

STEFANIA WILCZYŃSKA – A COMPANION IN JANUSZ KORCZAK’S STRUGGLE

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Is it right to recall Janusz Korczak’s achievements without mentioning the role of Stefania Wilczyńska in the life of the “Doctor”(as she always referred to him)? The authors of this article, in order to understand the complexity of their collaboration, have researched the work of both, and taken into account the realities of the times when Korczak and Wilczyńska strived to bring their dreams to fruition.

*I am neither an accomplished speaker nor a prolific writer.
I can only work hard, though slowly and very cautiously....*

Stefania Wilczyńska

The orphanage is not, will not be Korczak’s Home for Orphans. [I am] too small, too weak, too poor and too stupid for the challenge of choosing almost two hundred children to dress them, gather round – feed and and keep them warm – protect them and introduce them to life. This great work was accomplished by the collective effort of many hundred people of good will and with an enlightened understanding of the needs of an orphaned child. Many beautiful names are among them and many remain nameless – their work, help, advice and experience constituted the material and spiritual values of this workshop and this wealthy enterprise. If names are required: Wilczyńska, Porówna, Korczak. ¹

Equal rights – unequal chances

For religious and social reasons, until the inter-war period, women could only play a secondary role in major public and charitable undertakings. They were allowed to work as children’s carers, as bursars, doing basic work, without any prospects of serving on the management boards of the organizations for which they worked with great devotion. Unfortunately, even today the role of women throughout history tends to be underestimated. In

¹ Korczak, “Gazeta Żydowska”, 3 (1942), in: Wilczyńska, p. 35.

Polish elementary schools children learn the names of only three outstanding women: Queen Hedwig (Jadwiga), Maria Curie-Skłodowska and Helena Modjeska (Modrzejewska). Secondary schools do not mention one single female role model in their programmes. While the works of women writers such as Konopnicka, Orzeszkowa, Kuncewicz and others are widely discussed in the classroom, these authors are not perceived as independent individuals propagating women's rights in society. It would be difficult to find topics in the curriculum dealing with various family models in history or with the role and position of women in social and economic life. Absent is any notice of women struggling for equal rights, of the voting rights' reform, of the role of women in the 19th century workers' movement or of women's activities in the cause of education. History is presented from the perspective of male leaders, warriors, politicians, diplomats and kings. In history lessons women appear only as queens or as the mistresses of great male leaders. Absent from textbooks is the information i.a. on women's organizations spreading education in the 18th and 19th centuries, women's philanthropic activities, the achievements of women liaison officers, first-aid workers and soldiers in the Warsaw Uprising or even of their role in the political opposition to communist Poland. People tend to forget that among the hundreds of thousands of anonymous Solidarity activists there were many women.. They made up about 50% of the Solidarity underground. Men notoriously try to stick a moustache on Solidarity as a whole, although this may only be half of the truth and never the entire truth.

We do not want to know and we never remember that often behind the "great men" stood dedicated and self-sacrificing women. History remains silent about them. We do not mean only the wives but also the women who, due to the patriarchal social structures had to remain invisible, had to live in the shadow of men, since they had no right to play an active part in the public sphere.

The Women's Congress, a social movement which came into being in 2009, objects to gender segregation and discrimination against women in Poland. The Professor Mojżesz Schorr Foundation has joined its efforts with the mission of the Congress. We trace and make known to the public the biographies of Jewish women - those nameless heroines whose names should be inscribed in the history of our civilization.

From a wealthy home to an orphanage

Wilczyńska, who was born into a wealthy middle class family, devoted herself to running an orphanage not out of poverty, but motivated by pedagogical passion. Her own education was at the highest level which was then possible for women seeking

scientific degrees. She studied biology in Belgium, where she obtained the title of a bachelor. She could not – as Korczak could – establish her own practice or study further while travelling in Europe. The fact that she remained a “spinster” was a social stigma to a much greater degree than in the case of Korczak, who also decided to devote himself to professional work and not to have a family. For his biographers this fact merited applause, while in her case it sometimes provoked derision. Together they ran orphanages; organized work in those homes, introduced innovative methods in pedagogy, raised necessary funds and gave personal care to children.

As early as 1909, the 23-year-old Wilczyńska begins her “honorary” cooperation with an orphanage in Franciszkańska street 2, organized by the Jewish Society for the Help for Orphans, founded in 1907. The main goal of the Society was to provide welfare for orphans and poor Jewish children understood in its widest sense. The organization delivered clothing, food, shelter, provided medical care and education in vocational schools and other educational institutions.

Spiritus movens of this Society were a married couple – the Eliasbergs.

One day Stella Eliasberg: convinced a colleague of her husband, doctor Goldszmit, to come to Franciszkańska street and see an artistic performance staged by the pupils of the children’s home for the public – wealthy philanthropists, who supported the orphanage. The performance was devoted to the literary work of Maria Konopnicka and her then very popular poems on the sad fate of poor children – such as “In the cellar” – which were perfectly suited to move the hearts of the benefactors. We witness a moving scene. Standing in the Hall are many Jewish children with closely cropped hair, dressed poor but neat and clean. They come in turn centre-stage and with trembling voices recite Polish poems they have learned for weeks. Others listen with excitement. The child-actors are prompted by a young, dark-haired woman with motherly looks. When they finish they run to her and hide in the folds of her long skirt. A slim, reddish-haired and slightly balding man in spectacles is standing in the doorway. He is deeply moved and cannot hold back his tears.²

It is likely Henryk and Stefania met that day for the first time. Korczak is thirty-one in 1909. He already has had his first literary successes. Everything he has published so far has been very well received. The readers were enthusiastic. Critics wrote: “Here is a real talent!”. Stefania is a 23-year-old young woman, eight years younger than him.

² Olczak-Ronikier, p. 140.

Did this encounter result in love at first sight for her? Those who knew them wrote about it in a more or less explicit manner. But even if this beautiful story began this way – does it justify the lack of interest in our heroine?

In the orphanage – boundless commitment

In 1910 the Society for the Help for Orphans decided to build its own home for children. On 12 May 1910 at Krochmalna street 92 a plot of land was bought for the sum of 24000 roubles. A Construction Commission under the Chairmanship of Izaak Elisberg was appointed. Janusz Korczak became a member of the Commission. The opening of the orphanage took place in 1912. Janusz Korczak becomes its director, Wilczyńska – the Head Tutor. Together with 85 pupils of the orphanage in Franciszkańska street 2 they enter the building in Krochmalna 92. Both discharge their duties without remuneration: “As I came to the boarding school I had no idea of what this work involved”.³

Stefania Wilczyńska leaves her wealthy family home and moves into the orphanage. She occupies a room on the second floor. “The room wasn’t small but longish, with no proportions. A narrow, Spartan bed, as if no one had ever slept in it. A table – a small one, covered with a freshly ironed tablecloth. A chest of drawers, a nice, old-fashioned wash-basin in a corner by the door”.⁴

Janusz Korczak and Stefania Wilczyńska gradually introduce new educational methods. The idea of the “beloved Miss Stefa”, as the children called her, is the introduction of the famous system of the duties rota by the pupils in the orphanage. It was her responsibility to take care of the hygiene, order and everyday organization. The home was located on the peripheries of Warsaw: “As if I were living in the province, so seldom was I a guest in real Warsaw” – Wilczyńska, feeling lonely, wrote several years later, in 1925.⁵

In 1914, on to the outbreak of the First World War, Janusz Korczak is called up for army service. Stefania Wilczyńska assumes responsibility for the Orphanage, where the number of pupils increases and the material conditions steadily worsen. She

³ Stefania Wilczyńska’s letter to Fejga Lifszyc, 26.04.1926 (Korczakianum Archive).

⁴ Wilczyńska, p. 9.

⁵ Stefania Wilczyńska’s letter to Jakub Einfeld, 26.03.1934 (Korczakianum Archive).

struggles with growing financial problems. We read in the report of the Society for the Help for Orphans from the year 1914:

whether to suspend the work already started and attempt a rescue action, transform all rooms into dormitories from basement to the roof, or rather not destroy anything and only broaden the activities within the means possessed or even expected. [...] And who knows [what would have happened] if the rudder from the Director's hands was not taken over by the brave Manageress-in-Chief, Miss Stefania Wilczyńska, who with all the self-sacrifice and understanding continues the methods and the work created and cherished by our doctor Goldszmit (Janusz Korczak)⁶.

In 1925, in a letter to Fejga Lifszyc, who lived in Palestine, she writes:

I remember, while reading your letter, the first months (13 years ago), when dr. Goldszmit (Janusz Korczak) went to war. It was hard to be alone – true, the work conditions were a hundred times better than where you live, but also a hundred times bigger was the responsibility for not spoiling

the work that a wise teacher brought into being. And afterwards the years of hardship: war, famine, Germans, typhus, scabies, fungus and me all alone. God helped me not to give it all up.⁷

Il bagno nella Casa degli Orfani

Did Korczak at least praise Wilczyńska for her fortitude during the difficult years? This we do not know. Perhaps he just took her behaviour for granted. Those four years of Korczak's absence show Wilczyńska as an autonomous, responsible and thorough person. But above all she is loyal to the Doctor. Arie Buchner, the tutor in Różyczka (Little Rose), a branch of the Orphans' Home, writes in the notebook, where he describes facts and incidents from children's lives at the summer camp: "16th July: Dr. left today to receive his medal. 19th July: I was in Warsaw. Miss Stefa showed me the medal and said that she only shows it to those, who work well. She added that she is more happy about the medal than the Doctor himself".⁸

In 1926, Janusz Korczak creates and becomes the editor of "Mały Przegląd" (The Little Review), a weekly supplement for children to "Nasz Przegląd" (Our Review). Stefania Wilczyńska writes for this unique periodical from its very beginnings. She is in charge of the Little Column, a regular review of letters from the youngest correspondents. She does not sign her articles, she remains anonymous. Her name appears at last in 1937 on the "Jubilee List"

⁶ "Pamiętnik Towarzystwa Pomoc dla Sierot", 1 (1914), pp. 4-5.

⁷ Stefania Wilczyńska's letter to Fejga Lifszyc, 1925 (Korczakianum Archive).

⁸ Zyngman, p. 21.

printed in “Mały Przegląd”, although her regular contributions ended in 1933. Why didn’t she sign her column? – maybe she thought that the scope of her work was too modest? – or perhaps she believed that with time... we do not know.

In 1925, Wilczyńska considerably broadens the scope of her responsibilities. In the Orphans’ Home a ‘bursa’ (boarding house) is created, which provides a hands-on training for aspiring teachers and educators. In the beginning it was intended for pupils over 14, but gradually it becomes available to others from outside the orphanage. The *bursa* was to give them the chance of completing their school education or learning a profession. In exchange for room and board the residents had to help in the orphanage working for 3 to 4 hours daily. Wilczyńska assumes the position of the “Bursa Manager”. She supervises work and study, takes care of the young trainee tutors and their daily needs. She encourages them to get to know the child, the society of children, and to make notes of those observations. In the evening she analyzes attentively their copybooks with notes about the work done. She makes her remarks in red. These remarks provide important suggestions for further observations to be made by her pupils. Once a week, together with Korczak, she leads seminars for the trainees. They take the form of conversations on specific pedagogical problems.

Ida Merżan, a resident trainee, wrote in 1927:

Miss Stefa stayed with us, resident pupils, the whole day. She got up before us, went to bed last and didn’t stop to work even when sick. She was with us at all our meals, taught us how to put on bandages, bathe children, cut their hair etc. Tall, dressed in a black apron, hair with a manly, short cut, always alert and watchful, she remembered every child and student even when she rested. [...] during the meals she chose a seat so that she could see all the children and she often stood up to show a new pupil how to hold bread or a spoon, how to wipe the spilled milk. At night she got up to cover up the children, help to the toilet those who urinate in bed, find out if any groan in sleep. [...] The house was full of Miss Stefa, we felt her foresight, her care everywhere.⁹

Wilczyńska makes sure that after leaving the Orphans’ Home the contacts with the pupils were not only not broken, but on the contrary – she worked hard to create a big “Korczak’s family”. A very astute decision. The alumni, equipped with moral values specific to this institution, returned to milieus that differed greatly from what they experienced in the Orphans’ Home. They felt lost. She devoted much time and energy to creating family bonds between them in order to protect them from loneliness in new, different environments, and strengthen their memory of the values they had

⁹ Merżan, pp. 43-44.

learned in the Orphans' Home. "The family", the lasting contacts with the graduates gave them the feeling of security and the possibility of sharing their problems. This was the chance for them to implement in life the moral rules they had learned in the Orphans' Home.

Years later Miss Stefa gave a stark assessment of the cost of her enormous commitment in those early times:

Nothing makes one as stupid and dumb as a continuous stay in a boarding school. You didn't know me before, but believe me, I became so one-sided, lost my good manners in this barrack-like existence. And only I know how difficult it is to get out of here even for a few hours. But for the sake of the cause I should see to it in the future that I don't get deaf and blind to what is happening around.¹⁰

In the first days of February 1933, Korczak moves out of the Orphans' Home: "I felt tired, sick and superfluous in the Orphans' Home, that's why I took a back seat or rather was dispensed with"¹¹ – writes Korczak to Józef Arnon, a former pupil in the orphanage. Stefania Wilczyńska reports this to a friend in a different way: "Dr Korczak moved out indeed, but he spends three entire days and nights at Bielany and with us in an advisory role, and four days he works for himself".¹²

With even more duties falling on Wilczyńska's shoulders, her psychological state deteriorates. She is frustrated with the never ending work, heavy responsibility and escalating problems. The idea of leaving the Orphans' Home is more and more present in her thoughts:

I became an awful shrew. A greater one than I ever was before. This I could not tolerate, so I left quietly for a while to put myself in order. And I continuously accuse myself that I have no courage to abandon the boarding school, the idea is unacceptable to me. [...] The children [are] in summer camps –two hundred people altogether. It's all so orderly and well functioning.... So why should I return? You must be laughing, you think you were right, it's your triumph you scamp. But no, you smart aleck – you know nothing. No one knows anything, so let's not philosophize. [...] But I am beginning to save money, since I am planning a collective excursion to Eretz in 1933.¹³

¹⁰ Stefania Wilczyńska's letter to Fejga Lifszyc, 1925, op.cit (Korczakianum Archive).

¹¹ Janusz Korczak's letter to Józef Aron, 1933 (Korczakianum Archive).

¹² Stefania Wilczyńska's letter to Fejga Lifszyc, 1933 (Korczakianum Archive).

¹³ Stefania Wilczyńska's letter to Fejga Lifszyc, 26.07.1930 (Korczakianum Archive).

On July 1st, 1937 Stefania Wilczyńska leaves the Orphans' Home after 25-years of continuous work. In her opinion the children don't need her any more, *since organizations replace people*. She begins to work for CENTOS (*Centrala Towarzystw Opieki nad Sierotami i Dziećmi Opuszczonymi* – Headquarters of the Societies for the Care of Orphaned and Abandoned Children) as a consultant for tutorial affairs in boarding schools. It was a busy and effective Jewish welfare organization that helped children. CENTOS endowed boarding schools, orphanages, day-care centres for small children, where they received meals and could play supervised by tutors. The organization provided for their education and medical care.

Palestine – a metamorphosis of Stefania Wilczyńska

In March 1938, Wilczyńska leaves for Palestine, for kibbutz Ein Harod. She wishes to continue the work of developing a tutorial system for children's houses in kibbutzim. Can we assume that building on her experiences in the Orphans' Home she intends to create something of her own, a program she herself will develop? She fulfils her duties in Ein Harod very conscientiously and methodically. As in her work with the trainee tutors and her advisory duties in CENTOS she believes it very important to record the observed reactions of children. It is somewhat reminiscent of the daily weighting and measuring of children by Janusz Korczak. Perhaps she planned to analyze this abundant material to make some generalizations or to begin theoretical studies. The results could have been valuable for the development of the pedagogical sciences.

In Ein Harod we get to know a different Stefania Wilczyńska. She is still very meticulous, diligent but the 10 letters published in "Mały Przegląd" show her as a person full of joy of life, sensitive to nature, full of initiative, self-confident. It is a great pity she did not manage to finish and analyse the work she began. In May 1939, Wilczyńska returns to Poland. She is disturbed by the news of a possible war. "My children are in Warsaw. My place is there".¹⁴

Together to the end

¹⁴ Wilczyńska, p. 33.

During the first days of the war Korczak, together with older pupils and co-workers, is on call day and night on the roof of the building, putting out fire bombs, which cause minor damage. Stefania Wilczyńska, in the basement, organizes a first aid dressing point. The wounded are carried from the street and homeless people come in, too. Miss Stefa and the Doctor give first aid, the children carry out the tasks they are entrusted with. Boys carry water in the buckets, girls set buckets filled with sand to prevent fire from spreading. Under these tragic conditions the system of duties introduced in the Orphans' Home by Wilczyńska stands the test.

Throughout the whole of that year and until autumn 1941, thanks to Korczak's efforts, life in the Orphans' Home under the watchful eye of Stefa Wilczyńska, runs its normal course. Both decisively reject every offer to abandon the children and get to the so-called Aryan side. Ludwik Hirszfeld, a well-known scientist and Chairman of the Health Council in the Warsaw Ghetto in 1940-42, who often visited Korczak in the Orphans' Home, wrote that during those visits he was always overwhelmed by

the feeling of a higher world. Korczak didn't want to rescue just the physical persons – he wanted to sculpt the souls. And he succeeded even in this hell, since children of the Orphans' Home were known in the district as personification of nobility and goodness. A brave and devoted companion in his work was Miss Wilczyńska.¹⁵

Nachum Remba, an underground self-defence activist in the Ghetto, who was one of the last people to speak to Korczak, notes in his diary:

This day finished me off [5/6 August 1943 – EM..G.P.].A blockade of the Small Ghetto was taking place; we were informed that the nurses' school, pharmacies, Korczak's orphanage, boarding schools at Śliska and Twarda, and many others were led to transport. It was a very hot day. I placed the children from the boarding schools on the far end of the square, beside the wall. I hoped that perhaps I could possibly save them this afternoon, keep them till the next day. I proposed to Korczak to come with me to the Community Council and convince them to intervene. He rejected the offer, he didn't want to leave the children even for a second. Loading the train began. I stood beside the cordon of the Emergency Services which led people to the wagons. I stood there with a trembling heart and watched if my plan would succeed. I kept asking about the number of people in the wagons. People were still being loaded, the wagons were not filled yet.

¹⁵ Hirszfeld, pp. 261-262.

[...] Suddenly Mr. Sz. (Szmerling, the Jewish chief of Umschlagplatz, called by the Germans “the Jewish executioner” gave the order for the children to be led to the train. The procession was led by Korczak. No, I’ll never forget this scene. [...] The children lined up, four in a row. Korczak went first with eyes turned up high, holding two small children by their hands. He led the procession. The second group was led by Stefania Wilczyńska, the third – by Broniatowska (her children had blue backpacks), the fourth group – by Szternfeld from the Twarda boarding school.¹⁶

Korczak’s absolute sense of duty, his heroic death and solidarity with the children awake the unquestioned admiration of all. He died in Treblinka together with his pupils. But he was not alone in his heroism. At his side was Stefania Wilczyńska and some other workers of the Orphans’ Home.

In the *Chronicle of the Warsaw Ghetto* by Emanuel Ringelblum we read:

All of the time, before the war and during the war, Korczak worked together with Miss Stefania Wilczyńska. They worked with each other the entire time of their lives. Even death did not part them.[...] Everything connected with the person of Korczak – the boarding school, propagation of love for children etc. – all this is the legacy of both of them. It is difficult to determine where Korczak begins and where Wilczyńska ends.¹⁷

Korczak established and was editor of several journals on pedagogy. He is the author of numerous publications. The written work of Wilczyńska is meagre. She left over hundred letters to and from friends to whom she was the “beloved Miss Stefa”, several dozens of texts published in the pedagogical press in Poland and Palestine, a few comments recorded in the minutes of kibbutz meetings in Palestine. The “forgotten Miss Stefa” has not become the subject of a deeper, detailed biography. The only publication devoted to her life and work is the wonderfully produced collection of letters and articles edited by Barbara Puszkin and Marta Ciesielska, both working at Korczakianum in Warsaw for many years. *A Word to Children and Tutors* constitutes a wonderful beginning to further and deeper studies not only of Wilczyńska’s life, but also of her ideas and methods of working with children. Our aim is to encourage historians and writers to present the very real achievements of Wilczyńska, who was not only sensitive to children’s misery and loyal to Korczak, but was above all a creative

¹⁶ See Falkowska.

¹⁷ Ringelblum, p. 605.

person, who contributed her own original ideas to the theory of pedagogy. We owe this to Wilczyńska as well as to Korczak. We owe it to ourselves.

Translated and reviewed by Lena Stanley Clamp

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Wilczyńska e Korczak.



La sala da bagno della Casa degli Orfani.



La sala da ricreazione.



Wilczyńska e i bambini all'ingresso della Casa degli Orfani



Wilczyńska con Fejgą Lifszyc-Biber, suo marito Chaim e il figlio Neta, Ein Harod, 1938.