

the Legend Of **DR. KORCZAK**

by Jack Goldfarb

As a schoolboy in Warsaw, a hundred years ago, Henryk Goldschmidt often got beaten up in fist fights with bullies who picked on the smaller and timid children. Henryk, the child of a well-to-do Jewish family, always tried to defend the weaker boys. He learned to fight back at an early age.

Years later, studying to become a physician, he chose to live in the backstreets and slums of the Polish capital, where again he often fought

and got a black eye for the sake of what he saw as a just cause. This spirited young man, with a reddish beard and a bunch of cheerful jokes, decided to become a doctor so that he could do something practical to help poor people. In the grimy courtyards of Warsaw's worst neighborhoods he became a friend to ragged and homeless children whom no one cared about. He entertained them for hours with heroic stories of Polish patriots and poets.

At age twenty, Henryk en-

tered a play he had written in a national drama competition. He submitted it under the pen name of Janusz Korczak, a name he had chosen from an old Polish tale. He won first prize and kept the name Janusz Korczak. For the rest of his life, Henryk Goldschmidt was known as Janusz Korczak.

Although his literary works and magazine articles were widely read and he became a successful doctor, Korczak was much more interested in the care of deprived and unwanted children. Eventually, he gave up his comfortable life as a doctor and child specialist to become the director of a newly-established orphan home in the Warsaw slums.

In Dr. Korczak's orphanage the values of honesty, justice, and kindness were stressed. He strongly believed that children should be treated with respect. At that time, this was a new approach compared to the discipline with which children were brought up. There were no beatings or threats in Dr. Korczak's Orphan Home. Helpful acts and voluntary good deeds were given awards and notices about



THE JEWISH CHILDREN IN GHETTOS AND DEATH CAMPS



MY BROTHER'S KEEPER by Israel Bernbaum G.P. Putnam's Sons New York 1985
THE HOLOCAUST THROUGH THE EYES OF AN ARTIST

them were posted on the bulletin boards. The children organized their own self-government and a Court of Honor settled disputes, gave advice, and handed out punishments.

During these years, Dr. Korczak produced a great deal of writing, mostly for children. One of his books, *King Matthew the First*, became a best-seller in many languages. It was the story of a wise young king who wanted to make a better world. King Matthew had hopes of seeing all the children of the earth marching together under a green flag with chestnut blossoms on it.

In 1926 there appeared on the newsstands of Warsaw the first weekly newspaper written by and for children ever published in Poland. Called *The Little Review*, it had three

editors: a boy for the Boys' Section, a girl for the Girls' Department, and "an old bespectacled and bald gentleman," as Dr. Korczak described himself, to see that everything worked together smoothly. All children were invited to send in articles and letters to the editor. Poor spelling or bad handwriting would not be a drawback, the editors said. Children were also welcome to come to the newspaper's office and say what was on their minds. One time, over two hundred young reporters were on the staff of the paper, all getting paid a salary.

The Little Review became tremendously popular and received thousands of letters each year. At a time when anti-Semitism and racism were coming out of neighboring Germany, the newspaper strived for the noble aim of a brotherhood for all children.

Dr. Korczak also conducted a radio program on Warsaw's

government radio station. The program was directed at children. On the air he was known as "The Old Doctor." He read from his books and stories and related many of his experiences with the children he knew.

Because of the rising anti-Semitism in Poland, "The Old Doctor" was asked by radio officials not to reveal his true identity. Although he was well-known throughout the country, he agreed to remain anonymous, believing that his message of tolerance and better understanding between peoples was more important than his personal prestige. Ultimately, certain government authorities, who disliked the program, caused it to come to an end.

World War II, which began with the Nazi Germany invasion of Poland, saw the rapid destruction of the Polish Army. As the German troops closed in to capture the capital, Warsaw was heavily bombed

by waves of *Luftwaffe* airplanes.

In those dark hours "The Old Doctor" was recalled to Radio Warsaw to talk to the citizens of Poland. While Nazi bombers soared overhead, his calm voice and brave comments helped to raise the morale of the people. With Warsaw about to fall, Dr. Korczak stood fast at the microphone. On one occasion the studio was shattered by a direct hit, but, fortunately, he escaped unhurt.

Even before the ruined city came under German occupation, friends urged Korczak to flee the country. Nazi anti-Semitism would put him and the 200 children who lived in the Orphans' Home in great danger. But Dr. Korczak knew the children needed him now more than ever before.

Putting on his old Army uniform [he had served in the Polish Army years before], he went out into the destroyed streets of Warsaw searching for ill and forsaken children and brought them to his orphanage. To help support them, he knocked on the doors of the wealthy and circulated in cafes begging and insisting on donations for his orphanage.

As the months went by under the German occupation, food became scarcer, and Korczak was even more concerned. When the Nazis built the wall which closed off the Jewish Ghetto, Korczak began to fear the worst. He kept on trying to cheer up the children with jokes and stories. Plays and singing sessions were organized in the Home.



Dr. Janusz Korczak

He wanted the children to have a symbol to unite and encourage them. He chose the green flag with chestnut blossoms that young King Matthew had hoped would unite the world's children. On the other side of the flag was a *Magen David*, the blue and white banner to remind them of their ancient heritage. This was at a time when the Nazis had sought to make the Star of David an object of scorn.

The order came from the Nazis for Korczak's orphanage to be moved inside the Ghetto walls. By now the daily food available for each child was one slice of bread, a tiny portion of jam made of beets, a potato, and a couple of spoonfuls of cabbage. New quarters were found in an old Ghetto building.

In the midst of the cruelty and suffering around him, Korczak wrote in his diary, "I do not wish anyone evil...."

Early on the morning of

Wednesday August 5, 1942, the children of the Orphans' Home were assembled by the Nazis and ordered to march to the railroad terminal, at the *Umschlagplatz* in the Ghetto, where they were to take a train for a camp somewhere east of Warsaw.

Dr. Korczak walked to the head of the procession and handed the green banner of King Matthew to the older boys to carry. When the column of anxiety-filled children reached the railroad depot, a Nazi officer, who had been waiting for him, called Dr. Korczak aside and told him he did not have to go with the children. He could go free.

But Dr. Korczak turned away from the officer. He would go with the children wherever it was they were being sent.

None of the children ever returned from their destination. Nor did Dr. Janusz Korczak. But his devotion, courage, and kindness were left behind as an unforgettable legend.