

## STEFANIA WILCZYŃSKA – THE WOMAN BEHIND KORCZAK!?

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**Abstract.** Stefania Wilczyńska was the main educator of the orphanage run by Janusz Korczak (Henryk Goldszmit 1878 – 1942) as director from 1912 – 1942. Unlike Korczak, Wilczyńska only produced a few writings, which are only available in Polish. There is also very little secondary literature on Wilczyńska. This article addresses this research desideratum and aims to broaden the picture of Stefania Wilczyńska and make her known. Not only did Korczak die together with the children, but Stefania Wilczyńska accompanied them as well. She had previously returned from what was then Palestine to stand by Korczak and the children due to the critical political situation. Korczak had numerous other commitments during his lifetime, but Stefania Wilczyńska was the one constant in the orphanage, working and maintaining the organisational structure of the orphanage.

*Keywords:* Stefania Wilczyńska; Janusz Korczak; Orphanage; Dom Sierot

Stefania Wilczyńska - the woman behind Korczak!?

While Janusz Korczak is known in many parts of the world as a physician, writer, educator but especially as a hero, only very few know his main educator Stefania Wilczyńska, who was born in Warsaw on 26.05.1886 as the daughter of Julian Wilczyński and Saloma von Walfisch. Unlike Janusz Korczak, she left very few written testimonies. Her life had to be reconstructed from her letters to her friends or stories told by former orphans.

This article aims to introduce Stefania Wilczyńska and her life and attitude and to show how valuable she was for the educational work in the Warsaw orphanage on Krochmalna Street.

First Wilczyńska's life is presented and then her field of activity in the orphanage is discussed.

### 1. Wilczyńska's life

Like Korczak, she came from a wealthy and assimilated Jewish family with three sisters and a brother, who died during the war. Letters to her friend Fejga

Lifszyt-Biberowa indicate that she had completed secondary school and Fröbel courses. She studied at the University of Natural Sciences in Liège in Belgium and received her half diploma (baccalaureate) there (Falkowska 1997, p. 7). She trained also as an educator and took Montessori courses (Sachs 1989, p. 17). After returning to Poland, she applied to Mrs Stella Eliasbergowa in 1909 to volunteer at the orphanage at 2 Franciszkańska Street, which was founded by the Help for Orphans Association. Wilczyńska distinguished herself as a very dedicated and talented educator (ibid.). It was during this time that she first met Janusz Korczak, who came to the orphanage more and more often as time went on (Abramow-Newerly 2000, p. 302).

In October 1912, Korczak, Wilczyńska and 85 orphans moved into the orphanage (Dom Sierot), newly built by the Help for Orphans Association, where Korczak was the director and Wilczyńska the main educator (Falkowska 1997, p. 9). However, due to Korczak's call-up to the war in 1914, Wilczyńska remained alone with the children in the orphanage and subsequently bore full responsibility there for four years. Due to the political situation, the financial and hygienic circumstances deteriorated drastically, but due to the high hygienic standards at the orphanage, no child died of disease. While Korczak was still away, the newspaper *Nowa Gazeta* (No. 267) wrote in June 1916:

“The Dom Sierot already has the reputation of an exemplary educational institution. The whole system of employment, the division of labour and the daily schedule are based on the foundations of a modern pedagogy which produces excellent educational results.”<sup>1</sup>

In addition to the educational activities and organisation at Dom Sierot, Wilczyńska supervised trainee educators. Furthermore, Wilczyńska visited the Różyczka Summer House (founded in 1921) weekly to look after things and was also involved with the *Little Review* from 1926 to 1933 (Falkowska 1997 p. 18).

Tired of the hard work, Wilczyńska took a six-month leave of absence from work in the autumn of 1935 and then went to Palestine. In the course of this time she made the decision that after returning to Warsaw she wanted to plan a permanent residence and her move to Palestine. While waiting for the residence permit, she finally moved out of Dom Sierot on 1 July 1937 into a small but private and quiet room (Falkowska 1997, p. 28ff.).

In 1937 she took up a six-month assignment as a referent for CENTOS<sup>2</sup>, during which she made it her most important task to visit boarding schools throughout Poland (Falkowska 1997, p. 29). She announced her visits and always mentioned that she was coming as an advisor. She did not pay attention to what the children ate, but how they did it. This way she could tell if the children were hungry or not. She also paid attention to the sleeping situation and the condition of the sanitary facilities. In addition, it was particularly important to her that the bond with the children's family was guaranteed despite their stay at the boarding school

(Godel-Gassner & Krehl 2013, p. 64). However, by the end of the year Wilczyńska had already received the exit and residence permit for Palestine. In March 1938 she arrived in Palestine in Ejn Harod to pass on her experience to younger educators. In addition to many opportunities for improvement, however, she also encountered opposition from the kibbutz inhabitants, which she wrote about in the *Little Review* (Falkowska 1997, p. 31.).

When war broke out in 1939, Wilczyńska made her way back to Warsaw. In 1940 she wrote to her friend Fejga Lifszyc that they were well up in the orphanage and that she had not come back to Palestine because she did not want to go without her children (Falkowska 1997, pp. 32, 33). Wilczyńska now put all her energy into preserving the pedagogical and organisational continuity at the orphanage. Despite increasingly catastrophic conditions, she managed to provide the children with a comfortable home in accordance with the circumstances. She always took care of the physical, psychological and moral well-being of her orphans. Until the last hour, Wilczyńska was a firm support for Korczak as well as for the children and the staff.

„...until the last moment we will all be together.“  
(Quoted in Falkowska 1997, p. 36).

## **2. Stefania Wilczyńska and her image of the child**

When contemporary witnesses speak of Wilczyńska, a clear relationship to her always becomes apparent. Either they liked and loved her, or they criticised and rejected her. Their relationship with her was always more polarised than their relationship with Janusz Korczak. For example, if they wanted her attention, they simply did not eat anything before the day of the regular weight measurement in order to lose weight (Abramow, p. 5.).

In the memoirs, Wilczyńska is often described as a serious and silent person who rarely smiled, or caressed anyone (Gogol 1999, p. 18) or participated in common games (Cukierman 1999, p. 30). She is remembered by former tutees and interns as a confident, smart and energetic woman who worked with dedication for every child in the house (Kahana 1999, p. 368). She loved the children with a motherly love and combined it with her strictness (Szymańska 1999, p. 443; Tyler 1999, p. 67). However, those who knew her agreed, that Wilczyńska was always present everywhere and was always available to help the children with problems and other concerns (Merżan 1999, p. 351).

Wilczyńska's previously strong, self-confident image is put into perspective by Hagar-Poznańska, who also analyses Wilczyńska's letters to her friend Fejga Lifszyc in detail and portrays Wilczyńska as a sensitive woman full of self-doubt (Hagari-Poznańska 1990, p. 60).

Wilczyńska placed as much emphasis on the systematic observation of children as Korczak did. She observed the children in every situation very closely. She felt

it was very important to record her impressions in writing, as this was the only way to ensure that no information was lost. At the same time, through her intensive observation, she got to know the children themselves as well as their needs and preferences very well. When walking through the house in the evening, she was able to assign lost objects she found directly to the children and to recognise from the disorder or tidiness of the rooms whether and which children had quarreled during the course of the day (Merżan 1999, p. 351.).

She strongly resisted looking at children in general and saw each child as an individual. Again and again, she emphasised that each child stands for itself with its own preferences and needs. In Kibbutz Ejn Harod, for example, she criticised why one child should be woken up at night to be taken to the potty and not another. She questioned the basis on which such decisions were made (Wilczyńska 1938a, p. 106). She also criticised the general statements of the parents as well as the educators at Kibbutz Ejn Harod that a certain number of hours of sleep was set for each age group and that a certain amount of food always had to be eaten (Wilczyńska 1938b, p. 96).

### **3. Wilczyńska's pedagogical work at the orphanage**

Wilczyńska was present at the orphanage 24 hours a day and was present for all residents, both orphans and trainees (Mandelblatt 1999, p. 109; Merżan 1999, p. 351). Nadel said: "I often thought: how does she know where to be? If I did something wrong, she was the first to find out. And if a child had just become sad about something, she would already ask what had happened. She took a handkerchief and wiped their snuffy nose. Later I got interested in technology and learned that there is such a thing as radar." (Shlomo Nadel in Kicińska 2015, p. 8) She took on numerous and extensive tasks. On one hand, these were organisational and administrative tasks, but also simple household activities. Likewise, she took up educational activities and carried them out with great dedication (Godel-Gassner & Krehl 2013, p. 75; Bertisch 1999, p. 280).

#### **3.1. Organisation of the orphanage**

The structure in the house and the preparation of all duty rosters was Wilczyńska's area of responsibility. Her friend Fejga Liszyc provided the important document that she had copied from Wilczyńska for her own purposes while still at the orphanage. It is dated 1920 and contains Wilczyńska's thoughts on the duty roster. She describes how all the children, without exception, took on a duty and were very happy to do so. Not getting a duty would be perceived by the children as one of the biggest punishments.

Four days before the beginning of each month, the children made a short request for whether they wanted to continue the service or change it. They were also supposed to give a reason, whereby boredom could also be given as a reason (Wilczyńska 1920, p. 174.). Wilczyńska accepted all requests and drew up

a duty roster on this basis. She wrote that it was extremely important to know the characteristics of the child (age, temperament, etc.) as well as the nature of the service very well. Based on Wilczyńska's transcript, it can be assumed that the service system was also used as a means to support the children in their development and to strengthen their responsibility for themselves and the group (Wilczyńska 1920, p. 174).

Wilczyńska did not only strive for cleanliness throughout the house, but also for a pleasant living atmosphere for the children, which was to be realised through an aesthetic design of the interior as well as tastily prepared food. Several orphans reported that the orphanage was always perfectly tidy and clean and that everything was always aesthetically designed (Gogol 1999, p. 19). Even during the difficult wartime period, when the orphanage had to move to much smaller premises in the Warsaw Ghetto, she was the one who endeavoured to make this environment as pleasant as usual in a state of emergency, despite the aggravated conditions (Lewin, 1998, p. 59).

### **3.2. Care and education of the orphans**

At the orphanage, it was important to Korczak to bathe, weigh and cut the children's hair himself. However, the literature on Korczak does not emphasise that this only applied to the boys. The girls at the orphanage were bathed, measured and weighed by Wilczyńska (Szymańska 1999, p. 443). In addition to her permanent presence at the orphanage, Stefa also took an active part in looking after the children. She got up at night to check on the children. She knew which children regularly wet the bed, so she would wake them up and take them to the chamber pot. She tucked the children in and soothed those who had bad dreams (Merżan 1999, p. 352).

She was also the one who noticed the children's special interests and talents and tried to encourage them. She recognised orphans with a special artistic talent or an interest in certain subjects and gave them, for example, crayons and paper or books with specific contents. These children were given the opportunity to pursue their interests undisturbed in a separate room (Belfer 1999, p. 77; Lejbmann 1999, p. 92). In accordance with her studies in natural science and her love of nature, she specifically encouraged all interested children to interact with nature. The orphanage was decorated with numerous potted plants, which were tended by children. She also asked the society "Help for Orphans" to buy land near Warsaw to build a summer house especially for the children of the orphanage. This request was granted, so that from now on the children had a place for excursions and holidays (Zuk 1999, p. 371).

As mentioned before, Wilczyńska also tried to influence the older orphans like a mother, with strictness and love, as she was very worried about the future of the (former) orphans. Through her regular letters to the former orphans, she tried to follow the development of these young people even after they had left the

orphanage and at the same time provide them with up-to-date information from the orphanage, their former home. A letter she received from Bronisław Gelblat in 1925 shows how much the former orphans appreciated this contact and how intensive the relationship with Wilczyńska must have been. Gelblat thanked her in detail for the letter received from Wilczyńska and described how much Korczak and Wilczyńska had meant to him as a father and mother substitute. He asked Wilczyńska to send him a photo of her, so that his 'mother' would always be visually present.

### **3.3. The Burse**

From 1921 onwards, Korczak worked together with Stefania Wilczyńska as a trainer of pedagogical staff as well as trainee pedagogues (Beiner 2011, p. 152 ff.). In 1923, two rooms were set up in the orphanage, which initially served children who had reached the age of 15 and were being trained as educators by Korczak and Wilczyńska or who wanted to finish school. For this they had to work several hours a day at the orphanage. Later, external interested people could also apply for this training and move into the rooms (Beiner 2011, p. 152).

Wilczyńska had a special position as the director of the Burse. She usually conducted the initial interviews with the applicants and ultimately decided on their admission. She was perceived as very strict by the interns. Arnon reported that the very matter-of-fact admission interview with Wilczyńska and the formulation of her requirements would have been like a cold shower for him (Arnon 1999, p. 228). However, the amount of thought Wilczyńska gave to the Burse and its composition was revealed by Poznańska-Hagari in her writing prepared especially for the Korczakianum in Warsaw in 1990. She wrote that in the letters to Fejga Lifszyc, 1926: "This year we have an extremely serious staff: a smart one, heavy, solid, a good one, very conscientious, but generally with little joy." (Poznańska-Hagari 1999, p. 32).

In everyday life, however, Wilczyńska was always available to talk to the interns. Whenever she met them, short and stimulating conversations ensued. There was detailed and systematic written guidance through the interns' observation notebooks, in which they wrote down their observations, but at the same time they could also write down questions for Wilczyńska, which she answered while reviewing the notebooks (Kahana 1999, p. 364).

Ida Merżan reports how the interns often went to Wilczyńska to talk to her about fashion and other "trivia". It was important to the girls that they were also noticed by an adult with their hair and eye colour. Korczak could not provide this, but Wilczyńska made an effort to satisfy these needs of the trainees (Merżan 1999, p. 353). In line with this positive approach, it was Wilczyńska who took over and organised the management of the Burse. Of course, Korczak also had an influence on the interns, whom he met and discussed with sporadically in everyday life as well as once a week at the seminars he led. However, the Burse area was Wilczyńska's responsibility.

#### **4. Korczak & Wilczyńska**

Korczak and Wilczyńska worked together for a total of 30 years, with short interruptions during their stays in Palestine. In terms of their characteristics, the two educators were fundamentally different. While Korczak was the “good little uncle” who demanded little from the children, Wilczyńska was perceived as a strict and unyielding woman. She was, after all, the one who bore full responsibility for the organisation and running of the orphanage and accordingly had to ensure that rules and agreements were adhered to (Kremer 1999, p. 14; Bertisch 1999, p. 280). This was a division that resulted from the different personality structures of the two educators, and this seems to be one of the reasons for the success of the orphanage.

Wilczyńska not only cared for the orphans, but also for Korczak, who was like another child to be cared for as well. In concrete terms, this meant that Wilczyńska not only assisted him in his everyday pedagogical life, but also bought him new clothes or made sure that he was well looked after when he went out. He himself had no interest in such 'trivialities' (Merżan 1999, p. 354.). Wilczyńska was very interested in a good relationship with Korczak, but he showed no reaction in this regard. However, this in no way indicates that Korczak did not care about Wilczyńska. In several letters between 1936 and 1938, Wilczyńska wrote to her friend Fejga Lifszyc that Korczak would not have agreed to emigrate to Palestine and that he would at best agree to a six-monthly rotation between Warsaw and Palestine (Hagari-Poznańska 1999, p. 45.).

Former orphans and trainees were sometimes of the opinion that Wilczyńska was even completely devoted to Korczak, loved him and suffered from his unrequited love (Kahana 1999, p. 361; Merżan 1999, pp. 354.). However, these statements cannot be confirmed with all certainty. It can be assumed, however, that Korczak and Wilczyńska were united by their love for the child and his or her consideration as a full and individual human being.

In summary, it can be said that Korczak and Wilczyńska did not have an intimate relationship, but they were strongly connected through predominantly shared values and views regarding children and education, which created a very good basis for long-term cooperation.

##### **4.1. Common Foundations of Korczak and Wilczyńska**

The common ground between Korczak and Wilczyńska is not always easy to identify, as it has not always been explicitly handed down what exactly both educators dealt with in the orphanage. However, their common ground is based on the same pedagogical principles, which are based in particular on the individual education of children, which also corresponds to Wilczyńska's image of the child described earlier.

Korczak warned the educators and trainees not to use the word children. Every single child had the right to be seen. Those who only saw the mass of children and not the individual child could no longer work with children, but would become mere

chaperones (Merżan 1999, p. 198). The extent to which Korczak was aware of the individuality of each child can be seen in the following quote: “Under the same uniform beat a hundred different hearts; each of them – means for you a different difficulty, a different job, a different worry, different fears.” (Korczak 1999, p. 152). This attitude is also found in Wilczyńska. In Mirjam's intern's notebook, which is still preserved today and can be found in the Korczakianum Warsaw, the intern described washing the children's hands and complained about “the children”. Wilczyńska made the comment at this point (and another) whether all the children were really meant?<sup>3</sup>

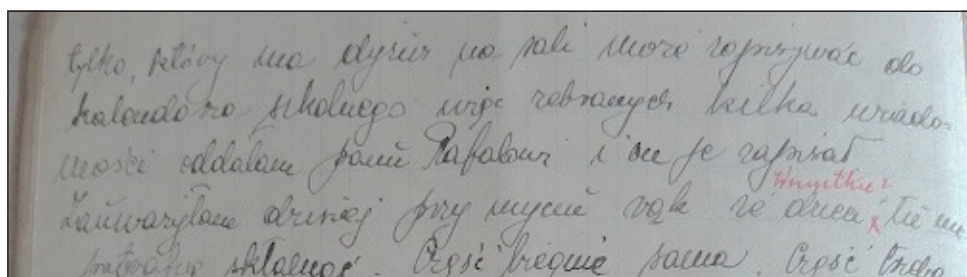


Figure 1<sup>4</sup>

In her 1938 remarks “I ask for advice”, Wilczyńska wrote that there were people who claimed that a child needed a certain number of hours of sleep. But she wondered how these people would know that? Perhaps too much sleep could even create bad habits for some children, while for others less sleep would trigger nervousness and tantrums (Wilczyńska 1938b, p. 96). She found an answer to the question of what needs a child had, to what extent and at what time, by observing in an empirical approach: weighing and writing down the children's usual hours of sleep. In her paper “Liczby czy wrażenia” (Numbers or Impressions), Wilczyńska wrote how important it was to record this data about a child and what information could be derived from it. For example, one would learn when a child develops particularly quickly physically, which could be accompanied by increased food intake and sleep at the same time. One could assess the development of each child and could take a holistic view of the observed behaviours (Wilczyńska 1938c, p. 98 ff.). There are clear parallels to Korczak here.

#### 4.2. Disagreements between Korczak and Wilczyńska in everyday pedagogical life

Wilczyńska and Korczak worked together for the orphanage for 30 years and fought for the right of the child. In everyday pedagogical life, however, there was still room for disagreement between the two educators, which they did not hide.

As mentioned before, Wilczyńska was mainly responsible for the Burse in the orphanage, which also included the acceptance of trainees and educators.

Nevertheless, Korczak and Wilczyńska consulted together on the choice of interns and educators and did not always agree on this. Merżan reports that Korczak did not value appearance and could not stand “false glamour”. Wilczyńska, on the other hand, paid attention to a well-groomed appearance and good manners. This led to regular conflicts, which were openly acted out by both sides (Merżan 1999, p. 357). Korczak even dared to stick his tongue out at her behind her back when she was in the middle of a discussion with a child or otherwise made fun of her (Kahana 1999, p. 367). The former orphans recount many such examples in their memoirs. Wilczyńska, however, was not intimidated by this, but was able to deal with the criticism or even argue against it.

Whether open conflicts are productive for the education of children is debatable, but especially in terms of hierarchy and respect for the child, it can be seen as positive that Korczak and Wilczyńska did not always agree, and showed it openly. Instead of Korczak taking Wilczyńska's side and forming a front with her against the child, he takes it upon himself to appear impertinent by taking the child's side, thus showing that adults are not always right.

#### **4.3. Wilczyńska's worried criticism**

The more experience Wilczyńska gained with the orphanage and the development of the orphans, the more she criticised this form of orphanage. In an article for the magazine *Dos Kind* in 1937, she wrote that the boarding school was perhaps already outdated. She wondered if perhaps a semi-boarding school would be a better alternative, where the positive qualities of a boarding school could be combined with close ties to the family (Wilczyńska 1937, p. 76). She answered a former educator at the orphanage's question as to why she would not also publish something, that she was planning to write a book before her death with the alleged title 'Away with the boarding school' (Bertisch 1999, pp. 280 – 281). Thus she additionally demonstrated her displeasure with the structure of the orphanage.

But how did she come to this attitude? Wilczyńska was very aware that leaving an orphanage was very challenging for the child. In an orphanage, children would live isolated from their surroundings and leave it completely unprepared for the independence required of them. In doing so, they would encounter a new environment, even if it was not worse, it could still be different and thus upset the child (Wilczyńska 1937, p. 74).

Korczak was also aware of this problem. The bonds of the family and contact with a differentiated milieu were very important to him. However, the care for the child and the protection he wanted to offer them were no less significant (Wróblewski 1999, pp. 175, 180, 181).

#### **Summary**

It can be seen that both educators had found their niches in the the orphanage and complemented each other in their areas beyond. It seems that Korczak and

Wilczyńska were not only dependent on each other in terms of complementing each other in their different areas of responsibility, but formed a perfect interplay in their different roles as educators. Therefore, it cannot be said that Wilczyńska was the woman behind Korczak, but the woman next to Korczak.

## NOTES

1. NOWA GAZETA quoted in Ungermann 2006, pp. 492, 493).
2. Centrala żydowskich Towarzystw Opieki nad Sierotami u Dziećmi opuszczonymi, z siedzibą w Warszawie. In English: Headquarters of Jewish Societies for the Care of Orphans and Abandoned Children, based in Warsaw.
3. Comment in the trainee's notebook, Mirjam, January 1932, p. 12.
4. SKALSKA (2014). Notebook of the trainee Mirjam (January 1932) p. 12. From the archives of the Korczakianum, Warsaw.

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