

«As a reflection on the future of the Janusz Korczak Movement world-wide, this article presents some interesting points of view concerning the past and the present perception of Korczak's ideas, but also the future of the International Korczak Movement. He asks some critical questions but at the same time he offers new challenges and new perspectives.» Theo Cappon, 2005-05.

Cet article apporte une réflexion critique sur la perception actuelle des idées et de l'œuvre de Janusz Korczak et interroge l'avenir du mouvement Korczak international. Après sa diffusion par e-mail dans le réseau de la Newsletter du mouvement (n° 16 du 29-12-2005 et n° 8 du 31-05-2005) par l'Association Janusz Korczak des Pays-Bas <http://www.korczak.nl>, nous proposons à notre tour ce texte, en le mettant en ligne pour en faciliter l'accès aux francophones et pour contribuer au débat sur le legs de Janusz Korczak et sur son intérêt pour les enfants d'aujourd'hui.

Does Korczak have a future?

Gérard Kahn, Vice-president of the [Swiss Korczak Society](#), Bern, 2005

Although it has been more than sixty years since he died, there are still people in all four corners of the world who are committed to the ideas and principles of the Polish doctor, writer and pedagogue, Janusz Korczak (1878 – 1942). There are schools, kinder gardens and homes that carry his name, and his complete works will shortly be available in Polish, German and Hebrew. Texts by and about Korczak are available in over 20 languages. This success is partly down to the fact that there are people who have dedicated their lives – or at least a significant part of their lives – to Korczak. These include researchers, publishers of his works, practising teachers - who respect the children entrusted to them as a matter of course – and members and donors of Korczak societies. At first sight, there seems little reason to question whether Korczak will continue to have an impact in the future. Yet a closer look reveals that although much has been achieved in the past years, there have also been some marked changes.

Korczak's "children" and his contemporaries are leaving us. Leon and Geula Harari, Aleksander Lewin and Maria Falkovska, to name but a few, are no longer among us. During the 1980s and '90s, they were key figures of the Korczak "movement" if one can call it such. Along with many others, they did a great deal to keep Korczak "alive". So what now? With the possible exception of eastern Europe, the average age of Korczak societies' members (at least those known to the author) is relatively high and finding new followers is proving difficult¹. What could be the reason for this? How can Korczak societies best manage the generation change? What more can be done in the future, beyond what has already been achieved? Do we in fact still need Korczak societies at all? And what should be their role? These are some of the questions that this article will seek to answer, with the aim of provoking further developments in Korczak's interest.

¹ See the German Korczak bulletin 1/2003, 3: "The 'forerunners' are dying out [...] and the younger generation is not filling their places. Even in our own society there are more people leaving than joining."

Korczak today

It is not possible to give a complete description of Korczak activities today, as these are too varied and gaining an overview is impossible. One can only give a rough sketch of some Korczak-inspired activities.

There are many pedagogues who closely adhere to Korczak's principles but who would never define their work in these terms: they take children seriously, respect their wishes and guide them along the way, even if they themselves would have chosen a different path. Children are directly involved in shaping and discussing certain educational establishments, they publish their own newspapers or sell their "treasures" during the school break. In some countries there are training projects for street children, and musical and artistic events for children and youngsters. In Kursk, for instance, every child in hospital receives a fresh piece of fruit a week. But some other establishments have a more flighty approach to Korczak: aside from a bust of the pedagogue in the entrance hall or some black boards and bookshelves, there are precious few reminders of his ideals. Even drawing competitions to draw the best Korczak are hardly in line with his teachings.

On an international level, there are conferences where those interested in Korczak can meet: contacts are made which lead to other activities, such as mutual visits, lecture series, holiday camps for children with or without disabilities, which are run by people from different countries of origin. A significant part of this networking is carried out via the Dutch Korczak society, headed by Theo Cappon, through its homepage (<http://www.newsletter.korczak.nl/>).

The publications and translations of many of Korczak's works - thanks to Marta Ciesielska, Friedhelm Beiner and Erich Dauzenroth - are also key, as is the distribution of his literature to areas where it was previously hard to come by (such as Bosnia, Croatia and Vietnam). There are also cultural representations – in musical works, film, theatre and the visual arts - in which Korczak is often depicted as a hero and martyr who fought for children until the very end. This view is justifiable, but commemoration should not be the only goal if his ideas are to live on. The question therefore arises as to what these various projects and activities are or should be about.

Working in the spirit of Korczak

All these various projects are bound by the same fundamental principles of respect and consideration – or at least, they should be. Korczak renewed his own position – albeit not systematically – and wrote about this vividly and impressively: children have a right to be as they are, they have the right to live their own experiences and must not, should not and cannot be shaped by adults. Among Korczak's most famous quotations is the following: *"I can account for a tradition truth, order, diligence, honesty and openness, but I cannot change any child into something which he or she is not. A beech tree will always be a beech tree, an oak tree an oak, and a burdock a burdock. I can awake that which slumbers in the soul but I cannot create anything new"* (CW, vol. 4, 194). Children have the right to their own experiences, meaning that they must also make their own mistakes and be able to start afresh².

This means looking at children in a way that is open and free from prejudice: observing them, listening to them and taking their joys, fears and needs seriously, having faith in

² This is comparable to the basic principles set out in the statute book for the children's court (CW, vol.4, 273 ff.)

them without losing sight of one's own views – this is what Korczak demands. We as adults do not have the right to decide what is best for a child just because we are more experienced. But it goes without saying that it is also our duty to share our knowledge with children in a way that also respects their point of view. Obviously this raises its own challenges. But Korczak warns against resorting to simple formulas; he himself constantly re-examined and revised his pedagogical methods³. What mattered to him was to consciously remain critical and watchful: not to blindly put one's trust in someone (we should not blindly trust him either), but also to think and see for oneself; no book, no doctor can be a substitute for one's own alert thoughts, one's own considered observations. *“The book, with its own completed formulas, has clouded our judgement and has made our minds sluggish”*, he writes. *“We are so used to living with borrowed experiences, investigations, points of view that we have mostly lost our self-confidence and no longer want to trust our own eyes”* (CW, vol. 4, 24). This, in other words, means that it is our own experiences and thoughts which are important and formative, not those which we unquestioningly absorb from others. Being true to oneself, to children (and to other adults) is after all also key to Korczak's principles.

Considerations for the future

To tackle the question how the future will shape up for Korczak, one has to differentiate between what Korczak societies are doing and the practical work being carried out at large. Working along the same lines as Korczak does not mean having contact with Korczak societies. Yet the reverse does not apply: Korczak societies that have no practical relevance can be called into question. ‘Practical relevance’ means not only working alongside children, but also bringing out publications about and by Janusz Korczak, hosting conferences and discussions about current societal themes that relate back to children's rights and dignity.

The figure of Janusz Korczak himself is secondary to putting his teachings into practice. His ideas and concerns that children should be respected for what they are and be treated as people are at the heart of everything (or should be). Korczak's biography may well be important and can serve as a gateway to his ideas. But getting caught up in Korczak's martyrdom is exactly what he would not have wanted, namely putting him on a pedestal without giving a thought to what oneself can and should do⁴.

So what can be done?

In the *practical work* it is the attitude and not the form that matters. So it is not a question of drawing a pretty Korczak, of setting up children's courts or newspapers or having black boards, but rather of *involving children in discussions*, allowing them to *have their own experiences* and to *learn from their own mistakes*, and for us to *accept them as they are*. As educators we must recognise that we do not have the *right of disposal* over children because of our greater experience and that, on the contrary, we should always strive to *observe and listen without prejudice*. Making mistakes is not the exclusive privilege of children – adults are not without their flaws, but they should have the *honesty* to admit their mistakes to themselves and to others, and learn from them.

³ That is one of the reasons why, after a few years, he set up the children's court at the orphanage. This was a way of allowing youngsters to overrule the judges' sentences.

⁴ It goes without saying that Korczak's moving and tragic life and suffering should be honoured as such.

Korczak does not require one to blindly follow ideas, but to rather to engage critically with new concepts with the aim of *constantly revising and adapting one's own position*.

What also could be useful here would be an exchange programme for teachers from different institutions and different regions, to tackle questions such as “*How can I better respect children?*”, “*What are my limitations?*”, “*How can I deal with these limitations?*”. Another possible course of action would be to *document examples of his ideals being put into practice*: “*How can children be respected at school, in the crèche and at home?*”, “*What does this mean in practice?*”. The documentation could be made in various formats (books, DVDs, videos), which could then also be used to training purposes.

The answers are not so easy to find when it comes to the Korczak societies. The key question here is what exact goals do and can Korczak societies pursue today. All societies undoubtedly aim to make Korczak's life and works better known⁵. But what does this mean? And how can this be carried out at a time when members of Korczak societies are getting older and older?

One of the problems with Korczak is that his pedagogy is not prescriptive, that he did not, compared with Maria Montessori or Célestin Freinet, develop a methodology that merely needs to be tailored to today's requirements⁶.

Adapting an attitude is far harder than perfecting a technique.

If Korczak societies want to survive, they must deal with the generational change. And this in turn can only be achieved if the ideas of respect and consideration can be communicated in a way that also draws in younger people. The aforementioned ideas of exchanging and documenting Korczak practices could be one way of achieving this. Korczak societies could try to initiate or support such projects. For instance, they could also produce publications that spell out the role of a Korczak institution and explain what sets it apart from other institutions. Lending support to projects such as the summer camp of the Russian Korczak society might also be a way of attracting young people.

Just as before, it is still also the role of Korczak societies to support the publication of his works, to finance translations, to encourage the spread of his work, to organise conferences and seminars which seek to tackle contemporary issues from Korczak's point of view. Naturally, the figure of Korczak can be used as a peg – but there can be no real developments in the short or long-term unless there is also real content in the discussions.

Artistic works should also be viewed in this light: the objective should not be to put Korczak on a pedestal – and to leave him standing there. Instead they should whenever possible also relate back to contemporary questions and themes.

Happily, Korczak is frequently the chosen topic of seminars, diplomas and research work at universities and colleges. Korczak societies should capitalise on this opportunity by providing material and expertise.

⁵ See article 3 of the statute of the Swiss Korczak Society: “*To make known the life and work as well as the social and humanitarian activities of the Polish child doctor, psychologist and pedagogue Janusz Korczak*”.

⁶ Freinet and Montessori are also preoccupied with attitudes towards children.

Korczak societies are not the only organisations dedicated to protecting children's rights, so they should work to support initiatives with similar objectives, such as with children's rights organisations, child protection agencies, groups that seek to promote democracy and antiracism, etc.

There is also a lot of potential for being active on an international level: Korczak societies could create a network to facilitate work experience in other cultural environments. One prerequisite would be the creation of a code of standards for Korczak institutions; this could be drawn up by the International Korczak Society. The Dutch organisation has already made a start in coordinating international activities; this work could be broadened significantly with greater coordination and organisation. Such a project could be prepared during an international conference and then carried out by smaller groups with an allocated budget.

Some of these ideas are already being put into practice, while others might yet see the light of day. The question of whether Korczak has a future, however, has only been partly answered. Much depends on whether his ideas can be interpreted in a way that is relevant today and that attracts younger generations and encourages them to get involved. If this fails, Korczak's future looks bleak. It is not a question of erecting more Korczak statues, but rather of putting his ideas into practice. As a practising teacher, it is not enough just to be open in one's approach to children. For the Korczak societies, this means thinking hard about how to pursue their goals in future. The aforementioned ideas set out show some possible ways of going about this. It is high time to deal with Korczak's future – his ideas deserve to live on, more than 60 years after their inception.

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Gerard Kahn wrote this article for the Jubilee book 'Janusz Korczak in Theory and Practice' volume II. (International Interpretation and perception; On the retirement of Prof. Friedhelm Beiner), Gütersloher Verlag 2004, Gütersloh. BRD.

Published two times by e-mail in the J. Korczak International Newsletter on-line, n° 16 (29-12-2005) & n° 8 (31-05-2005), ed. Dutch J. Korczak Association <http://www.korczak.nl>

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