

# Focus on...

## Janusz Korczak: educator, poet and

**Daniel Halpérin writes about the life and work of the pioneering Polish champion of children's rights.**

Among the great figures illuminating the history of education, that of Janusz Korczak (1878-1942) is the most unusual: a paediatrician and pioneer of social medicine, a journalist, essayist, poet, playwright and novelist for children, an activity leader in children's holiday camps and orphanage director, the first militant in children's rights, a university professor and precursor of radio talk-shows. The "Old Doctor", as he was affectionately known, was everything ... except an educationalist – a professional category that he regarded as too firmly entrenched in theory or ideology. In fact, he was an outstanding educator who developed his knowledge through his own participation in the daily life of children and through a real understanding of their physical, mental and social need. Unfailing commitment, even in the most difficult physical conditions, immense respect for children and devotion, which led to him sacrificing his own life, characterise Korczak and his work, which is universally recognised, consistently relevant and absolutely unique.

Born in Warsaw into a liberal Jewish family, Henryk Goldzmit became Janusz Korczak at the beginning of his literary career, preferring this "nom de plume" to his family name. Becoming aware of urban misery early on, he devoted his

first writings to street children, while undertaking the medical studies which led to him becoming a respected paediatrician. Mindful of the psychosocial dimensions of health, in 1908 he organised holiday camps for poor children. At the time this was unprecedented. His observations formed the basis for an educational approach advocating respect and democracy, similar to Pestalozzi, whose legacy he studied during a trip to Zurich, and also close to the New School movement which started at the same time with, among others, Decroly, Montessori and Freinet (see *Children in Europe*, issue 5).

Caring for the body was not enough for Korczak. He wanted to mould minds,

also became his own home. He lived there modestly in an attic, looking after the well-being of his protégés day and night and putting his ideas to the test of real life. In 1940, Korczak and his orphanage were ordered into the Warsaw ghetto, where for two years he cared for hundreds of sick and hungry children. Refusing the chance to get out of the ghetto, he was murdered by the Nazis in the Treblinka death camp along with 200 children from his orphanage.

### Importance of respect

The idea which underlies all his others is the concept of respect. Korczak was not naive: he knew that love, important as it is, could not be demanded from

everyone – not even from parents for their own children and certainly not from educators. Respect, which is no less important in building a child's identity, could, however, be defined, codified, taught and demanded. Lack of respect or its violation could be penalized. Here, therefore, was not

only a theoretical concept but also an invaluable tool for managing the rights and duties of everyone in all areas of life.

Respect starts with respect for the person. Korczak encouraged parents and educators to recognise the child as a complete human being, not as a future

**"Under identical clothes beat a hundred different hearts, and each one is another difficulty, that requires another task, another worry and care."**

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correct injustices and build a better society. To do this, he needed to live with and for the children. In 1912, he gave up his paediatric practice and became the director of the Jewish "Dom Sierot" orphanage (in reality a home for socially excluded children, rather than an orphanage in the usual sense), which

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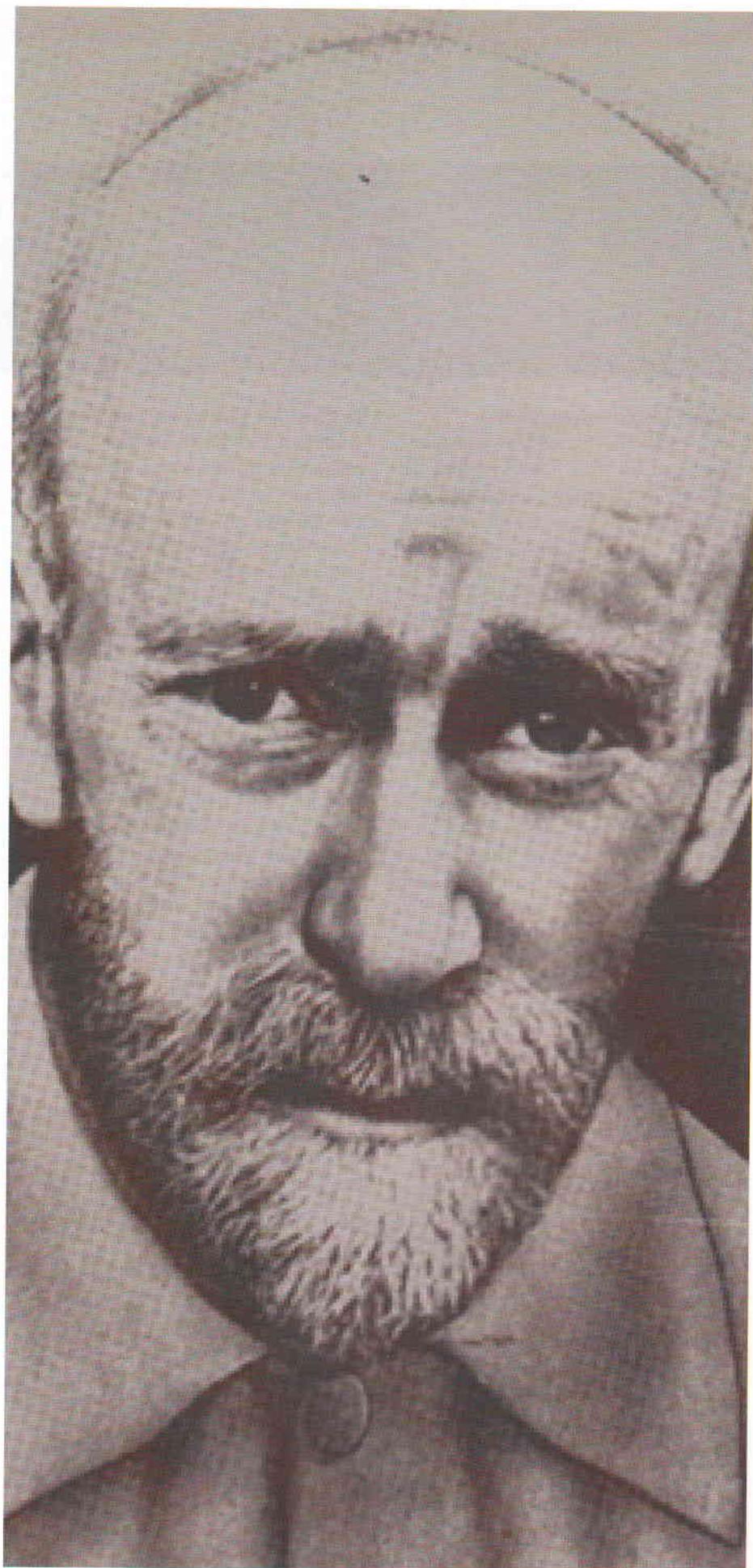
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adult: "Children are not people of tomorrow, they are people today". Their feelings, their sense of urgency, their rhythms, their dreams, their secrets, their privacy, their right to be taken seriously, their values, their victories and failures, their joys and sorrows had to be respected. A hierarchy could not exist in terms of age any more so than for feelings. "When I talk or play with a child", he wrote, "a moment in my life is bound to a moment in the child's life and these two moments have the same maturity".

Respect also involves respect for work, which is a source of dignity, and for the home which children must make theirs in order to feel involved. In the orphanage, Korczak "[fought] to ensure that no distinction [was] made any longer between delicate and rough work, between intelligent and unskilled work, between clean and dirty work". He himself cleared away the refectory tables after meals.

Respect for rules is an inescapable condition of group life. Rules therefore have to exist and if necessary be created, particularly given that people have more respect for what they have created than for what is imposed. In an educational environment, rules also have the virtue of confirming that children's disputes are serious matters and that, in the event of a quarrel or offence, compromise, forgiveness and reparation are priority values.

In putting into practice this exercise in respect, Korczak did not lack inventiveness. Some of the methods he developed are explained on the next two pages. ►



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## Mentoring and referendum

Every new arrival at the orphanage was placed for three months under the protection of a senior child. After the first month, and then a year later, all the children were asked to express their feelings about the new arrival by a vote: the choice was “I really like him or her”, “I have no opinion” or “I do not like him or her”. This was the referendum. Between the two votes, the new arrival had to try and win the confidence of the group and the group had to prepare itself to integrate the new arrival. Rejection was extremely rare.

## First children's newspaper

Korczak paid particular attention to the children's right to free expression through a noticeboard, letterbox, newspaper wall, school gazette, meetings and debates, all of which were excellent for encouraging the children to take part in the life of the orphanage and in the life of the city. A pioneer in children's journalism, in 1926 Korczak

founded the first newspaper written by children for children. Guided by “an old man (bald with glasses) [himself], so that there is no disorder, and two other editors – a boy and a girl”, the *Little Review* was published every week until 1939 with a print run of 150,000 copies.

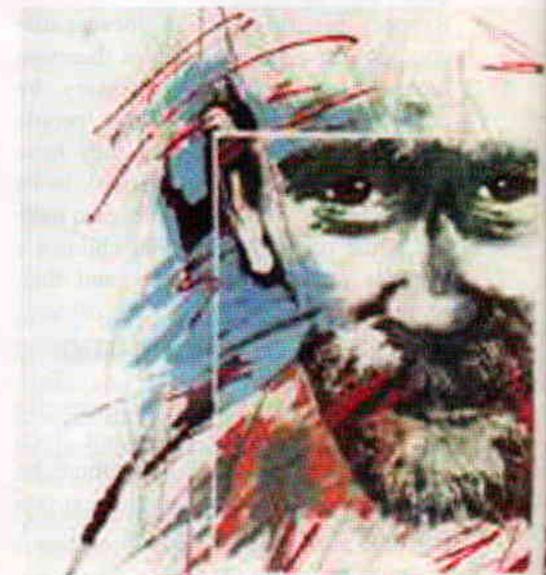
## The Parliament

To prevent abuses of authority by the adults and to give substance to the idea of self-government, Korczak devised a parliament of 20 children elected by their peers. This Parliament was not just consultative; it was a legislative body which had the power to adopt new laws and to give opinions on the acceptance (or rejection) of a pupil, an educator or another employee of the orphanage. It also had the task of organising school support, ensuring a fair distribution of chores and awarding certificates to children who had accomplished something memorable.

## The court

“Children”, said Korczak, “have the right to demand that their problems be considered impartially and seriously. Up to now, everything has depended on the goodwill, or lack of this, of the educator and his or her mood on the day. It is time to end this despotism”. To this end, Korczak established a court at the Orphans' Home. Its five judges were children chosen by drawing lots from among those who, in the previous week, had not been the subject of any complaints. The court clerk was an adult responsible for gathering the statements of witnesses and for producing the records of hearings. The court, which sat every week, had the power to try all members of the orphanage, including the adults. Korczak himself was the subject of five trials.

The court's aim was to defend the weakest, support the children in their quest for justice and reinforce the democratic operation of the institution itself. It was in no way intended to make



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the children into vexatious litigants, even less to promote punishment. Accordingly, of the 109 articles in the court's code, 99 led to discharge, acquittal or pardon. Among the remainder, only two led to a serious punishment: placement of the accused under supervision or expulsion. And even in the latter case (which was applied only once in over ten years), the expelled child could request his or her readmission after three months.

## Rights of the child

Korczak was the inspiration for the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child. From the beginning of the 20th century, he prayed for such a convention and his work is full of pointers to the rights which he held most dear: the right for respect, the right to make mistakes, rights to property, to education, the right to resist educational influences contrary to children's beliefs, to protest against injustices – and even the right to the occasional lie!

Korczak does not provide recipes or easy answers for today's educators. "Life is not a series of arithmetic problems for which there is only one solution and two ways of finding it". However, he stresses the importance of committing oneself fully to one's work, of questioning oneself, of remaining true to and demanding of oneself before being demanding on others and of not fearing "becoming lost in the immense forest of life".

**"Find your own way. Learn to know yourself before you try to know children ... It is a mistake to believe that education is a science of children and not of man."**

This message has lost none of its force and relevance.

1. Children brought to Korczak from Ogdodova.
2. The girls' sleeping hall.
3. Korczak photograph after he received a reward from the Polish Academy of Literature, 1937.
4. Korczak with children and teachers in front of Dom Sierot orphanage.
5. November 1940, Dom Sierot (staff and 150 children) had to move from Krochmalna 92 to to Chlodna (street) 33.
6. Korczak and his children passed over this bridge from Little Ghetto (left side) to Great Ghetto (right side) on the way to Umchlagsplatz and thereafter to Treblinka.
7. Korczak with children and teachers in Goclawek. Saba Lejzerowicz (on the left side of Korczak) was deported together with Korczak and 200 children from his orphanage, in cattle railway cars to Treblinka. Misza Wroblewski (on the right of Korczak) survived deportation as he worked outside the ghetto that day.
8. Korczak and his children passed along this railroad on the way to Treblinka extermination camp on 5 August 1942.



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