

**CAN EDUCATION BE THE MEETING PLACE OF ALL HUMANITY?
UNIVERSAL HUMANISM
IN THE THOUGHT AND PRACTICE OF JANUSZ KORCZAK**

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The 20th century taught us some harsh lessons about humankind and its capacity to cruelly mistreat others. The chaos that the Holocaust brought in its wake led to a profound sense of despair. Through the story of Janusz Korczak, we are given an exemplary starting point for renewing the belief in a better world, capable of overcoming the bitter antagonism that rages between diverse social groups, religions and nationalities. The aim of this study is to investigate the hypothesis that Korczak, who lacked a true sense of belonging to his Jewish origins and who was never fully accepted into the Polish social milieu, developed universal humanism based on the sake of the child, a substitute home and a homeland for all men. I argue that the core of Korczak's identity lies in his alienation from both his Polish and his Jewish background, and in his inability to be at home in any national milieu. The cause of children, all children, became his nationality, a universal homeland. Education should be blind to differences of race, religion, nationality or any social exclusion. I would also argue that this alternative milieu is a classical Jewish response to the reality of modern times when both Jewish traditional life and European society failed to give Jews a clear sense of identity.

The Holocaust overshadows Korczak's legacy. Few have looked beyond the story of Korczak's heroic death and a superficial identification of his inspiring educational ideas into the backbone of his legacy. These accounts also overlook Korczak's predicament as a lonely person, one who was torn between two opposing worlds: his hopes for resurrection of the Jewish people in his country and his being Polish to the marrow (Sharshavsky, 1990; Perlis, 1986). Throughout the course of his life, Korczak hoped that his work with children would build the longed-for bridge between Jews and non-Jews. Sadly, nonetheless, all his public education work was marked by the failure to construct this living bridge between these two worlds.

Most people who heard about Korczak know only the final chapter of his life — the last march on August 5th, 1942 (others claim it was August 6th) with 192 children (196 in other accounts) and a few (8-10) staff members from Sienna street on one side of the ghetto to the deportation square on the other side, where they boarded the train to Treblinka (Mortkowicz-Olczakowa, *Last Road*, 98-100; *Hayey Janusz Korczak*, 93-101). This is the tragic end of Korczak's life and work but as far as we associate Korczak with this story alone, we do not do justice to his legacy. Korczak's story began to unfold many years prior to World War II and his significance should not be limited to our reflections on this catastrophic chapter in human history. Korczak's story has a much larger context – the Jewish struggle for life, emancipation and meaning in modern, pre-WWII Europe.

When Korczak entered the Warsaw ghetto with his orphan children in November 1940 he already had more than thirty years of educational work behind him, having served as the director of two orphanages, one for Polish Jewish children and the other for Polish Christian children. In young post-World War I Poland and on the European scene alike, Korczak was a well-known figure: social activist, paediatrician, writer, journalist, philosopher of education and pioneering educator in practice. His ideas on children's rights were included by the League of Nations in the first international declaration of the Rights of the Child in Geneva, 1924.¹ He was not only a theoretician or a practitioner, but rather a total educator who combined both rich writings about education and pioneering educational practice.

Korczak ideas about education inspire educational thinking all over the world: a better world would come about through better education and a better education depends on a different understanding of children and childhood. Childhood is an essential part of life, a chapter to be respected – neither more nor less – than adulthood. The child should be viewed as a complete person – not a person in the making – but a person in the here and now, albeit one with different needs, capabilities and limitations than an adult. Childhood should be respected for its own sake – not as a corridor leading to adulthood

¹ The first Declaration of the Rights of the Child was drafted by Eglantyne Jebb and adopted by the International Save the Children Union, Geneva, on 23 February 1923 and endorsed by the League of Nations General Assembly on 26 November 1924 as the World Child Welfare Charter. The original document, in the archives of the city of Geneva, carries the signatures of various international delegates, including that of Janusz Korczak.

– and it should not be sacrificed for the sake of future years. Each and every stage of life has its own value and should be lived in full. Educators have responsibility not only for years that will elapse in the distant future but for a child’s life in the present. Children have rights that should be respected, so that they may grow up and fulfill their talents and capabilities. Education is an endless task, providing the child – through love, good will, common sense and tolerance – with the possibility to experience happiness in his childhood years.

Korczak’s ideas were translated into inspiring realities: the children’s democracy that he implemented in both of his orphanages, and popular media designed for children, which included a newspaper, a program on the Polish radio – “the Old Doctor’s Corner”, and his books for children, such as *King Mathew the First* (1923) and *Kajtush the Magician* (1935).

Education, according to Korczak, was the expanse upon which the future of the world will be built. To counteract a world of evil, poverty, and humiliation, Korczak attempted to weave a haven of mutual respect, justice, and faith. But what is the source of this legacy? What foundations gave birth to the world of Korczak? We do not have a definitive answer. Korczak's ideas and educational work, as inspiring as they are, remain marginalized in the field of educational philosophy and the history of education. Scholarly education studies hardly deal with Korczak. Why?

In attempting to answer this question, we must recognize the fact that Korczak himself is at least partially to blame. His writings are fragmentary, and he repeatedly expressed his adamant opposition to elaborate educational theories, including his own. The result is that many of those who wrote about Korczak were satisfied with a face-value presentation of his ideas. They could not find any ordering principles behind them and could not define the context by which they could be articulated (Shner, *Two Educators*, 2011). I would argue that Korczak’s world of education was a Jewish one, but not in any traditional sense. It was a cosmopolitan world – no place, no nationality, no defined religion. It is a realm that gives meaning and a sense of belonging to a person – in this case the modernized and assimilated Jew – who is divorced from any historical or cultural domain, and desperately seeks to find one that he or she can belong to.

1. Who was Korczak: a Jew, a Pole, both or neither?

Polish or Jewish? The question of Korczak's identity has occupied the thoughts of several scholars. Those who saw themselves as disciples of his legacy claimed him as one of their own (Sadan, 1964; Gutterman, *National Identity* 61-71; *Jewish Roots*, 41-84; Tal, 4; Cohen, 45-61; Perlis, *Jewish Fate*, 368-374; Korczak's *Nationality* 585-590; Sharshavsky, 1990). One may offer a dissimilar interpretation of Korczak: that he failed to be at home on either side.

This study will not present new historical data about Korczak's identity. One cannot divulge a secret document proving that Friday night candles were lit in his parents' home or other facts of this sort – there doesn't appear to be any such evidence. Nevertheless, the rereading of data collected thus far by Korczak's historians may enable us to construct a new understanding of his identity and the crucial role that education played in his life.

Much has already been written about the significance of Korczak's dual national affiliation and his roots in Polish culture together with his Jewish identity. A few claimed that his dedication to children's welfare is the fruition of a basic concept in Jewish tradition of looking after and caring for one's fellow man, a Jewish notion that was perpetuated – as it would be claimed – in Korczak's heart even without his being aware of it. Further proof of Korczak's long-lasting Jewishness – as it has been argued – was demonstrated in his voluntarily following the long tradition of Jewish martyrdom: *Kiddush Hashem* (the sanctification of God's name). In this perspective, the last chapter of his life defines and gives meaning to his entire life's work, but such a line of argumentation is problematic. In his work Korczak sanctified life, not death, and he did so not in Jewish terminology. In his diary – his most reflective text – as well as other writings, he elucidates his educational mission, yet barely relates it to any elements of Judaism.

A superior reading is offered by those historians who emphasize Korczak's double identity. In her thorough and elaborate work (*Two Homelands*, 1990), Miriam Sharshavsky adopted a more sophisticated, and therefore, probably more accurate reading of Korczak. She emphasizes his double identity and the complex, multifaceted

human situation that his character represents, as a man who was constantly torn between his connection to Polishness and his undeniable link to the Jewish people.

It is a sound theoretical framework, although the known data invite also a different interpretation. It is plausible that the core of Korczak's identity lies, not in his belonging to a certain social circle, or in his belonging – as Sharshavsky proposes – to two identities, but rather in his not belonging to any nationality and in his tragic failure to feel at home in any national milieu (Shner, *Between Two Worlds*, 1996; *Two Educators*, 2011). This sense of homelessness is the thread that runs through the different stages of Janusz Korczak – Henryk Goldszmit's life. This very characteristic of Korczak's life defines his Jewish identity and motivated his educational pathos. Korczak is a tragic hero not only in his death but also in the impossible situation of homelessness and lack of any identity that characterized his entire life. Korczak more closely resembles a Greece tragic hero than a Biblical figure. His inspiring dream remained unfulfilled and what is known to all is his last journey to Treblinka.

2. The confusion over Jewish identity in modern times

George Steiner, a contemporary thinker and literary researcher, describes modern Jewish identity as based on detachment and homelessness (Steiner, *Language and Silence*). It is the fate of the modern Jew to be the lonely stranger, but this is also what defines his identity. The destiny of the Jew, which is unquestionably difficult, is to be the eternal guest. Only trees, claims Steiner, not people, set down roots in the ground. He turns Jewish homelessness into a moral challenge and even a moral mission: “If trees have roots, then people better have legs and just be guests at each other homes” (Steiner, *Language and Silence*, 15). First and foremost the Jew is loyal to human dignity, the “image of God” in Man, and the struggle against nationalism and fascism in all its forms and facets. Korczak provides us with a vivid example of this kind of identity.

With regards to modern Jewish identity, we realize that the Jew in the 20th century was often molded not by a specific cultural content, but rather through the lack of it, through detachment, confusion and a desperate search for spiritual meaning in life. After hundreds of years of secularization and efforts to achieve emancipation in

European society, Jewish identity in the mid-20th century was a fractured one that possessed little self-confidence. In the pre-emancipation period, the world of Rabbinic tradition was a kind of a portable home for the Jewish person, yet this “being at home” collapsed in modernity. Emancipation was built upon nurturing the Jewish dream of becoming fully integrated in the surrounding non-Jewish society. We could find, among liberal Jewish circles, an ideology of assimilation, rationalizing in different ways the abandonment of what remained from the traditional Jewish world. Towards the end of the 19th century this struggle for equality and integration reached the stage of impasse; the modernized Jew was displaced and alienated both from his previous being and from the Gentile-like image, which he tried to adopt.

Korczak’s life best symbolized this tragic reality of a generation of Jewish intellectuals that were caught between earth and sky. While the nucleus of their being was torn and bereft of all illusion of emancipation on one hand, it was distanced and alienated from the Jewish world on the other. Jean Améry, another 20th century Jewish intellectual who deeply felt this loneliness, worded the paradox of modern Jewish identity as follows: “I cannot be a Jew but has no choice” (*Amery, At the Minds Limits*, 82-101).² Jewish identity becomes an exterritorial border zone which the Jewish person cannot leave if he or she remains loyal to itself. Amery argued that it was the experience of a whole generation of Jews, probably “numbering into millions” (*Ibid*, 94). Korczak was one of them.

Korczak – torn between two worlds – had hoped that his many years of devoted efforts on behalf of the children would build the longed-for bridge between Jews and non-Jews. The modern Jew – ever since the days of Moses Mendelsohn in 18th century Berlin – deceived himself into believing that dual identity was possible. The tragic and heroic story of Korczak bore painful witness to the crumbling of this naïve vision in the mid-20th century. The same Polish society that willingly embraces Korczak in the 21st century pushed him outside then, in the thirties of the previous century. I would not dare mention the collapse of Jewish integration in Europe had it not been said by Korczak

² Jean Améry was born into an assimilated family by the name of Hans Mayer and died in 1978 in Salzburg. At this time, he lived in Belgium, as a cosmopolitan humanist and a Jew. He was completely devoid of religion or aspects of Jewish national culture but claimed that his Jewish identity was forced upon him by history and is based on feelings of deep alienation, desperate search for human solidarity. His identity is best symbolized by the number tattooed on his left arm (*Amery, Mind’s Limits*, p. 94).

himself. He candidly admitted the failure of his life's work, and the impasse at which he arrived. In Poland, he said bitterly in those last years of Polish independence, he was an object devoid of value, and in Israel he would be regarded as impotent and lacking any real significance.

Dov Sadan, a Korczak scholar, wrote the following comment with sensitivity and empathy:

the importance of a man, whose dream showed him one mold, the mold of a man, but whose reality showed him two molds, the first of the Polish people, to which he was clearly connected, and the other of the Jewish people to which he was connected in a dim way, and the core of his life was the winding and twisting between these two peoples. [...] but in the center of his way of life, the man was divided into two: his culture one and his life another [...]. Here we have a soul wounded in both sides [...] and he must defend himself from both sides (Sadan, *Avnei Gvul* 218-219, my trans. M.S.)

The core of Korczak's identity was his stance of being caught in a state of limbo, plagued by profound feelings of not belonging, which he most likely experienced as an insult. At this point in his life we meet his attempt – a somewhat pathetic one – to solve this divide with the building of an ideal home for children which will bypass the old boundaries of European society. We should understand his educational life's work, being completely dedicated to the child, as a creative attempt to build for himself and his generation a world in which he could be a full and undeniable citizen.

3. Korczak the Pole – deep-rootedness and illusion

Korczak was well-versed in Polish culture, and Polishness was the milieu in which he created. This is clearly illustrated in the way Korczak described his life to the Jewish council in the Warsaw ghetto, in an application seeking the position of director in a second orphanage (*Ghetto Years*, 230-234). In that letter, he depicted himself as the epitome of a Polish intellectual and public figure, deeply immersed in Polish culture and society.

Another example of this could be seen years earlier, when Korczak was trying to decide upon a pseudonym for a literary contest. The name he chose, which later became his identity, was that of a figure from the Polish national heritage. It is not a marginal biographical detail that the literary Polish mask became his permanent name. Only in the days of the ghetto would Korczak once again sign his papers as Korczak-Goldszmit. Did Korczak-Goldszmit chose this Polish pseudonym as his name for life because he felt the need to be more Polish than the Poles, because, somehow, somewhere, he was also a Jew? His identification with the Polish name probably reveals an apologetic element deep in his personality as a “genuine” Pole is exempted from this extra effort. Later, when being Polish was no longer possible, Korczak discovered he could not manage without it. The mask became an inseparable part of his identity.

As a Pole, Korczak took part in four wars and saw himself as a Polish patriot to the end of his life (Perlis, *BeMaale HaYezira*, 12-17). Marshal Piłsudski, the leader of post WWI new Poland was an exemplary persona for Korczak. During the first weeks of the Nazi occupation Korczak endangered himself with the pathetic gesture of Polish patriotism by walking around in a Polish officer’s uniform. He was subsequently sent to the Pawiak, the notorious Gestapo prison, but he remained true to his identity as a Polish patriot. Reports on record about Korczak at the beginning of the war and during the first days of the German occupation show a period of revival in his life, almost happiness. He felt that he belonged and this renewed his sense of purpose and self-worth. Korczak enthusiastically embraced his being part of the Polish nation. Therefore it was doubly painful that Polish society, and later the German occupation, refused to recognize his identity and identification.

In his ghetto diary we find the following statement: “Warsaw is mine and I am Warsaw” (*Ghetto Years*, 128). He belonged to Warsaw, he rejoiced and grieved with the city. But this kind of declaration of loyalty was superfluous to a Polish person. Probably, only a Jewish Pole felt the need to openly make such a declaration.

For years, Korczak fought to obtain permission to educate also Polish children, besides Jewish children, and this opportunity was finally given to him by Maryna Falska in 1919, when the two of them founded the Our Home (Nasz Dom) orphanage. Korczak made a conscious and deliberate effort to be known as a Polish persona, to gain

legitimacy in being a Pole. However, in spite of his patriotic attitude, Poland in its first years of independence reveals to us a sad and skeptic Korczak with the ugly images of the war embedded in his heart. His ever-increasing focus on education, first in the Krochmalna Jewish orphanage and then in Our Home Christian Orphanage was of itself an estrangement from the world of adults while centring on the domain of children. The adult world placed Korczak in an existential dilemma from which his educational work allowed him to escape – so it seems – for several years.

Undoubtedly, Korczak was the product of Polish society with all that is good and noble in it, and all efforts of contemporary Korczak scholars to cover up this fact are apologetic and superficial. Be that as it may, when Korczak was categorized as a Pole he was a “Jewish Pole”, even before he identified himself as such. His “Polishness” was just short of being automatic.³ His belonging was not immediate and it demanded constant legitimation. It was not a simple “Polishness”, alive, in the sense of a milieu of fruitful creativity of which the creator is not aware of its existence, but a heart’s desire and belief that with good will and dedication one may achieve this propagative belonging.

Korczak’s interest in the poor and in social justice, first expressed in his continuing story of 1900, *Children of the Street* (*Dzieci ulicy*, Warsaw 1901) and its sequel *The Salon Children* (*Dziecko salonu*, Warsaw 1906), reflects many traits of the tradition of Jewish intelligentsia who believed that social activism would enable their acceptance into the non-Jewish society. The social struggle created a social and ethical milieu, which gave the Jews a sense of belonging and significance as Polish citizens. Korczak’s growing affiliation with the radical left is only one of concern and involvement in Polish society. At the same time, it is typical of a Jewish intellectual who wants to belong by altruism and through the negation of the Jewish elements in his identity.⁴

The twenties of the 20th century were stable and fruitful years of educational labour for Korczak, in which he appeared to realize his universal vision. However, this educational activity demanded a certain amount of blind sight to the anti-Semitism which was present around him at that time. He wanted to see anti-Semitism as a

³ See similar idea expressed by Sir Joshua Berlin in “Slavery and Emancipation on the identity of the Jews in Germany” (1953).

⁴ Jewish involvement in the radical left at the turn of the century is a well-known subject in itself (See Sharshesky, pp. 24-33).

temporal moral fault in Polish society, to be repaired through education and good will and not necessarily a national Jewish problem, which was his as a Jew (Sharshesky, 76-77). This too, if you will, is a repression, typical of Jewish intellectuals. Korczak never ceased to hang on to encouraging signs and only the thirties and the forties brought the crumbling of the sweet illusion of cosmopolitan humanistic existence in Poland.⁵

4. Korczak the Jew – solidarity and detachment

It is clear that Korczak felt a degree of solidarity towards the Jews in Poland, however, he was not familiar with the intensive life in the largest Jewish diaspora, its culture and language. He did not share the everyday life of the large Jewish population in Warsaw; instead, he looked upon it from the outside.

Korczak came from a well-to-do home, where he received a genuinely Polish upbringing, almost entirely devoid of any scrap of Jewish culture or education. He could, perhaps, understand a bit of Yiddish, the language of the Jewish masses, but he could not speak it, and certainly not write it (Perlis, *Final Chapter*, 57-59).

Korczak's pale Jewish identity is quite typical of that era in Jewish history. The story of Korczak's family represents that of the larger Jewish community, even more so in central and western Europe, as it continued to gravitate towards its non-Jewish surroundings, and gradually lost the familiar traits of Jewish customs and rituals. With Korczak, the authentic traditional Jewish home was already beyond the horizons of his personal memory – he was familiar with the family genealogy, but distanced himself from its culture (Perlis, *Final Chapter*, 64-82; Korczak, *Ghetto Years*, 197-198): Korczak's great-grandfather was a religious person who kept a traditional way of life, pedantically returning home from his work as a glazier for the Sabbath. The grandfather, after whom Korczak is named, was a Hebrew intellectual and a medical doctor by profession. The father, a lawyer involved in Polish society, worked for the expansion of Judaic studies in the Polish language. His children were given Christian

⁵ The difference in reaction between Korczak and Jean Améry is interesting. Korczak never relinquished the illusion of "Polishness". Améry testified that he suddenly understood the illusion and accepted the fact that he was a Jew, and therefore he does not belong (Améry, *Mind's Limits*, pp. 84-90).

names. Henryk Goldszmit – Janusz Korczak – already grew up in atmosphere of an assimilated Polish family.

The assimilated Jew in Europe had a dream, which he strove to realize all his life – to be like everyone else, accepted in the general society, known in his profession, similar in his way of life. This dream was destined to be shattered time and time again.

Korczak scholars are in disagreement about his Jewish identity, and a few tend to see in Korczak's diary descriptions of his ancestors clear evidence of the strong ties he had with his people and heritage (Gutterman, 75-77; Kahana, 177-178), but we must remember that Korczak wrote these words in old age, when the reality of anti-Judaism had already shattered his dreams of a pluralistic Poland. Secondly, the family narrative he offers is a story of growing detachment that Korczak is aware of. Lastly, this description, warm as it is, does not appear in any of Korczak's open publications, in which we can hardly find any mention of the fact that he was Jewish. These were concealed thoughts and feelings of the heart until the last days of his life.

When does a Jew understand that he is not a Pole? There is moment in the life of an assimilated Jew in which he understands that he is still different, that he is not "really" Polish. Sharshevsky brings the words of Aleksander Hertz, Korczak's peer, on the negation of his self-image as a Pole upon entering high school (Sharshevsky, *Two Worlds*, 33). Jean Améry recalled the day he sat in a Viennese café, reading the Nuremberg laws in the newspaper. He immediately understood that society classified him as a Jew, an inferior human being. In his diary, Korczak gives an account of how the gatekeeper's son threw his being Jewish at him, which meant his being different and therefore not belonging. The description is taken from the world of the child, who wanted to place a cross on the grave of his beloved bird. It would appear, on the face of it, a childhood story, but in retrospect it is suffused with meaning for old Korczak: for the first time society made him aware of his Jewish roots as a sign of inferiority and "otherness". Thus he understood that he was regarded as being different, of seemingly lesser value, cast into a status of basic non-belonging.

When, in my teaching, I listen to the stories of young people who came from different parts of the former Soviet Union, many of them relay similar experiences. They grew up without a Jewish upbringing and their being Jewish was of no importance

in their lives until society, through some act, made them aware of their erroneous notion. Sometimes it happened at school, sometimes on the street or at the home of a non-Jewish friend. In each case the incident changed their self-awareness and brought home the fact that they were different.

Korczak met the "Jewish question" and Zionism relatively early while studying medicine in Warsaw (Sharshevsky, 31). His articles about poor Jewish children, published anonymously in the pages of the *Israelita* in 1904, elucidate his involvement in the question of Jewish life in Poland. These articles reflect Korczak's growing concern about this social problem; his having written the articles anonymously reflects, perhaps, an attempt to hide this fact. Korczak encountered Jewish children in a summer camp in 1906. It is clear that Korczak was aware of the "Jewish problem" in general and of his Jewish roots in particular, but throughout his life he also made an ongoing attempt to find his niche in the Polish society and its culture. Korczak was aware of the complications that being Jewish imposed upon him. When he spoke of his painful personal decision not to have children, he specified that being a Polish Jew is what prevented him from doing so (letter to Moshe Zilbertal on March 30th 1937, Korczak, *Dat Hayeled*, 198).

His appeal to the Jewish children in the summer camp, to the sick and the orphaned, derived less from feelings of national solidarity or Jewish ethos and more from noble ideas of love of Humanity in general, social awareness and his dedication to people, which Korczak developed in his youth as part of that radical socialistic activity in the general Polish society. He expressed a kind of dual altruism: a Jew voids his national existence in favor of the struggle for Polish society and then, with the same willingness and sensitivity, goes back and extends a helping hand particularly to the Jewish child.

Korczak wanted to believe that the social struggle would bring an end to the painful duality of his world and would thus foster the acceptance of Jews into general society. However, years of work as an educator, writer and public figure, filled him with disappointment, when he witnessed the continual treacherous behavior towards Jewish children even in free Poland. Once, in a Jewish summer camp, one of the counselors expressed fear that one of the children might, heaven forbid, drown in the river;

Korczak replied with bitter sarcasm: “And what, if he drowns? Isn’t it the best solution for a Jewish orphan?” (Perlis, *Yaldut shel Kavod*, 19).

5. A Jewish orphanage

The years following the suppression of the Russian Revolution of 1905 were a period of crises for the radical left movements. The shattering of the vision of the brotherhood of men disclosed the basic instinct of cultural survival of Jews and contributed to the channeling of efforts by Jewish intellectuals to new horizons and to the strengthening of Jewish national consciousness, Jewish social solidarity and philanthropy. In 1912 Korczak was chosen director of the Jewish orphanage, created by Jewish philanthropists, which moved from Franciszkańska street to Krochmalna street. This, amongst other things, brought about closer ties between Korczak and the Jewish community. From 1919 Korczak also headed the *Nasz Dom* orphanage, which was actually run by Maryna Falska. The reality of the two orphanages and the young educators’ schools connected to them offered Korczak the material for his educational writings and the place to put into practice his special approach to education.

Korczak, in partnership with Stefa Wilczyńska and Maryna Falska, worked to implement in each of the two institutions a holistic educational experience which lived within itself, following different social values and codes of behavior from the adult world which surrounded them. It was a micro-cosmos which was to serve as the model of a new society, where the Jew is not different and alien and where the child, every child, is respected and treated according to his needs, regardless of his religious, national or racial identity.

The Krochmalna orphanage gave the impression of being a universal institute on the surface level. In actuality, however, it was a Polish institution in its culture, with an orientation of assimilation, which sought to merge the Jewish masses into Polish society. Only in the twenties, due to changes in the circumstances and up-keep of the national movement, was more room given to the study of Hebrew and the *Sidur*, the Jewish daily prayer book, and some Jewish appearance was given to the life in the orphanage. Within the walls of the Krochmalna orphanage there was a certain

indifference to questions of institutionalized religion but there was respect for the religious feelings of the children (Sharshavsky, 99-101).

Korczak scholars claim that he made sure to accommodate the residents with a prayer corner in the orphanage and saw it as a sign of commitment to Jewish tradition. Yet, the reality of Korczak's religiosity is different; It only proved Korczak's humanistic sensitivity and empathy to the deep feelings of others. He was not familiar with Jewish rituals, but saw to it that children who were interested in praying could do so. In the same way, he responded to the spiritual needs of Christian children. It does not prove that he was Christian as well; it proves only his tolerance towards all faiths, the respect he had for the religious feelings of his children and the understanding that religion is a genuinely human phenomenon. Korczak expressed in several places his interest as an educator in the religiosity of people. One can educate without established religion but he or she cannot educate without addressing God in his or her educational discourse (*Dat HaYeled*, 97). Thus, he demonstrated that the major life-and-death questions are religious in their essence.

The total devotion of Korczak to his Jewish children – together along with his commitment to his non-Jewish children – strengthened the myth of his return to Jewish life. However, it is more likely that Korczak was actually removed from Jewish life until the onset of WWII. The pluralistic place of religious sentiments in his work and the universal language he used in his writings illustrate his universal humanism rather than his Jewishness.

6. Zionism and Jewish identification

Already in the twenties, with the strengthening of Zionism after WWI, Korczak took a closer look at the Zionist enterprise. During those years, he got closer to the Jewish pioneering youth movements in Poland. The Hashomer Hatzair (a leftist Zionist youth movement) cell in Warsaw contacted children at the Krochmalna orphanage and invited them to join its various activities. These meetings began to bear fruit in the second half of the twenties when some atmosphere of Zionism and the Land of Israel penetrated the institution.

Korczak himself began to show interest in the Zionist settlement enterprise, partly because of the reality in Poland and partly because of those young educators who immigrated to the Land of Israel. In 1925, after much deliberation, he became party to the wording of a proclamation by the Jewish intelligentsia of Warsaw favouring the Zionist experiment. This was distributed in honour of the arrival of a delegation of the “Keren Ha-Kayemet Le-Israel”, the Jewish national fund, in Poland.

On this soil, the soil of Eretz Yisrael was the Jewish genius reborn; the Jew, who throughout hundreds of years of slavery, of humiliating exile, dispossessed of creative works, returns to be a man who is consistent with productive work.⁶

Korczak was hesitant about joining this proclamation because its essence was support and obligation to the building of a Jewish nationality and an affiliation with a new Jewish homeland rather than their present countries. His attitude had changed and he was now more open to these ideologies. While in 1900 Korczak sharply rejected similar invitations, he now added, through struggle and reservations, his signature to the proclamation.

In 1926, Korczak participated in a conference of Hebraic educators in Warsaw. That Korczak had moved nearer to Jewish nationality and Zionism was made evident also through the weekly magazine, “Mały Przegląd”, which included many reports from the land of Israel. Towards the end of October 1926, Korczak’s “call to the children of Eretz Israel” was distributed and around Chanukah he published an essay about Mattathias, the Hasmonean. At the end of the twenties, HeHalutz, another pioneering Zionist movement, contacted the orphanage and political activities were stepped up. Korczak, who still advocated the Jewish future in Poland, supported neither the Zionist faction nor the communist camp in the political debate which flared within the walls of the institution.

At the end of the twenties and with the rise of the Nazis in Germany in the thirties, Korczak began to grasp that his utopian universalism could never transpire on European soil. His statement, “the problem ‘man’, his past and future on earth – over shadows the problem ‘Jewish’”(*Dat HaYeled*, 177, 28/1/1928) now seemed naïve and deserved a

⁶ Korczak. *Dat Ha-Yeled*, p. 13.

new reading. Korczak felt convinced that there was a reciprocal link between national rebirth in the Land of Israel and the liberation of the children, and he became more and more involved in Zionist matters.

The group of graduates who left for Israel also grew, as others followed and they pleaded with Korczak to join them. The Land of Israel became part of his humanistic thinking. On October 8th, 1932 he wrote to Joseph Arnon in Israel: “My hope is not lost, that my few remaining years will be spent in Eretz Israel missing Poland from there” (*Dat Ha-Yeled*, 177).

7. The land of hope

Universal humanism was also the prism through which he saw the Land of Israel – the meeting place of all human prayers. Sadly, we have to admit that the Land of Israel, Palestine, is until today an area of bitter conflicts among different nationalities and faiths, a source religious fanaticism, hatred and violence. In those years Korczak drew for this troubled land different utopic horizons – the meeting place of all men behind the cause of the child, the world ‘s sanctuary of education.

In the twenties of the 20th century Korczak still lived his Polish patriotism and rejected the suggestions of immigration, however he did not reject the Zionist experiment. The Jews’ return to their homeland – he claimed – is a historical necessity. Nonetheless, he was totally aware of the existential distance between exile Jews and their ancient homeland. He understood the enormous human difficulties that the act of return carried with it, and – contrary to the general mood in the pioneering Zionist movement in those days – urged his former students to acknowledge it. In a letter to a friend in Israel on January 27th, 1928, Korczak described this humanistic understanding of the nature of being in exile:

Torn from the land, we acclimated to a soil of pines, snow and exile – physically and morally. The attempt to tie together two ends of the string that was untied two thousand years ago, is difficult matter: it will succeed because this is what history demands, but how much efforts and suffering (*Dat Hayerled*, 176).

The exile is expressed in spiritual distance from Eretz Israel and physical incompatibility to the climate, sunlight, landscape, the physical reality of Israel. Korczak, the physician and educator, had a holistic approach; his perception of exile was of an existential situation encompassing all aspects of the person's selfhood.

The rise of fascism in Germany encouraged manifestations of anti-Semitism in Poland as well and the years 1934-1939 were years of increasing hatred of the Jews and a restriction of their freedom. These were also the years in which Korczak as a Polish public figure finds the ground caving in under his feet. The result of this was, as with many other Polish- and European Jews, that Korczak experienced an ever-growing and increasing sense, not of his own volition, of Jewish belonging. With Korczak the feeling was of a strong loss of home.

The hostile environment had a major influence on the atmosphere in the orphanage. The two sides become extreme: the Zionists, on the one, and the communist, on the other. Polish patriotism disappeared and Korczak experienced ever-increasing alienation between himself and the best of his pupils. This alienation was but another facet of Korczak's forced multi-faceted exile, for both the belonging to the Polish society and to the Jewish people cannot be fully realized. Korczak was unable to identify himself with any of the other alternatives.

In a letter on November 27th 1933 Korczak expressed a universal view of the Zionist experiment: "The world does not need new work and more oranges, but rather a new belief" (*Dat HaYeled*, 179). This can be realized in Eretz Israel. For Korczak, the Zionist enterprise was a humanistic revolution, in which only the universal dimension is that which gives it meaning. The national dimension, which also affected Korczak himself through the need for offering asylum to a persecuted people – hardly emerged.

The letters in that year, 1933, showed the increasing difficulty Korczak had in working in Poland. However, when he brought up the question of immigration to Palestine, he raised painful soul-searching deliberation out of the deep understanding of his inability to adapt to life there or continue to be active as an author in a new language and as an educator without common language with the children. (*Dat HaYeled* 181)

In a letter on March 20th, 1933 Korczak clearly expressed the dilemma that the outside circumstances created. Here he describes the conditions that push him outside of

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Poland, and the difficulties facing an old Jew rooted in the Polish language, trying to acclimate himself in Eretz Israel:

There is much work to do here, in Poland. I do not stand aside, lazy, for this is my climate and my growth, the tradition and the people I know – and a language I command freely. There [in Israel] everything will be strange and different (*Dat HaYeled*, 182).

In a few words Korczak captured the entire tragedy of the Diaspora Jews, that circumstances of the century forced upon them a Jewish identity and a painful decision of immigration. For Korczak, rooted with every fibre of his being in Poland, there was no national ideology to sweeten the bitter pill.

Meanwhile, Korczak's interest in the land of Israel increased and he visited twice, in 1934 and 1936. He planned a third trip, perhaps with the purpose of settling, but the trip never materialized. Approximately 50 letters have been found which Korczak sent to friends and former pupils in Eretz Israel as well as pages of a diary his second trip. All these paint a broad and painful picture of Korczak's relationship to the land of Israel and his Jewish identity. His visits to Eretz Israel reinvigorated him with the power to create and a vision and belief in Man.

While in Israel, Korczak came to terms with the historical meaning of Zionism and the momentous significance of his own visit. He was the first of his family to get to Israel. He recorded an emotional and historical perspective of his trip in the following sentences:

No man, not one of my forefathers, I am the first. I have privileged, I accomplished it. When seeing the far off Haifa coast – the thought pulsed in me. The wish that is recited in the prayer every year “next year in Jerusalem” will come true. This is the end of exile. The return after years of wandering and persecution, I have privileged and have reached it (*Dat HaYeled*, 86).

Korczak saw himself as part of the Jewish story but retained a measure of distance; he was excited but does not lose his broad and critical view. Reading his letters and articles reveals the deep observations of a humanist. Nonetheless, this is usually an empathic

but external observation. What interested him is Man – his struggle, his failures and his successes. “The same thing is being done in Australia” he wrote in an article summarizing the two trips (*Dat HaYeled*, 86). The historical dimension of the redemption of the Jewish people and its return to the land of his forefathers is evident, but more than anything, the Zionist enterprise – especially the Kibbutz – is a human laboratory on the road to a better society. This is the supreme test of Zionism: “But in Israel we must see, even through a crack [...] the attempt to resurrect the land, the language, Man, his destiny and his faith” (*Dat HaYeled*, 86).

During Korczak’s second visit to Israel, he came face to face with the Jewish Arab conflict, and here too he assumed a critical humanistic attitude without any nationalistic phraseology. He looked upon the Arab as a human and show empathy and sympathy for his poor condition and his first attempts to promote a national revival parallel to that of the Jews. He showed great sensitivity for the Arab children subsisting in poverty not far from the Jewish children (*Dat HaYeled*, 93-94, 108). Korczak gave no voice to the fear of a national confrontation, even when these comments were made just after the bloody incidents of the Arab Revolt of 1936.

Korczak’s humanism allowed him contact with the Christian Holy Land. Jesus interested him as an individual who struggled for the cause of men. The land of Israel was, is, and probably will be the largest laboratory of human spirit through all history. It is also fascinating and surprising to see the strain of sympathy with which he wrote about the Bahai faith and its vision of universal peace and syncretism of all world faiths which will take place in the Land of Israel (*Dat HaYeled*, 138).⁷ He even mentioned a field trip of the children of Kibbutz Ein Harod to a Bahai village across the Jordan river (*ibid*).⁸ The Land of Israel held a sort of syncretism of all the great cultures. It was, he hoped, the place in which a moral and just society would once again emerge.

8. The loneliness of all immigrants

⁷ It stands out and is surprising in view of the fact that until this day the Israeli educational system ignores the Bahai faith and their universal message and continues to see it as a religious sect, a threat or a minority to be avoided.

⁸ It is probably the Jordanian village of Al-Adasyiyh that was abandoned by his Bahai population during the sixties of the 20th century (See: Ruhe, *Door of Hope: the Bah.Faith in the Holy Land*, 2006).

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The loneliness of the pioneers was clearly visible to Korczak, and he offered a hand of solace and support. Korczak understood the desperate loneliness of the immigrant and gave credit to the human effort required to revive one's life in a new country. He experienced it through his own thoughts of immigration to the Land of Israel, an act he could not withstand for the same reason: "How long is the pregnancy after which a diaspora Jew becomes a citizen of his ancient new homeland? – it would seem three years [...]" (*Dat Hayeled*, 92-93). It takes time to reborn into a new place. It is a holistic project of the human being. One has to adjust his sight, his breath, all his senses, his understanding of reality. Different people adjust in different ways and at their own pace. It is shorter for younger people but it still demands a lot of effort. Perhaps, suggested Korczak, this explained the total dedication to work amongst the pioneers – their work is their alcohol: "The ability to live is still not the ability to work. To work here is to forget everything with no exception (the Jews are not drinking spirits). From this perhaps, stem this religious outlook on work" (*Dat HaYeled*, 90). Work is part of the rite which enables the young pioneers to forget the pain and loneliness in their hearts.

In Zionist pioneers writing at the beginning of the 20th century the expressions of nostalgia and loneliness were very scarce. Expressions of such feelings were looked upon as an unaffordable luxury and a sign of weakness. To feel deep longing for the old homeland could tear a person apart and Korczak – looking at this phenomenon from a universal humanistic perspective – suggested that these feelings should not be denied. Only devotion could help overcome despair and a lot of empathy.

In January 4th, 1938, in a letter to Arnon, Korczak acknowledged these feelings and brought forward yet another human truth:

You are lying to yourself in hiding the longing to your homeland or what is known in Russian as "Rodina" - a place in which you were born. This is not good. One must acknowledge and describe the process of growing into the new soil, and this can only be done through a child – he binds. Do you have one – so? (*Dad LaYeled*, 214).

Immigration is a lifelong process. The immigrant puts down roots and becomes a native in his new land only through his children. Only children born in the new land feel that it is truly and fully their home.

As a skeptic and a humanist Korczak stood beyond complete identification with the Zionist enterprise, as he focused on its human dimensions alone. In many places he expressed his empathy with those who emigrated to a far legendary homeland and their struggle with the difficulties of a total rebirth in a new world. The phraseology of Zionism as a national movement didn't catch his attention.

9. Giving up

The Eretz Israel chapter in Korczak's life is no less tragic than the loss of the Polish homeland. Korczak fell in love with the charm of the country after his two visits to Palestine on 1934 and 1936. He deeply identified with those who tried to hold on to her, and for some years nurtured the idea of immigration. After returning from his second visit, two things happened which demonstrate Korczak's exclusion from Polish society: he lost his popular corner on the Polish radio and he was forced to relinquish directorship of the Nasz Dom orphanage, which he had run with Maryna Falska since 1919. The reason for being cut off from Nasz Dom was not just on nationalistic grounds, but also an essential difference of opinion between Korczak and Falska. However, it would seem that the "winds of time" had no small influence in the matter.

During those years, after the death of Piłsudski, Polish Anti-Semitism was exacerbated; the public discourse focused on one million "superfluous Jews" in Poland. Korczak's isolation grew and his dream of education of Polish and Jewish children together is over and done with. He suffered a deep personal crisis which brought him to the decision to try immigrating to Eretz Israel (*Dat HaYeled* 36-37). On March 29th 1937 he writes to some friends in Israel:

After a depression, which lasted two months, I have made one last decision: to spend my remaining years in Eretz Israel, as of now it would seem, to Jerusalem; there to learn the Hebrew language and after a year, to go to a kibbutz (*Dat HaYeled*, 197-198).

Korczak was still undecided about immigrating, and considered settling in Jerusalem. However, he feared that the transition to Eretz Israel would make him impotent altogether. The accountability and moral obligation he felt towards the children of the orphanage further paralyzed him and he could not fathom the courage to leave. In an additional letter, two days later, he writes: “In May (?) I am going to Eretz Israel”, and explains:

As of now, I have severed all ties here, there are but a few supporters. – and the feeling of running away? [...]in Poland of today I could but be a consumer; I read what others write and am sink in memories for my own benefit alone. I am not allowed to share concealed truths. Maybe Jerusalem will give me strength. – Exile, nostalgia – a life so impersonal, as if I were already looking down from the next world – on the satanic comedy of today ‘s reality.⁹

The final part of this letter related, it would seem, to the double exile in which he was trapped; Poland was an exile, because there, Korczak would “only be a consumer”, but Jerusalem would also be an exile or a kind of spiritual death, and there he would experience the yearning for Poland and her culture. This would be not just a painful longing for something loved, but the sense of having lost the cultural milieu in which Korczak felt more at home than anywhere else. Further in the letter, he reflects upon himself: “I cannot detach myself from contact with the Polish reality”. The letter should be taught as a classical document, an insight into the very existence of contemporary Jews.

In a letter written on the same day to another friend, he asks – actually asking himself: “Will I really be able to get straightened out, be born anew, I am not sure”. In this letter Korczak still clung to his plan to come in May: “if no obstacles arise” (*Dat HaYeled*, 204). However, two months passed and Korczak painfully retreated from his former decision. In May 23rd 1937 Korczak writes to his friend in kibbutz Ein Harod, Israel:

⁹ Korczak, *Dat Ha-Yeled*, p. 199.

A year passed and I did nothing [...] I am old; my time is short. – I am tired; strength fails. – I have never known how to fight [...] I ask you to believe me, that I want to. But, I am not allowed to travel and come to be a burden. You have enough stones in the fields of your work and your lives (*Dat HaYeled*, 207).

In another letter, Korczak gives an additional reason for aborting his plans of immigration to Eretz Israel: the responsibility to what he might leave behind:

To travel and come to you – there is responsibility for what I leave here and to what I must obligate myself there. Will I be able to? The danger – it is the possibility of bankruptcy; only I alone can bear the results of having erred. To disappoint trust – is unjust and disgraceful. I became frightened at the last minute (*Dat HaYeled*, 208).

Korczak felt burdened with a heavy responsibility on his shoulders, the fate of the Jewish children in Poland. He hesitated lest his going to Israel would mean abandoning the post he had assigned for himself. And beyond that, the end of the letter expresses a very personal truth: “I became frightened at the last minute”. Korczak admitted to his friends that in the end he was afraid to do what several months before appeared to him to be necessity of fate. Fate, it would see, planned otherwise.

In that same painful and tragic letter, Korczak still held fast to his universal belief in Man and his love for every child. “The children, the “Yosekim” (the Jewish children) and the “Yashekim” (the Christian children) are dear to me all the same. Both here and there, so many manifestations of human kindness, nobility, were trampled in the mud” (*Dat HaYeled*, 208).

In another letter on December 30th, 1937 he writes: “one must not allow the world to remain as it is” (*Dat HaYeled*, 213). Everyone should have his or her mark in the world. Korczak had a mission to perform and fate would have it that it be the orphanage and not the building of his own family. Until his dying day, he remained loyal to the orphanage.

In the aforementioned letter from January 4th, 1938 Korczak justified his reasons for not coming to Eretz Israel, listing two main factors: lack of language and lack of

funds, which also prevented him from learning Hebrew (*Dat HaYeled*, 214-215). He was afraid of becoming a burden. Afterwards, in this letter, Korczak spoke at length and emotionally of the metaphysical meaning of life in Israel. And the meaning of the land is not a national one but a universal one. The land of Israel was suffused with deep spiritual significance and Korczak was afraid that in his condition he would be unworthy of getting there. It would appear that at this time Korczak again invested his efforts in Jewish life in Poland – and for the time being his work in the Polish radio was also renewed – amongst other reasons, as a way to forget his failure regarding immigration to Palestine.

Korczak stayed in Poland for several reasons, and it was not clear even to him, which of them tipped the scales. However, the most meaningful of all was Korczak's consciousness of being caught in the middle between free authentic Jewishness and Polish rootedness. One can say that had the Polish nation allowed Korczak to live and be active within her as a Pole, he would not have been thrown into his Jewish identity. However, when forced by the facts of his life to be part of the Jewish public and to identify himself as a Jew, he came to a determining crossroads. He could not be at home on both sides. The Polish option – it became increasingly clear, was impossible, even though Korczak never relinquished his Polish identity and Polish patriotism. The possibility of going to the Land of Israel began to take shape with the chance of joining the evolutionary course of the Jewish people. Korczak was long tormented by his procrastination about whether to go to Israel, and in the end, he discarded this option as well. What was left to him, and that which he ultimately chose, was the obligation and association with the destiny of the Jewish children of Poland.

What did it mean to be a Jew in Poland in the middle of the 20th century? It represented a trap of double identity: on one hand, it meant making the difficult choice between exile, isolation and ultimately, Treblinka, and on the other, freedom through self-alienation and the severing of roots. Judaism in this perspective can no longer be considered as the outer exile of being barred from one's homeland, but rather is a state of inner exile, from which the Jew cannot free himself. Korczak was a typical representation of Jews in Europe whose Judaism could be summed up as not being able to be Jewish, but having no choice in the matter. Judaism was no longer "their home". On the other hand, they could not feel as an integral part of the place in which they lived

either, because their national affiliation was continually questioned and quite often rejected and it was accompanied by feelings of alienation, which in the circumstances of WWII materialized as the Nazi Final Solution.

Korczak created his own world out of this situation, the universal world of all children. The theoretical building blocks for this universal reality – and this is a topic for another lecture – were taken partly from stoic philosophy (Shner, *Two Educators*, 2011, 22-35). Classical Stoicism emerged in the Hellenistic world when people looked for a universal ordering principle after their local circles of life were destroyed by Alexander the Great. Nature gives the universal context to the life of all human beings. Here again, when a universal ordering principle is needed infinite nature and rationality were used by Korczak to structure a world that brought together all human beings from east and west, north and south, all races, nationalities and religious affiliations. The child and his or her sake unite all men – Korczak's utopia still inspires us today.

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