

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

SHATTERING MYTHS

By: Dr. Orna Douvdevany

Over the years, 'The Last Journey' was described in various texts. Many aspects of Korbzack's character emerge from them. Many of the texts emphasis the aspects of humanism and heroism in his character, and they contribute to the construction of the myth woven around the journey of Korbzack, Stefa, the educators and the children - to their deaths. Without diminishing Korbzack's image as a humanist and a hero, some of the authors actually want to shatter the prevailing myth regarding 'last journey', or at least give it a different perspective, stemming from their own world view.

	Jacob Rotem	Marek Rudnicki
source	"The right to respect and the duty to respect" according to the doctrine of Janusz Korbzack - the sixth international conference on the legacy of Janusz Korbzack	Janusz Korbzack's Last Way, "Tigodnik Pausceni" 1988, n. 45. Appears also in Roman Wroblewski's
perception	heroism	humanity
highlighted value	selfhood	Nobility

Yaakov Rotem was born in 1912 in Galicia, immigrated to Israel in 1938 and was a pediatrician in the hospitals of Hadassah, Afula, The Valley Settlements and Pardes Katz. For 28 years he managed the children's department at Tel Hashomer Hospital. Rotem wrote about 300 articles, several medical books, was the editor of the "Medicine" newspaper for 15 years, and one of the founders of the new pediatric medicine in Israel.

In his lecture, Yaakov Rotem analyzes various descriptions of 'The Last journey' of Korbzack, Stefa, the staff and the children of the orphanage. Contrary to the way many try to describe 'The Last journey', Rotem expresses his opinion that "the journey itself was not festive at all, and it is difficult to assume that under the threat of German and Ukrainian whips and weapons, Jews stood along the



streets and witnessed the journey." He concludes that it is impossible to know what really happened there: **"Only in the limited area of the siege area people were standing along the sidewalks, near house entrances, submissive and frightened Jews who were also ordered to go down, for the same purpose - to be taken to the Umschlagplatz. Beyond the siege area, the streets were deserted, and the walls sealed. The journey could only be seen through the cracks in closed shutters, from hiding places, from distant observation points, or from windows."** According to Rotem, the various descriptions, despite their similarities, are intended to create a myth.

The author describes the deportation as part of a larger process in the ghetto: **"On Wednesday, August 5, the fifteenth day of the "deportation" and five days before the final liquidation of the small ghetto."** Korczak and his orphans were not unique in their journey to the Umschlagplatz, many marched in this way. It was a shared destiny - with the children, Stefa and with all the Jews. In his description, Korczak's spirit is reflected in the internal organization of the orphanage, in the children's obedience, in the joint descent of Korczak and Stefa with the children. Korczak was there with them, but there is no personal description of him, because no one could see, and no one knows. In this text Stefa is the active and proactive character, who prepared everything and her actions determined how the children were dressed and what they took with them when they left the orphanage.

Regarding the rescue proposals, Rotem compares different descriptions of proposals given at different times and from different proposers - friends, colleagues and Germans. He concludes: **"Korbzack refused rescue offers of his Polish friends. If he refused these offers, why would he accept the offers of the oppressors?"**

According to Rotem - what happened in the livestock train cars and the arrival at Treblinka is generally known from reports on the Holocaust, but specifically about Korczak, Stefa and the children: **"Some may have arrived, but as far as the sick and exhausted Korbzack is concerned - there is a question mark. It stands to reason that after marching 4 hours in heavy heat through the streets of Warsaw and staying in a cattle train car in inhumane conditions, it is very doubtful that Korbzack withstood this abuse."** And he adds **"There are no witnesses, no testimony. Here and there a bit of information is provided, with reality and imagination mixed."**

Rotem points out that "in the first years after the war, they used to say that Korczak was saved, that they saw him wandering with the children from village to village in the Kaltza area, and that the train car they were in was separated from



the other cars on the way... the tireless striving to cling to imagination regarding the fate of Korczak, Stefa and the children is providing the "fuel" for creating a myth. These authors tried to give a different ending to the story, to allow an opening of hope, even an imaginary one."

Rotem does not doubt Korczak's heroism, and even confirms it. However, he doubts the reliability of the descriptions that claim to be eyewitness accounts, and estimates that the end was much less glorious than it is commonly thought. In his opinion this fact does not reduce Korczak's greatness and strength, expressed in Korczak's adherence to his self-identity. Though the environment tried to rob him of the human identity with all its might, Korczak remained true to himself until the last moment. The attitude of the Nazis and their helpers to him and his orphans - did not make him change the way he behaved and the choices he made. Rotem writes from a perception of heroism, as he tries to remain realistic and faithfully reflect Korczak's character and values. In this, in fact, he echoes Korczak's own approach, which accompanied him throughout his life - to be a realist: to look reality straight in the eye, and stay true to his values and identity at all times.

The ideal - Rotem presents the readers with **heroism** as an ideal.

The value from which the consciousness of heroism derives is **selfhood**.

Marek Rudnicki was a Polish graphic artist, book illustrator and a cartoonist. His father was a doctor, and a friend of Korczak's. Rudnicki grew up in Lodz. In November 1940 he was sent to the Warsaw ghetto, where he worked with Janusz Korczak. On August 8, 1942, he lost his parents and brother during "The Great Aktion" (final liquidation of the small Getto). After he managed to get out of the ghetto, thanks to Polish resistance fighters, he became active within the armed Polish resistance movement. After the war he continued his studies in Krakow. From 1948 he worked as a cartoonist and book illustrator. In 1957 he immigrated to France, started working as Helena Rubinstein's graphic designer. In 1959 he was appointed as the official portrait illustrator of the French Academy, and his illustrations were published in the 'Le Monde' newspaper. He also illustrated well-known literary works for which he won many honors and prizes in France.

Mark Rudnicki says that he followed Korczak and the children from the orphanage to the "gate" at the Umschlagplatz. He claims his description is realistic, "**I don't want to bust myths, but I have to refer to what I saw then.**" He says that the day of the deportation was a very hot day, that Korczak was tired and weak, and that the "deportation team" allowed the group to stop several times to allow Korczak to rest.



"Several adults from the orphanage, including Stefa (Wilczynska), walk beside him, like me, or behind him, the children at first walk in groups of four, but then in any way, in mixed rows, in one column. Some of the children held Korczak by his clothes, perhaps by his hand, they walked together as if in a trance."

"The atmosphere was dominated by an overwhelming sense of passivity, automaticity and apathy. No one was visibly moved by the fact that it was Korczak walking, there was no salute (as people describe), certainly no intervention by members of the Judenrat, and no one approached Korczak. There were no gestures, no singing, no proudly raised heads, and I don't remember if anyone carried the orphanage flag, although some people say they did. There was a terrible, exhausted silence...". According to Rodnitsky, "On the recommendation of the Jewish Council, I worked right there, in the Umschlagplatz." When Korczak, Stepa and the children arrived at the Umschlagplatz "Doctor Korczak was terribly tired. What was he thinking? I'm not sure about that. He looked at me and said: This is the end. Then he added: - Why?..." This question, Rodnitsky writes, mainly addressed to him, will haunt me for the rest of my life.

And he ends his description by saying that "apparently Korczak died on his way or upon his arrival at Treblinka. The cattle cars were covered with a thick layer of chlorine!"

Rudnicki's description is very different from the conventional myth: not a heroic event, no heroic walk, no demonstration of heads held high in protest. He paints a loyal picture of what he remembers seeing, that Korczak, his orphans and the crew walked in a state of trance, misery, fatigue and helplessness - like everyone else. They had no choice, and they did not receive any special treatment. Most of them died in the train cars even before they reached Treblinka. From this text it appears that even though Korczak was a unique person, he was a human being just like the rest. There was no "shiny" exterior - he was an old, hopelessly broken realist. In a situation where everyone was broken - the great Korczak was broken too, the same as everyone else.

Rodnitsky does is not attempting to paint an ideal picture of 'The Last Journey'. His description stems out of an ideal of truth, as it is perceived in his mind. From Rodnitsky's description, it is impossible to know what underlying value he attempts to convey, or what his motive was to shatter the prevalent myth of 'The Last Journey'. himself being a survivor who lost his entire family in that 'AKtion', this raises the thought that Rodnitsky may have wanted to say in his description of 'The Last Journey' that each and every one of those who perished in that 'Aktion',



in particular and in general, was equally valuable and significant, so it is not right to single out one person - however special, and neglect to relate to all the others.

In conclusion:

These two descriptions of 'The Last Journey' are presented side by side, while they are fundamentally different from each other - from the motivation for writing and up to the conclusions. However, they both challenge the prevailing myth. Rotem believes that Korczak was indeed an extraordinary figure up to his very last days, but – as he sees it – Korczak's heroism and spirit are not expressed specifically by external attributes. Rudnicki, however, challenges the very formation of a myth round Korczak and his apprentices.