

Exhibition Opening :

"In King Matt's Poland. The 100th Anniversary of Regaining Independence"

Speech on Janusz Korczak,

By Eli Rubenstein, Delivered by Malgorzata Dzieduszycka

Polin: The Museum of the History of Polish Jews

Warsaw, Poland, November 8, 2018

It is such an honor for March of the Living Canada to work with Polin on this important exhibit celebrating the life and message of Janusz Korczak.

I had the privilege of meeting two elderly Canadians who were born in Warsaw and who as children lived in Korczak's orphanage. I can still see the light in the eyes of the late Anne Shechtman from Saskatoon (whose funeral I only recently performed) and Leon Gluzman of Ottawa when they spoke with such adoration and affection about their time with their beloved Janusz Korczak.

Of course, it is most suitable that March of the Living is involved with this effort - since we have taken over 12,000 young people from Canada on this moving experience, just part of the over 265,000 people from around the world who have participated in the March of the Living since its inception in 1988.

(For those of you not familiar with the March of the Living, this program brings students, Holocaust survivors, educators and distinguished leaders from all over the world to Poland to commemorate Holocaust Remembrance Day. In Poland, their program includes visits to once thriving sites of Jewish life and culture as well as sites of Jewish persecution and martyrdom. Then, on Holocaust Remembrance Day, the students march arm in arm with Holocaust survivors from Auschwitz to Birkenau. They are joined by thousands of other people of goodwill - of diverse backgrounds & faiths - as they march side by side in memory of all victims of Nazi Germany's genocide and against prejudice, intolerance

and hate.)

Korczak's inspiring and visionary message is one I always share with the students on the March of the Living, who – not surprisingly – respond very positively to his ideas about young people.

Allow me then in the few short minutes I have left to share with you, some of what I try to teach our students on the March.

First, we talk about how from a young age, Korczak (who was then known as Henryk Goldschmidt) realized that adults did not respect children and simple did not understand them or value their feelings. This was brought home to Korczak when, as a little boy, he went to bury his pet bird – only to be scolded by his governess for even thinking of burying his bird, for putting animals and people on the same level - when they were, in fact, different species.

At that tender young age, Korczak realized it was not animals and people who were a different species – it was indeed adults and children: Adults simply did not understand children.

When he was older Korczak never forgot that moment, and always tried to treat children as full human beings, deserving of their own honor and respect, and not as half people, not worthy of serious consideration.

In the 1930s. Korczak visited Kibbut Ein Harod where he taught the children there how to fly kites. Why kites? Perhaps Korczak surmised that every child should feel like he or she has endless potential. Every child should dream that they have the ability to touch the very sky, to touch infinity.

One day, Korczak agreed to a conductor's request to bring his musicians' to play music for his orphans. But the children soon tired of the conductor choice of music. Seeing their impatience the conductor abruptly stopped the concert, complaining to Korczak about their unruly behavior, and questioned Korczak as to why the children could not sit still for his musicians' wonderful music.

To which Korczak replied, “Why did you choose to play the kind of music that my children could not sit still for?”

Korczak understood that we must bring ourselves to the level of the child and not burden them with unrealistic expectations.

Korzack’s philosophy was to always be honest with his children. But, even he had to break his own principles. It was August 1942, and the deportations of the Jewish population were taking place from the Warsaw Ghetto to Treblinka. His fame and popularity among the general Polish population was such that Korczak had many opportunities to escape to the other side of Warsaw. But, as a captain does not abandon his ship, so too would Korczak not leave behind his orphans.

So on that fateful day in August of 1942, when the Germans came to the orphanage and told Korczak to have his 200 some orphans brought to the Umschlapatz in a very short amount of time, Korczak knew exactly what that meant: Sure death for him and his orphans.

But instead of telling his orphans about their true destination, he announced that they were going on an adventure. Then he led a march through the streets of Warsaw with his orphans – clutching their favorite toys and their handmade flags – to the waiting train that took them to Treblinka, where they met their tragic fate with 870,000 other Jews.

“The very stones of the street,” wrote Yiddish novelist Yehoshua Perle, “wept at the sight of the procession.”

Irena Sendler, the famous Polish heroine and Righteous Among the Nations, was one of those who witness this tragic march. And I know survivors in Canada who never forgot the heart-rending sight of those children marching.

Today, of the 17,000 some stones in Treblinka, there is only one stone with the name of a person on it, and that is the stone that has these simple words engraved on it: Janusz Korczak and the Children.

Let me conclude with one last thought: The person who Janusz Korczak developed into could not have been possible without his dual Polish-Jewish identities. Both of these precious heritages, made Korczak the remarkable person he was, a person whose values and ideas are still celebrated by countless people around the world.

So as the Polin Museum and March of the Living work together in remembering this trailblazing man, let us continue to look for other positive and uplifting ways in which we can celebrate our common heritage.

Thus we will honor the best values both our peoples represent, and also pay homage to the life and legacy of this courageous Polish-Jewish man, our shared and mutual hero: Dr. Janusz Korczak.

*Eli Rubenstein is National Director of March of the Living Canada
In Canada, March of the Living is sponsored by Jewish Federations of Canada-UJA*