

Dariusz Tomasz Lebioda

### *The quivering heart of a child*

An old doctor stands opposite the Nazi soldiers that are telling him that he is free and can leave the group destined for a gas chamber in Treblinka. He raises his eyes, glimpses over the neighbouring fields and looks at the children punishingly aligned in fours, waiting for the course of events. He feels a sudden pang at his heart, tears appear in his eyes, but within a second once again he makes a decision. He comes up to the foster-children, takes a little boy and a girl by their hands and waits for the order to march. The Nazi soldiers are looking at the scene unemotionally, and ironically comment the act of the grey-haired doctor. The column begins walking slowly towards the gas chamber where other soldiers are running and shouting at the frightened children. Orders are given to undress themselves before a bath, to take off shoes and stand before the huge gates. The children are embarrassed with their nakedness. From time to time they look at their master, and he is calming them down, asking to do what they are told to, there is more and more commotion, the bodies rub against each other, and at last the gate opens and everybody is heading forward. Up above you can see showers and the children wait until refreshing water appears, starts running and washes away the dust of a long journey in cattle-trucks. There is nothing happening for a longer while, only the steps of men on the roof, and then suddenly the showers start pouring poisonous gas. The small ones burst out crying, shouts and moans are becoming more and more intense, the doctor holds his arms around the closest group, and despair invades his consciousness falling like a pall. His world is fading away, he manages to take a look at those he loved most, leads them into non-being proving by this his great human bond. There is nothing he can do to save them, but this mutual death is like a final son adoption, daughters taken to a family, the mutual death is a goodnight cuddle to a frightened, quivering child.

Henryk Goldszmit was born at the end of the eighties of the nineteenth century, and went down to history as Janusz Korczak. He took his nickname from Kraszewski's novel whom he regarded as being a great

writer, artist and a social activist. He was the son of a defence lawyer, Józef Goldszmit, and Cecylia Głębińska, which gave him a certain social status allowing to take up studies in renowned schools. In his – „Diary” he divided his life into seven-year periods, and pointed out that a truly intellectual birth began at the age of fifteen when he started reading loads of books of different branches. He also learnt foreign languages and was a keen observer of the surrounding, drawing some conclusions from an extravagant life of his father, which caused his early death and brought ruin to the family material fortune. At that time, the future doctor began shaping the qualities of his character which were to be brought out in his educational and writing activity. Despite the prospect of financial straits, in 1898 he took up medical studies in his home town, attending classes of famous anatomy, bacteriology, surgery, and psychiatry professors. In 1905 he received a medical doctor diploma and almost immediately was put to a next life test. Namely, he was directed to Harbin in the north-east of China to take care of the injured. There he encountered the awe and tragedy of war, and there the future ideas and notions of his own began to sprout in his head. A year's stay in the Far East resulted in getting a major's degree and extensive practical knowledge about body injuries, and also people's behaviours in extreme situations. After coming back to Warsaw, he got down to treating patients in hospital as a paediatrician, and very often he gave up his salary treating the poor. Publishing his articles in faculty magazines, Korczak became an appreciated specialist and concerned parents with their sick children began to pour over to him. What he was appreciated for by the patients and other medical doctors was the fact that he treated children as partners, introducing children's authority boards in the institutions he managed, and he even agreed that the children have courts of justice over the tutors. In 1926 he helped to create a magazine mostly written by children, which was part of his whole idea on resocialisation and educational diagnosing.

Korczak put special attention to „difficult children” and created the backgrounds of the contemporary, creative pedagogy in which it is important to treat the people to be educated as partners, as integral, deciding-for-themselves entities. Having to do with different environments, the poor, the proletariat and the upper classes, he ran up against examples of misunderstanding. However, he tried to stick to the belief that it is highly possible to be both a good Polish person and a good Jewish one, given the

example from the past that such a unity was really fruitful. In 1907 he went to Berlin where he took part in the lectures of famous medical specialists and professors, as well as getting to know the methods used in many educational institutions. After coming back to his country in 1911, he made up a decision that he will not start his own family treating all the children he had to do with as his own. Thus, he could feel as a real father to almost two hundred orphans in a foster house that he was running, giving them love and trying to bring them up as good people who in the future will find their right place in the society. Childhood is a difficult time in the life of a human being, especially in pathological families, in situations where family bonds fall apart, at the time of adolescence with no pedagogical support. Korczak understood all these difficulties and introduced some revolutionary changes in the groups which he was taking care of, allowing the foster children, apparently too young and not ready to, to make decisions and manage on their own. Paradoxically enough, Korczak had good results, enabling the children to have reckless childhood and adolescence and become equal citizens. He discussed with them on equal terms, giving them a sense of self-realisation and a sense of value of the expressed notions, and tried to appease the emotional attitude to the difficult situations that were to come up in the future. Provided with such an education, they were prepared and immune to the hardship of life, and able to draw conclusions and create model solutions to different difficult circumstances. In the years 1914-1918 Korczak again found himself on the front, this time in Ukraine, where he was chief of a military hospital, and then he treated children in poorhouses at Kiev and also worked in an educational house for Polish boys for not a very long time in the biggest city of this land. Besides, almost since the very beginning of his professional career Korczak was engaged in a literary activity, and published his numerous columns in a satirical weekly "Spikes", contributed to a collectively written thrilling novel, and kept sending plays to competitions. He published several novels, collections of columns, but he became mostly known as the author of children's books. „King Matt Ist”, „King Matt on a desert island”, „Little Jake's bankruptcy”, „Kaytek, the magician” – these are the most important literary pieces which became the most favourite books for children for the next decades, and which wisely developed their consciousness and showed the right attitudes to choose in the process of acquiring knowledge about the world and the surrounding. Before his literary activity weakened, after

1930, he had managed to publish „Fame”, „Jocular pedagogy”, „How to love a child”, and „Face to face with God”. Added to all this his wide popularising and lecturing activity on the radio, the regular publishing of „A little review” as well as constant medical help for those in need, we will have an image of a man of incredible vitality and intensity.

In those hard times, the works by Korczak heightened, became powerful, and were a token of deep humanism, a general human belief in the good nature of people appearing on our way.

Unfortunately, this belief was severely damaged during Nazi occupation when he was arrested and put to prison in Pawiak, and then after his release- when he was taking care of the children in the ghetto orphanages, in Chłodna and Sienna streets .People tried to persuade him to leave these places, but he consistently refused, writing reflective notes in his „Diary” , sometimes even taking into account such extreme solutions as suicide and euthanasia, which would save children from the sufferings of the twentieth century apocalypse. His way of life ended in the beginning of August,1942 when he set off with children on their way to Umschlagplatz, holding the smallest one in his hands, bare-headed,in a shabby unifom of the Polish soldier, having misgivings about what was about to happen, but not letting a thought of abandoning the children pass his mind even for a second.

The children procession was moving on amongst exploding shells, ripping granades and burning houses,with all of them wearing toys, carrying proudly the flag of King Matt Ist, heading as if for a new „playground”.Doctor Korczak prepared them very well to sustain the torments of the final journey and he stayed with them till the end. In those inhuman times, Doctor Korczak proved that real humanity faced every challenge, and the belief in goodness always prevailed.Even though it has to go through cruel, unjust, innocent death.

From the very beginning of a new period of the post-war history, a legend of the Old Doctor was strengthened, the legend of the one who gave proof to his beliefs, introduced innovative pedagogical methods, and showed a great disinterested humanism standing by his children till the end. Being a symbol of a cruel death and an after-death victory , he became the hero of numerous literary pieces, novels, plays and essays, and, consequently, valuable feature films have been made, pictures have been painted, and musical compositions inspired by his life and works have been

composed. Relatively few poems were written because this literary genre is the most difficult, demanding delicacy and unusual creative abilities. Although lyrical books were dedicated to Korczak and poetical cycles were created, it is rare to have poetical collections that would present the phenomenon of this figure in wide dimensions. Karolina Kusek an author of several score poetic books, plays, and children's poems, awarded with Maria Konopnicka prize, managed to challenge the great task. She made a choice of a collection out of all her poems focusing on a child from a point of view of the defender of children's rights for a happy childhood, and she wrote new poems which substantially enrich the understanding of Korczak and the role he played in the world of those who were going towards adulthood and beautiful future, but eventually had to face human cruelty and relentless death. However this is not the only area of interest in this collection of poems, the author is trying to probe into the nature and sensitivity of children from different parts of the world and different times. The very motto of the book – taken from the words of The Old Doctor – highlights the importance of our children and their wise upbringing: Children - are future people. So they are yet to come, as if still not there. But here we are: living, feeling, suffering... This thought, very characteristic of the pedagogy of Korczak, this paradox and an obvious reality at the same time, shows that a child – just like an adult – lives, feels and suffers. Similarly to the doctor who tried to look inside the consciousness of a child, Karolina Kusek tries to understand his teaching, methods and final message, as well as the mind of the small ones. The lightness of metaphors, the beauty of similes and symbols become juxtaposed to the depressing end of the epos of the adopted children – a method of counterpoint and a distinct expression of theme, known from her earlier books, is once again strengthened as an element of a monumental creation. This is pointing out the greatness without unnecessary pathos, this is bringing out lofty tones in much appealing references to nature and human depths: This is the last bluebell of summer /It's recognised by a listful, violet spell./ Though it will soon be blown away from the stem - / its bell is no sound of despair. /To hear its voice, / it needs a heart of steel./ But deep inside it only sings.../ a dewdrop bead. Everything here leads to the place of annihilation, everything runs towards a final moment, everything defines the blood innocently shed, but it also introduces the awareness of other suffering children. The poet sees a huge column of the small ones following their leader, believing that they

are safe with him. The sole "lie" of Doctor Korczak was like tucking a child up before going to sleep, like nestling close to it, like saying goodnight. How much cruelty does it take not to spare children in the long plan of the extermination of nations. The time of war constantly brings about tragedies, but to die as a soldier on the battlefield is one thing, but to kill children is quite another. The Doctor knew they were going to death, but he wanted them to believe to the end that they would just have a bath, he had a premonition, but wanted to save the children from an overwhelming fright. Nazis used cyclone B which paralysed breathing and quickly caused death, but consciousness did not disappear right away. The children did not have enough time to realise what was going on, before they understood what tragedy they were experiencing, they had been saved for the last time by their leader. Having sacrificed his own life, Korczak proved that his work, his pedagogical methods and notions had a deeply human sense. He really – as the poet says – taught them how to die with dignity, without fear – he was giving them his heart and at the last moment symbolically raised them in the hands in their own direction.

A good side of the poems by Karolina Kusek is that coming from the history of the Old Doctor and his deed in Treblinka, she is moving towards the children of our century – and tries to awaken human conscience by alluding to the starving children in Africa scrabbling for soup in a cauldron, and even by creating an image of a lonely death of nestlings in a nest. This is an indication that a child's suffering was and still is commonly spread, this is an outcry in the face of the world, the world that did not draw any conclusions from history, that so easily forgot about the sacrifice of Janusz Korczak. Suffering children, those looking for their parents, loitering around bus stations, human beings that need a helping hand as well as problems with a child's abuse caused by pathological situations, lack of systematic remedial programs and indifference of the world – they all become the heroes and the subject matter of the poems by Karolina Kusek. The poet depicts without any vagueness the children's drama using at the same time a well-known from films method of close-ups which shows how much beauty there is in the look of a little girl, how much tenderness there is in a several-year-old boy. Coming from the suffering of the children of Doctor Korczak, the poet goes on to present

immense territories of children`s sensitivity, creates pictures that have depths and vividness, but most of all the ones that become a cordial admonition.. Her message is in harmony with what Doctor Korczak was striving for throughout his life,with his pedagogy that understood and put children`s sensitivity at one with the wisdom of an adult man. It feels as if we were looking into the thoughts and souls of the children led to death at that time, with the stories and episodes from their minds as well as from the reflections of contemporary children.

Only beautiful ,deep poetry is able to embrace the world of a child with its subtle gaze and listen closely to its quivering heart...