

KORCZAK (1990)

Polish with English subtitles

Not Rated. Running time: 1 hour 55 min.

Our content ratings (1-10): Violence 5; Language 3; Sex/Nudity 1.

Our star rating (1-5): 5

Then little children were being brought to him in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them; but Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs."

Matthew 19:13-14

Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing?

³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?'

Matthew 25:37-39

Director Andrezej Wajda's film about Dr. Janusz Korczak's heroic efforts to provide for the 200 children of his orphanage in the Warsaw Ghetto is informative and inspiring. Famous for his writings and radio talks, the doctor led what amounted to a children's rights movement in his native Poland. He even wrote books specifically for children, their purpose being, like those of Fred Rogers, not just to entertain but to

instill a positive self image and creative values in their young readers. He was forced in 1936 to give up his radio show "The Old Doctor" because of his being a Jew. ("Korczak" was actually the Polish name he used for public consumption, his birth name being Henryk Goldszmit.)

He was running an orphanage when 400,000 Jews were herded into the Warsaw Ghetto. He became dedicated to securing enough food and clothing for the children, and even more so in his attempt to keep up their morale in the face of such overwhelming incidents of evil perpetrated daily by the Nazis. In these endeavors he sometimes had the help of Gentile Poles, and also had to make bargains with the devil, that is the Nazis. The film shows one episode when a German soldier seized a truck loaded with potatoes. When the doctor protested, he was beat up.

As a realist he did not think his efforts were so noble. He remarked, "He who says that he sacrifices himself for somebody else is a liar. This man likes to play cards, that man likes women, another never misses a horse race. I like children." That he certainly did, but what he refused to say about himself, we can—here is a courageous man who, though he received much for his benevolence, gave far more than he received, ultimately his life. His methods with children were far ahead of the Prussian authoritarianism of the times. I should not have written above "running an orphanage," because he set up a student government in which the children governed themselves, thereby learning to be responsible leaders and citizens. They were able to hold forums in which students could criticize their teachers.

Because he was such a famous person he could have escaped from the Ghetto any number of times. Even near the end, when it became clear that the Nazis would clear the Ghetto of all Jews, he turned down the escape plans of his Polish friends because he could not "abandon my children." The film shows well his spiritual crisis when he speaks of crying out to God,

only to find that he and his fellow Jews are alone.

Excellentlly acted, this film, like Spielberg's, is enhanced by its black and white photography. (And in turn, it has been pointed out, Spielberg was influenced by the director, listing Wajda in he credits of *Schindler's List*.) Film footage shot by the German crew sent to the Ghetto before its demolition is worked seamlessly into that shot by the director.

The strange, almost surreal ending of the film, must have been put in to mitigate the horror and the failure of the doctor to protect his small charges. It proved controversial at the time of the film's release*, but perhaps now is more acceptable. There is no Easter for the Good Friday victims in this film, despite the final scene. Indeed that scene bears witness to the Easter hope embedded in each of us, including the film's maker. The best that I can say is that Korczak stood with Jesus in his love and concern for children, and whether or not he accepted Christ as Messiah (how could a Jew do so when those claiming to follow Christ were the ones exterminating Christ's people?) I believe he has a firm place in the still emerging kingdom of God.

** For a good article about the controversy that includes a statement by Mr. Wajda himself see [Stephen Engelberg's](#) article in the NY TIMES for April 14, 1991.*

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