Foreword

Korczak – our teacher on the rights of the child

Janusz Korczak is said to have once described himself as "a doctor by training, a pedagogue by chance, a writer by passion, and a psychologist by necessity".

He was well known at the time in his native Poland in all these capacities, but what made him a legend was his desperate struggle to shield the Jewish orphans from the atrocities in the Warsaw Ghetto. He refused to leave them when the Nazis decided in August 1942 that they were to be executed, rejecting offers to save his own life. He died in Treblinka together with the 192 children and his co-workers from the orphanage.

Janusz Korczak is remembered by many for the way his life ended but by some also for how he lived and what he said and wrote. UNESCO declared 1978-79 as the Year of Korczak to mark the centenary of his birth – this coincided with the United Nations (UN) Year of the Child. Some of his writings have been translated into other languages, there are Janusz Korczak societies in several countries and child rights activists often refer to his writings.

No doubt he had an influence when the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child was drafted in the 1980s. Still, his teaching deserves more attention. Korczak was one of those thinkers who was ahead of his time. Some of his ideas are still not fully understood and they are absolutely relevant to the work for children's rights today.

Janusz Korczak, whose original name was Henryk Goldszmit, was born in a Jewish, assimilated, middle-class family in Warsaw. His first years appear to have been happy, his father was a successful lawyer and there were no economic problems. This changed when Henryk was 11 and his father had a serious mental breakdown which ruined his family.

In spite of poverty he managed to write novels and get them published when he was still in his early twenties. This was when he started using his pen name, Janusz Korczak. However, having concluded that "writing is only words, medicine is deeds", he focused on his medical studies. At this stage he was becoming more and more committed to the fate of destitute children.

Soon after he qualified as a doctor he was enlisted in the Russian army during the Russo-Japanese war. As always, he was writing:

War is an abomination. Especially because no one reports how many children are hungry, ill treated, and left without protection. Before a nation goes to war it should stop to think of the innocent children who will be injured, killed, or orphaned. No cause, no war is worth depriving children of their natural right to happiness. One must think first of the child before making revolutions.

From 1904, he acted regularly as supervisor at summer camps for poor children. He focused increasingly on child psychology and pedagogy. While spending more time on teaching and giving lectures, he continued his medical practice. He was known to demand high fees from wealthy patients and treat the poor free of charge.

At the age of 34 he was asked to become director of a Jewish orphanage – a position he would keep until his last day. As a doctor he cared for their physical well-being, weighed and measured them and gave them medicine. Seeing that the deeper wounds related to broken families, poverty and other social ills, he redefined the very concept of health care. There, he would develop his talents as medical doctor and teacher but also as author and therapist to support children and promote their rights.

He saw the importance of child-friendly learning methods, arguing that ethics was more important than pure facts. He introduced a democratic spirit in the orphanage in which the children themselves had a say in the decisions – but also had to carry the burden to ensure that decisions were enforced. This "children's republic" had a parliament and a newspaper.

Best known is his experiment with a system of justice. A code was written in the orphanage and a court established among the children to deal with alleged injustices. Korczak himself was charged a couple of times for mistakes. The punishments after these trials were regularly to ask for forgiveness and be excused.

With an extraordinary capacity to listen and relate, Korczak had entered into a life-long study of children's reactions, emotions and behaviour. He filled his notebooks with observations, reflected upon them and formulated aphorisms addressed to parents and other adults, many of them in poetic form. He became an interpreter between the worlds of children and grown-ups.

During a wave of anti-Semitism in Poland he was dismissed from the radio after several years as the popular "Old Doctor" – answering questions from listeners. His colleagues at the radio station wrote a letter of protest in which they described how he could "talk with children as if they were adults and with adults as if they were children". His books for children, and not least *King Matt the First*, are indeed demanding and do not hide conflicts and sorrow – in this they are similar to the later writings of Astrid Lindgren. Korczak's messages to adults are written with a large portion of child-like clarity.

He became the first and most radical campaigner for children's rights. When reading the Declaration of the Rights of the Child adopted by the League of Nations in 1924 he was disappointed. It was not clear enough, it was begging rather than insisting. He wanted rights – not charity – and rights now, not in the far future.

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

For Korczak two rights were particularly important: the right to receive love and the right to respect. He developed these in two longer texts for parents and teachers. *How to Love a Child* was prepared on the battlefields of the First World War and *The Child's Right to Respect* written in the 1920s.

Korczak pleaded for equality between children and adults.

People speak of the old with weighty respect. They speak of the child patronizingly and condescendingly. This is wrong, for the child too deserves respect. He is still small, weak. He does not know much, he cannot do much as yet. But his future – what he will be when he grows up – commands us to respect him as we respect the old.

Many children react against adult hypocrisy towards them. This is how Korczak formulated this feeling – while in language identifying himself with the grown-ups (using "we") but in substance standing on the side of children:

We do not like it when children criticize us. They are not permitted to notice our mistakes, our absurdities. We appear before them in the garb of perfection. We play with children using marked cards. We win against the low cards of childhood with the aces of adulthood. Cheaters that we are, we shuffle the cards in such a way that we deal ourselves everything.

Korczak worked in the worst of circumstances and experienced how immensely important it was that at least some adults treated the child with respect and love. Abuse caused deep scars:

There are many terrible things in this world, but the worst is when a child is afraid of his father, mother or teacher.

Korczak dared to use the word "love" and did so repeatedly. But he was not sentimental – not even towards children. His education was not a laisser-faire approach, he pleaded for rights with responsibilities. In the orphanage each child had a task. He argued against too much protection: children should also have the right to learn from experience, they must be able to test and even to take the risk of harming themselves.

Many of the points Korczak made are about respecting the integrity of the child. He argued that the child must have the right to have secrets – reading a diary without permission is wrong. Another right he proposed – probably surprising to

some – was the child's right to respect for its own possessions and budget. Even if he or she owns almost nothing, it is important that the ownership of these few belongings is respected.

The 1979 Year of the Child was followed by the drafting of a United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Korczak's thinking played a role – I know this for certain as I took part in the process. The final text was adopted by the General Assembly in 1989. Now another 20 years have passed and it is time to take stock again.

During 2008 and 2009 a series of five Korczak Lectures were held across Europe. The purpose was to assess to what extent Korczak's ideas have been made reality until today – and what remains to be done in order for his ideals to be met.

Five child rights experts were invited to give their presentations on areas of prime importance for children's rights. The first is about the principle of the best interests of the child; the second about protection against corporal punishment; the third about children and prisons; the fourth about children and institutional care; and the last one about respecting the views of children. All lectures proposed further work in the spirit of Janusz Korczak.

The publication presents an English translation of one of Korczak's more well-known texts, *The Child's Right to Respect*, in which he summarised his thinking on the relationship between children and adults. It is introduced by Sven Hartman, Professor of Pedagogy at the Stockholm University and followed by a moving testimony of Irena Sendlerova who herself tried to save children from the Nazi brutalities in the Ghetto and who saw Korczak, his colleagues and all the children from "My home" being marched to their death.

Thomas Hammarberg
Commissioner for Human Rights, Council of Europe

Janusz Korczak's legacy

Janusz Korczak – a brief biography

Janusz Korczak was the pen name of Henryk Goldszmit, who was born in Warsaw on 22 July 1878 or 1879, and murdered in the Treblinka death camp on 5 or 6 August 1942. He was a doctor, educator, writer, social worker, "guardian angel" and thinker.

Having completed his studies at Warsaw University, Korczak worked as a doctor at the Barson and Bauman Children's Hospital (1905-12).

He managed the *Dom Sierot* orphanage for Jewish children (1912-1942) and took part in the creation of the Nasz Dom orphanage for Polish children, set up in Pruszków in 1919, then moved to Warsaw in 1928. Both establishments used Korczak's own education system, which set particular store by the development and social life of the children living there.

He was a popular speaker, holding numerous seminars and lecturing at colleges and universities. He was also consulted by the courts as an expert on children.

He founded a children's newspaper, *Mały Przegląd* (Little Review), and worked for the radio under the pseudonym "Stary Doktór" (Old Doctor).

His career as a writer, journalist and researcher began in 1896 and ended on 4 August 1942, when he jotted down his very last notes. Korczak's writing, composed both with adults and children in mind, consists of more than 20 books and over 1 400 articles, published in some 100 magazines.

For Korczak, activism in the social and educational sphere went hand in hand with involvement in the struggle for national independence.

Korczak witnessed, took part in and ultimately fell victim to some of the most historic events of the first half of the 20th century, including the Russo-Japanese war, the Russian Revolutions of 1905-06 and 1917, the First World War, the Polish-Bolshevik war of 1920 and the Second World War. Having been drafted into the Russian army, he crossed central and eastern Europe and travelled as far as Manchuria.

To broaden his education, he also travelled in Switzerland, Germany, France and England. He visited Palestine twice, drawn by a fascination with the Holy Land of three religions (though deeply religious, he was not attached to any specific religious creed) and an interest in the revival of the Jewish national movement and the kibbutz experiment.