

Janusz Korczak was born Henryk Goldszmit in 1878. He grew up in Warsaw, Poland. Korczak chose to study medicine as a young man because he wanted to help people. He specialized in pediatrics and was an extremely popular doctor in the community because of his compassion for the poor children who lived in the Warsaw slums. In addition, Korczak wrote children's books, stories, plays, and a few books about education. He even had a radio show in which he gave advice to parents.

Korczak founded the Jewish Orphanage in Warsaw and soon his life was dedicated to the orphanage where he lived and worked twenty-four hours a day. As the Jews of Warsaw were being forced into the ghetto in 1940, Korczak insisted on remaining with his children and moved his orphanage into the ghetto. Korczak continued to run the Jewish orphanage according to the values that had guided him in the past, and he tried to insulate his children from the reality of the Nazi occupation. In the ghetto period, his efforts focused on providing livable conditions for the two hundred children in the orphanage; he even tried to expand his activities to encompass other abandoned children in the ghetto.

Korczak could have hidden outside of the ghetto with the aid of Christian friends, but he refused to leave. In August 1942, as the overwhelming majority of the people who had been imprisoned in the Warsaw ghetto were being deported, Korczak realized that his charges were to be deported immediately. He knew that they were headed for deportation from the ghetto, but, rather than frighten the children, he told them they were going on a picnic. Although Korczak could have been saved, and was begged by his friends and admirers to let them help him, he chose to remain with the children. Korczak perished along with nearly 200 children in the gas chambers of Treblinka, as did his most senior coworker Stefania Wilczynska. It is known that many other staff members of other Jewish orphanages throughout Europe acted similarly to Korczak and Wilczynska when their charges were taken to their deaths.



ABOUT THE PHOTOS

Left: Janusz Korczak with several orphans in his institution, Warsaw, Poland. Yad Vashem Photo Archive 24AO2

Right: A sculpture in memory of Janusz Korczak, after the war, Warsaw, Poland. Yad Vashem Photo Archive 7941/6

SELECTIONS FROM “THE CHILD’S RIGHT TO RESPECT” (1929)

“The child is not foolish. There are no more fools among children than among adults. Draped in the judicial robes of age, how often we impose thoughtless, uncritical, impractical regulations. The wise child, sometimes stops short in amazement when confronted with the aggressive, senile, offensive stupidity.

The child has a future but also a past consisting of events, memories, long hours of highly significant solitary reflections. He remembers and forgets in a manner no different from our own, appreciates and condemns, reasons logically and makes mistakes born of ignorance. Thoughtfully, he trusts and doubts.

The child is a foreigner who does not understand the language or 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 the child!”

“Not to trample upon, humiliate, handle as a mere slave to tomorrow; not to repress, hurry, drive on.

Respect for every single instant, for it passes never to return, and always take it seriously; hurt, it will bleed, slain, it will haunt with harsh memories.

Let him drink eagerly 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. Right is on the side of the child.”

Selections reprinted from Janusz Korczak, “The Child’s Right to Respect,” in Selected Works of Janusz Korczak (translated from Polish by J. Bachrach). Published for the National Science Foundation by the Scientific Publications Foreign Cooperation Center of the Central Institute for Scientific, Technical and Economic Information, Warsaw; [available from the U.S. Dept. of Commerce Clearinghouse for Federal Scientific and Technical Information, Springfield, VA], 1967, 484–490.