

Korczak's character as emerging
from the 'The last journey' myth:

HEROISM

By: Dr. Orna Douvdevany

Korczak's appears in several texts as a heroic character. However, in the different texts there are different shades of heroism.

source	Vladislav Schlenegel From: Yerachmiel Weingarten Janusz Korczak - The Tortured Jew	Michael Zilberberg Warsaw Diary 1939-1945 Published by Dvir Tel Aviv. Page 36
perception	heroism	heroism
Emphasized value	Humanity (being human)	choice

Michael Zilberberg saw Korczak and the children leave the orphanage and start walking. Several months later, during his own run for his life he documented what he saw in case he would not live to tell. In the introduction to his diary – add at a later time, he writes that his description relates to the fate of every Jew in Warsaw: "... **I tried to describe the characters I met. I wrote in particular quite a bit about one noble man, Dr. Janusz Korczak, striving to show his Jewish and humane qualities, under circumstances that made his heroism even more incredible. I am honored for having worked with him.**"

According to Zilberberg, the children walked in fours, fearful, knowing where they were going, surrounded by S.S. officers. They walked slowly, orderly; An image of peace and order from out of this world; of innocence, faith and adherence to human principles in the face of utter evil.

Zilberberg describes a release offer that Korczak received from the Germans, and refused it. He did not abandon the children, even at the cost of his life. From personal acquaintance with Korczak, Zilberberg feels that Korczak knew exactly where they were going, and chose to stay with the children, comfort them and hide the truth from them. Even in the face of death, which was known to him, he wanted to comfort the children.



Korczak is described as **heroic, noble, considerate** and calm, in the face of a frightening diabolic reality. He had knowledge, he had a choice, and for human reasons he chose to waive life in order to stay with the children.

The Ideal - Zilberberg presents readers with a **perception of heroism** as an ideal.

The value from which the perception of heroism stems is **choice**.

Vladislav Schlenegel was a poet, best known in the Warsaw ghetto for the satirical cabaret about ghetto life, known as the "living newspaper", which he wrote and sometimes even presented. His hymns describe the events and feelings that prevailed in the ghetto. During the deportations to Treblinka, his poems expressed a relentless account with mankind and with God.

He wrote the description of 'The Last Journey' five days after it took place. He describes protest, fearlessness and deep contempt for the "**unscrupulous**," especially Brandt, head of the Warsaw Ghetto Gestapo, who offered Korczak a release. The author protests in outrage against the silence of Europe that does not lift a finger. He criticizes the choice of people to save their lives even at the cost of the lives of others - even those who were closest to them. He cries out against the very diabolical forming of the "dance of horrors" in which people were forced to make such choices. This was the reality the Jews were put into, and in the midst of all that - "**Janusz Korczak was the only soldier who protected the orphaned child ...** "

According to Schlenegel, Korczak believes that abandoning a child is an unscrupulous act. With his very conduct **within the "chaos of helplessness,"** says Schlenegel, Korczak "**writes the most wonderful page of heroism.**"

Korczak's character is portrayed as a symbol of standing up to evil and chaos, while maintaining morality and values that have always been his values, and he is not abandoning them at this time.

The Ideal - Schlenegel presents the readers with a **perception of heroism** as an ideal.

The value from which the perception of heroism stems is **humanity** (being human).

In conclusion

Out of a perception of heroism, Korczak is portrayed as a man who rose above the circumstances, as one who defied "the unscrupulous." He did not enter the whirlpool of saving his life at any cost, though many others were drawn to it out of the nightmare. In the face of the horror and nightmare he continued to lead, to reassure, to be the one who all gather around him for guidance and a to feel protected.

Korczak is portrayed as preserving his humanity and his humanistic and humane values in which he believed his whole life, lived by them and educated towards them - even when all around him humanity disappeared. Fully aware he walked to his death, choosing not to accept offers to abandon the children and save himself.

It seems that Korczak's heroism is rooted in the authors' perception, while from the descriptions it appears that to Korczak himself it was a natural continuation of his life's path: without the children - there is no point to his life. He is not willing to win his life by abandoning his basic values, without which life loses its meaning.

From the various descriptions of Korczak's heroism, emerge various values that were important to the authors:

- **There is no point in meaningless life.** In Korczak's case - without his children and without the values to which he was loyal
- **Standing up to evil.** In Korczak's case – sticking to his life-long values.
- **Leadership in any situation.** In Korczak's case - even under impossible conditions.

The perception of heroism, in the sense of rising above personal-human fears and adhering to a worldview, portrays Korczak's character, while emphasizing values that the authors would like society to choose and emphasize, and set them as worthy goals.