

Wojciech Lasota

**Henryk Goldszmit/Janusz Korczak**

# **Inspirations. Motivations. Achievements.**

## **Guide to Biography**

### CHILDHOOD

According to Korczak's *Memoirs* written in the Warsaw Ghetto, his father played a pivotal role in Henryk Goldszmit's difficult childhood.

Józef Goldszmit, a barrister, took a long time to get his son's birth certificate; that is why the exact date of his birth remains unknown. His exuberant father considered Henryk a weakling. It was often the grandmother who would stand up for the sensitive and introvert boy.

A great role model that he was to both Henryk and his sister, the father would also initiate the most original games which he played with them.

The most traumatic experience of Korczak's childhood and youth was a his father's chronic mental illness. For many years, Korczak himself was afraid of falling ill and being sent to a mental institution, the thought of which filled him with panic.

### JOURNALIST AND WRITER

Henryk Goldszmit wrote his first humorous texts mainly for money. With time, he started publishing in more serious magazines. However, two features stand out in his extensive journalistic output: he was always sensitive to the suffering of the excluded and he was tireless in seeking effective methods of helping them.

Thus, his first book entitled *Children of the Streets* was devoted to what we would call today marginalized children. Several years later, he counterbalanced this image with *Child of the Drawing Room*. Its protagonist, a young man from a rich family, tries to find a purpose in life by helping others.

His next books prove that Korczak liked to analyse one subject from different perspectives. He wrote two amazing features about summer camps. One of them about Jewish, and the other about Polish boys. However; both groups were portrayed mainly through what they had in common, rather than what made them apart.

Korczak's *How to Love a Child* is a multifaceted analysis of a child's life and education in the context of the family home, the dormitory, the Orphanage and summer camps. In this way, he offers parents, teachers and tutors an opportunity to benefit from his experience. This book and *The Child's Right to Respect*, where Korczak sets out fundamental rights of children form a complete oeuvre.

In *When I Am Little Again*, Korczak demonstrates how difficult it is to respect these rights when one is no longer a child. The protagonist re-lives his childhood, while retaining his adult consciousness. This allows us to look at the boy's dilemmas from an unusual, double perspective – that of an adult's knowledge and of a child's emotions, to which, as Korczak wrote, we as grownups have to *reach up, stretch, stand on our tip-toes. As not to offend*<sup>1</sup>.

The main protagonist of *King Matt the First*, Korczak's best-known novel, is also struggling with this twofold nature and trying to extract from it the most precious elements. Matt can draw on his experience as a king of adults to introduce changes dictated by his child emotions.

For Janusz Korczak, literature was not an area of free expression. Rather, it was used to present views. Its aim was to foster more conscious, responsible and empathic attitudes on the part of both children and adults.

## DOCTOR AND ACTIVIST

Korczak always verified his opinions in practice. This motivated him to study medicine and, afterwards, to work in a Jewish children's hospital. His contribution to community life involved working for free in libraries or as a tutor at camps for the poorest children, who later became the protagonists of his books. Korczak knew that the problems he was grappling with had often been successfully resolved abroad. Consequently, he travelled to Switzerland, Berlin, Paris and London visiting hospitals, schools or orphanages and talking to foreign scientists. He was capable of working and studying in every situation, even the most difficult one. As an army doctor during the Russo-Japanese War, he went as far as Manchuria, where the local children taught him Chinese. Also as a doctor but this time on the frontlines of World War One, he began to write his next book - *How to Love a Child*.

Korczak's work for the Jewish "Orphan Relief" Association represents a turning point in his life. As he became more and more involved in the Association's activities, its ad hoc campaigns were replaced by more systematic and long-term educational work. He came up with the idea of building an Orphanage for the Association's children. Later, he became the Orphanage's director, giving up his work at the hospital. Earlier when in London, he made a lifetime decision to stay single.

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1 Korczak, J. *When I Am Little Again and The Child's Right to Respect*. Lanham 1992, translated by E.P. Kulawiec

Difficult as it was, this sacrifice of not having his own family enabled him to devote his life to caring for the children at the Orphanage, as well as to promoting children's rights.

## AT THE ORPHANAGE AND IN OUR HOME

Janusz Korczak shared his responsibilities as director of the Orphanage for Jewish children with Stefania Wilczyńska. He also assisted Maria Falska in running Our Home, an institution for Polish children that was supported by the *Our Home* Society. Korczak saw these posts not only as orphanages, but also as a kind of laboratory that enabled him to implement his pedagogical theories and study their practical effects. He was a firm believer in children's independence and initiative; trusted their wisdom and ethical intuition, and fully recognized children's subjectivity. These ideals were part of the so-called New Education Movement, which spread around the world and was closely followed and highly regarded by Korczak himself.

Children would learn Korczak's ideals mainly through action. In the court of peers they would find out that they were not only subject to laws but could also enforce these laws with respect to their peers and adults. Rules laid down by Korczak did not entail the use of threats or violence.

New arrivals were assigned guardians who would help them get used to the rules of life at the Home. Both sides would benefit from this scheme – guardians were happy with the trust placed in them and their charges felt safe in the new environment in no time. The tasks that children were given during their shifts in the kitchen, in bathrooms or in corridors were respected. This was reflected by the special prominence that Korczak gave to floor rags and brushes – they were hanged in a visible place by the main dormitory door. There were various channels of written communication. They comprised a mailbox for children's letters to their tutors, a bulletin board for notices, and a newspaper read every week to all the children.

The first year during which these innovative rules of coexistence governed the child community at the Orphanage was a difficult one. Unaccustomed to modern amenities, children were ill at ease in the new environment and would break appliances and tiles. As regards the court of peers, in its first year it caused more chaos than order. For this reason, Korczak decided to temporarily suspend it to introduce the necessary modifications.

When faced with obstacles, Korczak would seek more effective ways to accomplish his ideals (e.g. giving up violence) or goals (e.g. introducing self-government), rather than abandoning them. The effects were astonishing. After the first year, children and adults came up with a system that allowed them to jointly run the Orphanage and loyally share their responsibilities.

## KORCZAK AND THE NEW MEDIA

Korczak's relationship with the cinema, which became popular when he was on the verge of adulthood, was rather loose. This was despite the fact that in private Korczak was an avid moviegoer who wrote about using the camera to observe children and predicted the spread of television (however, he thought it would mainly be used for educational purposes). He was also planning to film one of his books, *Kajtus the Wizard*. However, the project was not completed for shortage of money.

Newspapers and radio were the new media that Korczak employed. He saw in them effective tools of disseminating and fostering his educational efforts (which resembles his approach to literary work). At the same time, was aware and exploited the potential of what is known today as interactivity. In his work with children, he did not want to be an orator but an interlocutor; rather than lecture them he preferred to talk with them.

This is best illustrated by the *Little Review*, which no other newspaper in the world can match even today. Its subsequent editions were composed of letters or excerpts from letters sent by children, as well as replies to readers' questions. Initially, Korczak would also publish his own texts.

As Korczak emphasized himself, the *Little Review* was set up to make children more self-assured and encourage them to write. In his editorial, the Old Doctor declared that the paper would defend children and make sure they received fair treatment.

The results were beyond anyone's wildest dreams. For example, in 1929 the paper boasted around 3,200 contributors and a readership from across Poland. More than just an ordinary paper, the *Little Review* was an experiment and a successful attempt at dialoguing with a substantial number of children and young people.

Korczak also experimented with the radio. Under the nickname "Old Doctor" he developed his distinctive style of addressing the youngest audience, which probably drew on his many years of storytelling to children. He was natural in his speech, would not rush and made frequent pauses. Unfortunately, his broadcasts did not survive the war. However, passages from *How to Love a Child* can give us some idea as to what his storytelling could have been like. In this book, Korczak discusses the way fairy tales are told by ordinary people – with patience and respect for the story and the listener's capabilities and imagination.

And that was exactly the way he would tell simple stories on the radio – e.g. *How we made scrambled eggs* or *Worry, such a big worry*. Simple as they were, they became extraordinary to the listeners.

Yet sometimes he would employ quite different methods, e.g. in his report on a summer camp he once incorporated an orchestra of seven hundred children's voices.

Due to the rise of anti-Semitism, in 1936 the Old Doctor lost the job of radio host. Two years later,

he returned to the radio and would address the audience in the first days of September 1939, following the war's outbreak.

## JEW AND POLE. A MAN

Henryk Goldszmit/Janusz Korczak, who referred to himself as a Pole and a Jew, had a double Jewish-Polish identity. To some extent, he inherited this identity from his grandfather and father, who made sure his son learned the customs of the Catholic majority. Henryk Goldszmit's mother tongue was Polish. He decided to study Hebrew as late as in the 1930s, and his knowledge of the Jewish language, or Yiddish, which was spoken by the majority of Poland's Jews, was limited to a few expressions that he probably picked up from children.

As a physician, lecturer, tutor and social activist, he divided his time and efforts between Jewish and Polish communities and thus managed to establish a certain link between them. But he published principally in Polish – texts for Yiddish or Hebrew-speaking readers account for only a small portion of his oeuvre.

The Jewish part of Korczak's identity grew important to him in the 1930s. At that time, he was going through a crisis, both privately and professionally. However, thanks to two trips to Palestine he overcame the crisis and was planning to visit the country again in autumn 1939. The outbreak of the Second World War made him cancel his plans.

The wartime fate of Korczak and the children from the Orphanage was determined by their Jewishness. Condemned to death by Nazi Germans, they were forced to move to the Warsaw Ghetto. Then, during a massive liquidation campaign of the Ghetto, they were transported to the Treblinka extermination camp.

Rather than focusing on national or religious differences, Korczak always attached more importance to what people had in common – solidarity with fellow men and responsibility for their fate. He would demonstrate this attitude on many occasions, and it is also reflected in his *Ghetto Memoirs*, whose last lines read as follows:

*I am watering the flowers. My bald head in the window. What a splendid target.*

*He has a rifle. Why is he standing and looking on calmly?*

*No orders.*

*And perhaps he was a village teacher in civilian life, perhaps a notary, a street sweeper in Leipzig, a waiter in Cologne?*

*What would he do if I nodded to him? Waved my hand?*

*Perhaps he does not even know that things are as they are?*

*He may have arrived only yesterday, from far away...<sup>2</sup>*

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2 Korczak, J. *Selected Works*. Warsaw 1967, translated by Jerzy Bachrach

# QUOTATIONS

Though written in a language that may appear obscure or anachronistic at times, Janusz Korczak's works abound in inspirations and ideals that are still relevant today. What makes them worth studying is also the fact that they have been put into practice and proved true and effective in real life situations.

***How to Love a Child. The Child in the Family, 1920***

*Each time you put aside a book to spin the thread of your own thoughts, it means that the book has served its purpose. Whenever you skim over the pages, seeking rules and ready prescriptions, frowning at their paucity — you should know that if you do find counsels and indications, that this has happened not only despite but even against the writer's will.*

*I do not know, and cannot possibly tell, how parents unknown to me can rear a child likewise unknown to me, under conditions unknown to me.*

*Instead of carefully watching the child in order to understand him, one picks a random example of a "clever child" and imposes demands upon one's own: here is a model you must copy — and be like him or her.*

*Abhorrent to well-to-do parents is the idea of their child becoming a manual worker. Rather let him grow up unhappy and demoralized. That is not love for the child but parents' selfishness, not the good of the individual but the ambition of the community, not a search for the right course but the grooves of social convention. (...) However, for the time being, we are witness to the struggle of the parents and the school against any exceptional, atypical, weak or unbalanced intelligence.*

*Not whether bright, but how bright.*

*One should be careful not to confuse good with easy.*

*The entire present-day upbringing is set on having an "easy" child; consistently, step by step, it strives to lull, squash and destroy all that goes into the making of the child's willpower and freedom, his backbone and the forcefulness of his demands and aims. Well-mannered, obedient, good-natured and "easy", with no thought given to the fact that inside he will be will-less, and helpless in the affairs of life.*

*We have given the child too much or something unfit to eat: too much milk, or a bad egg — he has vomited. We have presented him with an indigestible piece of information — he has failed to understand; useless advice — it went against his grain, he would not listen to it. It is by no means grandiloquence when I say: it is most fortunate for mankind that we are unable to force children to yield to educational influence and didactic assaults upon their common sense and sound human volition*

*Even if he does not trust at all, or trusts half-heartedly because he has been deceived repeatedly, he still follows the advice of adults in much the same way as an inexperienced employer has no alternative but to trust a dishonest but indispensable employee, as a paralytic must accept the assistance of others and put up with the whims of a heartless nurse.*

*The child's soul is as complex as ours, full of contradictions, struggling tragically with the eternal: I desire to but can't; I know that I should but I won't manage.<sup>3</sup>*

### ***When I am Little Again*, 1925**

*If I were a boy again, I'd want to remember and know everything that I know now. Only I wouldn't want anyone to find out that I was already a grownup once.*

*Maybe children really aren't so different from adults, only they live differently, and have different rules.*

*If I'm going to be a teacher again, I'll never bother a child who has a worry. I'll leave him alone to think; let him calm down and rest.*

*And they shake you yet, and push and hit. They hit you once or else yank you by the arm and it seems to them that it doesn't hurt. They call hitting children punishment. When they're beating a child with a strap, they hold him and wallop him like a criminal while the child's struggling and yelling:*

*"I won't do it again, I won't do it again."*

*For such a beating—maybe it's rare nowadays, but it still exists—they'll take you to court in the future.*

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3 Korczak, J. *Selected Works*. Warsaw 1967, translated by Jerzy Bachrach

*Grownups don't want to understand that a child repays gentleness with gentleness, and that anger immediately awakens in him something like revenge or spite. As if the child were saying:*

*"This is what I'm like and I won't be any different."*

*We are experts on our own lives and our own affairs.*<sup>4</sup>

**"Little Review", 1926**

*Editorial To My Future Readers!*

*(...) Everything will be interesting. Our paper will be printed on a rotary printing press. I am not quite sure what a rotary printing press is, but all great papers are printed this way. (...) There are going to be three editors. One of them old (and bald, with specs), so that everything runs smoothly. Another one – a young editor for boys. The third one – a girl who'll be writing for girls. This is because we don't want anyone to feel embarrassed, and because we want everyone to be frank and outspoken about what they need, what harm has been done to them, and what woes and worries they have.*

*(...) I have no idea yet what it's going to be like. I'm only now sorting things out in my head to make sure it turns out well. If this were a prospectus for grownups, I'd have to pretend that I knew. And I don't like pretending.*

**King Matt the First**<sup>5</sup>, 1928

*"Listen, Felek, I am a very unhappy king. Since I learned to write, I have been signing all the papers, and they say that I am ruling the whole country. But all I'm really doing is what they tell me to. And they tell me to do the most boring things, and they forbid me to do anything that's fun."*

*"Our kings very much want to live in friendship with Matt and of course will agree to lend him the money. Then Matt was given a gold pen inlaid with precious stones, and he added:*

*Your Royal Majesties,*

*I defeated you and demanded no reparations. Now I am asking you to lend me money. Do don't be piggy about it, lend me the money.*

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4 Korczak, J. *When I Am Little Again and The Child's Right to Respect*. Lanham 1992, translated by E.P. Kulawiec

5 Korczak, J. *King Matt the First*. New York 1986, translated by Richard Lourie



*King Matt the First*  
*The Reformer*

*“Why does Your Royal Majesty play such sad music?”*

*“Because life is no fun, my friend. And a king’s life is probably the saddest of all.”*

*“But,” said Matt in surprise, “the other kings are so jolly.”*

*“They’re sad, too, dear Matt, they only pretend to be happy for their guests, that’s the custom, that’s what etiquette demands. How could they be jolly when they just lost the war?”*

*“Oh, so that’s why Your Royal Majesty is worried.”*

*“I’m the least worried of the three kings. I am even pleased.”*

*“Pleased?” Matt was even more amazed.*

*“Yes, because I didn’t want that war.”*

*“So why did you go to war, then?”*

*“I had to. There was nothing else I could do.”*

*What a strange king, thought Matt. He doesn’t want to go to war but he does, and then he’s happy when he loses. A perfectly strange king.*

*“It’s very dangerous to win a war,” said the king, as if talking to himself. “That can make you forget what a king is for.”*

*“And what is a king for?” asked Matt naively.*

*“Not just to wear a crown – but to bring happiness to the people of his country. But how can you bring them happiness? What I did was to make various reforms.”*

*Oho, that’s interesting, thought Matt.*

*“But reforms are the hardest thing of all, yes, the hardest.”*

*“Gentlemen,” began Matt, and then took a drink of water, because he intended to speak for a long time. “We have decided on a democratic form of government. But, gentlemen, you forgot that our country has children as well as grownups. We have several million children, and they should help govern the country, too. Let there be two parliaments – one for the grownups with grownup senators and grownup ministers. And the other one will be the children’s parliament, and the children will be the delegates and the ministers. I am the king of the grownups and the children, but if the grownups consider me too little for them, let them elect themselves a grownup king and I will be the king of the children.”*

## ***The Child's Right to Respect, 1929***

*It is annoying to have to stand on tiptoe and still be unable to reach. It is hard to keep up with the grownups when one's steps are small. A glass will easily slip out of a little hand. Awkwardly, with difficulty, a child climbs on a chair, into a vehicle, up the stairs. He can't reach the door knob, look out of the window, take down or hang up anything because it is too high. In a crowd, he can't see anything, he gets in the way and is buffeted. It is uncomfortable and annoying to be small.*

*The child is a foreigner who does not understand the language or the street plan, who is ignorant of the laws and customs. Occasionally, he likes to go sightseeing on his own; and, when up against some difficulty, he asks for information and advice. Wanted — a guide to answer questions politely. Respect the ignorance of a child!*

*It is not true that kindness turns children defiant, and that the response to gentleness is lack of discipline and order.*

*Beware that by kindness you do not mean laxity, inefficiency and clumsy stupidity.*

*Years of work made it increasingly obvious [to me] that children deserve respect, confidence and kindness, that good is derived from them in the cheerful atmosphere of mild sensations, merry laughter, strenuous first efforts and surprises (...).*

*The good is strong and unflagging. It is not right to say that it is easier to spoil than to correct.*

*We do not allow children to organize themselves. Disdainful, distrustful, resentful, we do not care. Yet without the participation of experts we shall never succeed, and the expert is the child.*

*Respect for the present moment, for today. (...) Not to trample upon, humiliate, handle as a mere slave to tomorrow; not to repress, hurry, drive on.*

*Respect for every single instant (...).*

*Let him eagerly drink in the joy of the morning and look ahead with confidence. That is just how the child wants it to be. A fable, a chat with the dog, catching a ball, an intense study of a picture, the copying of a single letter — nothing is for a child a waste of time. Everything kindly. It is the child who is in the right.*

*Naively, we are afraid of death, forgetting that life is a procession of dying and reborn moments.<sup>6</sup>*

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6 Korczak, J. *Selected Works*. Warsaw 1967, translated by Jerzy Bachrach

*Memoirs [in the U.S. published as Ghetto Diary], May – August 1942*

*(...) Under a chestnut tree in a candy box, wrapped in cotton, was buried my dear and beloved dead, for the time being only, canary. Its death brought up the mysterious question of religion.*

*I wanted to put a cross on the grave. The housemaid said no, because it's only a bird, something much lower than man. Even to cry over it was a sin.*

*So much for the housemaid. It was worse that the caretaker's son had decided that the canary was a Jew.*

*Me, too.*

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

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

*I feel old whenever I revert to the past, to bygone years and events. I want to be young, so I make plans for the future.*

*What will I be doing after the war?*

*Maybe they will invite me to cooperate in building a new order in the world or in Poland. Highly doubtful and not my idea. I should have to become an official, meaning the slavery of fixed working hours, contacts with men, a desk, an armchair and a telephone here or there. Squandering time on current petty everyday problems and contending with little men with little ambitions, friends in high places, hierarchy, and goals.*

*More or less. The question:*

*"Do you know, Helcia, you are a restless person?"*

*She:*

*"Am I a person?"*

*"Of course. You're not a puppy."*

*She pondered. After a long pause, surprised:*

*"I am a person. I am Helcia. I am a girl. I am Polish. I am mummy's little daughter, I am a Warsaw resident. What a lot I am!"*

*(...) I love the Vistula at Warsaw and when away from Warsaw I am nostalgic.*

*Warsaw is mine, and I am Warsaw's. I'll go further: I am Warsaw. Together with Warsaw I have*

*rejoiced and grieved. Its weather has been my weather, its rain and mud, mine also. I grew up with it. We have drifted somewhat apart of late. New streets and districts which I no longer embrace have emerged. For many years, I felt like a foreigner at Zoliborz. Much closer to me is Lublin, and even Hrubieszow, though I have never seen them.*

*Warsaw has been my field of work, my workshop. Here are the landmarks, here are the graves.*

*Sliska, Panska, Marianska, Komitetowa streets. Memories, memories, memories.*

*Every house, every courtyard. Here were my half-rouble calls, usually at night.*

*For medical advice in the daytime for the rich and in rich streets, I asked three or five roubles.*

*A boy on leaving the Orphans' Home said to me:*

*"If not for the home I wouldn't know that there are honest people in the world who never steal. I wouldn't know that one can speak the truth. I wouldn't know that there are just laws in the world."*

*Fourteen years old. I look around. Perceive. See.... My eyes were due to open. They did. The first ideas concerning educational reforms. I used to read a lot. First anxieties and frustrations. Now, imaginary voyages and stormy adventures, then again quiet family life (...).The exciting world was not already behind me. Now it is within me. I exist not to be loved and admired, but myself to act and love. It is not the duty of those around to help me but I am duty-bound to look after the world, after man.*

*When I was seventeen, I even started writing a novel entitled Suicide. The main character hated life out of fear of insanity.*

*I used to be desperately afraid of the lunatic asylum. My father was sent there several times.*

*So I am the son of a madman. A hereditary affliction.*

*More than two score years, and to this day this thought is at times a torment to me.*

*I am too fond of my madness not to be afraid that someone may try to treat me against my will.*

*I was a child 'able to play for hours on his own,' concerning whom 'you wouldn't know there was a child in the house.'*

*I got building blocks (bricks) when I was six. I stopped playing with them when I was fourteen.*

*"Aren't you ashamed of yourself? Such a big boy.*

*You ought to be doing something. Reading. Blocks — what next...."*

*When I was fifteen I acquired the madness, the frenzy of reading. The world vanished, only the book existed.*

*I used to talk to people a lot: to peers and to much older ones, adults. In Saski Park I had some really aged friends. 'They were amazed at me.' A philosopher.*

*I conversed only with myself.*

*My mother used to say:*

*"That boy has no ambition. It's all the same to him what he wears, whether he plays with children of his own kind or with the caretaker's. He is not ashamed to play with toddlers."*

*I used to ask my building blocks, children, grownups, what they were. I did not break toys, it did not interest me why the doll's eyes closed when it was laid down. Not the mechanism but the essence of a thing, thing all for itself, in itself.*

7.

*My share in the Japanese war. Defeat — disaster. In the European war — defeat — disaster.*

*In the world war.*

*I do not know how and what a soldier of a victorious army feels....*

8.

*The newspapers I contributed to were usually closed down — went bankrupt.*

*My publisher, ruined, committed suicide.*

*And all that not because I am a Jew but because I was born in the East.*

*It might be a sad consolation that the haughty West also is not well off.*

*It might be but is not. I never wish ill to anyone. I cannot. I don't know how it's done.<sup>7</sup>*