

Korczak's *Memoirs*: An Educational Interpretation

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Janusz Korczak dates the beginning of his *Memoirs* May 1942.¹ Korczak had never before in his life kept a diary. His last entry in *Memoirs* is this:

I am watering the flowers. My bald head in the window. What a splendid target.

He has a rifle. Why is he standing and looking on calmly?

No orders.

And perhaps he was a village teacher in civilian life, perhaps a notary, a street sweeper in Leipzig, a waiter in Cologne?

What would he do if I nodded to him? Waved my hand?

Perhaps he does not even know that things are as they are?

He may have arrived only yesterday, from far away....

(Korczak, 2005, p. 377; English translation taken from Korczak, 1967)

The entry is dated August 4, 1942. For the days after that, we have an account from the pianist Wladyslaw Szpilman. Szpilman wrote how he by chance came to witness Janusz Korczak and his orphans' march out of the ghetto. In his own memoir, Szpilman (1999) described the event as follows:

The evacuation of the Jewish orphanage run by Janusz Korczak had been ordered for that morning. The children were to have been taken away alone. He had the chance to save himself, and it was only with difficulty that he persuaded the Germans to take him too. He had spent long years of his life with children, and now, on this last journey, he would not leave them alone. He wanted to ease things for them. He told the orphans they were going out into the country, so they ought to be cheerful. At last

¹ All of the dates in the following have been taken from Deutsche Korczak-Gesellschaft e.V. (n.d.).

they would be able to exchange the horrible, suffocating city walls for meadows of flowers, streams where they could bathe, woods full of berries and mushrooms.

(pp. 95-96)

Szpilman saw Korczak tell the children to wear their best clothes and to spruce themselves up: “And so they came out into the yard, two by two, nicely dressed and in a happy mood. The little column was led by an SS man who loved children, as Germans do, even those he was about to see on their way into the next world” (Szpilman, 1999, p. 96.). The SS man was particularly taken with a 12-year-old boy, who had a violin under his arm. The SS man told the boy to go to the head of the procession of children and play. And so, as merry musicians, the line of children set off:

When I met them in Gesia Street the smiling children were singing in chorus, the little violinist was playing for them and Korczak was carrying two of the smallest infants, who were beaming too, and telling some amusing story. I am sure that even in the gas chamber, as the Cyclon B gas was stifling childish throats and striking terror instead of hope into the orphans’ hearts, the Old Doctor must have whispered with one last effort, ‘It’s all right, children, it will be all right,’ so that at least he could spare his little charges the fear of passing from life to death. (Szpilman, 1999, p. 96)

In the interwar years, Korczak was well-known in Warsaw. He played an important role in the cultural life of the city, despite the fact that he was a Jew and Polish culture is shaped by Catholicism. As a writer, Korczak was known for his novels and plays, and he also gave popular talks on Polish radio as “the Old Doctor,” for which he became a legend.

Korczak had an interest in education already as a high school (*Gymnasium*) student, and during university as a medical student he visited Zurich, which he knew as Pestalozzi’s city. Korczak wrote innovative literary works for children, and at his orphanage (Dom Sierot) he developed a pedagogy of respect for the child that today is considered by many to be

decisive for educational theory. Together with Eglantyne Jebb, Korczak was one of the first advocates of children's rights.

The Dom Sierot orphanage was located at Krochmalnarstrasse 92 in Warsaw. In October 1940 the orphanage was forced to move to the Warsaw Ghetto created by the Germans. Korczak and his staff moved there with the children and spent the rest of his life in the ghetto. The children's home continued its work and also took in new children from the ghetto. Korczak's *Memoirs* reflects these experiences as he takes stock of his life and the meaning of life. This last of Korczak's writings does not contain mere descriptions of the daily events but instead his reflections on himself and his work. *Memoirs* is more than a diary. What Korczak records at the end of his life is *this* life.

Korczak left the manuscript of *Memoirs* behind at the children's home. It was found and saved by his secretary, the educationalist and writer Igor Newerly. Korczak titled the manuscript "Pamiętnik," meaning a record of events experienced in interesting times. Newerly saw to the publication of the work. *Memoirs* was published in Polish for the first time in 1957/1958 in a four-volume anthology of Korczak's writings edited by Newerly. The German translation by Arnim Dross was published only in 1992.² Despite its availability, *Memoirs* has been cited comparatively infrequently. *Memoirs* is seen primarily as documenting that Korczak was sent to the Treblinka extermination camp.

International admiration of Korczak is connected with his pedagogy of respect for children and focuses on the end of his life. Here little attention has been given to how Korczak himself saw his life, which is precisely what *Memoirs* makes accessible. Korczak does not by chance start *Memoirs* with a criticism of memoir literature, which he calls

² Martin Wolins, a professor in the School of Social Welfare at the University of California, Berkeley, organized an English translation of *Wibor Pism, Selected Works*; Jerzy Bachrach is the translator, and Igor Newerly wrote the introduction. The book was published in 1967 for the National Science Foundation, Washington, D.C., by the Scientific Publications Foreign Cooperation Center of the Central Institute for Scientific, Technical and Economic Information, Warsaw, Poland. In 2003, Yale University Press published a new English edition of *Memoirs: Korczak, J. (2003). Ghetto diary* (J. Bachrach & B. Kryzwicka, Trans.). With an introduction by Betty Jean Lifton. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

“gruesome, depressing” (Korczak, 2005, p. 297; English translation taken from Korczak, 1967), since memoirs tends to portray the end of the curve of life as the resignation of old age. But Korczak seeks to approach his own life differently; he sees the course of his life as a kind of personal archeology:

When you make a well, you do not begin to dig at the deepest level. First you break up the upper layer, throw the earth aside, shovelful after shovelful, not knowing what is underneath, how many tangled roots, what obstacles and flaws, how many stones and other obstructions to the work, dumped by yourself and others, long forgotten.

(Korczak, 2005, p. 298; English translation taken from Korczak, 1967)

According to this metaphor, our own lives are not simply transparent and also not transparent when they are nearing the end. We have to dig down into our lives, so to speak, and seek the subterranean springs of memory, and when digging, as in Freud, we meet fierce resistance and obstruction. The depths of our lives are thus reachable only with difficulty, and they are not more than a well shaft. Digging in a different place would bring a different well to light.

But Korczak writes that he has sufficient strength to start the excavation, and indeed, he tries mainly at night in the early morning hours to create a text from the many ideas in his memories. He does this in the form of longer and shorter aphorisms and not in the form of a narrative that has a beginning and an ending. The memoirs, like life, have also no definite arc but instead reflect on events and memories. At the same time, Korczak has an aim. The memoirs are to be understood as an answer to “a mendacious book by a false prophet” that “has done a great deal of harm.” The false prophet is another aphorist: Korczak is referring to Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Also sprach Zarathustra* (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*). The harm done by that book concerns the vision of the *Übermensch* and thus of the philosopher that labors under the delusion of being on a mission, even though he denies God. For this reason he had to fail in life:

And I had the honor to talk to Zarathustra. His wise innovations, serious, hard and sharp, led you, poor philosopher, behind the sinister walls and close bars of a lunatic asylum — for so it was. (Korczak, 2005, pp. 298-299; English translation taken from Korczak, 1967)

For Korczak, philosophy is not a system but the art of living, and thus it does not lead to a system or a radical critique. The great philosophers do not start from children and practical issues in education but instead develop abstractions in which life cannot be found. What follows from this is not passive acceptance of reality but rather taking responsibility for one's own goals and willingness to put effort into pursuing them. Korczak's pedagogy of respect involved an enormous amount of personal effort, as many of the descriptions in *Memoirs* show.

Each day with the children is taxing and demands putting one's own person aside. At the same time, it is precisely this work that produces the crucial intuitions on ways to grasp and understand the world. Korczak mentions, for instance, that he plans "to write a thick volume on nighttime in an orphanage and in general about children's sleep" (Korczak, 2005, p. 302; English translation taken from Korczak, 1967). No one else in the history of education has had ideas like this, to say nothing of attempting to carry them out.

Korczak had written a piece for children on the life of Louis Pasteur, and in the ghetto he thought about writing a continuation of that series, which did not happen, but the plan for the continuation shows the direction of his thinking (Korczak, 2005, p. 302). The source is always his practical daily work with children. In *Memoirs*, he writes further: "How can one waste five hundred children's weight and height graphs and not describe the wonderful, honest and joyous work of the growth of man?" (p. 302; English translation taken from Korczak, 1967).

Reflecting occurs in passing and is at the same time precise in grasping the phenomena. Korczak is a literary writer, a pediatrician, and only then an educator. He does not follow the

dogmas of educational theory, even where they could confirm his work. What he records is a juxtaposition of overexertion and realization. In *Memoirs* there are entries at night that bear witness to a “hard day,” to violent arguments, grueling encounters, and people who turn up invited and cannot be got rid of (Korczak, 2005, pp. 306-307).

At one point in *Memoirs*, Korczak wonders what he wants to do after the war. He imagines a utopia in America, where he wants to give lectures on his educational work and where the audience cheers and claps (Korczak, 2005, pp. 307-308). He then sees himself in the hills of Lebanon and in young Palestine. In this vision, he comes into unlimited means and can call for tenders for the construction of a great orphanage of his own planning (p. 308) – until day brings him back to reality.

At five o’clock in the morning, the first children wake up, and his “life universe” begins again. If a little child coughs at night, “altruistically I commiserate but egoistically I think of the disturbed night” (Korczak, 2005, p. 310; English translation taken from Korczak, 1967). In this daily ambivalence education takes place. It is good not because the intentions of the educator are good, intentions that can be no other than good. Anyone who becomes engaged at the practical level learns quickly his or her own inadequacy, out of which no pathos leads.

Korczak does not make things easy for himself. The children are not only the “center” of education, as is often assumed in progressive education, without being able to give substance to the metaphor. Korczak knows that the decisions depend on him; he is not an observer as in Montessori education, nor is he the class teacher of the Waldorf schools. Educating means making decisions day after day and in doing so responding to the interests and demands of the children. Korczak offers this example:

You must not refuse if a child asks for a fairy tale to be repeated over and over again, and once more the same. For some children, far more numerous than we are apt to think, a performance should consist of a single item repeated time after time.

A single spectator, he is frequently a large and grateful audience. Your time will not be wasted. (Korczak, 2005, p. 317; English translation taken from Korczak, 1967)

Korczak provides a phenomenology of education that is certainly supported by principles but without narrowing one's viewpoint to one's own assumptions. Korczak does not see only what he wants to see, and he is not closed to also the negative and trivial sides of education, which in the great educational designs are regularly ignored.

His children are ill, resistant, occasionally dirty, and at the same time lively, clever, but not free of conflicts. There are acts of aggression, and no day passes simply peacefully. One has to observe the daily happenings, see how they might be articulate; one has to decide what to leave out and what to emphasize, and no two days follow one and the same priority (Korczak, 2005, p. 320). No educator is really "a sculptor of the soul of the child" (p. 322). The soul of the child forms itself, and no one has authority to dispose over it. But that is precisely what most educational theories imply.

Practically, daily life is governed by the constant concern: The day began with weighing the children. May showed a marked decline. The earlier months of this year were not too bad and even May isn't yet alarming. But we still have two months or more before the harvest. No getting away from that. And the restrictions imposed by official regulations, new interpretations, and overcrowding are expected to make the situation still worse. (Korczak, 2005, p. 326; English translation taken from Korczak, 1967)

These are the problems in the background of the educator Korczak's thinking. Thus, the "gnawing" question is always, "Have I done right or wrong?" This Korczak calls "a gloomy accompaniment to the children's carefree breakfast (p. 326; English translation taken from Korczak, 1967).

Korczak captures also the reality of the ghetto in which the children must live, whether they wish or not, laconically: "The body of a boy lies on the sidewalk. Nearby three boys

playing horses and drivers. Suddenly they notice the body, move away a few yards, go on playing” (Korczak, 2005, p. 328; English translation taken from Korczak, 1967). Korczak knows that children can be protected only to some extent not only in this extreme reality.

Criticism of overprotection can be found throughout Korczak’s work, also because he starts out from the assumption that children are realists. Only adults espouse educational ideals. Korczak’s famous formula stating that between adults and children the only difference is experience is revealed not least in this characteristic. Theories are of no help; they are as if “made to order. Flatly, drably, habitually, professionally as through a mist, blotched emotions, dimensionless” (Korczak, 2005, p. 334; English translation taken from Korczak, 1967).

Experience is made up of situations that we have experienced. We can – but do not have to – draw conclusions from them that can be generalized to a limited extent, because the next situation can change everything. But some things are impossible to bear unless we are indifferent, as the following scene on the street shows:

A youngster lies by the sidewalk, still alive or perhaps already dead. Just there, three boys playing horses and drivers try to disentangle the reins. They consider, try one way then another, grow impatient, stumble over the one on the ground. Finally one of them says: “Let’s move on, he gets in the way.” They move a few steps away and continue to struggle with the reins. (Korczak, 2005, p. 334; English translation taken from Korczak, 1967)

Educators do not guarantee the future but instead influence only the present, and this they do only in situative excerpts. This thought by Rousseau radicalizes Korczak, who does not start out from the assumption of natural development and also does not construct “educational stages” that are supposed to determine the life story, provided that the educator pays attention to them. Instead, each day is determined and characterized by ever new and surprising events.

Korczak describes two incidents in *Memoirs* that demonstrate the problems determine the day, that time can be hurried, and that it is not always possible to find good solutions:

The night bell. The ambulance brings a child suffering from burns.

“What do you think?”

“I don’t think. Nothing can be done.”

“This is no ordinary child. I am a merchant. I have a house. I can pay.”

“Please don’t shout. Please leave, you’ll wake the patients.”

“What’s that to me?”

The assistant surgeon and I took him under the arms, and out onto the stairs. The bed with the child in it was rolled into the surgery on the ground floor.

“You’ve got a telephone so you can summon as many Warsaw professors as you like!”

“I’ll write to the papers about you. You’ll be struck off the roll.”

A spoiled night. (Korczak, 2005, p. 339; English translation taken from Korczak, 1967)

Or: six o’clock in the morning. A woman enters my room.

“To a child.”

I am drowsy after a bad night.

“What’s wrong with him?”

“Inflammation after scarlet fever.”

“Who has been treating him?”

“Various.”

“Then you’d better call those various.”

“And if I prefer you? I can pay.”

“I don’t go out at night.”

“Is six in the morning night?”

“Night.”

“So you’re not coming?”

“No.”

Banging the door, she threw a final:

“Aristocrat! Just lost three roubles.”

Without bargaining, she would have given me 25 kopecks, and three ‘for the caretaker.’

She wanted to punish me: now he won’t be able to sleep, will bite his fingers, feeling sorry for himself. He lost three roubles. (Korczak, 2005, pp. 339-340; English translation taken from Korczak, 1967)

In other words, education is about situative perception and not always good decisions. Even the best educators can become impatient, and often for their ideals none of the right situations are available.

And finally, Korczak also knows that the children judge him and that he is dependent on their assessment. In the end what is decisive for education is not the intentions of the educator but the judgment of the children:

A boy on leaving the Children’s Home said to me:

“If not for the home I wouldn’t know that there are honest people in the world who never steal. I wouldn’t know that one can speak the truth. I wouldn’t know that there are just laws in the world.” (Korczak, 2005, p. 342; English translation taken from Korczak, 1967).

The judgment on the success of education can also be negative, of course. There is no law and no method for producing the educational outcome that fulfills all objectives as planned at the outset. Korczak has a sense of what is called “contingency” in systems theory – that is, that the outcome of a process is not predictable with certainty. In this way Korczak’s pedagogy is ateleological, whereas most educational theories use objectives-based

argumentation. For those theories, the process must lead to the goal, whereas Korczak simply notes what occurs and puts it into words:

Yesterday, a little boy came back from the hospital after having had a leg amputated following frostbite. Everybody thinks it his duty to tell me about it. An annoying thoughtlessness. I'll put up with it. But that boy — hero of the day? One sees too few hysterics around here. (Korczak, 2005, p. 348; English translation taken from Korczak, 1967)

Everyday life reflects one's own. There is no observer's position from which we could look at ourselves. For this reason, we do not have our life before us, as if it were a biography; but rather we can only remember situations and events. If there is such a thing as great characteristics of our life, then we have to construct them.

At one point in *Memoirs*, Korczak attempts to divide his life in a rhythm of 7-year periods. He was 63 years old when he wrote *Memoirs*, or “living through my tenth seven-year life-stage, 7X9” or 9X7 (Korczak, 2005, pp. 344-348; English translation taken from Korczak, 1967). But the “the lottery of life” (p. 346) cannot be managed using number mysticism, and the ups and downs of life can be seen as patterns or schema only in retrospect. Korczak knows that for this existential experience there is no foresight possible, and he also knows that this experience takes place in the mode of finiteness.

Not by coincidence Korczak says that he will read Diderot's *Jacques, le fataliste* (Korczak, 2005, p. 344; English translation taken from Korczak, 1967). What he writes in *Memoirs* is not the pedagogy of the ghetto but instead a general philosophy of life that paradoxically does not want to be a philosophy. It contains more questions than answers. The questions live on, whereas the answers often last only for a moment. This becomes clear in four passages at the end of part one and the start of part two:

- “Long after the war, men will not be able to look each other in the eyes without reading the question: you are alive, you survived? What were you doing?” (p. 350)

- “When during the dark hours I pondered over the killing (putting to sleep) of infants and old people of the Jewish ghetto, I saw it as murder of the sick and feeble, as assassination of the simple” (p. 358)
- “My life has been difficult but interesting. In my younger days I asked God for precisely that” (p. 360)
- “A week’s break in writing which, it seems, was absolutely unnecessary. I had the same feeling when writing *How to Love a Child*” (p. 360).

Korczak knew that he was not “the genius Korczak” who apparently “had demonstrated that he could work miracles even in a rat hole” (Korczak, 2005, p. 363; English translation taken from Korczak, 1967). Korczak was not a hero but rather a courageous and resolute man to whom his children were more important than his life. He did not want them to be in fear of their certain death. He could have left them to their henchmen. For Korczak, the march to Treblinka was only the consequence of his philosophy of life, which did not count on redemption but rather only on the possibility of a dignified end.

It is education that separates him from Nietzsche. It allows only the radicalism of the every day and not the destruction of practical reason. Korczak, too, opposes metaphysics, but despite the skepticism he engages with life, because he knows that one can do no more. He is no seeker of God like Nietzsche and therefore does not think that people can be gods. From believing that he was spared by the children, who can curtail any form of megalomania. Nietzsche’s end, which was so very different, bears witness to that: His was a life without children, which Korczak could never imagine.

At the end of “Memoirs,” Korczak (2005) writes about himself as a child:

I was a child ‘able to play for hours on his own,’ concerning whom ‘you wouldn’t know there was a child in the house.’

I got building blocks (bricks) when I was six. I stopped playing with them when I was fourteen.

“Aren’t you ashamed of yourself? Such a big boy.

You ought to be doing something. Reading. Blocks – what next....”

When I was fifteen I acquired the madness, the frenzy of reading. The world vanished, only the book existed.

I used to talk to people a lot: to peers and to much older ones, adults. In Saski Park I had some really aged friends. ‘They were amazed at me.’ A philosopher.

I conversed only with myself. (p. 364; English translation taken from Korczak, 1967)

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