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Our Home: a revolutionary case study in social pedagogy

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Abstract

At the turn of the twentieth century, Western European governments embarked on anti-terrorist agendas, labelling certain ethnicities as undesirable for spreading revolutionary ideas and criminal degeneracy. Several educational experiments emerged intending to eliminate the so-called degenerate element. Academics rarely consider this influence within famous examples by Maria Montessori (1870–1952) in Italy and Janusz Korczak (1878–1942) in Poland. Indeed, the conflation of the two educators obscures that each held opposing views in this critical debate. Years of war and revolution in Polish territories had produced multitudes of orphans, traumatised children and child soldiers. Following Polish independence in 1918, tensions remained high between ethnic minorities and ethno-nationalists. Social pedagogues aimed to rebuild society by drawing on Polish communitarian theories on rights and conflict. Engaging with this history of ideas related to cosmopolitanism and communitarianism disrupts dominant ideas within debates on human rights and citizenship. This article challenges the usual depiction of Korczak's philosophical position aligned with cosmopolitan ideas on children's rights. Associated historical research reveals that Polish social pedagogy emerged with the understanding of human rights as situated, embedded and embodied within time and

place. Social activists rejected utopian visions to embrace the local conditions at the time, including the violent realities of Polish society, where teachers were often revolutionaries and terrorists. The orphanages established by Korczak functioned as sociological research centres emphasising human rights and democratic ideals while aiming to influence surrounding neighbourhoods. This article summarises Korczak's worldview by reversing a famous epigram – *it takes a child to raise a village*. Such children's rights pioneers envisaged that following years of imperialism and war, their model institutions would grow into a nationwide network fostering democracy and multiculturalism on a broader scale. In the current global context of conflict and anti-terrorist agendas, these institutions serve as critical case studies of possibilities.

Keywords social pedagogy; terrorism; citizenship; human rights; communitarianism; multiculturalism

Introduction

This article outlines the origins of Polish social professions as shaped by unique historical and epistemological drivers that set them apart from other national traditions. Years of war and revolution in Polish territories had produced multitudes of orphans. Likewise, many teachers and social workers had engaged in illegal political activity, ranging from printing banned material to terrorist acts within the collective struggle for Poland's freedom. The socio-historical context of the early twentieth century is contested and not well known even in today's Poland. Scholars often fail to recognise or acknowledge the legacy of oppression under the empires or that Warsaw was a violent and chaotic city characterised by bullets and bomb blasts. Following Polish independence in 1918, tensions remained high between ethnic minorities and ethno-nationalists due to the precarious nature of the new nation-state. Pedagogues attempted to raise societal consciousness and build solidarity by adapting theories of educational reform and care to practical and material constraints. The reader may question why it is worth studying the socio-educational history of a poor Eastern European cousin. However, the International Bureau of Education in Geneva provided an answer by declaring in 1930 that Poland had become Europe's most advanced country for democratic education and the integration of social services (Ferrière, 1931).

The structure of this article relates to the research methodology, leaning towards the emerging trend of applied history, where the analysis of the past enriches decision-making, often through greater awareness of the complexity and uncertainty of life (Mukharji and Zeckhauser, 2019). The first half of the article provides some background information to broadly orientate the reader through critical differences in the historical contexts influencing the development of social pedagogy. Well-educated activists from all walks of life engaged in illegal social or educational activities, as Poles often had limited formal capacity or access to professional roles under foreign rule. Alongside the challenges of industrialisation and poverty, social pedagogues sought to address Poland's legacy of war and violence, primarily through patriotic and democratic education. The second section provides an example with a historical case study exploring Korczak's experimental orphanage.

Exploring the national traditions reveals a much older relationship between education and the anti-terrorism agenda than is usually discussed within academia or policy. The decision to undertake a history of ideas relates to Korczak's (1942/1967b) deliberations on cosmopolitanism, nationalism and patriotism, as noted in his memoirs. Embracing this direction highlights the inherent tension between cosmopolitan and communitarian ideas regarding human rights and citizenship. This article is limited to outlining a few issues rather than fully developed arguments; however, the hope is to sow doubt in readers' minds about the preferred English explanations regarding the role of such ideas in Korczak's worldview and Polish social pedagogy. An unapologetically confident narrative is needed to counter the existing phenomenon of explanation bias regarding Korczak's philosophical position. Such biases tend to overinflate the importance of influences, distort historical events and ascribe causal mechanisms,

thus affecting people's interpretations and the lessons drawn from the past (Mukharji and Zeckhauser, 2019).

Historical context

The scholarship on the development of social pedagogy tends to follow a diachronic/historical approach. Scholars position various social pedagogy approaches within the historical contexts that shaped the identity and defined the purpose of the social professions within different national traditions (Hämäläinen, 2015). For example, a recent discussion on social pedagogy versus social work in contemporary Poland appears in Odrowąż-Coates and Szostakowska (2021). Meanwhile, alternative positions deem locale less significant, citing social conditions and ideas as playing greater roles in the translation and development of the discipline (Schugurensky and Silver, 2013). This article sits uncomfortably between the two, revealing how specific governments instigated national education and how social strategies targeted Poles. Imperial oppression paradoxically shaped the Polish social professions as a form of resistance, both anti-state and democratic.

One pioneer in the field, Lorenz (2008), outlined the historical routes of developing social work in England and of social pedagogy in Germany. In the English case, he observed that social work emerged as coordinated charitable work undertaken predominantly by women. It appears as:

a private task, centred on individuals, their moral improvement and rescue not only from destitution but also from the effects of the Poor Law and the very institutions the state itself provided within this ideological framework, such as the workhouse, prison and deportation, which stood as deterrents in the background. (Lorenz, 2008, p. 630)

While the English responded to the effects of industrialisation, the German approach focused on nation-building, beginning with the public task of educating the masses to act morally and behave rationally. This politicised form of nineteenth-century social work attempted to engineer social cohesion for a modern German nation-state. In seeking to overcome deep-seated divisions in culture, language and religion, the state fashioned itself as the *Fatherland*, with its educational policies demanding loyalty and conformity.

The German political culture, outlined by Lorenz, balanced socialist and liberal factions to form a third way. His narrative favours the strong hand of the state, with little heed paid to how Bismarck's Germany declared *Kulturkampf* (culture war) against some of its subjects (Lorenz, 2008). Furthermore, Lorenz (2008) has contended that 'the social professions in Europe overall have their origins in the fundamental transformation processes that confronted societies with the advent of industrialisation and the political revolutions that replaced feudalism with political systems based on democratic procedures' (p. 628). Greater historical sensitivity reveals that the Prussian Empire violently oppressed the fledgling democratic inclinations of Poland, eventually employing socio-political work for Germanisation. Thus, the development of the Polish social pedagogy tradition presents as an amalgam of English and German, with the machinery appearing similar but taking on very different meanings. The Polish nation-building exercise was undertaken predominantly by women as a private task but with a subversive public purpose to build solidarity and, more importantly, to achieve self-government and freedom.

To understand the history of ideas at play, the following explores how Korczak may have reflected on the emerging tension between cosmopolitanism, nationalism and patriotism during his last lectures delivered in the Ghetto. Polish historians warn that the English usage of nationalism requires more discrimination, where historical understanding eliminates unjustified associations with patriotism (Wandycz, 2006). Potter (2017) advised about generalisations in historical writing, with non-historians 'mistaking the nation as a people for the nation as a state' with a nationalistic impulse (p. 124). According to Dann (1988), the French Revolution precipitated two different phenomena of nationalism: (1) the pursuit of an existing state's interests; and (2) the claim or desire for a state by a group of people who did not have one. French expansion and influence ensured that a nation-state model prevailed, with governments requiring populations to unite in political, cultural and military efforts to suppress internal dissent or conquer new ground.

The French Revolution also precipitated a shift in the political discourse shaping revolutionary expansionism under the guise of modern-state nationalism (Dann, 1988). The effect of this shift diffused across neighbours even before the Napoleonic wars; however, systematic analysis often overlooks

the local conditions giving rise to different forms of nationalism, the modern state and patriotism. Historians generally credit the move away from the classical republican conception of patriotism towards greater nationalism or a political fatherland to Rousseau's (1985) book, *Considerations on the Government of Poland*, commissioned in the 1770s by the Polish Parliament shortly before its demise. However, contemporary assessment perhaps overlooks that this publication responded to foreign hostility intending to preserve Poland's unique cultural character.

Meanwhile, Pagden (2013) has suggested that the cosmopolitanism envisioned by European intellectuals intentionally offered empty promises of liberty, equality and fraternity for the world's citizens. On a quest for secularisation, the French elite targeted Poland as a repository for ignorance and superstition associated with Catholicism and a large populations of Jews.

Cosmopolitanism

Cosmopolitanism is notably associated with Immanuel Kant as a moral ethic where all humans are of equal worth, overriding any obligations or parochial views belonging to communities of class, race or religion (Kaufmann and Pape, 1999). In Kant's idealist philosophy, any difference between cultures caused by education and tradition has no bearing on the structural quality of a person. Thus, it would follow that all people share equally in the universal human condition and are capable of being citizens of the world – if willing to follow the rules. If asked where to find such 'rules of life', Pagden's (2013) answer suggests that it is 'in the collective practices of humankind, regardless of condition, status, colour or belief' (p. 78). However, as Korczak (1929/1988) explained in his book, *Rules of Life*, children also asked where they could find the rules to guarantee equality. In their case, historical precedents reveal Kantian rules enforcing inequality and exclusion, while forcing many to abandon language, religion and culture. For example, the Września children's strikes of 1901–4 responded to the persecution and imprisonment of children speaking Polish under the decree by the Prussian government (Kulczycki, 1981). This child-led action gained enduring international notoriety, appearing in English propaganda during the First World War (Chesterton, 1986).

Liberal cosmopolitanism did not recognise shared humanity but established rules of engagement between the host and stranger, which did the least harm between potential enemies. Kant intended a degree of hospitality towards the stranger or guest, but ensured that the visitor held no political claims to land rights or an intention to settle (Baban and Rygiel, 2017). The Kantian basis for Western morality eliminated protest and challenge to oppression, as Poles turned to subversive educational strategies to disrupt existing hierarchies and power relations. This exercise explains Korczak's radical resistance to cosmopolitanism because of its universal sweep. Across Europe and its colonies, cosmopolitan philosophy elevated rationality and secularism as indicators of civilisation and progress, justifying the use of force to subjugate local populations fighting for their territorial, cultural and religious rights.

On a quest for secularisation, Western European intellectuals targeted Poland as a repository for ignorance and superstition associated with Catholicism and Judaism (Pagden, 2013). In the late eighteenth century, Poland disappeared from the map, having been torn apart by different empires. In response, Poles orchestrated repeated violent insurrections trying to regain their freedom from foreign rule. The revolutionaries adopted patriotic and anti-state educational strategies to withstand the oppressive forces of cosmopolitanism that threatened assimilation and extermination. It is essential to highlight the tension between cosmopolitanism, nationalism and patriotism, with the first two concepts associated with the nation-state, while patriotism is related to *patria* or the loyalty and love of one's homeland and people. Regional and cultural diversity was characteristic of those groups resisting the domination of German unification and cosmopolitanism in general. Thus, the epistemological basis for Polish revolutionary movements appears in their fight for indigenous rights to land, language and culture, drawing from their perspectives as oppressed people (Vucic, 2022).

As globalisation increased the complexity and interaction between European and other cultures, the cosmopolitan school of thought provided the basis for constructing contemporary social policies and programmes (PEACE, 2015). Likewise, Starkey (2012) believes a cosmopolitan perspective in citizenship education enshrines human rights and has much to offer culturally diverse societies. However, he has mistakenly stated that nineteenth-century nationalist education obliterated cosmopolitanism. Instead, cosmopolitan trends emerged from nationalist states that were fundamentally empires creating monocultures to serve expansionist aims, while claiming to liberate and enlighten ignorant people. The

promises of liberty, equality and fraternity for the world's citizens did not materialise (Pagden, 2013). Thus, the cosmopolitan legacy suffers under two centuries of imperialism, racism and intolerance towards anyone refusing or unable to live within Western European preconceived legal and moral codes.

Scholars such as Erskine (2000) have also cast doubt over cosmopolitan claims by those in power, suggesting that neutrality disguises special interests by masquerading as holding the higher moral ground. She has challenged the derivation of ethical norms from universality and impartiality, instead outlining how specific moral communities create them through shared traditions, customs and values (Erskine, 2000). Similar threads appear in Appiah's (2006) discussion of cosmopolitanism and ethics, but he has labelled different views as counter-cosmopolitanism, citing examples of white supremacy and neo-Nazism. Instead, opposition to cosmopolitan theories is primarily associated with communitarianism, which argues for primary obligations towards one's own community. This position states that moral reasoning must be 'situated, embedded and embodied' (Erskine, 2000, p. 572), where all individuals are attached to a specific social and political context for action.

As Erskine (2007) has highlighted, criticism of the communitarian approach often comes from a feminist perspective assessing traditional communities as exclusive, conservative and oppressive. There is scepticism about whether such communities can change existing attitudes; for example, where specific practices violate certain human rights, particularly for women. This article demonstrates that crisis often creates conditions that necessitate such change. For example, men are absent in war and armed conflict, increasing women's uptake of different roles and tasks. Furthermore, in the case of Poland, where men were also in exile, under arrest or surveillance, women's social care and domestic work became the main conduit for subversive and illegal activities. Young Poles had little professional or political capacity; thus, activists such as Korczak encouraged the spheres of culture, education and care to satisfy their revolutionary drive (Vucic, 2022). The new consciousness emerged from the interplay between oppression and resistance. Understanding resistance as both an act and process appears to have shaped the social, collective activity.

The Russia-Ukraine War has highlighted historical conflicts related to state borders that remain unresolved in Europe. Poland is a similarly contested territory, dating back to the eighteenth-century partitions by three neighbours (the Prussian, Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires). Historians describe this region as borderlands or territories where different cultures, religions and ethnicities once coexisted. Unlike the concrete concept of a border, the contested nature of borderlands furnishes instability and provides ambiguity. This lack of definition, cultural, ethnic and so forth, is the absence that creatively drives the search for self. Historically, the patriotism associated with specific Polish movements aligns with communitarian ideals while emphasising shared geographic contexts to embrace cultural inclusion (Nałkowski, 1904). As Poles did not recognise the imposed rule of empires, their position was distinctly anti-state, with little regard for national boundaries joining with others who shared their democratic beliefs and struggles.

Contrary to evolutionary and racial theories at the time, Polish scientists believed that war, migration and colonisation made pure bloodlines impossible, and considered all races of people to be one human family (Chałupczyński, 1880). The connection between groups of people was the location and a shared struggle against natural and artificial disasters. Communities of propinquity refer to groups valuing geographic closeness rather than communities of interest, ethnicity or religion. Consequently, one can predict that such a position allows for cultural diversity and enriched social interactions, while generating conflicts. Indeed, fostering diversity between and within groups was considered essential for surviving the harsh conditions of Eastern Europe.

Anti-terrorism

Social pedagogy emerged from the tension between the German and Polish traditions fostering nation-building, one from above and the other resisting from below. Political theorists readily align anti-state action with the school of thought associated with anarchism. Though drawing many to embrace militant action, the conditions became unbearable for many Eastern Europeans and millions emigrated. Among the immigrants were revolutionary fugitives wanted by authorities. Hence, Western governments promoted a perception of immigrants as a threat to society in terms of disease, criminal activity and the spread of revolutionary ideas. With scientific backing, a threatening image of racial degeneracy ingrained itself within the public imagination, producing long-lasting effects. Anarchists

such as Kropotkin (1902/1939) publicly supported the marginalised groups, offering counter-arguments against the influential tide of eugenics.

Historians regard the period between 1881 and 1914 as the era of terrorist action earning the label *propaganda by the deed*. Initially, the idea appealed to peasants and workers to occupy public spaces with protests and strikes (Fleming, 1980). However, the revolutionary deeds of anarchists soon became associated with violence and terrorism. Individuals attempted to reveal state vulnerability by assassinating rulers and figureheads, hoping to inspire a mass revolt (Kinna, 2019). Acts of violence spread, with terrorist attacks on government officials and ordinary citizens. The media sensationalised the killing of the Austrian empress on 11 September 1898, to cement in the public mind the image of revolutionaries as destructive and dangerous terrorists (The Call, 1898, p. 1). Public fascination with the empress's assassination allowed political leaders and lawmakers to leverage the fact that the Italian terrorist grew up in an orphanage (Fleming, 1980). Increasing awareness of how childhood experiences shaped individuals also fuelled interest in poor children's education, care and custody.

In contrast, the Polish charities and welfare institutions linked the child to national history, as organisations fostered resistance to the official ideas promoted by authorities. Many Polish institutions undertook patriotic political activity 'under cover of philanthropic aid' (Michel and Varza, 2010, p. 41). Equally, after the First World War, orphanages claimed to have gained foreign assistance by 'hiding our true face – working for the people – a mask of philanthropy was convenient for us' (Towarzystwa Gniazd Sierocych, 1921, p. 27). Resistance–oppression fostered an experimental relationship between education, social work and revolutionary politics, apparent in historical monographs on actors but now rarely acknowledged.

In 1899, the first international anti-terrorism conference in Rome encouraged the introduction of various child-protection measures and more state intervention in family life. European governments sought measures to counter escalating terrorist threats, which many educators have been surprised to discover were associated with Maria Montessori. Academia has habitually missed Montessori's dedication to Cesare Lombroso, the leading proponent of 'The Criminal Man' theory. Within the Lombrosian school of thought, the role played by political and social circumstances in producing revolutionaries and criminals was considered insubstantial. On the contrary, violent actions and resistant behaviour were strongly correlated with elements of degeneracy, such as hereditary factors and the vice associated with impoverished families. Although Lombroso's research fell into disrepute, his ideas had spread sufficiently to provide a dangerous theoretical footing for Montessori and others (Pick, 1989). The text *Pedagogical Anthropology*, published by Montessori (1913), shows the origins and purpose of her method as geared towards preventing the spread of a perceived plague of criminal degeneracy among children. Her approach emphasised supervision and individualised activities to restrict children's association with each other so as to suffocate any spark of dissent (Vucic, 2018). Meanwhile, Polish and Jewish doctors challenged these dominant theories that connected terrorism with race, and the paediatrician-educator Janusz Korczak provides one remarkable example.

Case study

Introduction to Korczak

Janusz Korczak was born Henryk Goldszmit in 1878 or 1879 as a Polish Jew in Warsaw. The city was under the rule of the Russian Empire, and Poland as a country did not exist. Highly intellectual and socially engaged, he simultaneously studied sociology, pedagogy, psychology and philosophy while completing a medical degree. During his university years, Korczak studied in Berlin and Paris, funding his travels as a writer. After completing his studies, he controversially abandoned medicine to become an orphanage director. In 1912, he formed a lifelong association with Stefania Wilczyńska to establish the *Dom Sierot* (Orphan's Home) for the Jewish Aid for Orphans Society. Within this new facility, Korczak implemented a project of self-governance with children 7–14 years of age. A second institution began in 1919 for Polish refugee children called *Nasz Dom* (Our Home). The name Our Home relates to the code used by Polish writers referring to their homeland when harsh Russian censors banned such references. Similarly, the title of this article not only relates to the homes, but also refers to the vision of scaling up this model into a nationwide network to secure a homeland for all.

Despite achieving independence, Poland was a fragile state plagued by ongoing ethnic conflict and terrorist violence. The instability is evident in the sensational *New York Times* (1922) report that

Poland's first president was gunned down by an insane assassin only a few days into office. Amid growing anti-Semitism and ethno-nationalism, Korczak hoped to develop a pedagogical system to secure Poland's stable and diverse future. Despite his celebrity status, the Polish government curtailed Korczak's official roles to Jewish children's interests. The reasoning probably lay in the strategic network established by the right-wing National Democrats, who already controlled more than 500 committees at the district and municipal levels (Przeniosło, 2016). Nevertheless, Korczak persisted in his efforts to influence the social and educational spheres, primarily through his writing and as a lecturer for institutions educating teachers, nurses and social workers. The Homes, his experimental newspaper and many publications secured fame beyond Poland. His pedagogical books appeared in Russian in the 1920s, followed by English and French translations in the 1930s. During the Holocaust, Korczak was imprisoned by the Germans and murdered with his Jewish associates and children in 1942.

One common denominator in scholarship is the suggestion of Korczak working in isolation from other influences and without theory or philosophical underpinnings (Berding, 2020; Lasota, 2012; Silverman, 2017). Academics conflate Korczak's ideas with other educators such as Dewey, Steiner and Montessori, creating a pedagogical pastiche (for examples, see Kirchner, 2013, p. 180; Silverman, 2017, p. 3; Tsur, 2018; Valeeva, 2013, p. 88; Wołoszyn, 1997, p. 34; Wróblewska, 2017). Likewise, Lifton (1988) wrote in her famous biography, 'although they were never to meet, Janusz Korczak and Maria Montessori had much in common' (p. 92). Beyond the legalistic construction of rights, Liebel (2018) appears perplexed by Korczak's distrust of authorities and the state, unable to resolve it with the democratic activities within the Homes. Although Milne (2013, 2015) and Liebel (2018) have diligently included Korczak within the intellectual currents of the Russian Empire at the time, both have de-historicised his work. Likewise, despite Veerman's (2014) awareness of a rights-based movement associated with revolution in the Russian Empire, his chapter on Korczak failed to make any connections. It is an issue plaguing even Polish scholars such as Igor Newerly, Korczak's former secretary who took many years of research to conclude, 'it is not you (Korczak), it was Doctor Trentowski in his "national pedagogy system" who prioritised the discovery of the rights of children' (Jakubiak and Leppert, 2003, p. 224). The Polish belief that a society discovers rights before any declaration mirrors the anarchist principle of society before the state. Compilations of Korczak's rights appear in the works of others, and such artificial constructs remain superficial if not grounded in the philosophical and historical traditions from which his ideas emanate. Most of these issues relate to scholars failing to recognise that for most of Korczak's life, Poland did not exist. Being born into a revolutionary atmosphere leaves his pedagogical journey inseparable from the nation's quest for independence and human rights.

During Korczak's university studies, he became embroiled in the revolutionary agenda, leading to his arrest. Uniquely, he attended an illegal women's university banned by the Russian authorities, where he met some of his future collaborators. Though Korczak's aphorism, 'before revolution and war ... think of children', appears as a sympathetic plea for child protection, it can also be a directive for young revolutionaries to channel rebellious energy into seizing children's rights during times of conflict and chaos. For example, Wanda Kraheńska (Kraheńska-Dobrodzicka/Kraheńska-Filipowicz; 1886–1968, code name Alinka or Alicja) emerged during the Second World War as a leading underground figure assisting the Jewish population. Tracing earlier activities demonstrates Kraheńska's role in educational and care initiatives for workers' children, including collaborating with Korczak to establish the Our Home orphanage. However, one stunning revelation concerns the Warsaw Revolution in 1906, identifying Kraheńska as a notorious baby-faced terrorist wanted for an assassination attempt on the governor (*Proces Wandy z Kraheńskich Dobrodzickiej*, 1906). Her involvement in the new orphanage is not coincidental, as Korczak also repatriated another revolutionary, Maria Falska, along with refugee children from Kyiv following territorial losses in the First World War.

These revolutionary women were not social outliers; the Women's League numbered 12,000 battle-ready troops engaging in female warfare in the First World War. With access to study circles and the frequent absence of men due to war or exile, enlightened Polish women far outgrew their counterparts in the West in terms of activity, confidence and knowledge. Leading scholars banned from foreign universities created cutting-edge educational programmes and materials for bright young women. Much earlier than in England, France or the United States, the Polish women's movement demanded liberation and a range of political and economic freedoms far beyond the simple right to vote (Theiss and Bron, 2014, p. 51). The illegal study circles produced energetic and devoted young educators and social workers known as the 'generation of unsubdued' (Theiss and Bron, 2014, p. 51).

Restless to build a new society, the freedom fighters involved in the failed 1905 Revolution took advantage of any opportunities or events to further their cause. The political party led by Józef Piłsudski was a combined military and training organisation that educated and mobilised the masses to join the national cause. These conspirators believed in the latent potency of the people and looked to awaken the 'sleeping strength' of others willing to join their struggle and make diverse contributions (Theiss and Bron, 2014, pp. 56–7). Guided by Polish philosophers, these non-conformist groups shared an ethical code with respect for the dignity of every human being and the desire to put words into action through work for the public good. Thousands of young women attended lectures to pursue various endeavours, including Marie Curie (Maria Skłodowska), dual Nobel Prize-winning scientist; Maria Grzegorzewska, education specialist; and the social pedagogy professor Helena Radlińska.

Shaped by conspiracy and warfare, Theiss (1992; Theiss and Bron, 2014) has explained this history of social pedagogy in the stages of fighter–instructor–professional. The process began with political activists or *freedom fighters* undertaking illegal educational tasks that developed into professional roles once Poland gained independence (Theiss and Bron, 2014). The founder of Polish social pedagogy, Helena Radlińska, described carrying grenades under her skirts while attending social-work conferences. She was a well-respected delegate in many foreign organisations, actively participating in the International Congresses of Moral Education and Adult Education in England, the International Office of Education and the International League of New Education, both in Geneva. In Radlińska's conception, we can better understand social pedagogy as *societal* pedagogy, acting as the 'driver of the bottom-up process of building democracy' (Theiss, 2018, p. 117), one that develops in the minds and hearts of the people. She believed that as long as the state explicitly supported political rights and individual freedoms, such mechanisms facilitated top-down constitutional and legal foundations for implementation in action (Theiss, 2018).

Generally, the popular narrative overlooks many prominent women who were Korczak's colleagues, adversaries and friends. Although he built on a more progressive position of equal rights for women, peasants and minorities, this is not to suggest that there was a consensus for women's liberation among the populace. Despite a significant presence in military action, there was still little opportunity granted to such women in political or civilian circles in peacetime or independence. Beyond female empowerment and participation, education was well established as essential to equality within this movement. Korczak's texts began to explore the intersectionality that had emerged during Poland's rapid social, economic and political upheaval. Delving further into the complexity of this political-historical context is vital, but in-depth analysis remains beyond of the scope of this article. This historical background reveals examples of terrorist teachers challenging the usual image of women of this era, while also demanding revision to the image of Polish children as either criminals or victims.

Scholars such as Tobin (2014) are highly critical of the vulnerability that most people associate with children compared to adults, but this is notably absent in the historical Polish sentiments. Deeply ingrained in the Polish psyche is the celebration of the *Mały Powstaniec* (Little Insurgent), the image of a child holding a rifle and wearing the helmet and boots of a German soldier. The portrayal is not without controversy in contemporary Poland, as most people wish to keep children away from violence and armed conflict. However, the tension is evident to historians who explain that this child image forms part of the Polish story (Lubański, 2018). For many Poles, this symbol pays homage to the nameless and courageous children who died fighting for freedom. Of course, children were not always willing participants, with armies forcing violence on children as conscripts, victims, hostages, shields and target practice. Though parents often did not encourage their children to fight, many ran away to join the military or engage in partisan activities. Wysocki has said that there is no intention for the Little Insurgent to be an incentive of war or violence, but it remains 'an unfortunate symbol of our uneasy history and the Polish experience of difficult childhoods' (Lubański, 2018, n.p.).

Repeated wars fashioned roles for Polish children and youth as brave and capable revolutionary fighters, often in the role of spy, courier, trader and smuggler, saving their families, communities and the nation during troubling times. Avoiding this political–historical context of childhood disconnects the political dimension from Polish social pedagogy and shuns treating children seriously as citizens. This brief history explains why Radlińska, the founder of Polish social pedagogy, kept a Little Insurgent statue prominently on her desk (Theiss, 2018).

A radical experiment

Contrary to the romanticised image of orphans, Korczak often referred to his children as partisans, brigands and even dictators, providing descriptions of extreme behaviour due to trauma, abuse and neglect. As a paediatrician, Korczak kept medical ethics at the centre of his appraisal of symptoms, causes and prognosis, which similarly transferred into his pedagogical work with children. Therefore, he rejected the prevalent monomaniac atmosphere that sought one system for all without considering experiences, local conditions or generational trauma. He criticised approaches such as Montessori's method that promised predetermined outcomes via a prescriptive set of rules and equipment. Korczak considered that anyone peddling such views supported domination aimed at assimilation and singularity rather than diversity. Primarily, he rebuffed Montessori's suggestion that her teachers could form equal, reciprocal and satisfying relationships with all the children in the group, as Korczak (1920/1993a) global change wrote: 'And then what happens to the rule of absolute equality of all children? Why – that rule is a lie!' (section 24). Kamińska (2013) summarised his views with his quotation, 'the child rearranges not only our furniture but also our values' (p. 224). The statement refutes criticism of communitarianism by suggesting that it is children who either challenge or maintain social coherence through intergenerational tension.

Individually, children are weak, but a group of children constitutes a force to be reckoned with. The newest community members embrace or reject the norms, traditions and roles of their immediate concerns, thus reinforcing or destabilising existing social relations and hierarchies. Korczak mocked the educator striving for a replicable method like Montessori for not realising that such success was achieved merely by providing better conditions for the agency of a few individual children. The danger of systematic solutions entices teachers to ensure the method's success by relying on inducements and coercion only to replicate hierarchies of domination (Korczak, 1929/1993b). Thus, he warned of the teacher who waited, yearning for better materials, conditions or the ordered ease of routines.

Korczak (1920/1993a) blamed the notion of a controlled and obedient group of children for creating fearful educators who were unwilling to make mistakes. Though rarely publicised, the opening of his first Jewish orphanage dealt Korczak a sharp and painful lesson. His first year as orphanage director was fraught with rebellion as the children's resistance manifested in property destruction and violence towards staff. The incoming children brought their experiences of gangs, crime and prostitution from the streets of Warsaw. Contrary to Montessori's image of the child as innocent, Korczak (1920/1993a) believed that children reflect broader society with 'just as many evil ones among children as among adults' (section 69). The Home was one of the most modern buildings for children in Europe, but he lamented: 'Confronted with my requirements, the children adopted a position of absolute resistance that no words could overcome. Coercion produced resentment. The new home they had been dreaming of for a whole year became hateful' (Korczak, 1920/1993a, section 3). Even addressing defiance directly, in Korczak's experience, resistance continues in annoying, trivial or intangible ways and, worst of all, in the conspiracy of silence. The comfort of neutrality, indifference and distance was far more dangerous than open conflict and hatred. Referring to his 'camp of partisans', with a great deal of goodwill, time and effort, he was able to rouse the collective conscience, which consolidated a 'new order' (Korczak, 1920/1993a, section 3). Thus, the messiness and conflict afforded by group living creates the conditions for agency and resistance to emerge from below.

Later, Korczak explained that the old orphanage, though chaotic and miserable, had afforded the children opportunities for initiative and energetic efforts, accompanied by self-denial and heroic acts. This forgiving attitude characterised Korczak's work, also appearing in his public defence of some young arsonists, where he sympathetically described the 'anarchists' as impulsive and dramatic, merely 'seeking a monument to their youth' (Goldszmit, 1905/1994, p. 114). At the time, the crimes had caused a sensation, with crowds gathering outside the court demanding the death penalty; but amid the throng were fire victims who came to defend the youth. The Moscow court decided to send the youngsters to reform school, and Korczak concluded that it would have been a terrible mistake for the whole community if it had sentenced 'the little ones' (Goldszmit, 1905/1994, p. 114).

In the 1920s, Korczak and his colleagues relocated the second orphanage, Our Home, to the outskirts of Warsaw. The building catered for 70 school children, 10–20 of pre-school age and 30 older youths. The structure and operation mirrored that of the orphanage that Korczak had established earlier to implement his pedagogical ideas with Jewish children. The basic principle of the Homes was that

childhood years are part of real life rather than a promise of the future, thus each child should be treated as a citizen.

Our Home avoided the two extremes of coercion and chaos by using a system based on a partnership agreement. The institutional rules changed gradually, depending on needs and aimed for the individual to voluntarily adjust to the collective and social life. A primary goal was for the children to reveal their best qualities and strengths in everyday life. The children developed their understanding of the role of self-discipline in social relations and conflicts, sometimes turning to other children and adults for assistance in eliminating negative habits.

The daily operation of such a boarding house was an essential educational element based on work. Children nominated themselves for housekeeping, warehousing, kitchen and laundry duties, and caring for younger or ill colleagues. As one of the educators explained, the idea was to construct work as how an individual could gauge their value and purpose within the group (Falska, 1931/2007). The children regularly assessed work themselves, noting shortcomings, negligence and mistakes in the duties, resulting in deductions of allocated units as a form of salary docking. Although not paid in traditional currency, these units translated into various privileges or recognition. However, Korczak also implemented a universal wage, where all children resident in the Homes received actual monetary payment regardless of tasks undertaken, recognising that biological growth and development also constituted hard work.

Pedagogy of law

The concept behind Korczak's approach went beyond work for health or economic production, encouraging the gaining of respect for laws governing social relations and enhancing civil society. His references to the Bible guided the children in the history of law and custom fashioned by religion, often centred on practices related to food, hygiene and rest. Celebrating traditional holidays and legends marked transitions when societal practices were overturned or changed to accommodate new knowledge and different generations of people. He emphasised that conventions in law originate among ordinary people within their conventional approach to life. This hands-on approach bridged the theory–practice divide for the implementation of rights, beginning with the right to health, dignity and respect within our daily lives.

Both Homes operated as self-governing institutions modelling mutual relationships with the collective group. While the 1791 Polish Constitution formed the cornerstone of the Home's legal system, the Children's Parliament responded to democratic pressure, amending and developing legislation over three decades into a Codex of more than 1,000 laws. The Homes' Court is perhaps Korczak's best-known innovation adhering to the legal principle of judgment by peers and placing everyone on an equal footing under the law. Children and adults fronted the court to receive judgment, including Korczak himself. The former Polish ombudsman for children, Michalak (2018), described this vision for democracy as 'a task for free people; (as) freedom, courage, audacity, assertiveness, subjectivity, respect for yourself and others. It must be learned, created and fought for' (p. 48). Beyond lofty sentiments, he concurred with Milne (2013) that Korczak showed us democracy. This political science interpretation tends to catalogue Korczak developing a constitution, a court and other mechanisms for the institution, leaving children in passively allocated roles. The significant flaw in these studies is the itemising of activities without considering the historical or cultural significance in the jurisprudence process.

Revolutionaries justified breaking the law as a form of rebellion if existing laws were corrupt or unjust. To establish the rule of law without the possibility of change, no matter how just and radical at the point of inception, would eventually decay or serve existing authority to appear as a Leviathan. Thus, in contrast to other countries, the described political structures and social institutions did not exist or barely functioned in Polish society at the time. This article highlights that any criticism of the empires or calls for freedom required disguise. Thus, Korczak and his children engaging in any democratic process was a revolutionary act.

Without a democratic political system to imagine a new reality, Korczak conceived of a children's society where the democratic culture was indistinguishable from the desired state and moral rights were inseparable from the art of living. Against such a background, notions of child participation in citizenship or democratic education are far less straightforward, while Korczak goes much further in conceiving how property is integral to identity and power. Some of the Home's lesser-known instruments, such as the contract book, lost-and-found box, and personal lockers, upheld the laws of rightful ownership and

extended economic rights to the youngest citizens. If property laws were at the heart of justice, then the source of crimes committed by children relates to adults having *everything* while the child is destitute. The adult retains their status as sole judge and executioner of transgression in terms of possessions, with the child left to wonder at the explicit hypocrisy.

By highlighting historical issues related to labour and property rights, this model goes beyond child participation to expose power structures and the economic dimension as its defining feature. In *The Child's Right to Respect*, Korczak (1929/1967a) outlines the relationship between respect, labour and property, in writing 'a child's property – not rubbish, but beggars' possessions and instruments of labour – hopes and souvenirs' (p. 452). For convenience, the adult bans exchanges, gifts and other contractual arrangements, forced, fraudulent or otherwise, effectively closing complaints and the chance for redress. According to Korczak, rules that keep the peace and ban conflict force matters underground. By introducing transparent decision-making processes, each outcome restores or abolishes faith in the rule of law; thus, the imperfect authority gains or loses consent from the individuals involved. In line with Polletta's (2002) description of critical pedagogy incorporating prefigurative practice, the Homes valued children's expertise and authority in the micro-political arena. Indeed, some have criticised these elements as trivial and mundane, mirroring Polletta's book title, *Freedom is an Endless Meeting* (2002). However, this social pedagogical model can 'demystify power and authority and simultaneously foster autonomy' (Kinna, 2019, p. 86).

This approach to implementing children's rights relates to the narrow discipline of pedagogy of law that Stadniczeńko (2018) summarised as an exploration of our 'world of ethical, legal, economical, cognitive, religious, esthetic, and social values' (p. 142). His argument is for the complementary function of the teaching of statutory law as a tool within social education, 'capable of integrating values and defining the objectives of the political community, that is – of civil society' (Stadniczeńko, 2018, p. 142). He has argued that the pedagogy of law has far more practical applications than sociology and develops a more open stance by integrating many complex issues within a messy system. The highlighting of anthropological interpretations of the law allows for legal comparisons between groups granting an emphasis on cultural differences, on the one hand, and illuminating universal elements on the other. Such research using legal anthropology also facilitates the discovery of 'links between elements of culture, such as political, ideological, religious, worldview, and economic factors which impact any legal system' (Stadniczeńko, 2018, p. 152). Thus, Korczak's radical approach to participation went beyond the child's voice by including the conventions of their deceased ancestors, a *democracy of the dead*, which addressed intergenerational issues of injustice and trauma.

In place of coercion and inducements by adults, formal institutional processes and peer pressure dictated conformity and social norms, not a force created but uncovered by removing the artificial government of adults. The child-citizen experiences authority from the school, family members, neighbours and playground gangs. Regarding the latter, schoolyard bullies and teacher's pets who may have controlled activities and intimidated children now faced the collective judgement of their peers, requiring different skills and self-mastery. Though precarious and chaotic, the shift did not result in complete lawlessness or the primitive rule of physical violence many children experienced on the streets. A gradual shift into new behaviours and customs also required broader domains of activity than just the official processes of the court or voting. For example, banning physical violence would be coercive, so Korczak permitted children's fighting, which seems counter-intuitive to teachers reinforcing peace education.

However, his introduction of fighting rules and handicaps made organising a physical fight onerous. The process elicited cooperation and organisation between the parties involved, while reflecting societal acceptance of violent sports as contests. Thus, Korczak facilitated boxing matches, gambling, insults and other risky forms of behaviour to ensure that children retained ownership over the transformation and the degree of freedom and autonomy their previous life of poverty and neglect had afforded them. Examples of children's use of force and coercion included peer disapproval, name-calling, time-consuming court prosecutions, gossip, slander, fraud and emotional bullying. Children entered the Homes with wide-ranging life experiences and would not have voluntarily remained if forced into a highly sanitised environment. A range of spheres, sometimes transient, transformed violence from the brutal physical to the more symbolic and representative as children reflected on their character and relationships.

Contemporary practitioners may be shocked by Korczak's permissive attitude towards negative behaviours, which certainly caused friction with many of his colleagues who believed that children

needed a protectionist approach. However, social pedagogy today could benefit from serious consideration of these institutions that foreground the sham separation of the child from the adult world, usually deemed as preparation and protection of their needs. Korczak highlighted the hypocrisy of adults who attempt to cleave children from society, while expecting a higher ethical standard than they themselves exhibit. For example, New Zealand's then-prime minister was forced into publicly apologising for vulgar swearing at a political rival (BBC News, 2022). Children witness daily such adult bullying, harassment and oppression, and continue these social hierarchies and behaviours as both perpetrators and victims. Banning such behaviour hardly stops it, instead driving it underground, previously outside the school gate and now, more commonly, online. Instead of adults imposing an artificial utopian vision on the children's lives, both generations democratically transformed social relations within the Homes to build shared cultural history. Later, even under the horrendous conditions of war, visitors described the orphanages as 'an atmosphere on a higher plane', a lighthouse sending out a beacon of hope into the neighbourhood (Falkowska, 1989, p. 357).

Conclusion

This article presents the development of Polish social pedagogy as geared towards the collective emancipation of the nation. While the German tradition is also rooted in nation-building, local resistance to such top-down efforts shaped the Polish experience. Unfortunately, cosmopolitan discourses continue as powerful forces obscuring this communitarian ideal that understood rights as situated, embedded and embodied within time and place. Thus, the popular image of Korczak as an outstanding citizen of the world requires historical revision. This article challenges the assumption that Korczak held no theoretical basis for his pedagogical approach by rejecting the cosmopolitan basis for his understanding of children's rights. Writing as a philosopher, Korczak repeatedly engaged in geopolitical debates on European colonialism and strongly supported Poland's independence. His grassroots approach favoured anarchism and communitarianism by relying on conflict and crisis fracturing existing political and social hierarchies to facilitate the emergence of children's rights from below.

Introducing this case study of social pedagogy showcases active political spheres related to children's lived experiences, not the creation of closed environments dedicated to some preconceived notions of freedom and justice. Instead, immersing children in the laws and customs of their communities brought those desiring change into direct conflict with peers dedicated to preserving tradition and existing hierarchies. While contemporary trends encourage young people to question authority, Korczak ascribed power and resistance to the youngest children, even infants. Unlike the anarchist revolutionaries seeking the destruction of legal and government structures, Korczak advised his readers, young and old, to develop a critical understanding of who or what they hold as authorities, while consenting to conditions of freedom. Polish social pedagogy harnessed such processes to facilitate a sense of solidarity and belonging without discounting the local realities of material circumstances or the continuity of cultural traditions.

Within the Homes, numerous internal institutions and processes complemented the work of self-government. The approach placed children (and adults) into every societal role as offenders, prosecutors, victims and judges, while the court strongly advocated forgiveness instead of punishment. Operating as a parallel society, the children predominantly decided what behaviours were considered unsociable and what to do about them. Beginning with a basic Constitution, the Children's Parliament expanded the legal codex with hundreds of rules, repeals and modifications over decades. Rather than impose democratic and judicial systems that shift power and authority into the children's hands, the children could challenge the very principles of lawmaking and governance by actively researching the flaws of practice and implementation.

The general absence of pedagogy of law is a criticism that converges with Korczak's study of economic and political theory and aspects of law and jurisprudence to build the foundation of his pedagogical model. Drawing from applied history trends provides radical alternatives for contemporary institutions that have failed to revise their citizenship education practice. Although the usual constraints prohibit further exploration, this article highlights how Korczak's radical pedagogy of law embraced the historical and cultural institutions relevant to the children. The practices of self-government featuring mutuality and autonomy demonstrated prefigurative practice with and by the child-citizen to successfully build grassroots democracy among the violent and weak outcasts of society.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The author conducted the research reported in this article in accordance with UCL standards.

Consent for publication statement

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The author declares no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently blind the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

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