

# White House in a Grey City

Written and Illustrated by  
Itzchak Belfer

*A Child of Janusz Korczak*



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ASSOCIATION OF CANADA

**Provincial Advocate**  
*for Children & Youth*

**L'intervenant provincial**  
*en faveur des enfants & des jeunes*



Cover art: *Encounters*, Oil on paper, 55 x 75, by Itzchak Belfer (front)

detail of \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, 100 x 70, by Itzchak Belfer (back)

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Published by the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth  
English Translation © 2016 Itzhak and Haim Belfer

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ISBN English Print Version: 978-1-987815-28-3  
ISBN English PDF Version: 978-1-987815-29-0

Published in 2016 by  
Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth of Ontario  
401 Bay Street Suite 2200  
Toronto Ontario M7A 0A6  
CANADA

[www.provincialadvocate.on.ca](http://www.provincialadvocate.on.ca)  
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Originally published in Hebrew as Bayit lavan be`ir aforah  
© 2014 Itzhak and Haim Belfer  
Editor: Elana Rechtman; Drawing and Sculptures: Yitzchak Belfer; Cover: Tali Amit; Production: Haim Belfer

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Belfer, Itzhak, 1923-  
[Bayit lavan be`ir aforah. English]  
White House in a Grey City – Written and Illustrated by Itzhak Belfer – A Child of Janusz Korczak.

Translation of: Bayit lavan be`ir aforah.  
Includes bibliographical references and index.  
Issued in print and electronic formats.  
ISBN 978-1-987815-28-3 (paperback)--ISBN 978-1-987815-29-0 (pdf)

1. Belfer, Itzhak, 1923-. 2. Korczak, Janusz, 1878-1942. 3. Jewish orphanages--Poland--Warsaw--Biography. 4. Jews--Education--Poland--Warsaw--Biography. 5. Holocaust, Jewish (1939-1945)--Personal narratives. 6. Holocaust survivors--Biography. 7. Jewish artists--Israel--Biography. I. Ontario. Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, issuing body II. Title. III. Title: Bayit lavan be`ir aforah. English.

ND979.B45A2 2016                      759.95694                      C2016-901652-8  
C2016-901653-6

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1  
Printed in Ontario, Canada



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## Introduction



*White House In A Grey City*, written and illustrated by Itzchak Belfer, is the second remembrance of life as a child of Janusz Korczak that the Office of the Provincial

Advocate for Children and Youth of Ontario has been honoured to help bring to the public's attention. Young people today who live in residential care often speak about feeling alone and isolated. They tell us that in many instances they feel as if they simply don't matter to anyone. In Ontario, their words are borne out by the over 20,000 serious occurrences that take place in residential care each year that are reported to government. It does not have to be this way.

Our Office believes that Itzchak Belfer has something to offer the children of Ontario, and Canada for that matter. He has something to give to those working and operating residential care homes across our province and the country. The memoir you are reading tells us clearly that things can be different. Itzchak describes how residential care can be delivered embodying the rights of the child. He paints a picture of care with both the child and love so clearly at the centre.

Why is it that we struggle to provide homes for children in the care of the state this way today? When we ask this question, even dare to mention the word "love", politicians, bureaucrats, even service providers look at us quizzically at best, and say "we can't legislate love, you know". As if we thought they could. What we do know is that the conditions in which love can exist and flourish can be created. Itzchak Belfer describes them. He demonstrates to us that while we cannot legislate love, we can create legislation, draft policy, and set practice that creates the possibility for it to exist.

In virtually any piece of research about young people struggling to overcome, you will discover a finding that one person can make the difference in the life of a child. As youth have said to us, "it's not rocket science". Reflect for moment. Who in your life influenced you and the positive choices you made. Was it a parent? A brother or a sister? A friend? A teacher or a coach? A pastor or an elder? Chances are there is one person that many of us can pinpoint who provided us with an opportunity, who changed the path we were on, who said or did something that transformed the way we thought about ourselves.

Janusz Korczak knew this simple truth. For Itzhak Belfer, Dr Korczak was the “one person”.

Yet in his dedication Itzhak Belfer also acknowledges Stefa Wilczyńska, Dr Korczak’s partner in running the orphanage. He knew that the orphanage which so profoundly changed his life was supported by many. Itzhak demonstrates that it was the community which was created under the leadership, vision and guidance of Janusz Korczak that lifted him up and past the pain, from life apart from his family.

Let this book about the life of Itzhak Belfer and the work of Janusz Korczak, provide the inspiration for the leadership and will to change our approach to children and their care today. Let it be a guide on how to harness the power of that commitment into real practical action. Our children deserve nothing less.

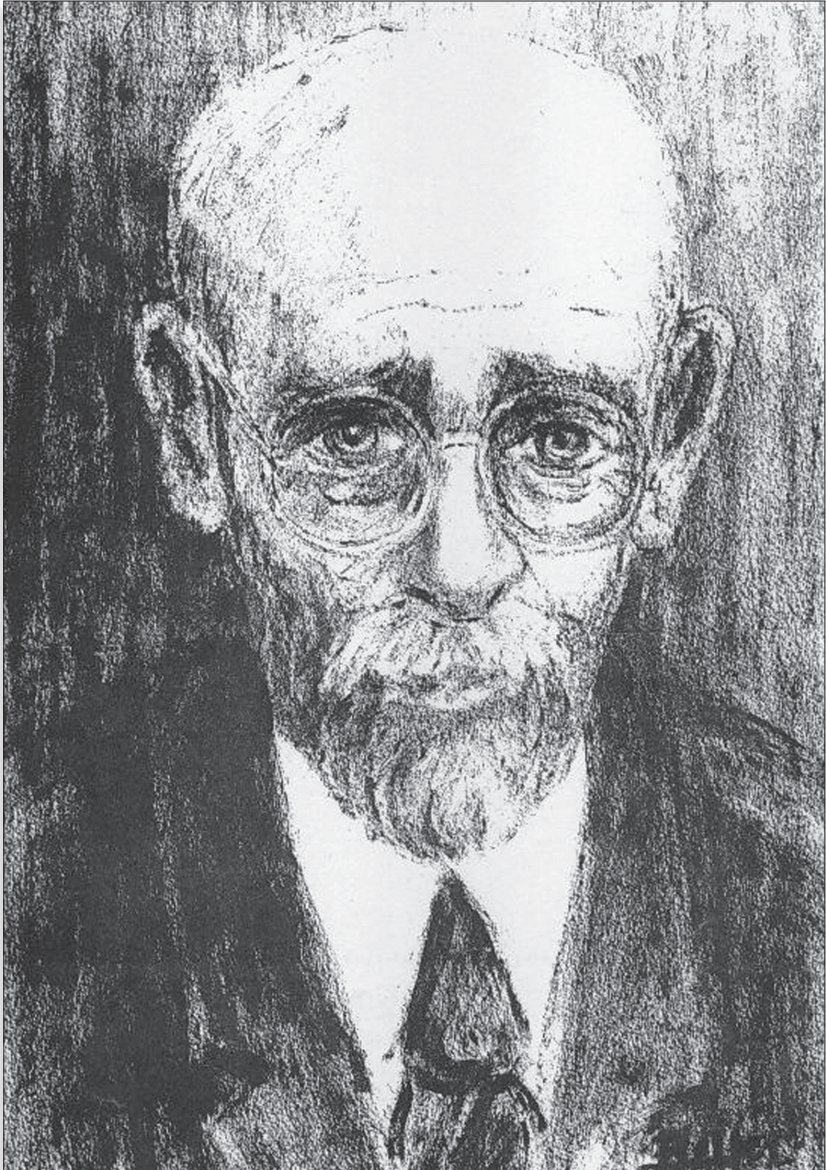
**Irwin Elman**

*Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth of Ontario*

*March 4, 2016*



**A**s I write, I am thinking of you, Itzchak Belfer, whom I have never met, except through the stories you tell in this wonderful, sad and inspiring book. It seems this will be one of the last stories written by a boy who actually lived with Janusz Korczak and Stefania Wilczyńska in the Dom Sierot orphanage on Krochmalna Street. What a gift to the world this is, Itzchak, to share



Janusz Korczak (Dr. Henryk Goldschmidt)

your lived experience of the Korczak approach to caring for children – no, to *loving* children. I thank you for having the courage and determination to travel back in your memories, many deeply painful, to put into words what is almost impossible to express. Thank you for your generosity.

As an academic and a professional child and youth worker, I study



Miss Stefania (Stefa) Wilczyńska



scholarly literature, undertake research, instruct university students, and consult with practitioners and agencies around the world about the nature and practice of child and youth care. But, truth be known, all of this would be meaningless if it were not grounded in the day-to-day experiences of children and young people that they have – also generously – shared with me over the years. Indeed, it is their experiences of moments of relationship with trusted and loving adults that have made a significant difference in their lives, and that are the





true touchstones of “how to love a child”. Itzchak, you bring back to life and into our lives these two brave and committed souls, Janusz Korczak and Stefa Wilczyńska, who have receded, for most of us, into legendary and almost mythical status. You remind us that they were “father”, “mother”, teacher, mentor, companion and inspiration to so many children over so many years. Thank you, Itzchak, for sharing with us, your eager readers, some treasured moments that you experienced with Miss Stefa and the good Doctor.

I find that it is reading accounts of many small but significant moments – a gesture, a pat, a noticing, a smile,



a gift of candy, a game of train – that makes Korczak’s philosophy real, vibrant and compelling. In my own research, children have taught me how important congruence is within a children’s home. One misstep, one angry word, one slap, one overlooked injustice can undo all the good intentions and fine sentiments in the blink of an eye. One of the impressive aspects of Korczak, Stefa and the young social educators they trained was their relentless pursuit to consistently care for children with devotion and attention to the specific interests and needs of each and every one as a unique and precious person. Speaking personally, I know that being a parent or a care worker with one or a few children is a gigantic challenge to our being fully and consistently human. How much more challenging must it have been to live and work in a community of one hundred young people, and in the midst of such inhuman social conditions for much of the time.



On their final journey



Thank you, Janusz and Stefa, for what you have done for Itzchak, and for so many children, and for leaving legacies that will live on forever.

Thank you, Itzchak, for telling us the story of your struggles, and for sharing memories of your years in their loving presence. One hundred years on, we are still so far from emulating, in most of our contemporary children's programs and classrooms, the children's republic you describe in such moving and powerful terms. I expect your readers will go forth a bit better people than they were before reading your book.

**James P. Anglin**

*Professor, School of Child and Youth Care, University of Victoria, Canada,*

*Member, Janusz Korczak Association of Canada*

*February 29, 2016*



Mother



# Dr. Janusz Korczak

## In memoriam

In memory of my parents, brothers, sisters, grandmother, and grandfather, whose place of murder remains unknown.

In memory of Janusz Korczak, Stefa Wilczyńska, and the children murdered by the Nazis.

I dedicate this book to them.

## Acknowledgements

**N**umerous acquaintances have often urged me to commit my memories to writing. It was painful for me to undertake the recollection of those distant days of suffering and fear and to reencounter family members whom I loved so dearly and who are no longer with us.

Janusz Korczak and Stefa Wilczyńska represent a ray of light and a beacon along the sombre journey of my life from childhood in the orphanage under their direction, to this very day. Thanks to them, I have adopted a way of life based on values of humanity, honesty, justice, and consideration for others. Thanks to their theories and pedagogy, I have managed to overcome obstacles and to create a positive dialogue with people and the world in which I live.

It was my fortune to have met Varda Segal, whose profound artistic talents as a designer and archivist were already known to me in the past. Varda agreed to undertake this task with me and the rapport between the two of us led to a common language, the product of which is this book. I wish to express my deepest appreciation and thanks to Varda for the patience and personal involvement she demonstrated in our discussions and meetings.

I warmly thank my dear ones, my wife Shosh and my son Haim, without whose support and assistance, this book would never have been published.

**Itzchak Belfer**

*Israel*

*February 2016*

# Chapter 1

## 215 Wolska Street, Warsaw

*I do not exist in order to be loved or cherished, but rather to act and to love.*

*I do not expect my surroundings to be of assistance to me, rather I must care about the entire world and about the people around me.*

**Janusz Korczak**

**A** small building with a slanted roof stands at the end of Wolska Street, number 215. This two storey house looks modest, its walls are made of wooden slats and its windows are cut into the walls, wide open into the street. This is the house of my childhood.

My grandparents resided on the first floor of the building in an apartment containing two rooms and a kitchen. The six rooms on the second floor housed six families, each blessed with many children. One of those families was mine; there were seven people in the family: my mother, my brothers and sisters, and me. Every corner of the apartment was filled with signs of life, overcrowded, and poverty-stricken.

The basement of the building contained a room for storing coal used for our heating, various unused items, and vegetables such as potatoes, beets, and cabbages. A church was a stone's throw from the house. The residents of the street were both Christians and Jews, all coexisting in peace.

My name is Itzchak, or Itzchakale in my childhood, the fourth child to my parents, Esther Bernstein and Haim Belfer. My oldest brother, Moishe, was ten when I was born, Alter was seven, my sister Chaya was three, Velvleh (Wolf) was born two years after me, and the youngest child was Miriam, who sprang into the world when I was four years old. I was born on February 6<sup>th</sup>, 1923.

When my father died, we moved into my grandparents' house. I was four years old then. I have vague memories of another house, beautiful, and spacious, the house where I had previously lived with my mother, father, and siblings until pneumonia took my father from us. My mother was approaching the end of her pregnancy and became a widow while we became orphans. My youngest sister, Miriam, was born after my father's death.

I have very few vague memories of my early years of childhood. I was told that my father had been a painter, repairman, and tradesman. I can barely conjure up an image of him. However, a hazy memory springs to mind.

My father and I are sitting on a *bryczka*<sup>1</sup> drawn by a white horse with brown spots, a horse I loved dearly. We were on our way out of Warsaw to buy fruit from an orchard. The unripe fruit was bought for purposes of trade.

I clearly remember my mother's large, black eyes. These kind eyes looked at us, her children, and at others around her with concern, tenderness, and sadness. Despite the overcrowded conditions, my widowed mother created a warm and pleasant nest for us in my grandparents' home. Besides taking care of her children and all the routine concerns of the household, my mother laundered, cleaned, cooked, and found the time and stamina to mend and patch other people's clothing so as to earn a few extra pennies for our upkeep.

I did not have daily contact with my two older brothers. Leaving their childhood behind them, they set out each morning to work to help with the upkeep of the family.

I had limited contact with my sister Chaya. She was already a young lady, also already working. I sometimes used to converse with her or visit her at her place of work. She would always give me a hug and some pocket money from her meager wages, to buy a candy or a treat.

I have a distinct memory of my grandfather, Yechezkel my mother's father, who took us into his home. I see his face staring at me over the years. I try to conjure up his image, to cement it into my works of art. I mainly remember a long, white beard. He wore a large, black skullcap on his grey hair. His clothes were black, his body strong and he walked proudly. On Sabbath days and festivals

<sup>1</sup> Small horse-drawn cart with two wheels

he would take my small hand in his warm one and we would walk together to prayers. As the *Gabai*<sup>2</sup> of our local synagogue, he would take his seat on the pulpit reserved for distinguished persons. I would sit at his feet.

Grandfather made his living as a horse and cart owner. The cart drivers were hired Polish men. The stables were in the back yard and the carts were in front of the building. Every morning, the horses were harnessed and the cart drivers went out to work, loading bricks from the nearby factory and unloading them at various sites.

After watering and washing the horses at the nearby lake on Friday afternoons, the cart drivers would come to our home to collect their wages. Grandfather would give them a glass of Sabbath wine and a piece of *Challa*<sup>3</sup> torn off by hand. Together they would bless the *Shabbat HaMalka*<sup>4</sup>.

Ours was a traditional Jewish home. I remember my grandmother, Henia, after finishing her housework, sitting down with the *Gemara*<sup>5</sup> open on the table, concentrating on her Talmud. She was so engrossed that she would not allow anything to interrupt her study of the Torah. If I approached her at those times trying to get her attention, she would dismiss me with a candy which she swept out of her dress and the wave of her hand which meant, "Away with you!"

And where could I go? The house was crowded. There was not enough room in the living room since the beds, which we shared, took up most of the space. Mother slept on the shelf of the fireplace which heated up the chilly winters. There were other pieces of furniture which left hardly any place for recreation. The children's toys bothered the adults in the house.

Outside, the harsh winter covered Warsaw and Poland with a freezing white blanket of snow. Most people remained in their houses, trying to stay warm by the crackling flames of the fireplace. The few people outside were rushing about, wrapped up in their heavy coats, hats, and gloves, bundled up to keep out the lashing wind.

The children did not play much outside except for the times when we gathered together to build snowmen, have snowball fights, or skate, shrieking with delight.

<sup>2</sup> Manager of synagogue affairs.

<sup>3</sup> Challah is Jewish braided bread eaten on Sabbath and holidays.

<sup>4</sup> The Sabbath Queen.

<sup>5</sup> Part of the Talmud that contains commentary on the Mishnah, part of the Oral Law of the Jewish religion.

Then suddenly, out of nowhere, a rainbow appeared and a burst of joyful spring began to melt the frost, warming our hearts, enchanting us all with colourful blossoms, and intoxicating smells of nature, reinventing itself all around us. We swooped down on the verdant fields, gulping down the pleasure of the open space.

There was a little bridge leading to our house, crossing over a canal. Water flowed from the melting snows to the lake beside the fields around our neighbourhood. When the flow stopped, the parched canal became my playground. Crawling under that bridge was my favourite pastime, my imagination leading me to pleasurable places.

The summers shuffling in after the spring were short and hot. Thunder and lightning storms brought down furious rains, creating puddles on the warm ground. How I loved to jump barefoot into the warm puddles, play around, and run wild, splashing water all over the place.

After the summer, the fall dragged its dismal trail. The winds once again started blowing and the sky filled with heavy clouds. Spurts of rain washed the world around our house. Again it was winter and the white snow erased the bright colours. As usual, the sun sought refuge from the cold behind the clouds. My nose stayed pressed against the window pane, as I watched the world outside, sad and bored until the end of the winter.

Warsaw of those days embodied a huge centre of Orthodox Jewry. Warsaw Jews created a flourishing and impressive culture whose impact on all of Polish Jewry was significant.

Some of Warsaw's Jewish intellectuals were affiliated with the general Polish population. In addition, there were many Jewish institutions interspersed over the city, such as *Beit Hava'ad*,<sup>6</sup> synagogues, schools, *yeshivot*<sup>7</sup>, clinics, and a hospital. Jews spoke mostly Yiddish. There was also a *Talmud Torah*<sup>8</sup> school from which I was not exempt.

I made my way every morning to the *Cheder*<sup>9</sup> nearby the synagogue. Candles illuminated the winter darkness. At sunrise, rays of light capered gaily through the window. There I sat for hours

<sup>6</sup> Meeting place.

<sup>7</sup> Rabbinical colleges

<sup>8</sup> Parochial elementary school for boys

<sup>9</sup> A school for Jewish children in which Hebrew and religious knowledge are taught



on end with the other children, bored, falling asleep, and then waking up to the rising voice of the teacher repeating the *alef beis*<sup>10</sup>, or the sound of the Rabbi's prayers, which reduced one of my classmates to tears.

Another memory of my childhood is connected to water. There was a hut not far from our house, towards the centre of town. A



<sup>10</sup>Alphabet

faucet was attached to one of the side walls of the hut. When we required water, we would fill a bucket or two from that faucet, paying a woman for the water through a window in the wall. If we could not, for some reason, carry the water by ourselves, the old bent-backed water bearer would do so for several pennies. He had shoulder poles and the buckets would rock from side to side. Years later, I sketched that water bearer.

How can I conclude the story of the Jewish home without mentioning the *Hamin*?<sup>12</sup> This was, after all, the best part, the highlight of the Jewish Sabbath.

It all started on Fridays at noon. A procession of women, men, and children carrying pots marched down the street. Their destination was the bakery. The pots that were placed in the baker's oven would be devoutly retrieved after the *Shacharit*<sup>13</sup> and *Mussaf*<sup>14</sup> morning prayers. The procession made its way back home, the smell of the dish permeating the air.

As a young boy, mother occasionally sent me to the bakery carrying the pot of Hamin and on Saturdays, my sister Chaya joined me. I carried our pot while she carried that of my grandparents.

Without the aid of my grandparents, Yechezkel and Henia, my family's survival would have been unbearably difficult. It was they who opened their home to us and supported us financially after my father passed away.



<sup>12</sup>Or cholent – a traditional Jewish stew

<sup>13</sup>Daily morning prayer

<sup>14</sup>Additional service that is recited on Sabbath and holidays



# Chapter 2

## A White House in a Grey City

(The Orphanage of Dr. Janusz Korczak, 92 Krochmalna Street, Warsaw)

*Children and youth make up one third of the human race and they are entitled to one third of humanity's resources.*

**Janusz Korczak**

**M**y mother and I stood before an iron gate supported by a high walled fence. I was almost seven years old. My small hand gripped hers. I suppose she said something to the effect of, "That's it, my child, we are here." The gate opened, exposing a huge courtyard in which several children were playing. This courtyard represented an entirely new world for me.

A large, impressive building stood at the far side of the courtyard, exactly how I had imagined it. The Jewish orphanage of Dr. Korczak was a four-storey house with many windows on 92 Krochmalna Street. On one side of the building, there was a factory and on the other side were workers' houses. The neighbourhood was predominantly Christian, a point which I shall discuss at a later stage.

When my mother became widowed, she was burdened with our upkeep. Possibly urged by my grandparents and others, she decided to move me into the orphanage which had an excellent reputation. Why did she choose me specifically? First of all, popular demand resulted in the orphanage policy, which was to accept only one child from each family. Secondly, I happened to be seven years old, which was the age at which the orphanage accepted children. I was also small and thin, and perhaps they thought that I would receive suitable nutrition, good medical attention by Dr. Korczak, and of course, a proper education.

On that morning, my mother bathed me, brushed my hair, dressed me in my best clothes, held my hand, and said, "Come,

Yitchzakaleh, we are going to a new home today.” I do not remember whether she told me that I was going to stay there permanently. I doubt whether I understood the implications of her words. I stepped forward together with her, crossing the courtyard towards the front door of the building. It opened and we ascended several stairs leading to a beautiful and spacious hall.

A man took us to a small room at the side of the hall. He was cheerful, sported a small blonde beard streaked with reddish patches. His kind eyes were pale blue behind a pair of glasses. I later learned that the small room, containing a table and two chairs, was called the “store”. The man beckoned my mother to sit down, sat down himself and, as though it was the most natural thing to do, lifted me onto his lap.

At first I felt uncomfortable about the close proximity to a stranger, but my discomfort gradually vanished as I felt the soothing effect of the man’s warm embrace as he and my mother engaged in a conversation.

I began to play with the man’s beard which piqued my curiosity, wondering whether it was real and how it grew in that way. The man displayed no indication that I was perhaps bothering him. I started to feel a sense of security.

I then made another step. I put out my arms and embraced the man, holding on to him. I gained courage from his patient attitude and from my own curiosity, which to this day is one of my qualities. I raised myself slightly, rested my cheek against his, and inspected my surroundings through his eye-glasses. The man remained indifferent to my movements.

When the adults’ conversation came to an end and my mother was about to leave, she said goodbye and gave me a kiss, saying, “I am going home, Itzchakale. You are staying here.”

And there I stayed with him, the man who took my hand in his warm one. I felt comfortable and I did not feel the need to cry. Still holding his hand, I was introduced to, Yossi, my guardian, or Apotropos.<sup>15</sup> He was an older child whose role was to guide me through the ways of the orphanage, its rules, and regulations. “You can ask him any question you have.” The man said, “He is responsible for your actions. You have no responsibility, but you must try to behave according to the rules.”

<sup>15</sup> The term for “Guardianship”, in Jewish Law. It means the guardian or custodian of another’s affairs.

The three of us then descended to the washroom. My hair was shaved and then I was bathed and dressed in new clothes. I was now clean, sweet-smelling and relaxed. The man stroked my face gently with his kind hand, not sparing a pat for the Guardian, and then went on his way.

It was none other than Dr. Janusz Korczak, or “Mr. Doctor”, as we called him, who had given me such a warm reception and had made better the first few hours of my stay at the orphanage.

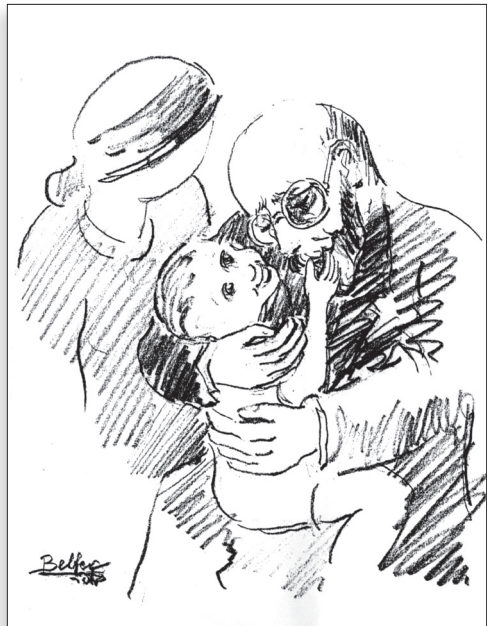
I gradually started to feel comfortable in this place which was beginning to feel like my new home.

My guardian first took me around the building to acclimatize me to my new surroundings. We looked inside all of the rooms and halls and I received an explanation about each of them and the codes of behaviour for each room. I could not absorb everything at once, being quite overwhelmed with the day’s events, emotion, and fatigue.

Evening came and then night, time for bed. There were two sleeping halls on the top floor of the orphanage. One was for boys, with fifty one beds. Opposite it was the girls’ hall, containing fifty six beds.

“This is your bed. This is where you will sleep; do not be afraid. A light will keep away the dark. A teacher will sleep in the room with us. He will take care of us, guard us, approach us and comfort us if we need him,” Yossi said quietly.

My eyes opened wide in amazement. An entire bed to myself! A clean, white sheet, spread out, stretched out over the bed and a pillow and blanket on top of it. The children’s beds were close to each other, separated by a tin board, high on one side



and low on the other. The closeness created a feeling of security and offered an opportunity for contact and familiarity.

If I desired the company of other children, I turned my face to the low side of the board to make eye contact with my neighbours. We chatted, laughed, told each other stories, and revealed our fears. If, however, I was very tired, I would turn to the other side, the high side of the board providing me with privacy and a signal to the other children to leave me to sleep. Lights were out at nine o'clock and a night light was left on overnight. One of the youth leaders of the home would be on duty and stay with us, giving us a feeling of security. If a child cried, there was always someone who would approach him or her. If a child was ill, he or she would be soothed with a kind word or a pat.

The children in the neighbouring beds told me endless stories about the orphanage. One would provide a kind or comforting word. Even the older children, whose beds were separate from each other, granted me a feeling of safety. Their stories were my proof that this was a good and worthy place in which to be.

Over the next few nights, I was introduced to the regular routine that slowly helped us sail into the world of sleep and dreams. This sometimes took the form of calming music which filled the sleeping

halls or else it was Mr. Doctor telling us a goodnight story, walking between the beds, patting a child, fixing another's blanket there. If the doctor was absent or occupied in his work, one of the youth leaders would replace him. We were always allowed to read until lights out.



## A new day dawns

I woke up to a new day at six in the morning. The air was fresh and flowed into the sleeping hall through the wide open windows. On cold winter days, I actually had the inclination to curl up and hide inside my blanket instead of getting out of bed. We overcame this temptation not only through our own self-discipline, but thanks to the tenderness, softness, kind words, and a gentle pat on the head, which we received from the person who was on duty to wake up the children. He would move from child to child, coaxing and persuading him or her to get out of bed.

We eventually got up, made our beds, arranged the sheets, and folded the blankets. Then we washed ourselves, got dressed, and went down to the dining room. I was surprised to see Dr. Korczak standing on a small landing half a floor below the sleeping halls, at the side of which was a little room.

“Come, Itzchakale,” he said and showed me a note. “You see, here it says that everyone has to take cod liver oil and we are going to take it now. This oil is excellent for your health, and thanks to it, you will grow up healthy and strong.” We reluctantly followed him since we knew we had to obey any instructions the doctor gave us.

On the landing, there was a table with little cups laid out. In each of the cups was a thick, shiny, oily liquid. This was cod liver oil. There was a small bowl with little pieces of bread beside the cups, next to which was another bowl containing salt.

“Come, my child,” he said, “I will show you how to take this medicine. Do as I do and you will see how easy it is.” Dr. Korczak





took a piece of bread and so did I. He dipped his into the salt and I did the same. He held the bread in his hand and so did I. “Now, block your nose,” he said, demonstrating on his own nose. I blocked my nose. “Now, take a glass and — Hopa, drink it all at once.” I drank. Yuk! “And now, please eat the bread and see how tasty it is.” It was really tasty! I started the day with a glass of cod liver oil for many months to come.

The weighing and measuring ceremony was held every Saturday morning. In turn, each child entered the small room where we were weighed and measured. All our details were registered on our personal growing charts which accompanied us throughout our stay at the orphanage. One of Dr. Korczak’s intentions was to write a book about the physical development of the child. The terrible War ahead was to destroy his wishes and hopes.

On the first morning of my stay at the orphanage and for the following four months, I was accompanied by my guardian who provided me with explanations and instructed me in the workings of the orphanage. Together we entered the dining room, where the children were sitting down for breakfast at long tables. Everyone sat together. Older children together with the younger ones, teachers



with children, girls and boys, Dr. Korczak and Miss Stefa among them. There was no distinction, division, or class system. Eight people sat at each table, all as equals.

Each person had a permanent seat at the table in the dining room for all the meals. If a child wished to switch places so as to sit next to a friend, he or she could negotiate the swap with the child with whom they wished to exchange seats. If that child agreed, the switch

was made. Korczak and the teachers rarely interfered. The children managed their world by themselves. I shall discuss this aspect of our education later.

I was seated at a table. I must admit that my first breakfast at the orphanage was quite delicious. All of the meals at the orphanage took the same form. Today, as an adult, I understand that the aim was to educate us in rules, table manners, consideration of others, and sound eating habits.

The dining room bell sounded regularly (three times a day) inside the building and in the courtyard. Miss Stefa was usually in charge of ringing the bell. When we heard the bell, we all stopped whatever we were doing, went to wash our hands, and entered the dining room to take our regular places at the tables quietly, calmly and politely, without pushing, racing, or shouting.

The tables had already been set for the meal by the dining room helpers, who were children, chosen by the children themselves. The dining room duty roster was arranged once every few months, the children deciding upon the composition of each team. The dining room had the largest team of helpers.

There were two helpers in the kitchen, which was on the ground floor of the building. An additional two helpers operated the small manual elevator which delivered the food from the kitchen to the dining room. This was no easy task; it was a great responsibility and required much physical ability. If the helpers ran out of strength and lost their grip on the rope, the elevator would slip from their hands and fall all the way down, making a clamor while all the food splashed around it. Once the meal successfully made its way up to its destination, the two helpers in charge of the task would transfer the food and lay it out on the sideboard. Additional helpers served the plates and food to the tables. Yet another team was in charge of clearing the tables. And of course, at the end of the entire process, another team was in charge of piling up all the dishes for washing in the kitchen. Once again, the small elevator was loaded, this time for the return trip down to the kitchen.

A child was in charge of all the helping teams. It was his or her responsibility to make sure that everything ran smoothly. For example, he or she had to make sure that the children walked in from right to left, to and from each of the serving points and tables, so

as to avoid collisions. The person in charge was the one who had the authority to approve or decline a request to switch duties or tasks.

To this day, I still remember the tranquility, contentment, and grace of those meals at the orphanage.

## **Miss Stefa attends to everything**

We would go to the “store” for our supplies before breakfast. This was a small room at the end of the hall, upon whose shelves along the walls were arranged learning materials, such as notebooks, pencils, and coloured pencils. Miss Stefa was there, waiting for our arrival. We were provided with replacements if we had only a stub of a pencil left, if we had filled up our notebooks, or needed anything else. However, we had to show the old item as proof that we really needed a replacement.

After our “purchases” at the “store”, we went down half a floor to the cloakroom where we polished our shoes and put on our coats in the winter months, each child taking their coat from his or her own coat hook. Mine was number 43, one of 107.

Holding our school satchels, we proceeded towards the front door where, like a devoted mother, Miss Stefa was waiting for us. She equipped us with sandwiches for school, which she produced from two large baskets at her side. Understanding the soul of a child, Miss Stefa would vary the fillings of the sandwiches and she was aware of each child’s preferences. Usually placing two sandwiches in my hand, she would murmur, “Please, finish them both.” Then she would warmly part from us and send us on our way to school.

We felt her constant presence and love, even when she was not physically with us. With silent steps, she would glide around the hall, hurrying from place to place to perform all the many tasks awaiting her. Spotting her out of the corner of our eye, we would gain a feeling of security, knowing that somebody was taking care of us.

At school, we were always identified as Janusz Korczak’s children. We were well-groomed, quietly behaved, polite, self-confident, and successful at school.



The school was on 61 Grzybowska Street. It was a Jewish state school where we learned general studies together with Jewish history. Studies were conducted in Polish. Most of the teachers were Jewish and Dr. Hecht was the principal of the school. We did not study on Saturdays but we did on Sundays, the Christian Sabbath.

Conflict sometimes arose on our way to and from school. We would walk in groups, for safety's sake. We were accosted by Polish children on several occasions, especially on Sundays when they did not attend school. They provoked and abused us, both verbally and physically.

Dr. Korczak was pained by this. He repeatedly urged the attackers' parents through the press, "Please, leave my children alone." When the frequency of bullying incidents increased and the staff of the orphanage began to fear for our safety, one of the teachers would accompany us to school, choosing alternative routes for us each time.

At the end of the school day, we returned to the orphanage where a delicious meal awaited us, something different every day.



## A happy childhood afternoon

The afternoon was filled with hours of pleasure spent on games and activities. We did our homework preparation in the “Quiet Hall”, which was exactly as its name suggests. It was here that we were able to read, relax, or rest in a quiet environment. The idea behind this activity was that we were trusted to do our homework. Anybody who required assistance was helped by a teacher who was on duty for that purpose.

After completing our homework, we were free to do anything we wished. For example, we played games. A team of children called “The Group for Beneficial Games” was appointed by the Children’s Council. It was responsible for supplying varied equipment for games, such as dominoes, chess, checkers, and ping pong. We joined two tables from the dining room, drew a net across the centre, took out two paddles and a ball, and two players were free to engage in an exciting game. During the long winter evenings, we held championships in ping pong or chess, all intended to benefit our bodies and our minds.

There was a course for handicrafts and ball games: dodge-ball, volleyball, which was extremely popular, and a basketball team called “The Star”. These ball games were only played in the summer months when we were able to go out into the yard. During the winter, we were confined indoors.

There were language courses. We could choose Hebrew or Yiddish to preserve our heritage. I chose Esperanto and managed to gain a fairly good mastery of it. There were also courses in history and geography, music, piano, and mandolin. Each child was free to choose whatever subject he or she wished to learn.

There was a large, black, and shiny grand piano at the end of the hall standing on a platform. It was mainly the girls who showed signs of talent and musical ability and they were the ones who played the piano. I also explored my piano-playing ability, took several lessons and, well, quite soon I understood that I would never become a pianist. Nobody ever dreamed of disturbing the piano players while they were playing or approaching the piano if they were not piano students.

The small children received building blocks with which I loved to play and build houses, castles, palaces, and entire cities. If I didn't manage to finish what I was building, I would sometimes leave all the building blocks intact, without tidying them up. Nobody would touch them or move them from their place. Respect and consideration for others were the major values instilled in the children at the orphanage.

There was also a sewing course in which I participated. I learned how to mend socks, sew on buttons, and mend tears in clothing.

My favourite pastimes were ping pong, in which I excelled, and reading. There was a library along one of the walls of the dining room. Its shelves held many adventures and heroes. Once a week, in the evening, we were permitted to borrow books from the library. One of the teachers served as the librarian and advised us which books to read.

During the freezing cold winter months, when winds howled, rains grew torrential, and snow piled up in the streets, covering the trees and the roofs of houses, I would sit beside the heater where benches were arranged. With piano music in my ears, I was swept into other worlds which opened up before me through the pages of books.

Each child at the orphanage had a private drawer in which we could store our treasures. I had numerous collections, just like all children do. My joy was boundless when I had fruit seeds with which to play. I love them to this day. Adults never interfered in these collections unless we asked for assistance. We, the children, had to find our own solutions for our personal or social problems. If one of the adults wanted to guide or advise us, they would say, "If I may say so..."

## **Playing games with the doctor**

Dr. Korczak would sometimes notice that we were bored or else he might have simply wished to become a child again. He would gather us around to play games. One of our favourite games was "The Train". We would file into a long line behind the doctor who was the leader. We would "ride" throughout the entire big house, going in and out of all the halls and rooms, going up and down the stairs, our shouts of joy filling all the spaces.

Another game we sometimes played was “Green.” Playing “Green” meant that anybody who had any green item in their pockets, such as a leaf or a toy, was the winner.

Playfulness was definitely one of Dr. Korczak’s characteristics. He loved to surprise us, catch us unawares, crying, “Now we are going to play Green!” And we immediately pulled out the green items which we always made sure to have in our pockets. Nobody was going to beat us! If we won, Dr. Korczak produced a candy from his candy-filled pockets. Even if Dr. Korczak had something green in his pocket, it was never revealed and he always lost the game, so as to give us our candy prizes.

During the half hour before dinner, we knew that we were required to put away all our games in their proper places. The dining room helpers began to set the tables for dinner.

One of the experiences I remember from the orphanage was in connection with teeth. A child whose tooth fell out received a coin which was worth about a half a zloty. This was a huge amount for the child who could buy many candies with that money. We all craved that coin and tried to obtain it as fast as possible. If we felt the slightest looseness of a tooth, we ran happily to tell Korczak about it, “Doctor, my tooth is loose. Is it coming out yet?”

The experienced and wise doctor would pay thoughtful attention to the tooth and then determine, “Not yet, my child. Give it another week. Come back to me and we will check.”

The child, obviously disappointed would go on his way and return impatiently the following week. Again, Korczak seriously checked the tooth and once again gave his verdict. When the time came for Korczak to declare that the tooth was ready to leave its home, he said, “Hmmm, yes, I feel that this time it is much looser.” While talking to the child, telling one of his stories to distract him, he would yank the tooth out of its place. Joy! The doctor would fumble in his pockets and pull out the long-awaited coin. Dr. Korczak simply always found a coin in his pocket.



## Dr. Korczak's unique method

I wish to tell a very personal story at this point. I stuttered when I was a child. I do not know why, nor do I know when the stuttering began. Ashamed of the fact that I found difficulty in pronouncing words clearly, I shied away from the company of other children. I became sad, irritable, and felt humiliated.

Obviously, Dr. Korczak and Miss Stefa discerned my problem. Dr. Korczak would never let anything like that escape his perceptive eyes. With Korczak's agreement, Miss Stefa asked me whether my stuttering bothered me and then she wrote a letter to the school requesting the teachers to refrain from calling me up to the board and to exempt me from any oral testing. I would do all tests in writing, and anything oral would be done in private. Simultaneously, Dr. Korczak called me for a talk and we sat side by side.

"Itzchakale," he asked, "Do you want to stop stuttering?"

"Yes."

"I suggest you start out by reading out aloud, you alone. In that way, you will hear your own voice. Whenever you find a vacant room, enter it, close the door behind you, and sit and read out aloud. Once, twice, three times. If anybody enters the room and interrupts you, stop reading."

I did as he said. I chose books that I liked, and whenever the opportunity arose, I slipped off into one of the empty rooms, sometimes into the small room that was intended for my painting hobby (I will elaborate on that later). I read out aloud, over and over again. What a miracle!



When I read to myself, I did not stutter at all.

My explanation for this phenomenon is that, in his calm and quiet manner, Dr. Korczak instilled confidence in me. He understood the soul of a child, he was considerate of my feelings, and he was willing to search for a solution to every child's problems. The general atmosphere of safety at the orphanage also helped me to overcome my stuttering. This was an almost unbelievable solution which did not entail treatments, remonstrations, anger, or humiliation. The only advice I received was, "Sit down and read out aloud to yourself."

Over the years, through persistence, I gradually overcame my stuttering. My gain was three-fold. Firstly, I started to speak fluently. Secondly, I was never called up to the blackboard, or asked to speak aloud in front of the whole class, even after my problem had disappeared. The third was that I learned to love reading books, and do so to this very day.

## Sabbath traditions

Although the orphanage upheld traditional Jewish values, it was run along secular lines and there was no religious coercion. Friday, the traditional bathing day in Judaism, was the day on which we all bathed at the orphanage. First the girls bathed and then the boys just before the *Kabbalat Shabbat*.<sup>16</sup> There was no need to urge or remind us or to hurry us up.

You can just imagine a delighted and joyous band of children, chatting, joking, and letting off steam. We were offered the choice of bathing in a bathtub or under a stream of water in a shower. We all chose the shower which was most enjoyable. We could play, fool around, splash water, and forget all about the events of the past week. We were all educated to respect each other, not to hurt anyone, and to share our belongings. We were instilled with values of mutual respect.

The doctor was present with us in the bathroom, smiling and inviting everyone to join in the fun. This kind man walked among the young children and patiently, smilingly, taught us how to attend to our personal hygiene. He only allowed us to wash ourselves when he was fully confident that we understood the principles of bathing well enough.

<sup>16</sup>Literally "Receiving of Shabbat", is a ritual designed to welcome the Jewish Sabbath.

Sweet-smelling and dressed in fresh clothes, we proceeded to the dining room. Before dinner on Friday nights, one of the children would be waiting in the hall with a hat filled with slips of paper. These papers bore names of children who, throughout that whole past week, had no complaints filed against them and who had not been defined as “uncaring residents.”

Five randomly-appointed children each pulled a slip out of the hat, one at a time. The five winners constituted the jury of the Children’s Court for the coming week. The children posted the list of judges on the bulletin board and the Children’s Court was scheduled for nine o’clock on Saturday mornings. I was never enthusiastic about becoming a judge or having the responsibility of criticizing my friends, but I was obliged to respect the rules.

The atmosphere on Friday nights was festive. There was a *Challah*<sup>17</sup> on each table for the *Kabbalat Shabbat*, *Shabbat* candles were lit on the central table, and the teacher Jakob Tzuk blessed the wine. The meal served was quite different from the dinners on any other day of the week. After the meal came the *Oneg Shabbat*<sup>18</sup>. We were told long stories and bedtime was put off for much later.

On Saturday mornings woke up late and then we dressed ourselves. After the cod-liver oil ceremony, we were weighed and measured. At the sound of the gong, we sat down quietly for breakfast. There was an assembly of all the orphanage children at ten o’clock.

The assembly took place in the large reading room, each child taking his or her chair from the dining room. First, Dr. Korczak reviewed the week by reading from the children’s newspaper. The articles in the newspaper were written by the children, while Dr. Korczak had a regular column. The topics of the articles expressed the events of that week. Exceptional cases were discussed, analyzed, conclusions were drawn, and if necessary, we were reprimanded. At the end of this part of the assembly, Miss Stefa read out the verdicts of the judges of the Children’s Court.

<sup>17</sup>Challah is Jewish braided bread eaten on Sabbath and holidays.

<sup>18</sup>Oneg Shabbat is literally “Joy of Sabbath”, including stories, songs, discussions, and refreshments.

# The children's court

The Children's Court was to settle complaints received by any member of the pedagogical staff against any child during the last week. On Saturday mornings, the clerk read out the complaints one by one to the judges, who were the children chosen for that purpose.

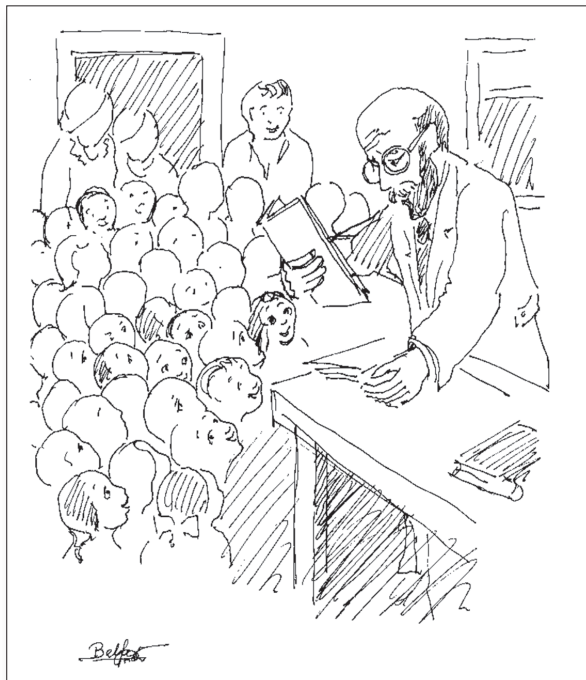
The judges discussed the details of each complaint, listened to the various sides of the issues read out to them, and decided upon the appropriate punishment by means of a vote. The punishment was selected from the legal code of the Children's Court, which stressed the value of forgiveness.

Articles 1 to 99 covered minor infractions, pardoned the defendant or even cancelled the complaint. The reasoning was: "If the defendant acted wrongly without realizing it, he or she will commit that infraction again in the future. If the defendant committed the act by mistake, he or she will take more care in the future. The best action to take is to wait for the child to improve his or her ways."

The next step on the scale of the legal code was for the defendant to be pardoned, but it would be pointed out that he or she acted wrongly.

The articles then progressed in units of one hundred to one thousand. For example:

Article 100:  
The court does not declare the defendant guilty, does not censure or display the court's displeasure, but includes the case in the judgment count.





Article 300: You acted wrongly; the court censures this and demands that you do not repeat this action.

Article 600: The court has decided that the defendant was greatly at fault. The judgment must be published both in the newspaper and on the bulletin board.

Article 1000: The child is finally expelled, with the right to apply to the children's Appeals Council for readmission after three months, on condition that the pupil promises to mend his or her ways.

If there was opposition to the verdict, both sides would submit an appeal to the court. At the end of the assembly, we were free to do as we wished after returning our chairs to their places in the dining room.

## The Saturday meal and mother's "kichlach"

Lunch on Saturdays was served at twelve o'clock. I have two memories of these lunches. Firstly, they were quite different from lunch on any other day of the week and secondly, the *katchkeleh*, the serving of duck. We loved this dish which had a distinct taste, the taste of *Shabbat*.

Satisfied after our lunch, those of us who had families or relatives went out to visit their homes at one o'clock. I can still remember the delicious taste of my mother's wonderful *kichlach*<sup>19</sup> which awaited me on Saturdays. They were fresh, crispy, and sweet, just like she was. "How are you, my son?" would be her first question together with a warm kiss. "How do you feel at the orphanage?"

I told her about my new friends, boys and girls, about the events that transpired at school, and about our games. I always finished my account with the words, "Everything is fine, everything is so good there." Mother listened to me, happy to hear what I was telling her, a soft smile on her face, nodding her head. She gave me a hug and a kiss and went on with her work.

The children who remained at the orphanage on Saturday afternoons either joined Dr. Korczak for a walk in the public parks

<sup>19</sup>Yiddish for "cookies."

of Warsaw, went to see a film, or ate ice cream.

During the winter, when we were unable to go outdoors, all the children sat around the doctor who read them one of his stories. Indeed, I was sometimes envious of the children who remained at the orphanage on Saturday afternoons, for being able to enjoy those activities.

From four o'clock in the afternoon, the orphanage received visits from former pupils who had grown up and left the orphanage, but not forgotten it. These encounters were extremely moving, whether they were with the children, Dr. Korczak, or Miss Stefa. Those orphans had by then married, brought their wives or families along on these visits to "grandmother and grandfather." They were always met with a huge smile, a hug, a caressing stroke, and an attentive ear.

Those of us who returned early from our visits to our families' homes observed these encounters with curiosity and wonderment, not believing our eyes. Here were once small children who had become adults. We did not understand that we, too, were growing and developing.

On Saturday evenings, at about 6:30, we once again assembled and were served dinner at seven o'clock. We were in our beds at eight o'clock. Lights were extinguished at nine. The next morning we awoke to greet the new week.

## **The Kingdom of children**

During all my years at the orphanage, my peers and I felt sure that this was our home and that we were responsible for its proper management. This was the children's republic. The children were certain that they had both equal rights and duties, all based on the legal code of the orphanage.

The Children's Independent Governing Council was the highest body in charge of enforcing the legal code of the orphanage. The members of the Children's Council were replaced once a year by elections which lasted for an entire day. The first stage was the election of the parliament which consisted of twenty children. A child was elected if he or she had the support of five other children of the orphanage. During its first session, the twenty parliament

members appointed nine members to constitute the Independent Children's Council. This Council appointed three members of the Court of Appeals and the clerk (an educator) who was, by definition, ineligible for voting.

The Children's Council received a budget of one half a percent of the orphanage income. This sum was deposited into the Council's bank account and was used to finance the regular activities of the Council and to assist in exceptional cases. The clerk was responsible for depositing the cheques into the bank account.

## The legal code of the orphanage

The following is an excerpt from the legal code of the orphanage:

- A guardian<sup>20</sup> will be appointed for the new recruit for a period of three months. This period may be shortened or lengthened according to the needs of both sides. The guardians volunteer for this duty at the general assembly of the children. Boys are in charge of boys and girls are in charge of girls.
- All the children vote to appoint the guardian for the new child from among the candidates. The guardian will provide the child with information, advice, and protection when necessary.
- The guardians will use a notebook to take notes about anything special regarding the new child. At the end of the period of guardianship, the guardian will write down positive and negative traits of the child's behaviour from his or her point of view.
- The children's court will settle arguments between the new recruit and the guardian.
- A month after the arrival of the new recruit, there will be a referendum regarding the child. Each child in the orphanage receives three slips of paper. One of the papers has a plus sign, meaning that the child votes for the new recruit and another paper has a minus sign, meaning that the child does not approve of the new recruit. The third paper contains a zero sign, meaning that the child has no opinion or does not care.

<sup>20</sup> Apotropos, the term for "Guardianship", in Jewish Law. It means the guardian or custodian of another's affairs.

- If a child receives a large number of minus signs, he or she will be called a “difficult recruit” and his or her parents will be notified that their child may be asked to leave the orphanage.
- A year after the arrival of the new recruit, yet another referendum is held regarding the new child. He or she then receives the status of a “member”, a “resident” or a “careless resident”, for the negative cases.
- The title that is given by the Children’s Independent Governing Council is re-examined each year and is subject to change.
- The children must study at school or in a group. They must help out by fulfilling their duties. They are obliged to learn Hebrew, gymnastics, singing, and music. Participation in plays and cultural entertainment is not compulsory.
- The Children’s Court deals with any arguments between the children and the staff. The Court’s ruling is according to the Legal code. There are ten convicting sentences, the most severe being expulsion from the orphanage.
- The Children’s Court sits once a week. All five judges are appointed each week by drawing lots. Especially important matters are relayed to the Court’s Council, consisting of an educator and four children.
- The children visit their families once a week on Saturdays. The Independent Governing Council may grant any child permission for a longer stay at his or her family’s home, during holidays or festivals.
- The manager of the orphanage and the chief educator are responsible to the Governing Council and the guardian committee for taking care of the children, and are responsible to the children for stringent adherence to the rules of the orphanage.

## Dr. Janusz Korczak's room

You may wonder why we all craved a visit to the doctor's room. There was a couch there, waiting only for us. At least, so it seemed. It was in that room that we could enjoy the undivided attention of Dr. Korczak. What a luxury it was!

It was sufficient to complain of a headache, real or imaginary, for Korczak to lead us by the hand up the staircase to the room in the attic. Korczak would place a pillow on the couch, gently lie us down on the couch and caress our brow until we fell asleep, safe and protected.

The room was sparse in appearance, modestly furnished, with no luxuries or extravagances. On entering the threshold, it was the window that first caught one's attention. This arched window exposed a view of Warsaw and below it one could observe the courtyard of the orphanage. The window was composed of connected glass squares. One of the squares, the one closest to the windowsill, resembling a porthole, was always open. This is where the doctor laid two saucers, one filled with water and the other with crumbs of food. Who was this for, you may ask. It was for the birds. Every bird was invited for a meal. Korczak understood the ways of birds and was an expert in their cycle of life.

There was a large library on the right side of the room behind the couch. On the left was a monastic bed with a mattress and blanket. At the head of the bed, there was a huge desk, inherited from Korczak's father. It was constantly covered with books and papers. In addition, the room contained a bench and several chairs and — a small mouse which moved around freely, to the delight of the children and the regret of Korczak's guests. The surprising fact is that the mouse never left Korczak's room to roam around the rest of the house.

It was in this room that Dr. Korczak sat at his large desk, seeking solutions to educational and developmental issues through his unique approach to problems of childhood. It was at this desk that the doctor expressed and composed his pedagogical theories and wrote his books. Besides all of these activities, he created and arranged radio programs in which he administered medical and educational advice to parents. Korczak would also make notes for lectures he was about to deliver at universities, seminars, Jewish organizations, and to the general public.



In his private corner of this room, Korczak searched for solutions to the economic crisis confronting the entire world, Poland, and the orphanage in particular. Here too, he conceived his ideas for improving the lives of the children living under his roof in the orphanage.

Any boy or girl was permitted to visit Dr. Korczak's room for any conceivable physical or emotional reason. Children who had something bothering them or a difficulty of any nature were met with an attentive ear and ample advice. It was here, too, that Dr. Korczak wrote his children's books loved by so many young readers.

Korczak's numerous projects kept him away from the home during the course of the day for many hours at a time. "I am a father, with all the negative implications of the role," he would say. "I am always busy, with not enough time for leisure. I can tell stories, but I tell them very rarely."

As soon as the children noticed that Korczak had returned from his work outside the orphanage, they hurried towards him, clinging to him, hugging and being hugged. In return, they received an embrace, a little story, a joke, a smile, or a feeling of security of "daddy has returned home".

Korczak used games as one of his methods of education. Another method was called "betting". Once a week, at an assigned time, we would find him sitting in the "store", the same room in which we received our school supplies. The purpose of "betting" was to help any child to overcome a negative habit that constituted an obstacle in his or her life.

## **My disobedience, the doctor's bet, and my win**

I was an unsociable child. I was ashamed of my stammer which prevented me from forming relationships and hampered my social bonding with children who, in my opinion, "did nothing". I was boastful of my sports prowess. I sometimes initiated activities that did not receive the cooperation of other children. For a long time, I was merely a "resident" and found myself involved in arguments, conflict, and fights. I was judged by the Children's Court.

The court found me guilty on several occasions. I so wanted to be recognized as a “member.” I usually neglected my studies at school and invested the minimum effort in doing homework assignments. In addition, I was dreamy, absentminded, and created a world of my own.

When I was about eleven years old, I realized that I had to change certain behaviour patterns in order to become socially accepted. I sought the advice of the doctor, certain that he was able to counsel and instruct me.

A long queue formed outside the “store” on the assigned day. I waited impatiently in the line for my turn to talk to the doctor. When my turn finally arrived, Korczak asked, “How can I help you?”

“I am ashamed of my negative behaviour towards the other children.”

“I agree with you. It is important that you change your attitude. But please know, my child, this is going to be a long and difficult process. You will succeed if you show persistence and determination. Now please tell me, how many times a week will be enough for you to argue and fight?”

“None at all.”

“You may argue and fight no more than four times a week. Obviously, you should try to stay out of confrontations, and do not accumulate more than two court cases a week.” I received a candy as a sign of agreement. “Come back to me in a week’s time and we will see whether you have succeeded.”

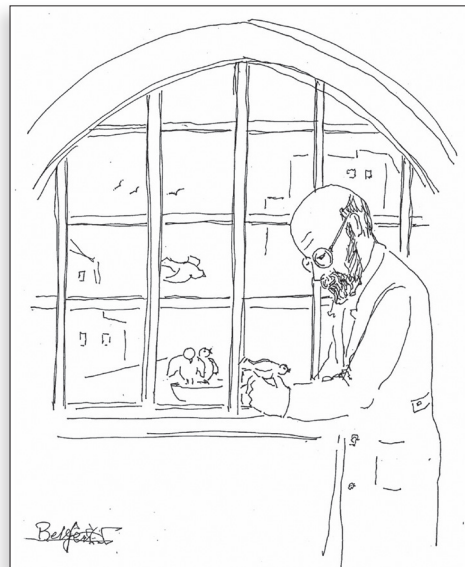
I returned to him.

“How was it?” he asked.

“Not very successful, I think. I was arrogant this week and I was involved in more than four fights.”

“Never mind,” said the doctor who knew that I had made an honest effort and that I was trying. “That was the first week. From now, not more than four times.”

This is how, from week to week, I continued the



process. Success was met with two candies. Failure meant a new agreement and only one candy.

The process finally succeeded, thanks to Korczak's patience and tolerance. It took me a long time, during which I learned to be less boastful, to make friends with the children, respect others, not to interrupt through an assumption that I knew better, and in short to be more considerate of others.

I had learned an important lesson: One must be persistent and unrelenting in order to succeed. It is preferable to live in a supportive and accepting environment. I eventually earned the title of "member" and indeed felt that I belonged.

## **I became an artist in this home**

Miss Stefa approached me one day when I was about ten years old. Placing a warm hand on my shoulder, she said, "Itzchakale, I know that you love drawing. If you wish, I will give you paper, pencils, colours, paintbrushes, and anything else you need. You may take the key to the "store" from the office whenever you like. This will be your very own corner where you will be able to sit quietly and draw."

My joy knew no bounds. My dream to draw was materializing. The excitement that swept over me improved my self esteem. I surmised that if Miss Stefa knew about my talent for drawing, the doctor probably knew too.

As an adult, I am able to appreciate the attention and perception of the doctor and Miss Stefa toward each of the children at the orphanage. There were one hundred and seven children in the home, each consisting of a world of his/her own, with different characters, personalities, and talents. Both Dr. Korczak and Miss Stefa succeeded in identifying and cultivating the hidden talents and strong points of each and every one of us, despite all the menial tasks they performed and the day-to-day problems and obstacles which required solutions. The doctor and Miss Stefa recognized our weak points too. They directed and guided us.

Until that point, I had been satisfied with sketching in my school notebook. But now I was equipped with a drawing pad, watercolour paints, pencils, and pencil crayons for colouring, all of which allowed my imagination to run wild.

I have no doubt that the attention and guidance I received from the doctor and Miss Stefa facilitated my affinity to the fine arts. The small room at my disposal was a private and quiet haven in which I could develop my talents and engross myself in books and dreams. I committed the drawings I had created in my imagination to paper using a pencil and paintbrush. I painted many landscapes, whether real or imagined.

Neither the doctor nor Miss Stefa ever visited me in my small room. They had full confidence in me and did not need to check on me. I did not tell anybody at home that I had started to draw.

## Camp once again, at the start of summer

How many children, especially children of an orphanage, had the privilege of attending summer camp during those years? We, the children of the orphanage, enjoyed this luxury because we had the distinguished Dr. Korczak, who understood how the human soul craved freedom, change, and refreshment. He was a person who sought to pamper us with the joys of nature.

Our school closed its gates when the summer heat began, and we were sent off on vacation. We set out excitedly and expectantly for the camp on a farm in Goclawek, a short distance away from Warsaw. We traveled first by tram and then by horse and cart, announcing our arrival with jubilant singing.

As soon as we arrived at our destination, we excitedly ran barefoot towards the golden spans of sand, surrounded by green



fields. The reason for running like that was to claim our stakes to our private little corners of land. Each of us took possession of a little plot of sand and immediately started digging sand holes, a metre deep, a metre wide, with wooden logs serving as steps to the bottom of our new dwellings, using tree branches for a roof. We were careful to mark out the borders of our territory into which we could escape from everybody else, or else invite friends to come and play or talk. We always found topics of interest to discuss.

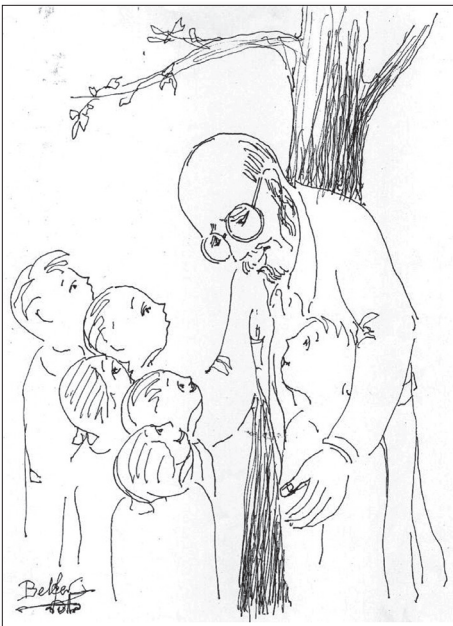
Dr. Korczak stayed on throughout our holiday at Goclawek and succeeded in giving us a feeling of freedom through organized games, maintaining a high level of mutual respect between us at all times. After breakfast, we were free as birds. Barefoot and wearing light clothing, we charged around in the open spaces.

Some of us spread our wings and went out to inspect the green fields. Others joined the doctor for walks in the nearby forest, burrowing and searching for treasures in the dark shadows of the trees: blackberries, mushrooms, interesting leaves, a pebble for a souvenir, a squirrel to which to say good morning, or a dried fruit that had fallen from one of the trees. The older children enjoyed the privilege of paid employment in the farm's hothouses. I picked fruit and, like my friends, earned ample money with which to buy several

luxuries for myself on our return to Warsaw.

In the afternoons, after scrubbing off all evidence of the morning's activities, we gathered once again in the dining room. Dr. Korczak was consistent in educating us about our own personal hygiene.

We occupied ourselves during our leisure time in the afternoons playing table games, outdoor games, simply running wild, or practicing for the Olympic Games that





were held at the beginning of the second month of our stay at the camp. Hungry and thirsty after these activities, we were served sandwiches, fruit, and water in the dining room.

Even here, in the dining room, Dr. Korczak provided us with an important lesson in life. Above the dining table there was a poster indicating that we should eat and enjoy ourselves, but that we should make sure to leave enough for the other children.

At the end of the day's activities, we sat down for dinner washed, combed, and dressed in fresh clothes. After dinner, we gathered around the doctor, listening to his stories, talking about everyday matters, making requests, and solving problems.

Among the numerous activities of the camp were occasional excursions in which we learned about new places. One of our favourite outings was to the Vistula River; the highlight was the inevitable prank that the doctor played, which usually reduced us to tears of laughter.

## **A moment of grace**

I was about twelve years old, still small and thin. I awoke one morning at the summer camp to the sound of whispering voices. Dr. Korczak and Miss Stefa were standing at the foot of my bed with a concerned countenance. "Itzchakale, are you feeling alright?" asked Miss Stefa. "Are you hungry? Should I bring you something to eat?" I was late waking up that morning, and like two concerned parents, they were worried that something was wrong with me. Nothing was the matter with me. I was simply in the deep sleep of an adolescent.

"There is no need to bring me anything to eat," I answered, embarrassed at the concern I had aroused, "Everything is alright, I will eat when I get up."

"In that case, continue sleeping as much as you like," said Miss Stefa and stroked my head.

I will never forget that heartwarming moment, a moment of love and concern.

Dr. Korczak regarded physical exercise as paramount to our wellbeing. He held Olympic Games at the camp so as to encourage us to train and strive for excellence. The games were organized for

all the children at the camp by the “Committee for Beneficial Games”. The sports included athletics, high jump, long jump, and team games.

Sports games were for boys and girls together and some of them were for boys or girls separately. There were three stages for each of the areas of sport: quarter finals, semi finals, and championship, as in the real world.

I was small and nimble and participated in the long-distance running competitions, 400 and 800 metres. I sometimes came first in these competitions. I also enjoyed competing in the volleyball team. As an older child, I was even selected as the captain of the team.

There were also mock games, such as the sack race in which we ran with our legs in a sack tied at our waists, the egg in a spoon race, in which we ran while holding an egg in a spoon, the loser being the first one to drop the egg, and a tug-of-war competition.

After the sports day we, of course, slept very soundly.

Participation in the sports events taught us to strive for excellence and to practice seriously for these competitions. These lessons proved to be useful tools later in our independent adult lives.

## Tonight is the big night

During the evening meal, the boys were flooded with a wave of concern that the girls could get wind of their plans for a nocturnal walk that night. The boys went to sleep earlier than usual, excited and barely able to fall asleep.

At midnight, we silently crept out of our beds and rooms, cautious not to let a shriek of joy awaken the girls. Dressed in warm clothing and carrying potatoes for the camp fire, we set out into the cold night in the direction of the forest with the doctor and a teacher on duty.

The further we moved from the farmhouse, the louder our cries of joy. Our laughter and animated singing drove away any apprehensions of all fifty one boys off to seek an adventure.

After walking for about a half an hour, we reached the forest, prepared to experience the highlight of the camp’s activities. Twigs released sparks of fire and snapping sounds from the camp fire we lit. Our appetites were unleashed at the smell of the potatoes, the *kartoshkes*, roasting away, trapped between the whispering coals. We

sat around the fire on blankets spread out on the ground, bewitched and amused by Dr. Korczak's tales.

The exhilaration of that night made way for fatigue. Still smiling with happiness, the younger children fell asleep and the older ones stayed awake, taking turns at guard duty.

At the crack of dawn, we returned to the farmhouse, proud, merry and noisy, waking up the girls with our shrieks of laughter, and evoking their envy of our night's adventure. Needless to say, the girls were also treated to such a night on another occasion!

We were permitted to carry on sleeping until lunchtime the following morning, obviously not before we had cleaned ourselves of everything that had stuck to our clothes and bodies during our hike and campfire.

We cherished this experience. Recollections of the nocturnal picnic of the Goclawek camp are still vivid in my memory.

At the end of August, our splendid summer vacation, we returned home to the orphanage in Warsaw, full of energy and equipped with a sack full of memories and experiences.



# Chapter 3

## No Longer a Child

*There are no children, just people who have different ranges of understanding, experiences, desires, and feelings. Remember! We do not know them.*

**Janusz Korczak**

**I** stood alone at a crossroads for the first time in my life, sad, afraid, bewildered, and helpless. According to the legal code of the orphanage, I was to leave at the end of my elementary school studies. I was fourteen years old and the time for my departure was drawing near.

Where would I go? What would I do? There was no room for me at home. My mother was worn out due to her strenuous life, having barely enough to support the family. How could I impose myself upon her? My *yiddishe*<sup>21</sup> childhood lifestyle had already become foreign to me. I felt alienated. I had been exposed to distant, different, and interesting worlds. I did not have a profession, so where would I find employment? It was clear to me that as a boy from a poor home living in those times, I would have no choice but to go out and work once I finished my studies at elementary school. Time was running out, but still I had no solution.

“Itzchak,” said Miss Stefa, as she called me in those days instead of “Itzchakale”, another sign that I was growing up, “I know what you are going through. I also know what your family’s situation is at home. Why don’t you put in a request to the Children’s Council to stay at the orphanage for another year? You should state in your request that if the council agrees, you will commit yourself to any assistance that may be required, in the house, or in caring for the children.”

I felt an immediate sense of relief. I drafted a letter in which I gave all my reasons for requesting an additional year at the orphanage and my pledge to be of assistance in any way I could. After several days, I received a positive answer to my request.

<sup>21</sup> Jewish

In retrospect, I understand now as an adult that Miss Stefa and Dr. Korczak had initiated this move so as to help me out of my predicament. It was so wonderful that the children, in this case the Children's Council, was authorized to discuss requests, consider facts, and make decisions.

## **My first employment**

The secretariat of the orphanage was responsible for finding me employment. I am sure that Miss Stefa was involved in this issue, thanks to the connections and respect that she and Dr. Korczak had cultivated. The job was at a well-known and prestigious record store in Warsaw, owned by Jews. Radio Poland even purchased records for its broadcasts from that store.

I was proud and excited. I, Itzchak, already a grown boy was working and earning money as a messenger boy. I was responsible for delivering vinyl records which had been ordered by wealthy and respected Warsawians. I enjoyed the task extremely! I would often save the tramway fare and walk through the streets of Warsaw, looking around me curiously, drinking in the sights and sounds, taking my time and not always in a hurry to reach my destination. After two weeks, the storeowner suggested that I buy myself a bicycle. "Your deliveries are too slow. A bicycle will save you time and you will be able to make more deliveries," she said.

I consulted with Miss Stefa. "Why don't you submit a request to the children's council?" she said. I put in a request which was approved on condition that two council members accompany me to purchase the bicycle. Of course I agreed. When I relate this story today, I smile to myself. My companions were younger than me and the business of purchasing and selling items was foreign to them. The orphanage treated us so wonderfully, giving us the feeling that we were grown up, responsible, respected, and able to reflect and make decisions, to feel independent and to feel that we were prepared for adult life.

On a pre-arranged day, we set out for a bicycle repair store. In a very adult manner, we had decided to buy the parts for assembling a bicycle on our own instead of purchasing a new bicycle. There was



no happier person than I. My joy was boundless! I pedaled away proudly and happily, sailing through the streets of Warsaw!

The days went by, weeks, and months. I was floating on a cloud. I was the owner of a bicycle, working, earning a wage, and returning to sleep at the orphanage in the evenings.

And then it happened. Somebody coveted the bicycle. It was not even new or shiny. It was worth nothing, but it was mine. One day, on the way back from a delivery, I tied the bicycle to its regular place at the back entrance of the store. When I was called to my next delivery, my heart missed a beat. The bicycle was not there anymore, as if it had never been there. I went back to the store but was so tearful and upset that I could barely articulate the words, "somebody took my bicycle". I could not believe it had happened.

I told Miss Stefa what had happened. I felt betrayed. How could anybody steal a bicycle that three innocent children had assembled so painstakingly?

Miss Stefa had foreseen what was about to happen and, unbeknownst to me, had already started looking for another place of employment for me. About one week after the theft, I was indeed fired from my job as a messenger at the record store. Thanks to that kind and wise woman, the mother of all the orphans, I was hired as an apprentice in a small enterprise that assembled radios. It was called Trio Radio and was also under Jewish ownership. The company was located on Grzybowska Street, a stone's throw away from the Jewish school where I had been a pupil.

The time was drawing close for me to leave the orphanage, the home of Dr. Korczak and Miss Stefa. "Itzchak," said Miss Stefa, "You will be returning to your home in several days. This is a new chapter in your life. You will receive a suitcase containing full sets of clothes, from head to toe. We bid you the best of luck."

Once again, I stood before the iron gate of the tall brick wall. This time, I was on the other side of it and I was alone. I left the home holding a suitcase. I was leaving the courtyard and leaving my childhood years behind. A click of the latch and I was on the outside.

In all honesty, I remember nothing from the process of

parting. I do not remember the hours before I left, or whether anybody accompanied me. Were they watching me from behind? I do not remember the very moment at which my feet stepped outside the orphanage.

All I remember is how extremely trying it was to return to my mother's home. Chaya, my older sister, was still living at home. She and my mother welcomed me with warm and loving embraces, which gave me the feeling that I was wanted there. Although it was, in fact, my home, I felt strange and detached. It was difficult to re-adapt to life in my mother's home.

The physical conditions and economic situation dampened my spirits. Five of us were crammed into one room. My mother barely made a living, and I was an adolescent boy who naturally required independence and privacy. I was a little envious of my older brothers who had already married and set up their own homes. However, I had no choice or alternative solution.

During all of those days I carried on working at Trio Radio which was a haven for me. The work was mechanical and repetitious, consisting of transporting the framework of the radio from one worker to another for assembly, in a sort of conveyer belt. One worker added a part; I transferred it to the next worker who, in turn, added a component, and so on. I loved watching the process and also managed to learn the principles of radio assembly.

The highlight of the process was a visit to the room in which the engineers inspected the finished product. It was an apparent miracle when the radio began to work and emit sounds and voices. On several occasions, at the end of the day's work on my way home, I would stop for a minute or two near the wall of the orphanage, listening for any sounds that might be coming from there, imagining the activities going on inside, feeling nostalgia, and then stepping away with a heavy heart.

## From a secure home to reality

Injuries and harm to the Jewish population were, at that time, becoming routine. The first event of that nature that I witnessed left me shocked and distressed.

It was a summer's evening and I was on my way home from work. Reaching the Polish quarter, I heard shouts of anger and hatred. "Żydzi! Hit the Jews; hit them!"

The voices became louder and came nearer to where I was standing. The uproar of stamping feet indicated a huge crowd. I heard shouts of pain and crying. I stayed near a wall of one of the buildings as did other people around me, hoping not to be noticed and wishing to miraculously become invisible.

The crowd passed me by. Hundreds of people were carrying sticks and batons in their hands and were screaming instructions to hit the Jews. I could not fathom the source of this savagery.

Luckily for me, I was able to save myself as I resembled a Polish and not a Jewish child in both appearance and dress. After many moments, my breathing went back to normal and finally I dared to leave my temporary shelter. My knees shaking, I returned home, trying to understand what I had just witnessed.

It was only much later that I was conscious of the painful understanding that the rabble was collaborating with the rightist Polish government in the incitement of a mob against the Jews.

Like many other graduates of the orphanage, I participated in the gatherings that took place on Saturdays. During one of these gatherings, I conversed with two of my friends and we realized that we were in the same situation. We discussed the difficulty of living under the same roof with family on the one hand, and bearing the financial burden of independant lodgings on the other. We decided to take action and to rent an apartment together.

We rented an apartment from a Jewish family in the Jewish quarter. We shared the kitchen, bathroom, and toilet with the family. Life began to seem brighter to me. We each left the apartment in the morning for work and in the evenings we spent time together but had independant lives. We wove dreams together, made plans, enjoyed ourselves in the company of girls, and planned our futures.

## **The beginning of the horrendous war, Friday, September 1, 1939**

When Warsaw was bombed for the first time and we saw shells hit buildings, we ran back to our families' homes as fast as we could, so as to be together. My two brothers and their families also came to my mother's home, each couple cradling their baby. We sat together, fearful of what was about to happen. Together we hoped and prayed for the best.

The shortage of food worsened. There was no water and no electricity. Day and night, we ran for shelter at the wailing of the sirens. Fear was creeping in and we were restless. Heavy shelling and airplane bombing shattered Poland to pieces. The Polish air force was destroyed and the Germans, having the upper hand, increased the pressure and fire.

Towards the end of the month, the war which shocked the entire world and the Jewish people was already in full swing. It was then that an incident occurred, which rocked our whole family and left me full of sorrow and hurt. The bombing and shelling subdued Poland, leading to surrender to the Germans. The German army appeared at the gates of Warsaw in an aggressive victory march.

My family and I gathered in the street with many of our neighbours and the general population of Warsaw. Anxious masses of people were waiting outside their homes. Who knew what awaited them?

My grandfather's house was at the edge of the city. My grandparents sat close to the wall of the house. My mother, brother, sister, and I were standing beside them. Several metres separated us from the road. A German military vehicle appeared suddenly, driving slowly, and stopped opposite us. Two Germans, an officer and a soldier, emerged from the vehicle. They slowly crossed the small wooden bridge leading to the house and approached us with an evil smile on their faces and unpleasantly cold laughter.

One of the soldiers grabbed and pulled my grandfather's beard,

pulling him up to his feet. The other took out a large pair of scissors, and began to cut off his beard, laughing all the while. The locks of hair started falling, piling up at their feet. They carried on with their task, cutting with precision, taking care to cut only one side of the beard, all the while laughing hysterically. They were in no hurry, taking pains to enjoy what they were doing. When half of my grandfather's beard was fully shaved off, the soldiers retreated, entered the vehicle and left, their evil laughter still echoing in our ears and chilling our hearts.

We remained transfixed and almost paralyzed. Humiliated and helpless, we could not grasp what our eyes had beheld. We were convinced that these were messengers of the devil.

Supported by my grandmother and mother, my grandfather dragged his feet towards the house, and locked himself in his room, refusing to see anyone, except for my grandmother. We were shaken, confused, having never witnessed such cruelty before.

We tried to console our grandfather and calm him down, but his bedroom door remained locked before us. My grandfather's pain could not be alleviated and he permitted only my grandmother to enter and to bring him small portions of food and drink.

After several days, when my grandfather finally came out of his room, he was unrecognizable. Grandfather, the hero of my childhood, had once been an upright, long-bearded, well-groomed, and good-looking man who carried his age gracefully, courageous in his actions and thoughts. Instead, out of the room emerged an old man, his face shaven, wrinkled, his eyes extinguished. He looked small, bent, downcast, with a slow and weary gait, as though he bore a heavy load on his shoulders, the burden of his being Jewish.

Shocked and aching, the family unanimously decided to move away from our home. My uncle, my mother's oldest brother, and his wife were living in an apartment in the Jewish quarter of Warsaw. For some reason or other, there were several vacant apartments in their building. Their residents had possibly sought refuge somewhere else, owing to the raging War.

We moved into one of the vacant apartments in the Jewish quarter. Since we were, at that time, required to wear Star of David



armbands signifying that we were Jewish, we thought that we would be better off residing in a Jewish neighbourhood, where we lived as a community.

After a short time, I arrived at my place of employment, Trio Radio, only to find the premises locked and a notice reading: "Trio Radio has closed, due to the War." What was I to do? How would I make a living? How would I help my mother? I was immersed in desperation. My days of youth were over.

There was a dire shortage of food by then. Enterprises were closing down or were sending their products to the Germans and stores were sealed up. The ones that remained open had only a few products to offer. Fortunately, my uncle was the owner of a bakery so we at least had bread and I had a job for a short while.

My uncle suggested that I join a group of peddlers and sell bread rolls in the makeshift market that had sprung up on one of the streets. Bread was always in demand. I walked around and sold my wares, carrying a pail of rolls in addition to a wooden tray of rolls which was tied from my neck by a strip of leather.

When I felt tired, I laid the pail on the street corner, placed the tray on top of it, and continued my sales from there. People bought my rolls and I made a little money for our upkeep.

One morning, my route was blocked by a group of Jewish street children. They flanked me from three sides, stole all my rolls and ran away. This was the last time I went out to sell rolls.

I had a new job offer. One of my friends sold books in the street. Interestingly, despite the hardships, people were thirsty for books so as to temporarily escape from reality and enter the lives of other imaginary people. A book publisher was looking for salespeople. A friend of mine recommended me and I was offered the job. I sold light novels in Polish mainly to Jewish people. I do not remember how successful I was at this job and I am unable to remember why I stopped selling books.

From this point on, I concentrated my efforts on finding food for my family, and bringing water to our home. The authorities opened water distribution stations at various public places in Warsaw. I used to visit one of these stations holding a pail in each hand and waiting for a long time in the queue for my turn to fill the pails at

the faucets. Then I would return home, cautious not to let any of the water spill out of the pails. When the precious water reached its destination I went out again to stand in yet another queue, this time for food.

The search for food around the streets of Polish Warsaw was an extremely difficult task which I carried out without the armband signifying my shame, my being Jewish. I trusted that my “Warsavian” appearance and blue eyes would not betray my origin. Wandering around a Christian area with an armband would have been, at best, an invitation to be beaten, and in the worst case, shot to death.

I strode long distances through the streets, merely to find a store with one can of preserves on its shelves, or another store a small amount of beans. If I was fortunate, I would perhaps find a handful of noodles or potatoes, cabbage, cauliflower, or a beet or two. Any find would satisfy me, anything that would stave off our grueling hunger.

My walks through Warsaw took me to the neighbourhood of my childhood. I hoped that I would find some fruit in the fields at the back of the church opposite our old house. Many others had the same idea, mainly Christians. They were also starving and there was very little left for anybody to find.

The Nazis were aware of the starvation that had stricken Warsaw. Sometimes a truck would stop across the road and soldiers would throw out round loaves of old and dry black bread to the crowds that gathered in their tens or hundreds. This was mainly to show “consideration” and “humanity” before the movie cameras which filmed the “gesture” for purposes of propaganda. One can easily imagine the commotion, the shoving, and shouting. Everybody stretched out their arms to catch a loaf. While the Germans found this sight entertaining, it was, for us, an opportunity to bring home some food to eat. I was sometimes successful too. Mother would then cover the loaf with a damp cloth, so as to restore some of its softness, and of course we all shared the bread down to its last crumb.

## Abductions. Aktions

Several months after the occupation of Warsaw, the Germans began to round up the Jews into one residential area, the Jewish quarter, later known as the Ghetto. Jews all over Warsaw were ordered to exchange their home with Poles. The *Judenrat*, or Jewish Council, paid a high ransom for postponing the date of implementing the final demarcation of the Ghetto. Even before the Ghetto gates were finally sealed and movement to other areas of Warsaw was still possible, the authorities began to build a three metre wall covered with barbed wire. The overcrowded conditions inside worsened from day to day and several families had to occupy a single apartment. Violators of the curfew were severely punished.

The Nazis were known for the *Aktions* they organized. The German word *Aktions* means “action” or “campaign.” Although we already knew by then that the word embodied the action of locating, arresting, and deporting Jews, we were, at that stage, under the impression that Jews were being sent to forced labor camps. I was witness to these *Aktions* on several occasions, when the Germans closed the streets, blocked off any escape routes, and abducted Jews.

One evening, I was hurrying back home before curfew after seeking food all day. When I was already inside the Ghetto, I was caught in an *Aktion* together with others.

We were driven in two trucks about thirty kilometres east of Warsaw, to a labor camp. Our task was to clear out wreckage and dig a security ditch. The work was arduous and crushing and we worked from sunrise to sunset without a moment’s rest, not water or food. When we returned to the camp in the evenings, we were given a bowl of thin soup.

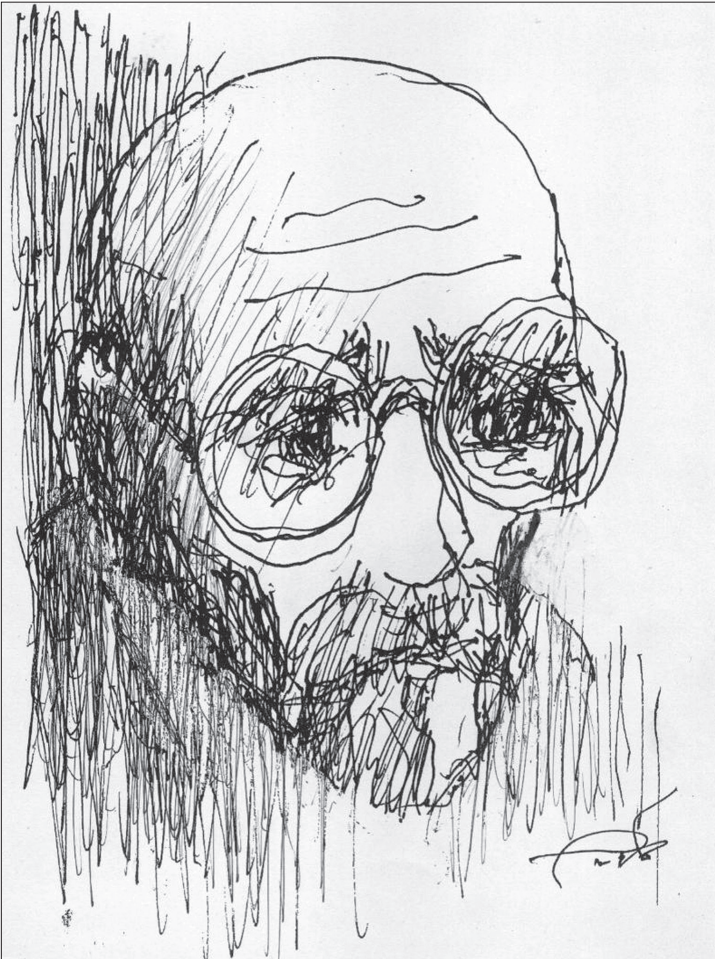
On our discharge from the labor camp on the third morning, we formed into groups so as to plan our way back home. To avoid capture, we chose a route through forests, moving by night and resting by day, so as not to traverse residential areas. Despite our hunger and exhaustion, I managed to return home to my family two days later, to my mother who had lost sleep through concern for my safety. My mother asserted that her strength would not hold out for another event like the last one and that we had to find a solution.

I agreed with her and we decided to find a way of escape out of that hell.

Never imagining that it would take another five years for the infernal War to be over, the idea of escape seemed reasonable. Naive and hopeful, I believed that life would return to normal after a short time and that I would soon return to my home.

## **A blessing from the doctor**

I encountered one of my friends during one of my Saturday visits to the orphanage. From our conversation, I understood that, like me, he wished to escape the pressure and persecution of life in Warsaw.



There was a prevalent rumor that it was safe to reside in a Polish area occupied by the Russians about one hundred kilometres from Warsaw. We decided to cross the border to Bialystok, which was the closest city on our escape route. In truth, we did not think too far ahead. The main consideration was to depart from the Ghetto and live elsewhere. We imagined that after several months, we would return to Warsaw.

Our anxious and concerned families were resigned to our decision and gave us their blessing without hesitation. We wished for the blessing from Dr. Korczak as well.

The situation in the orphanage was severe. The number of children residing there was by then one hundred and fifty girls and boys, some of whom were War orphans. Money was lacking, food was rationed, and it was difficult to heat the rooms adequately. The building was in need of repair since it had been damaged by the shelling. Above all, fear of eviction was hovering over their heads. Since Krochmalna Street was located in the Christian quarter, Dr. Korczak was commanded to leave the building and move the children to the Jewish quarter which was the Ghetto.

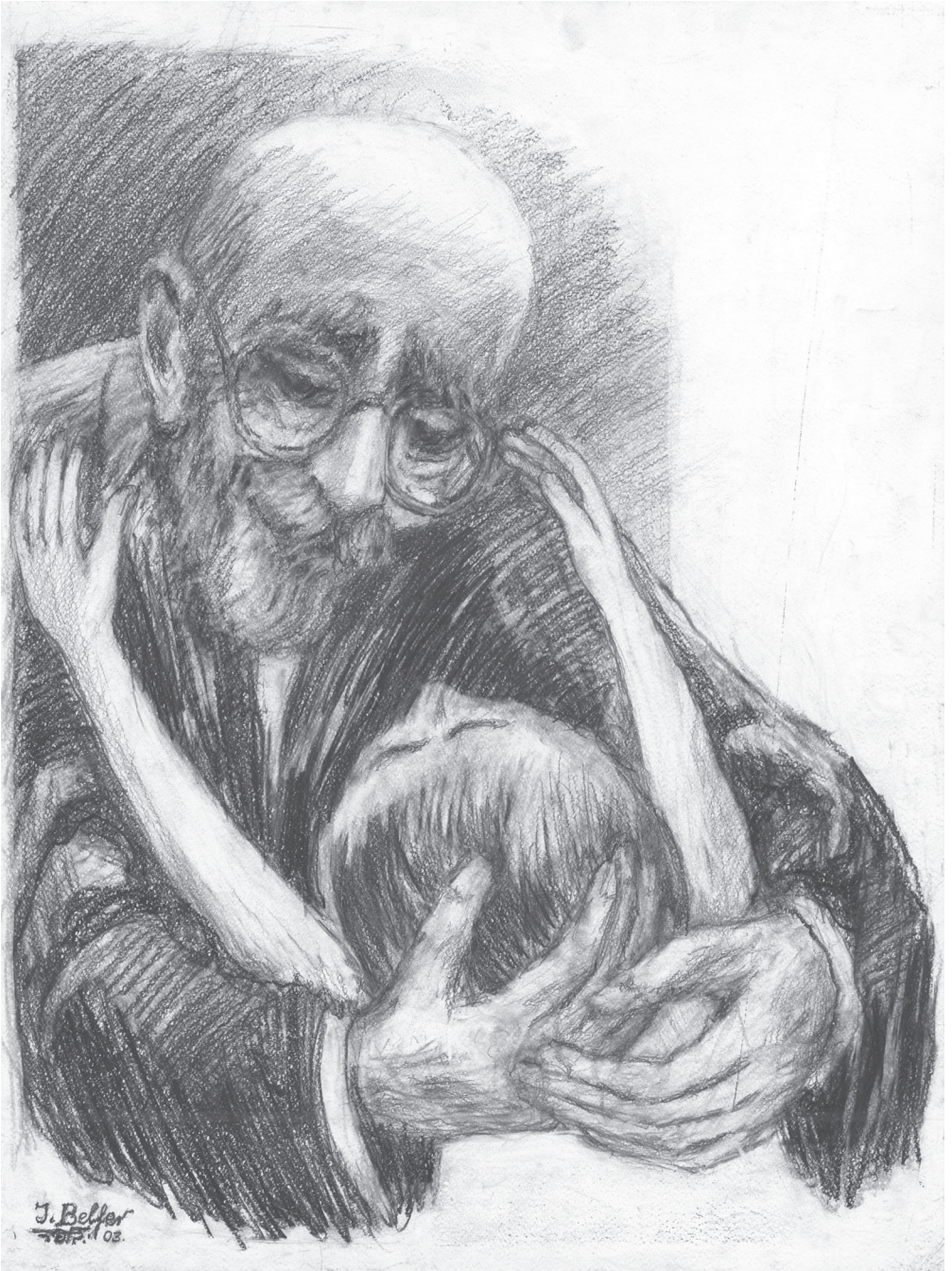
We found the doctor in the large hall surrounded by a circle of children, talking to them quietly. We apologized for interrupting them and explained the purpose of our visit. I will never forget the silent, shocked, and tense atmosphere. Tears welling in his kind and wise eyes, the doctor said these chilling words which have remained with me forever, "The nestlings are departing. They are flying from their nest."

The kind man, knowing us as a father would, expressed total understanding. The doctor himself had been imprisoned for refusing to wear the armband. He had, all his life, opposed any type of coercion and his educational doctrine encouraged free thought, and respect for others. Having no other choice, the doctor gave his blessing, provided us with several useful tips, and placed some small change into our hands.

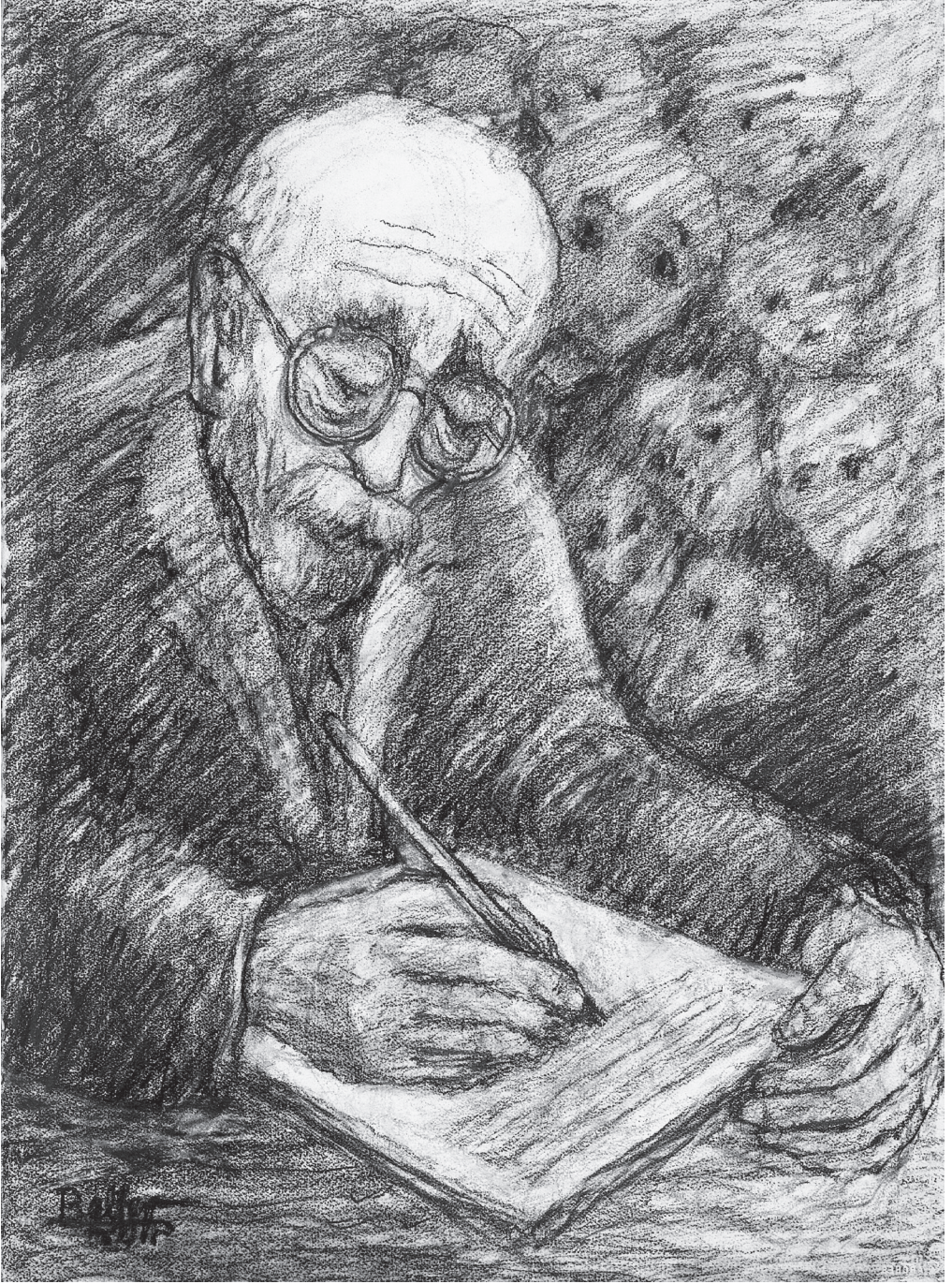
This was the last time I ever saw Dr. Korczak and Miss Stefa, who was standing to the side. I am not sure whether she participated in the conversation or not. She possibly remained silent due to her inability to help.



# Artwork by Itzchak Belfer















A Grandfather's Embrace – Printing ink on paper 30 X 45





Elders of the City – Printing ink on paper 38 X 57













The Mother – Printing ink on paper 50 X 70



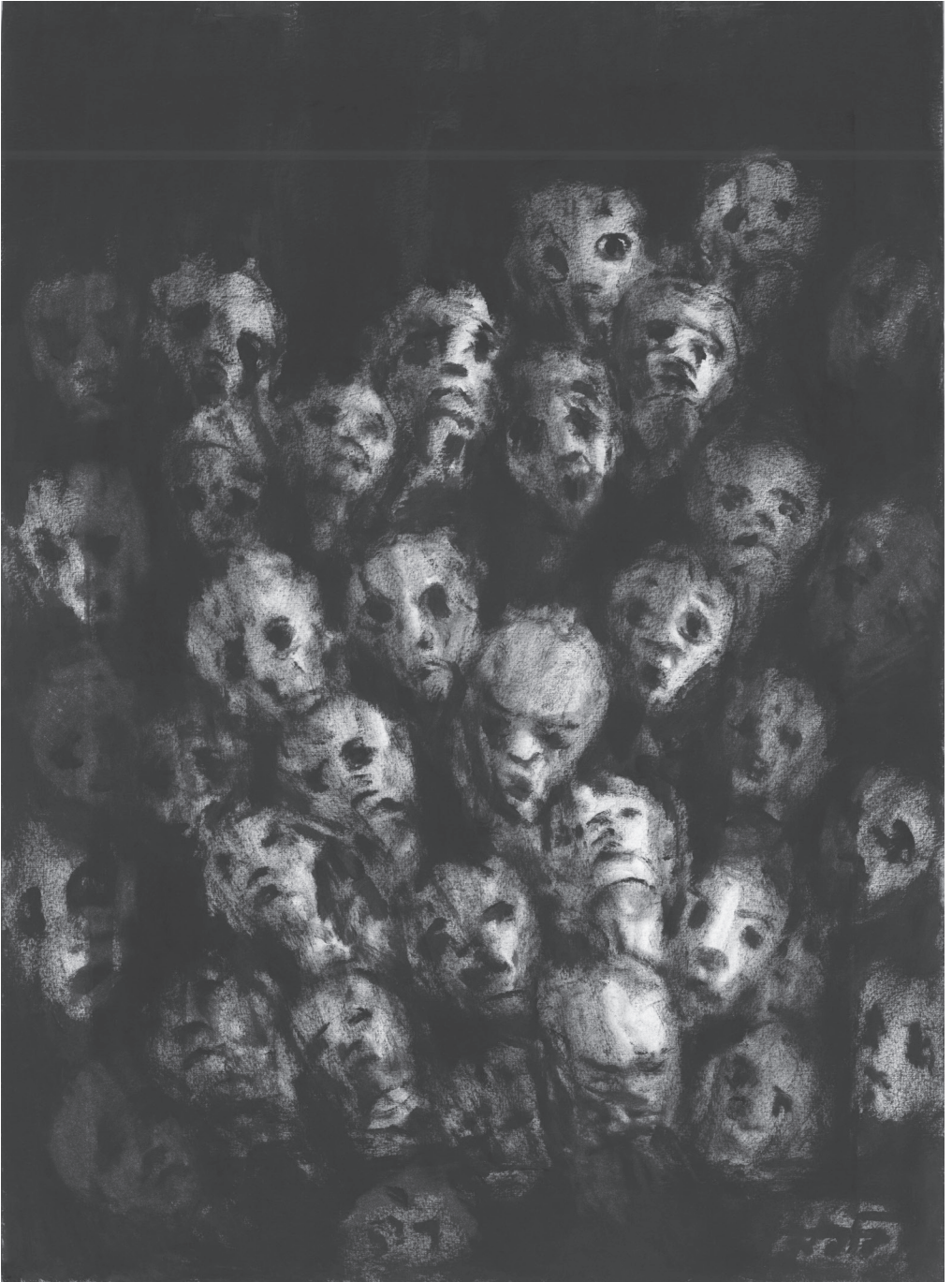


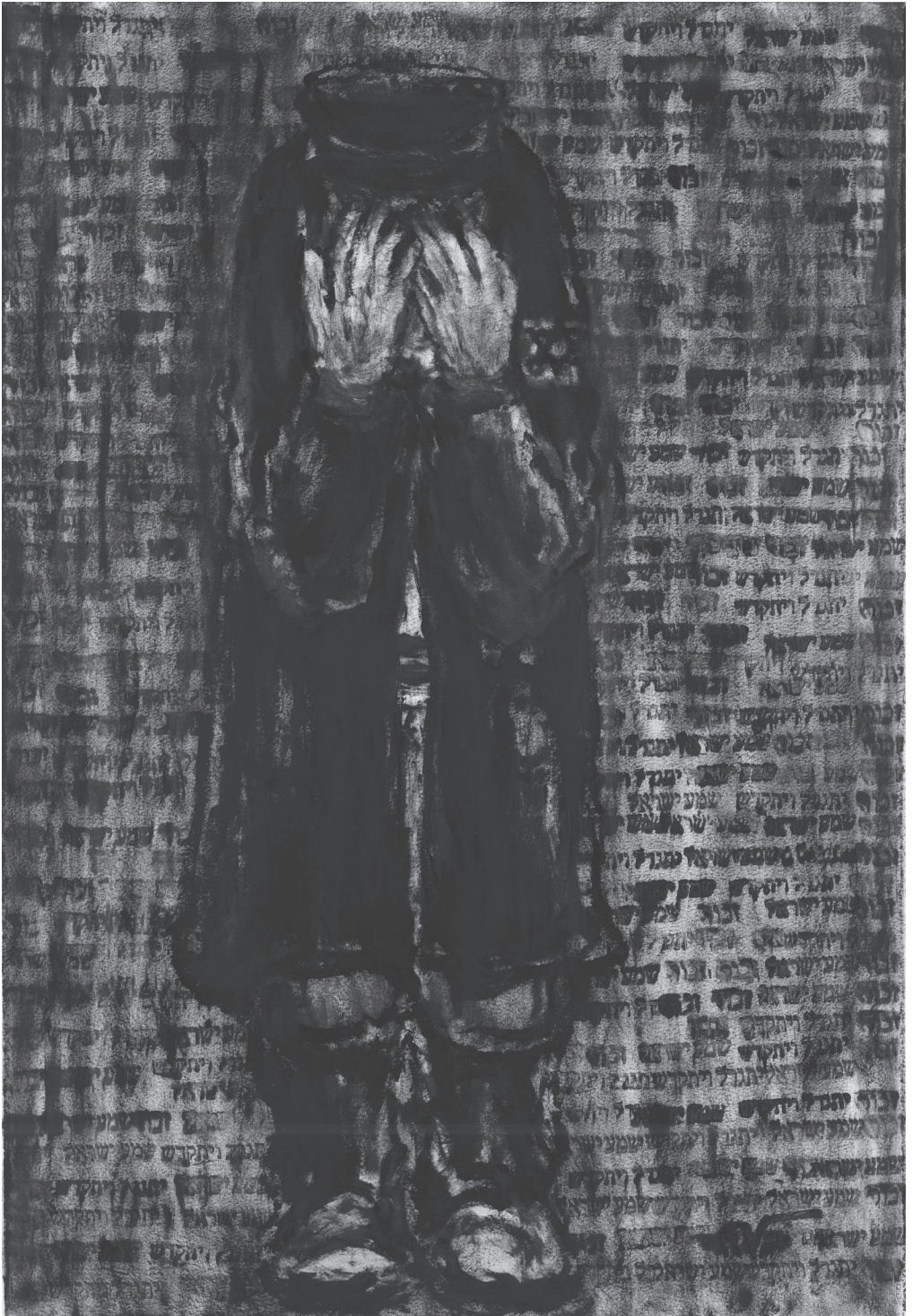




Meditations – Printing ink on paper 50 X 70











Despair – Printing ink on paper 35 X 50



The Escape – Printing ink on paper 35 X 50





Homeless – Printing ink on paper 35 X 50





Fear – Printing ink on paper 35 X 50





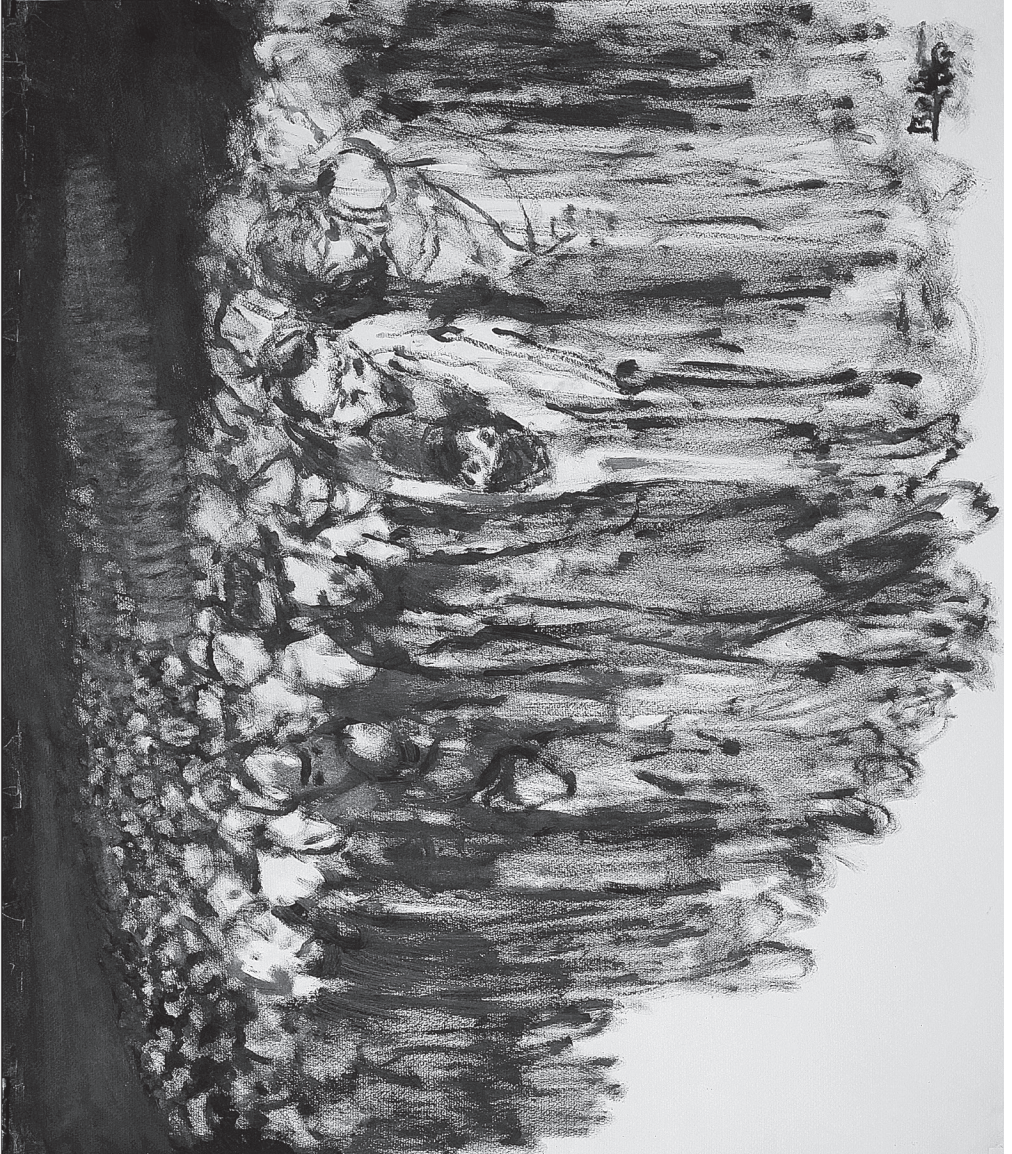




















In Distress – Printing ink on paper 35 X 50







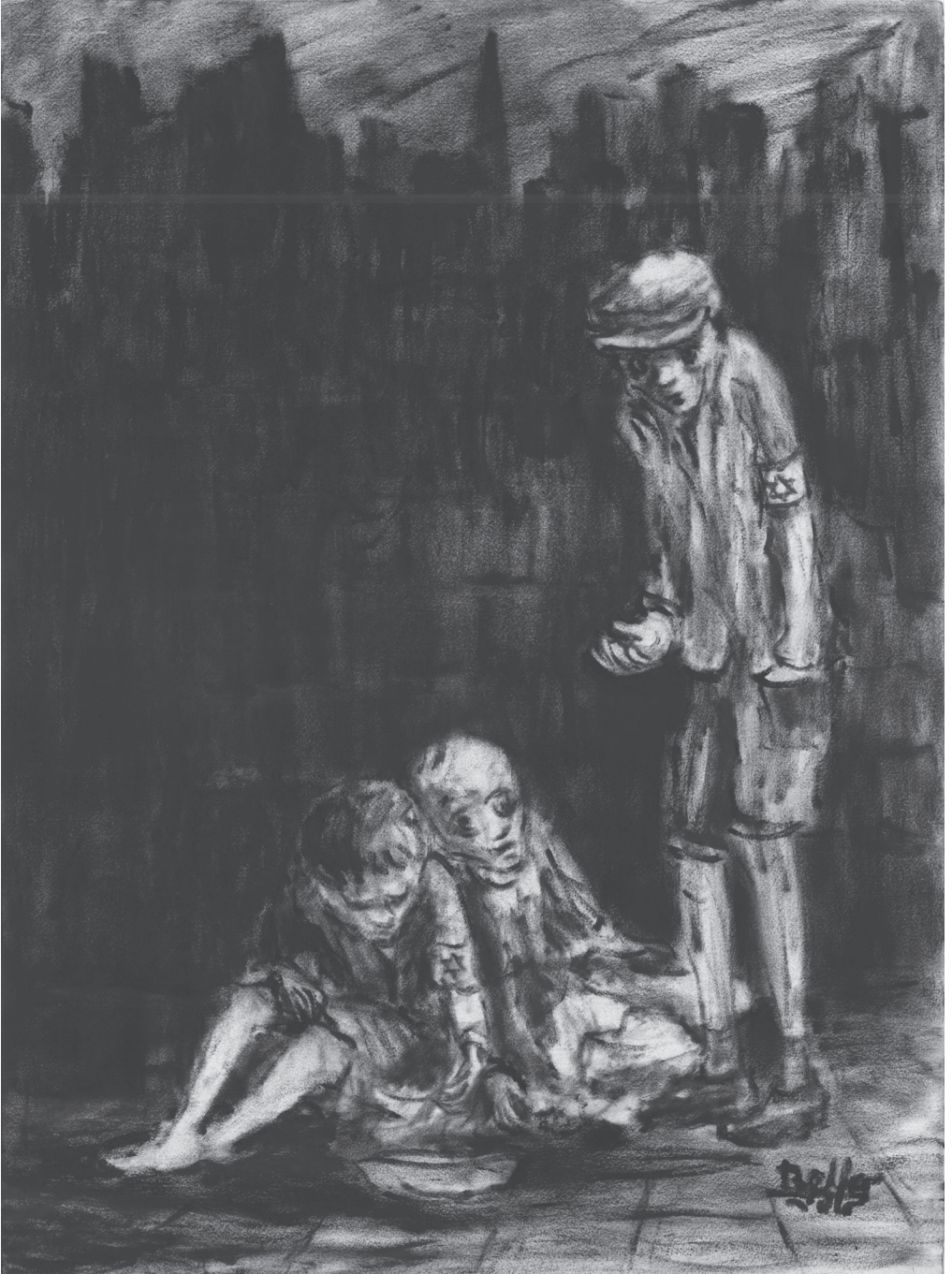




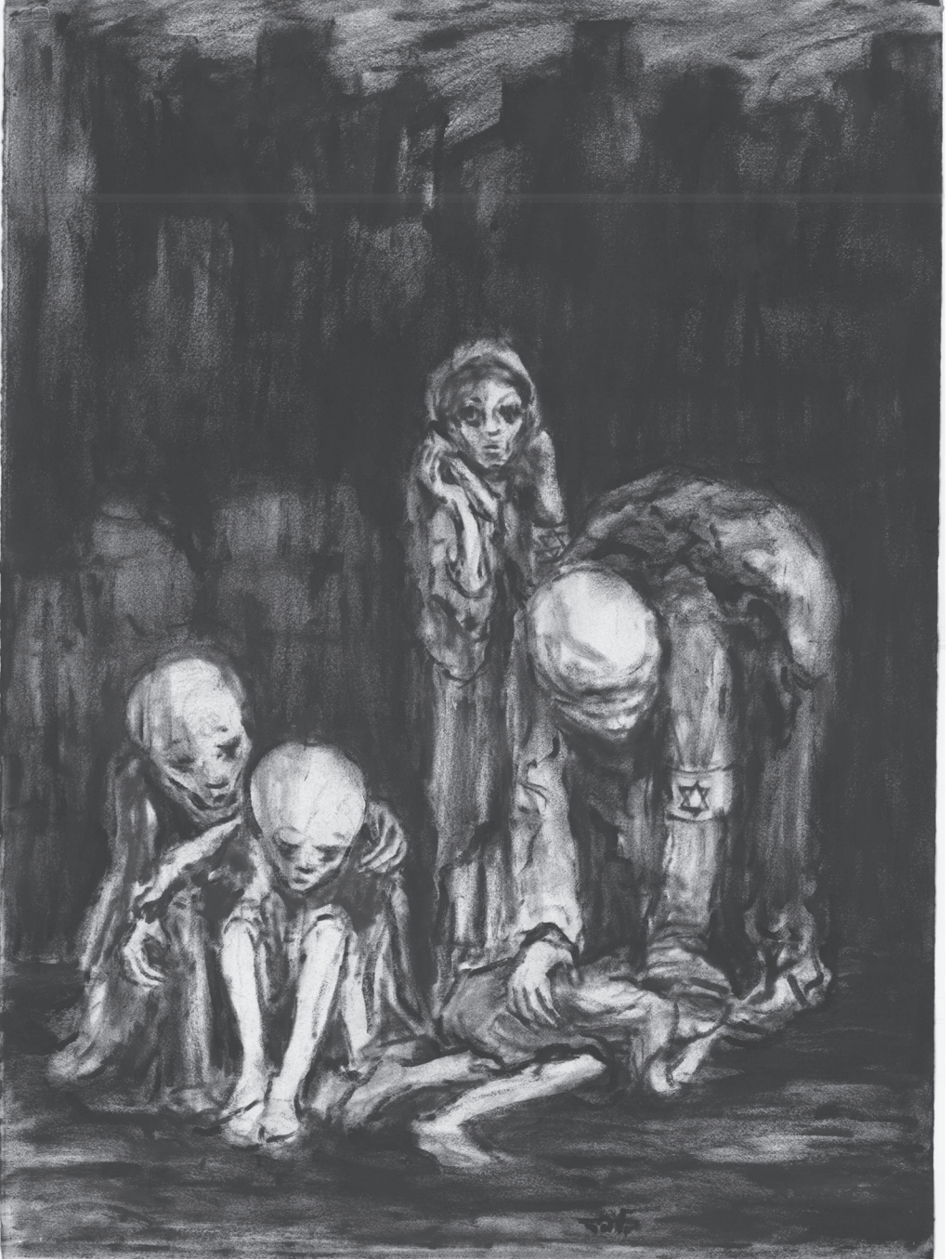
In Distress – Printing ink on paper 35 X 50













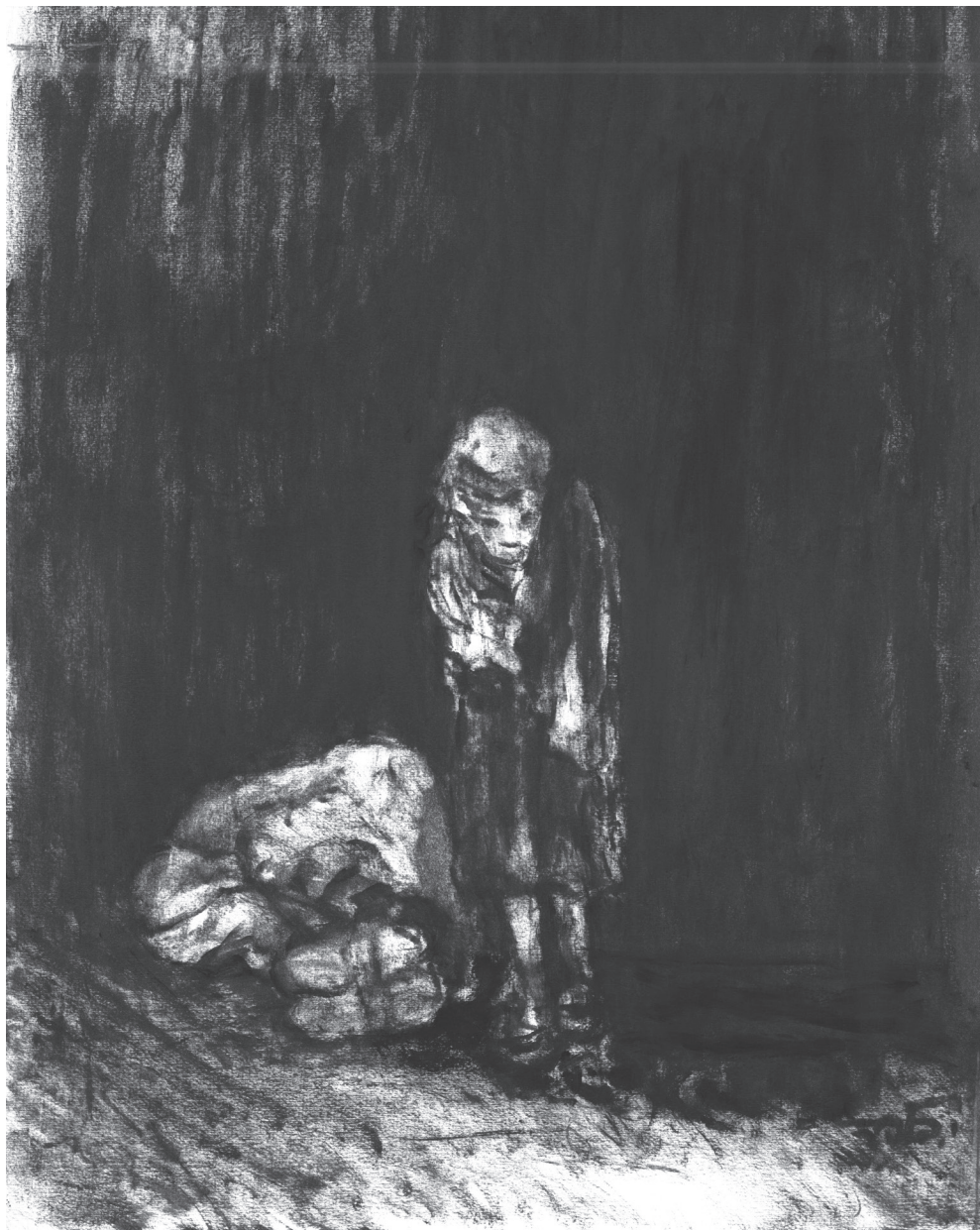










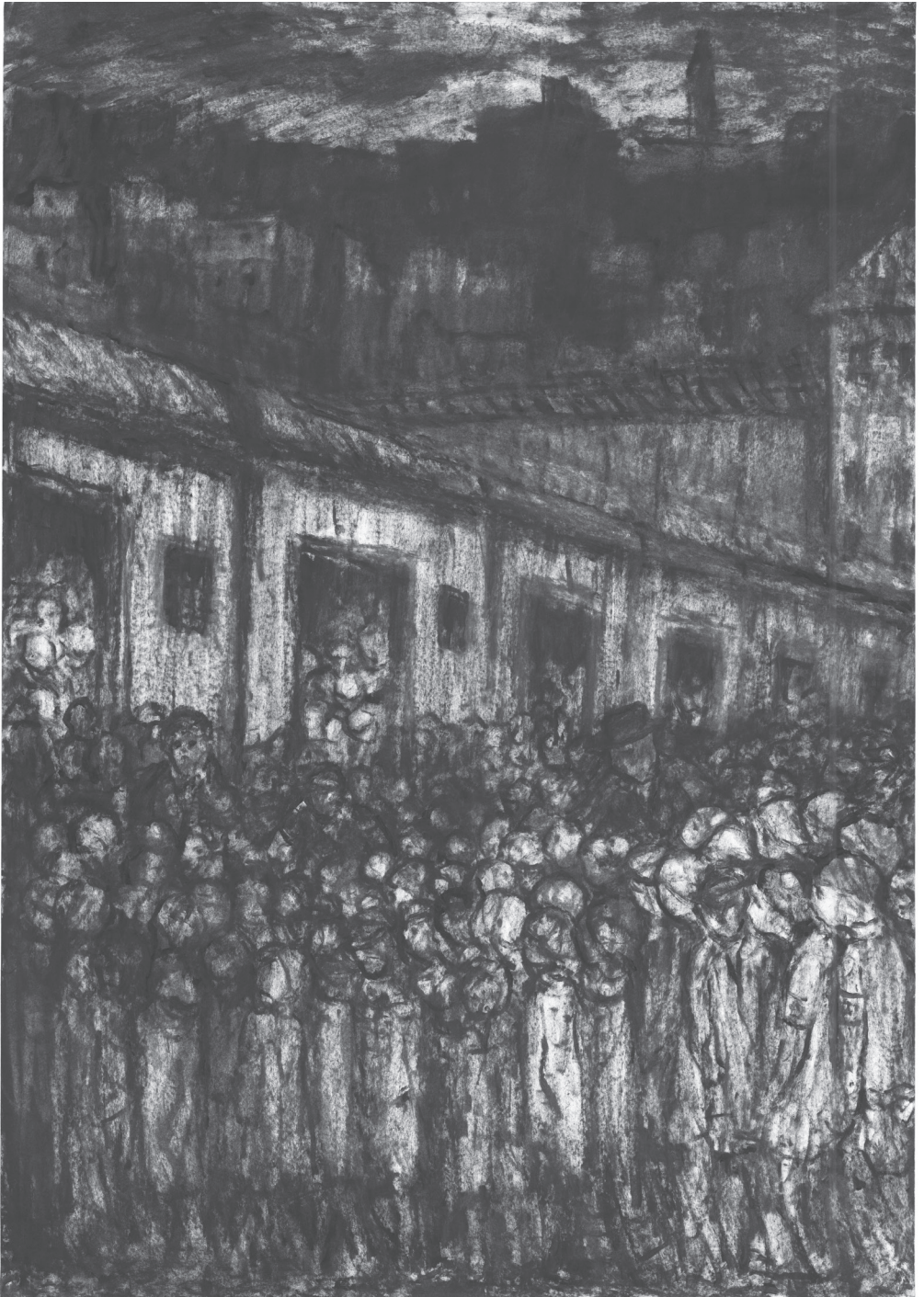








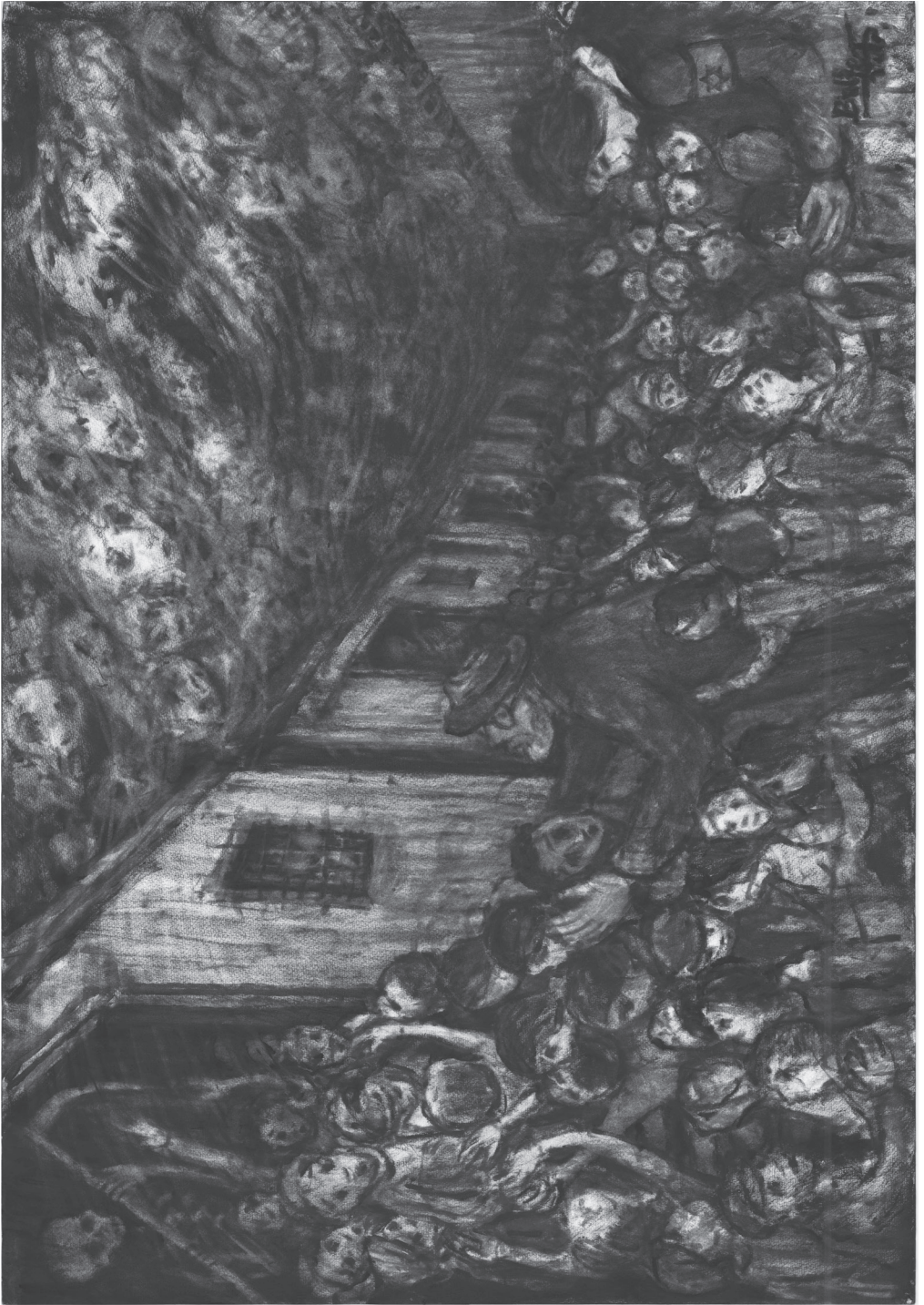












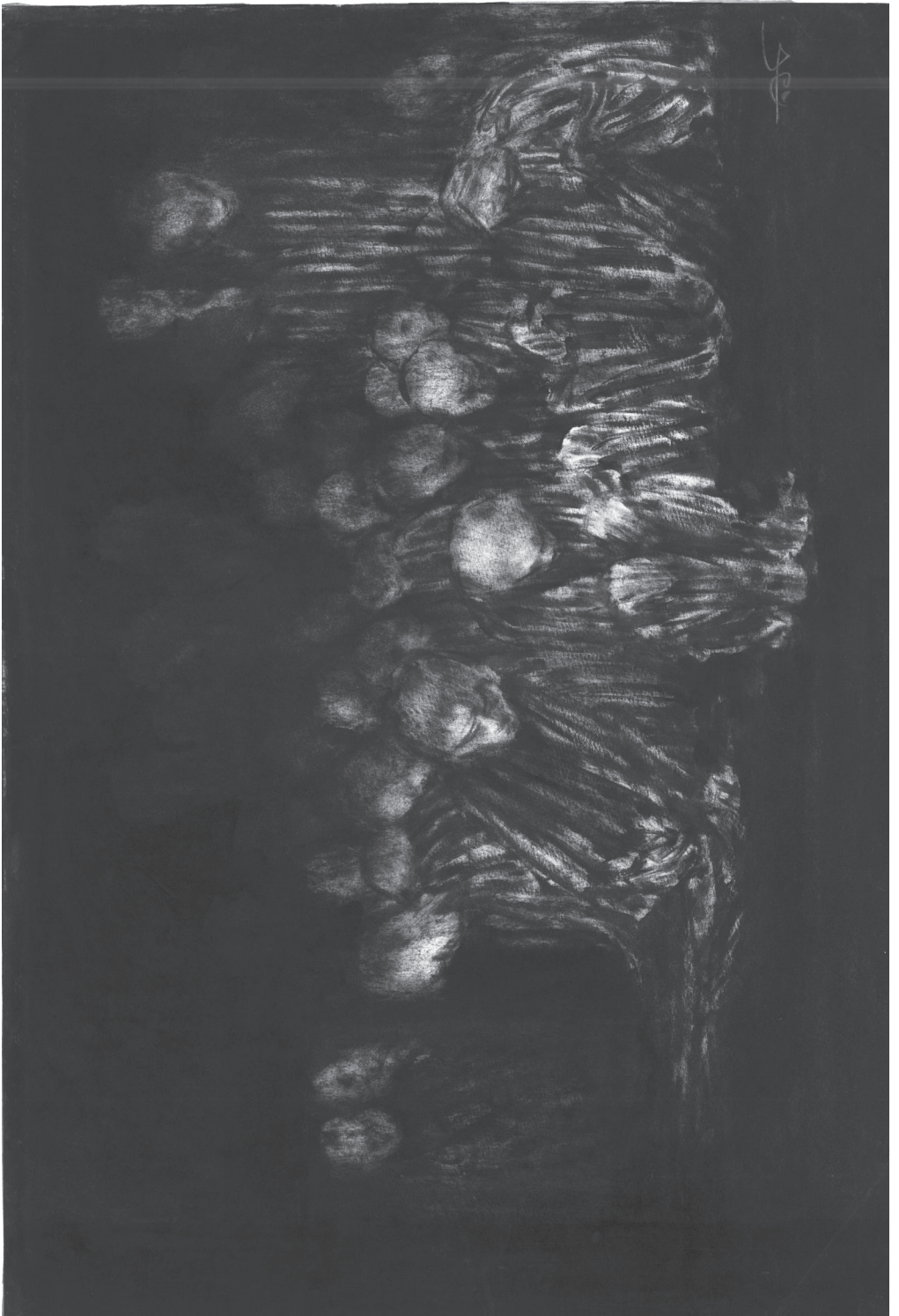






Ghetto in Flames – Printing ink on paper 60 X 80





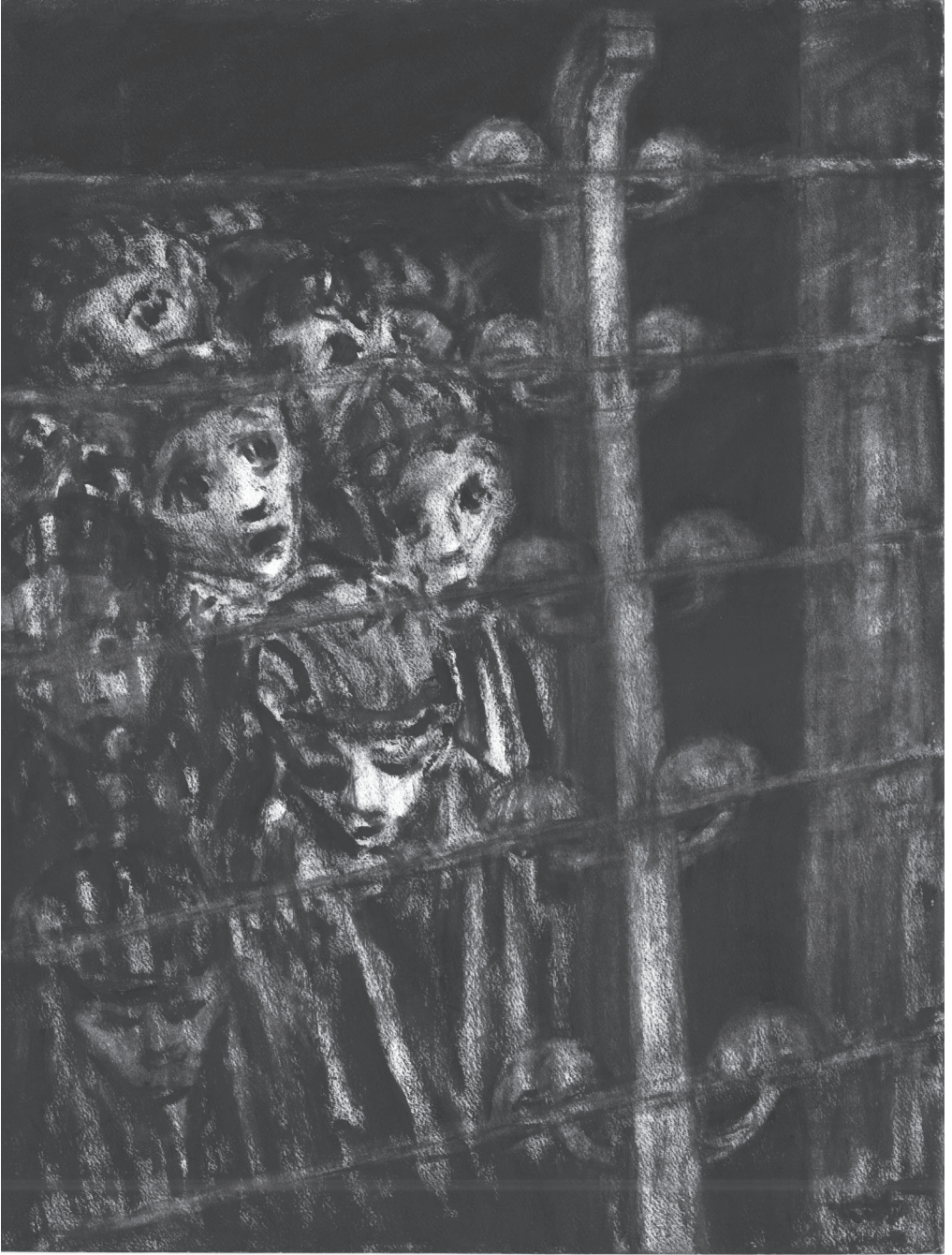






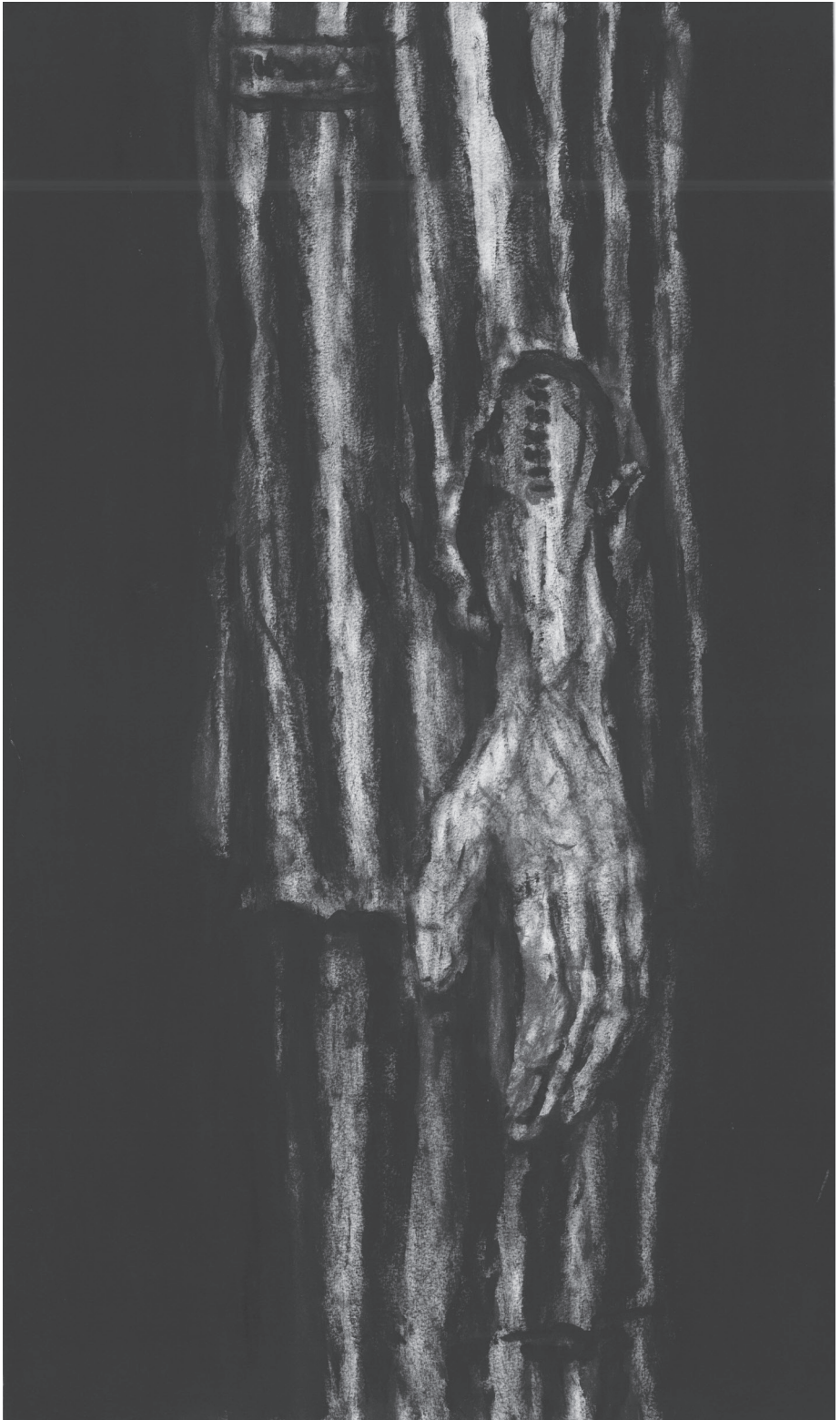




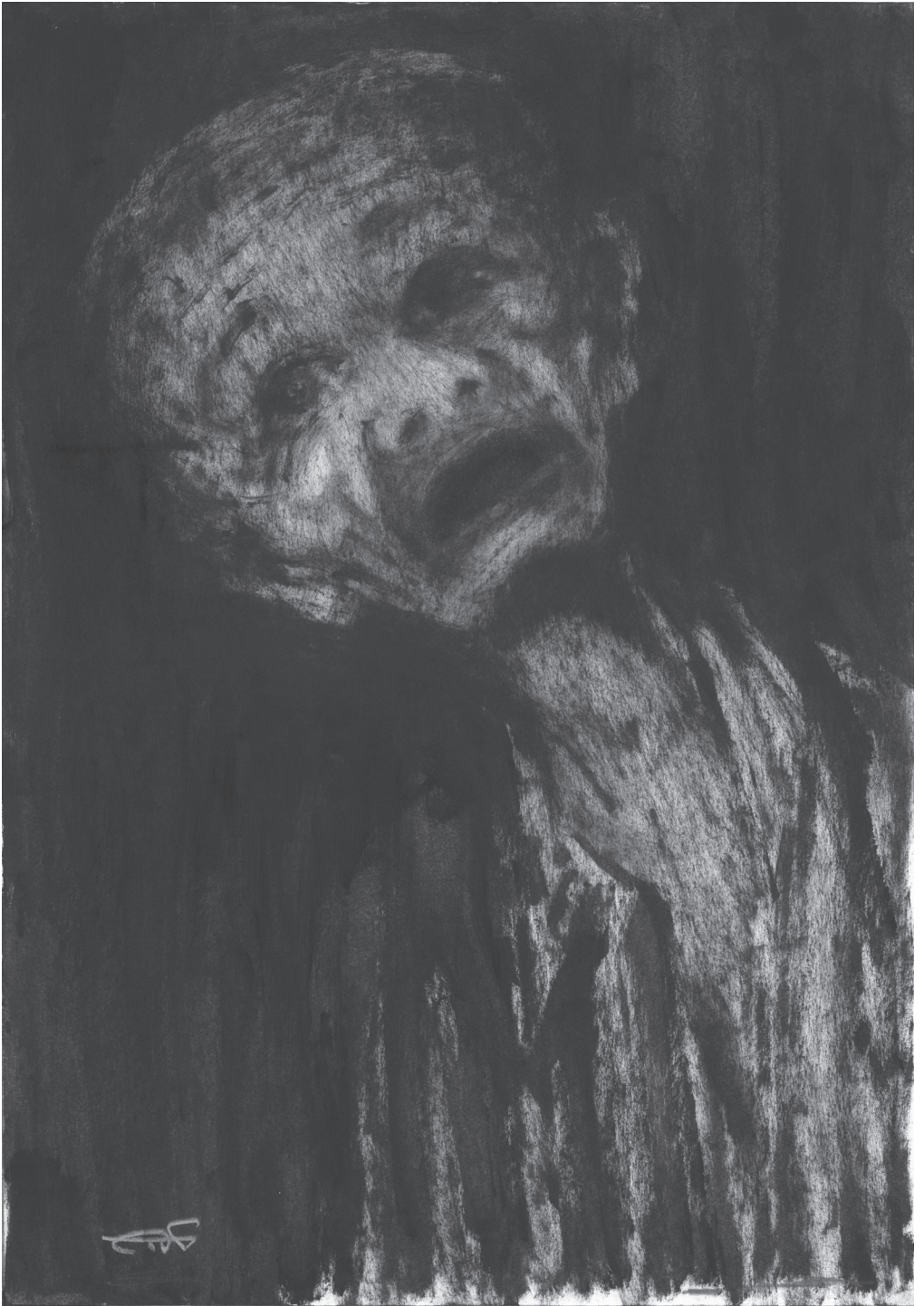








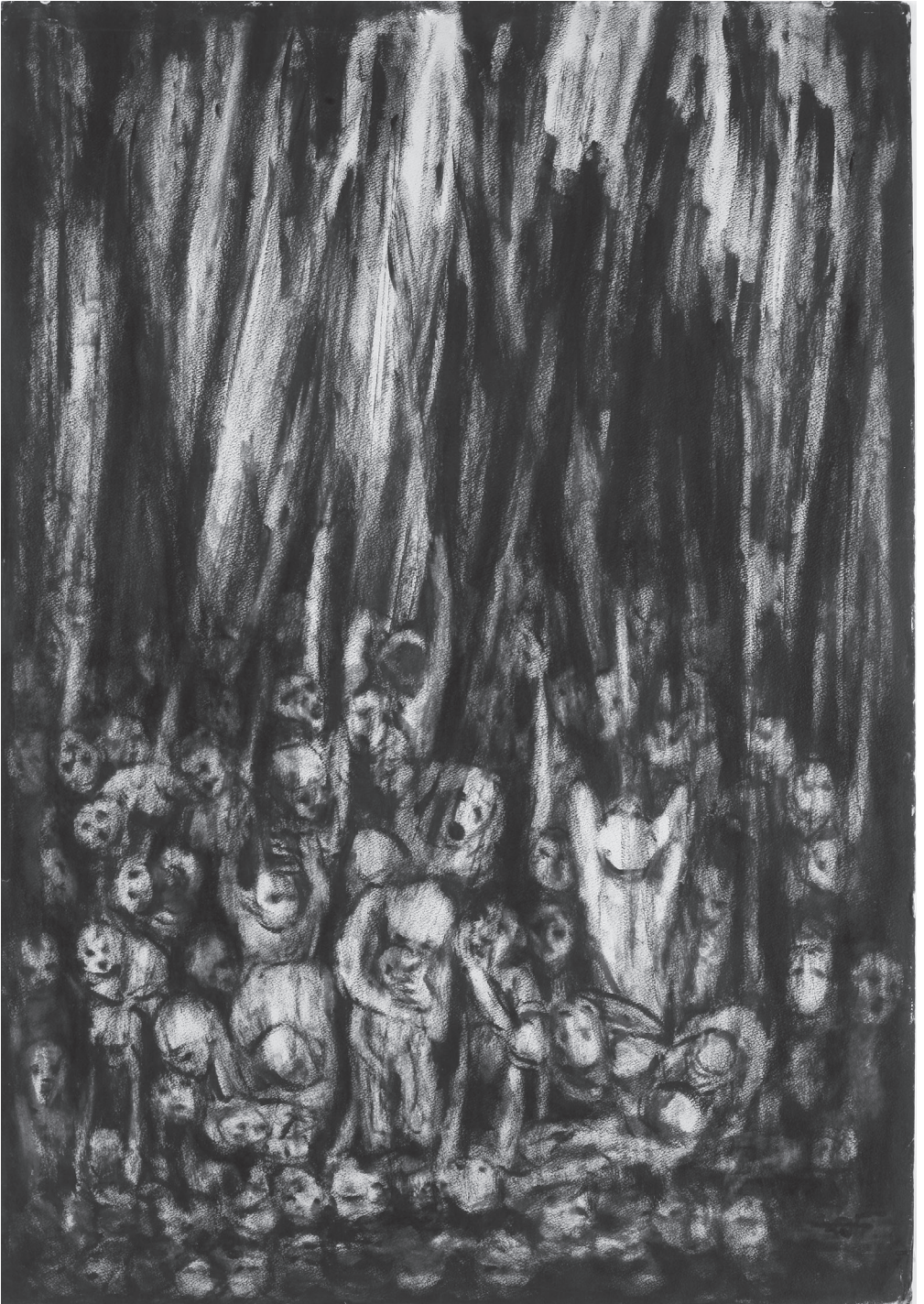




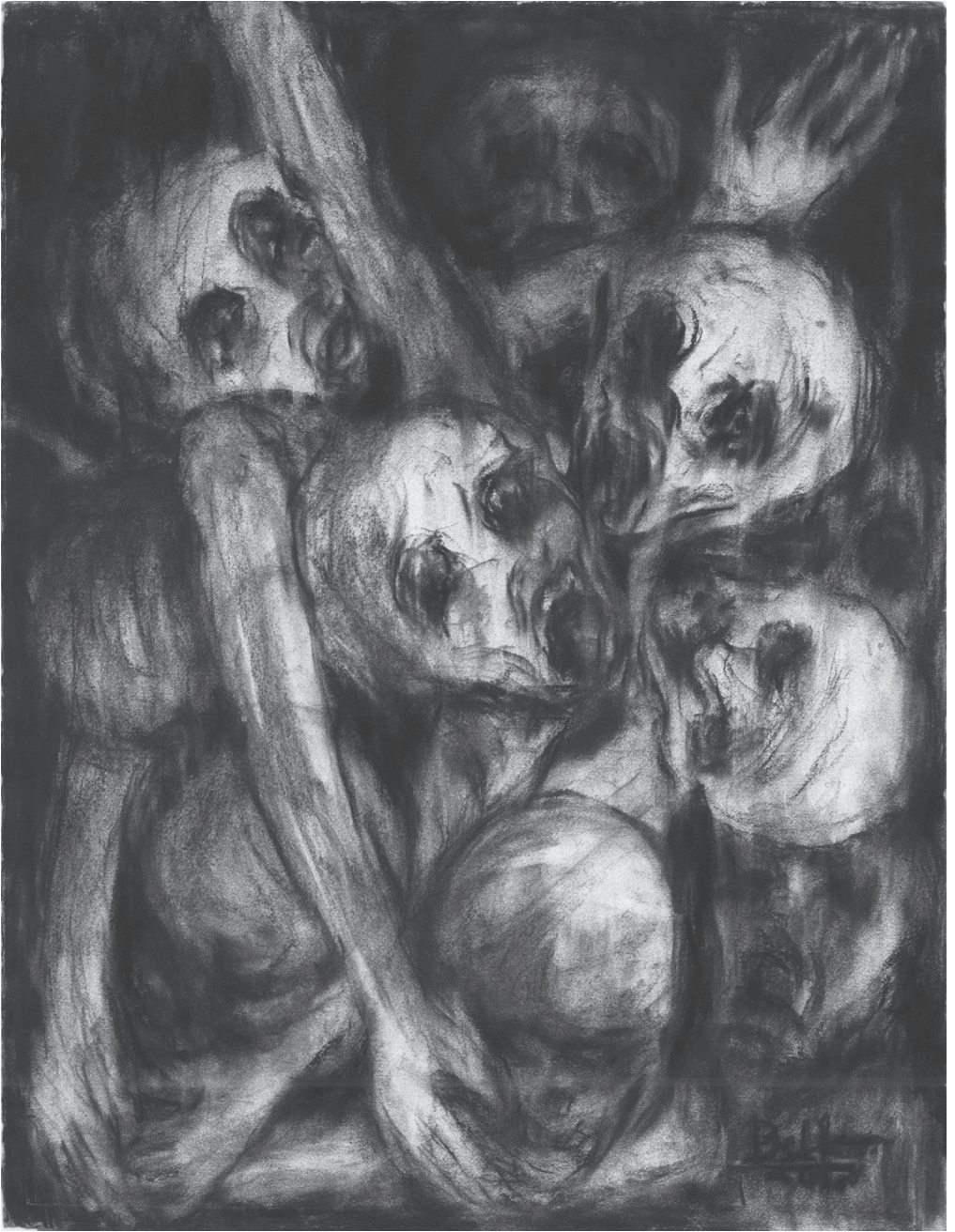






















Itzchak and Zeev at Steyr





With members of the group in Bologne (Itzchak is sitting second from the left)

## To Itzchak Belfer

Your teacher was the best of our times; he was like a father,  
 Your visions of childhood under his patronage were like a gold mine.  
 You remember a light blue smile with a murmur of longing.  
 When you speak of him, pain penetrates the hearts of the listener...

“The children who grew up there were privileged”, you tell  
 your students,  
 “The doctor would say this...”

All the details of your experiences are instilled in others.  
 They feel his presence, indeed these events really happened,  
 Your stories bring him back, like a resurrection.

You were born gifted, an artist,  
 Your eyes fill with tears, but your stories are so joyful.  
 This artist is a Jew and that is another of his traits.  
 He immigrated to Israel to create his art in the land of his forefathers.

The man’s testimony is both the topic and his mission,  
 Day and night, he bears the painful memory of the Holocaust of  
 his people,  
 With unending love and a stroke of a brush, he creates and documents  
 the events that he witnessed.

I observe you, Itzchak, while you are at work.  
 I see you among the children, listen to your stories.  
 I watch how your smile sheds a tear which then dries up,  
 And you in your Warsaw childhood can run and play once again...  
 Bless you, kind Itzchak, we are all certain that Dr. Korczak is here  
 with you today.

He, too, bestows his blessing upon you.

The poetess **Yardena Hadas**

## In Respect of Dr. Janusz Korczak

In my old age, I wish to thank you on behalf of all the children of the Janusz Korczak orphanage. I wish to express my deep respect and esteem for your most supreme work in which you educated desperate orphan children towards the undisputed belief in the struggle for the rights and respect of the child.

You were full of love for children and concern for humanity. You educated us towards honesty, fairness, work, and mutual respect. Thanks to your education methods at the orphanage, we fully understood the meaning of freedom and egalitarian, democratic education.

The Children's Court operated for the benefit of all and the legal code of our home was identical for everyone, including staff members. The Children's Council was fully involved in decisions of the management and in the daily routine of the orphanage.

Your educational doctrine proved to be successful in two orphanages and in many other institutions.

You adhered to your doctrine even in the worst of times, during the War and in the Ghetto.

My deepest thanks and respect for granting us a happy childhood, filled with significant experiences, light, color, and joy.

It was my honor to live in your midst, to be nourished by your wisdom, and enjoy your warmth.

Thank you for laying the foundations of the warm home you built for us. You showed us the way without ever expecting anything in return.

You were selfless in your sensitive, loyal, and loving care of us.

You taught us to love others and that there is no love without forgiveness.

You instilled in us hope for a better life someday, a life of truth and justice.

You showed us the path to the Land of Israel and it is here that we have found the love of mankind and the Homeland.

We remember you with reverence,

We will cherish your memory forever

**Itzchak Belfer**, a Child of the Orphanage



## A Note from the Author

I was born into a tragic and stormy period, between the First and Second World Wars. Those were days of hope followed by nights of disillusionment. I struggled and fought to survive and to keep afloat in the world. The events of this period have been woven into the very fabric of my life.

I was brought up with a strong Jewish awareness in an Orthodox home with my mother, father, and grandparents in Warsaw of the 1920's. I was but a child when I lost my father. After his death, I became an orphan child at Dr. Korczak's home.

The orphanage was founded on democratic and egalitarian educational values which characterized Dr. Korczak's theories. Life at the orphanage opened a whole new horizon for me, affecting my entire world view. Those two dear people, Dr. Korczak and his associate, the admired educator, Miss Stefa Wilczyńska, left their mark on me and, to a large extent, molded my personality. I have adhered to their doctrines throughout the course of my life.

The Second World War unsettled the world order, turning my own life upside down. Never again was I to be a young boy sipping life's pleasures, living through new experiences, and paving my way towards adulthood. I matured against my will and became a master of my own fate. My sole purpose was to claim responsibility for my own survival.

During the Second World War, the free world was oppressed by evil forces of the Nazi regime. Those dark and painful days left a deep scar upon the spirit of my people, the Jewish people.

I have visions of the Holocaust, of the Warsaw Ghetto, before and after the War. Never again will my eyes behold the images of my loved ones. I can still hear the horrific accounts of the Holocaust sounding in my ears to this day, just as I did when I first heard them. I have forgotten nothing. My thoughts often take me back to that time.

Working as a sketch artist and sculptor, I have, over the course of my life, endeavored to express my pain, grief, and loss. I totally identify with the suffering of others. I hope and believe that sanity will eventually return to our lives.

At a certain point in my life, I resolved to direct my art towards

the stories of those who did not survive the Holocaust, and towards the commemoration of those responsible for my happy childhood experiences.

I am often overwhelmed by the feeling that however hard I try, my story will never succeed in doing justice to the huge contribution of Doctor Janusz Korczak and Miss Stefa to the Jewish people and to the field of education. These two dear people provided me with my “toolbox for life”, which I cherish to this day. I have felt an obligation to learn, explore, digest, and disseminate their unique educational model. Dr. Korczak and Miss Stefa remained close to my heart during the darkest of times and throughout my entire life. Both exist within the pages of this book, narrating my personal story.

This book is a memorial volume.

*“I lived in close proximity to him for ten years.  
I have lived my entire life in his light.”*

**Itzchak Belfer**



**Itzchak on his return to Warsaw, 1946**

# Korczak Known and Unknown

By Professor Aleksander Lewin<sup>22</sup>, translated by Yitzhak Belfer

“When I first stepped into the orphanage, I felt as though I was in a strange, interesting, and unknown land, totally different from what I had been used to until then. Some of the children were playing in the courtyard in front of the building and others were setting the tables for dinner in the dining room.

The children’s behavior was confident and assured. Their faces showed that they were serious, smiling, and prepared to help. They immediately displayed an interest in the new person who had come to work with them. During the communal meal, they proudly and patiently explained everything regarding the ways and customs of the house, the dining room, homework preparation, the weekly newspaper, family visits, and sleeping arrangements.

This was the beginning of my training as an educator. I first received verbal guidance and later acquired practical experience at the orphanage. I learned all the about the system from within.

Paradoxically, it was the children and not the doctor or Miss Stefa who introduced me to the everyday routine and the important rules of the orphanage. From the first moment I started working there until I left, I had the distinct feeling that the children held some kind of secret regarding the rules and legal code of the house. There were so many rules and regulations that one could easily go astray, but not the children. It happened to Korczak, to Miss Stefa, but never to the children.”

<sup>22</sup> Professor Lewin was my teacher from 1937–1938. During the time he was employed at the orphanage, he was still a student. We met again after the War and formed a close friendship which lasted for many years. Above is a quotation from his book. See: Lewin, Aleksander. *Korczak znany i nieznan*. Israel: Ezop Agencja Edytorska (Ezop Editing Agency), 1999.





### **My Family**

**Top right – my brother Moshe’s wife, to her left – my father Haim.**

**Second row from the top: My oldest brother Moshe and his baby daughter. My mother Esther. Grandmother Henia, grandfather Yechezkel.**

**Third row from the top: My oldest sister Haya, my youngest brother Velvaleyh (Zeev), my brother Alter and his wife and baby daughter.**

**Bottom row: My little sister Miriam**









*Whenever I attempted to draw or paint the horrors of the Holocaust on paper or canvas, or to find some kind of expression for them, I had gnawing doubts whether this was at all possible.*

*Is an artist able to express the atrocity and fear, the unfathomable, inhuman reality of persecution and abysmal hatred of those times?*

**Itzchak Belfer**

Itzchak Belfer, born in Warsaw, Poland, one of the children of the orphanage under the management of Dr. Janusz Korczak, was the only survivor of his large family which was wiped out in the Holocaust.

At the age of seventeen, Belfer left his dear ones in the Ghetto on a journey of survival. On his return to Warsaw, on the ruins of the Ghetto, he realized that his home was in 'Eretz Israel' and he decided to immigrate there.

Belfer's attempts at immigrating to Israel landed him in the British detention camps in Cyprus. It was there that he studied sculpture under Zeev Ben-Tzvi and was captivated by the magic of art and sculpture.

Itzchak fulfilled his dream of living in Eretz Israel. After serving in the army, he studied art at the Avni Institute of Art and Design. He has since then taught and instructed generations of young artists. He has channeled his artistic talents, which were already obvious during his years in the orphanage, to the commemoration of Dr. Janusz Korczak's work and the memory of his family and the Holocaust.

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