

Janusz Korczak and the orphans of the Warsaw Ghetto.

An online self-directed study lesson for KS3 students.

Hello, I'm Ruth-Anne



Good to meet you!

I work at the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education, and I've put together this self-directed study lesson for you.

This 50-minute lesson focuses upon the story of a man called **Janusz Korczak** who spent his life protecting children and fighting for their rights.

He ran a very special home for orphaned Jewish children in Warsaw in Poland before World War II began. The children were extremely well cared for by Korczak and his staff but what was particularly inspiring was that the young people were also given the freedom to run the home for themselves. Korczak treated the children as equals (however young) and celebrated their gifts and insights.

All this changed once the Germans invaded Poland in 1939 and took over Warsaw. Korczak, along with the 200 orphans now faced terrible danger.

In this lesson we will discover what happened to those children, that orphanage and consider the actions of Korczak, when he was given the chance to be rescued.

Introduction: Key icons

As you work your way through each slide, there will be icons to help show what you are expected to do. The icons are;



Read



**Helping help /
Help for you**



Do an activity



Time activity lasts



Think about it



**Watch a video
or film clip**

**Look carefully at this photograph.
What can we say about it?**



Now refer again to that photograph as you ask yourself 6 key questions. Then note down your responses.



1. What can you see when you look at this photo?
2. Who is depicted in the sculpture? What are they doing?
3. What do the faces tell you about the mood of the sculpture and the people in it?
4. What type of situation could the people represented in the sculpture be in?
5. Stones have been placed on the sculpture – why might that be the case?
6. What questions do you still have?



Sharing ideas, reaching out to others: phone / text a friend

5mins



If you have a phone of any sort or a means of making contact with a friend who is also working on this lesson you may find it useful to discuss these questions with them. *Remember to ask permission first from whoever pays the bill!*



Alternatively, talk to your parent/carer – how do they interpret the photograph? Perhaps speak to your sibling or neighbour over garden fence – what do they see in the photo?

Some info to help you...



- The sculpture is actually a monument. A **monument** is a construction that serves to remember an idea or an event or someone who has died but whose life has been important in some way.
- Perhaps the person did something extremely good, brave or extraordinary in their life which leaves behind a lasting message. This is often referred to 'a legacy'. In this case the artist (or those who commissioned the sculpture) think that is the case.
- The stones have been laid by visitors. (It is a Jewish tradition that stones are laid on a grave as an act of remembrance or respect to the person that has died). This monument is, however not in a cemetery. It is located in Israel at Yad Vashem, a museum about the **Holocaust**.

Consider, answer the following...



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1. Now that you know that this monument is related to the Holocaust, what situation do you think the artist trying to capture in the sculpture?
 2. Why do you think this monument has been made out of bronze and not a more light weight material such as paper or wood?
 3. Why is it considered the subject of the sculpture is considered important enough to warrant such a work?

Who was Korczak?



- This monument is a representation of a man called Korczak and the orphans he cared for. It shows a moment which we will learn about during the Holocaust. Before we find out what happened to Korczak and the orphans let's learn more about him and the life of the children in his care. Read the text below:
- Korczak was born Henryk Goldszmit in 1878 in Warsaw, Poland. He changed his name to Korczak when he needed a pen-name in order to enter a writing competition. He became famous throughout Poland as a writer and radio broadcaster, paediatrician and teacher. Korczak was highly respected and indeed much loved within Polish society for his dedication to children.
- Korczak dedicated his life to protecting children and young people who were excluded from society and were not able to get help. He wanted to help children who were living on the streets with no one to care for them.
- At that time no one really bothered with such children – they had to fend for themselves. Many ended up in prisons with no one to defend them and with very little in the way of rights young people were vulnerable and had no agency. Korczak was determined to change all that. He testified for young people in juvenile courts and became a pioneer for children's rights. (A pioneer someone who fights for/invents or creates something new).
- He believed that young people should be listened to not ignored. He said they are not people in the making (so to speak) they are people now with rights like any adult. They should be treated with respect and should be allowed to govern their own lives.



Artwork by Yithack Belfer.

One of Korczak's main ideas



Does the quote below resonate with you? How does it make you think/feel? Do you agree or disagree? Ask a friend, your teacher, your parent/carer/trusted adult what they think about this and compare responses.

‘Children are not people of tomorrow. They are people today. They are entitled to be taken seriously. They have a right to be treated by adults with respect, as equals. They should be allowed to grow into whoever they were meant to be - the unknown person inside each of them is the hope for the future.’

Some of the child's (young people's) rights Korczak championed...



- The child has the right to forgiveness.
- The child has the right to protest an injustice.
- The child has the right to happiness.
- The child has the right to respect for his grief.
- The child has the right to judge and be judged by his peers



Korczak's pioneering work in championing the rights of children influenced the rights and freedoms children enjoy today and are the roots of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Buddies, children's court & flying kites.



The children in Korczak's orphanage were well fed and well clothed. They lived a wonderful life there despite the fact that their parents had died or that they were there because their parents could not afford to keep them at home.

Members were between the ages of 5 and 14. They were given their own lockers and made their own beds. Each new member had to abide by the laws of the home governed by a children's court. A teacher or pupil could be sued and put on trial by pupil magistrates. Korczak himself often found himself at the mercy of the court when he himself had broke one of the orphanage's rules such as washing up duty.

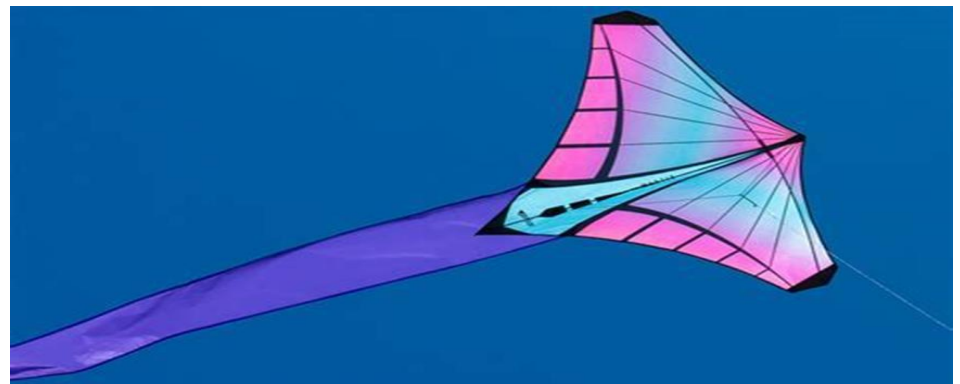
Sentencing was based on fairness, forgiveness and compassion but also an agreed set of laws that were established by the child parliament that created the laws of the orphanage. Nothing was imposed on them by adults. It was revolutionary!

Within the orphanage every child's talents were nurtured, and a buddy system was implemented so no child felt lonely on their own.

- **Have you ever flown a kite?**

Korczak believed that children should have fun during their childhood and teenage years. To emphasize this Korczak would say..

***Just as the sea gives a child a toy - a boat,
so the wind has to give him a kite."***



Itzhack Belfer grew up in Korczak's orphanage and graduated at 14, just when the Nazis marched into Warsaw. With Korczak's blessing he set off to escape the ghetto and managed to survive. He is now in his 90s and is an artist **living in Tel Aviv in Israel.**



Itzhack remembers life in the orphanage:



'Life was wonderful. It was full of drawing, sports and music – there was even a grand piano in the home- and we were always well fed and smartly dressed. It may be difficult to grasp, but life was the exact opposite of a typical orphanage. We experienced security, love and warmth. Korczak loved the children in his care and was like a father to me.'

After completing this lesson you may wish to watch a 30 minute film about Itzhack's life at Korczak's orphanage. The film is called: *The Last Korczak Boy*. Follow this YouTube link.



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jq_WUJ5oWjo

Learning from Korczak and the orphans of the Warsaw Ghetto.



In 1939, when the German invasion of Poland, happiness, as Korczak and the orphans had once known it, came to an abrupt end. All Jewish people under Nazi occupation found themselves in increasing danger.

Under the cover of World War II, the Nazis set about hunting down, isolating and violently persecuting Jewish people. Jews were excluded from society and in certain towns enclosed them behind walls of an small area of the town. This cruel policy was based on racist lies about Jewish people. Surrounded by armed soldiers, Korczak and the children had to move within this area of Warsaw called a ghetto. He struggled to find a building that could house all of them together. Korczak was determined that they would not be parted,. He did not want them to feel fear and knew they would not survive without him.

Many non-Jews, who were not even part of the Nazi party, bought into the idea- often for their own benefit. (For example. if Jewish families were forcibly removed from their homes – uncaring neighbours would often ‘help themselves’ to the Jewish family’s goods and property). Most did not help or protest when Jews were rounded up and beaten up. Some individuals may well have felt pity but did not dare reach out to assist for fear that they too would suffer as a consequence. Many simply ‘turned a blind eye’. Only a few, at great risk to themselves helped Jews when they most needed it.

Jewish people and their suffering in the Warsaw Ghetto.



Artwork by Yithack Belgfer.

Conditions in the Warsaw ghetto soon became intolerable. The Nazis made it deliberately harsh. They had no concern for the people inside the ghetto – not for the elderly, not for the sick nor for the children. Not even for the children of the orphanages. The Jewish people set up ghetto soup kitchens and welfare to help each other but everyone was struggling and living in fear. The ghetto was crowded and the Nazis supplied insufficient food inside. Slowly the people started to die of **starvation and diseases** due to the lack of nourishment and poor sanitation. The death rate was rising month after month. It was so bad that dead bodies lay in the streets. Anyone caught trying to escape would-be shot by the guards. Children, in a desperate effort to find food, would sometimes squeeze themselves through a small gap in the brick wall of the ghetto to find food for the family to eat. Most were caught and never made it home. **Hope was dwindling.** They were slowly being **murdered.**

Deportations of summer 1942 in Warsaw



- By the summer of 1942 the Nazis policy towards the Jewish people of Europe reached a terrible turning point. A decision had been made earlier that year to carry out the murder every single Jewish man, woman and child. Rumours were circulating around the inhabitants of the ghetto of places where Jews were taken to be murdered on mass.
- So when the orders came for the Jews of the ghetto to be rounded up and taken away a tremendous sense of doom and fear raced throughout the ghetto.
- Korczak, now was in his 60s, weakened by the strain of looking after the children and suffering from malnutrition himself. He was so loved by the Polish people that arrangements had been made in secret to rescue him and organise an escape route so he would avoid being taken away with the other inhabitants of the ghetto and almost certain death. He would have to leave the children behind as only he could be smuggled out. They would have to face whatever dangers lay ahead, alone.

Q: What do you think Korczak chooses to do – take the chance to save his life or stay with the children and face almost certain death?
Note down your answer and explain your thoughts.

Korczak remained with the children.



In this painting Itzhack imagines the scene when the orphans accompanied by Korczak and other staff of the orphanage were forced to leave the ghetto. They would not have known that they were heading for Treblinka – a place where they would be murdered by there was a sense (at least amongst the adults) that this was the last journey. Notice the colours and mood: **Q: What is Itzhack trying to create in this painting? Jot down your thoughts**



The Last March. Kind permission of Itzhack Belfer.

Read this eye witness account of the arrest of Korczak and the children August 1943.



“I shall never forget this scene as long as I live...”

“This was no march to the train cars, but rather a mute protest against this murderous regime...a procession the like of which no human eye has ever witnessed.”

Nahum Remba



And this one.....

"...a miracle occurred. 200 children did not cry out. 200 pure souls, condemned to death, did not weep. Not one of them ran away. None tried to hide.

Like stricken swallows they clung to their teacher and mentor, their father and their brother Janusz Korczak, that he might protect and preserve them...

Janusz Korczak was marching, his body bent forward, holding the hand of a child, without a hat, a leather belt round his waist and wearing high boots. A few nurses marched behind him, wearing white aprons. They were followed by two hundred children dressed in clean and meticulously cared for clothes, who were carried to the altar...

On all sides the children were surrounded by the German, Ukrainian and this time also Jewish policeman. They whipped and fired shots at them... The very stones of the street wept at the sight of this procession."

Jehoshua Perle In Y. Perils "The Last Chapter" The Ghetto Years, page 96)

Going back to where we began..

What do you see now? Think carefully-
What title would you give this sculpture?



Activity for students:

Remembering Korczak - do you agree?



5 mins.



‘The way Korczak lived his life (his values & deeds), is more important than the manner of his death’.

Do you agree?



Strongly agree

Strongly disagree

- Write a short paragraph to explain your reasons. Aim to give at least 3 reasons to support your opinion.

Korczak tweet summaries

write a few sentences that capture your thoughts.



5 mins.



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- I think its important to talk about Korczak because...
 - One thing I have learned about Korczak is...
 - More people should know about Korczak, his life and death because...
 - My Korczak kite reminds me that...
 - Korczak gave us the foundations of the #UNCRC. The most important thing he said was...
 - Learning about Korczak reminds me that...
 - My three words to best describe Korczak are...
 - Korczak's lasting legacy is.....

Teachers could send the most thoughtful examples to us
@UCL_Holocaust

End of lesson.