Yesterday I caught on myself and killed without turning a hair--with one
dexterous squeeze of the nail--a louse...Our attitude toward this fine insect is
unjust and unfitting...Who will explore the persecution of the louse? Who if not
I? Who will come forward, who will have the courage to come forward in its
defense? (Ghetto Diary: 13–14)

Janusz Korczak was a louse. He was one of the millions that inhabited the great head of
pre-World War II Europe. Then, not unlike the six million others who perished during the
Holocaust, he was crushed. Before his murder, Korczak was able to achieve something that most
great historical figures never attained. Janusz Korczak modeled moral courage. He was a lone
defender of the lice, a spokesperson for justice. Perhaps for this reason, he was bitterly
destroyed.

Janusz Korczak grew up in a secular Jewish family in Warsaw, Poland during the late
1800s. Certified as a doctor, psychologist, and writer at the start of his career, he was most
known for his inspirational educating skills. Korczak became a very respectable man among the
Jews and Gentiles of pre-War Poland.

In 1912, Janusz Korczak gave up his prestigious positions to open the Krochmalna Street
Jewish orphanage. He set his intentions on revitalizing the 100 young souls--orphaned and
abandoned--whose lives depended on him. This led to Korczak’s realization that in order to teach
these children the power of ethics, he must treat them like adults. The orphans ran their own
newspaper, government, and legal system. The freedom that Korczak granted these impoverished kids enkindled in them an astonishingly deep, moral understanding of the world.

The Nazis confined the Jews of Warsaw into a ghetto in 1940. Janusz Korczak, despite a previous desire to move to Palestine, refused to abandon his children. Instead, he moved with them to the infamously vile confinement of the Warsaw ghetto. Although the neglected corpses of children lying bare on the sidewalks haunted Korczak’s mind, he succeeded in hiding his emotions from the residents of his orphanage. He kept life for the residents routine and orderly while still providing them with ample independence.

Then, on August 6, 1942, this day-to-day order ended. S.S. guards ordered the nearly 200 children and staff of the orphanage out from their home and onto the street. They were taken to the Umschlagplatz, the ghetto train station where hundreds of thousands of the Warsaw Jews were loaded into cramped, filthy cattle cars. Most of the Warsaw transports advanced towards the Treblinka concentration camp. All too well, the 1942 inhabitants of the ghetto knew that this place differed greatly from other camps. When the Jews boarded the train to Treblinka, the true destination was inescapably clear: Death awaited them.

Countless tales embellish on the heroic behavior of Janusz Korczak on this fatal day. One of these stories details how a Judenrat official offered to save Korczak in exchange for him leaving his orphans and employees to die. Korczak immediately turned down the offer and marched onward, towards his doom. Janusz would never abandon his children, his trusted personnel, or any of his nearest and dearest at the orphanage. They were his family. Would a father ever save his own life at the expense of his children’s?
The one quality that set Korczak apart from other orphanage administrators was his moral courage. Writer Yehuda Bauer suggests that what he possessed was more even than this; it was *amidah* (Rethinking the Holocaust: 119). *Amidah* is a Hebrew word without a direct English translation. Generally, it is active resistance performed out of pure selflessness. On August 6, 1942, when Korczak honorably led his famous four-to-a-row procession down the ghetto street to the *Umschlagplatz*, into the train, and ultimately to death, he wasn’t thinking about himself. He was thinking of the children—garbed with their finest dress clothes, miniscule heads held high—the children who displayed no ounce of fear, even when staring directly into the eyes of their oppressors. For this reason, for the duration of the last hours of his life Janusz Korczak stood proud. His own small act of resistance showed the Nazis that even though they were slowly killing off the Jews, their courage and confidence would last eternally.

I could never compare in character to a person as remarkably brave as Korczak. However, a few instances in my life demonstrate a thread of moral courage that abides deep within me, and within everyone else in the world.

Not many people arrive at the earliest chapter of their educational future only to leave as the best friend of both the autistic kid and the deaf boy. Throughout my entire grade school experience, I was “that girl”. I was “that girl who’s friends with the weird boy” or “that girl who’s always talking in sign language.” I didn’t care what everyone else said, though, until my teachers started singling me out.

In kindergarten, I was taught to play fairly with everybody. I couldn’t grasp in my naïve mind why, then, my third grade teachers would congratulate me on my “great cooperation” with the boy who happened to have autism. Neither could I understand why another teacher praised
me, not the boy who struggled through life with a disabling hearing impairment, but me for being “so dedicated to learning how to communicate with him.” Despite my youthful outlook, I knew that these comments weren’t right. I decided to indirectly let my teachers know that I wasn’t befriend ing differently-abled kids to gain their appreciation. I was simply their friend because they were mine.

This type of moral courage is a small seed compared to Janusz Korczak’s lush garden. Though I didn’t face a horrid death, I stood up and supported others who many labeled outsiders. Every person, no matter his or her challenges, deserves a trusting friend. My ability to live by this conviction keeps the light of Janusz Korczak, and so many like him, shining brightly in today’s world.

Works Cited


