



The character of Korczak as emerges
from the myth of 'The last journey':
LEADERSHIP AND LEADING

By: Dr. Orna Douvdevany

Korczak's character as a leader emerges from many texts. However, in the different texts there are different shades of leadership, but only a few of them emphasize this ideal.

	Aaron Zeitlin	Avraham Berman
source	Janusz Korczak's Last Way Published by the Ghetto Fighters' House and the Janusz Korczak Association Pp. 63-68: The walk to Umschlag-Platz	Adolf-Avraham Berman, From the Days of the Underground, 1971, p. 225. ©All rights reserved
perception	Leadership	Leadership
Emphasized value	Destiny, faith	Maintaining humanity

Avraham Berman was born in Warsaw. As a student, he joined the "Poalei Zion Left" movement, and became the editor of the party's newspapers in Polish and Yiddish. In 1932 he received a Ph.D. in psychology. During World War II, Berman was the director general of the 'Centos' organization dedicated for helping children in Warsaw. He also served as the secretary general of the Polish Council for the Aid of Jews "Zagota". In the Warsaw ghetto he was one of the leaders of the Jewish anti-Nazi underground, and was also a member of the presidency of the underground national committee. In the advanced stages of the deportation, it was decided that Berman and his wife, Batia, would move to the Aryan side to contact those who might help rescue Jews. At the end of the war, Berman was elected a Member of Parliament in Communist Poland, and in 1947 he was elected Chairman of the Committee of Polish Jews. In 1950, Berman immigrated to Israel.

In the years 1955-1951 he served as a parliament member of the Second Knesset. Berman headed the anti-Nazi fighters' organization in Israel, and was a member of the presidency of the World Organization of Jewish Partisans and Former Nazi Prisoners.



During his testimony at the Eichmann trial, which ended in 1961, he answered questions and referred to Korczak's 'Last Journey'.

Question: Do you remember Janusz Korczak walking at the head of the procession?

Answer: Yes, I remember well. One of the institutions that were led to the Umschlagplatz was this exemplary institution, Janusz Korczak's Orphanage. It was a shocking procession.

Court chairman: Did you see it with your eyes?

Answer: Yes. He walked at the head of the procession with two small children by his side. Followed by the institution's chief educator, Stefania Wilczynska along with young children. They marched with a crowd of Jews who were caught in this "blockade", in this terrible siege. When they came to the Umschlagplatz, there were certain policemen who wanted to release Janusz Korczak. He was very well known and loved.

Attorney General: Polish policemen?

Answer: Jews. Korczak said he did not want to part with the children he had raised ... Stephania Wilczynska told the children that they were going on a trip ... and a smile, a slight smile was on her lips. ...A few hours later they were put in the death carriages, and that was the last journey for this great educator.

... I would like to add that apart from these institutions, our boarding schools and orphanages, within a few weeks all one hundred of our institutions with all the educators and teachers were liquidated and destroyed, and we had about 1000 employees, teachers, educators, doctors, psychologists, nurses, etc. Everyone was killed, along with the children."

According to Berman, in a state of complete constraint, in a reality compelled by human beings - Korczak headed the journey, leading, standing out among others. The author refers to Korczak's choice not to part with the children he educated, as well as to the protest, the preservation of humanity even on the way to death: inseparable, tidy, dressed, as saying: 'this is who we are'.

The testimony was given years after the events, and was meant to tell and document the horrors perpetrated by the Nazis, to tell the story of the Holocaust, to place the inconceivable cruelty and inhumanity of people like Eichmann, in the face of the absolute humanity of the Jews. The Eichmann trial was intended to shock the world, to



allow the people who were there to describe what happened and sound the cry and shout of the murdered victims. This trial was far beyond doing justice with one senior Nazi. It was aimed to reveal what was convenient for the world not to see.

The Ideal - Berman presents readers with **leadership** as an ideal.

The value from which the conception of leadership stems is the preservation of a humanity.

Aaron Zeitlin grew up in Warsaw. His father, Hillel Zeitlin, was an author and a 'Hasidut'(Jewish piety) researcher, who perished with his students in the Warsaw ghetto. Aaron Zeitlin immigrated to Israel in 1920. Two years later he returned to Poland, where he stood out among the young Warsaw writers in prose, poetry and children's literature. He was also a famous journalist in the Yiddish press. During World War II, he lived in New York and was one of the influencers of Jewish spiritual life in the United States. He dealt with 'Kabbalah', 'Hasidism' and Jewish philosophy.

The description of 'The Last Journey' in his book is unusual and unique. Beyond describing the way to Treblinka on the day of the deportation, Zeitlin goes on to describe the 'next day' - the continuation of their way in heaven, after the deportation and murder. In this chapter the souls of Korczak, Stefa and their proteges are described, in a heavenly discussion with God. The description of 'The Last Journey' begins early in the morning, with a struggle between Korczak and Stefa, that eventually ends by Stefa snatching a cyanide pill from Korczak and swallowing it. Zeitlin says that a few days earlier, Korczak had had a conversation with the children, in which he had prepared them for the day when the Germans would order them to leave, and how they should behave. Indeed, Zeitlin says that immediately after Stefa's suicide, the very moment Korczak had prepared the children for - occurs.

Korczak tells the children that Stefa has already set out ahead of them, to prepare everything they will need when they reach their destination. Avrasha, who is in charge of the flag and the only child who knows what happened to Stefa, helps, walks next to Korczak carrying the flag and singing. The author explicitly states that all the other orphanage workers have disappeared, and no one knows where they are. According to Zeitlin's version - Korczak alone walks with the children.

"The children walked – as a special and enclosed group... Avrasha, as well as the doctor were singing. When the SS whipped them, the children restrained their pain and continued to sing even louder. When Von Blutenau attacked Avrasha, tore the flag from his hands, threw it to the ground and began to trample it with his feet, the flag seemed



like a living being which was crushed to death ... meanwhile they arrived at the Umschlagplatz. The train-cars to Treblinka arrived. At the last moment, Von Blutenau jumped to Korczak ... and you, of course, stay with us ... as we planned ... Korczak rejected his hand and shouted: - Do not touch me, you Nazi dog – and before he recovered from the surprise, The Doctor jumped on the sloping board, and entered the sealed train car. The train moved."

In this description, beyond removing Stefa from the picture, there is a symbolism of the living flag trampled to death, a protest march with singing, which increases as the pain intensifies; The disappearance of the orphanage workers, and a rejected release offer. The focus of Zeitlin's story is revealed in the next chapter - the awakening, "**beyond what is called life.**" Here we find that Stefa did not flee, but actually did come ahead of them, prepared the place for them and waited for them. They have all become heavenly beings, recognizing one another and able to converse in a new way. Even the flag re-lives there. There is life after death. In that place they converse with angels, and then with God.

"I have the audacity - and the right to impudence - to invite such a God to a short test. If God is not abstract, then he is a figure, even a super-figure, he must know each of us personally ... - Will all the children here have the same impersonal fate? Do you know them? Do you know me? Know what my name is, who I am? Who my father was? Are we all familiar to you? "

And this is God's answer:

"- I know you as I know all my creatures. I know the number of the stars and count all human tears. Zvi-Hirsch, son of Yosef of the house of Goldschmidt, I know your father, your mother, all your ancestors. I know in which of my worlds each of them is. ...

Both she and you and the two hundred children with you, and all the children and all the adults, whom my enemies and my people's enemies have destroyed and will destroy - each of them - in my secret of reincarnations, will return in their own time - re-live their lives and fulfill their destiny....

In my distant mysteries lives justice, no eye have seen it, I command it to wait, and it waits. But the reward and the revenge are mine... "

In comments at the end of his book, Zeitlin wrote: "From the literature about Korczak, I chose the details I needed. There is no factual accuracy here. This is a poem".



According to Zeitlin's description, Korczak was left alone with the children, leading them on their final journey. He is the one who prepared them for this moment, he is the one heading them, and he is the one who stands before God demanding answers to his questions. Korczak is revealed here as a leader in every sense.

Only the continuation from the earthly to the heavenly description makes it possible to understand Aaron Zeitlin's unique description of 'the last journey'. Seems to me that Zeitlin sees this journey, and what follows it, as a key to a deep understanding of what happened in the Holocaust and of the belief in God. It is possible that the doubts and questions that Zeitlin expresses in his text are not his own questions. It seems that he himself has clear answers, and that he chooses to raise commonly asked questions - in order to answer them from the perspective of his own beliefs and perceptions. Through this text, Aaron Zeitlin conveys to his readers the message: suffering has a purpose, every person has a destiny and everything happens according to a divine plan.

The Ideal - Zeitlin presents readers with **leadership** as an ideal.

The values from which the perception of leadership stems are **destiny and faith**.

In conclusion

Both Berman and Zeitlin describe 'the last journey' from the perception of Korczak's character as a leader heading his orphans; A leader of stature – for as long as he lives, he continues to care for all their needs as much as he can. He continues to lead, to be an anchor for the children, to show a way, to be a role model. He continues to make decisions and act on them as he "holds the reins in his hands" - even in the face of an inhuman and impossible reality. According to Zeitlin: not only as long as he lives, but also afterwards.

Berman, who knew how difficult it was to maintain inner resilience, personal identity and a humanity under the conditions created by the Nazis and their assistants in the ghetto, saw Korczak as an idealist with stature and deep inner personal commitment. Zeitlin, who believes that every person has a destiny in the world, saw Korczak as a person who fulfilled his destiny in this incarnation.