

# THE KING OF CHILDREN

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Janusz Korczak was a paediatrician, writer and educator who wrote in Polish, died anonymously in 1942 along with millions of others whose bones are not even graced by a grave, and whose life and example deserves to be far better known. Had it not been for Korczak the UN would not have produced the only UN human rights treaty to be signed by every world government, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Janusz Korczak was not his real name. He was born in Warsaw in 1879 as Henryk Goldszmit, the privileged son of an assimilated Jewish doctor. His life changed dramatically after his father became mentally ill, was institutionalised and died seven years later when the boy was only 18. Henryk helped support his family while he studied medicine through tutoring and by writing. He adopted his nom de plume, Janusz Korczak, when he won a significant literary prize when he was 20 years old.

Korczak graduated in medicine in 1904, and worked with slum families and street children as well as in Warsaw's fashionable society. He decided to specialise in paediatrics and worked in the Warsaw Children's Hospital for a time. Twice — in 1905 and 1914 — he was drafted into the Russian army and served as a doctor, witnessing the atrocities that all war visits on all children. After the Russo-Japanese war Korczak studied child psychology in Berlin, Paris and London, and he then returned to his native Poland to run the Company of Children's Camps in Poland for destitute Warsaw children.

Korczak began to teach medical students from a deeply humanist perspective, which was somewhat at odds with the heroic, scientific experimentalism of the time. He continued to practise medicine, often charging no fee. In 1912 he decided that this was not satisfying enough,

writing that “[a] spoon full of castor oil is no cure for poverty and parentlessness”. Korczak then became the Director of a new Jewish orphanage, and he spent the rest of his life working in and for the orphanage with no salary, and living in its attic.

Korczak also continued to write and lecture about children and became greatly admired and loved throughout Poland and in other parts of Europe. His most important work, *How to Love a Child*, is a profound yet practical book about nurturing children that he wrote while he was serving during the First World War.

Korczak’s most productive years were between the First and Second World Wars. His Jewish orphanage was an oasis of happiness for the children who lived in it, and in 1922 he was able to set up another orphanage, this one for Catholic (i.e. non-Jewish) children. He wrote two particularly popular novels. *King Matt the First* was the story of a little prince who inherits the crown of a utopian kingdom and fights the world’s injustices (especially those inflicted by adults on children). It ends with the children governing and adults going back to school. *If I Were Small Again* is the story of an adult man turned back into a child. Both were widely read and translated. In 1926 Korczak also founded *The Little Review*, a newspaper produced and edited by children, until the German invasion.

Poland became far more anti-Semitic during the 1930s and Korczak’s weekly radio broadcasts and newspaper columns suffered as a result. His nom de plume and the title “the old doctor” were devised to ensure that nobody would realise he was Jewish: his broadcasts were eventually terminated for that reason. He continued to work with the Jewish orphans, when the same bigotry made it politically necessary for a non-Jew to be responsible for the orphanage he had also established for “Polish” — that is, Catholic, or non-Jewish — children.

Korczak taught that it is necessary for adults to respect the child, to learn from children and to teach children by example that they can trust and rely on adults for respect, love and care.

A child's life, he wrote, has an importance of its own: it is not a preparation for "real" life later. Children must be appreciated for what they are now, not what they will become. Adults must respect and understand children's way of thinking, not observe them from an adult perspective.

Korczak showcased his theories on child psychology and education in his orphanages. Surviving children report that he gave them love, respect and healing, and there were thousands of unwanted children who benefited, as part of a consistent and comprehensive code of ethics and values that was meant to serve them throughout their lives.

Most extraordinarily, his orphanages were democratic, managed in accordance with laws that the children made and voted for, and subject to the jurisdiction of a Court of regularly-elected child Judges that could determine complaints and grievances by and against both adults and children, including Korczak, the Director, himself. This, he taught, was what would really teach children respect for the law and individual rights. It was not always as easy for his employees to share their authority with children as it was for this much-loved man.

In 1940 occupying Nazi forces forced Korczak to relocate his orphanage to the Warsaw ghetto. Starvation and disease were rife. He worked tirelessly, begging for food and medicines for his children every day. The situation worsened. He took over responsibility for the Ghetto's Orphans' Refuge and cared for the dying children, though he could not do any more than try to comfort them.

Though he was repeatedly given the opportunity to escape by his admirers and supporters, including Germans and non-Jewish people with influence and real power, Korczak refused, saying that it was "unthinkable to leave children  
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at such a time". He was urged to allow such children as still had families or relatives to flee from the ghetto, but he did not encourage this, because he believed that they would be afraid and alone. It seems incredible, not just in hindsight but given the obvious evidence that the plans to deport or kill them were developing, but Korczak seems simply to have had too great a belief in the fundamental decency of people. Once, when he was asked how to respond to inhumanity, Korczak had simply said that "one must act even more humanely".

During the whole of his life Korczak continued to write. He developed his own version of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Presciently it included "the right to a premature death". He also kept a diary which was concealed, preserved and published after the war, and which became second in popularity only to Anne Frank's.

On 6 August 1942 Korczak and his orphanage staff led a procession of 200 children to the cattle trucks destined for Treblinka, all holding a favourite toy and singing, walking behind the orphanage flag — green and white blossoms on one side, Star of David on the other.

None returned.

He wrote:

Children are not the people of tomorrow, but people today. They are entitled to be taken seriously. They have a right to be treated by adults with tenderness and respect, as equals. They should be allowed to grow into whoever they were meant to be — the unknown person inside each of them is the hope for the future.

After the end of the War the Polish Government moved the United Nations to proclaim and dedicate the International Year of the Child to the example of Janusz Korczak, and to implement his life-long championship of a children's charter.

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**Further reading:**

Joseph, S (Ed), *A Voice for the Child: the Inspirational Words of Janusz Korczak* (London: Thorsons (Harper Collins), 1999).

Lifton BJ, *The King of Children. The Life and Death of Janusz Korczak* (New York: St Martin's Griffin, 1988).