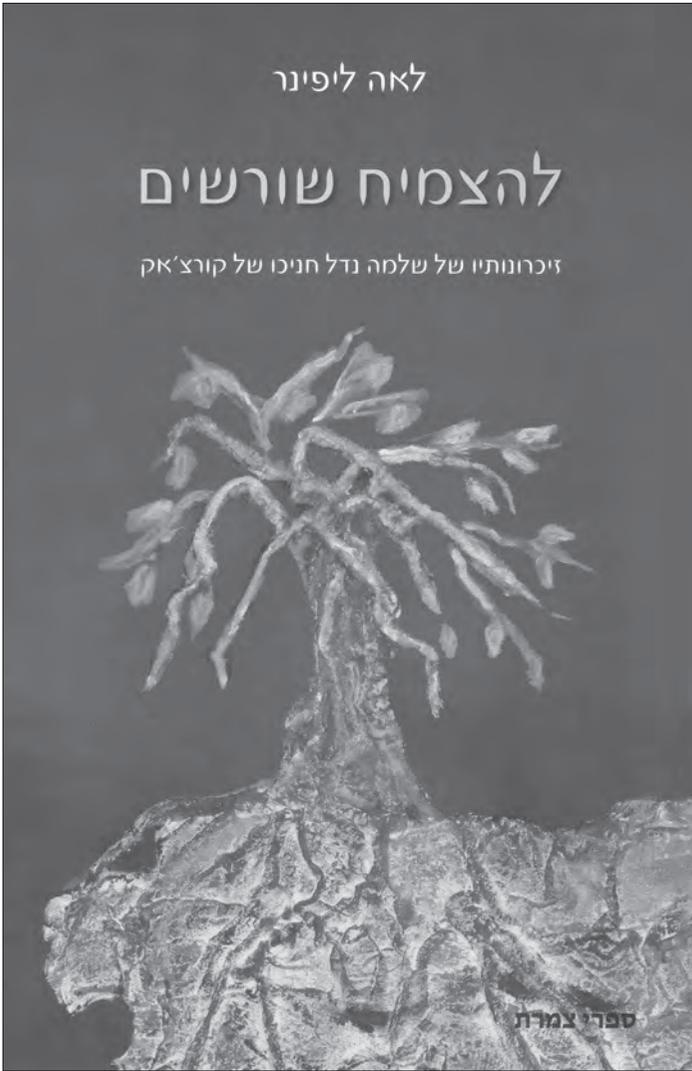




לאה ליפונר

להצמיח שורשים

זיכרונותיו של שלמה נדל חניכו של קורצ'אק



Taking Root: My life as a child of Janusz Korczak—the father of children's rights—The biography of Shlomo Nadel was originally published in Hebrew in 2013.

Reproduced here is the cover of the Hebrew book.



Shlomo Nadel's memories of the orphanage reveal the story of a wonderful institution founded by Dr. Janusz Korczak for Jewish children in Warsaw.

Besides being a doctor and educator, Korczak was an intellectual, author, publicist, and humanist through and through. The institution he founded provided children with a promise both of their physical existence and of their healthy emotional development. The children were educated in a democratic environment, the basis of which was respect for the children as humans and an education towards social commitment and respect for others.

The children were involved in the educational process of the home, and independently managed democratic bodies such as the "children's court" and the "senate". Shlomo Nadel's story about his years in the orphanage offers a window into the implementation of Korczak's educational philosophy which has been studied and admired in countries all over the world to this day.

Born in 1920, Nadel decided to commit his memories to writing and to publish them through his gratitude and appreciation both of Korczak, the man and educator, and of Stefa, Korczak's associate. This is a unique personal account that preserves and shares stories vital to an education in tolerance and preventing apathy and indifference. Nadel also had a powerful perception that, while the name of Korczak is mainly associated with his heroic march to the gas chambers together with the orphan children, his life achievements in the fields of education and literature have almost been forgotten.

During the years that Nadel was a member of the Janusz Korczak Association in Israel, he was approached by representatives of many countries to recount the story of his life in the orphanage. He testifies that his survival of the Holocaust and his success in "taking root", thereby growing a blossoming and fruitful tree, are on account of the man Janusz Korczak and the home he established, a home which Nadel terms "a paradise on earth."

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