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The New Opportunities in Korczakian Documentary Research Love and Friendship among Pupils in the Orphans' Home*

Abstract: The main aim of this article is to show an example of the new opportunities in Korczakian research. They have arisen due to the development of digital history and recently donated or hitherto unused archival resources. The article also adopts the perspective of deepening the knowledge of those aspects of the Korczak research field that is not directly related to Janusz Korczak, his biography and pedagogy. I consider it important to explore the topics and biographies of people around Korczak, not only Stefania Wilczyńska, but also children, educators or staff. The more complete the picture of Korczak's universe, the better we will understand the multidirectional influences and connections between individuals and topics.

My ambition was also to introduce non-Polish-speaking researchers to Korczak source materials that are rarely translated from Polish. My preliminary research, based on almost unknown sources from the archives of Lohamei Ha'Getaot in Israel (Ghetto Fighters' House Archives), served as an example of how to take advantage of new opportunities. I adopted a microhistorical approach and analyzed personal documents, primarily letters of the pupils of the Orphans' Home from 1938/1939–1941. The content of the sources made it possible to look at love and friendship relationships among the teenagers in the Orphans' Home. I also discuss the topics of love and friendship in the pedagogical context of Janusz Korczak's approach.

Their intimate stories complement the knowledge of the history and functioning of the Orphans' Home that we get from Korczak's writings, Wilczyń-

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ska's texts and other documents. In turn, the intrapersonal and interpersonal skills that can be captured in the sources I examined allow us to assume that also in the aspect of love and friendship relations, we can capture the positive impact of the Orphans' Home on its pupils.

Keywords: Chaja (Helenka) Lewi, Janusz Korczak, Stefania Wilczyńska, Orphans' Home, microhistory, Ghetto Fighters' House Archive

Introduction

The main aim of this article is to show some new opportunities in the Korczakian, historically-oriented, documentary research. There are many unexplored areas, particularly connected with archival sources and topics concerned not strictly with Korczak and his biography but with issues and people who surrounded him. Even though there already have been great publications written from that perspective,¹ a lot of research still remains undone in that area.

I can see two main reasons due to which I perceive these opportunities as new:

First of all, the rapid development of digital history allows much faster and easier access to, searching and ordering sources than it was ever possible.

Secondly, the fact that many important Korczakian collections, including Chaja (Helenka) Lewi's, have been donated no earlier than during the last two decades.

This article is based on my research in the Ghetto Fighters' House Archives (GFHA) in Israel, which I carried out in September 2022. I had

¹ See e.g. I. Merżan: *Dzieci – miłość moja, duma moja, troska moja* [Children – My Love, My Pride, My Concern]. Ed. M. Ciesielska, O. Kierczyńska. Ezop, Warszawa 2002; S. Wilczyńska: *Słowo do dzieci i wychowawców* [A Word to Children and Educators]. Eds. M. Ciesielska, B. Puszkin. Muzeum Historyczne m. st. Warszawy, Warszawa 2004; M. Falska: *Nasz Dom: zrozumieć, porozumieć się, poznać* [Our Home: To Understand, to Communicate, to Know]. Vol. 1. Eds. M. Ciesielska, B. Puszkin. Muzeum Historyczne m. st. Warszawy, Warszawa 2007; M. Falska: *Nasz Dom...*, Vol. 2. Eds. M. Ciesielska, B. Puszkin. Muzeum Historyczne m. st. Warszawy, Warszawa 2009; J. Goldszmit: *O prawo do szacunku* [For the Right to Respect]. Eds. B. Wojnowska, M. Sęczek. Instytut Badań Literackich, Warszawa 2017; A. Landau-Czajka: *Wielki „Mały Przegląd”: społeczeństwo i życie codzienne w II Rzeczypospolitej w oczach korespondentów „Małego Przeglądu”* [The Great Little Review: Society and Daily Life in the Second Polish Republic as Seen by the Correspondents of the Little Review]. Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, Warszawa 2018.; A. Witkowska-Krych: *Mniej strachu: ostatnie chwile z Januszem Korczakiem* [Less Fear: The Last Moments With Janusz Korczak]. Wydawnictwo Akademickie Dialog, Warszawa 2019.

got a grant from the Integrated Development Programme of the University of Warsaw for research connected with my PhD thesis about the so-called Bursa in the Orphans' Home (hereinafter: OH).² During my visit, I achieved my goal and realized how many sources regarding Korczakian research remain unknown or unused.

I perused almost the whole available collection of GFHA related to Korczakian issues. Before I visited Israel, I had known all the appropriate records from an accessible online catalogue of GFHA. During my visit, I also researched sources that are non-accessible online, digitalized and non-digitalized, including ones that are not even described in the GFHA catalogue.

The article consists of three main parts:

Firstly, I discuss the letters sent to a former pupil of the OH, Chaja (Helenka) Lewi, between 1938/1939 and 1941. The letters are part of a unique collection from GFHA.³ Seemingly small, the collection consists of many categories of documents (including photos) and much information. In this article, I am focused on the experiences of love and friendship, expressed in the letters.

Secondly, I put the discussed material in the pedagogical context of love and friendship in Korczak's approach as well as in the daily routine of the OH.

The third part is conclusions, where I order my reflections about the experiences of Chaja (Helenka) Lewi and her colleagues, and discuss the great potential inherent in unknown and/or unused Korczakian documents preserved in GFHA and other archives.

From a methodological point of view, I take a microhistorical perspective, understood in two important aspects. Firstly, "as the history of a unique event or circumscribed community."⁴ And secondly, to stress that "people who lived in the past are not merely puppets on the hands of great underlying forces of history, but they are regarded as active individuals, conscious actors."⁵

² About the Bursa see e.g. B. J. Lifton: *The King of Children: A Biography of Janusz Korczak*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York 1988, pp. 139-148.; I. Merżan: *Aby nie uległo zapomnieniu*. Nasza Księgarnia, Warszawa 1987, pp. 67-107.

³ [Collection of Chaja (Helenka) Lewi] [online], (1938?-1941). Catalogue No. 037997. Ghetto Fighters' House Archives (GFHA). <https://shorturl.at/bmKV9> [access: 20.01.2023].

⁴ M. Maclean, C. Harvey, S. Clegg: "Conceptualizing Historical Organization Studies." *The Academy of Management Review*, 2016, vol. 41, no. 4, p. 623.

⁵ S. G. Magnússon, I. M. Szijártó: *What is microhistory? Theory and practice*. Routledge, London 2013, p. 5.

Regarding the analysis of letters, my general approach is very close to the one described by Marta Ferenc:

[...] the analysis of letters – personal documents produced to maintain contact and nurture ties with loved ones – provides an opportunity to get closer to the experience of people whose fates usually escape the eyes of historians and makes it possible to reconstruct how they interpreted current events.⁶

The collection of Chaja (Helenka) Lewi (1924–2007)

Chaja Lewi was born on 7 July 1924 in Otwock near Warsaw, Poland and passed away in 2007 in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Her brother Ruben was born on 10 March 1929; a few days later their mother died. Their father Szmul decided to place them in an orphanage. The earliest sources concerning to Chaja's (Helenka's) stay in the OH are from 1934. Szmul and his older son Huna immigrated to Argentina in the early 1930s. Chaja (Helenka) and Ruben joined them in March of 1939.⁷

The collection amounts to twenty PDF files in Polish and Yiddish, a total of 298 pages of scans, all of which are accessible in and downloadable from the GFHA online catalogue. Almost all the files are connected strictly with life in OH. Ruben Lewi, younger brother of Chaja (Helenka) Lewi, donated the collection to GFHA in 2016. It has been never presented in Korczakian literature as an independent topic of research.⁸

⁶ M. Ferenc: „Každy pyta, co z nami będzie”: mieszkańcy getta warszawskiego wobec wiadomości o wojnie i Zagładzie [“Everyone is Asking What Will Become of Us”: The Residents of the Warsaw Ghetto in the Face of News of the War and the Holocaust]. Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, Warszawa 2021, p. 261. Unless otherwise indicated translations are my own.

⁷ See biographical information about Chaja (Helenka) Lewi in the description of the [Collection of Chaja (Helenka) Lewi]...

⁸ There are references to individual documents from that collection, see e.g. J. Korczak: *Pisma czasu wojny: (1939–1942)* [Wartime Writings: (1939–1942)]. Vol. 15. Eds. H. Kirchner, B. Dziadkiewicz, J. Leociak, M. Ciesielska, A. M. Czernow. Instytut Badań Literackich i Muzeum Warszawy, Warszawa 2021, p. 601; M. Kicińska, M. Dziedzic: *Teraz '43: losy*. [Now '43: Fates.]. Wielka Litera, Warszawa 2018, pp. 168–171, the collection is described also on the blog of Roman Wróblewski, see <https://jimbaotoday.blogspot.com/search?q=Lewi> [access: 10.02.2023].

Beyond letters, the collection contains other unique sources, for instance, the set of 27 so-called Commemorative Postcards⁹ (most likely the second biggest set preserved in the world¹⁰), two albums with entries of colleagues from the OH¹¹ and the annual certificates (1933/34 and 1934/35) of Yiddish language classes in the OH.¹²

It is also worth mentioning that in the GFHA online catalogue, one can also find some photographs of Chaja (Helenka)¹³ and the Lewi family¹⁴ which are not parts of the discussed collection.

The collection requires careful elaboration. I did only the preliminary study for the needs of this article. In a separate preprint paper I reconstructed the chronological sequence of the letters because some of them were misordered in the collection, hoping to make future use of that material easier.¹⁵

Chaja or/and Helenka Lewi?

Chaja was her Jewish, original name, we can see it in official documents such as school certificates¹⁶ or her passport.¹⁷ Helenka is a Polish diminutive version of Helena that was given to Chaja in the OH as a nickname. It was a very popular practice there, many children and adults used names like these.¹⁸

From that point, I will use only the name Helenka because that was the only name she was known by in the OH, which is the main context of my consideration.

⁹ See [Collection of Chaja (Helenka) Lewi]..., 037997-1.1.-1.4. There are mentioned 28 postcards in the description on GFHA catalogue but there are in fact 27 postcards in the collection.

¹⁰ See O. Medvedeva-Nathoo: *Oby im życie łatwiejsze było... / May their lot be lighter...* Trans. R. Reisner. Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu im. Adama Mickiewicza, Poznań 2012, p. 206.

¹¹ See [Collection of Chaja (Helenka) Lewi]..., 037997-4.1.-4.2.

¹² Ibidem, 037997-3.4., pp. 12-13.

¹³ See e.g. GFHA Catalogue No.: 143, 65073, 65074, 65075, 65081.

¹⁴ See e.g. GFHA Catalogue No.: 65072, 65076, 65077, 65080.

¹⁵ See W. Lasota: "The Letters to Chaja (Helenka) Lewi From the Orphans' Home. A Proposal of the Chronological Sequence." ResearchGate. Preprint. DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.12800.20481

¹⁶ [Collection of Chaja (Helenka) Lewi]..., 037997-3.3., pp. 9-15, 037997-3.4., pp. 1-11.

¹⁷ Ibidem, 037997-3.2., p. 3.

¹⁸ See e.g. I. Zyngman [Stasiek]: *Dzieci doktora Korczaka* [Dr. Korczak's Children]. Nasza Księgarnia, Warszawa 1989, pp. 101-104.

The love and friendship among pupils in the Orphans' Home in the letters to Helenka Lewi

The letters to Helenka Lewi offer us a unique insight into experiences of love and friendship as a very important dimension of the reality of the OH. That dimension was not so easily available even for Janusz Korczak, Stefania Wilczyńska and educators. Of course, they were aware of many feelings among pupils but it seems improbable that they read their letters.

The main topics of almost all letters to Helenka are love and/or friendship. All the other topics: life in the OH, school, plans, holidays, even war – was a kind of background to her correspondence. Girls exchanged the letters with Helenka because they liked her or – as was the case with Irka Waffel – loved her as a friend. The boys wrote to her because they loved her, which also made them somewhat rivals to one another.

The love

From the preserved letters we know of two boys from OH who competed for Helenka's love: Josef (probably Goldfarb¹⁹) and Chaim Kierszenberg. We know of four letters from Josef, written between March and July 1939. In March, about three weeks after Helenka's departure, he wrote to her:

In my free time, even while in class, I compose letters to you, but such that I would never send you any. Maybe someday. [...] I could write to you so much, but I am still ashamed.

[W wolnych chwilach nawet na lekcjach układam listy do ciebie, ale takie, że nigdy bym ci nie przysłał żadnego. Może kiedyś. [...] mógłbym Ci tyle napisać, ale jeszcze się wstydzę.²⁰]

In an undated letter, most likely from April,²¹ Josef felt insecure:

¹⁹ There are no surnames in his letters but the handwriting seems to be identical with Józef Goldfarb's, who wrote the entry in Helenka's album on 27.09.35, see [Collection of Chaja (Helenka) Lewi]..., 037997-4.1., p. 4.

²⁰ Ibidem, 037997-2.1., p. 4. In quotations in Polish, I retain the spelling of the original. In translations, I render it only if it does not interfere with understanding the sense of the statements.

²¹ See W. Lasota: "The Letters to Chaja (Helenka) Lewi From the Orphans' Home...", description of the letter 8, p. 2.

I received your letter, but it made me happy only so much. While I await the letter impatiently, you write that only after having been for two weeks already in Buenos Aires you wrote the letter.

[Dostałem Twój list, ale nie tak znowu bardzo się ucieszyłem. Ja czekam z niecierpliwością na list, a Ty tymczasem piszesz, że napisałaś list dopiero po dwóch tygodniach przebytych już w Buenos Aires.²²]

But when Helenka sent him a photograph of her that he had asked for, Josef became bolder. In his letter in May, he was much more open, despite his suspicions about Chaim Kierszenberg as his potential rival.

I would very much like to write to you about my feelings towards you, but I don't have the audacity, probably like yourself. In time maybe I will get it, in my next letter maybe. One thing I would just like to tell you is that I love you more every day and that I don't think I will ever stop loving you. [...] I don't understand why Chaim is so angry with me [...] I turn to you with this matter because though I don't know yet, I'm starting to surmise.

[Bardzo chciałbym Ci napisać o moich uczuciach w stosunku do Ciebie, ale nie mam śmiałości, chyba tak jak ty. Z czasem może się zdobędę, w następnym liście może. Jedno chciałbym Ci tylko powiedzieć, że z każdym dniem kocham Cię bardziej i, że chyba nigdy nie przestanę Cię kochać. [...] Nie rozumiem, dlaczego Chaim jest na mnie taki zły [...] Zwracam się do Ciebie z tym bo chociaż nie wiem jeszcze, ale zacznam się domyślać.²³]

Josef's conjectures were consistent with the truth. We know of only two letters of Chaim Kierszenberg to Helenka, from March and May of 1939, but the message of both is very clear:

I love no one like you, even my mother I hate her.

[...] I was angry with Josef. And you did not know that I love you so much [...]?

[Nikogo nie kocham tak jak Ciebie, nawet matkę nienawidzę jej.²⁴]

²² [Collection of Chaja (Helenka) Lewi]..., 037997-2.5., p. 3.

²³ Ibidem, 037997-2.2., p. 7.

²⁴ Ibidem, 037997-2.1., pp. 12-13.

[...] byłem zły na Josefa. A tyś nie wiedziała że Ciebie tak kocham [...]?²⁵]

The tone of Chaim's letters is significantly different from Josef's:

And I didn't know, I wasn't sure if you loved me (did you? or did you not? Whom more, me or Josef? Why?)

[I nie wiedziałem, nie byłem pewien czy Ty mnie kochasz (kochasz? czy nie? Kogo więcej, mnie czy Josefa? Dlaczego?)²⁶]

We do not know Helenka's answers to Chaim and Josef but we can assume that she chose Josef and she expressed it to him. In Josef's final letter, from the beginning of July, he did not even utter a word about Chaim but instead wrote openly and freely about his feelings:

I love you as only a boy of 15 or 16 years old can love, t.[hat] i.[s], a boy who has never loved before. [...] Josef who will always love you.

[Kocham Cię tak jak tylko może kochać chłopiec 15, albo 16 letni t[o].z[naczy]. chłopiec, który jeszcze nigdy nie kochał. [...] Josef który Cię zawsze będzie kochał.²⁷]

On the first page of that letter we can see stains looking like tears that smeared the ink. That is the last piece of information about Helenka's romantic relationships.

The friendship

We have ten letters from Helenka's friends: one from Renia Abramson, one from Sara Biderman, three letters from Guta Rosenfeld, and five from Irka Waffel. These girls expressed their feelings towards Helenka very clearly. We can easily put them on the kind of emotional continuum, from reserved Guta Rosenfeld, through Renia and Sara, who declared their deeper affection, to her best friend Irka Waffel.

Guta Rosenfeld had left Poland while Helenka still was in the OH. She used in two of three of her letters to Helenka the same opening lines: "My dear peer" It seems to reflect their relationship in an adequate

²⁵ Ibidem, 037997-2.3., p. 10.

²⁶ Ibidem, p. 11.

²⁷ Ibidem, pp. 3-4.

way. She left the OH²⁸ and in letters described her travel to her father in Paris, France, focusing primarily on facts, behaviours, and descriptions of the surrounding reality. The only emotive parts are connected with Abram, probably Guta's love from the OH:

Helenka, I would like to write a letter to Abram with a few words, but I know they will laugh[clipped]

[Helenko, chciałabym napisać list do Abrama kilka słów, ale wiem, że będą się śmia [urwane]²⁹]

I ask you to tell Abram not to show the letter to anyone. [...] I do not write anything on the envelope to Abram but you will know for yourself.

[Proszę żebyś powiedziała Abramowi, żeby nikomu nie pokazał listu. [...] Niepiszę na kopercie do Abrama nic ale ty będziesz wiedziała sama.³⁰]

Renia Abramson had also left the OH and stayed in Warsaw afterwards. She felt much closer to Helenka. One reason for it was that she was a friend of Josef and the second reason she described as follows:

You know, we were never such good friends after all, but that day when we went to cinema together brought me so close to you.

[Wiesz my przecież nigdy nie byliśmy takimi dobrymi koleżankami ale ten dzień gdy szliśmy razem do kina tak mnie zbliżył do ciebie.³¹]

Sara Biderman and Helenka had a shared passion: theatre. Helenka was a member of the so-called Circle for Useful Entertainment [Polish *Koło Pożytecznych Rozrywek*], a very important institution in the OH, with a long tradition. As a member, she was an amateur actress and director of theatrical plays in the OH. In Helenka's album (scrapbook), many people referred to her role as "grandma."³² In another source,

²⁸ See W. Lasota: "The Letters to Chaja (Helenka) Lewi From the Orphans' Home...," information about letter 1, p. 2.

²⁹ [Collection of Chaja (Helenka) Lewi]..., 037997-2.4., p. 12.

³⁰ Ibidem, p. 7.

³¹ Ibidem, 037997-2.1., p. 14

³² See Ibidem, 037997-4.1., pp. 9, 11, 15, 16, 19, 20, 21, 22, 26.

a photo album dated 23.02.39, which Helenka was gifted before her departure, we read:

To the longtime director of performances and our treasurer as a keepsake before her leaving for Argentina. C.U.E. [K.P.R.] Board.

[Długoletniej reżyserce przedstawień i skarbniczce na pamiątkę przed wyjazdem do Argentyny. Zarząd K.P.R.³³]

Beneath the entry are ten signatures, among them Sara Biderman's and Irka Waffel's.

That thespian context is reflected in Sara's letter. She described to Helenka in detail the play which was performed after Helenka's departure and Sara was probably a stage director of that play. The shared experience brought the girls closer together:

But this stage fright, because it is the worst, now I understand you perfectly. I had fear as an artist, (because I played solo) I did very well [...]. Now in this area, we both understand each other.

[Ale ten strach przed przedstawieniem bo jest najgorszy teraz ja Cię doskonale rozumiem. Ja miałam stracha jako artystka, (bo grałam solo) b. dobrze mi poszło [...]. Teraz w tej dziedzinie to obie się rozumiemy.³⁴]

But the deepest and strongest friendship was between Helenka and Irka Waffel. In her letters, Irka expressed her love, sorrow, and feeling of loneliness in a highly emotional way and she hoped they will remain friends forever and one day they will meet.

14.03.39

I cried terribly as the train moved and realized that I was leaving you for so long and maybe "God forbid" forever.

[Strasznie płakałam jak ruszył pociąg i zdałam sobie sprawę z tego że Ciebie na tak długo opuszczam a może „Nie daj Boże” na zawsze.³⁵]

³³ [Album of Chaja (Helenka) Lewi] [online], (1939). Catalogue No. 143. Ghetto Fighters' House Archives. <https://shorturl.at/gABNO> [access: 20.01.2023].

³⁴ [Collection of Chaja (Helenka) Lewi]..., 037997-2.2., p. 4.

³⁵ Ibidem, 037997-2.1., p. 6.

10.05.39

Now I just felt [...] that the second closest person after my parents, and maybe even sometimes in the closest person period, is a friend just like you and I to each other. [...] I also vowed to myself that we must get together.

[Teraz dopiero odczułam [...], że drugą najbliższą osobą po rodzicach, a może nawet i nieraz w pierwszym rzędzie najbliższą jest przyjaciółka tak jak ty i Ja nawzajem.³⁶ [...] Ja również sobie przyrzekłam że musimy się razem spotkać.³⁷]

2.07.39

When I read in your letter that there is a possibility for us to see each other again, I started laughing and crying alternately. When I sometimes hear someone say: "Helenka is happy with her father now" [...] I immediately go away. Well, because how can someone and a complete stranger feel the same as our two hearts feel. [...] we know our common goal and common aspirations.

[Kiedy przeczytałam w Twym liście że jest możliwość żebyśmy się jeszcze zobaczyły to zaczęłam się śmiać i płakać na przemian. Kiedy słyszę nieraz że ktoś mówi: „Helenka jest teraz szczęśliwa u swego ojca” [...] odrazu odchodzę. No bo skąd może ktoś i to zupełnie obcy czuć to samo co czują nasze dwa serca. [...] my znamy nasz wspólny cel i wspólne dążenia.³⁸]

Irka began her letter dated September 1939 not with the information about the outbreak of war but from an apology for not writing Helenka back immediately after receiving her letter. She described in detail the first weeks of war: fear, fire, and famine, but also the effective organization of the OH. At the end she wrote:

Dear Helenka how are you, write to me everything exactly about your plans. Write back immediately. Loving you Irka W.

[Kochana Helenko jak u ciebie, napisz mi wszystko dokładnie o twoich zamiarach. Odpisz natychmiast. Kochająca cię Irka W.³⁹]

³⁶ Ibidem, 037997-2.2., p. 10.

³⁷ Ibidem, p. 12.

³⁸ Ibidem, p. 14.

³⁹ Ibidem, 037997-2.4., p. 1.

In her last letter, from July of 1941, Irka wrote:

It's been two years already since we stopped writing to each other. [...] I don't know if you received my letter that I sent to you in October [...] [1939]. In any case, I did not receive a reply from you. [...] You can be sure that I will not forget about you. [...] Why don't you write to us. Have you already completely forgotten about us and nothing interests you? Helenka, if you don't care about my letter, then forgive me for scribbling so much to you. However, Helenka, I think you will be happy with this letter, just for the thought that I have not forgotten about you even in these times.

[Już dwa lata mija jak przestałyśmy do siebie pisywać. [...] Nie wiem, czyś otrzymała mój list, który wysłałam do Ciebie w październiku [...] [1939 r.]. W każdym razie nie otrzymałam od Ciebie odpowiedzi. [...] Możesz być pewna, że o Tobie nie zapomnę. [...] Dlaczego do nas nie piszesz. Czyś już zupełnie o nas zapomniałaś i nic Cię nie interesuje? Helenko, jeżeli Cię mój list nie obchodzi, to wybacz, że Ci tyle nabazgrałam. Helenko, myślę jednak, że ucieszy Cię ten list, na samą myśl, że o Tobie nawet w tych czasach nie zapomniałam.⁴⁰]

Her anxiety and suspicions are also featured in many letters from the Warsaw Ghetto.⁴¹

The last two letters from Irka, dated 23.09.39 and 14.07.41, are very rare sources in Korczakian literature.⁴² These are also highly moving testimonies, not only of the time of war and Holocaust but also of the friendship which was maintained to its tragic end.

The authors of the letters in the reality of the Orphans' Home

Love, friendship and many other experiences of the letters' authors were embedded in the environment of the OH and that is the appropriate context for understanding them. The way of establishing and developing the relationships, including love and friendship, was con-

⁴⁰ Ibidem, 037997-2.5., pp. 5-6.

⁴¹ See M. Ferenc: „Każdy pyta, co z nami będzie”..., p. 266

⁴² See M. Ciesielska: „Dużo trudu i dużo piękna w życiu internatu: z Domu Sierot Janusza Korczaka” [“A Lot of Hardship and a Lot of Beauty in Boarding School Life”: From the Janusz Korczak Orphans' Home]. *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały*, 2012, no. 8, p. 293.

nected with many activities and methods in the OH which gave children opportunities to fulfil their passions and strengthen their skills.

Regarding love, we know something which was confidential, present probably only in the letters. Therefore, there are no traces of romantic love in preserved official or semi-official documents of the OH (e.g. in Helenka's albums). Hence we are restricted to guesswork and circumstantial evidence, however, to carry out in such a manner is hardly novel in the microhistorical approach.⁴³

What do we know for certain or almost for certain?

Josef mentioned that the love he felt for Helenka was his first. Chaim described an attraction between Helenka and Josef before she left the OH.⁴⁴ We can assume it was her first love, too. Thus, it was a significant and important challenge for them to cope with. As we know, many children in the OH were well-prepared to look for solutions and achieve their goals.

Let us look at Helenka's Commemorative Postcards. She probably was a very hardworking person (she completed 4,000 so-called work units),⁴⁵ smart (excellent in Yiddish,⁴⁶ good at school,⁴⁷ spent a year in the office of the OH⁴⁸), with impressively strong will (12 postcards "For Early Rising"). We know already about her theatrical successes. It seems she was for sure well-prepared for dilemmas and difficulties connected also with her first love.

We know less about Josef. He enjoyed reading⁴⁹ and probably playing volleyball,⁵⁰ he was engrossed by *Hamlet* and tried to understand it.⁵¹ He had ideas to gather money for the journey to Helenka to Argentina.⁵² He had allies who supported him in his love: Renia spoke with him for long hours⁵³ and Irka passed him the letters from Helenka.⁵⁴

⁴³ See C. Ginzburg: "Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm Clues." In: *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*. Trans. J. Tedeschi, A. C. Tedeschi. JHU Press, Baltimore 2013, pp. 96-125; S. G. Magnússon, I. M. Szijártó: *What is microhistory?...*, pp. 21-22.

⁴⁴ See [Collection of Chaja (Helenka) Lewi]..., 037997-2.3., p. 10.

⁴⁵ See *ibidem*, 037997-1.1 - 1.4.

⁴⁶ See *ibidem*, 037997-3.4., pp. 12-13.

⁴⁷ See *Ibidem*, 037997-1.3., p. 13.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 11.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, 037997-2.5., p. 4.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*.

⁵² *Ibidem*, 037997-2.1., p. 7.

⁵³ *Ibidem*, p. 13.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 6.

The significant part of life in the OH was summer camp called Little Rose in the village Gocławek near Warsaw (now it is a part of Warsaw). Children from the OH spent there all summer holidays, having much fun and making friends. For children, Gocławek was synonymous with carefree and holiday relaxation.

But Josef wrote that even there he could not forget about his love towards Helenka. The message seems to be clear: nothing was more important than that love.

2.07.1939

I love you so much that *even though Gocławek* [emphasis mine – W.L.], I don't stop thinking about you for a moment. It occurs to me that if you were even with us in Gocławek I would tell you what I am writing now.

[Kocham Cię tak, że chociaż Gocławek, na chwilę nie przestaję myśleć o tobie. Zdaje mi się, że gdybyś nawet była z nami w Gocławku powiedziałbym Ci to co teraz piszę.⁵⁵]

Hermetic knowledge was needed as well as many shared experiences in order to understand how happy one can be in Gocławek and how strong a love was when it was “stronger than Gocławek.”

Based his letters, we may conclude that Josef was patient and slowly letting Helenka know about his feelings until he was sure he could express them openly. He communicated with Helenka frequently, they exchanged thoughts and feelings, questions and answers; they explained the meanings of symbols (e.g. Helenka gave Josef a medallion⁵⁶) and behaviours (letters from Helenka to Chaim⁵⁷). They were coping with their love successfully, as we can assume. And it seems that Irka Waffel and Helenka Lewi were coping with their friendship the same way. From the initial sorrow resulting from Helenka's emigration, Irka was going to quickly look for possible solutions. She considered moving to Argentina but she had no one there.⁵⁸ She clearly declared she wanted to stay in Poland⁵⁹ but looking for a way to meet with Helenka, Irka would be happy even if Polish Jews will be expelled to America (!):

⁵⁵ Ibidem, 037997-2.3., p. 4.

⁵⁶ Ibidem, 037997-2.1., p. 11.

⁵⁷ Ibidem, 037997-2.2., p. 7.

⁵⁸ Ibidem, 037997-2.1., p. 6.

⁵⁹ Ibidem, 037997-2.2., p. 12.

I want it to be that the Jews were sent to America from Poland.

[Chcę żeby już bodaj było tak żeby Żydów wysłano do Ameryki z Polski.⁶⁰]

Helenka was also looking for opportunities for a reunion. She probably proposed she will come back to Poland with her family, the very prospect of which made Irka happy.⁶¹

We know nothing about institutional support of love relationships in the OH (it is even hard to imagine solutions like these) but we know the other positive bindings, including friendship, were supported in the OH, which could make Irka's and Helenka's attempts easier. Irka wrote:

(Mrs. Madzia⁶² seems to be about to submit for a postcard for us for our friendship)

[(P. Madzia ma zdaje się zamiar złożyć dla nas o pocztówkę za przyjaźń)].⁶³

Friendship was not only a private relationship in the OH. It was also a part of public sphere of life, which was noticed in the OH and considered worthy of support and commemoration.

When the Second World War broke out Irka wanted to maintain their relationship, as we saw previously in her letter from September 1939.

She could not express it openly so we can only imagine what might have been the reasons why Irka did not write to Helenka between October 1939 and July 1941. As for so many people in the Warsaw Ghetto,⁶⁴ relationships with people outside of it were the sources of consolation and solace. Therefore, while forced to remain on the inside, Irka was focused on her relationship with Helenka. In Irka's last two letters, there is nothing about a reunion with Helenka, she was not trying to find a way to meet anymore. We will probably never know if they were aware they became separated forever.

⁶⁰ Ibidem.

⁶¹ Ibidem, p. 14.

⁶² "Mrs. Madzia" is Matylda Temkin (1903–1971), who directed the OH between 1938 and 1939, see e.g. Korczak: *Pisma czasu wojny...*, pp. 512–515.

⁶³ [Collection of Chaja (Helenka) Lewi]..., 037997-2.2., p. 9.

⁶⁴ See Ferenc: „Każdy pyta, co z nami będzie”..., p. 262

Love and friendship in the pedagogical context of Janusz Korczak's approach

I treat Korczak's pedagogical approach as the most relevant pedagogical context to understanding the issues I have already discussed. In particular, I shall discuss three groups of sources, which communicate Korczak's pedagogical approach: his selected works of fiction and pedagogical books, as well as primary sources from the OH.

Korczak's fiction

Themes of love and friendship among children and adolescents play a crucial role in the many books of fiction by Korczak but they are never the main topic in them.

The message of *Sława* (Fame, 1912) is the importance of dreaming. A group of poor children establish the "Society of The Knights of Honour" because they want to self-improve themselves. Their dreams about the future are painfully limited by their possibilities but they fulfill their dreams to some extent. It is possible thanks to their friendship and experiences in their "Society."

The role of friendship is much more complicated in the most popular of Korczak's books, *King Matt the First* and its continuation *Little King Matty... and the Desert Island*.⁶⁵

In the first part, at the beginning of the story, Matt has only one soulmate, Felek, a friend of the young king. Felek becomes the guide in the cruel world of life beyond the royal palace, including war. But finally, Felek misuses the formerly strong relationship with King Matt, which is one of the causes of the collapse of the state and, in the second part of dylogy, the death of Matt.

But friendship plays also a more positive role in King Matt's world. The young king owes so much to his friends. "Sad king" shows him democracy and inspires Matt to implement it in his country. The African king Bum-Drum helps Matt to finance his ideas of political transformation. Bum-Drum's daughter, Klu-Klu, is a model of loyalty and devotion as a friend.

Love plays a fundamental role in, among others, *Spowiedź motyla* (Confessions of a Butterfly, 1914), and *When I Am Little Again* (Polish *Kiedy znów będę mały*, 1925).

The main character of *Spowiedź motyla*, an adolescent boy, fights with love, trying to find a balance between happiness, sorrow, excitement,

⁶⁵ See J. Korczak: *King Matt the First*. Trans. R. Lourie. Vintage Books, London 2005; and J. Korczak: *Little King Matty... and the Desert Island*. Trans. A. Czasak. Joanna Pinewood Enterprises, London 1990.

and helplessness. He is suspended between love and hatred towards girls, parents, knowledge, and the whole world.

The main character and narrator of the book *When I Am Little Again* has a double identity. He is a teacher, an adult who missed his childhood. However, when his dreams are fulfilled magically, he becomes a boy, a student in a primary school. Korczak describes this world from two perspectives at the same time: from a cognitive perspective as an adult and from an emotional perspective as a child. And, however, the character remembers his adult experiences, he is helpless when he is falling in love with Mary; he loves her as a child. And that love becomes the main reason for his final breakdown when he does not want to be a child. To be more precise, the reason was not the love itself but rather the brutal way of treating it by adults and other children.

And these reflections will serve me as a connection between Korczak's fictional and pedagogical works.

We read in *When I Am Little Again*:

I'm in love with Mary.⁶⁶ [...]

If I weren't a grownup already once before, maybe I wouldn't even have known. But now I know that children love too, only they don't know what it is called. And maybe even they're ashamed to admit it. [...] Because grownups make fun of love very easily. And it is here precisely where you see how indelicate they are.⁶⁷

[...] I bring Mary's post-card to school in order to show it to Mundek.

But Wisniewski tore it out of my hand. [...] He waves his hand in the air and shouts:

"[...] A letter from his girl friend."

I tear it out of his hand and crumple it and tear it into pieces.⁶⁸

Five years earlier Korczak wrote something similar in one of his most influential pedagogical books:

⁶⁶ J. Korczak: *When I Am Little Again; and, The Child's Right to Respect*. Trans. E.R. Kulawiec. University Press of America, Lanham-New York-London 1992, p. 125

⁶⁷ Ibidem, p. 126.

⁶⁸ Ibidem, p. 155.

Adolescent love is nothing new. Some love even while they're children, others sneer at love as children.

“She’s your girlfriend; has she shown it to you?”

And the boy, wanting to prove that he doesn’t have a girlfriend, sticks his foot out in front of her on purpose or pulls hard at her braid.⁶⁹

Korczak’s pedagogical works

Topics of love and friendship, however important, are present in the pedagogical legacy of Janusz Korczak in an indirect way. In his strictly pedagogical works, Korczak rather mentions adolescent love and friendship than writes about them at length. It seems to be a kind of strategy of concealing the topics in question. Sometimes he wrote about love to show difficulties connected to an adolescent’s life, which was visible in the foregoing quotations. At other times he discussed adolescent love as a particular case of the topic of feelings. In a children’s book *Prawidła życia* (The Rules of Life, 1930) we have a separate chapter “Myśli-Uczucia” (Thoughts-Feelings) and love is only one of them:

What is love? Does one always love only for something, or does one always love those one should love and as much as one should? Is the feeling steady, or at times intensifies, and at other times wanes? What are gratitude and respect? What is the difference between liking very much and loving? How do you know whom one loves more? [...] I once asked a boy how he knew that he liked one girl more than the others. He replied:

“Because in the past I used to talk to her like everyone else, and suddenly I started to be ashamed of her.”

[Czym jest miłość? Czy kocha się zawsze tylko za coś, czy zawsze się kocha tych i tyle, ile się powinno? Czy jednakowo, czy raz więcej, raz mniej? Czym jest wdzięczność i szacunek? Jaka jest różnica między: bardzo lubić i kochać? Jak wiedzieć, kogo się więcej kocha? [...] Raz pytałem się chłopca, po czym poznał, że jedną dziewczynkę lubi więcej niż inne.

Odpowiedział:

⁶⁹ J. Korczak: *How to Love a Child: and Other Selected Works*. Vol. 1. Trans. B. Paloff, D. Borchardt, S. G. Bye. Ed. A. M. Czernow. Vallentine-Mitchell, London-Chicago, IL 2018, p. 92.

— Bo dawniej rozmawiałem z nią jak ze wszystkimi, a nagle zacząłem się jej wstydzić.^{70]}

We do not find love or friendship as separate topics even in Korczak's book *How to Love a Child. The Orphanage. Summer Camp. The Orphans' Home*.⁷¹ The book was a direct effect of his experiences as an educator of Jewish children.

Love was mentioned there as an explanation for the weird behaviour:

Do you know why the boy wanted to wear a cape on a hot day? Because he has an ugly patch on the knee of his pants, and the girl he loves will be in the park...⁷²

Children confessed their love to people who were their tutors but it was only one of many topics in their relationship. Korczak quoted a part of a written conversation between a nine-years-old boy and a girl, his twelve-years-old tutor:

[...] When I return from my travels, I'll get married. Please advise me about whether I should marry Dora, Hela, or Mania [...]. The tutor's note: "Dora said that you're a brat, Mania doesn't give her consent, and Hela laughed."

But I wasn't asking you to ask them, I only wrote which one I love. Now I'm worried and am embarrassed [...].⁷³

Pedagogical praxis in the Orphans' Home

My presentation on the topics of love and friendship in the pedagogical praxis of the OH is only a quick glance at topics which are awaiting more extensive research.

⁷⁰ J. Korczak: *Prawidła życia* [The Rules of Life]. Towarzystwo Wydawnicze w Warszawie, Warszawa 1930 [i.e. 1929], pp. 84–85. That is a part of the whole chapter titled "Myśli-Uczucia" [Thoughts-Feelings], pp. 78–87. That chapter is absent from the translation in: J. Korczak: *How to Love a Child and Other Selected Works*. Vol. 2. Trans. S. G. Bye et al. Ed. A. M. Czernow. Vallentine-Mitchell, London–Chicago, IL 2018.

⁷¹ See Korczak: *How to Love a Child: and Other Selected Works*. Vol. 1..., pp. 102–247.

⁷² Ibidem, p. 123.

⁷³ Ibidem, p. 204.

Love and friendship had different positions in the pedagogical praxis of the OH.

Friendship was a border area between the private and public life of individuals. It was perceived as a valuable part of children's biographies as well as children's social world in the OH. Friendship had been seen, observed, and appreciated. There were some mechanisms which helped to establish and improve relationships between friends.

We can find the term "friend" even among the regulations of the Court of Peers, one of the essential institutions of the OH:

§94. The court takes under advisement a friend's (brother's, sister's) fervent appeal and forgives A.⁷⁴

Friendship was a kind of substitute for family bonds, for instance, in the institution of "honourable mentoring."

The process of preparing the older children to look after their juniors had a strong grounding. The "educators" kept an "education diary" in which they would write their thoughts about their younger charges.

Amongst the older pupils looking after the little ones (usually this lasted three months) a group of former juniors made up a group called the "tribe" or "family" at the Home.⁷⁵

These "tribes" or "families" were given Commemorative Postcards for their special relationships. On that postcard was a group photo of all members.⁷⁶ This tradition was an effective tool which made these quasi-family bonds very significant and desired. The same function we can find in a special Commemorative Postcard for friendship between two persons, as we know directly from Irka Waffel.⁷⁷ The right to Commemorative Postcards was given by the Children's Parliament,⁷⁸ one of the crucial institutions in the OH.

As opposed to friendship, love was evidently a part of the private not public life of individuals. Of course, love affected some dimensions of

⁷⁴ Ibidem, p. 217.

⁷⁵ Medvedeva-Nathoo: *Oby im życie łatwiejsze było...*, p. 198.

⁷⁶ See Ibidem, p. 129.

⁷⁷ [Collection of Chaja (Helenka) Lewi]..., 037997-2.2., p. 9.

⁷⁸ See Korczak: *How to Love a Child and Other Selected Works*. Vol. 1..., p. 245.

social life in the OH but there were no ideas such as Commemorative Postcards of Love or public announcements about who loves whom.

The way of perceiving and treating love in the OH seems to be coherent with Korczak's remarks in his pedagogical works. Korczak, Wilczyńska and other educators in the OH were observing children and did not underestimate the power and importance of love. On the contrary, they were treating love as a valuable and very sensitive phenomenon and left a free space to experience and communicate love between children, trying to protect it.

But if children needed them, they were ready to help. Chaim Kierszenbaum, who exchanged letters with Helenka, spoke with the educator "Mr. Szura"⁷⁹ about his feelings towards Helenka and the latter helped him.⁸⁰

They did know very well what they do when they were protecting love. Josef Goldfarb, probably beloved by Helenka, described the scene in the bedroom which is strikingly similar to quotations from Korczak's books:

Chaim's colleague Jakób laughingly recounted what Chaim had written to you in a letter. [...] At first I laughed myself because I thought he was joking [...]. However, I saw that Chaim was angry with Jakób for saying this and forced himself to laugh.

[Jakób kolega Chaima ze śmiechem opowiadał co Chaim do Ciebie napisał w liście. [...] Z początku sam się śmiałem bo myślałem, że żartuje [...]. Widziałem jednak, że Chaim jest zły na Jakóba za to, że to mówi i przymusza się do śmiechu.]⁸¹

The attitude to sexual education in the OH sheds interesting light on the attitude to love. A novice educator, Miriam Gerblich, noted that she went to the lecture about homosexual love. Next, she wanted to use this knowledge to understand the situation when a girl did not want to sit with boys at the same table. When Gerblich asked Wilczyńska what to do with relationships between girls and boys, Wilczyńska responded she first needs many years of observation.⁸²

⁷⁹ "Mr. Szura" was a nickname of Aleksander Lewin.

⁸⁰ Ibidem, 037997-2.1., pp. 10-11.

⁸¹ [Collection of Chaja (Helenka) Lewi]..., 037997-2.2., p. 7.

⁸² [The Notebook of Miriam Gerblich] [online], (1931-1932). Catalogue No. MHW 88/JK. Muzeum Warszawy. (MW), pp. 4-5, <https://kolekcje.muzeumwarszawy.pl/pl/obiekty/14689/> [access: 20.02.2022],

Even more experienced educator, Róża Sternkac, was a little bit jealous, when her older colleague, Felek Grzyb, calmly spoke with boys about sex:

I was jealous that Felek had access to them, I am curious about their judgements, and I was v.[ery] surprised and pleased that it was they (Wolf, Szaje) who walked about the topic seriously, without “dirty talk” and cynicism [...].

[Zazdrościłam Felkowi, że miał do nich dostęp, jestem ciekawa ich sądów i byłam b.[ardzo] zdziwiona i zadowolona, że właśnie ci (Wolf, Szaje) mówili o tem poważnie, bez „wyświniania” i cynizmu [...].⁸³]

Wilczyńska answered Róża and it seems to be a good summary of the whole praxis of the OH regarding sensitive social issues in the OH, including sex and love:

[...] if they are not provoked by intrusive curiosity, if they are not nagged with questions, if they are not extorted – they are more willing to talk about it and inform themselves. I have been told by former male and female pupils [...] that they did not like to talk about sexual matters with adults until this issue had matured in them. They were amused by the young educators, who supposedly wanted to raise awareness, but actually “snooped” on how much they knew about these issues.

[[...] jeśli się nie prowokuje swoją natrętną ciekawością, nie nagabuje pytaniami, nie wydusza – sami chętniej opowiadają i informują się. Opowiadali mi b.[yli] wych.[owankowie] [...] i wychowanki, że nie lubili mówić z dorosłymi o sprawach seksualnych, póki ta sprawa w nich nie dojrzała. Bawili ich młodzi wychowawcy, którzy niby chcieli uświadamiać, a właściwie „szperali”, jak oni się w tych kwestiach orientują.⁸⁴]

Conclusions

My conclusions concern two main areas discussed in the article: love and friendship in the OH and the importance of using uninvestigated, unrecognized Korczakian documents.

⁸³ [The Notebook of Róża Sternkac] [online], (1933–1934). Catalogue No. 12913-2. Ghetto Fighters' House Archives (GFHA), p. 1, <https://shorturl.at/ipvHP> [access: 20.02.2022].

⁸⁴ Ibidem, pp. 1-2.

Letters to Helena Lewi allow us to suppose that many methods in the OH which engaged literacy skills (e.g. reading news from the board, listening to people during weekly meetings, writing information, notes, subpoenas, applications etc.) affected also the communication connected with love and friendship.

The letters varied from the viewpoint of literacy skills, but in all of them authors achieved their goals and effectively communicated their thoughts and feelings, even if it was difficult and ambiguous for them.

I connect it also with the other dimension of the intensive training they had in the OH. Among others, it was training in fulfilling their needs, drawing boundaries, and recognizing feelings. And if one can realize something, it is easier to communicate it.

The perspective of educators in the OH towards love and friendship seems very interesting. One of their essential duties was to observe and see as much as possible, including issues connected with love and friendship.

Friendship was perceived as a semi-public area, so there were some tools to enhance, appreciate, and even reward relationships between friends. It is not an obvious attitude because strong social bonds beyond control could be perceived as dangerous in many organizations. In the OH it was not a threat but a chance for better functioning in the complicated structure and, for many members, a substitute for family.

Love among adolescents could be (and still is) perceived as a crucial threat in institutions, connected with uncontrolled sexual behaviours and unwanted pregnancy. In the OH it was an area under special observation because educators tried to protect it. Paraphrasing Korczak, one can say that children had also a right for their love to feel respected.

Even in such a unique community as the OH, love needed to remain a secret among children and adolescents. As I have mentioned above, boys laughed at Chaim because of his feelings towards Helena. Helena and Guta did not write their letters directly to their beloved ones: Irka passed Josef the letters from Helena and Helena passed Abram letters from Guta.

Many children and adolescents in the OH were laughing at love because they behave according to the cultural patterns they knew from outside, even if adults in the OH were supportive.

Treating adolescents' love with respect required from the educators many skills beyond the one of observation, which was essential in the OH. Among others, it was mindfulness and receptiveness; readiness for giving people space to have their experience but at the same time to help and support them, if needed. That kind of attitude seems to be universal, and helpful also today.

Regarding the importance of Korczakian documents, the letters to Helenka Lewi, as well as the entirety of her collection, illustrate the huge potential of unknown or unrecognized sources preserved in GFHA and many other archives, libraries etc. They pertain not strictly to Korczak's biography or pedagogy but they are of importance to Korczakian research. A lot of work is required because most of these sources need to be read, elaborated upon, and ordered. From non-Polish speaking researchers, they demand also a command of the Polish language as well as Yiddish and Hebrew or international cooperation. But I am deeply convinced that the work is well worthy of effort, especially because these sources are in fact only a fraction of documents created in the OH.

When reaching primary Korczakian sources, we have access to one of the main features of microhistory: the importance of human agency.⁸⁵

In the letter from 15.12.1932, Wilczyńska used a parallel between the OH and the well-oiled machine.⁸⁶ She probably wanted to describe the organizational effectiveness of the OH. It is very important to remember that youth, children, and educators from the OH were not the objects in the "pedagogical machine" operated by Korczak and Wilczyńska and I am sure they did not want to see it that way. To them, they were human beings with their motivations, plans, dilemmas, and passions. Yes, they were members of the very formative place, which was OH but: "[...] people are both objects and subjects of their history."⁸⁷

And that was also one of the crucial features of Korczakian pedagogy and thought, so convergent with the microhistorical approach. Korczak expressed it his short utterance:

I don't wait for life to arrange, I arrange it myself

[Nie czekam, jak się życie ułoży, tylko sam je układam.⁸⁸]

The education and staying at the OH also facilitated the development of competences instrumental in building one's own existence independently. Reading Helenka's letters and other sources we can see

⁸⁵ S. G. Magnússon, I. M. Szijártó: *What is microhistory?...*, p. 5.

⁸⁶ S. Wilczyńska: *Słowo do dzieci i wychowawców* [A Word to Children and Educators]. Eds. M. Ciesielska, B. Puszkina. Muzeum Historyczne m. st. Warszawy, Warszawa 2004, p. 23.

⁸⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 34

⁸⁸ J. Korczak: *Prawidła życia: publicystyka dla dzieci*. [The Rules of Life: Publicism for Children]. Vol.11/2. Ed. A. Lewin. Instytut Badań Literackich i Muzeum Warszawy, Warszawa 2007, p. 110.

in detail how not only Korczak, but also people around him tried to do it in their everyday life.

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