



Janusz Korczak International Newsletter

No 18 (May 2006)

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Dear friends and colleagues.

We like to send to all our contacts news from:

- Canada (pages 1-5)
- The Netherlands (p. 6)
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CANADA

We received from our friends in Canada “*The Newsletter of the Janusz Korczak Association of Canada*”, number 4, April 2006, an interesting and beautiful volume, because of the richly coloured pages with children’s drawings. There is a report of the International Exhibition of Children’s Art “*My World and I*”.

The exhibition was produced by the Canadian Korczak Ass. and was on display November 19-29, 2005 at the Moat Gallery of the Vancouver Public Library and later at the Consulate General of the Republic of Poland in Vancouver. 112 drawings of kids from Poland, UK, Israel, Russia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Japan, etc.

In this “Newsletter” also:

Janusz Korczak: Bridging the Nations (abridged)

by Olga Medvedeva-Nathoo

[Members of the Canadian Korczak Association met the Ambassador of the Republic of Poland in Canada, Mr Piotr Ogrodzinski on the 10th of May 2005. A talk was given by Olga Medvedeva-Nathoo].

Janusz Korczak has become known not only through his biography, philosophy and educational ideas - an influential international movement also bears his name. However, the movement is not just named after Korczak. Rather it is the movement towards Korczak, together with Korczak, following Korczak, and even developing Korczak.

I have been taking part in this movement for quite some time, and I think of it as a kind of brotherhood of people, for whom the word "Korczak" sounds like a password, a password denoting respect for a child, tolerance, forgiveness and dialogue - in the broadest sense of these terms.

In part through the efforts of this movement, Korczak's name has become a symbolic and self-sufficient word that does not need further definitions or attachment to clichés such as "great educator and humanist." Indeed, Korczak as a phenomenon represents various issues: the educational one first of all, but to an equal degree, the national, historical, ethical, and metaphysical ones.

What is unique about the Korczak movement?

It is not like a political party. It does not strive for power and does not use the slogan, "*those who are not with us, are against us*". It also does not generate bureaucracy.

It does not resemble a union of professionals, who mostly deal with children during their working hours.

It is not an association of scholars who are focused in their research on specific children's problems.

The Korczak movement bonds societies and individuals, who hold similar views on Second World War history and, first and foremost, on the child. There are educators and teachers, pediatricians and psychologists, social workers and lawyers amongst them, as well as historians, writers, translators, artists, and, certainly, parents. Regardless of whether their contact with children is institutional or non-institutional, they are aware of the complexity of the child-adult relationship and try to make their lives together happier for both sides.

This openness allows us to look at a child and his or her development from different points of view. Korczak, himself being a many-faceted figure - a doctor, an educator, a writer, and a public personality-breaks professional isolationism. How much more fruitful the science of child development could be if teachers could digress from pedagogical dogmas! How wonderful it would be if pediatricians would consider not only symptoms produced by the growing body, and psychologists would forget for a moment the theory of age psychology and rely more on the child within himself? How fruitful it could be if all of them would join their efforts for the child's sake. This sort of interdisciplinary approach is a tool for professionals, but it is the children who are the winners!

Korczak, undoubtedly, was a remarkable figure - not only because of the 200 children with whom and for whom he perished in Treblinka, but because of his philosophy of a child as the center of the Universe. He impressed people indelibly, as his image and his words were carved in their minds and souls. No wonder that besides the 16 volumes of his written works, there are extensive oral testimonies to Korczak which were passed from person to person by those who had the chance to meet him.

A few years ago in Moscow, I wrote down one of these stories as relayed to me by Mrs. Kinga Sienkiewicz, a translator of Korczak's works into Russian. The story was told to her by her father, who had once been Korczak's student.

In the late 1930s, while Nazism in Europe was becoming more and more aggressive, the student attended a course on pediatrics delivered by Korczak. Korczak arrived on time but could not start his lecture because the class door was locked. Students crowded at the door, wondering where the keys could be. Korczak, standing on the side, said quietly to himself: "We have lost the keys to many problems nowadays." The student who happened to have heard these words remembered them throughout his entire life. After many years he passed them down as a treasure to his daughter.

"*We have lost the keys to many problems nowadays*" - It sounds so simple, but at the same time precise and significant - as Korczak's words always were, and still are.

People remember Korczak in very personal ways. This is why his legend arose from the ashes. This is why here in Vancouver, thousands of kilometres away from Warsaw, when the obelisk of the victims of the Holocaust was erected at the Jewish graveyard, Korczak's name was inscribed on it.

For this very reason, those who are introduced to his biography and his philosophy feel as though they are his friends. In some countries, Korczak societies are called - the Friends of Korczak's societies.

Korczakians live in more than 30 countries: in Western and Eastern Europe, in the USA, in South America and South Africa, in Japan, India, Vietnam and many more.

Finally, in the year 2002, Korczak reached Canada.

Some Korczak society chapters are large and some small, some at their peak and others in decline (societies- as people - live and die), each one with its own tasks depending what that country needs. What they all have in common is that in working with children, they search for their own path of education and not for trivial solutions. Korczak, whose educational concept is not describable by simple manuals and does not really suit multiple choice tests, did the same in his own time.

In Brazil, where there are millions of abandoned and deprived children, the Korczak Association cooperates with other organizations trying to solve-at least to some extent -the problem of orphans. In Russia, where there are many wards of state, Korczakians provide them with psychological support. In France, Switzerland and other European countries Korczakians help the children of immigrants, in Bosnia they help the children who survived the war, and so on. As I have said, each society has its own tasks and its own capacity to realize its goals.

I believe that in Canada, Korczak's educational approach could be especially effective in the area of social work with First Nations children.

Now a few of words on the history of the international Korczak movement.

People who knew Korczak personally were at the source of this movement - his pupils, students and colleagues. There were many of them. The Korczak Orphan Home operated from 1912 up to 1942; for over 31 years hundreds, if not thousands, of children passed through it. As well as this Orphan Home, there was a second, Polish Korczak Institution called "Our Home". Apprentices and students of numerous courses were taught by Korczak as well. In addition, he had hundreds of thousands of radio listeners and readers of his books, not only in Polish but also in several other languages.

Many of those who knew Korczak left Poland and settled in various countries. Even now, more than 60 years after Korczak's death, here in Vancouver we have Lilian Boraks-Nemetz who as a child once visited his Orphan Home in the ghetto; we also have Mr. and Mrs. Endelmann. As youngsters they repeatedly heard about Korczak from their parents, who had maintained friendly relations with the Old Doctor.

Many of Korczak's pupils moved to Israel. They carried memories of him into the postwar years.

The Israelis were followed by the Germans. The publication of Korczak's books and the forming of the Korczak society were for the Germans a question of a guilty conscience, and a desire to give meaning to the past.

The year 1978 was a banner ~ That year, which was the 100th anniversary of Korczak's birth, was recognized by UNESCO as the International Year of Children. The Korczak centennial celebration, under the patronage of UNESCO, helped to disseminate his educational ideas all over the world.

In the same year the International Korczak Association was founded in Poland, as a voluntary federation of over 20 Korczak societies from various countries.

However, it would not be correct to consider Korczak's post-mortem life a cloudless one.

In postwar Poland Korczak's educational ideas were almost completely substituted by the Soviet educator Anton Makarenko's system, which recognized collectivism as the only value and educational goal. Even Korczak's books, classics such as "King Matt the First" were not republished until the early 1960s when Korczak returned to country's good graces.

In Russia Korczak's texts were known as early as the beginning of the 20 century, that is, before the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. Over there he fell from graces in the 1920s.

At that time, Korczak's book *A Boarding School* was translated into Russian. Nadezhda Krupskaya was asked to write a preface to this publication. Mrs. Krupskaya was a professional teacher and also Lenin's wife, and because of that, naturally, a Number One Teacher of the Soviet Russia. It is needless to say that Krupskaya's attitude was negative due to Korczak's "lack of collectivism". The publishers stopped publishing Korczak's books after this. Moreover, his books were taken out of the libraries and many of them were destroyed.

This attitude persisted until Stalin's death, which was followed by a period of liberalization. During this time, Korczak's texts returned to the readers. His book "How to Love a Child" was printed in hundreds of thousands of copies and was instantly sold out. Readers were hypnotized by its title. Apparently, they believed they had found ready-made answers on how to love a child. But they had not. However, those readers who were willing enough to learn using their own experience, never forgot his ideas.

One more peculiar detail. Russian translations of Korczak's books used to be published with extensive prefaces. But none of these referred to the fact, that Korczak was Jewish by birth and as a Jew perished in the gas-chamber of Treblinka. He was always presented without national identity as a kind old man with naive blue eyes, as an ideal grand-dad... almost like Lenin. Somebody even noted physical resemblance as both were short, bald, bearded men.

Within a span of one century Korczak's works went from one extreme to the other; but it was still far from understanding the true complexity of his life and heritage.

Here is a story dated to the beginning of Perestroika, social and political changes that took in the Soviet Union in the late 1980s.

I was at that time the President of the Korczak Association of Russia and would get, at my residential address, Korczakian correspondence in abundance. Once, when I went to the post office to receive a special package, I presented my ID to the female clerk. Naturally, it had my name - Olga Medvedeva, but on the envelope was written: Janusz Korczak. The lady threw my ID back to me, did not give me the letter, and said angrily: "He should come himself to pick up a package!" So I had to explain to the lady who Korczak was and why he could not come himself. From that time on, whenever I would meet her, she kept repeating that Korczak was a saint.

Indeed, Korczak is frequently called a saint. Sometimes he also is called the saint of all creeds. Much more precise though were the words of Pope John Paul the Second, who called Janusz Korczak a symbol of faith and morality.

Korczak was too controversial to be canonized by any faith.

His decision to hold his children together in the ghetto amazed most people; for some it is disputable. They questioned - was he being aware of the coming deportations and what would happen to his children, if he kept them together? Why he did not disperse them? Then at least some of them would have survived.

On the other hand, is it not true that most parents believe that if they are with their children, nothing bad will happen to them and somehow, miraculously, misfortune will pass by? Korczak had two hundred of them - each one was his child, for each of them he was their father. Jeanne Hersch, a renowned Swiss philosopher, said "*he went along with his children to death because he did not want them to be scared*".

As both a Jew by birth and a Polish author, Korczak unifies people.

In the 1970s and 1980s Poland and Israel did not maintain diplomatic relations. In this period the Korczak Association of Poland and the Korczak Association of Israel were few institutions which connected Poles and Israelis. Korczak helped their communication a great deal. An invitation letter written on either the Israeli or Polish Korczak Association letterhead served as a permission for

Israelis to visit Poland and vice versa. Nobody has been able to count how many of these invitation letters - authentic and fake - were issued.

Now a fact from my own experience.

Korczak helped me, as a Soviet citizen, to make the centuries long dream of my ancestors come true. As a participant of the international Korczak conference I was able to visit Israel at a time when a Soviet Russian could not even think about doing so. It was Korczak who issued me... a Dutch visa for entry to the so called "hostile" Israel! Thank you for that, Doctor Korczak!

There were Korczak societies in both Eastern and Western Germany before the unification. It was a rather painful process of reconciliation, nevertheless Korczak succeeded. In the USA an American Korczak Award was founded, jointly by American Catholic organizations and American Jewish ones. This was a monumental event!

The Polish cultural institutions abroad often start their activities with a Korczak themed events because Korczak is an excellent ambassador of both Polish and universal values.

To end with, let me give you the most amazing examples of Korczak's power of integration. They are related to the Middle East - one of the most volatile regions of the world.

For years a course on Korczak's pedagogy was taught at the David Yelin Teachers Training College in Jerusalem for both Jewish and Arab students. Several of Korczak's books had been translated and published in Arabic.

Korczak's life and educational heritage are topics featured in meetings of both Arab and Jewish teachers and high school students at the Ghetto Fighters Museum in Israel. At the end of the course Arab and Jewish teenagers carry out workshops on Korczak, for their parents.

Thus, Korczak is a password for dialogue, indeed.

These days, the world is dominated by various misleading ideas and false representations that pretend to be alive but are not real. Words used to describe good are used and heard so often that they become dull and trite. Unfortunately, the words people use to lie are themselves becoming deceitful. However, if the words human rights, tolerance, forgiveness and dialogue are followed by the word Korczak, they always seem to regain their initial meaning and sound fresh and authentic.

Finally, let me share with you another personal feeling.

I've always asked myself, what did Korczak give me emotionally? I think I am ready to answer this question:

Korczak taught me to love not only my own children and not only children that I know personally. He taught me to realize that the adult world we live in is inhabited by children.

Olga Medvedeva-Nathoo

Dr Olga Medvedeva-Nathoo is an independent researcher in the field of Polish literature and history, and in particular in Korczak's legacy; a member of the Board of the Janusz Korczak Association of Canada.

Interested in this Bulletin of our friends in Canada, contact Mrs Gina Dimant,
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The NETHERLANDS

We repeat our call for the:

International Janusz Korczak Youth Meeting, 2007 in the Netherlands.

Theme: “*When I was little again*” (based on the title of Korczak’s book)

Our mission for this conference is:

- How to understand children and how to communicate with them;
- What can we learn from children;
- Mobilizing the competencies of children.

Dear colleagues, dear friends,

In 2007 the Janusz Korczak Association in The Netherlands likes to celebrate her 25th anniversary with a special meeting for young people from different countries who work with children or teenagers as professional or as volunteer.

We therefore want to invite young participants (18-35 years old) to the

International Janusz Korczak Youth Meeting, which will take place in Holland from 22-28 September 2007

(People older than 35 are welcome of course, but we ask them to look for one or more young people to join them).

For more information: www.info@korczak.nl

RUSSIA/THE NETHERLANDS

True to tradition the Dutch and the Russian Janusz Korczak Association will organise the “Nash Dom” – summercamp for handicapped and non-handicapped children from both countries. It is already since 1995 that we organise together these integration camps in Russia. This summer we travel with 17 children and group leaders from Holland to our friends in Russia. We’ll spend three weeks together in the Vladimir Region (200 km East of Moscow)

All together more than 100 kids, stagiaires and so called “papas” and “mamas”.

The camp unites very different children: disabled children, orphans, children with behavioural problems, children with tragical life experiences, children from families with a single parent and from families with social problems.

We follow the humanistic ideas of Janusz Korczak: respect for the child, his right to make mistakes and the right to be as he is. The principle of forgiving and the partnership relation between children and adults are also important in the camp.

The camp is called “Nash Dom” (= Our home) after one of the Korczak’s orphanages in Warsaw.

SWITZERLAND

In “**La Lettre**” no 51, March 2006, newsletter of the Swiss Association of friends of doctor Janusz Korczak. (*Association suisse des amis du docteur Janusz Korczak*) some interesting articles and texts.

* Three years after Dr. Stanislas Tomkiewicz passed away, his daughter Elisabeth Tostivint-Tomkiewicz, physician herself, wrote an impressive portrait (personal memories) of her father. The story, “**Respect as an unique compass**” tells full of love about his life. She tells the story of the terrible time in the Warsaw ghetto during the war, his fear, the razzia’s, and finally the transportation of the whole family. He escaped by jumping through a hole in the wagon. Was arrested again and spent two years in the concentration camp Bergen-Belsen and survived. After 1945, another two years in a sanatorium.

Elisabeth describes her father as a man with a complex personality, sometimes full of hate, sometimes proud and very strong but most of all a man with a great humanity. It was his memory of Janusz Korczak during the ghetto-period that influenced this vocation after the war. He dedicated himself for the rights of children and at the same time he was for the society a brilliant psychiatrist.

* As always in “La Lettre” a text of Janusz Korczak. In this issue the story: “**The secret of Esther**”. This story tells about a girl who can talk confidential with her grand-dad and not so much with her mother. The grandfather is sometimes also rude to her by sending her back to the other children in the inner court, but he takes her serious. And when she complaints about bullying by boys in the streets he gives her good advices.

If you like to read this story and other texts of “La Lettre”,
address to korczak@gkb.com

FRANCE

We received the “**Lettre d’information de l’Association Française Janusz Korczak**”
(No 6, 15 May 2006)

The French Korczak Association will be a participant in the International Exhibition (Salon) of Peace Initiatives in Paris (from 2-4 June). This “salon” is organised in accordance with the decennium for promotion a culture of non-violence and peace in favour of children (world-wide). 2001-2010. It is under the patronage of the UNESCO.

The French Korczak Association has in her stand a special guest from Congo (RDC), Mrs Christine Musaidizi, coordinator of “Children’s Voice”.

“Children’s Voice” is a very active local ONG in Goma, Nord-Kivu (near Kigali), fonded by twelve women (mothers), which produce a weekly radio and TV - broadcasting program in Congo (in French and Swahili). Children in Congo are victims of violence: in the family, in society, in school, in traditional tribes etc. They suffer a lot. “Children’s Voice” give these kids a forum to tell their stories, and to share their experiences.

A theatre play adapted from Korczak’s book *King Matt the First* will be performed by the pupils of the Primary School “Pablo Picasso” in Nanterre. It is part of a one year project together with the city of Nanterre and a center for activities for handicapped adults.

It will be a big spectacle with more than 50 actors and walking-people.

The street to children.

On Sunday 28th of June, the 19th district of Paris organises a festival of play. **The street to children** and a plea for better circumstances and conditions for playing outside. The French Korczak Association participated in such an event last year. The association produced a journal called: "*Journal of children of the street*" (see: <http://afjk.org>, page ENFANTS)

The "Lettre d'information" no 6 (15 May 2006) has more interesting items.
See the website: <http://korczak.fr/infos/2006/afjk-lettre06c-web.html>.

The ed. board of the Janusz Korczak International Newsletter thanks all of you for sending this interesting information. The Korczak World is full of activities and indeed a vivid movement.

**Please send your news items, publications or newsletters
to: info@korczak.nl**