

**WALKING THE PATH OF 'THE LAST JOURNEY' –  
SUMMARY OF LOOKING AT THE DESCRIPTIONS  
OF 'THE LAST JOURNEY'**

Dr. Orna Douvdevany

According to 'Milog' dictionary, the word 'way' in Hebrew means:

- A lane, a passage ... for the movement of people or vehicles
- All the actions that a person does to get to a certain place
- The way things are done, attitude, manner.

The journey of Korczak, Stefa, the educators and the trainees from the orphanage to the Umschlagplatz and from there to the train carriages, is called 'the last journey', for in fact these were death row people on their way to their deaths.

On every journey along a way, and moreover - a joint journey of a group of fate-sharing people - different processes take place. These are manifested both in the various actions of people during it - acts that indicate not only the mood but the nature and essence of the people, as well as the essence of the whole group.

The last journey of Korczak, Stefa, the staff and children of the orphanage, is the same journey that thousands of Jews walked, before and after them. Yet - the journey of the orphanage members led by Korczak, created 'The Last Journey' myth. The myth, emerging from 'the last journey', reversed the intent of the oppressors. Their actions were meant to destroy, but the very journey on which they sent Korczak, his staff and children, made them and their ideas - eternal. The journey and those who walk it - can never be ignored again. Their journey to doom becomes, in effect, a journey to eternity.

As can be seen from the many and varied descriptions, along 'the Last journey' Janusz Korczak's character grows to enormous proportions, becoming a symbolic, legendary figure, under whose wings all who walked the same path huddle, and Korczak's legend makes everyone significant. Some compare this 'last journey' to the last way of Christ - the 'Via Dolorosa', which created something new in the world, that at the time of its occurrence it was impossible to know what change of perception it will create.

'The last journey' myth is formed out of the very act of walking the path, and arises from descriptions of events that, according to various authors, occurred during it: Korczak carries first aid materials in his pockets, and rushes to provide help to children injured on the way; A protest march with a raised flag and singing; Side viewers' reactions –

crying, salute, shock. Most descriptions end at the train cars. The descriptions do not go farther, into Treblinka. No description of physical death is required to create the myth.

Along the journey, the identity of the condemned goes through a process of transition from a personal-human identity to a collective identity of a nation. As they walk to their death, their personal identity fades away. It no longer matters what the age of the walkers was, what their dreams and hopes were, what they did in their lives, what they had achieved, how well they were known and what their name was. All that remains is their being Jews - belonging to a collective named and identity as "The Jewish People."

One of the things distinguishing the myth 'The last journey' from others is the fact that it was first written in the ghetto itself, almost in real time, when many other Jews were about to walk the very same path - and for them it was intended. The first versions were written in Polish by people who were in the ghetto at the time, aiming to strengthen the readers' spirits by giving them an example to hold on to, of a Jewish man like themselves who found a way to preserve his identity and dignity, inspire of everything.

Later descriptions were intended to document and preserve in the collective memory the atrocities perpetrated by the Nazis and their aides, with the story of Korczak and the orphanage members being an example of their opacity and cruelty. Some authors have included harsh social critique of the Jewish community itself, as well as of the international community that has stood by and did nothing.

'The last journey' has become a myth, which sometimes overshadows Korczak's life story. This walk to his death on 'the last journey' became a symbol for all those murdered in the Warsaw ghetto, even those whose names were not known, and no sign and personal mark remained for their lives.