

Educational ideas by Janusz Korczak in his literature for children

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Abstract

The turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the beginning of the twentieth century, in which Janusz Korczak came to act and create, was marked by great reformist concepts in the field of education. The mainstream progressive movement initiated in America at the end of the nineteenth century, which opposed Herbart's didacticism and postulated a change in view of the child, quickly came to Europe, becoming the New Education.

Already in 1900, the Swedish writer, Ellen Key, made bold postulates for changes in education, announcing the 20th century of the age of child. The new pedagogical trend focused on the child himself, emphasizing freedom and spontaneity in upbringing and development, and his main directions became *paidocentrism* and activism. At that time, many educators and psychologists created their own pedagogical concepts, often tested in institutions that they founded for their child, including Montessori, Freinet, Neill, Decroly, and many others.

Janusz Korczak joined this movement early on using the experience of great reformers. He visited their experimental facilities during his travels to France, England, Germany, Switzerland, studied literature, explored the knowledge of the child under the guidance of masters (including Jan Władysław Dawid, who conducts research in the field of psychology and experimental pedagogy).

Keywords: Janusz Korczak; children's literature; children's rights; 20th Century Education

The ideas of the New Education largely determined Korczak's views and caused the creation of his own *paidocentric* concept, a concept that resulted in a great synthesis of the child (Korczak 1993).

A doctor-pediatrician by profession, a writer by talent, by calling a pedagogue-guardian and tutor (quoted after W. Okoń). It is impossible to treat his professions as separate fields. The combination of medicine, pedagogy and literature functioned in Korczak as an integral whole, which was complementary and interpenetrating, enriched with a charismatic personality.

As Korczak himself wrote:

As a doctor, I find symptoms: I see a rash on my skin, I hear a cough, I feel a rise in temperature (...). I see one at a time, looking for the hidden ones. As an educator, I also have symptoms: smile, laughter, blush, crying, yawning, shouting, sighing ... (ibidem).

Both of these professions were combined with literary practice, in which Korczak presented not only his views on the essence of childhood, but also knowledge about the child and his development. At the same time, it should be noted that *Janusz Korczak does not fit*

into any of the three professions he practiced. No only an excellent writer, not only an educator-reformer and an excellent doctor, but someone more significant to the world. With all his personality, way of life and death became a universal phenomenon, mobilizing good feelings of desire, connecting people of different nationalities, denominations and unambiguous regimes commandment of humanity(Newerly 1978).

Korczak's literary output includes 16 volumes of the collective edition under the slogan "*Janusz Korczak - works*". In principle, all his work is subordinated to children's issues, and especially to his fundamental idea, which is the good of the child. It is noticeable that the author addresses this issue in two currents: interest in the child's development from prenatal period to maturity, and interest in the fate of a poor, abandoned child, street child, without respecting his rights. This is evident in each of the genres cultivated by the author: journalism for adults and children, scientific articles and books, novels, theater plays, and finally in children's books.

Korczak's journalism from the beginning it was clearly socio-educational, and moral, moralistic, often interventionist and alarming, extremely critical in its overall tone and pronunciation. Korczak signaled problems extremely difficult and painful. He showed huge areas of human misery, he drew attention to the elementary needs of the poorest sections of the population, he revealed gross negligence in the field of health care, terrible situation in hospital and occupational disease treatment. He described and supported the activity charitable societies, he called for good(Lewin 1999).

Korczak's psycho-pedagogical works are the sum of his experiences and insights acquired through direct work with children. They have rich knowledge about the child's development, growth, needs and upbringing. This is the case with tetralogy „How to love a child”, which is the author's pedagogical credo. This is the case with the book „Moments of Education”, which is a kind of introduction to the pedagogical diagnosis through the detailed observations of individual children and entire groups. Finally, the right of the child to respect is a position that places Korczak as the ombudsman for children's rights, a steadfast fighter for the affairs of children, especially the weakest, the poorest, orphans.

In books and sketches, he criticizes the adult society for not noticing the child's needs, desires and interests, for disrespecting him, often giving him a secondary role as small and unreasonable (Górski 2018). And yet the child is from the beginning, and not just will be human. *There are no children, there are people* - he wrote (Korczak). The author dedicates his works to educators, parents and other people responsible for the situation and fate of the child, passing them experience and knowledge about the child, but also trying to stimulate them to their own thoughts.

It is no different in Korczak's novels. *Street children, Koszałki opałki* or *Child salon*, deeply move the reader by showing realistically the real problems of children and hostile adult society.

Children's literature is a special area of Korczak's writing. It is difficult to separate it from the entirety of his literary output, because, like Korczak's other works, children's books contain all of the author's *paidocentric* ideas.

Until now, children's literature was treated as an insignificant genre of writing, not having the right rank. Igor Newerly, writer, secretary and friend of the Old Doctor writes that it is Korczak *by contributing to the child's equality, he unintentionally contributed for the equalization of literature for children and adolescents. After Korczak it is hard to treat it as a byproduct of writing or as anymore inferior writing for the little ones (Newerly).*

In the times of Korczak, at the turn of two literary periods, the topic of a child in Poland, especially the psychological and social, existential approach to it, is extremely fashionable. Maria Konopnicka, Wiktor Gomulicki, Antonina Domańska take care of the child's play in the *Młoda Polska* (Young Poland) period, in the interwar period Maria Dąbrowska and Stefan Żeromski. However, none of contemporary writers Korczak subordinated all his work to the problems of the child - in principle, they were individual works.

In addition, reading the books of the Old Doctor's children, it is impossible to resist the impression that they are different from the commonly known children's literature of that period. First of all, Korczak introduces the character of a child hero from the proletariat. In the contents of his books he shows the economic crisis of that period, and unemployment, the work of minors, a high percentage of child mortality, wealth and misery as two co-occurring phenomena at that time or the false benefit of philanthropy (Szlązakowa). He does not isolate children from the real world, he does not hide from them difficult matters that they may encounter in life. He introduces them to political themes, shows the mechanisms of power and governance, the effects of wars, raises the issue of racism (ibidem). Therefore, he treats the child as an equal adult person.

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The originality of his children's fiction also lies in the fact that he speaks to the reader from the point of view of the child. Knowing thoroughly child psychology, Korczak takes on the character presented, becomes as if it, adapts this character to the authentic experiences of children. The author himself admitted that the content of the books, the adventures of the characters, consulted with his pupils and often gave in to their suggestions. This view of the world through the eyes of a child was also noticed by contemporary critics of Korczak. One of the greatest Polish novelists of this period Maria Dąbrowska wrote about Korczak that it was *Polish Amicis, which transformed all "important teachings", beautiful principles and wise ideas for artistic values, for childish ethics, created intuitively in pending, unexpected, discovered by children, not imposed by adults* (Kurier Polski 1924).

This empathy with the child's world is also evident in the style of narrative. The language used in the works is colloquial speech of children, which makes them simple and understandable.

Each of Janusz Korczak's children's books is a difficult, often philosophical, and always educational work, which is an unusual element of education through a pedagogical message. The recipient of these songs should also be adults to deepen their knowledge about the child.

Let's look at some of the author's works, which are a reflection of his pedagogy based on the world of childhood experiences and values.

1910 brings stories "Moški, Joški and Srule". A year later, "Józki, Jaški and Franki" appear. Books are a form of literary reportage from the author's stay as an educator in summer camps in the countryside: the first concerns Michałówka, the second Wilhelmówka. The titles of the books suggest the existence of two worlds - Jewish and Polish, which Korczak wanted to combine (Korczak 1997).

The children participating in the colonies are poor from the Warsaw proletariat, who leave misery behind, often the hell of the family home, all the evil of the world. But children in colonies not only relax from their problems. This stay is a kind of education for them: they learn how to live in a community, how to cooperate. Korczak describes in his works his

participation in creating a children's community, introducing organization of camp life, e.g. development of a code of rules applicable to the whole community, duty hours, a camp newspaper, a peer court, which deals with complaints in the absence of discipline.

The author writes about this community as follows: *Where there are one hundred and fifty boys, there must be thirty every day quarrels and five fighting games; where there are disputes and fights, there should be a court; the court must be fair, have seriousness and trust. And just such a court we had in Michałówka. There are three judges: by voting they elected them among themselves boys. (...) The court takes place in the forest or on the veranda, judges they are sitting on chairs at the table, the accused and witnesses on a long bench, and the audience is behind the bench. Janitors keep order. The caretaker who is and prosecutor and lawyer-defender, he writes everything to thick notebook in a black binding. After the case, the judges go to deliberation, and the announcement of the verdict announces the ringtone* (Korczak).

According to Korczak, the institution of peer court is extremely important from an educational point of view, because it teaches children to respect and respect the law. In turn, the division of responsibilities, cooperation between older and younger ones, is to create a substitute for family life.

The author in both series of stories not only communicates the experience of educational work, but also introduces into it elements of his then crystallizing educational concept. The self-governance he created in the colonies was then implemented in an extensive form in the orphanages he ran.

Almost all children's books highlight the rights of the child, for which Korczak has fought his whole life.

In the story "Sława" from 1912, the author emphasizes the child's right to dream. Little Władek, due to his father's bankruptcy, is forced to move with his family to the lumpenproletariat. He makes friends with the local poor, who like him patiently endures poverty and humiliation, but dreams of a better life. Despite the difficult living conditions, the children work a lot on themselves to achieve the fame they desire. Admittedly, these dreams in adulthood come true only partially, but the heroes striving for them remained good, honest and sensitive people. Therefore, the author ends the story with an optimistic message: *Kids! Proudly have intentions, have dreams above and strive for fame. Something from it always results* (Korczak 1996).

In 1922, probably the most famous book for children of Janusz Korczak, „*King Maciuś the First*”, which in a year has its continuation in the form of „*King Maciuś on a desert island*”. Both are classified as fantastic novels by introducing fairy tale elements to the content and a specific model of democracy. This model is an ideal state ruled by children, which in practice turns out to be a utopia. On the other hand, however, both stories realistically show how in a little boy who is forced to take the throne after his father's death, evolution is taking place, not only the process of physical and mental, but above all social maturation.

A beautiful portrait of the development process: from childhood egocentrism and enthusiasm "exaggerated" (in King Macius the First) to become a mature social worker (in the novel King Macius on a desert island), which he teaches with his example other love and nobility, who gives up his own happiness and life gives to others (Wołoszyn 1978).

Dylogia is primarily the author's pedagogical program, which contained a declaration of their rights developed during many years of work with children. He highlighted these rights through the situation of the main character in the adult world, emphasizing how difficult it is to implement them. Little Maciuś says:

Why are adults allowed anything and nothing? They are still angry with us and screaming and they get angry. They even beat. I want children to have the same rights as adults. I am a king and I know history well. Formerly they had no rights neither peasants nor workers, neither women nor negroes. And now everyone has rights, only children do not (Korczak 1966).

The little king wants to reform the country, just as Korczak wanted to do. He dreams that all children live in a better world than the one that adults created for them. He believes that all children have the right to happiness. He wants to achieve this by following the path of honesty, truth and justice, because he thinks that only such values are important in life.

But in the adult world presented by Korczak, other priorities predominate: hypocrisy, contempt for others, a private person, which the Author opposes by creating a positive character of the main character. In addition, Maciuś is lonely in his fight, and thus too weak to be able to fulfill these desires. Therefore, he must fail. However, the author does not leave the reader without hope to change the situation. Here, after the death of Maciuś, his work is continued by the wise Klu-Klu, introducing reforms in his African state. Learned by experience, she tries not to make mistakes of her predecessor. She is convinced of the validity and value of reforms, and her words carry a kind of message to society:

After all, it is the greatest luck to live, work and fight for it to be better world... (Korczak 1966)

Like King Maciuś, under the weight of power, this time associated with spells and responsibility for them, becomes Kajtuś the Wizard, from another fantastic novel by Korczak from 1935. The boy undergoes a metamorphosis: since he learned to charm, he satisfies his own whims, makes various selfish tricks that cause a flurry of trouble for the inhabitants of the state, but over time he begins to help people. Like Maciuś, he also undergoes a process of social and spiritual maturation and discovers that the most important happiness is not his own good, but serving others. Korczak writes in the dedication at the end of the book:

Life is like a strange dream. Who has a strong will and a strong desire to serve other people, this beautiful life will be a dream. Even if the road to the goal is tangled and thoughts restless (Korczak 2003).

There are still many works of the great Author, written for children, which lead to pedagogical reflection on the essence of human existence, the system of values or the vision of changing the world. Just mention, among others The bankruptcy of little Dżecek, When I am little again, Stubborn boy.

You also can't forget about the magazine „*Mały Przegląd*” (Small Review), the only one in Poland, and maybe even in the world. It was created by Korczak for children and was edited by children in 1926-1939. He based mainly on children's correspondence, which came from various parts of the country, and then also from Europe and the world. In its pages, the children's editorial team presented and tried to solve children's problems, published children's rights, taught life. The "Small Review" had undoubtedly significant educational impact on the crowds of children and youth of that time.

All the literary work for Janusz Korczak's children is a multi-layered world of childhood experiences, it shows gaining experience sometimes at great cost, the desire to work on yourself, children's dreams and ideals. As Stefan Wołoszyn wrote beautifully, this work is a poetic documentation of childhood (Wołoszyn).

A summary of considerations, let it be a poem by Stefania Grodzieńska, which aptly presents the extraordinary figure of the Old Doctor:

*If you took all the children's smiles,
smiles of flowers and smiles of birds,
smile of the poet and smile of the doctor -
a poem about Janusz Korczak would be created.*

*A poem about a man who in times of darkness,
in a world mad with hatred
he had a bright heart and had clear thoughts.
A poem about a man who loved children (Ney Grodzieńska 1949).*

SUMMARY

The following paper is a form of a literary – critical analysis of Janusz Korczak's works written especially for children. The selected publications from the rich collections of author's works were studied, with a particular reference to the fact that it was Korczak himself who gave the above discussed literary genre the proper significance. Each of his works seems difficult to be fully comprehended, as it is mainly of philosophical and always strictly educational meaning. Each of them exposes the children's rights and the author always obeys and defends these rules, treating a child as a rightful human being, creating his vision of changing our world in accordance with traditional values. The whole set of works for children by Korczak is that of multilayered dimension of child's experiences.

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