

The Legend of Dr. Korczak

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As a schoolboy in Warsaw 100 years ago, Henryk Goldschmidt often got beaten up in fist fights with bullies who picked on the smaller and more timid children. Henryk, the child of a well-to-do Jewish family, always tried to defend the weaker boys. He learned to fight at an early age.

Years later, while studying to become a physician, he chose to live in the back streets and slums of the Polish capital, where again he often fought. Once he 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 repertoire 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 most wretched 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 20, Henryk submitted a play he had written to a national drama competition. He entered it under the nom de plume of Janusz Korczak, a name he chose from an old Polish tale. He won first prize and kept the name, Janusz Korczak. For the rest of his life, as a doctor, author, educator, and director of orphan homes, Henryk Goldschmidt was known as Janusz Korczak.

Although his literary works and

magazine articles were widely-read and he became a successful physician, Korczak was much more interested in the care of deprived and unwanted children. Eventually, he gave up his comfortable lifestyle 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 themselves should be treated with respect. This was a new approach, compared with the stern discipline with which children were brought up in most European countries during that time. There were no corporal punishments or threats in Dr. Korczak's orphan home, but helpful acts and voluntary good deeds were rewarded, and notices praising children were posted on bulletin boards. The children organized their own self-government and a court of honor, which settled disputes, provided advice and meted out just punishments.

During these years at the orphan home, Dr. Korczak produced a great deal of writing, mostly for children. One of his books, *King Matthew the First*, which became a bestseller in many languages, told the story of a wise young king who wanted to make a better world. King Matthew had hopes of seeing all children of the earth marching together under a green flag covered with chestnut blossoms.

In 1926 there appeared on the

newsstands of Warsaw, the debut issue of a weekly newspaper, written exclusively by children. Called *The Little Review*, its adult editor, Dr. Korczak, invited children to send in articles and letters. Poor spelling or bad handwriting would not be a drawback, he said. Children were welcome to come to the newspaper office and voice their opinions. Over 200 young reporters were at one time or another on the staff of the paper—all were paid a salary.

The Little Review became enormously popular and received thousands of letters each year. At a time when rampant racism emanated out of the neighboring Third Reich, the newspaper persisted in a noble aim of unity for all children. Despite rising anti-Semitism in Poland, Dr. Korczak also produced a radio program for children. Radio officials asked that his name not be revealed for fear of a government backlash. He became known as "The Old Doctor" and continued to relay his message of tolerance for many years, but ultimately, certain government authorities who disliked the program, put an end to it.

World War II, which began with the Nazi Germany invasion of Poland, saw the rapid destruction of the Polish Army. As 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 over-

head, his soothing voice helped raise the people's morale. With Warsaw about to fall, Dr. Korczak stood fast at the microphone. At one point, the window in the studio was shattered by a direct hit, but thankfully, he escaped unscathed.

Even before the ruined city came under German occupation, friends urged Korczak to flee. Nazi anti-Semitism boded a grave danger to him and the 200 children who lived in the orphan's home on Krochmalna Street. But Korczak knew that the children needed him more now than ever before and he resolved to stay with them.

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. He brought them to his orphanage.

As the months went by under the Occupation, food became scarcer with Korczak ever more concerned. When the Nazis erected the walls which defined the Ghetto, Korczak began to fear the worst. Doggedly, he tried to cheer the children with jokes and stories. He organized plays and singing sessions.

Korczak 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 for to unite the world's children. On the other side of the flag was a Magen David—the Star of David—on a blue and white banner to remind the children of their ancient heritage.

This, at a time when the Nazis sought to make the Star of David an object of scorn.

The order came from the Nazis for Korczak's orphanage to be moved from Krochmalna Street to inside the Ghetto walls. By now, daily food for each child consisted of one piece of bread, a tiny portion of jam made of beets, a potato and a few spoonfuls of cabbage. New quarters were found in an old Ghetto building. In the midst of cruelty and horrible suffering, Korczak wrote in his journals, "I do not wish anyone evil..."

Early in the morning on a Wednesday, August 5, 1942, the Nazis assembled the children of the orphan home and ordered them to march to the railroad terminal, at the Umschlagplatz in the Ghetto, from where they were to entrain 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 oldest boy. When the column of anxious children reached the railroad depot, a Nazi officer who had been waiting for Dr. Korczak took him aside and told him he did not have to go with the children; he was free to go. But Dr. Korczak turned away from the officer. He would go with the children wherever it was they were going.

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