

Janusz Korczak, an inspiring pioneer in residential youth care

Summary

This article presents some of the central ideas in Janusz Korczak's philosophy with respect to raising children in residential homes and elaborates on the significance of these ideas to the theory and practice of modern residential youth care. The central ideas discussed include 1. The importance of a comprehensive diagnostic attitude, 2. The significant roles the residential children have in relation to each other, 3. The view of child development as an active process and 4. The view of the child's home as an active community. The author further shows that many issues in modern youth care can be traced to Korczak's philosophy, including 1. Residential versus outpatient care, 2. Freedom versus tolerance, 3. Child-oriented versus family-oriented care and 4. A professional versus a personal view on youth care.

Introduction

In many countries Janusz Korczak nowadays is greatly admired. But is he also admitted and recognized as an important participant in our actual discussions on bringing up and growing up, on child care and education? Our impression is that he is not, at least not very seriously or generously. In footnotes in important books on child psychology, child psychotherapy and child care he is not mentioned frequently. He is situated, rather, in the prehistory than in the actual development of the scientific study of child development. Freud and Piaget, Erikson and Vygotsky, Montessori and Redl seem to have left deeper marks. And in the countries where he is most popular, Israel and Poland, the number of monuments and schools named after him is more striking than his factual influence on educational and child care policies. Why is this so? What is the cause of his marginal position in modern child studies? Some possible factors:

- 1) the times and social conditions in which he worked and developed his ideas were so different from the present situation that it does not seem very appropriate to apply his experience and conclusions to our problems;

- 2) his way of observing and studying children and his writing are so far removed from what is considered 'scientific' in modern times that he is at best seen as a man of subtle intuition and a literary style;
- 3) perhaps many people consider him such a unique, charismatic personality that it would not make sense to derive methods and principles for current practice from his way of living and working with children. The style of so unique a person cannot be translated in general theory, or in generally applicable guidelines;
- 4) due to his life and especially to his self-sacrificing attitude during the last episode in the ghetto and on the way to Treblinka, Janusz Korczak developed into a hero for many people, a symbol; indeed almost a saint. As a result, studying his pedagogical work for purely theoretical or practical reasons would be little short of blasphemy. Indeed, it would be sacrilegious to study and discuss his work critically. Nevertheless, critical study is inevitable if we are to take his contributions to today's discussion serious;
- 5) last but not least, there might be another, still more serious reason to overlook Janusz Korczak's potential contribution to our theoretical, practical and political discussion on child development. It is obviously more comfortable to praise him ('to praise him into heaven' as the Dutch saying goes) than to seriously study his merciless exposure of modern child-unfriendly society, for example, or to look in the revealing mirror he offers to parents and professional pedagogues alike.

No matter how compelling, understandable and, to a certain degree, legitimate the reasons may be to praise rather than to actually follow Korczak, we are convinced that it is very relevant and rewarding to study him thoroughly and critically as a very important voice with regard to modern pedagogical problems and embarrassments.

This conviction is based, among other things, on the fact that his texts strike us as decidedly 'modern'. It is also connected with our feeling that bringing up children in modern societies and especially caring for children and youth at risk confronts us with overwhelming challenges as well as with fundamental dilemmas. This is an extra reason to listen carefully to this voice from Krochmalna Street. We will try to do so in this chapter, especially with regard to Korczak's ideas (and our problems) in the field of residential child care. We will first cluster our remarks around four central themes in Korczak's work, and later around four dilemmas in the field of residential youth care with which we have been confronted in the Netherlands over the last few decades.

By doing so, we hope to avoid the risk of simply identifying Korczak's basic ideas with a limited number of concrete instruments he used in his orphanage, such as the court, the weekly paper and the children's guardianship. The adoption of these concrete methods alone does not make a children's home 'Korczakian'. That qualification really depends on the total climate and the way in which these methods are used.

We also hope to avoid another risk while trying to gauge Korczak's contribution to the current discussion on residential treatment and care for children: the risk of annexing him too easily, even greedily, to our own hidden or overt ideological orientation. It is not difficult to find a fair number of quotations that would portray him as an early and great champion of anti-authoritarian pedagogics or as an important advocate of well-organized and well-disciplined

group education in the socialist style. Yet we think it is wiser to devote careful attention to the specific ideas that distinguish Korczak from Neill and Makarenko (in the illustrations mentioned above) and from other famous pedagogical pioneers.

Korczak as a fervent diagnostician

We hear so much about Korczak's love, affection and respect for children that we might forget how fervent a diagnostician he was. In his books about the orphanage and the summer camps, we read over and over again how important it is to be aware of the background of the child's behaviour. The ongoing message seems to be: Don't condemn or correct a child's behaviour before you have seriously tried to understand and to 'feel' the roots of this behaviour in the child's character, mood, life history and inner world. What you regard as 'misbehaviour' may be practised by the child in order to attain a certain goal, or it may originate in hidden old pain or serve as a reaction to something in the situation that you are not aware of.

It is obvious that there has been considerable progress in the field of diagnostics regarding child development and deviancies since Korczak's days. The modern DSM IV (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) is a highly refined version of Kraepelin's famous classification of psychiatric illnesses. Binet's intelligence measurement tests started in 1904 and gave rise to a wide variety of psycho-diagnostic tests. Behaviour therapy has stimulated the development of precise analysis and measurement of children's behaviour. Nevertheless, there still is a great deal we can learn from Korczak as a diagnostician.

Firstly, Korczak's 'diagnostic' attitude is not diagnostic in the modern sense. It is not a way of getting to know children by means of special procedures, measurements, tests, quantifications (I.Q, f.i) and classifications. Above all, it signifies open-minded and thorough attention to the thousands of events and nuances of everyday life. The countless observations, in all of over Korczak's books, about how children eat, play, sleep, wake up and so on are convincing reminders that ordinary everyday occurrences should not be ignored and that we should not jump to conclusions and classifications. In this respect, the residential worker (i.e. the worker in the child's life environment) has excellent diagnostic opportunities compared with the social worker, who is dependent on relatively short visits and conversations, and also compared with the psychologist, who uses psychological tests in artificial situations.

Secondly, in many illustrative examples Korczak draws our attention to the inner world of children, to what in German is called their 'Erlebniswelt'. What adult will ever be able to understand the exhilaration that a child feels when it sees the first snow of the season? And who will be able to fathom a child's sadness about difficult situations it left behind at home? In Korczak's view, diagnosis is closely linked with empathy and with the quality of communication. Quite often our feeling for what is going on inside the child is blocked by hasty communication or by our eagerness to stop or change a certain type of behaviour. Korczak's preference for empathic diagnosis does not imply that he undervalued or neglected more objective, science oriented methods. On the contrary, he spent a lot of time measuring the children's growth of weight and height and following their reading capacity as accurately as possible (Ida Merzan).

We see an ironic coincidence in the fact that in the decades in which Sigmund Freud began to explore the subconscious mind, Janusz Korczak made the consciousness of the child, their hidden inner world about which very little was known, an object of description and study.

Thirdly, Korczak's diagnostic attention is focused in a very modern way on what we now call interactional processes. Perhaps the child that exhibits strange behaviour is reacting to another child, or to your (the worker's) way of asking a question, or to an unnoticed humiliation it suffered a few moments ago.

Within this context Korczak makes a surprisingly modern remark. In many countries the video camera has become an important instrument for analysis and diagnosis in the study of the child. In the Netherlands, for instance, 'Video Home Training' has developed into a method to help problem families by clarifying the intra-family interactions using video registrations of situations in everyday life. When reading Korczak's ghetto diary, I was surprised to come across the observation that one day every teacher and residential worker will use his own camera to see and to reflect on the thousands of subtle interactions between children which would escape his attention in the normal routine of things. Then they will understand, for instance, why Joseph does not like to sit next to Winston.

Fourthly, it is inspiring to hear from Korczak how difficult it is to understand, to 'diagnose' people who are living in, or rooted in a culture that is very different from our own life pattern. His description of the situation of the child in 'The right of the child to be respected' is famous: We are living as a people of dwarfs among giants, weak, not understood. In 'When I am a child again' he convincingly describes how little teachers generally understand what their pupils think and feel. Two worlds, two cultures. But there is another, very topical illustration of Korczak's feeling for the very different environments or (sub)cultures of people. In 'Children of the street' he wrote a very intense dialogue between a street child and a well meaning (social) pedagogue. Summarized: 'You will never understand us. You are from a totally different world. We have our own honour'.

Especially in modern multicultural societies, with their residential settings with a mixed population and mixed staff, it is important to take Korczak's plea for diagnostic modesty seriously, all the more so when the other does not belong to our own adult, Western, urban, middle class or intellectual 'culture'. Nicely phrased by Korczak in one of his last letters to Joseph Arnon in Israel: So many children arrived, so many books to decipher.

So much for some inspiring and topical elements in Korczak's 'diagnostic' approach to children. They are all related to his fundamental plea for respect towards children. Especially in residential settings that frequently take in new children from very different backgrounds and with severe behavioural problems, it is no luxury to be warned again and again:

Don't interfere, don't correct, don't draw any conclusions too early. Try to understand. It is their factual daily life, it is their inner world, it is their reaction to the - often unfamiliar - situation, it is their cultural background and history that count.

The significance of children to each other

We know that Korczak had a high opinion of the mutual support among the children in his orphanage. The best known illustration of that is the phenomenon of 'guardianship', which refers to one of the older children taking responsibility for a newcomer. From the written exchanges between such guardians and their 'pupils' we know how serious these contacts were in some cases.

Korczak's fictional writings show that friendship and comradeship between children can be of considerable pedagogical value. In 'Wlodek', for example, the mutual support and understanding of the three friends is more significant than that of the adults in their environment. And in 'When I am a child again', the central figure receives more warmth from his friends than from most adults around. But more far-reaching is the role Korczak gave the children in important decisions in the orphanage. The best known example is of course the court. Korczak did not hide the practical difficulties that sometimes presented themselves. He had a strong conviction, however, that the responsibility for enforcing the rules should be shared with the children, also with respect to punishment and especially to helping the 'offenders' restore their relationship with the community.

Some workers in residential care will have doubts about attributing this role to children in a residential setting today. Their doubts will grow when they read about the children's part in decisions about intake and eventually about outplacement, and also in the 'ranking' of the children in a plebiscite-like system. Is that responsibility not too heavy to place on children, especially when they themselves have not solved their problems yet?

Perhaps these doubts are legitimate. It would be imprudent to imitate such methods indiscriminately in our own institutions. But residential workers told me that in difficult situations when they failed to find the right tone or to do the right thing toward a child, another child sometimes came with the answer, the right approach, thus contributing to the pedagogical or therapeutic task.

Korczak's emphasis on the children's mutual significance may be particularly important and inspiring for the residential forms of child care. When you are a child and enter a children's home that offers a reasonable quality of care, there is a good chance that the adult workers will try to offer you many favourable things (warmth, security, activities, understanding) and that they listen to your problems, give advice and let you have as good a time as possible. But do they expect you to contribute to helping other kids? Or to the atmosphere in the group? Doesn't the word 'client' denote a 'consumer', 'a receiver' of services than 'fellow worker'? Shouldn't we think a little bit more seriously and more optimistically about the capacity of children, even of children with serious problems, to understand, to support, to help their fellow inmates? Elsewhere Korczak draws our attention emphatically to the risk of children dominating over other children by usurping the helper's role, which attests to his pedagogical realism. But for him that is not a reason not to value and to accept the children as 'fellow care givers'

Korczak's view on psychological development as an active process, as a personal activity

In the study of child development two basic models, paradigms, have dominated the field for many decades, sometimes claiming exclusively to be the whole truth, sometimes striving towards an (un)easy synthesis.

One model is that of biological growth, *maturation*, as the decisive factor in psychological development. Piaget, Gesell, biological psychiatry are examples of this approach.

The other model is that of a process of *shaping from outside*. As far as it was optimistic about the possibility of 'shaping' a character, traditional pedagogy is an illustration of this approach. But behaviourism, with its emphasis on the power of conditioning, also belongs to this philosophy. The impact of conscious influence on the child, the effects of emotional climate or the socio-cultural conditions are alternatively seen as the most important factors.

We are of course aware that Korczak was deeply interested in the processes of growth and maturation, and that, on the other hand, he was firmly convinced of the power of emotional climate, life experiences and socio-economic conditions. With regard to the prevailing paradigms of development theory, he was obviously anything but biased or narrow minded. But as one of the first and indeed one of the very few in this century he drew our attention to a third, quite different aspect of development: the developing human being's own activity. This principle can be found in his description of the three-year-old child exploring the world around its parent's small farm. (*How to love a child*). It is stated more explicitly in his motivation of the child's right to be respected. (*The right of the child to be respected*). We have to respect, among other things, the child's deep involvement in the difficult task of growing up. Often in Korczak's works we find descriptions of children contemplating their problems and the decisions that are confronting them. One of his very early works, 'Children of the street', is characterized by the recurrent theme of the central figure and other youngsters facing the choice between this or that way of life: good or bad, free or submissive. In 'How to love a child' we are often reminded that the educator has to take the child's decisions into consideration and is indeed dependent on them. The well-known bet Korczak entered into with children is another illustration of his conviction that the children themselves are the makers of their progress.

Why is this element in Korczak's view of child development so important to modern residential youth care? In our view, because a disturbed child in residential care runs the risk of being seen as an object and a product of different internal and external factors, rather than as an actor itself. At best it is seen as a person that re-acts to negative factors as an explanation for difficult behaviour, and that re-acts well to our therapeutic measures when it develops in a positive direction. On one occasion, Korczak's basic idea was effectively summarized by a Dutch residential worker when he said: 'I am often impressed how intensively my children are trying to make something of their, very disturbed, lives.'

If psychological development is also an active process, and if the child is an actor in its own right, the essence of educating, bringing up children and also of helping those in disarray, lies in communication with the child. This is not a superfluous reminder for residential child care.

Extra doses of discipline or of therapeutic interference are quite often dominant ingredients of existing programs in this field. In addition, the over-organization of structured activities may overshadow the youngsters' own initiatives. One of Korczak's messages is that sometimes a child prefers to be left alone. In this context it is obvious that Korczak's views suggest interesting parallels with the approach that characterizes the more recent humanistic psychology (self-actualization), especially with the so-called client-centred psychotherapy of Carl Rogers. At the same time, anyone who knows Korczak's work will agree that he was not naive about the power of internal biological or external social factors.

A children's home as an active community based on shared responsibility

Reading Korczak's report on the orphanage in Krochmalna Street and Ida Merzan's description of it, one is struck not only by the basic attitude of love and respect towards the children but also by the social organization, the culture of this orphanage as a whole.

It was not only well-structured, orderly, thoroughly caring and warm but also permanently inviting - and enabling - everybody to take their place, to play their role, to make their own contribution. The examples are plenty, even the photos abound with them: working together in the garden, peeling potatoes, making music together, cleaning the house. But also giving every newcomer a personal task as soon as possible, giving older children responsibility (sometimes far-reaching, as in the case of guardianship) and the court: all these features illustrate the philosophy that regards children as active and gradually more responsible citizens of democratic society.

The festive days are another example of Korczak's concern to create a pleasant pattern in life at the orphanage. So were the outings, the weekly paper and the music and theatre performances.

The underlying message seems to be: Working in and directing a children's home is not only favourable to the individual child via individual contacts, but also contributes to the creative development of a culture, a pattern of communal life, a well-structured community.

The question of what this culture should look like is not easy to answer. It depends to a high degree on our taste, preferences and background. Maybe our answer would in many respects be different from Korczak's. But I think that most of us agree about the basic requirements Korczak seems to imply with regard to this '*residential culture*'.

1. The children (and the workers) should feel safe, at ease in their environment.
2. The children (and the adults) should be recognized as individual persons ('belonging' is not enough).
3. Every member should be invited and enabled to deliver his or her personal contribution, which can always be more than a minimal, formal obligation. In this context it is useful to think of Korczak's habit of publicly rewarding well-preformed tasks.

Korczak was very well aware that the development of the culture, the pattern of life in a small community is not an easy task. In 'How to Love a child' he gives a vivid description of his struggle for orderliness, for cleanliness, against teasing, against squealing. A culture has to be cultivated in order to develop. And that is every individual member's responsibility.

Again we raise the question 'Why is this element of Korczak's philosophy particularly relevant to modern residential youth care?' We see a number of reasons. Firstly, the culture of many residential settings is not particularly rich. They are often characterized by a high measure of control and a certain rigidity and uniformity. The behavioural problems of the inmates, which can sometimes be very serious, are an important justification (sometimes an excuse) for these characteristics.

Secondly, the short stay and rapid turnover of the children hinder the organic development of an 'institutional culture'.

Thirdly, most of the residential workers, especially the higher ranking ones, tend to be individual-oriented rather than community and culture-oriented, because of their training and the dominant influence of psychology and psychiatry. (see, for example, the agendas of staff meetings).

Fourthly, due to the extremely varied cultural background of the inmates, it is very difficult to develop a style of communal life that appeals to all children and all workers.

Fifthly, the highly asymmetric demarcation of roles in discipline as well as in therapy-oriented residential settings makes it difficult to invite and to enable the children to contribute to the institutional culture. A worker might think, 'After all they are difficult and we are in charge'. One morning a child in a Dutch children's home said to his group leader (after a look in the group's garden): 'Your flowers are flowering now!'

But despite all these obstructions, or indeed because of them, it is important for us to heed Korczak's admonition in this context.

Engaging children in the active development of the group and institutional culture, of communal life patterns, is a very important learning experience for them, however limited the concrete opportunities and the degree of success may be. I would like to remind pessimists of the very positive experiences with so called 'adventure camps' and other types of intensive 'learning by experience' projects. The shared tension, the shared responsibility, the concrete mutual dependency and the suspension of the usual asymmetrical roles prove to be very favourable in these schemes. Why shouldn't we try to incorporate some of these elements during the 'other 51 weeks'?

We will now summarize some of the most important themes in the debate on European Youth Care during the second half of the 20th century. We will choose and describe these problems independently from Korczak, but afterwards we will ask the question whether Korczak's ideas and experiences make sense or are helpful in our discussions on these problems. Obviously, our selection and description of these themes is dependent on our own (the writers') taste and our (the Dutch) national situation.

Helping children and youth in residential settings or in their own environment?

Ever since the famous 'controversy about the orphanages' at the end of the 18th century, there has been a great deal of ambivalence about residential care for children. Isn't a parental family,

even if the quality of care it provides is less than excellent, always preferable to the artificial, big orphanage? And isn't foster care, when the original birth family is no longer available or acceptable, generally preferable, more affectionate and intimate, than the large institution? We know that the early economic exploitation of orphanage inmates sharpened the criticism of residential care. In the 19th century there were a few pioneers who tried to develop better centres of residential care for young people, but generally the reputation of institutions was not very good, they tended to provide discipline rather than real social help and accommodated relatively many youngsters from the lower classes. In the twentieth century, other types of help for children and parents in trouble have developed, such as child guidance (advisory) centres and specialized day care. Ambulatory care became popular; especially in the broad critical cultural movement of the late sixties the protest against the 'suppressive and authoritarian' children's institutions gained momentum. It proved to be hard, however, to create effective alternatives to institutional care, especially for youngsters with seriously problematic behaviour.

A debate has been going on in several countries for some decades pro and contra residential youth care, on general policy level as well as on individual cases. Frequent arguments in favour of non-residential, ambulatory help include the following:

- it is better to help a child in or near its own family because the main problems are related to intra-family relationships;
- also from the point of view of social learning, living in the birth family and neighbourhood is better;
- institutional life is characterized by persistent negative side effects of institutional life, such as impersonal contacts, (pre-)delinquent infection and weak identity development;
- social stigmatization and inferiority feelings are almost unavoidable.

Arguments in defence of residential care include:

- only in a professionally staffed residential setting is it possible to handle seriously problematic behaviour;
- only by removing a youngster from his or her environment can serious negative influences from within the family and the neighbourhood be stopped;
- only in a professionally operating residential setting is it possible to structure and direct the overall situation to such a degree that all factors converge in an effective treatment of personality disorders.

There are no signs that the debate will arrive at a conclusion soon. The value of the arguments from both sides depends, among other things, on the type of problems involved, on the availability and the professional quality of different types of assistance, on the availability of funds and also on underlying opinions with respect to education and child rearing. In this context it is interesting to see what Korczak's views might add to the debate.

At first sight he was so devoted and so creative a leader of a very pleasant and effective children's home that we can hardly imagine that his work and principles could in any way contribute to a conclusion against residential care. However, as early as the first paragraph of the section about the children's home in 'How to love a child', Korczak is sceptical about residen-

tial care, although his scepticism is directly linked to his criticism of the family. He writes, 'This book is perhaps not only relevant to workers in the barrack-like prisons, the (children's) institutions, but also to educators in the cellular prison, the family for the child in our time. Children are tormented in the institution and the family alike.'

It is clear from countless passages that Korczak does not regard children's homes as idyllic places where nice adults are working harmoniously with lovely children. Korczak is very honest and realistic about the moments of weakness, the self-interest, the exhaustion and the misunderstandings that typify workers in residential settings, including himself. His first and compelling contribution to the debate mentioned above seems to be, 'Do not think that it is an easy task to develop a good residential setting'.

In the same paragraph Korczak writes, 'The way I have chosen to reach the goal was neither the shortest nor the easiest.' But his second warning, still in the same context, is: 'Do not idealize the family, it can be a tormenting prison for the child, too!'

The resulting admonition seems to be, Do not generalize dogmatically the nature of the children's home or the family as such. Neither of the two is bad by definition, but neither guarantees a favourable climate for growing up on the basis of its structure alone. Both imply risks and offer real opportunities, which are serious challenges at the same time. Given the predominant trend against residential care in several countries, it is perhaps useful to refer to the ways in which Korczak counterbalanced the much-quoted negative aspects of institutional care.

- His main weapon against an overdose of discipline was not the abolition of all or most rules, but the involvement of children in the enforcement of the rules. This means that rules were no longer instruments and symbols of one-sided adult power, but rather an expression of shared obligations and responsibilities. This generated a different style of communication with respect to rules and the violation of rules.
- The often criticized depersonalization, especially in large institutions, was counteracted by Korczak by his generous and explicit use of personal tasks, appreciation and visible distinctions.
- The artificial separation of a child from its natural environment by residential placement was compensated by Korczak with substantial attention to and genuine respect for the child's personal history (and his or her stories about it) and by allowing the children to visit their parental homes regularly. In this context, we should bear in mind that in Korczak's time alternatives to residential placement, such as child guidance centres and professional social work, were not available. His enthusiastic involvement in the organization of summer camps proves that he was convinced of the pedagogical value of activities outside school.

Freedom or discipline?

A second, very controversial dilemma is that between an authority, discipline-oriented approach on the one hand and a more anti-authoritarian, freedom-oriented approach on the other. The debate on this dilemma takes place in many residential institutions as well as in ordi-

nary families. Which is better for the developing child and youngster: a well-structured situation with strict rules and limits, supervised by a strong authority, in which the child has to adapt and to obey, or an atmosphere of freedom and tolerance in which children can be themselves and choose their own way? Both opinions are rooted and justified in different philosophies and patterns of life. The supporters of rules and authority sometimes substantiate their position on the basis of religious values and directives. But a patriarchal social structure or an extreme nationalistic or collectivistic political regime can also be the background of an authority-centred upbringing. The advocates of a freer education, on the other hand, sometimes base their approach on their view of the child as a perfect, pure, unspoiled being, for whose majesty we have to bow (Ellen Key), on other occasions on a revolutionary, almost anarchistic protest against any form of authority. It seems that these opinions on and methods of bringing up children are often reflected in an intensified, exaggerated way in residential youth care. In the world of strict Protestant morals of 18th century Germany, August Hermann Francke developed the idea of 'breaking the sinful will of the child' as a pedagogical guideline in his big orphanage. And in the large resocialization institutes of the nineteenth century, severe discipline was the main educational instrument. Military organization and monastic obedience were the hidden models of children's homes. On the other hand, in the twentieth century and especially in the late sixties and seventies progressive pedagogics and a libertarian cultural climate became the inspiration for highly anti-authoritarian regimes in some residential centres (for example Neill). In the eighties the two extremes were better balanced; sometimes even a sensible compromise was reached, but the debate continues and is often conducted in a quite emotional manner: 'Away with this terrible suppression.' or: 'This so-called freedom and lack of discipline is the root of the whole modern youth problem.' Even the famous Dr. Spock was involved.

Can we learn anything from Korczak in this context? It does not make sense to enlist him as an advocate of either of the two opinions. People sometimes try this, most of the time in favour of the freedom side: they present Korczak as an early forerunner of anti-authoritarian pedagogics. But that does not do justice to his ideas. His intense personal presence in the orphanage, his emphasis on the important role of the adult in the life of the child and his strong commitment to formulate and maintain clear rules in the daily life of the orphanage, make it difficult to classify him among the anti-authoritarians.

On the other hand, it would be still more absurd to introduce him as a supporter of a strict authority-centred style of rearing children. Of course his emphasis on group life, on every child's responsibility towards the community, on the importance of rules and sanctions could all be taken as a proof of a pro-authority basic philosophy, and the court, the guardianship and the mutual social control might be presented as illustrations of a distinct anti-permissive education. But that, too, would be too biased an interpretation.

We think that Korczak's main contribution to the freedom-discipline controversy is his emphasis on the quality of communication, on the importance of the ongoing dialogue with the child. He was not 'anti-authoritarian', because he confronted the children intensively with their social responsibility and obligations. Neither was he 'authoritarian', as he was always prepared to listen to children, or talk with (not 'to'!) them and to reconsider his original opinion.

It is obvious that these are important impulses, also for modern residential care. Especially in larger institutions and given the frequently switching contacts, it is a permanent risk that at difficult moments force or resignation replace real dialogue.

Child or family?

Another well-known debate in child care during the last decades has centred around the following question: Who after all is to be helped, who is the client, the child or the family as a whole? In the professional jargon of our American friends: Who is the 'client system'? The use of this concept itself implies a preference for including the whole family, or even a wider network than the nuclear family, in the approach.

Traditionally the object, the client of child care was the child. The word 'child protection', quite common in several countries, often also had the connotation of protection against the (bad) parent. In many laws, 'neglect' was the key concept in the diagnosis that led to a judicial intervention in parental custody. And it is symptomatic that, at least in the Netherlands since the child-care laws of 1905, loss of parental custody automatically entailed the loss of the parent's right to vote. Also the geographic situation of many residential settings founded in the 19th century (unlike the old orphanages) symbolized the message: the further away from the original family and social environment, the better.

This strong trend to 'help by separation' was based, among other things, on the high levels of social deterioration in the poor city districts, but also on the moralistic view that the inability to raise your children decently and effectively was a reflection of serious moral shortcomings.

But fortunately we have come a long way since then - or at least most of us. As early as the first decades of this century, progressive care providers in child care and psychiatry understood that they at least had to cooperate with the families (and further networks) of individual clients. Why? Firstly because the problem is almost always partly rooted in that network. Secondly because in many cases part of the solution lies there. And thirdly because, in all cases, emotional ties are strong.

This is why, in the second half of the twentieth century, many residential youth centres hired social workers and began to cooperate with parents if these parents were 'cooperative'. At least three different influences can be distinguished that contributed to this new trend.

- The development of so-called 'family therapy', based on the discovery that in many cases the problems of the individual are manifestations of problems in the family network;
- The growing influence of general systems theory on human sciences, which helped to overcome the individualistic perspective;
- The very practical discovery that the return to the birth family after a period of residential care often led to a revival of old problems and conflicts and, at the same time, emphasized the individual's alienation from the original social environment.

Many practising social workers discovered that cooperation with parents was not easy, in spite of its popularity, and that in many cases the other family members were so deeply in trouble

themselves that they too needed some kind of treatment. Many residential workers inside the residential settings experienced that it was not easy to avoid or overcome a certain degree of competition and antagonism between themselves and the parents. Methodical questions arose: should we be working with the whole family, or with child and family separately? At the same time, the basic debate continued. Is it always better to involve the family in the care process, to see the family as the 'client system', or is it sometimes better to work with (or towards) a radical separation of children or youngster from their family? This debate was intensified by the growing evidence that child battering and sexual abuse are widespread phenomena in our civilized society. Sometimes the debate finds its extension in different approaches taken by different workers or agencies.

We now come to the question whether Korczak has anything to contribute to this debate and where he stood in this context. We mentioned in paragraph 6 of this chapter that he had a great deal of respect for the children's personal history and, by extension, for their family background; he was also a great advocate of regular visits by the children to their parents.

Of course in Korczak's time modern approaches, such as family-therapy, social casework or system-analysis, did not exist. However, this makes his openness towards the family background all the more surprising. We can only understand Korczak's open attitude in connection with his deep conviction that in the end, difficult, unsuccessful and ostensibly 'bad' parents are not to blame. They too are seen by Korczak as human beings, with their own problems, sorrow and pain. They too are in need of help, not of moralistic condemnation. At several points in his books, most in 'When I am a child again', he describes the compassion that children feel for their parents in misery. The least this implies is a serious obligation for care providers to understand, help and above all not to exclude the parents.

In this respect, Korczak was far ahead of his time. He overcame the dogmatic dichotomy of helping, protecting poor children away from and against 'bad parents'.

Professional or personal?

The fourth, and last, controversy we would like to discuss is the one between the advocates of a personal, spontaneous, non-systematic approach and the supporters of a professional, methodical and systematic approach.

For many centuries, residential care, in practise, was provided by non-professional people who were not trained for this purpose. The head of a larger centre might be a priest, a Protestant minister or a doctor; in the residential quarters the work was done by lay people. However, we shouldn't look down on these people from our highly developed 20th century, expert-centred civilization. Many of these so-called non-professionals developed an impressive amount of practical competence and insight, especially when they served many years and were blessed with a warm heart and a clever mind. For many monks and nuns and other religiously inspired people, residential youth care was a life-long career.

As early as the nineteenth century, however, certain types of in-service training for residential workers developed (Pestalozzi, Wichern). Still, it was not until the twentieth century, more specifically until the second half of the twentieth century, that professional training

became more widely accepted. Sometimes it was combined with the training of social field-workers, sometimes it was separate. Of course training alone does not guarantee a reasonable level of professionalism. True professionalism presupposes more than that, especially a number of generally accepted and transferrable (learnable) working principles. Professionalism is mostly associated with systematical work, based on diagnosis, with an explicit purpose, with ongoing planning and (re)assessment. It seems self-evident that today this is the only way in which this work can be done responsibly. Shouldn't the days of well-intended, spontaneous but non-expert care belong to the past, at least in residential centres for (seriously) disturbed youngsters?

To be honest, even in countries that pretend to be quite advanced in this field, the degree of professionalization in residential care is quite minimal, compared for instance with social (field) work, teaching and nursing. Why is this so? We can distinguish at least three quite diverse obstacles.

- The lack of a sufficient body of theoretical insight and practical skills for working with the people in these families, who are usually difficult to motivate and not accustomed to primarily verbal approaches;
- The lack of sufficiently qualified people, combined with the lack of money to hire and to train qualified staff. Obviously, this is also dependent on the policy and the priorities of the authorities and the institutions themselves;
- A more fundamental reason for the slow progress of professionalization is the deeply rooted doubt whether professionalism is good for this type of work at all. This doubt can be traced in a great many workers and policy-makers in this field, conservative or more progressive. The reasoning behind this doubt is generally that too professional an approach might weaken the spontaneity, the warmth, the inspiration and the personal involvement, which are so important in this work.

So we are not only confronted with differences in the speed of developments towards professionalism, but also with an ongoing fundamental debate on the pros and cons of professionalism in residential youth care. This debate is complicated by the aspect of finance, for one thing. Non-qualified staff is cheaper. Moreover, there are very different definitions of professionalism. Most people agree that professionalism presupposes that the work is done in a systematic and methodical way, but the definition of 'methodical' in this field is not easy to find and fuels persistent controversies. Some of the problems in this context are the following.

- Does working methodically imply distancing oneself emotionally from the clients involved?
- Is the essence of working methodically to be sought in the application of a science-based social technology?
- Does working professionally - in this context the same as methodically - exclude everything associated with the workers' personal taste, preferences, emotions and creativity?
- Do intuition, common sense and emotional value have an added significance compared with systematic diagnoses and planned intervention?
- Supposed there are at least a number of methodical working principles agreed upon: how much may we expect from professional training and what are the best training methods?

This debate will obviously go on for a long time to come, and be confused with personal and material interests. It linked with the controversy between a more personalistic and a more technological approach in psychotherapy.

We should now raise the question of what Korczak's contribution to this debate might be. We have the impression that many are inclined, without hesitation, to claim him for the party of the 'anti-methodologist'. His spontaneity, his warmth, his creativity and his personal involvement seem to make him quite the opposite of the rational, analytic and planning professional. But let us be careful. Korczak was in many respects a fervent advocate of a systematic and methodical approach. His repeated plea for making notes, for communicating through written messages with the children, for example, is symptomatic of his distrust of much so-called spontaneity. And in one of the preceding paragraphs we already referred to his strong diagnostical attitude, and to his insistence on thorough observation.

At least two more aspects position Korczak near some important elements of modern methodological social science thinking. Firstly, his deep and frequently expressed conviction that change in human beings needs time. Do not be impatient. The child burdened with old problems and old pain needs time to recover.

Secondly, his repeated plea that the care worker should reflect upon his own feelings and his own emotional involvement. Korczak may not be advocating professionalism in the sense of an applied social technology. Intuition and creativity play an important role in his approach. But he was far ahead of his time with his plea for working thoroughly, for an ongoing clarification of the child's feelings and of the interactional process. In that sense he tried to work methodically long before the term itself gained currency. We think that Korczak is not just one more partisan in the debate in favour of or against professionalism. He strongly encourages critical reflection on what is meant by the concept of professionalism in this field.

A conclusion and an anecdote

In the previous paragraphs we have explored the significance of Korczak's ideas to the theory and practice of residential youth care in modern times.

We have found that some of his basic ideas inspire new thoughts within the context of residential care. We have mentioned:

- his diagnostic attitude;
- the children's mutual significance;
- his view of psychological development as an active process;
- his view of a children's home as an active community.

We have also found that it is worth while to look at some of the modern dilemmas in residential care from Korczak's point of view. We have mentioned:

- residential versus out-patient (ambulatory) help;
- freedom and tolerance versus discipline;
- child or family as the primary client (system);
- professional versus personal.

Perhaps our findings are disappointing to some people because Korczak does not provide guidelines, models or systems. In that respect he is no match for Montessori or Steiner or other famous system builders.

Korczak did not mark out a road for us to follow, but greatly stimulates and supports us in finding our own way.

His openness nicely materialized in an anecdote, related to us by an eighty-year-old lady, Yanka Zuk, in Israel, who was an educator in Korczak's orphanage in the thirties.

One day, one of the children under her supervision ran away but returned before the end of the day. She dealt with the child in a certain way, later told Korczak about the event and asked him: Would you, doctor, have done the same? When Korczak answered: 'No', she was quite upset, and asked: 'What did I do wrong?' 'Nothing' answered Korczak, 'but why should you handle such a situation in the same way I would have done?'