

The character of Korczak as emerges from the myth of 'The last journey':

**HUMANIZM AND HUMANITY**

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Korczak's character as a humanist and as humane (Mensch) emerges from many texts. However, in the different texts there are different shades of humanism and humanity, and only a few of them place the emphasis on this ideal.

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|                         | <b>David Hartley-Mark</b>                    | <b>Israel Singman (Stasehk)</b>                   |
| <b>source</b>           | Remember Dr. Janusz Korczak<br>July 21, 2015 | Janusz Korczak Among the Orphans<br>(pp. 162-176) |
| <b>perception</b>       | <b>Martyr</b>                                | <b>Humanism, humanity</b>                         |
| <b>Emphasized value</b> | Inner truth                                  | grace   |

**Israel Singman** (Stashek) was a student in Korczak's orphanage. In the introduction to his book, even before describing 'The Last Journey' (p. 148), he writes: "There were no witnesses to Janusz Korczak's heroism in accompanying his proteges on their final journey to extermination; all those who were with him perished in Treblinka extermination camp. However, from indirect testimonies, the journey path, the date of the orphanage liquidation, the conditions that prevailed in the ghetto and more - it is possible to paint a vivid picture of his last journey." Singman met Korczak for the last time after the Warsaw conquest, even before the orphanage was moved into the ghetto. Years later, he came across a description in a Polish newspaper, of the liquidation of an orphanage. The description remained in his thoughts until he returned to Poland and looked for people who had been in the ghetto or heard what had happened during the deportation.

"Based on these few facts, and especially on my personal acquaintance with Dr. Janusz Korczak, the conditions and the way of life in the orphanage and on



information I collected about the situation in the Warsaw ghetto at the time, I constructed a story of the last days of The Doctor's orphanage. I hope it reflects, as much as possible, the reality of those days, late 1942 in occupied Poland. "

Singman tells a long, detailed story, which includes many sub-characters. In great detail he describes the journey, and various occurrences along it, a description which he puts in the mouths of his characters. In Singman's story, after the SS broke into the orphanage, the children, Korczak and the staff gathered in the dining room. Korczak informed the children that they were going to the country, but only some of them believed him.

After 30 minutes - led by Stefa - of getting organized, they set off. Each child held a small package. They took with them the **"green flag, the flag of hope, of the orphanage."** When the news of the orphanage journey with Korczak spread in the ghetto, the windows, balconies, wherever possible to stand, were filled with people "who, with a silent look, wanted at least to say farewell to the Old Doctor and the orphaned children."

Israel Singman describes the difficulty of walking, running and long waits under the burning sun. Along the way, their group was joined by children from other orphanages, some of whom were injured in clashes with the SS. The author even describes shooting and killing of whoever could not keep up, or fell and was injured in the crowded race. In an imaginary conversation between two former trainees in the orphanage watching the occurrence from an attic, Singman offers a comparison between 'The last journey' and the the 'Via Dolorosa' procession in Jerusalem of Jesus to his death.

And when the train arrived, **"no one shouted, no one pushed or shoved. Dr. Janusz Korczak himself ... calmly led his own children on their final journey. He stood in front of the opening of the train-car, looking each entering child at the eye, as if apologizing to every child that disappeared in the dark car."** When the children were all on the train, a release offer arrived from an SS officer. **"Korczak's eyes, which were fixed on the German's face, opened wide with an expression of immeasurable hatred and contempt ... - Enough! - Korczak hissed through his teeth, turned his back on him and jumped into the train car."**

Singman was a trainee in the orphanage; he graduated and left the orphanage several years later, when he was already living in Israel. His description of 'the last journey' is rich in details and characters, portraying his information and thoughts,



and perhaps also of the people from whom he received information about what happened there on that terrible day. Korczak's character is based on personal acquaintance and a great deal of respect and appreciation on the part of Singman, both personally towards Korczak and towards his educational way.

Beyond the heroism that underpinned Korczak's conduct, Singman describes how Korczak remained faithful to the principles in light of which he lived and educated; how he maintained his humanity until the very last moment. Korczak is portrayed, first and foremost, as a humanist; as a person who - in any situation - will extend help, even when it comes to a child who was injured on the way to his certain death. In his story, Singman describes many people who knew Korczak and valued his work so much that they risked their lives to come out of hiding to take leave of him.

**The Ideal** - Singman presents readers with **humanism and humanity** as an ideal.

**The value** from which the human perception stems is **grace**.

**David Hartley-Mark** was born and raised in New York. He studied at a Hebrew day school, at a yeshiva at HS University and at Yeshiva Univ, where he completed his degrees in English, Bible and Jewish education. He has also been ordained a rabbi, and serves as rabbi of a Florida synagogue, blogging at <http://deitychaser.blogspot.com>.

Hartley-Mark relates to Korczak, and he writes: "**He was not religious, but he became a saint. He did not go to synagogue, nor did he know Hebrew, but he was a martyr.**" To illustrate the torture, he describes the deportation and the cynicism of the deception: "**The Treblinka extermination camp, where flowers were planted along the tracks, where the hands of a painted station clock forever indicated 3 O'clock. About 4,000 children, their teachers and caregivers were deported from Warsaw that day, brutally escorted by Jewish ghetto police, Nazi soldiers and SS.**" This is how he notes Korczak's uniqueness: "**In a world where men voluntarily turned themselves into wild beasts, he devoted his life to saving children.**"

The author refers to two times when Korczak chose to stay: The first time "**When World War II started, he might have fled Nazi-occupied Poland, but he chose to stay**"; and the second time "**he was offered a chance to escape at the last minute but**

**refused: he wanted to stay with his children." Thus "he lived and died with his orphans."**

In describing 'The Last Journey' Hartley-Mark writes that Korczak headed "**this small army, the shabby remnants of generations of morality troops he raised in his children's republic.**" He also describes Stefa, and names some of the children - including their brief description. This text describes a partnership of work between Korczak and Stefa, as well as love and personal acquaintance with the children. David Hartley-Mark quotes Nahum Remba's description, and he adds: "**... Korczak headed the first group of children and Stefa - the second. Unlike the usual chaotic mass of people shouting hysterically ... the orphans walked in rows of four with quiet dignity.**"

Hartley-Mark emphasizes that Korczak, although he was secular and even assimilated and seemingly far from Judaism, in fact realized the most essential principle in Judaism - humanism, and although he did not behave like a religious Jew - was murdered for his Judaism and ended his life as a martyr. In his choices and behavior, Korczak fulfilled Jewish and humanistic values. He remained true to his humanity and humanistic values even when the world gave up on them. Therefore, in Hartley-Mark's view, Korczak became a saint.

**The Ideal** - Hartley-Mark presents readers with **Jewish humanism** as an ideal.

**The value** from which the perception of Jewish humanism stems is **inner truth**.

### **In conclusion:**

Israel Singman knew Korczak. He emphasizes his educational path, his attitude towards children and the way he has always seen his relationship with children. Singman wants to tell us that Korczak did not deviate from his faith, did not give up his way, even in the face of inhuman reality. Continuing the path he has walked all his life, Korczak is portrayed in Singman's text as kind to anyone who needs help and support. And in this case - giving without expecting anything in return.

Hartley - Mark holds an academic discussion from a distant time and place. He emphasizes that a person's external appearance does not necessarily indicate his inwardness and values. A person can look secular and behave as an assimilator, and yet hold on to values that are essential to Judaism, live and die by them.

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THE LAST JOURNEY  
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Despite the different starting point of the authors, both relate to Korczak's inwardness and the values that accompanied him through his entire life, leading him to the final choice - to go with the children to his death. While one speaks from a deep personal acquaintance and the other from a religious worldview - both come to the same conclusions about Korczak's character within 'The last Journey' myth.