

International Janusz Korczak Meeting in Mannheim, combined with the 30th Jubilee of the Janusz Korczak Association in Germany. (26-28 October 2007)

Some highlights from this ‘ Fachtagung Dreissig Jahre Deutsche Korczak Gesellschaft e V.’

During the three days we listened to some very interesting presentations and lectures.

The first evening was marked by two moments :

- * Siegfried Steiger, president of the German Korczak Association and leader of the Experimental Theater of Günzburg presented parts of the play ‘What example do we need?’ With contribution of the Duo Sternschnuppe. ‘Korczak, also to laugh in one’s sleeve’.
- * The lecture ‘Alone with God’ . Was Korczak a religious man? of Prof. Friedhelm Beiner. See the summery below:

Friedhelm Beiner

„Alone with God“

Was Korczak a religious person ?

Based upon his religious disposition Korczak rejects in his works a cynical philosophy that denies human dignity granted by God. Instead he points at the diversity and intensity of human thinking and human feelings : a creature, that can feel so strongly and variedly as a human being, cannot be a mere lump of earth, or a career „animal“. Someone once said viciously that the world is a clod of mud, floating around in an endless space, and that man is a animal that has accomplished a career. This may be true. But in addition : this clod of mud experiences pain, knows how to love and cry and is full of longing. And the career of mankind is – after examination of conscience - dubious. (Tagebuch/Erinnerungen).

His religious disposition, that consisted of a devoutness that was not restricted ecclesiastically, was shown in his educational work. He wanted to give the orphans a spiritual support. God was to Korczak an orientation, making it possible to understand the world and to live a humane existence. Rejection of faith was for him the same as rejection of essential moral and ethical support and of human meaning of existence. How simple is the expectation of parents (not to be interpreted as progressive) that it makes it easier for children to understand the world that surrounds them by saying to them „There is no God“. If there is no God, who made the world then ?

Korczaks religiosity and his belief in goodness are bound with the conviction, that goodness can be searched for, experienced and achieved, even if this seems to be contradicted by the present situation in the world. It is for Korczak important to educate children to look for God and practise solidarity. Here however each child must find its own way. He writes in his farewell-letter to his pupils who are leaving the home : „We do not give you God. You should look for Him in your own soul, in lonesome effort. [...] However we do give you one thing : the search for a better life, that does not exist yet, but that will one day, and for a life of truth and justice. Maybe this quest will lead you to God [...].

Korczak did not have a clearly defined conception of God ; the search for sense and goal in life were for him also a search for God. He spent his whole life in this pursuit. For Korczak

God can be interpreted as a reason for existence, that can be searched for, found and experienced, but that man in his imperfection can never fully achieve. Because there is a gap between the mortality of man and the infinity and diversity of his thinking and experiencing. Korczak relates this discrepancy in existence with God :

„Among millions of people you (mother) have borne – what ? A substance, dust, a mere nothing. [...] (But :) In there is something that can feel, question and search, suffer, wish, enjoy, love, trust, hate, that can believe, doubt, attract and repel. This substance with its thoughts can comprehend everything : stars and oceans, mountains and ravines. And is the essence of the soul anything else than a universe, but without measure ? Here we have the contradiction of man : created from dust, but in which God has taken refuge.

We people are related to dust – but we harbour Divinity, that can help us to answer to and account for the challenges of life (cfr. „Die Einsamkeit des Alters/The Loneliness of Age“ from Korczak, but also „Dialogische Prinzip“ from Martin Buber)

The second day was interesting for several reasons.

First of all we had the meeting of the International Janusz Korczak Association (see the report of the new president Batia Gilad) in this Newsletter.

Second, we were invited for the opening of Itzhak Belfer's exposition. Belfer is a former pupil of Korczak's orphanage, 'Dom Sierot'. After the Holocaust he moved to Israël where he became a famous painter and teacher of art. On many of his paintings we meet Korczak during his last days with the 200 children of the orphanage in Warsaw ghetto.

Another important moment was the lecture of Mrs Ulrich Koch, 'Reading with children Korczak's book 'Kaitus the Magician'. She showed with help of a slide-show the didactic steps with the students of the Franz Ludwig Gymnasium in Bamberg. She explained the impact of this reading project. Some examples.

- They learned about their relationship with adults and the community.
- The students learned about Korczak and the difficult period in the Ghetto of Warsaw.
- They developed another approach to Jewish life and culture and particular to Jewish people in their school and city.
- Also other colleagues in school became more and more interested in Korczak.

The project description can be found on internet: www.unterrichtshomepage.de

The third day of the Jubilee-weekend had one interesting lecture: '**Coping strategies of children with psychiatric disturbed parents' Examples of famous Personalities**, by Dr.med.Susanne Schlüter-Müller, Child-and Adolescent psychiatrist and psychotherapist in Frankfurt.

The scientific and clinical interest on children with psychiatric disturbed parents increased in the last years. Those children belong to a high risk population so that prevention is urgently indicated. Research of resilience factors gives us important information about resources and coping-strategies which can be used clinically. It therefore compliments the research of vulnerability in a clinical relevant way.

On the basis of biography of the surrealist painter René Magritte who lived with a psychiatric disturbed mother who committed suicide when he was thirteen it is demonstrated

how this stress maybe unconsciously forced his artistic way of painting. On the basis of some paintings of the artist the supposed connection between his work and unconscious coping mechanisms is worked out. Besides parts of the novel 'Eine Geschichte von Liebe und Finsternis' of the Israelite writer Amos Oz are analysed in which he firstly writes about the depression and later suicide of his mother and how much it influenced his whole life.
(summery by Susanne Schlüter-Müller)

We had a wonderful meeting with a lot of new and old friends. It gave us a lot of new inspiration.
(Theo Cappon)

