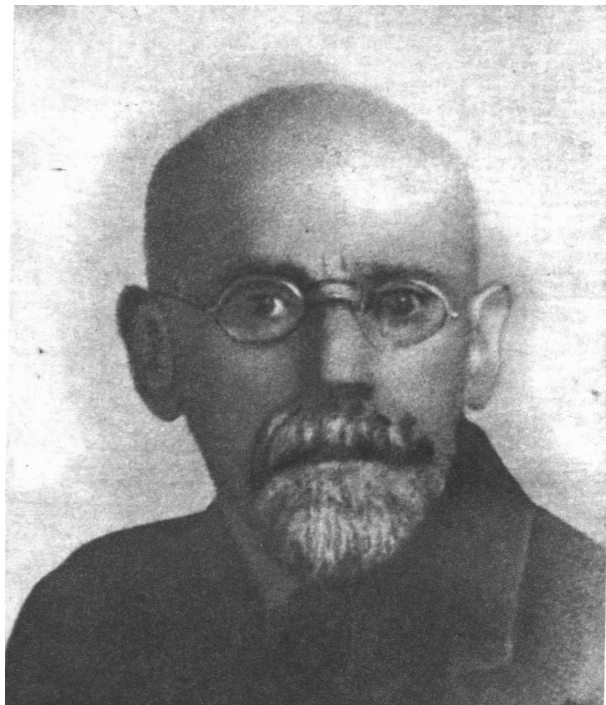




## Janusz Korczak – a freemason

In publications of encyclopaedic character Korczak is usually labelled as a doctor, writer, pedagogue and philanthropist. Because of himself cutting off from any political activity, he was not usually associated with notion of political thought. Nevertheless, examining his pedagogical activity one can notice that its long-time aims were concentrated on shaping a new man, and thus a new society. In the world full of grudge and conflict he was trying to “base the organisation of children on mutual sympathy and understanding. Separate in proper time from bad influence of the affairs of adults. Give them peaceful, gentle years for growing up and development. Never press, never stress, never strain, never neglect, never harm”.



Janusz Korczak took as his aim to equal in the eyes of the law all the rights of this handicapped “small person” and adults. Therefore he repeated in his works many times, that “a child is a person of worth equal to ours”. He died during Nazi occupation choosing to starve to death together with his Orphanage pupils, but from the very beginning he was aware that – as he wrote – “the way I chose to go to my destination is neither the shortest nor the easiest, but it is the best for me – because it is mine, my own”. This was the level at which Janusz Korczak saw his role in bringing to life the principles of social justice and equality of all people. Exactly that, all people, because one cannot speak about a man forgetting a child and speak about children without seeing them as persons. “It is one of the most obnoxious errors – to think that pedagogy is a science of child, not of a man” – he stressed.

If he taught anything, it was because he experienced that thing. When he spoke about an attitude towards a child, he did not talk in generalities, but he presented his



personal attitude. Similarly, when he spoke about an attitude to any other person, he meant his own attitude. In his diary the Old Doctor wrote e.g. “I exist not to be loved or admired, but to love and admire. To help me is no duty of my acquaintances, but it is mine to care about the world and the man”. Franciszek Ciszewski wrote: “To the Old Doctor came hurt, abandoned, poor children. He created for them their own beautiful world, a childhood they desired. There could happen to be no bread – but never the heart. Korczak had no time for himself, he made no family, for he had a lot of children already – his big family. They were the children for whom their own mothers were as stepmothers. For them he was ready to every, even the biggest, sacrifice...”.

One of Orphanage tenants, Józef Arnon (Halpern), stressed in a summary of his thoughts about religiousness of Korczak: “Who claim today that Korczak was religious – err, especially those who think about religion in its institutionalised form. But when one claims that Korczak was a man, who had great understanding for those who believed, no matter of what religion – then one strikes nearer the truth”.

Could this attitude to religion be connected with his involvement in Freemasonry? He was after all a member of the “Le Droit Humain” (co-masonry), which, because of its significant personal mingling with the Polish Theosophical Society, was often mistaken for the latter. The Theosophical Society began quite early to show interest in this new variant of Freemasonry. The structure of lodges gave the possibility to form tighter organisational bonds. First contacts with Freemasonry reached even the times of Theosophical Society founder – Helena Pietrowna von Hahn Blavatsky, who on 24 November 1877 received initiation in adoptive masonry from the Sovereign Memphis- Misraïm Sanctuary of Great Britain and Ireland, established by a theosophist and Rosicrucian John Yarker. Beside of this, English Rosicrucians allegedly sent her an order in the shape of a ruby cross and a rose. Hearing the news about formation of mixed lodges, the successor of Madame Blavatsky – Anna Besant – accompanied by six other members of the Society travelled to Paris in order to accept the first three degrees of Masonic initiation. Interconnections of “Le Droit Humain” with theosophy were clearly visible in almost all countries. Regarding theosophy itself, Ludwik Hass uses the following expression: “a mystical and occult wing of the Freemasonry in the widest sense of this word”. Helena Pietrowna Blavatsky underlined that theosophists hold to no specific religion, but everyone can practise the religion considered the best for themselves, or practise no religion at all. The Society aimed to transfer to its pupils moral truths, among which the first-line role was played by the idea of common brotherhood without racial, colour or religious discrimination. The rules propagated in the theosophical system were meant to constitute an essence of all the religions, therefore constituting so-called “primeval religion”. “Esoteric philosophy – according to Madame Blavatsky – makes all religions equal, gets rid of their human, external robes and shows that the core of each of them is identical to the core of any of the other great religions”.

It was evident to Maria Czapska that “Korczak was religionless, he brought up the children in the assimilative spirit, based on a very exalted but unclear idea of the highest justice. He led the children who were able through secret steps of realisations and overcomings to the top of a symbolic tower and raised them to the rank of Knights of the Green Standard. These initiations were performed by means of individual talks.



Posters fixed to a board in the hall of Orphanage depicted the steps of the symbolic tower augmented with slogans and recommendations. I saw children deep in thought gazing at this mysterious chart. Who was able, who wanted – understood. It had some taste of a Masonic initiation, some – of a Catholic confession: waking and shaping of the conscience”. Initiations, steps and this “Green Standard”. Exactly... and what this standard is? Readers of “Król Maciuś I” (“King Maciuś the First”) will have no difficulty of recognising the symbol. It is the standard under which children of the world were to unite. It is the standard symbolic of brotherhood without frontiers. The book was directed to children and spoke of their common brotherhood. But – if a child according to the thinking of Korczak is simply a “small person” – then would it not be rather a symbolic standard uniting the people? It was a standard of an idealised world, this world which he spoke about to the pupils leaving the Orphanage: “We give you one thing: a yearning for better life, which is not yet but is to come, a life of Truth and Justice”.

Speaking about the thought of Korczak one should stress three basic elements, all connected with a child, who was for Korczak at a centre of interest. The first was the immense, limitless love of a child. The second – faith in abilities of a child. And the third, so important and at the same time so undervalued by Korczak’s contemporaries – a respect for the dignity of a child – person. Eli Frydman writes that “the highest advantage of Korczak’s thought is his dynamic attitude towards all the manifestations of child’s life. The attitude full of caution and delicate understanding of the most hidden needs of every pupil. An honest, deep urge to explore child’s world of inner experiences, care to respect the dignity of every small kid”. Affirming the dignity of the child he gave new quality and fulfilment to the known and used for ages notion of “humanism”.

At the end, it is worthwhile to examine an appeal of one of the heroes of fiction by Janusz Korczak, King Maciuś the First, who, when on a desert island, wrote: “Beloved brothers and sisters, white children. Now it is the best time to show you are good. If you want to have rights, you should convince everyone that you have wisdom and good heart. Unhappy black children are given no help, so show that you want to help them. You have nice dresses, you eat tasty morsels, you play and go to school, you keep flowers and have bread with honey. And black children are ill and die of hunger. I tell you the truth. I was in many countries, on many wars. I saw much unhappiness. But all this is nothing compared to the Camp of Black Children. They are the most unhappy of all, because not only small and weak, but also wild. So it is more difficult for them to think about something to save themselves. Haste with your help”. Of course one can find here some faults according to recently advocated principles of political correctness. Maybe books for children written today would not contain such phrases as “wild black people”. But this is not important. The main idea of this appeal constitutes a kind of testament for Janusz Korczak. His call for rights of all children are calls for rights of those, who find it “more difficult to think about something to save themselves”. The appeal of the King Maciuś the First is an attempt to show that “if you want to have rights, you should convince everyone that you have wisdom and good heart”.

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