

**NOTES ON AN INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT OF  
KORCZAK'S PEDAGOGICAL LEGACY**



*Janusz Korczak*

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**WARSAW**

## Introduction

**T**he largest number of interpretations of Janusz Korczak's works come from Polish, Israeli, German and US scholars. He was also well received in Russia, Canada, Japan and lately several countries on African continent. The International Korczak Association (IKA) comprises of multiple national associations that can be found here: <https://www.korczak.org.uk/associations.html>. I hope that this paper will reach an audience in Portugal to share information about his heritage and perhaps even to evoke new interpretations of his works.

This paper is based on a personal journey to discover Korczak's legacy, made whilst completing the course "The Global Teacher" 2017-2018 (18 4565 018 2017/2018) at the University of Haifa, dedicated to Korczak's pedagogical and

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philosophical contributions. First I will introduce Janusz Korczak's biography to readers unfamiliar with his heritage. Then I will briefly refer to his major works, by attempting to answer two main questions related to cultural differences and the contextual nature of educational practice: could Korczak's pedagogy become universal - beyond cultural differences and therefore relevant in different cultures? Furthermore, based on this initial question, I would like to explore: could his pedagogy be employed as a baseline for teachers around the world?

In doing so, I will analyse a selection of published works about Korczak's legacy and engage with personal and educational practice in my own country that may be linked to his pedagogical thought. I noticed that in some circles around the world, Korczak is already considered one of the greatest pedagogues of the last century. In others, particularly in North America, he is less widely well known and I aim to encourage the mission to promote his writings and his ideas there. "The image of Korczak as a left winged writer, engaged in the critique of existing socio-political reality has become a thing of the past" (Smoliska-Theiss 2013, p. 17). "As well as the interpretation of his writings as an affirmation of collective upbringing" (c .f. *Ibidem*). Multiple lenses of enquiry were employed including a fresh publication by Liebel and Markowska-Manista (2017), which shifts the weight of understanding Korczak, towards children's rights in a multicultural context. Their recent interpretation fits closely with the premise of this paper.

#### Who was Korczak?

Based on information from two biographical works by Lifton (1988) and Bernheim (1989) I will briefly discuss Korczak's life history. Janusz Korczak was born in 1878, in Warsaw to a Jewish family (Poland was under Russian control at the time, due to the partitions of Poland). His birth name was Henryk Goldszmit (read Goldshmit), but he soon assumed a pen-name of Janusz Korczak when he started to write to Polish language newspapers. From birth, he embraced both Polish and Jewish identity, which at times of ethnic and religious conflict made him a link between two distinctive

worlds. His agnostic attitude towards institutionalized religion and positive take on spirituality, helped him to overcome faith based conflicts (c.f. Shner 2012a, Silverman 2006). He graduated as a doctor and specialized in paediatrics, but was forced to serve in the military during the Russian-Japanese war. Later on, voluntarily, he became a doctor and an officer in Polish Army during World War I and the Polish-Soviet war. When Poland re-gained independence he managed to study medicine in Berlin and designed his own orphanages, run like exclusive boarding schools, one for Jewish and one for Polish children, where his ideas of children's democracy took shape. He organized a "Little newspaper" written and run by children and he promoted the rights of children on his own radio programme. He also regularly visited a *kibbutz* in Palestine, where he gained inspiration for some of his philosophical ideas. Korczak is remembered as a tutor in a Jewish orphanage in Warsaw's ghetto during the Holocaust, where he entered voluntarily and as a martyr, who chose to die with the children he cared for, despite the possibilities he was given to avoid death. His most famous novels for children are "King Matt the First" (*Krol Macius I*) (1922) and "Kaytus the Wizard" (*Kajtus czarodziej*) (1933). Amongst his great scientific contributions to educational studies and children rights are: "Educational Moments" (*Momenty wychowawcze*) (1919), "How to Love a Child" (*Jak kochać dziecko*) (1919), "The Child's Right to Respect" (*Prawo dziecka do szacunku*) (1929) and a "Ghetto Diary" (1942).

According to B. Smolinska-Theiss (2013) he gained international recognition as one of the greatest pedagogues of the twentieth century. He is known as a critic of the existing socio-political reality, child-oriented educator, a social pedagogue and a researcher of childhood. Some, like M. Shner (2010), connect him to Stoic philosophy, others prefer to view him as a first pedagogue, who throughout a book entitled *Bobo* (1914) introduced a novel area of pedagogy connected to newborn babies' and toddlers (c.f. Odrowaz-Coates, Vucic 2017).

What is Korczak's pedagogical thought? Is there one?

"[...] There are no children, just people, but with a different conceptual scale, different ranges of experience, different urges, different emotional reactions. Remember that we do not know them...(Korczak 1967, p. 204)".

In my view, even if Janusz Korczak did not intend to produce long-lasting philosophical or pedagogical thought and perhaps was more engaged with children's upbringing in his own time and space, his thoughts produced child-centric educational goal posts, with methodical and coherent system of guidelines and beliefs about the socialization and education of children. I feel that due to the interest in his life and his writings, many seek ideological and epistemological grounding for his ideas. As learnt through the course at Haifa University (Dr. Moshe Shner - The Global Teacher 18 4565 018 2017/2018), this may be seen as a novel ideology, specific to Korczak's personality, his life situation and his personal convictions.

Furthermore, during this course I discovered an original concept by Moshe Shner (2010) of connecting the classical worldview of the Stoics to Korczak. Moreover, a spiritual dimension of his quasi ideology was found in his writings related to a utopian vision of the future land of Israel (c. f. Shner 2012b, Lewowicki 1994). At Polish higher education facilities, Janusz Korczak is often discussed during social pedagogy courses, yet he may also be noticed during philosophy courses at pedagogical departments. His pictures are frequently found at universities and sometimes at schools of different levels.

This for me is a sign that there the pedagogical thoughts of Janusz Korczak still exist and are relevant today. These pedagogical thoughts are very much connected to a child, viewed as an active agent, as an equal and as a person who has rights. Such concepts must have been incredibly novel and perhaps even very unpopular at his time. Moreover, it must have been rather unusual to find a man, who would be preoccupied with children, their play, their wellbeing, their health, growth and education.

Friedrich Fröbel (1782–1852), was also an exception, who pioneered nature education and children's development through play with the right kind of toys, but to give children voice (in the newspaper) to give children choice (the children's democracy) and to make it real and not just a practice or a play, was in my view, something incredible for Korczak's era. In his orphanage he established a 'peer court' and a self-governing parliament run by the children (Korczak, 1967, p. 351), whose main aim was to promote good, responsible citizenship. He found multiple benefits of engaging children with their own newspapers, amongst them, using his own words:

"It teaches a conscientious discharge of voluntary commitments, a work in a planned manner, based on the combined effort of various people. It teaches courage in voicing one's opinion and how to conduct a decorous controversy on the basis of argumentation rather than bickering [...]. It is the conscience of the community. You have a grievance – write to the paper. You are upset – write [...]. The newspaper is a link, which binds the class or school. Through it, complete strangers come to know each other. It puts a spotlight on those quiet and thoughtful ones who in solitary silence can express themselves on paper but whose voice is lost in a vocal dispute (Korczak 1967, pp. 379-380)."

The newspaper his children ran was called "Maly Przegląd" (Little Review) and was a bridge between Polish and Jewish children published nationally between 1926 and 1939 (c. f. Newerly 1967, p. 19).

#### The concept of children's rights - the cultural aspects

The discourse that Korczak chooses to describe children's curiosity and lack of experience, may serve as a good introduction to the intercultural discussion:

"[...] The child is a foreigner who does not understand the language or the street plan, who is ignorant of the laws and customs. Occasionally, he likes to go sightseeing on his own; and, when up against some difficulty, he asks for information and advice...." (Korczak 1967, p. 368).

A recent book entitled *Re-reading Janusz Korczak* (2017), which is a selection of previously published articles on Korczak translated into Polish, may be viewed as a symbol of intercultural reconciliation between several nations, through joint academic efforts in learning from the past and from Janusz Korczak's contributions to childhood and children's rights today. This symbolic dimension may also be found in the deep analysis of his thought in relation to the social inclusion and exclusion of children from diverse communities. The ever-present motto in this selection of papers is fully reflected by his conviction that the world should be 'repaired' starting from the mending of children's matters (c. f. p. 9). Child matters may be seen as more universal in more traditional societies than for example women's issues, when international law meets local tradition. An example may be found in Malaysia, where the Maqasid al-Shariah stood in conflict with the "Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)" and there was a heated debate about, which one should prevail (c. f. Afandi Salleh *et al.* 2016). M. Freeman (1992) maintains that Shulamith Firestone in 1970 pressurized feminist movements to include the fight against the oppression of children in feminist manifestos and to not follow the negligence displayed by men, who by being silent and unsupportive obstructed the women's cause.

As far as the common dialog goes, cultural differences may bring some incompatibility, especially around the issues of human rights and children's rights. Yet, all sane parents in the world love their children and want the best for them. So of course, do the educators. However, they may vary in the interpretation of what is the best for their children. For example, there is a known Biblical verse saying that the one who does not beat their child is the one who hates their child (*Proverbs 13:24*: "He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him."

*Proverbs 23:13*: "Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you punish him with the rod, he will not die). Despite differences in deciding what might be the best for the child in every society, children are the link to the past and the hope for the future. Therefore, Korczak is right, that children may be the uniting, common cause.

In fact Korczak's mixed heritage and being in-between cultures, religions, languages, reflects the experiences of many people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, due to migration and for example, more diverse choices in marriage. His thoughts resonate well with people experiencing an identity struggle and a search for belonging, as he felt that he did not fit in either of the communities and yet he identified strongly with both of them. He could also serve as an example of determination in face of adversity and a strong morale flagpole, that would not bend as the wind blows but stand up for his beliefs and maintain the high moral ground. Moreover, his attitude towards hard work, towards bettering oneself and life-long learning, makes a universal mold for modern educators and their students.

Will Korczak's concepts be accepted globally?

There is always a risk that the cultural and socio-political barriers may be too strong to overcome. In this context it may be worth noting that there was the "Moscow Declaration of Children Rights" (1918), referenced in Liebel & Markowska-Manista (2017). This document was produced earlier than the "Declaration of the Rights of the Child" adopted by the League of Nations in 1924, which was developed in Geneva, with Korczak as one of the delegates, proven by his signature (1923) on the original document. Yet, probably due to political reasons the initial Moscow declaration was never fully recognized (c. f. Liebel 2016). Korczak's influence in the initial Geneva declaration is felt in its ratification by the UN in 1959, through "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights" (1948) and again in the "Convention on the Rights of a Child" (1989).

An interesting aspect of re-thinking Korczak may be found in the African Charter of the Convention. The way that children's autonomy is interpreted may be

seen as tainted by Western bias, so having a separate charter, which accounts for cultural differences is perceived as the act of decolonization, yet it may also be an act of lowering the standards that Convention brings (c. f. Odrowaz-Coates (2018)). It is hard to decide what would be his point of view on this document. Either way echoes of his concepts may be found in all these documents.

#### Universalism in Korczak's ideas

Korczak may be seen as a critical pedagogue, almost a 'norm critical' pedagogue, norm critical for his times, but also in a more universal sense. In this way he wants to change the world for the better, not through revolution but through revealing social norms and social mechanisms and questioning them, putting them to the test and asking why? Who do they serve? Why one individual should have mastery over the other? He basically questions power hierarchies.

I feel that he also promotes a more open approach to dialogical pedagogy, which may be seen in his publications released a few years before Buber's "I and Thou" (1984), which was first published in German in 1923. However, Buber focuses more on a spiritual transcendence, whilst Korczak is more down to earth, with real life of children here and now, with their bodies, their roots and their persona. Sometimes we may even have a feeling that perhaps, 'I' - is the emerging I of a child and 'it' - is the teacher, boxed through previous experience, shaped and tailored to suit the culture, stuck in his or her narrow-mindedness, whilst the 'I' of a child is still wild and free, open to new experiences, not yet exclusionary - learning from 'it' to be stuck in the power structure and to obey.

Perhaps I go too far with my interpretations of it-I & I-it, but Korczak is not there to ask and we can only guess how far he would go with his ideology. We could say that he has created a form of ideology around childcare and upbringing that may be a reflection of a wider ideological underpinning and it may be interesting to pursue

the norm critical pedagogy<sup>3</sup> in his works. It may be a false trail, as Korczak does not deal directly with schooling and the school's routines. He does not refer directly to a teacher, but to adults' and children's relations in general. However, if we think of him as a critic of society and of the status of children in a wider sense, then school is one of the systems he referred to, making it possible to link him to norm critical pedagogy.

His concept of new spirituality or even the idea of a new 'almost faith' that would unite humanity has been a desire for so many free thinkers worldwide. Sadly, as much as humans need religion and need faith to feel more secure and to find meaning of life, religion in the wrong hands and interpreted in a wrong way may be a powerful tool of social control and social engineering (Durkeim 1912). In his writings one may find that Korczak was a religious and God fearing person, but not religious in a traditional sense, as a follower of a particular doctrine. He searched for a personal relation with God through individual dialog and prayer (c. f. Korczak 2018).

He supported ecumenical dialog between religions and faiths, granting education the central place in widening the narrow horizon of single conviction. Wringe (c. f. Freeman 1992) argues that the right to education should award people access to open global education and not incubate them in limiting 'emic' school indoctrination. It would be very hard to find a new faith, which would unite all humanity. Even if it were possible, I think that people would find a different way to create a distinction, based on eye color, wealth, health, or anything else, which would create conflict and discrimination. It does not mean we should not try to give our children a sense of responsibility for oneself and others, especially the weaker, the disadvantaged, the ones in need. Perhaps, this is the overall meaning behind Korczak's

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<sup>3</sup> Norm critical pedagogy aims to reveal how social norms create fields of exclusion / inclusion at school and in society, screening the power relations, questioning who is benefiting from certain norm creation and its reproduction and how norms dictate what is considered to be 'normal' and what is 'abnormal'. It was first developed in connection to gender related norms. Odroważ-Coates, A. "Is gender neutrality a post-human phenomenon? The concept of 'gender neutral' in Swedish education", *Journal of Gender and Power*, 3 (1) 2015, pp. 113-133.  
[https://repozytorium.amu.edu.pl/bitstream/10593/13996/1/Journal%20of%20Gender%20and%20Power%202015%20No.3%20%281%29Anna Odrowaz Coates.pdf](https://repozytorium.amu.edu.pl/bitstream/10593/13996/1/Journal%20of%20Gender%20and%20Power%202015%20No.3%20%281%29Anna%20Odrowaz%20Coates.pdf)

call to instill respect for any human being. Perhaps I went too far in my interpretation, this does not mean that racist or other discriminatory practice by fellow humans should be supported, but it means that respect breeds mutual respect and that the language of hate should be replaced by the language of acceptance.

#### Resistance to Korczak's thought

Amongst the barriers to Korczak's ideas, one may find traditional pedagogy, with authority figures and a social order that relies on age and experience. The idea of a child being socially programmed and 'tamed' is based on traditional power structures, which Korczak challenges. He sees adults more as the enablers and supporters of a child's independent curiosity than as disciplining and all-knowing. I think that it would be worth exploring whether the factors that block Korczak's ideas are inherent and imbedded in cultural contexts, or if they rely on a lack of exposure to children's rights concepts amongst educators and carers?

I believe that many country-specific pedagogies suffer from an ideological selection of philosophers on education and upbringing and that reproduction of social order, through repetition of their own childhood experiences by adults, may be a significant barrier. Perhaps people are afraid that the world leans towards a pre-figurative model of culture (c. f. Mead 1970) based on the digital revolution, which has somehow started to undermine the post-figurative culture's credentials, would be more hesitant of Korczak's idea of children's agency and freedom of choice. Adults are frightened to treat children as equals, because it requires a lot more effort. One cannot simply order a child to do what they are told, but must explain and reason. This may be a significant problem dependent on educational background and social stratification. Well-trained and dedicated educators could make a real change in this respect. The issue is how to engage them with Janusz Korczak's ideas during their training and if they are able to accept the following guidance from Korczak:

**"Be true to yourself, seek your own road. Learn to know yourself before you attempt to learn to know the children. You should realize what you are capable of before you begin to bring home to the children the scope of their rights and duties. Of them all, you yourself is the child whom you must learn to know, rear, and above all, enlighten... (Korczak 1967, p. 204)"**

## **Conclusion**

**The world has lost Korczak, but his heritage of humanity and pedagogical insights is still alive and has an impact in the world today.**

**I appreciate the way in which Korczak defined a child as "a complete person and not a person in making but a person here and now" (Shner 2014, p. 1). I believe that children should have their rights in life, just like adults. All that they need is deep understanding, much love and care and only then can they create a better world.**

**I may say that Korczak should be considered a hero, one who has struggled through hard conditions and bad experiences throughout his life, turning the direct impact of these conditions and experiences into a positive force. A force of revolutionary change in how I perceive children and their situation. His father's sickness caused him to take a decision not to build a family of his own and not to have biological children, as he feared they might have had genetically inherited the madness of their grandfather. Living with an internal struggle as well as the everyday life conflict and contraction between his Jewish identity and his Polish identity, did not prevent him to be equally engaged on both sides and finding a fair equilibrium for accommodating both of his identities. For instance he made efforts to manage a Polish and a Jewish orphanage and to keep them both at a high standard.**

**I feel that Korczak could become a role model for today's teachers. He was struggling for children's rights at all times and in all conditions. He fought for their dignity and for their future just because he loved them. Love was the driving force that might inspire many others. The need was his and not theirs. Unfortunately,**

nowadays there are still teachers who treat children as items, as objects, as things and not even as humans, that's why education is in danger today!

I propose that teachers should adopt Korczak's ideas and thoughts about children and find inspiration and courage to cultivate their own educational passions, like the one Korczak had towards children. Teachers must care for children and respect their needs and differences between them. Only then may we provide better, more pertinent education to build a better and brighter future.

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#### ABSTRACT

The paper's main aim is to introduce Janusz Korczak's pedagogical legacy to Portuguese readers. His pedagogical narratives are analysed through a lens of international contextuality of his times and of modern times, trying to identify both the universal and the controversial concepts. Korczak's contribution to the development of children's rights and his understanding of childhood and of being a child are discussed along directives for parents and teachers that may be found in his writings. This theoretical paper is meant to promote Korczak's works and to open a discussion with academics and practitioners, who are unfamiliar with his legacy. Moreover, it may also provoke Korczakians to re-read his intellectual heritage in multiple contexts and multiple ways, demonstrating that his concepts are still open to interpretation and therefore forever up to date.

#### Key words

Korczak, children's rights, childhood, pedagogy, philosophy of education, intercultural

## RESUMO

O principal objectivo deste artigo é apresentar a herança pedagógica de Janusz Korczak aos leitores portugueses. As suas narrativas pedagógicas são analisadas através de uma lente da contextualidade internacional da sua época e dos tempos modernos, tentando identificar tanto os conceitos universais como os controversos. A contribuição de Korczak para o desenvolvimento dos direitos das crianças e a sua compreensão da infância e de como é ser uma criança são discutidos assim como directivas para pais e professores que se encontram nos seus textos. Este ensaio teórico pretende promover as obras de Korczak e iniciar uma discussão com académicos e profissionais, que não conheçam a sua herança. Poderá, além disso, incitar os Korczakianos a lerem a sua herança intelectual em múltiplos contextos e modos, demonstrando que os seus conceitos ainda estão abertos a interpretação e, portanto, serão actuais para sempre.