

The Death March of Janusz Korczak

by Chris Besser, Upper Saint Clair High School, Pittsburgh, PA

9-10 Category, Third Place

Mounted on the wall of the Washington, D.C. Holocaust Museum is Martin Niemöller's poem "First They Came." It reads:

First they came for the communists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a communist;

Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a trade unionist;

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew;

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak out for me (Niemöller).

When faced with the atrocities of the Holocaust, how many people would turn their backs rather than subject themselves to ridicule or physical harm? It is the few morally courageous who would remain true to their convictions regardless of the cost. The plight of Janusz Korczak and his advocacy for underprivileged children struck a personal cord with me.

Born Henryk Goldsmit, his literary talent as a children's author brought him national acclaim. Working under the pseudonym Janusz Korczak, his most famous work was King Matt the First. Unbeknownst to Korczak, the fate of the main character would eerily foreshadow Korczak's own fate (Lifton, 1997).

Janusz went on to become a successful pediatrician. Ironically, though, it is his final calling that will forever burn his memory into the pages of history. Korczak abruptly abandoned his literary and his medical careers to become the director of a Catholic and

Jewish orphanage, forever changing his own destiny and the destiny of the children with whom he worked (Bernheim, 1989).

When the Nazis moved into Warsaw, the lives of the Jewish people came crashing down around them. Jewish businesses and factories were seized and schools were closed. The Nazis symbolically chose Yom Kippur to announce the creation of a Jewish ghetto in Warsaw. The wall that would divide Jews and Gentiles was much more than just a physical barrier. It represented the legal sanctioning of anti-Semitism.

Korczak and his gentile friends were fully aware that many who lived behind the ghetto wall would not survive the Nazis' reign of terror. When a friend offered to forge papers allowing Korczak to escape ghetto life, he refused to go without his orphans. Although his friend offered to hide the orphans as well, Korczak knew that this would be a death sentence since most would be discovered by the Nazis (Lifton, 1997).

The conditions inside the ghetto fully lived up to Korczak's expectations. The Jewish people were afraid to leave their homes, fearing that they would never return. Gunshots were heard day and night. What people feared even more, though, was the sound of knocking on their doors.

On August 6, 1942, the dreaded knocking reached the orphanage door. Any thoughts of hiding would have proved futile, for the Nazis had become experts at discovering those who went into hiding. A German officer made his way through the crowd to hand Korczak a petition of clemency granting him permission to return home without his orphans. Knowing

full well that those who were “relocated” to the East were never seen again, Korczak dismissed the officer (Lifton, 1997).

Carrying one child in one arm and holding the hand of another, Korczak led the 192 orphans along their final march through the ghetto. As they loaded into boxcars, the procession sang, “Though the storm howls around us, let us keep our heads high” (Lifton, 1997).

Although the Jews were told they would be going to a “resettlement in the East,” their final destination was to the death camp in Treblinka. No one knows for certain the fate of Korczak and his orphans, but it isn’t hard to imagine how they spent their final hours. Korczak’s final literary accomplishment, his journal, The Ghetto Diary, chronicled what life was like in the Jewish ghetto. Just as his life ended abruptly, so did his journal. The last entry was made just prior to his death march (Bernheim, 1989).

It was ironic that Korczak’s final hours mirrored the final hours of the lead character in King Matt the First. King Matt, like Korczak and his orphans, held his head high as he headed toward his execution. Although the Nazis may have taken their lives, no brute force could take away their dignity. It’s difficult not to imagine what potential the world lost when Korczak and his orphans boarded those boxcars. Who knows what impact Korczak would have had on the world had he survived? Who knows if one of those orphans could have been the next undiscovered Albert Einstein?

Last year, I went to the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. All of the displays were moving, but one exhibit alone almost brought me to my knees. There stood a small

metal framed bed that had been salvaged from an institution. The caption below read that countless disabled children had occupied this bed as they awaited their execution. I asked myself, "What crime could these children have possibly committed?" If you asked Joseph Goebbels, Hitler's Minister of Propaganda, he would say that disabled children were "useless eaters whose lives are not worthy of life" (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, n.d.). As I thought about my severely autistic brother, it broke my heart to think that had he lived in Poland during the Holocaust, he also would have been one of those "lives not worthy of life." Had my brother been alive, he too, would have made that long walk to the gas chamber. I know that Korczak would have been able to look beyond my brother's autism to see the beauty that lies within him. If my brother had been chosen to board the boxcar, I would only hope that someone like Korczak would accompany him.

As I again read the words of the poem, "First They Came," I couldn't help but think that no matter how hard he tried, my brother would never be able to speak out for himself, since his autism left him without a voice. I only hope that I will have Korczak's courage to be able to speak out for him.

Works Cited:

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