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Berding, J. (2019). *Patience as a pedagogical virtue – and impatience as well? Janusz Korczak’s lived experience*. Lecture at the Conference ‘The School of Life in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century’. Tel Aviv: Cymbalista Jewish Heritage Center, November, 28.

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### **Introduction: A scene at the beach**

*The other day, I was at the beach side, and from a little distance I watched a family of four gathering their things to go home. The bathing suits had to be taken off, they had to be dried and clothes and footwear to be put on. In short: operation “going home” was in full swing. This was one with obstacles. The mother in particular worried. She grabbed the buckets and other play-things, hit the cart with them to get rid of the sand, she threw in the bags, meanwhile shouting to her husband and children: hurry up, help me along, do I have to do everything on my own here!? The boys of 4 and 6 looked around a bit, not sure they wanted to leave at all. The mother was completely fed up. She wanted to go home now, but the children and their things were still covered with sand. She now screamed out loud: “I. DON’T. WANT. ANY. SAND.IN. MY.HOUSE !!!” And then she grabbed one child by the arm, put it in the cart, picked up the other and dragged them towards the exit. Daddy stumbled behind. A wonderful day at the beach was over.*

### **The patience of Janusz Korczak**

How to live together with children was a question that directed Janusz Korczak’s whole working life. He gave different answers: by observing children and babies when he visited them at the hospital or at home, by listening and talking to them, by writing about and for children, by giving children a voice in his essays, pamphlets and novels, at the summer camps in which he participated as a leader and especially in the orphanage in Warsaw of which he became director-doctor in 1912. In his most important book *How to Love a Child* that he wrote in 1919-1920, his encounters with children come under a beautiful light. Here is an example of his description of a visit to the maternity ward of the hospital:

*A hundred infants. I bend over the bed of each one of them. The lives of some of them may be reckoned barely in weeks or months; they vary in weight and in their graphs; there are sick and convalescent among them, fit and well, and some barely clinging to life. I come across different expressions of the eyes, from dimmed, veiled, and vacant, through obstinate and painfully fixed, right up to vivid, warm, and provocative. And the smile of welcome, it is either immediate and friendly or after a period of intense observation, granted in response to a smile and a tender word-incentive (Korczak, 1967, p. 113).*

If you can observe in this way, you must have a great deal of patience. And Korczak was largely in possession of this. After the above description follows page after page with observations of babies who he tries to “catch” in their uniqueness, with an open mind toward the possible development of every individual child. The work of Korczak during the summer camps in which he participated from 1904 has the same loving and penetrating perception of children and how he tried to live together with them, which is and remains astonishing.

### **Another side**

However, Korczak also had a very different, very impatient side. He turned sharply against the child unfriendliness of society, that for some reason cannot tolerate that there are ‘not yet’-adults in her midst. For all sorts of reasons adults hate children, Korczak writes: children are not yet big, but small (adults despise everything that is small), they are weak and cannot do anything; instead of being grateful to the educators for everything they do for them, they think that life is simple. They just jump around and while our years slip away, children have time. Indeed, they just do something, fiddle around, look around. In short: “A brat. Only a child, a future person, but not yet. He’s just going to be” (Korczak, 1992, p. 166). The child still has to become a human.

A child doesn’t yet know the difference between important and unimportant things; adults *do*, they are after all, the “experienced” and want the best for the children, they want to make life easy for them. But how do children respond to this? With deception, secrets and lies. A child is unreliable, an adventurer, a drinker, a rebel, a fool. And then as apotheosis the exclamation: “How can one live under the same roof with the likes of him?” (Korczak, 1992, p. 167)

### **The practice of patience, or how to overcome impatience**

Korczak not only criticized the impatience of adults with children, in his own pedagogical practice he looked for ways to overcome this impatience, which he undoubtedly also felt in himself and tried to curb it and turn it around positively. The most appealing example of this I still find in the work of the children's court in the orphanage. Instead of punishing children quickly and simply, which has the advantage that it takes little time, Korczak *did* take time, *much* time for discussing children's offenses. From documentation and life stories (i.e. Talmage Schneider, 2015) we know that the children in the orphanage were anything but sweeties, and constantly fought and quarrelled with each other, destroyed play-things, smashed windows and so on. Korczak was very sensitive to the suffering and pain that people, and certainly children did to each other, but he suppressed his primary reaction of retaliation and sought forgiveness.

His system was modelled on how in the adult society people by trial and error try to live together peacefully and settle their conflicts and conflicts of interest. In a democratic constitutional state, independent law plays an important role in this. In a comparable manner Korczak tried resolve the disputes and tensions between the children in a democratic, "republican" way (Berding, 2018). The term 'republican' refers to the 'res publica', our common interest or good. A regularly changing group of children formed the children's court, where the pupils presented complaints about each other (but also about the adults in the orphanage). The "suspect" then came forward and also the person who had submitted the complaint. After consideration the court ruled on the basis of a law book written by Korczak. Often no punishment was given, but forgiveness was granted, whereby it was assumed that the wrong-doer also understood that he was wrong. However, the child was given the opportunity to improve. Although the verdicts were more severe the more serious and repetitive the violation, they all knew the element of forgiveness and new opportunities.

It will be clear, that it was at least for Korczak, that this way of working was not the shortest route. On the contrary, the lawsuits took a lot of time, but it was not time lost for Korczak. It was a key issue for him in his vision of democratic relations. He took the work of the children's court therefore seriously; he saw it as its duty to do justice and to keep order in an institution with between one hundred and two hundred children who had not chosen to be with each other or to live together. The children's court therefore had the task to "replace

fighting by thought work and outbursts of anger by pedagogical influence”. The crucial point in my eyes - that directly touches on the patience of the educator - is that children, based on the moral compass of peaceful coexistence, always get new opportunities and that the educator does not give up on them or write them off, but believes and trusts in their possibilities, now and in the future. Trust, faith, hope and patience are the cornerstones of Korczak’s pedagogical outlook.

### **Educating *for* patience**

Another example of Korczak’s special patient practice will I describe briefly. He lived in a room at the top of the orphanage and was not always available for the children. His solution for that was as simple as it was ingenious: if you have something to tell me or something to ask, write a letter and put it in the mailbox. And he pondered:

*In the evening there is a handful of sheets of paper covered with misspelled words. You can scrutinize them the more carefully in peace and quiet and to think of things which would have escaped you during the rush and preoccupation of the day* (Korczak, 1967, p. 388).

He found everything on those cards: a request for a different place to sleep, complaints about other children, a request for an interview. Korczak took the time: preferably tomorrow a thoughtful response than a meaningless one today. He organized stillness and attention for himself because he was convinced that he could do justice to children. Moreover, there was one clear pedagogical aspect of this approach: the children learned to wait for an answer (what you might call “educating *for* patience”), they learned to distinguish between important and unimportant or trivial issues, they learned to think and argue and it taught them something about themselves: I can want something and I am able to do it, although perhaps I have to be patient. The last major advantage of this method of communication was found, he said, that the notes *prepared* (my term, JB) the conversation as it were. That saves time, he said and “lengthens the day” (Korczak, 1967, p. 389).

### **But again: no saint**

Described in this way it seems that Korczak, under the aspect of patience, was a kind of saint. However, that is an image that makes no sense. He was a man of extremes, suffering from

depression and despair and he recognized in itself signals of the “insanity” that his father died of. In his younger years he wrote ‘dark’ poems in which he referred to possible suicide:

*“Ah, let me die / ah, don’t let me live / ah, let me descend into my dark grave (Lifton, 1988, p. 30).*

Later, in the orphanage, he was certainly not always available for the children, in fact: sometimes he rejected them outright because he didn’t want to spend time with them. He was a busy man; he did his weekly radio talks, met with the editors of the children’s newspaper, acted as a witness at the court or taught paediatricians in the hospital. The demanding work as director and doctor of the orphanage he actually “added” to these other occupations. He reports, when he finally had a moment to himself:

*I read. Children play nearby. A boy comes to me. “What are you reading?” “A book, can’t you see that?” “Fairy tales?” “No, about minerals. Do not disturb me. “(…)” Do you want to box with me? “ I, with an angry face: “Go away now,, I don’t feel like talking to you. ““ Are you angry? ““ No, but I read. And I want to have two hours of rest, not just five minutes” (Korczak, 1979, pp. 170-171; translated and reworked by me, JB).*

He really had no patience for this. Also in other respects Korczak was anything but the ideal, always patient educator that is sometimes made of him. Not only children had to go to the court to be tried, adults too and this happened to Korczak according to tradition at least three times. Once because he had slid from the railing, which was forbidden; once because he would have struck a child and once because he had put a girl on a high tree-branch and did not want to release her (Talmage Schneider, 2015). He was convicted three times, but in the spirit of the children’s court with a relatively mild punishment (a ‘paragraph 100’, see Korczak, 1967, p. 410).

One of the great achievements of Korczak was the creation of the the first children’s newspaper in the world, the Little Review. After a long preparation the first weekly episode appeared in October 1926 and the magazine quickly became popular throughout Poland. The editors, a number of pupils, and Korczak, received many letters from children about the problems they encountered in their family, at school or in the street. They responded in the columns of the newspaper. Often social issues, such as health care, or the law, were also

touched upon. One problem often arose: children were beaten. Korczak stood up for them, but asked them to be patient with their parents at the same time:

*“Parents beat when they have problems and lose their patience. Tell them they don’t have to hit you right away; give them half an hour if you don’t stop immediately. With that you give them time to calm down”,* Korczak wrote (see Görtzen, 2010, p. 279).

Once, the production of the Little Review gave him problems: poor paper, sloppiness and printing errors, dropped texts ... It brought him to the annoyed statement: “My patience with the great Review is over” (Idem, p. 281). Moreover, not all letter writers were treated with patience: Korczak hated arrogance or flattery and bad writing especially:

*“In your Polish text I found 23 errors. You know what - translate it into English and send it to America ...”* Or he responded: *“That’s not interesting at all”* (what you write, JB) (Idem, p. 282-283).

Also for the lamentations of what he called “a cry-baby and mother’s son”, Korczak had no patience (Ibidem).

## **Conclusion**

Korczak’s work is not meant to be imitated or even a suitable example of patience. For Korczak nothing really went smoothly. He acknowledged that in people, including himself, there are negative, destructive lurking forces, for which only ‘*this*’ is needed to jump up from under a thin layer of civilization. I think that everybody who lives or works with children and youngsters know by experience of the lures of impatience. My story at the beginning on what I observed at the beach is only one, small example. But also note how fast the border from patience to impatience is crossed, and how violence looms under the surface. Patience as a virtue is under pressure, not only in education, but in society as a whole. I feel that it is a comfort that even a great educator such as Korczak knew moments of great impatience, and this makes him, to my mind, for that matter, only more human (Berding, 2019).

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