When most people think of a hero, they may think of a towering soldier or perhaps a lone warrior poised for combat. It is very unlikely that they picture a scrawny bespectacled man with barely enough height to clear a picket fence; but seventy-one years ago a man like this proved to us that bravery can come from just about anyone. Although Janusz Korczak did not fight battles or lead charges, on August 3, 1942, he showed as much strength, valor, and bravery as the most courageous of soldiers.

Henryk Goldszmidt was born in Warsaw on July 22, 1878. He grew up in poverty but always sympathized with those less fortunate even if he was not much better off himself. As an adult, he had promising careers in both medicine and literature but in 1912 gave up both to establish a Jewish orphanage by the name of Dom Sierot. He adopted dozens of children and the pen name “Janusz Korczak” as well. Dom Sierot was his temple of compassion; it was a home for orphans ages seven to fourteen and at one point even offered a summer camp to its inhabitants ("Janusz Korczak"). It was obvious to any outsider that Korczak cared for these children as if they were his own and in a way they were.

Although his career in literature was over, Korczak still put his considerable talents to work publishing many pieces on children and some even for them. *How to Love Children, Spring and the Child* and most popular among his orphans *The Fairytale of König Hanschen* were all written using his newest pseudonym, “Janusz Korczak”. He wrote, “Yes indeed, I salute those youngsters with my eyes and thoughts and with the question: what are you, what wonderful mystery is there deep inside you? I salute you with my determination” (Janusz 120-124). This is a passage from his acclaimed composition *How to Love a Child* in which he expresses his
methods on rearing his beloved orphans in their most impressionable state. It was clear that his love and fascination for children were unparalleled by anything else in his life.

Dom Sierot was undoubtedly one of the best places for an orphan to live at the time. That is until 1939. On September 1, 1939, Nazi forces invaded Poland and occupied Warsaw. The notorious Nuremberg laws were created which imposed brutal restrictions on the Jewish people and made life for the orphans at Dom Sierot not as jovial as it had once been. No longer could Korczak write kids’ stories or run summer camps. He was forced to spend his hours begging for donations of food to give his orphans. He received a surplus of offers to smuggle him from the country and away from danger. He denied all offers to escape Nazi tyranny. He refused to leave the children he had devoted his life to protect.

In 1940, the Warsaw ghetto was created and the population of Dom Sierot doubled to an astounding 200 occupants ("Janusz Korczak"). Then on August 5, 1940, a day that would become a black spot on the already tarnished fabric of history, the entire orphanage was deported and sent to Treblinka, one of the most infamous death camps ("Janusz Korczak"). Hundreds of children marched towards their imminent doom and at the front of the throng was their leader, father and teacher, Korczak. That day he joined his orphans unbidden and unnecessary but solidly present. As they boarded the cattle cars, they did not appear to be a mass of terrified victims but disciples following their teacher willingly into the next life. He died alongside the children he cherished, perishing in the gas chambers with them so that they would not have to be alone when they faced the end ("Janusz Korczak").

The subject of persecuting helpless individuals due to their differences hits home especially hard for me because it just so happens that my brother is severely Autistic. For as long as I can remember, I have been my brother’s keeper, protecting him from all possible harm: to
see someone so innocent suffer would be unbearable. I can truly understand the pain Korczak went through, watching his beloved orphans struggle to survive. To witness those you love being oppressed and knowing that they cannot protect themselves would be far worse than to suffer the same fate yourself. I would do anything to save my younger brother from peril and in a way he is my own orphan. Just as Janusz Korczak forfeited his life to comfort the helpless children whom he loved, so too would I pay the ultimate price to save my innocent brother.

The Holocaust was one of the most tragic atrocities to ever happen in human history. It is during these times of great evils, though, that the most remarkable people stand up for justice. They are people like Korczak, who know that they must stand up for what is right even if they stand-alone. Korczak died a teacher but this does not mean that his lessons of compassion and empathy died with him. His legacy continues to inspire goodness to all those who are familiar with his story. It is so remarkable that a single man can possess so much bravery in the face of so much persecution. Now that I know this man’s heroic story, I believe I have two obligations: to pass on his tale of tragic sacrifice to the generations that are to come and to live my own life with as much empathy and compassion as he once did.
Works Cited

