

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

JUDAISM

By: Dr. Orna Douvdevany

Korczak's Judaism is the cause and reason for the way his life ended. Despite this fact, to this day many are surprised to discover that Janusz Korczak - Dr. Henrik Hirsch Goldschmidt - was Jewish. In several texts describing 'The Last Journey' Korczak's Judaism is emphasized as an ideal, and each of them – presents it in a different way.

source	Zvi Sharpstein Education greets in our country From the Ben-Yehuda project	Joshua Perle "Ruin of Warsaw" Translation of the original document from Yiddish to Hebrew by Sarah Dover née Perla & Maya Dover Dafen pp. 17-19	Hinda Levi Lissner in the presence of Janusz Korczak (pp. 114-115)
perception	Hassid	The values of Judaism	The soul of the Jewish people
highlighted value	Nobility of mind	Being human	god consecration

Hinda Levy-Lissner was an educator at the Korczak Orphanage for five years, until 1935. Her writing stems from a Jewish-religious worldview. She describes 'The Last Journey' as a heroic act based on **religious and human principles** - they won despite everything. Because they sanctified God, they are part of the eternal nation, part of the generations- chain. The eternal nation will rise again - and they are taking part in it. Each step - increases the holiness. The spirit of the people of Israel is described here via Korczak's conduct.

'The last Journey' is a process of shedding shells of identity and revealing the deep core of the personal identity, which grows stronger as the road



continues: no longer a [Polish] citizen, but nameless - a Jew. from that moment on Korczak and his orphans, and all those who marched in this last journey, are the **image of God in man**. All the other shells of identity are gone. On their way they leave the streets of Warsaw - not the crowded ghetto alleys, but the great city. The children form fours, marching together - a description from out of this world, given the circumstances. The author refers to the **continuity and shared destiny** with millions of members of this nation, with a generations-long legacy of a **holy and martyred people**. In their march there is an essence of **eternity and triumph**, even though physically - they did not survive.

Levy-Lissner describes Korczak as a **father** gathering his children. Although he received an offer from the murderers to leave the children and save himself – he marches with them. By their upright march, they defy the murderers - "**Our souls you will not kill!**". Levy-Lissner describes Korczak and Stefa as the children's parents, contrasting the horror and cruelty of the situation created by the "evil beast", with the humanity of Korczak, Stefa and the children.

To emphasize his Judaism, the author refers to Korczak by his Jewish name, and notes that "**Doctor Henrik Goldschmidt consecrated his creator together with his orphans**". Referring to the children as a group, the author shows that the fate of the people is far beyond the fate of individual people. She describes the Jewish people, the sanctification of God and the shared destiny.

The ideal - Hinda Levy-Lissner presents the **soul of the Jewish people** as an ideal.

The value from which stems the perception of Judaism is the **sanctification of God**.

Yehoshua Perle, was in the Warsaw ghetto with his son and daughter-in-law, where he was involved in the underground cultural activity. He described the time in the ghetto in the diary "Warsaw Destruction", which he started writing at the end of August 1942, and stopped when he was forced to go into hiding. The manuscript contains, among other things, his eyewitness accounts of the deportations and of what happened in the ghetto. In April 1943 Perle and his son were temped out of hiding and sent to Birkenau, where they were murdered.



Perle, deeply shocked, writes in the ghetto that in the midst of horrible events **"which will make the blood freeze in the veins"**, Korczak's actions are a bit comforting, as he maintains humanity. " ...**"The pen is not capable to write about our great disaster... And if I would want to write down these terrible lines, it's because I don't know if there will be anyone left to tell ... I therefore want the great world (if there is still one somewhere) to find out at least to some extent ... how we were slaughtered ... if my lines are chaotic, if the dates don't exactly match, forgive me. I don't know how I can still hold a pen in my hand."**

The author describes concern for the children, caring for them, even when everything is known and seems lost. **"The two hundred children, two hundred "sprouts of life", stood in terror that they would all be shot ... and it was miraculous: the two hundred children did not shout, ... did not cry. None of them escaped, none hid. They just cuddled to their teacher-educator, their father-brother, to Janusz Korczak, like ill swallows, so he would keep and protect them ... He stood there, protecting them with his thin and fractured body. Alas the eyes, which had the dark fortune to watch this horrifying image."**

Perle also describes the rescue attempt: **"When the Jewish Committee found out what was about to happen ... they started to scamper, make phone calls, trying to save. ... Whom do you think the Jewish community wanted to save? Not the two hundred children, only Janusz Korczak alone. ... This great and noble man nicely thanked the people of the Jewish community, who sacrificed all the Jews of Warsaw, and went with his children to the Umschlagplatz."**

His ending words are: **"The paving stones wept, seeing what was happening... let my few words be an outline for this bloody scroll, named Janusz Korczak and his two hundred young orphans." "This is how Jewish Warsaw was destroyed. Destroyed and demolished..."**

Yehoshua Perle sharply criticizes the Jewish community and revolts against the moral collapse of that community, for in the moment of truth they, was ready to sacrifice all the children and save the famous man. Perle contrasts the Jewish community and Korczak' showing that the assimilated, secular Korczak is the one realizing the values that Jewish society was supposed to implement. At the moment of truth, Korczak was the one who stood the test, and not the Jewish community.



The ideal - Perle presents **Jewish values** as an ideal, with Korczak being the model and example of the ultimate Jew.

The value from which the perception of Judaism stems is humanism – **being humane**.

Zvi Sharpstein was born in Ukraine. At age 17, he began publishing articles in the newspapers "Hamelitz" and "HaZofe". At age 21, he moved to Galicia, where he taught and managed Hebrew schools, and was elected director of the Pedagogical Bureau of the Hebrew Teachers' Association in Austria. With the outbreak of the First World War he immigrated to the United States. Sharpstein was an educator and professor at Teachers college attached to the 'Beit Midrash' for Rabbis in America, and held this position for forty years. In New York he founded the "Shillo" publishing house dedicated to textbooks. Sharpstein visited Israel several times. His large five volumes book "The History of Education in Israel" earned him the Education Award of the Tel Aviv Municipality in 1965.

Zvi Sharpstein begins the description of Korczak's 'Last Journey' with a quote from the introduction to David Flinker's book, about the destruction of Warsaw. The description opens with the lamentation of Rabbi Shlomo David Kahane, the last rabbi of Poland's capital, for the great men of the nation of Israel who lived in Warsaw and perished at the hands of the murderers, Hitler's messengers. "...and among these he [Rabbi Kahana] names one person with a distinctly Polish name, and writes about him: "And who will narrate the nobility of the educated Doctor, the author, the Hassid in his qualities and deeds, Janusz Korczak..."

Sharpstein asks: "Why did an Orthodox rabbi add Korczak to the list of geniuses, believers of God and orthodox, calling him by the great name "Hasshid"?" And he replies: "His real name was Henrik Goldschmidt. He was the son of "Poles of Moses' religion", he had no contact with Jewish life, and did not know their culture. And since he was known by a pure Polish name, most people did not know his origin."

Sharpstein describes German policemen together with Polish policemen, who ordered the children and staff of the orphanage to go to the Umschlagplatz, where train cars would be waiting for them. The children marched in rows, carrying small suitcases, and cried, because they felt that evil was in store for them. "Korczak walked among them, wiped a tear from the face of one,



helped another, and on his arm he carried two young children who had difficulty walking, and together they went to the Umschlagplatz. There they were ordered to board the train cars. The executioner Brand wanted to take Korczak out of the train station, but he refused to part with his beloved children, and together with them he got into the train car. And left for Treblinka...".

Sharpstein mentions the book "Moyshe'lach, Yaske'lach, Yisrael'lach" that Korczak wrote about the summer camps, and points to the external similarity in the description of the train ride - to the summer camp and in deportation, and to the horrifying difference between the two journeys: "And he accompanies them, but this time not to see the light of the good life, rather to a place of no return."

Korczak is described as good hearted, "in his heart was the love and defense of the abused. During his life he spread light all around him. And after his disposal, his light grows even more ... It is not known whether his Jewish heritage influenced his actions and his method, but there is no doubt that the basis of his actions are the Torah values and Prophetic passion. ... To mention the essence of his radiant, noble, pure and one-of-a-kind soul, we will find no higher title than the one that Rabbi Kahana adorned him with - the Hassid.

It seems that the title "Hassid" is the highest title, with the highest qualities that Sharpstein can bestow on Korczak, who's Judaism was unknown to many, but was of sublime qualities and noble deeds. The meaning of "Hassid" here is of one who does good deeds, is righteous, kind and honest.

The ideal - Sharpstein presents **Hassidic** as an ideal.

The value from which this perception stems is - **nobility**.

In conclusion:

The three authors emphasize the Jewish aspect of Korczak's behavior, and his belonging to the Jewish people. While Levy-Lissner writes from a religious Jewish consciousness, and a world view of shared fate of a holy and martyred people, Perle refers to his disappointed expectations of the Jewish community, being what it was. Sharpstein saw through Korczak's external characteristic and into his inner self, where he finds the character of the Jewish Hassid, despite of being secular and assimilated.

JULY 2022



המכון החינוכי הישראלי ע"ש יאנוש קורצ'אק ע"ה

The Korezack Educational Institute of Israel



THE LAST JOURNEY
STORY OF A MYTH

Levy-Lissner expresses what the three texts have in common by saying that "all those who walk this last journey are now the image of God within man."