

**THE LAST JOURNEY OF JANUSZ KORCZAK, STEFA
AND THE CHILDREN OF THE ORPHANAGE
ON THE MARCH TO THEIR DEATHS ON AUGUST 1942 -
FOCUS ON THE DESCRIPTION OF THE CHILDREN AND ITS MEANING**

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'The last Journey' myth, of Janusz Korczak and the children of the orphanage, is represented in various versions, written by authors distant from the occurrences in time and place, as well as from various perceptions. In all versions, the authors describe what happened on August 5, 1942, from the moment the Nazi soldiers and their assistants violently and cruelly broke into the orphanage, to transport the children to 'Umschlagplatz' (transshipment point), where they were to board the trains to Treblinka, to their deaths.

Two themes are interwoven in this myth: the first is the unique character of Janusz Korczak, who didn't leave the children alone on their way to death. Most versions emphasize that Korczak waived offers for his release, because in his opinion this was a betrayal of all the human and educational values that he espoused, and in light of which he worked his whole life, as can be seen in the articles and stories he wrote for and about children, as well as from what is known about the Jewish orphanage management and organization in Warsaw. Some versions also mention Stefa Wilczynska, who ran the orphanage with Korczak and walked the last journey. She, like Janusz Korczak, carried in her arms a child or two who had no strength to walk. Like Korczak, She, too, chose to be with the children at that time, rather than remain in a kibbutz in Israel, where she had already begun to weave a new life. Korczak's call made her returned at once to the ghetto and to the same journey: Korczak, Stefa and the children marched to the 'Umschlagplatz', where they were put into train-cars that took them to Treblinka.

The second theme of 'The Last Journey', on which this essay will focus, is the **children's procession**: the term "procession" means (according to Wikipedia) "an organized march of crowds for celebration or demonstration. Sometimes the march is in a certain order, known in advance, and it is customary in religious or military processions to wear special, ornate, colorful clothing, a type of costume. "



The children's procession in 'The Last Journey' myth is mentioned in most texts. The procession creates a reaction of amazement at the clean and well-groomed children, dressed in similar clothes and marching in rows, usually of four or three children. In some versions, a boy is heading the procession carrying the orphanage flag. In some of the texts the procession provokes harsh criticism and sharp irony towards the Nazis and their assistants and/or towards God who did not pity these young children.

I will hereby present three versions of the "The Last Journey" myth, written by authors who wrote the descriptions as eyewitnesses. The focus will be on the characteristics and significance of the children's procession in these texts.

1. In the description of the children's procession in "The Destruction of Warsaw" by Yehoshua Perle, the author mentions the break-in to the orphanage at dawn, when the two hundred children "Sprouts of Life" looked at the Nazis, the children's murderers, in "deathly horror". The children were ready. "About two hundred children, orphans, chubby. They were washed, dressed in clean clothes. And it was miraculous: the two hundred children did not shout, those sentenced to death, two hundred innocent souls, did not cry. None of them escaped, none hid. They only cuddled on their teacher and educator like ill swallows. Two hundred children whose heads have just been washed, being led to binding."

This text emphasizes several issues:

The first issue is the cleanliness and purity of the children. Well-groomed children, washed, dressed in clean clothes. According to this text, Korczak knew what was coming, so he ordered them to bathe from head to toe and wear clean and festive clothes before leaving the orphanage. By Korczak's orders - each child also prepared a small satchel with bread and a water bottle. Apparently that was how they marched in the procession. The description of the children as "chubby" is also part of the nurturing and love for the children, a result of Korczak's successful efforts to provide them with food despite the hunger in the ghetto. The phrase "two hundred life sprouts" emphasizes once more the nurturing and love the children received: each child was like a flower sprout, cared for with devotion, so they would grow and develop to become a flower... they were pure "souls innocent of any sin".

The author creates a contrast between the well-groomed children of the orphanage, marching in procession, and the death awaiting them: on one hand, "their heads just washed", while the hair washing symbolizes nurturing and belonging to a beautiful life. On the other hand, they are led to extermination.



A second issue is the children's "wonderful behavior" before and during the procession: "They didn't shout... didn't cry... none escaped, not one hid." By repeating the word "**no**" 4 times, the author highlights the children's brave behavior, trying to suppress the fears they harbored and behave properly. They cling to Korczak, their teacher and educator, "like ill swallows", longing to feel a little safety. Korczak, despite of being "thin and fractured, bent and crooked", protecting the children as much as he possibly can. Holding a child in his arms and marching forward. He didn't escape either and now he leads the procession to the destination, which, as the story goes, was known to him, but not necessarily known to the children.

A third issue is criticism. The children's procession is intended to present a broad critique:

First, criticism of the killers of the children: the Nazi "German dogs", who urge children with dogs and whips, without considering their difficulty to walk fast. Underlying this guilt is a more serious guilt: the unimaginable cruelty of murdering innocent and pure children by "gas poisoning and electric current".

Second, criticism of the Jewish community leaders: "Who did the Jewish community want to save? Not the two hundred children, but Janusz Korczak alone." But Janusz Korczak, who was a "great and noble man" preferred to go to his death along with his children. He remained in the children's procession because he thought that was the right thing to do.

Thirdly, mentioning the biblical binding story, creates an ironic parallel between the two events. Indeed, even in the binding story in Genesis chapter 12, there is a procession of the father leading his son to his death by God's command, without telling him the truth. However, the contrast between the two stories is striking: in the biblical binding, God saved Isaac and sent a deer to be slaughtered in his place. On the other hand, in the story of 'The Last Journey', God did not save the pure, well-groomed, and well-educated children, who marched in the procession in exemplary order and solemnity. The author's obituary words, at the end of the text, mourns Janusz Korczak and two hundred of his students, whose burial place is unknown, those tender sprouts, who became "a bleeding story" for all of us.

2. From: Janusz Korczak - The Tortured Jew, Yerachmiel Weingarten, Bronfman Publishing, 1979

When deportation day came, the Nazis charged into the orphanage and were amazed at the sight of the children and staff ready for the procession. In this text, the description of the procession is emphasized:

Structure wise: **"They marched in fours", "Janusz Korczak heading the procession ... with two young children in his arms, for whom pacing was difficult".**

In terms of clothing: **"The children wore their nicest clothes."** Festive dressing.

In terms of ritual: **"The flag bearer marched next to Korczak. On its white side the flag had a blue Star of David and on the green side - a reddish chestnut leaf flower."** The flag combines the national flag with the flag of the orphanage.

In terms of Korczak's feelings: he walks at the head of the procession, a fearless look in his eyes. Korczak feels encouraged by the fact that he did not **"give in"** to the pressure put on him to leave the children and save himself. Korczak knows that it is impossible to explain his feelings towards the children and his unwillingness to abandon them at this moment, to those who are unscrupulous.

In terms of the goal: Korczak sought to create a festive setting for the children, that would be positive and encouraging, in order to remove any reason for fear from their hearts, **"as if they were going on a trip."** Korczak, as implied in most of the texts, chooses not to tell the children the truth, and that was his way of shielding them as long as they lived.

Indeed, they march in the procession and enter the train-car one by one, as if it were a religious procession related to 'Lag Ba'Omer' (the thirty-third day of the Omer period between Passover and Shavuot, celebrated with the lighting of bonfires). In the text, a chilling analogy is created, between the fire of Lag Ba'Omer bonfires, awaiting the children "going on a trip" and the completely different smoke, rising from the chimneys in Treblinka.

The reaction of the poet Vladislav Schlenegel, Korczak's friend, describing the last journey of Korczak and his children is presented in a manuscript dated August 10, 1942:

After describing the festive procession, the raging poet continues being furious with the people of Europe, who diabolically formed chaos and a dance of horrors, in which no one knows how to save lives, especially children's lives. Only Janusz Korczak knows, as Janusz Korczak is **"the only soldier who protected the orphaned child..."** ,



the one who understood children's hearts and was with them on the last journey. Korczak's heroism of sacrificing himself for the children's sake, the eternal orphans, they got to march together with their educator in the procession to their deaths.

3. From the Warsaw diary 1939-1945 by: Michael Zilberberg, published by Dvir Tel Aviv, p. 36

One bright day, in August 1942, SS officers surrounded the orphanage. Korczak, the institute staff, and the children (about one hundred and twenty of them) were taken to the concentration place, 'Umschlagplatz', to be sent to the death camp in Treblinka. No doubt Korczak knew what was coming. Although the Germans offered him a release, he chose going to the death camp with the children. He only wanted one thing - to comfort the children and hide the truth from them. He slowly marched with them, in fours. I stood in the window nearby, I looked and saw them leaving. I never saw them again.

In this section, the author is an observing eyewitness, who watched the deported orphans leaving on their way to 'Umschlagplatz', from a nearby window. The author sees only the beginning of the occurrence **"I stood and looked through the window nearby and saw them leaving"**. The author also adds a piece of information, probably a rumor, about the offer Korczak received from the Germans to release him, and his refusal to accept that offer and save his life. Korczak chose to be with the children to comfort and encourage them and **"hide the truth from them"** that this is their last journey. Korczak chose to be with the children to encourage and comfort them as much as he could. The author describes the procession, the orderly march in rows of four, with Korczak marching slowly with them. It is not clear if he headed the procession (or perhaps was in the middle of it). In the last glance, the author sees the children leaving the orphanage, and **"I never saw them again"**.

The striking and painful point of this story is "the disappearing children". Here an analogy is created between the children's procession in the famous legend of the Pied Piper and the children's procession to their deaths in the 'The Last Journey' myth: the Pied Piper leads the children's procession (as punishment to the villagers, who denied him the wage they promised him) into the mountain and there they disappear forever. In "The Last Journey" the children are seen marching in a procession only at the beginning of the journey, and at the end they "disappear forever". It is not even known whether they died in the train-cars (as suggested by the white ash) or in Treblinka extermination camp. This leads to the conclusion that two



issues are strongly interwoven in "The Last Journey" description: Korczak and the children. On the one hand there is Korczak's noble act of going with the children, sacrificing himself and voluntarily choosing death with the children and for them, over his personal salvation. On the other hand there are the children, who do not choose death. They are innocent victims, the youngest of whom did not even know where they were being led. They march in a procession, the end of which is known in advance, and they disappear forever.

In conclusion, 'The Last Journey' myth is a double monument: One – to Janusz Korczak - the unique person and educator, who will forever be remembered; The other - to one and a half million children who had been led to their cruel deaths, most of them not even having a comforter to ease their last moments, as Korczak's children had.