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## The Sorting Out of the World. Whom Did Janusz Korczak Bring Up?

In 1933 during the celebration of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Jewish society "Help the Orphans" which was managing the Korczak's Orphanage, the author of *King Matt the First* said: „*What kind of a tragedy the modern life is and what kind of disgrace it is for the generation which passes on to the children the world in such disorder?*”<sup>1</sup> Can we say anything more nowadays? Can we say these words are now obsolete? I do not think so. That is why I would like to speak today about the ordering of the world, about the work – or rather a number of uphill jobs – never-ending and thankless. One of those jobs is also the most difficult and that is raising children.

It seems like all we have to do to order the world is to raise children. But what about ourselves? Are we sufficient role-models for them? As far as this subject is concerned, nothing has changed since the Korczak's times, it is still quite unpopular matter. Korczak touched upon many such issues.

*The adults are not wise. They do not know how to use freedom. (...) They do not know everything: their answers are often a way to get rid of one, or a joke or something one can't understand. (...) The adults lie. It's a lie that when one eats candy, one will have worms (...) and when one swings his or her legs, one sways the devil. They don't keep their word: they make promises and then they forget about them or make excuses. (...) They tell you to always tell the truth and when they hear it, they are offended.*<sup>2</sup>

The work ethos is one of the most important ideas for Korczak. As he wrote in his *Diary*, he fought for *the work to be neither subtle nor coarse, neither wise nor stupid, neither clean nor dirty*.<sup>3</sup> In a common deed he stressed the importance that everyone put the same effort, regardless

if it was small, medium or big, but given with all their hearts. One of the most important common efforts, important also because it very often escapes our attention, is sorting out of the world through upbringing. But what Korczak meant was the upbringing of everyone: the children because they have to be raised, us - the adults *en mass* because there is still hope that we can be brought up and each one of us individually because it is all about the constant sorting out of the world which is inside of everybody. For that reasons, I will be speaking about Korczak as a pedagogue of the children, a teachers' teacher and an educator for himself. I will speak of matters which have not lost their aptness since his times.

### **The Pedagogue of the Children**

Convergence of the existence of children and adults is the key issue for Korczak: . In *When I Am Little Again*, he wrote: “*It seems that there are two different types of lives: theirs – serious and worthy, and ours – as if a joke. We – the smaller and weaker ones, almost as toys, hint the disregard. Children are the only people of tomorrow. Thus, they will only be and it is as if for now they were not. But we are: we live, we feel, we suffer.*”<sup>4</sup>

Korczak never disregarded children's' dreams, suffering and questions. An adult already knows the answers for most of them. But does it reduce children's' impatience, hurt or hunger for knowledge? A child's upbringing cannot do without the respect for the child. Thus, it does not exist without the child itself, as upbringing is not training. Korczak was making children aware of this idea in all his life roles, whether he spoke to them as a law-maker, a writer or in direct contact (on the radio or in the Orphans Home).

By “law-maker”, I mean a creator of the codes for the institutions which he established, and which always respected the children's and adults' equal rights. The pedagogue had to follow codes and not his or her good or bad mood, and the articles of the peer court applied to both children and adults.

The respect for a child's right to seek his or her own way can be found in the radio feature *Samotność młodości (The Youthfulness Loneliness)*. Korczak talks to a young girl who says: „*My mom told me that I don't know what I want, that I'm out of my mind. (...)*”<sup>5</sup>

*-Very nice and promising perspective, I must say. It is most important that you want. You only don't know what. (...) Out of your mind? Great! So you have your own mind, all you need to do is go back there.*

Finally, as a writer, as often as he could, he was repeating to his readers that they are as worthy as the adults. And just as Jack's mother in *The Bankruptcy of Little Jack* said: "The adults should not yell at children, only explain their mistakes to them because, just as at school children learn to read, write and count, outside the school they learn to live."<sup>6</sup>

„Mały Przegląd” (*The Small Review*) was the space where he could make an impact both as a publicist and as creator of the coexistence rules. It was a unique newspaper which he edited between 1926 and 1930. Its later editor until 1939 was Igor Newerly. This addition to the Jewish weekly „Nasz Przegląd” (*Our Review*) was written and co-edited by children and teenagers. The way the newspaper worked showed to its creators how much they could do on their own and what real impact their wishes and efforts could have. When writing the articles, Korczak was in a constant dialog with the children by his vigorous reactions to the letters and texts submitted by young readers. Not to forget, he was also meeting with the correspondents of „Mały Przegląd” (with some of them he used to go for hot-dogs or pears). Such meeting was an unforgettable experience for every participant.

## **The Caregivers' Teacher**

*The key-note: a child is as valuable to us as an adult.<sup>7</sup>*

This is the key-note of all Korczak's writings, but especially the part of them addressed to parents, pedagogues and teachers, whom I term here collectively as "caregivers".

From this rule other rules emerge, as well as tips and advices on organizing a collective life. If children are human beings, shouldn't they decide for themselves within the framework set by their caregivers' wisdom and experience? In community: hint the idea of summer camp and peer courts, as well as children self-government. And on the level of an individual: The rule: children should eat as much or as little as they want. (...) Making children sleep when they don't want to

is a crime. With a watch, one can easily determine how many hours of uninterrupted sleep a child needs in order to wake up rested.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, there are three famous, timeless children's rights:

1. *The right to death.*
2. *The right to the present day.*
3. *The right to be him or herself.*<sup>9</sup>

It may seem that the right to death became obsolete due to the significant fall of the children's mortality rate. However, it has also a deeper, figurative meaning. A child's death is after all this horrible event, totally out of our control, happening against our will and despite our will. To give the children this right is to give them the right to choose their fate, and not to tell them what we think is good for them. This is the only way children can live their own lives (the right to the present day) and to discover their uniqueness (the right to be him or herself). It is the caregiver's role, and at the same time duty and heartbreak, to teach the children the norms of thinking, feeling and acting which are for the child's well being. This subject is increasingly current. In the modern societies there is abundance of everything: humans, goods, information, choices. Children should practice making their own choices, not following choices of others. Korczak described it mordantly almost a hundred years ago: *"Here, have a cookie, my sonny. Here, have a clean handkerchief. Don't lean out of the window, my baby, you will fall out. Don't run, my angel... Here, have education. Have a diploma too, my dear... Here, have a girlfriend, my precious (...). Son, have a backing, a job, a position in the world, my dear. See, how good we are? We give you everything; we think of everything. And you love us, don't you? Give us a kiss..."*<sup>10</sup> Caregivers have to teach the children the difficult task of making choices. But what if the caregivers themselves haven't learned that task yet? They have to take themselves into consideration in the teaching process.

## His Own Educator

Not only the children and their caregivers, but each of us is a part of humanity for Korczak. That is why, we all have a duty to take care of both our external and internal world. For this latter one leaves a mark on everything we share with others. Speaking of one's own upbringing, I have in mind this particular and rare characteristic which won't let one sit on what is given and achieved, but gives one an opportunity to constantly explore, find new reasons for amazement and humbleness. It is the opposite of the "I'm a grown, well-mannered, decent man. I'm done with learning and wondering, and now I'm going to make others decent in my image, after my likeness" attitude. This attitude hinders or even makes impossible empathy and relating to those who are learning and wondering at this exact moment - the children.

How did Korczak bring up himself? Firstly, he was constantly observing himself. Only a heedful reflection, catching the moments of changes, dejection, the flows of strength and energy for new projects – only those can tell us who and where we are. In the text *Samotność starości* (The Loneliness of Ageing) Korczak asks a few questions: *Did you live at all? How much soil did you plow? How many loaves of bread did you bake for the people? How much did you sow? How many trees? How many bricks did you lay? (...) To whom and how much heart did you give? What was your service? What were the milestones of your life?*<sup>11</sup> Those questions are bitter, as the answers to them are never satisfactory but they have to be asked.

Secondly, bringing oneself up is the readiness (declared and real, taken up with joy, against the dejection) to take care of the world. It's easy to say: my caring is done, now they should do the caring after me. Korczak wrote: *"I am here not to be loved or admired, but to love and act. It is not the duty of those surrounding me to take care of me, but mine to care for the world and other people."*<sup>12</sup>

Thirdly, usually when we say "world" we think "my family, my street, my city". However, as a believer, though not affiliated with any religion, Korczak felt also responsible for the world on the – let's say – spiritual and metaphysical level. A few days before he was deported to Treblinka, he wrote in his *Diary*: *"It has been a while since I blessed the world. I tried to do it the other night, but I failed. I don't even know with what I have erred. The clearing*

*breaths turned out quite okay, but the fingers remained weak with no energy in them.* ”.<sup>1</sup> Against all odds, he tried to bless the world which was being destroyed in front of his eyes.

I'd like to end with a reflection on Korczak's timelessness. We often say: „Korczak eternally alive” . We enumerate the examples . We point at the variety and depth of the influence his thinking has had all over the world. But, just as we ended the fragment on sorting out the world with a question about bringing oneself up, I will not speak here about the “eternal Korczak” but I would rather ask whether Korczak, is or was alive for me and the people I live among at least for a moment .

<sup>1</sup> A report from the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the "Help the Orphans" Community, transcript 1933, p. 16 (*Works*, vol. 14, to be released)

<sup>2</sup> J. Korczak, *How to Love a Child*, in: *Works*, vol. 7, Warsaw 1993, p. 93 -94

<sup>3</sup> J. Korczak, *Diary, Pisma wybrane*, vol. 4, Warsaw 1986, p. 371 ( *Works* vol. 15 to be released)

<sup>4</sup> J. Korczak, *When I Am Little Again* in: *Works*, Warsaw 1994, vol. 9, p. 336

<sup>5</sup> J. Korczak, *Felietony radiowe* in: *Works*, Warsaw 1994, vol. 10, p. 155 -156

<sup>6</sup> J. Korczak, *Bankruptcy of Little Jack* in: *Works*, Warsaw 1994, vol. 9, p. 8

<sup>7</sup> J. Korczak, *Playful Pedagogy* in: *Works*, Warsaw 1994, vol. 10, p. 187

<sup>8</sup> J. Korczak, *How to Love a Child*, in: *Works*, vol. 7, Warsaw 1993, p. 68 -69

<sup>9</sup> J. Korczak, *loc. cit.*, p. 43

<sup>10</sup> J. Korczak, *Child of the Drawing Room* in: *Works*, Warsaw 1992, vol. 1, p. 277

<sup>11</sup> J. Korczak, *Samotność starości* in: *Pisma wybrane*, Warsaw 1986, vol. 4, p. 299

<sup>12</sup> J. Korczak, *Diary* in: *Pisma wybrane*, Warsaw 1986, vol. 4, p. 368 ( *Works*, vol. 15 to be released)

<sup>13</sup> J. Korczak, *loc. cit.*, p. 399