CineFiles
University of California
Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archive

Document Citation

Title	**Film : Children's protector in Warsaw ghetto**
Author(s)	Julie Salamon
Source	*Wall Street Journal*
Date	1991 Apr 11
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	Korczak, Janusz (1878-1942)
Film Subjects	Korczak, Wajda, Andrzej, 1990

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

Film: Children's Protector in Warsaw Ghetto

By JULIE SALAMON

"Evil has so many faces. It is so excitingly rich and inventive," the great Polish film director Andrzej Wajda has said. "Good is defenseless, naive, dull."

So, Mr. Wajda, concluded, the very idea of a film about Janusz Korczak—the legendary doctor and teacher and protector of orphans—"seemed pointless." What could be more boring than the life of a saint like that?

Yet Korczak proved irresistible to Mr. Wajda, whose films have been obsessed with questions of freedom and oppression, and the nature of heroism. He made "Korczak" just before he made the career switch so popular in Eastern Europe these days. Czechoslovakia has a playwright in power and now Poland has a film maker, Mr. Wajda, serving in the Senate. Mr. Wajda, now in his 60s, has said that "Korczak" was his last film and that he intends to concentrate on the workings of freedom and oppression in the real world.

Time will only tell if his move will be good or bad for Poland, but it's definitely bad for cinema. Mr. Wajda, a rigorous technician and unsentimental observer of the human condition, makes beautiful films—and "Korczak" is no exception. Mr. Wajda has proved that saints don't have to be bores. His Korczak is brave and stubborn and wise, and a defender of children. But Mr. Wajda makes it clear at the outset that Korczak's devotion to children wasn't self-sacrifice, as the saint-makers would have it, but self-preservation. At the start of this powerful, evocative film Korczak acknowledges that he does what he does because he wants to. "I like children," he says. "The pleasure is mine."

Korczak was a legendary character in pre-war Poland. He wrote books for children and about them, and performed on radio as a character called "The old doctor." He didn't denigrate children by treating them as either a lower or a higher form of the species. If he thought they were better than adults it was only because they hadn't had a chance to be corrupted yet. His bill of rights for children seems pretty universally applicable—including the right to love, to education, to protest, to privacy and to grief.

His life was full of contradictions, a requirement for a Jew operating in secular Poland. He was famous and he was anonymous; the Polish authorities wouldn't let his name be broadcast to conceal the fact that he was Jewish. He was Jewish (his real name was Henryk Goldszmit) but not religious. He was proud to be a Pole, but not ashamed of being Jewish. He spent his life surrounded by children, but never had any of his own. (His biographers have implied that he chose celibacy because he was afraid of passing along his father's mental illness, and because he feared he was homosexual.)

Wojtek Pszoniak as Korczak

Mr. Wajda and his screenwriter, Agnieszka Holland, begin Korczak's story near the end, in 1936, just as he's being dismissed from his radio program by the station manager. Embarrassed by having to fire one of his most popular performers because he is a Jew, the station manager invites Korczak to a farewell reception in his honor. As he leaves, the look on Korczak's face indicates this is just another example of what he's always believed: Grownups aren't to be trusted. It's obvious this whimsical fellow who was just about 60 years old at that time didn't include himself with *them*.

At the time Korczak was teaching medical students and operating a big, humanistic orphanage on the outskirts of Warsaw. He pretends life will continue normally, knowing that it will not. For Korczak, normalcy wasn't the same as it was for other people, in any event. When he lectured doctors at Warsaw's children hospital, he brought a small boy with him to the podium up front. He opened the boy's shirt and placed him under a fluoroscope, turning off the overhead lights. The only thing visible in the room was a rib cage and a beating heart. "Don't ever forget this sight," said Korczak. "Remember, always what a child's frightened heart looks like."

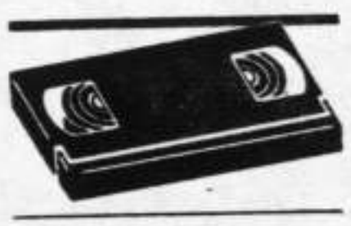
Cinematographer Robby Muller has shot this scene with a spare, unsentimental power that matched Korczak's own approach. Mr. Wajda chose to make this film in black-and-white, realizing that the very nature of his emotionally charged subject required a clean, simple technique.

His approach seems especially right when the action moves to the Warsaw ghetto, where Korczak was forced to move his 200 orphans in 1940—along with 450,000 other Jews. The camera records the misery of life there matter-of-factly, the way passersby would step around a skeletal corpse rotting on the street with barely a glance. The matter-of-factness makes it all the more horrible.

Korczak's children learn to maneuver through the horror. Korczak does all he can to protect them—their living conditions are far better than most—but he doesn't insult them by pretending the misery doesn't exist. When one of his charges talks about committing suicide, when his non-Jewish girlfriend tells him not to sneak out of the ghetto to visit her anymore, Korczak tells him it's a natural thought to have. "Death is easy," he says. "Life is terribly difficult."

Wojtek Pszoniak honors Korczak's memory by playing him as a complex mixture of whimsy and steel. He proves that good doesn't have to be "defenseless, dull."

* * *



VIDEO TIP: Louis Malle offered a another perspective on schoolchildren and the Holocaust in his heartbreaking picture "Au Revoir Les Enfants," an autobiographical account of a child's observation of heroism.

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)