POLE APART

the life and work of Janusz Korczak

He has been the subject of a film by Andrzej Wajda, schools, hospitals and streets across Europe are named after him and his books have been translated into twenty languages. Yet few people in the English speaking world have heard of Janusz Korczak and his pioneering work on children's rights. **Sandra Joseph** sets out to make amends

Dr Janusz Korczak (1879-1942) was a man who took his convictions and sense of responsibility so strongly that he was prepared to go to his death rather than betray them. During the Nazi liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto, having rejected countless offers from Polish admirers and friends to save himself, Korczak led his two hundred orphans out of the ghetto and on to the train that would take them to their deaths at the gas chambers of Treblinka.

Korczak, who had brought up thousands of Jewish and Polish children, refused to desert them so that even as they died, the children would be able to maintain their trust in him and some faith in human goodness.

Not surprisingly, most accounts of Korczak's life and work focus on this noble act. But it would be unfortunate if the legend of his heroic and tragic death was to obscure the richness of his life and work. Korczak left a legacy not only of living and topical educational ideas, he also achieved greatness as a writer. He was awarded Poland's highest literary prize, guaranteeing him a permanent place in the history of Polish literature and the hearts of hundreds of thousands of Polish readers, children and adults. One of Korczak's children's books, *King Matt the First*, is as famous in his native country as are *Alice in Wonderland* or *Peter Pan* over here.

Korczak was a renowned doctor, who specialised in paediatrics. Medical students would travel the country just to attend his lectures. His personality and unique teaching methods can perhaps best be illustrated by the account of a lecture he gave at the Institute of Pedagogy in Warsaw, entitled 'The Heart of the Child'.

One of his students recalls: 'We were all surprised by Dr Korczak's instruction to gather in the x-ray lab. The doctor arrived bringing along a four-year-old boy from his orphanage. The x-ray machine was switched on and we saw the boy's heart beating wildly. He was so frightened – so many strange people, the dark room, the noise of the machine.

'Speaking very softly so as not to add to the child's fears, and deeply moved by what could be seen on the screen, Korczak told us: "Don't ever forget this sight. How wildly a child's heart beats when he is frightened – and this it does even more when reacting to an adult's anger with him, not to mention when he fears being punished". Then heading for the door with the child's hand in his, he added: "That is all for today." We did not need to be told any more – everybody will remember that lecture forever.'

Korczak envisaged that in 50 years, every school would have its own court, and that they would be a real source of emancipation for children

Korczak devoted one day each week to defending local destitute and abandoned street children, who were often on the receiving end of long jail sentences. 'The delinquent child is still a child,' he wrote. 'He is a child who has not given up yet, but does not know who he is. A punitive sentence could adversely influence his future sense of himself and his behaviour. Because it is society that has failed him and made him behave this way. The Court should not condemn the criminal but the social structure.'

Pioneer

Korczak was the director of two orphanages – one for Catholic children and one for Jewish children. For most of his life, he lived in the attic above one of the orphanages, receiving no salary. He promoted progressive educational techniques, including giving the children real opportunities to take part in decision making.

His children's court, for example, was presided over by child judges. Any child with a grievance had the right to summon the offender to face a court of his or her peers. Teachers and children were equal before the court; even Korczak had to submit to its judgement.

Korczak envisaged that in 50 years, every school would have its own court, and that they would be a real source of emancipation for children – teaching them respect for the law and individual rights. His insights into children were unclouded by sentimentality; they were based on continuous clinical observation and meticulous listing and sifting of data.

Korczak founded a popular weekly newspaper, *The Little Review*, which was produced for and by children: 'There will be

three editors – one oldster, bald and spectacled, and two additional editors, a boy and a girl.' Children and young people all over Poland served as correspondents, gathering newsworthy stories of interest to children. This was possibly the first venture of its kind in the history of journalism.

Throughout Poland, Korczak was well-known as 'the Old Doctor' – the name he used when delivering his popular state radio talks on children and education. His soft warm and friendly voice, along with his natural good humour, brought him acclaim and a sizeable audience. In the words of one former child listener: 'The Old Doctor proved to me for the first time in my life that an adult could enter easily and naturally into our world. He not only understood our point of view, but deeply respected and appreciated it.'

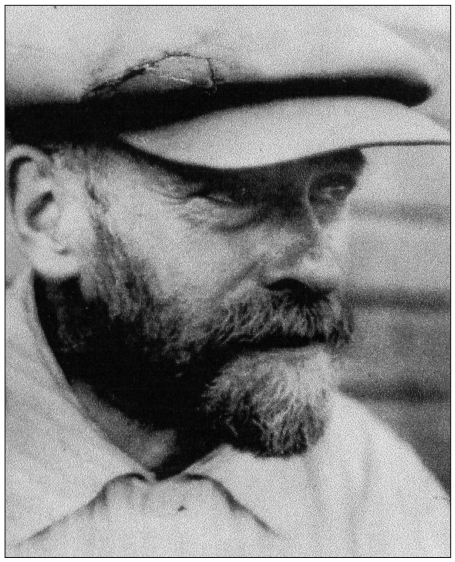
Children's rights

Korczak spoke of the need for a Declaration of Children's Rights long before one was eventually adopted by the League of Nations in 1924. Of that declaration, Korczak said: 'Those lawgivers confuse duties with rights. Their declaration appeals to goodwill when it should insist. It pleads for kindness, which it should demand.'

In 1959, the United Nations produced a second Declaration on the Rights of the Child, but it was not legally binding and there was no procedure to ensure its implementation. Twenty years later, it was Poland who proposed that a new convention should be drafted on a text manifestly inspired by the teachings of Korczak. On 20 November 1989, the Convention on the Rights of the Child was eventually passed unanimously by the UN General Assembly; it had taken more than 50 years to hammer out the 'rights' that Korczak had set out in his writings long before.

It is by chance that I stumbled into the world of Dr Janusz Korczak while studying psychotherapy. Alice Miller, who has received international recognition for her work on child abuse, had described Korczak as one of the greatest pedagogues of all time. So I tried to find out more about him, especially his theories on education and child-care. At libraries I drew a blank; I asked teachers, social workers, therapists – in fact, everyone I knew. No-one had ever heard of him.

Eventually, however, through a strange set of coincidences, I was introduced to Felek Scharf, a fellow Pole, an expert on Polish



Janusz Korczak

affairs and one of the few living links with Korczak in the UK. He sat me down in his office and started to talk.

Writer

Scharf showed me two books by Korczak that had been translated into English. One was his famous children's book, *King Matt the First*; the other was *Ghetto Diary*, written at the end of his life. 'But what about his work on children?' I asked. Scharf shook his head. Very little had been published in English. Although I left that meeting with two treasured books, *How to Love a Child* and *Respect for the Child*, both were written in Polish. I realised that there was no way I could access Korczak's world until the books had been translated into English.

One year later, Betty Jean Lifton's biography of Korczak, *The King of Children*, was published, and the brilliant film, *Korczak*, emerged from Poland's leading director Andrzej Wajda. And I set out to have some of his writings translated into English.

Korczak's basic philosophy was a belief in the innate goodness of children and their natural tendency to improve, given opportunity and guidance. Childhood, he believed, was perceived largely as a preparation for adult life, when in reality every moment has its own importance; one should appreciate a child for who he or she *is*, not who he or she will *become*.

Korczak believed in respecting and understanding the child's own way of thinking, instead of trying to understand the child from an adult's point of view.

Children in the orphanage lacked the emotional support of a parental figure. As a result, they were likely to assert themselves on the basis of anti-social norms. Korczak's approach was geared to prevent such development. First and foremost, he knew the children needed to be able to trust and rely on adults; therefore, he made it his goal to return to these children the very thing that adult society had deprived them of – respect, love and care.

Korczak's success is confirmed by a former resident of the orphanage: '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 could speak the truth. I wouldn't know that there are just laws in the world.'

Testimony

In the 1990s, I went to Israel to interview his 'children' -– the few surviving orphans left, now in their seventies and eighties. Their faces lit up when describing Korczak. Without exception, they spoke of the feelings of warmth, kindness and love they felt in his company; of his smiling blue eyes and his great sense of humour. Korczak had been a loved father to them all, at a time when they desperately needed one.

I asked how they would try to explain to people who knew nothing of him, why Korczak was such an important figure. One told me: 'It is difficult for me to explain to you in words the impact Korczak had on my life. He had so much compassion and a readiness to help all people. We used to say that Korczak was born to bring the world to redemption. What was so special about him was that he knew how to find a way to the child's soul. He penetrated the soul. The time spent at the orphanage changed my life.

'All the time, Korczak pushed us to believe in other people, and that essentially, man is good. He was an innovator of the educational system – the first to reach the conclusion that the child has the same rights as the adult. He saw the child not as a creature that needs help, but as a person in his own right. All this was not just a theory – he applied it in our orphanage. There were no limitations in the framework of the rules. The child had the same rights as the teachers.

'For example, the court's first mission was to protect the weaker child against the stronger. The rules were based in such a way that only children had the right to serve as judges. The teachers did all the paper work.

When the war broke out and I was starving and ready to do anything, I didn't because something of Korczak's teachings stayed with me.'

When I asked if perhaps history had been kind to Korczak, or was he really a man like this, an elderly man with a broad smile answered: 'In my opinion, this was his very nature. Maybe it was because he had witnessed such poverty and hardship among abandoned street children when he was a doctor that gave him the strength to dedicate all his life as he did.

'I cannot remember any negative side to Korczak's character, even now, when I myself am a grandfather and teacher, and understand more about children and their education. I honour the memory of a man who was my father for eight years; a man who has healed my physical and psychological ailments and who instilled a code of ethics that served me throughout my life.'

I have shown Korczak's writings to young people, parents, teachers – indeed, anyone whose life is involved with children. But it was the children I have counselled over the years, many of whom have experienced abuse and neglect, whose reaction surprised me the most. Without exception, they all wanted to know more about him.

The children could not believe that more than fifty years ago, Korczak had set up a committee – comprising older children, himself and teachers – which had actually given pupils a base to voice their ideas on improving the orphanage. They all felt that if teachers listened to their opinions and valued their feelings in schools today, it would help minimise truancy by creating a happier and more democratic environment.

In the words of one young person: 'If only my parents had read Korczak, they could have seen things from my point of view. Instead of feeling so isolated and misjudged, I could have quoted his words back to them. Maybe then they would have understood me.'

SANDRA JOSEPH

Sandra Joseph is a psychotherapist and the editor of *A Voice for the Child: the inspirational words of Janusz Korczak*.

The Institute of Education in London will host a conference on Korczak next March. Contact info@ioe.ac.uk for more information.

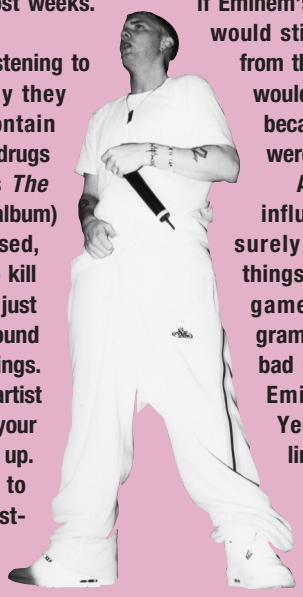
Give me some credit

As Eminem releases his latest album, 13-year-old **Sean Maher** says he has had enough of adults telling him he shouldn't be listening to the controversial American rapper

I walked into a gunfight with a knife to kill you
And cut you so fast when your blood spilled it was still blue
I'll hang you till you dangle and chain you with both ankles
And pull you apart from both angles
I want to crush your skull till your brains leak out of your veins
And bust open like broken water mains.

These lyrics are taken from a song written by Eminem. I know many people will find them disturbing, but all his songs have similar lyrics and they are all based on experiences drawn from his life or the way he feels. I don't pretend to like Eminem's lyrics, but it annoys me when adults, TV pundits and other busybodies say children should not be listening to his music. For most of us, Eminem is just another artist who resides in the top 40 most weeks. He's not a role model.

Like my friends, I enjoy listening to Eminem's songs for the way they *sound*, not because they contain swear words or references to drugs and sex. I've had Eminem's *The Slim Shady LP* (his first major album) since the week it was released, and so far I've had no urge to kill anyone in cold blood. I mostly just listen to the album as background music when I'm doing other things.



Eminem is not the sort of artist you listen to to help liven up your day. His lyrics won't cheer you up. But when I do pay attention to the words, I find them interesting; all his songs tell entertaining stories. For instance, his lyrical tirades against his mother and his wife Kym meant he was sued by both parties; he also used sound bites of his daughter as a baby on a track to get at his wife after they had slit up.

And the song 'Stan', which reached number one, is about an Eminem fan who goes mad when Eminem doesn't reply to his fan mail and then drives in to the sea. It's not a nice story, but that's what makes it interesting; it's Eminem being non-conformist and making fun of his extremist fans.

I know some of my peers are more likely to buy an album if it has an 'explicit lyrics' tag on the front of the CD case; some may even want to emulate Eminem. Maybe there *are* those who will see him pulling out his chain saw and wearing a hockey mask on stage and want to go and do the same. But is it fair to deny people the right to listen to music they enjoy just because of what someone, somewhere *might* do? And if Eminem's music was banned, kids would still be able to download it from the internet and many more would be inclined to listen to it because they would know they were doing something 'wrong'.

Anyone who is going to be influenced by Eminem would surely be influenced by other things anyway. Many computer games, films and TV programmes have content equally bad (or worse) than any album Eminem has ever released. Yes, those things have age limits, but the age limit on a computer game's packaging is confined to the back of the case – and many shop assistants turn a blind eye anyway.

Most people – including children – are strong minded enough to decide for themselves what they want to do in life. If Eminem was banned just because of fears about what some kids *might* do, then there's just as strong a case (if not stronger) for not allowing adults to buy alcohol. Adults watch and listen to all sorts of entertainers without feeling propelled to do things they otherwise wouldn't. So give us some credit: do you really want to deny thousands of children like me the chance to listen to music we enjoy?