



KORCZAK is the March, 2014 LVCA dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library. Below is a review by Kino Ken.

Poland 1990 117 minutes subtitled black-and-white live action feature drama BBC / Erato Films / Erboglyph Co. / Regina Ziegler Filmproduktion / Telmar Films Intl. / Zespol Filmowy "Perspektywa" / Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen Producers: Regina Ziegler, Janusz Morgenstern , Daniel Toscan du Plantier, Willi Segler, Wolfgang Hantke

19 of a possible 20 points

\*\*\*\*\* of a possible \*\*\*\*\*

Key: \*indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance

(j) = juvenile performer

#### Points

- 2 Direction: Andrzej Wajda\*
- 1 Editing: Ewa Smal
- 2 Cinematography: Robby Muller\*
- 2 Lighting
- 2 Written by: Agnieszka Holland\*
- 2 Production Design: Allan Starski\* Art Direction: Ewa Skoczowska\*
- 2 Music: Wojciech Kilar\*
- 2 Sound: Boguslaw Nowak\*
- 2 Acting
- 2 Creativity

18 total points

Cast: Wojtek Pszoniak\* (Henryk Goldszmit a.k.a. Janusz Korczak), Ewa Dalkowska\* (Stefania "Stefi" Wilczynska, headmistress of Korczak's orphanage for Jewish children), Teresa Budzisz-Krzyzanowska (Maryna Rogowska-Falska, director of "Our Home" orphanage in Pola Bielanskie), Marzena Trybala (Esther), Piotr Kozlowski (Heniek), Zbigniew Zamachowski\* (Ichak Szulc, Jewish gangster), Jan Peszek\* (Max Bauer, Jewish aristocrat), Aleksander Bardini\* (Adam Czerniakow, President of the Judenrat), Maria Chwalibog (Czerniakow's wife), Andrzej Kocpiczynski (Director of Polish Radio), Krystyna Zachwatowicz (Schlomo's mother), Jerzy Tass\* (watchman on the bridge), Wojciech Klata (j)\* (Schlomo),

Michal Staszczak (j)\* (Joseph), Agnieszka Krukowna (j) (Eva, Joseph's Aryan girlfriend, an orphan), Karolina Czernicka (j)\* (Natka, teenage cook, an admirer of Joseph), Anna Mucha (j)\* (Sabine, collector of Abram's debt of honor), Adam Siemion (j)\* (Abram), Robert Atzorn\* (German doctor), Janusz Bukowski (Sklepowa), Ewa Telega\* (disenchanted former pupil of Korczak's orphanage), Zygmunt Kestowicz\* (Peter Zalewski, Polish Underground resistance leader), Olaf Lubaszenko (tramcar worker distributing bread), Alicja Migulanka\* (Aryan washerwoman at orphanage), Włodzimierz Press (Jew at Ghetto auction), Jan Prochyra (Gancwajch, Jewish black market ringleader), Danuta Szaflarska\* (Mrs. Bauer, Max's mother, potential orphan fund donor courted by Korczak), Zbigniew Suszynski (student), Jacek Wojcicki\* (militant alumnus of Korczak's orphanage), Witold Bielinski (German soldier), Stanislaw Brudny\* (Polish man in prison), Grzegorz Pawlowski (Korczak's assistant, fiancé of Ester), Aleksander Trabczynski\* (Director of Gestapo ghetto filming unit), Wojciech Skibinski (Jewish Policeman in Ghetto), Roman Szafranski (entertainer with caviar)

KORCZAK opens with the title character delivering a radio program address to the children of Poland. For him, it is another in a long series of wildly popular presentations. But management has a different agenda. It's being pressured by agents of neighboring Nazi Germany to cancel the show due to its Jewish host. Trying to preserve a fragile peace, Poles acquiesce to foreign demands. So in the next scene, Korczak is being apprised of imminent discontinuation of his broadcasts. This at a time when he's trying to launch a new children's newspaper! After a brief, hopeless argument with the Director of Polish Radio, Korczak storms out, asking who cares about human beings anymore. It is the same question viewers will raise as they watch tragic events in this film unfold.

A pastoral outing beside a small lake finds the protagonist being confronted by former students who have found his accommodationist teachings about relations with Polish Gentiles to be completely inadequate for survival in the world outside their orphanage. For them, the time has come for confrontation. Even violent defense of their rights, if necessary. Emigration to Palestine is an enticing alternative. But it's clear the doctor has little sympathy. Poland is his home, for better or worse. He survived the last war there and is confident he can do so again.

This assertion is made despite orphanage headmistress Stefi's bleaker assessment of the situation. She has returned from Palestine to Europe, unable to bear the prospect of Jewish orphans being placed at risk by Nazi invaders. Whatever can be done to protect them she will undertake. Perhaps some can be smuggled out into safer Christian neighborhoods, or transferred to the Aryan orphanage at Pola Bielanski. Such a scheme, in Korczak's view, is a betrayal of both their religion and their culture. It must not become standard policy for his orphanage.

Events quickly overtake tentative security measures. Severely damaged by blitzkrieg and disheartened at rapid surrender of home forces, Poland is compelled in the fall of 1939 to surrender to Germany. Resistance appears useless, exemplified by the fate of a soldier who dared to shoot at an attacking bomber overhead. Warsaw and its institutions come under German control. Who will undertake to represent the most vulnerable of all citizens to Gestapo bullying? They have several unlikely potential saviors, the most highly respected being Korczak.

Whether the doctor foresaw the role he must play is unclear. At one time, he'd hoped to visit China and offer their war orphans medical services and friendly attention. Now, according to the screenplay, China has been replaced by Poland. Different children, same needs, similar persecution. The mistakes of the past have become present nightmares.

In middle sections of the film, Korczak is seen tending to physical needs of increasingly malnourished, isolated Jewish children. His charges have become political footballs, reduced to bargaining chips in a deadly game the Judenrat, a supervisory board comprised of Jewish community leaders, plays with agents of Hitler's Gestapo. The latter will stay out of orphanages only provided other victims are promptly delivered to them.

Soon all Warsaw Jews are relocated to a single overcrowded ghetto, from which only a select few may exit as day laborers. Jewish money and properties are seized, Jewish businesses closed. Of course, a few members with unusually extensive financial assets are still tolerated. Extortion, chiefly through the Judenrat itself, is not only acceptable, but privileged. Side stories anchored on black market boss Gancwajch and gangster Ichak Szulc reveal the moral quandary Korczak faces of having either to collect funds from such doubledealing collaborators or else resign himself to seeing children perish through starvation.

These children become more real as their individual stories are enacted. Teen leader Joseph is in love with blonde Gentile Eva, orphan of a different religion. They are separated into different worlds. Still, Joseph manages occasional reunions through daily approved work excursions outside the Ghetto. When Eva's employer threatens to inform the Gestapo, their romance is abruptly quashed.

Jewish adolescent Natka pines for Joseph, but for her efforts to defend him she's rewarded with a blow to the face.

Shlomo, a stunted, skinny twelve-year-old delivered to Korczak's care by a dying mother, is a belligerent thief: furtive, loud, scrappy, restlessly impatient with rules and restrictions. When he misses an opportunity to feed his mother on her final day of life, the boy blames Dr. Korczak and his mandatory balanced meal for depriving him of any possibility of saving Mama.

Abram, a lad of only about seven years of age, has foolishly made a bet with peer Sabine that his tooth will fall out on a given day. When it doesn't, he entreats the doctor to tug it loose prematurely. Korczak refuses, causing the youngster to lose his gamble. Sabine relentlessly demands compensation, threatening to take him to the orphanage's Children's Court. A real tough cookie. Abram has no money to offer and cannot get any until his tooth releases itself. Then he'll obtain a reward from Dr. Korczak, doubling as the Tooth Fairy. However, Sabine doesn't want to wait for Providence. Trapped in an unfortunate situation, Abram once again approaches the orphanage director for assistance. This time, Korczak's better informed about what is happening, relents, and hands over enough cash to pay off the boy's "debt of honor" with some change left over. Hardly has the recipient left the doctor's office than Sabine accosts him and pockets the full amount, to his great sorrow.

Parallel brief stories highlight even more heartrending predicaments facing adults. Adam Czerniakow, head of the Judenrat and chief negotiator between Warsaw's Ghetto and Gestapo tormentors, belatedly discovers he's powerless to avoid inhuman deportation demands made by the latter. Once imagining himself to be the savior of his community, instead he becomes its executioner, condemned by his position to preside over starvation and murder of the very people he'd expected to preserve.

Then there's the melancholy case of a Polish aristocrat disclosing to Korczak that he is not alone in approaching him for funds. When he then opens a door to his dining room, a scene almost suggestive of Viridiana's beggar's banquet is displayed. Its patron laments he's cursed with relatives from all across the country, many never before known to him, all asserting claims on his charity.

As conditions in the Ghetto grow ever more depressing, it becomes evident even to ever-optimistic Janusz that there will be no happy ending to their plight. He resolves to stage a play by Rabindranath Tagore of India in the orphanage to acquaint children with indications of a peaceful death, unlike agonizing ones daily observed on the streets outside. This play, *The Post Office*, concludes with contented resignation of its child protagonist to his fate while sights and sounds of nature outside bring consolation. Perversely, it seems to suggest death by starvation can be ennobling, if approached philosophically. Here drama foreshadows the march to a Treblinka transport, which, however honorably staged, can only end in tragic squandering of human potential. Probably not what Tagore had in mind.

Contrary to what some critics have claimed, Wajda is not dodging issues of responsibility for the final atrocity of gassings. He's simply declaring, by means of a fantasy liberation from cattle car into beckoning meadow, that Treblinka was only another episode in a history not yet complete. If anti-Semitic crimes are recognized and avoided in the future, then their victims shall not have died in vain. Simply showing children being suffocated to death is no political statement whatever. Nor any creative artistic achievement. After all, that's exactly what happened. The real question is, where do we go from there? Into greater evil? Or repentance?

Technically, the film is nearly flawless. Casting reflects inspired choices, both of juveniles and adults. Wojtek Pszoniak as Henryk Goldszmit depicts a flawed, somewhat self-deceiving dreamer who nonetheless elevates to heroic stature in the face of unremitting persecution. His lines are delivered with vigorous authority, reinforced by gestures restrained, yet powerful in their very limitation. He may be a caged lion, but he still knows how to bite. Aleksander Bardini's Adam Czerniakow journeys from upbeat gregarious politician to devastated suicidal loner with total credibility throughout. Another remarkably compelling performer is Jerzy Zass, anonymous watchman on the bridge leading from Warsaw's "Polish" sector over to the Jewish Ghetto. Is he actively hostile, secretly sympathetic, homesick, addicted to duty? Maybe all of these. Zass's acting gives no indication of his character's true personality. Nor should it.

Even more amazing is the look of child actors, none of whom ever directly experienced what is being portrayed. Yet every scene finds even mute juvenile extras completely immersed in reconstruction of the past, never wandering out of character for a second. Particularly impressive are Karolina Czernicka as lovelorn Natka, Michal Staszczak in the role of adolescent idealist Joseph, and Wojciech Klata, a restless, provocative shrimp with considerable survival resourcefulness.

Reinforcing black-and-white photography under the direction of Germany's Robby Muller is unflinching in capturing Gestapo brutality. Each scene is precisely framed to allow maximum range of viewer vision over a wide array of dispersed subjects, by no means an easy accomplishment. Lighting is focused with ideal timing on foreground characters, leaving backgrounds a bit misty, yet still with sufficient clarity to communicate content. Costuming and makeup simulate the period with uncanny replication of detail, no doubt modelled closely on what German occupiers themselves found too persuasive to ignore, instead conserving it through a photographic record made by their cameras which had shocked later generations of descendants.

Sound recording and mixing are exemplary, a necessity for such a picture, where nocturnal whispered conversations are as significant in revelation of character as vehement public speeches.

Nor is the screenplay written by Agnieszka Holland deficient in either insight or credibility. It includes bluntly informative lines, unanswered questions, philosophical musings, political debates. All compact and essential to the story.

KORCZAK is long overdue a second look by critics and audiences alike. Is it a whitewash of Polish collaborationism with the Nazis, as various individuals claimed at the time of initial European screenings? Or is it an even-handed depiction of the regrettable passion with which man annihilated his own in the madness that ultimately led to Shoah, Annihilation masquerading as Progressive Social Reform? Watch and decide for yourself.

The Kino DVD release of this underrated masterpiece includes scene selections, a 1 ½ minute trailer, subtitles, and a short gallery of five stills.

Due to Holocaust content and themes, KORCZAK is recommended only for adult viewing.