

SECOND GRADE LESSON JANUSZ KORCZAK BIOGRAPHY FOR THE TEACHER

*"I am not here to be loved and admired,
But to act and love.
It is not the duty of people to help me,
But it is my duty to look after the world,
And the people in it."*

The second grade Waldorf curriculum includes the stories of Legends and Saints, also known as Heroes or Persons of Great Deeds. These stories aim to connect the children with the higher qualities within themselves. The deeds of goodness, selfless service, compassion and love are the essence of the lives of the legends and saints. The stories of Legends or Saints connect with the children and through this connection help them connect with higher qualities within themselves. Dr. Korczak's exemplary life of devotional service and compassion for all children, especially those in most need, echoes this spiritual transformation and can live as 'food for the child's soul' as they embark on this earthly journey. The life of Dr. Korczak fits into this curriculum, teaching the children the fruit of good deeds and the power and possibility of human healing through great deeds and acts of kindness and love.

I. Biography of Janusz Korczak

Janusz Korczak was born Henryk Goldszmit in Warsaw, Poland on July 22, 1878. He was the descendant of two generations of educated Jews who had broken from tradition to assimilate into Polish culture. His father was a successful lawyer and he grew up in an affluent household, sheltered from poverty until his father suffered a mental breakdown and was institutionalized. When Henryk was 18, his father died and having the finances drained, he and his family moved into the poor district of Warsaw where he became the breadwinner for his grandmother, mother and sister. Each day after returning home from high school, he would tutor or write short stories, satires, and poems to sell to the literary newspaper. After winning 1st prize for a prestigious award, he realized he needed a pseudonym and picked Janusz Korczak, hence the name change.

When it came time for Korczak to choose his career path, he grappled with two options: writing and medicine. He chose medicine as he felt he could better help children, especially the sick and poor. He attended Warsaw University and moved to a district stricken with poverty and illiteracy. His love for literacy spurred him to teach the disadvantaged children in his spare time. Writing and medicine continued to weave together throughout his lifetime. His first book *Street Children* increased his popularity as a writer and became one of many literary works to receive recognition during his lifetime.

In 1904, he became a doctor and specialized in pediatrics at Warsaw children's hospital. He traveled to Berlin, Paris and London to further medical studies. During the summer he became the supervisor and director at Company of Children's Camps to better understand the psychology and behavior of children. The company organized summer holidays for the underprivileged children of Warsaw. This experience influenced him greatly and led him to devote more time to the education and care of children.

His respect in the field of medicine flourished and he became sought out as a physician to the wealthiest families. However, he always accepted house calls that other physicians refused, treating the poor families free of charge and often leaving money for needed prescriptions. However, his calling as an educator emerged as taking care of sick children no longer satisfied him. He now saw a great need for a social renewal in the care of children and became the director of a new Jewish orphanage. He designed and planned the building that was considered one of the most beautiful and advanced in Europe. In the orphanage Korczak was able to establish his methods for children's agency by creating a Constitution based on the rights for the child, a Children's court and a circulating children's newspaper.

Korczak spent the remainder of his life working at the orphanage, receiving no salary and living in the attic. He had no desire for fame or money, but devoted his life to understanding children's needs and working for their rights. During this time he published books for children, educators and parents. The Children's Court was presided over by five child judges. Children and adults could be summoned to appear in court, even Korczak was put on trial six times! He hoped that every school would one day have a court, teaching respect for the law and individual rights. He also created a popular weekly newsletter called *Little Review*, which was produced for and by the children. Mailboxes were set up across the country, where children could submit questions and problems. The editors, reporters, and writers were a group of children and adults, each receiving a small salary. The newspaper was published successfully from 1926-1939. The outbreak of the war in 1939 ended the publication of the *Little Review*.

The interwar period brought anti-Semitism from Germany to Poland. In 1939 the Germans invaded Poland and the Jewish orphanage was ordered to relocate in the ghetto along with the rest of Warsaw's Jews. The conditions were deplorable as starvation and disease were rampant, death became a common sight. Korczak continued to feel a sense of responsibility for the children of his orphanage, begging for food or medicine while he himself was ill and starving. He undertook responsibility for the Orphan's Refuge which served as a temporary hospital for dying and sick children. He continued to try and maintain a sense of normalcy in the orphanage for the children. He spent his last days tending to the dying and helping them die with dignity.

Korczak's Arian friends and followers pleaded with him to leave the orphanage and save his own life. However, he replied that he could not abandon his children. He wrote a final testament known as *Ghetto Diary* where he wrote out that he was angry with nobody and

wished nobody evil. On August 5, 1942 Korczak and his 192 children and nine staff members were led to the train station. They carried the orphanage flag that he had designed. The flag was the green flag from his children's novel, *King Matt*, the orphanage had adopted the flag and the children carried it with poise as Korczak ushered the children down the street. It is said that he held his head high and that a ghetto guard wept to see a man with such love carried off to the gas chambers of Treblinka. He died with his children in the Treblinka extermination camp.

Korczak's work continued to resound in the realm of children's rights long after his passing. He was a strong advocate for a 'Declaration of Children's Rights' and in 1979, the United Nations declared 'Year of the Child' also named 'The Year of Janusz Korczak' marking the century after his birth. In 1989 the Convention on the Rights of the Child passed by the UN General Assembly, fifty years after Korczak had introduced it. His work continues to live on as a torch for children's rights and a guide for parents and educators.

For further reading about Dr. Korczak:

The King Of Children, by Betty Jean Lifton. A comprehensive biography

How To Love A Child, And Other Selected Works, Volume 1, by Janusz Korczak. Original writings of Dr. Korczak.

Sculptor Of Children's Souls, by Marcia Talmage Schneider. Accounts from adults once children in the orphanage.

The Champion Of Children, by Tomek Bogacki, A picture book for children.

King Matt The First, by Janusz Korczak. A youth novel.

Korczak, a film by Andrzej Wajda. Watch "Korczak" on Kanopy

<https://www.kanopy.com/video/114221>