



*Януш Корчак – велик хуманист и педагог
Janusz Korczak- Great Humanist and Pedagogue*

„RESTLESS BOYS“ BY JANUSZ KORCZAK. SEVEN PORTRAITS

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Abstract. The article presents a view on Korczak as a man, writer and pedagogue, as well as on the characters of his children’s novels in two contexts: cultural-anthropological, and from the perspective of a contemporary literary discourse. The author of this paper analyzes various statements of Korczak (dedications, prefaces, extracts from his *Diary*), private photographs, as well as Korczak’s children’s novels (*King Matt the First*, *King Matt on a Desert Island*, *Kaytek the Wizard*, *Little Jack’s Bankruptcy*).

Keywords: children’s literature, anthropology of childhood, literature and education, Janusz Korczak’s literary output for children

A view on Janusz Korczak’s literary work which is presented in this article stems from reflection of a literary scholar and a researcher of children’s literature, not a pedagogue. The paper does not actually focus on his literary output, but shows a view on Korczak as a man and writer, as well as on the characters of his novels for children in the cultural and anthropological aspects, and also from the perspective of a contemporary literary discourse.

A writer and educator

In all his works, whether pedagogical, journalistic or literary, the author of *King Matt the First* (*Król Maciuś Pierwszy*) can still surprise us with his modern and original ideas. Korczak broke stereotypes connected with upbringing, writing and talking about children. He rejected the literary schematism which postulated, among other ideas, a narrow-minded, exclusively adult vision of the world. Korczak’s strategy consisted in moving away from moralizing and naive didacticism.

Instead of ready-made moral truths, teaching or patterns of behavior, he invited his young readers to a proper discourse between adults' and children's arguments.

The author of *Little Jack's Bankruptcy* (*Bankructwo małego Dżeka*), a less well-known novel for children, abolished the hierarchy governing the beginning of the 20th century, which assumed that only an adult person can always be right. In his world it is a child's voice that is the most important. With this view on the superiority of childhood's value over adulthood, Korczak introduced a new educational trend, later also an important literary phenomenon, which developed in the second half of the 20th century as antipedagogy. Korczak as the author of a manifesto *The Child's Right to Respect* (*Prawo dziecka do szacunku*) developed a writing model which does not fit into any literary tradition. It cannot be compared to anything else and it does not fall into any category. A variety of literary forms used, a distinctive style imitating the actual speaking of a child, a character that speaks with an 'adult' voice, and the vividness of the presented world are only a few elements on the writer's broad achievement list.

Korczak was also a fan of mass media, especially press and radio. He was one of the first public figures in pre-war Poland to use these information channels in order to bring the public round to his socio-educational program, as well as his literary strategy. It is worth noting that there are three most important public images of Korczak: a pedagogue, a writer and a journalist (por. Gąsiorek, *Trzy życiorysy – Janusz Korczak*, 2012). He used all these spheres of his activity to build his image, or actually for auto-creation. For the public's purposes he created a figure of a doctor who wears a worn-out gown and characteristic glasses, as if he was consciously hiding behind children, standing in their shadow. (zob. Janusz Korczak. *Życie i dzieło. Materiały z Międzynarodowej Sesji Naukowej*, 1982). Korczak had an innate talent for acting and the knowledge of rules governing the theatre, which helped him in the development of that image. His magnetic voice, which flew from the Polish Radio in the 1930's helped him in his auto-creation.

It was for radio broadcasts that his pen name and the Old Doctor, an educator surrounded by a group of children from the House of Orphans, came into being. It must be added that he himself guarded the Old Doctor's real identity; he did not want to reveal it. Using modern language, it might be said that Korczak created his own media image. All his life he guarded his privacy, but at the same time he provoked his readers to interaction. One of the many proofs of this readiness for dialogue were children's letters to Old Doctor, the idea of a newspaper „Little Review“ („Mały Przegląd“), based on children's correspondence, then a discursive form of literary works, various prefaces, as well as auto-commentaries to his own works.

Where to look for the real Korczak in his literary output, if even in his *Diary* (*Pamiętnik*) written at the end of his life, it was more important for him to show the ordeal of orphans' everyday life in the Warsaw ghetto than to discover his inner self? Even this account, which is at times chaotic and nervous, shows the signs of control. When, for example, he reminisces about his early childhood, he limits

himself to short comments or applies auto-censorship. He is silent when it comes to personal topics, even omitting a very painful past connected with his father and school years.

Thus, apart from various biographical contributions, the intimate portrait of Korczak can only be reconstructed thanks to narrators' voices, adult or child characters of his writings. The real Korczak can be found in the glimpses of King Matt, Little Jack, Kaytek the Wizard, and especially in the character from the novel *When I Am Little Again (Kiedy znów będę mały)* (por. Ługowska, *Dorosły w świecie dziecka. O twórczości literackiej Janusza Korczaka*, 1989, s. 82–93; Graban-Pomirska, *Samotność dziecka. Bezdomność i poszukiwanie wspólnoty w prozie dla dzieci dwudziestolecia międzywojennego*, 2011, 138–145). I believe that the writer's personality is also revealed in two important author's statements: the dedication which closes *Kaytek the Wizard* and the preface to *King Matt the First*. It is not by chance that the author makes us focus our attention on them, as if he was giving the reader an instruction to interpret the story of the two unusual boys. On the other hand, I treat those statements as one of the elements of a conscious auto-creation strategy that Korczak uses: talking about himself. He placed between himself and the two writings a kind of additional mirror, which 'reflects' a deeper meaning that can be related to his personal experiences.

In the dedication to *Kaytek the Wizard* Janusz Korczak wrote:

„To trudna książka.

Tę trudną książkę poświęcam niespokojnym chłopcom,
którym się trudno poprawić“.

(J. Korczak, *Kajtuś Czarodziej*, Warszawa 1973, s. 253)

This dedication surprises us with its original strophic form and its location. The reader will find it just after the last utterance of the protagonist, or to be more precise, after his solemnly made vow.

The dedication in a literary work usually serves two functions: it reflects the author's statement about the work's theme and identifies the person to whom the work is directed, which is the case here. It seems obvious who the addressee of those words was. Korczak dedicated his novel to 'restless boys', i.e. children such as Kajtuś – the objects of special love, as well as pedagogical and social care. The character of a little wizard epitomizes all traits of a group of foster children, difficult but extraordinary individuals, full of anxiety, who are often not adapted pupils showing signs of the well-known today Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Despite their efforts, they are unable to control themselves or turn into the so-called good, ordinary and disciplined boys. The author of *Kaytek the Wizard* in his career of a doctor and director of the Orphanage must have dealt with many similar cases. It is confirmed in his pedagogical works, e.g. *The Child's Right to Respect*, where we can find the prediction of such asocial children's behaviors, which

they cannot control. The last three lines of the verse, on the other hand, contain a society-oriented directive:

„Trzeba chcieć i silnie, i wytrwale.
Trzeba wolę hartować.
Trzeba być pożytecznym [...]“.

As if the writer was trying to counterbalance a bitter lesson he is teaching the reader – loneliness and suffering are inherent aspects in the existence of boys similar to Kajtuś (por. Gąsiorek, 2012).

Everything points to the fact that the dedication, like most literary writings, results from Korczak’s autobiographical experience. In this statement he combined adult knowledge and the resulting sorrow of existence with the memory of his own childhood’s hardships. Addressing the ‘restless boys’, who find it difficult to “be better”, he means both a child and an adult person. Thus, in the dedication we can hear three voices and three reflections: of a writer, of a journalist, and of an adult man for whom childhood is not only the past, but also the object of constant reflection.

The boy from a photograph

The literary activity of Old Doctor in the 1920’s and the fast pace of creating works devoted to child and childhood demonstrate a strong need to come back to early childhood years. This view is confirmed by observation of characters in his novels, particularly King Matt. The writer not only created a character based on his own personality, but also referred to his own memories, making the young king a lonely and sad child in a golden cage, who goes through an accelerated, brutal



Henryk Goldszmit as an 8-year-old boy.

initiation at the beginning of his life (por. Mortkowicz-Olczakowa, *Janusz Korczak*, 1978, s. 34; Olczak-Ronikier, *Korczak. Próba biografii*, 2011, s. 224). I believe that a significant proof of this need to escape adulthood is the story of a popular monochromatic photograph showing **an 8-year-old** Henryk Goldszmit. Korczak asked a famous Polish editor, Jakub Mortkowicz, to use it in the form of frontispiece in the first edition of *King Matt the First*.

The writer added to this picture a meaningful comment, which serves the function of a preface:

„Więc, kiedy byłem taki, jak na tej fotografii, sam chciałem zrobić wszystko, co tu napisane. A potem zapomniałem i teraz jestem stary. I już nie mam czasu, ani sił, żeby wojny prowadzić i do ludożerców jeździć. A fotografię taką dałem, bo ważne jest, kiedy naprawdę chciałem być królem, a nie kiedy o królu Maciusiu piszę.[...]“

(*J. Korczak, Król Maciuś Pierwszy*, 1998, s. 5)

Both the photograph and the text talk about a dream to be a child again. From a modern perspective reading this image of a good boy from a middle-class family will be emotional. Here it is: a small portrait picture, it must have been glued to a calling card, which could be kept in a wallet. We don't know who the photographer was, but apart from advanced technical skills, he must have also been patient since a child's photograph at the end of the 19th century belonged to the most difficult ones. The child's fidgetiness often required additional shots. The author of little Henryk's photograph was able to create a friendly atmosphere and must have won the child's trust if he reached his goal. He created an intriguing portrait of a child, which gained the recognition of his parents and the child himself. We can see a boy sitting in a seemingly careless posture, against a simple background, wearing neat clothes – at first sight a typical child's portrait. However, it is not – it is distinguished by the look which the photographer managed to capture. The boy's look reaches far away, far from the confined space of the atelier. It is like the look of a romantic dreamer. Although it is closed, paralyzed in the camera's lens, we can clearly see the look's movement, as if the boy was reaching outside, as if he was experiencing unlimitedness in limitedness. It is the visual forecast of Henryk Goldszmit's life path.

There is also a little, but not less important note to the photograph from *King Matt the First*. This portrait evoked my associations with the last picture of



Janusz Korczak in the Warsaw ghetto (1940).

Old Doctor, taken many years later, in 1940, in the Warsaw ghetto. Thus, we have two images of a man: a positive from childhood and a tragic negative of his life.

Child-king

The history of a young king-reformer belongs to a very important literary trend for children, namely fantasy. Three novels by Korczak: *King Matt the First*, its sequel *King Matt on a Desert Island* (*Maciuś na wyspie bezludnej*) and *Kaytek the Wizard* refer to the tradition of a fairy tale, fantasy-adventure prose, utopia, as well as philosophical tale. According to contemporary researchers, who refer to depth psychology (C. G. Jung, E. Fromm), the motifs of journey, magic, meeting with a wise man – symbolize internal mental processes and a spiritual change. (por. Sobolewska, *Od magii do mistyki. Powieści inicjacyjne Janusza Korczaka*, 1992, s. 100–126). Kajtuś and Maciuś are boys who experience some kind of initiation into adulthood. They go through various development stages: from childhood naivety and narcissism, through downfall, to moral victory.

Out of all the characters in Korczak's prose, Maciuś, the child-king, was affected the most by loneliness. Like a mirror, he reflects all the anxieties of "restless boys", a sensitive psyche and melancholy, which result from being Different, that is a child deprived of normal childhood. The first of the abovementioned qualities makes the disillusionments of a young king really painful. When his only friend and mentor desert him, a sad king admits: „My soul is suffering more than my fingers.“. In both parts of the story the narrator emphasizes the main character's orphan hood and homelessness, which refer to the sphere of his feelings and emotions. He misses the warmth and closeness of another person. He feels no security. On the other hand, the protagonist seems to be a recluse by choice. He accepts his imprisonment, later his stay on White Devil's Island, because he needs isolation. Loneliness enables meditation and conversation with oneself, which leads to self-discovery, a typical motif in writings about initiation. (zob. Sobolewska, s. 114–118).

Maciuś misses playing with his peers, but their company often disturbs him. In *King Matt on a Desert Island* he severely criticizes children's flaws: "Children are bad, unjust, malicious and untruthful" (J. Korczak, *Król Maciuś na wyspie bezludnej*, 1990, s. 54). The boy expresses that opinion in the moment of his doubt about the sense of any actions. At that point "the adult narrator" in a way replies with a tone of Old Doctor from the radio chats. He reminds us that a child is only a human being that has the right to be sometimes bad, unruly, evil, aggressive and malicious. It is yet another characteristic element of Korczak's prose – placing the narrator in the space between the worlds of a child and an adult.

The story of king Maciuś realizes in its best form Korczak's model of childhood. He is trying to put into practice the utopian vision of ideal society in which everybody will be equal, especially children and adults.

Child-outcast

Individuality and charisma of Maciuś will not protect him against despair or failure. As a prisoner by choice on a desert island he gets out of the most difficult trials, loneliness and courage. His symbolic getting lost in a dark forest, the meeting with a mysterious old man, the tower with seven ladders and the journey along the underground labyrinth are experiences which refer to ancient initiation rituals. As a result, a boy gained knowledge and adults' privileges. Being an outcast and prisoner on the White Devil's Island he completely gets rid of his egoism. He acquires the last necessary trait, namely moral perfection (he gives up the privileges of power and works in a factory). The noble Maciuś must die to show people's lack of understanding for his daring ideas.

The story of a child-king is the most personal of Old Doctor's works. Anna Sobolewska sees in Maciuś the writer's look-alike, while the dilogy itself is the most complete spiritual autobiography of Korczak. According to her, the author „...included in it everything, his dreams and fantasies, his everyday life and the premonition of his tragic death“ (Sobolewska, s. 125).

Child-magician

„Such is the nature of Kajtuś that he must first see, learn and then try himself“ (Korczak, *Kajtuś Czarodziej*, 1973, s. 22) – that is how the narrator describes the rational philosophy of Kajtuś, the character of one of the best-known children's novels by Korczak. Antoś, called Kajtuś is arguably the only character in the type of Doctor Faustus that exists in the Polish children's literature. Korczak creates his character in accordance with the duality rule: Kajtuś can create and destroy at the same time. He is a loving son. He has pangs of guilt when he acts in the wrong way. On the other hand, he uses magic for fun, he creates his own island at his whim, he wants to cross the border between life and death when he is in despair, trying to bring back to life his dead grandmother. The little magician reminds us of fairy-tale weirdos, who were not understood because of their physical, psychological or mental otherness and therefore rebelled by leaving their homes. They were rejected by families and not accepted by the society. Just like the young king, Kajtuś must also experience isolation and alienation.

Child-clown

„No other [...] author verified in such a cruel and ruthless way the world of utopia and child dreams, or showed their sober [...] confrontation with life as did Janusz Korczak“ – claims Joanna Papuzińska (Papuzińska, *Zatopione królestwo. O polskiej literaturze fantastycznej XX wieku dla dzieci i młodzieży*, 2008, s. 203). In Korczak's world children's antics do not make us laugh but rather terrify us with their dangerous consequences. It is not adults' actions that bring misery to the kingdom of Maciuś. The reasons for anarchy lie in the child-king's naivety as

well as his friend Felek's vanity and stupidity. Felek, the son of a royal warden, a jester and companion, who fights with Maciuś during the war, represents the figure of a child-clown in Korczak's anthropology. Although it is often the jester who initiates play, sooner or later he will also be the one to spoil it. As we know from the following adventures of the dilogy's hero, Felek turns from a friend to a traitor. Unlike Maciuś, he has not undergone an internal change. He is not familiar with such values as work, integrity or honor. Korczak distances himself from behaviors of children-jesters, fools or liars, who can be found in each child group.

Child-socialist

One more portrait among the characters of Korczak's prose, child-socialist, Jack Fulton from *Little Jack's Bankruptcy*. He should also be classified as a restless, non-humble mind, a hot-head mentioned in the analyzed dedication. He situates himself in the shadow of king Maciuś and Kajtuś the Wizard. Unlike the former, he is not an orphan, and unlike the latter he does not possess a magician's talent. He represents the spirit of resourcefulness (por. Beksiak, Papuzińska, *Nauki ekonomiczne w powieściach Janusza Korczaka*, 2009, s. 41–49). Jack sets up a students' trade association, which in accordance with utopian assumptions, will not be profitable. With his youthful enthusiasm he is trying to put into practice the slogans of fair trade. The story of Jack presents yet another vision of improving the world by a child's contribution. Although the cooperative society goes bankrupt, it does not undermine the role of a child hero, who according to Korczak might not only be a bright commentator of social and economic life, but also its co-creator.

All of the analyzed portraits constitute a combination of two perspectives: of a child and of an adult. It often remains unnoticed by the reader, who finds it difficult to recognize 'voices'. Korczak achieved a unique combination – uniformity of thinking, looking and feeling by an adult person and a child. In each of the presented characters we will find a grain of truth about Old Doctor. The autoportrait and spiritual autobiography was depicted in his novels and *King Matt the First*. All Korczak's writings contain this wish to create or recreate anew one's own childhood. Korczak's literary output addressed at young readers are also characterized by the motif of otherness, just like in his educational program, regarded as the key value and privilege of life's early years. When describing stories of extraordinary boys, the writer was clearly convinced of the power of literature to shape reality. The author of *Kaytek the Wizard* believed that he would teach his reader an individual approach to another person, acceptance of differences, as well as tolerance towards otherness, including one's own, which is hidden behind a gray gown and the pseudonym of Old Doctor.

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