



JANUSZ KORCZAK

"The lives of great men are like legends -
difficult but beautiful"

~Janusz Korczak

PRE-WORLD WAR II

1878 OR 1879

Henryk Goldszmit is born in Warsaw, Poland

1898

In Medical School Goldszmit starts writing under the pseudonym Janusz Korczak

1905

Janusz Korczak graduates from Medical School as a Pediatrician

1908 & 1910

In 1908, Korczak joins the Orphans Aid Society and in 1910, he meets Stefa Wilczynska

1910

Korczak becomes the Director of an Orphanage for Jewish Children in Warsaw

WORLD WAR II



1939

Nazi Germany invades Poland on September 1



1940

On October 12, the Nazis announced the creation of a Jewish Ghetto in Warsaw



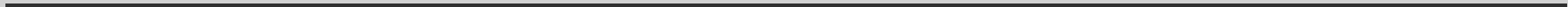
1940

Korczak and all of the orphanage children were moved into the Ghetto on November 30



1942

Korczak, Stefa and all of the children were murdered in the gas chambers at Treblinka





Janusz Korczak
*United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of
Międzynarodowe Stowarzyszenie im. Janusza Korczaka*

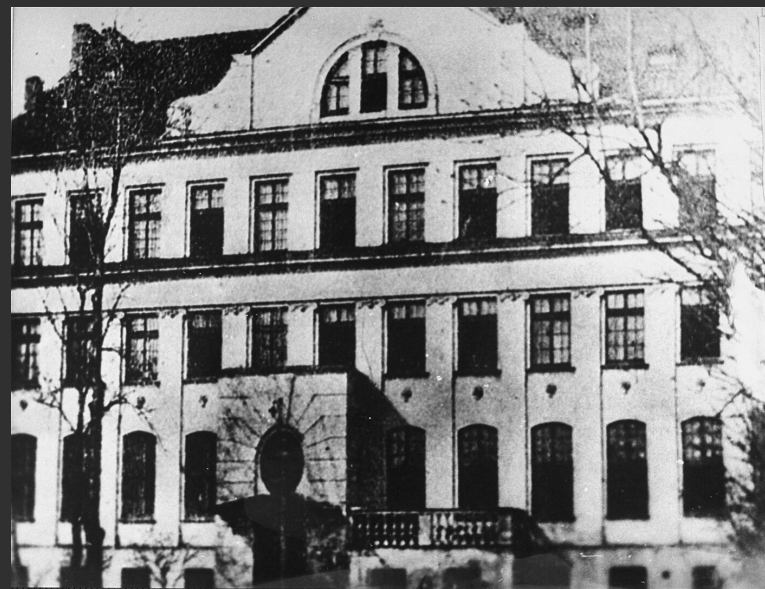
Henryk Goldszmit was born in either 1878 or 1879 in Warsaw, Poland. He was a quiet and thoughtful child. In high school, he tutored younger students and developed a love for education and an interest in the science of child development. He attended medical school and started writing fictional short stories. In order to be published, he wrote under a pseudonym (a fake name): Janusz Korczak. He did this because he feared it would be difficult for a Jewish author to be published, due to the antisemitism in Poland. Antisemitism is the prejudice and/or hatred of Jewish people. After medical school, Korczak accepted a job at the Children's Hospital on Sliska Street in Warsaw. This was one of the only clinics open, free of charge, to children of all faiths.

In 1908, Janusz Korczak joined the Orphans Aid Society of Warsaw. It was through this organization that he met Stefania Wilczyńska (Stefa), a teacher and volunteer for one of the local orphanages. Korczak was so impressed with this organization and felt so much compassion for the orphaned children, that he gave up his medical career to become the Director of Dom Sierot an orphanage for Jewish Children. Stefa became the general manager.

A new home was built for the orphanage. It was completed in October of 1912 and was four stories high and was one of the first homes in Warsaw to have central heating and electricity. It took many of the children a year to become comfortable in their new home. Several of the children had never slept in a bed before.

As the Orphanage Director, Janusz Korczak created a "Republic for children," with its own court, and weekly newspaper. For example: If a child pushed another child, then the child who was pushed could "press charges" against the child who did the pushing. Each week, a rotating jury of children would hear the cases and they would then decide what the punishment would be. For the newspaper, the children would submit stories, pictures, and news items. At the end of each week, Korczak would read the newspaper out loud to all of the gathered children. The children's court and newspaper allowed each child to feel heard and loved.

For two decades, life was good for the children in the orphanage. They tended flowers and vegetables in the garden, played in the yard, and attended camp in the countryside in summer. However, this all changed with the beginning of World War II on September 1, 1939, when Nazi Germany invaded Poland. It took 7 days for the Nazis to reach Warsaw and start bombing the city. Several shells hit the orphanage over the next three weeks. Whenever the air-raid sirens sounded, the children (at this point there were 150 children living in the orphanage), would run down to the basement shelter until the bombing was over. The older children would stand on the roof during fire bomb attacks. They only had a few seconds to douse a fire bomb with sand or water to keep it from bursting into flame and burning down their home. Nazi troops entered Warsaw on September 29, 1939, after the city's surrender.



View of the Krochmalna Street Orphanage. Korczak's room was in the attic
*United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Międzynarodowe
Stowarzyszenie im. Janusza Korczaka*

**THE INSTRUCTOR, FELIX GYP,
HELPS CHILDREN WORK WITH
CLAY IN THE KORCZAK
ORPHANAGE**

*United States Holocaust Memorial
Museum, courtesy of Shlomo Nadel*



**BOYS FROM KORCZAK'S
ORPHANAGE POSE OUTSIDE
ON A FIELD**

*United States Holocaust Memorial
Museum, courtesy of Shlomo Nadel*

At first, the Nazis were kind to the people of Warsaw. Soup kitchens were set up and bread was distributed to all who were hungry. But this was only a ruse. Soon, Jews were being rounded up for slave labor. If they refused, they were killed on the street. The Nazis took over Jewish-owned businesses and stopped allowing Jewish children to attend school.

The Nazis announced that all Jews in Warsaw would be forced to move into a ghetto. A ghetto was a section of a city where all of the Jews were forced to live. Usually the ghetto was surrounded by walls of some kind, typically brick or barbed wire, and many of the large ghettos were sealed so that no one could go out and only those with permission could go inside. The Warsaw Ghetto was the largest ghetto of all of the Nazi-created ghettos. It was surrounded by a 10 foot wall, topped with barbed wire. The Ghetto was 1.3 square miles in size and severely overcrowded with over 400,000 Jewish people attempting to share resources and survive. Conditions inside of the Ghetto were horrible. Between 1940 and 1942, 83,000 people died of starvation and disease.

Despite the awful living conditions, Korczak and Stefa tried to make life as stable and normal as possible. There were around 8 volunteers (most of those who volunteered had grown up in the orphanage) who helped teach, feed, and entertain the children. Classes were held each day and each of the children had chores. There was also a choir, drama club, and even a puppet workshop. However, as time went on, it became increasingly difficult to find enough food to feed the children, whose numbers also kept increasing as their parents died of disease or starvation. By 1941, there were almost 200 children living in the orphanage.



Stefania (Stefa) Wilczynska
Yad Vashem

Every morning, Korczak would leave the orphanage with a sack slung over his shoulder. He would go from house to house and beg for any additional food the person could spare. At the orphanage, Korczak would eat as little food as possible, so the children could have more. This caused a lot of health issues, which in turn caused his legs to swell. However, no matter how badly swollen his legs were, he would still drag himself out of the door each morning to beg for food and supplies. By early November 1941, a friend, who also happened to be a doctor, saw Korczak struggling to walk and convinced him to come into his house. Upon examination, the doctor found that Korczak had a congested lung and a ruptured hernia. No matter how much pain he was in, Korczak refused to give up.



Destitute children sit barefoot on the pavement in the Warsaw Ghetto
United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Instytut Pamięci Narodowej

In January 1942, friends of Korczak who lived outside of the Ghetto heard a rumor that everyone in the Ghetto was going to be "settled in the east" (this was a phrase the Nazis used to try and hide the fact that they were actually sending Jews to concentration camps). Maryna Falska, who was hiding Jewish children in her home, and Igor Newerly decided to do what they could to help their friend. Igor managed to get a fake identity card for Korczak and fake papers which identified him as a locksmith. The plan was for Igor (who had papers giving him permission to enter the Ghetto as a water and sewer inspector) to go into the Ghetto with Korczak's fake ID papers hidden in his clothing, as well fake papers identifying Korczak as a non-Jewish locksmith. Once Igor and Korczak left the Ghetto, Korczak would hide in a room provided by Maryna. However, things didn't go according to their plan.

When Igor Newerly entered the Warsaw Ghetto, he was appalled at the suffering he saw. Korczak was pleased to see his old friend but when Igor tried to talk him into leaving the Ghetto with him and going to the room Marnya had prepared, Korczak refused. He told Igor that it was unthinkable that he should be more concerned with his own safety over that of the children who saw him as their guardian and protector. He would stay with the children, no matter what.



Adam Czerniakow, Chairman of the Jewish Council
Holocaust Research Project

On July 22, 1942, the borders of the Ghetto were surrounded by units of Polish police and Ukrainian, Lithuanian and Latvian support troops. When Korczak saw the troops, he knew that a deportation was soon to happen. The term "deportation" was used to describe the forced movement of the Jewish people from one place to another. Korczak visited the head of the Judenrat (Jewish Council), Adam Czerniakow, and begged him to ask the Nazis to spare the children in the Ghetto orphanages. Czerniakow made the request to the Nazi officials, pleading for them to spare the children. The Nazis turned him down. Czerniakow was told that all children must be deported.

On August 6, 1942, Janusz Korczak, Stefa, the children, and the rest of the staff members, were having a little bread for breakfast, when they heard the dreaded "Juden raus!" (Jew's out!) being screamed from the street. Korczak walked outside and asked the Nazi officer to allow the children a little time to get their things together. Fifteen minutes later, Korczak and Stefa lined the children up in rows of four; the children were holding their favorite books and stuffed animals. The Nazi's had lists of the residents of each building in the Ghetto. Once everyone from the orphanage was lined up, the the Nazi officer took attendance. There were 192 children and 10 adults.

Korczak, Stefa, the teachers and the children walked for 2 miles to get to the train station where they were pushed into cattle cars. The train took them to Treblinka, one of the Death Camps. Janusz Korczak, Stefania Wilczynska, all 192 children and the 8 volunteer staff members, were murdered in the gas chambers.

Korczak kept a diary while he was in the Ghetto. The diary was saved by a friend who smuggled it out after Korczak and the children were deported. His friend Igor published it after the war. Because of this diary, we know a little bit about some of the children: Zygmus, Sami, Hanka and Aronek wanted to play in the church garden at the edge of the Ghetto; Hella, who was always restless; Big Hanna, who had asthma; Little Hanna, who had a pale smile; Mendelek, who had the bad dreams; Abrasha who loved to play with his violin. Each child was important and each child was loved.



Janusz Korczak (center) poses with children and younger staff members in his orphanage
United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Shlomo Nadel

On November 20, 1959, using the writings of Janusz Korczak, and his insistence that every child has the right to respect, the United Nations adopted the "Declaration of the Rights of the Child."

The right to equality, without distinction on account of race, religion or national origin.

The right to special protection for the child's physical, mental and social development.

The right to a name and nationality.

The right to adequate nutrition, housing and medical services.

The right to special education and treatment when a child is physically or mentally handicapped.

The right to understanding and love by parents and society.

The right to recreational activities and free education.

The right to be among the first to receive relief in all circumstances.

The right to protection against all forms of neglect, cruelty and exploitation.

The right to be brought up in a spirit of understanding, tolerance, friendship among peoples, and universal brotherhood.

Humanium.org: <https://www.humanium.org/en/declaration-rights-child-2/>

Essential Questions

1. Do you think Janusz Korczak was a hero? Why or why not?
2. How did Janusz Korczak and Stefa Wilczynska create a stable and loving environment for the children?
3. After reading the Declaration on the Rights of a Child, are there any Rights you would add? Why?
4. Do you think children and adults should have separate Declaration of Rights? Why or why not?

Activity

Use The Declaration on the Rights of a Child to create a quilt drawing with 10 squares. Each square should consist of one of the "Rights" along with a drawing illustrating what that right means to you.

For older students in grades 8 and 9, you should also write a paper with one paragraph (4-5 sentences per paragraph) per quilt square, explaining what the "Right" is, what your illustration shows and what this "Right" means to you.

Readings and Resources

Books:

- *The King of Children: The Life and Death of Janusz Korczak* by Betty Jean Lifton. "The acclaimed biography of the first advocate of children's rights and the man known as the savior of hundreds of orphans in the Warsaw Ghetto."
- *A Light in the Darkness: Janusz Korczak, His Orphans, and the Holocaust* by Albert Marrin. "The story of Janusz Korczak, the heroic Polish Jewish doctor who devoted his life to children, perishing with them in the Holocaust."
- *Mister Doctor: Janusz Korczak & the Orphans of the Warsaw Ghetto* by Irene Cohen-Janca and Illustrated by Maurizio A.C. Quarello.
- *King Matt the First* by Janusz Korczak. "One of Korczak's most beloved tales. This is the story of a boy who becomes king and sets out to reform his kingdom."

Online Learning:

- United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, www.ushmm.org.
- Yad Vashem, www.yadvashem.org
- UNICEF, www.unicef.org
- Humanium, www.humanium.org