Bożena Sieradzka-Baziur
ORCID: 0000-0002-4214-7268
Ignatianum University in Cracow

Janusz Korczak's Ancestors and the Image of Family in His Poem *Alone with God: Prayers of Those Who Do Not Pray*

ABSTRACT

The article shows the structure and the semantics of the religious text *Alone with God: The Prayers of Those Who Do Not Pray*, written by Janusz Korczak, a well-known pedagogue. Korczak's lively interest in the topic of human spirituality is apparent in this text. In the "Dedication" in the final part of the collection of prayers, the author writes that they are the statements of his ancestors, dictated by his parents. By writing this, he expresses his conviction about the overwhelming importance of the heritage of the past to the spiritual development of each person. The article also contains a description of Korczak's ancestors and the image of the family recorded in the text.

KEYWORDS
Janusz Korczak, educator, family, text semantics, religious language

Introduction

Henryk Goldszmit (1878?–1942), better known by his pseudonym Janusz Korczak, was an outstanding theoretician and practitioner of pedagogy, an innovative writer, and creator of a modern educational system. He also pioneered a new model of children's

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magazines. As an author, Korczak is best known for his children's books, such as *Król Maciuś Pierwszy* [King Matt the First]), which continue to be widely read today, as well as his pedagogical treatises (e.g., *Jak kochać dziecko* [How to Love a Child]). In addition to these, his body of work includes pedagogical articles, journalistic pieces, letters, and a diary written during his time in the Warsaw Ghetto.[1] These writings have been the subject of numerous studies in the fields of pedagogy, literature, linguistics, sociology, and beyond.

Subject of analysis, purpose, and research method

This article explores the structure and semantics of one of Janusz Korczak's most unique and lesser-known works: *Sam na sam z Bogiem. Modlitwy tych, którzy się nie modlą* [Alone with God: Prayers of Those Who Do Not Pray]. In this text, Korczak's keen interest in spiritual matters, as well as the significance of family in human life[2] is particularly evident. First published in 1922 as a 71-page standalone work, this collection of prayers by the eminent educator has seen multiple reprints after World War II (Korczak 1993b; 1994; 2005a; 2005b) by various publishers. In 2018, it was republished by the Children's Ombudsman, Marek Michalak, with a thoughtful afterword by Jan Twardowski (based on the 1993 edition: Korczak, 1993b).

The purpose of this article is to examine the structure and semantics of Korczak's work, with a particular focus on how the family is portrayed in one of his most personal texts, analyzed against the backdrop of his own family origins. The research method employed is semantic analysis.

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1 As part of a comprehensive critical edition, 15 volumes of Korczak's works were published between 1992 and 2021. The editorial committee for these volumes includes Hanna Kirchner, Marta Ciesielska, and the late Aleksander Lewin and Stefan Wołoszyn. A supplement and indexes are currently in preparation.

2 Korczak's religiosity has been the subject of previous analyses, such as those by Furmański (1993) and Gretkowski (2017).

Structure of the article

The work under analysis consists of an introductory text composed of five sentences, 18 prayers, and a dedication. Korczak's prayers are short; the longest, "The Artist's Prayer," spans six pages in a small-format booklet (10 × 14 cm). Four prayers occupy five pages each, one prayer covers four pages, eight prayers fill three pages each, and three others take up two pages each. The shortest prayer, "The Second Prayer of a Mother," is contained within a single page.

The title, *Alone with God*, refers to the fundamental nature of prayer as a personal encounter between the individual and God. The subtitle, *Prayers of Those Who Do Not Pray*, is particularly intriguing. As Piotr Matywiecki explains, the essence of this subtitle lies in:

> the paradox of a prayer expressed in non-prayer, in the thoughts of someone who does not pray. For each of the book's protagonists, prayer is something out of the ordinary, having nothing to do with a mere religious routine, and much to do with a sincere, unexpected decision made before of God. These prayers are offerings of their own sincerity, moments where people painfully shed their masks. (Matywiecki 2010: 79)

The contradiction in the subtitle serves as an invitation to both read and pray addressed to all those who are searching for God, and who feel that somewhere in the spiritual realm, there exists a being more powerful than themselves—someone to whom they can always turn in moments of happiness, joy, loneliness, abandonment, uncertainty, or terror.

Semantics of the text

Korczak's prayers are compelling examples of personal, introspective poems that transcend the conventions of any religion. These prayers are voiced by fictional characters, crafted by Korczak, a 44-year-old bachelor who had lost his beloved mother two years earlier. At the time of writing, Korczak was an educator who had dedicated years to caring for Jewish and Polish orphans at the "Orphans' Home" in Warsaw and "Our Home" in Pruszków. He was also a doctor, a widely-read writer, and a journalist. In this work, he takes on the ambitious task of creating prayers that are uttered spoken by a variety of imagined individuals.

The titles of the prayers in this unique collection reflect the diverse voices of those praying: "Prayer of a Mother (1)," "Prayer of a Mother (2)," "Prayer of a Young Child," "Prayer of a Girl," "Prayer of a Boy," "Prayer of an Old Man," "Prayer of a Poor Man," "Prayer of a Scholar," "Prayer of an Artist," and "Prayer of a Reckless Woman." Some prayers do not specify a particular character, but through the masculine forms used in the text, it is clear that the speaker is a young man or an adult male. The titles of these prayers, such as "Prayer of Sorrow," "Prayer of Impotence," "Prayer of Complaint," "Prayer of Reflection," "Prayer of Rebellion," "Prayer of Reconciliation," and "Prayer of Joy," hint at their themes and emotional tones. In "Prayer of Gaiety," for instance, the speaker is a young girl: "And I wander, I don't understand, and I try to guess myself, like a charade, like a very difficult algebraic task. To think that I am not what adults and peers think I am, is a folly; but after all, I am not what I think myself to be" (Korczak 1922: 49).[3]

Matywiecki (2010: 78) offers a thoughtful reflection on the choir of prayers in *Alone with God*:

> Korczak's prayer book captures the voices of people with diverse experiences and inner contradictions—people torn by emotions and moral dilemmas. Yet, it also represents a "harmony in one voice," reflecting the author's hidden voice within these prayers. What kind of imagination does it take to envision someone else's prayer? Or perhaps, to discover within oneself the prayers of all? Or, perhaps: to pray "from oneself" to pray "with oneself," and to find in oneself the prayers of everyone else? Perhaps in prayer alone, one can be truly oneself and yet also encompass everyone else. It seems that a prayerful attitude bestows upon a person the gift of empathy, the ability to enter into the personality of others. This empathic capacity is prayer's most beautiful grace: reaching towards God from one's depths, and in doing so, finding connection with others.

The prayers in this work are addressed to the One God—a transcendent, spiritual, supreme being represented by a multitude of names and terms, each carrying varied meanings. The term *Bóg* [God] appears most frequently in the text, about 100 times. Additionally, the diminutive form *Bozia* [God] is used a few times (pp. 16, 23—twice each, p. 24—twice).

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3 The examples I reference from Korczak's work are based on the first edition: Korczak (1922).

The names and terms used by Korczak to refer to the One God are rich in semantic complexity and can be categorized into several groups of meanings:

GOD'S GREATNESS, HIS POWER AND IMMORTALITY

His Majesty God Our Lord (p. 19—2 times, p. 20, p. 21), *His Majesty* (p. 19, p. 20, p. 22), *His Majesty God* (p. 22), *Mighty God* (p. 29), *Almighty* (p. 30—2 times), *Almighty God* (p. 28), *Mighty, Great, Immortal* (p. 20), *Great*, *Mighty*, *Immortal* (p. 50), *Omnipotent God* (p. 42), *God Omnipotent* (p. 42, p. 43, p. 44, cf. also *The One Almighty*, p. 43), *Your Omnipotence* (p. 44), *Our God and Lord* (p. 53, p. 54), *God and Lord* (p. 53, p. 55), *Lord* (p. 19—2 times, p. 47, p. 55), *Lord* (p. 61), *Grey Lord of the Silent World*, *God* (p. 18)

SECRET

The Greatest Mystery—God (p. 8), *God*, *the Mystery of Mysteries* (p. 56), *the Holy Proto-secret* (p. 60)

CREATION

Creator (p. 62—2 times, p. 63—2 times, p. 64, p. 66—2 times, p. 67)

GOODNESS

Good (p. 11), *Good God* (p. 11—2 times), *Good, Golden God* (p. 10), *Good*, *Beloved God* (p. 12; p. 14)

JUSTICE

Lord God, Righteous Judge (p. 39—2 times), *Righteous God* (p. 40), *Virtuous Judge* (p. 41), *God, the Righteous Judge* (p. 41)

LIGHT

Radiant God (p. 45), *Beaming God* (p. 45), *Sun* (p. 46), *God's Sun* (p. 46)

In *Alone with God*, the names and terms Korczak uses for the One God emphasize God's greatness, power, immortality, role as Creator, goodness, and justice—qualities typically attributed to God by Judeo-Christian believers. These include traditional names like "Father" (p. 34—2 times, p. 35—2 times, p. 46) and "Our Father"

(p 31, p. 35). Korczak also uses affectionate terms like "Beloved God" (p. 12), "Good, Beloved God" (p. 12; p. 14), and "Beloved, Most Beloved God" (p. 52). His conceptualization of God as a loving being is further expressed in the phrase: "You are our family, common room, homeland, willingness and reward, ally of the initiated ones" (p. 60).

Additionally, Korczak uses more unusual terms, such as "Old Man" (p. 12), "Poor Grandpa" (p. 15), and "Brother" (p. 46). Given the article's focus on family, these kinship related terms for God demand special attention. These include such names of the Supreme Being as Father (p. 34—2 times, p. 35—2 times, p. 46), "Our Father" (p. 31, p. 35), "Brother" (p. 46), and family (cf. "You are our family" [p. 60]), which were cited earlier.

Besides these, the text also features spiritual beings other than God, such as the "Angel of Sorrow" (p. 26) and "Satan" (p. 15). As in other prayers, Korczak's work includes a substantial number of pronominal references to God, such as "You" and "Your."

The author dedicated this work to his late parents, Cecylia and Józef Goldszmit, whom he lovingly refers to as Matuś (Mommy) and Ojczulek (Papa).

> Mommy—Papa. You dictated these prayers to me in a rush, and I had to painstakingly, from memory—word by word, letter by letter—piece them together and write them down. Sometimes I couldn't hear you clearly, often I didn't understand, and I made mistakes. My memory failed me, and I forgot so much. You rarely corrected me, just enough to make things clearer for both me and others. I'm not sure if I can call this my tombstone for you. I thank you for your life and death, and for my own life and death. We parted for a while, only to meet again.
>
> Mommy—Papa, from all the deep longings and pains of you and our ancestors, I want to build a tall, soaring, solitary tower for people. The number of those silent voices I speak on your behalf, the voices of our ancestors, goes back three hundred years: as many as one thousand and twenty-four souls. They bore so many different names, which is why I don't put any name on this small tombstone. Thank you for teaching me to hear the whispers of the dead and the living. Thank you for letting me understand the mystery of Life in the beautiful hour of death. Your Son." (pp. 69–70)

In the "Dedication" included in *Alone with God*, the great pedagogue expresses his deep belief in the profound importance of one's heritage and the legacy of the past; the great role of ancestors in the

physical, mental, and spiritual development of an individual. Matywiecki describes this dedication as "thrilling."

> Korczak portrays his deceased parents as the ones who dictated the prayers of various individuals to him. He suggests that these parents represent all praying people, embodying a kind of metaphysical motherhood and fatherhood. Korczak, as their son, speaks both from the perspective of someone living after their death and from a post-mortal viewpoint shared with them. He thanks his parents for both their lives and their deaths, including his own. I know of no more beautifully expressed communion with the Dead. (Matywiecki 2010: 85)

Korczak often explored the theme of generational continuity and its significance in his work. For example, in *Jak kochać dziecko. Dziecko w rodzinie* [How to Love a Child: The Child in the Family], he wrote:

> You say: "my child." No, it is a common child of mother and father, of grandparents and great-grandparents. It is someone's distant self that slept among ancestors; suddenly, the voice of a long-forgotten past speaks through your child. Three hundred years ago, amid war and peace, someone was taken by someone else in a kaleidoscope of intersecting races, nations, classes—through consent or violence, in moments of terror or affection—betrayed or seduced, who knows? But God has recorded these events in the book of destiny; the anthropologist tries to infer them from skull shapes and hair color. Sometimes a sensitive child imagines they are a foundling in their parents' home. This happens: their parent died before their time. The child is like a parchment covered with tiny hieroglyphs—some of which you manage to read, some you can wipe out or circle, and fill with your own meaning. It's a harsh law, yet a beautiful one. It provides each child with the first link in the immortal chain of generations. Look for your own particle in that of someone else's child. You might notice it, and perhaps you will even help it grow. (Korczak 1929: 10–11)

Korczak also pondered why exceptional people sometimes emerge from seemingly ordinary families. In his 1901 article "Geniuses," he noted:

> Each family, through gradual improvement, strives to produce genius, which is, as it were, the blossom of the entire nation's efforts. I believe that each family works to produce a brilliant person, that each member contributes their spiritual particle to this goal. Each of our great-great-grandparents contributed to this process with their own spiritual savings. (Wołoszyn 1993: 514)

Korczak also discusses the significance of family heritage in his introduction to Jędrzej Śniadecki's dissertation "On the physical education of children":

> degeneration, regeneration, and progeneration raise questions about families, nations, and humanity. Why do the few among the many (the great ones) emerge, surpassing others, leading the way and dragging along the passive masses of their contemporaries? … How often, quietly and carelessly, we speak of parents and grandparents as though their collective efforts did not endow unique value or achieve a noteworthy form. Let it be known how many generations silently and laboriously gather their sap in the shadows before finally blossoming as the family's flower. Let every peasant, laborer, worker, artisan, and humble individual understand that with their child aiming toward the future, they hold the power to shape destiny. (Korczak 2017: 11–13)

Alexander Levin (1999: 108) notes that research into Dr. Goldszmit's ancestry shows the social, journalistic, and literary talents of his ancestors, which significantly influenced the great pedagogue's interests, aspirations and actions. Korczak recognized his debt to his ancestors and expressed this appreciation in his literary works. For example, in *Confessions of a Butterfly*, the boundary between literary fiction and the author's personal life is notably blurred. Korczak also reflected on his family and personal thoughts in his *Diary*, written from May to August 4, 1942, in the Warsaw ghetto, just before his deportation to Treblinka (Korczak 2021b).

Korczak's ancestors: the Goldszmit and Gębicki families[4]

Korczak identified himself as both Jewish and Polish, a dual identity he often expressed in his writings. One of the most frequently quoted testimonies on this comes from a letter he wrote to Mieczysław Zylbertal on March 30, 1937:

> I remember deciding not to start a family. How solemn and naïve it was. I was in a garden city near London: "A slave has no right to have

4 Researchers who have studied Korczak's ancestry and written about his family include Hanna Mortkowicz-Olczakowa (1966), Maria Falkowska (1989), Joanna Olczak-Ronikier (2002), Maria Czapska (2006), and Bożena Wojnowska and Marlena Sęczek (see Goldszmit, Goldszmit 2017). These studies provide general information about his family background.

> children: a Polish Jew under the Russian partition." And immediately afterward, I felt as if I had committed suicide. (Korczak 2008: 213)

In her recent book, *Inna twarz Korczaka. Szkice o dwoistej tożsamości (i nie tylko)* [The Other Face of Korczak: Sketches on Dual Identity (and More)], Bożena Wojnowska offers a compelling exploration of Korczak as a figure deeply rooted in both Jewish and Polish cultures. Wojnowska fills a significant gap in the research on Henryk Goldszmit—better known as Janusz Korczak—by proposing that Korczak's life represents a parallel between two cultural models: the Polish intelligentsia, which he revered from his youth, and the reforming Jew, shaped by the emancipatory aspirations of the post-Enlightenment Haskalah movement (Wojnowska 2023: 7).

Korczak's Jewish ancestry on his father's side traces back to Hrubieszów. During a conversation with Maria Czapska (2006: 53), Korczak shared that the most distant ancestors he knew of were homeless orphans who married in a Jewish cemetery as an act of propitiation during an epidemic in the ghetto. Writing about his Hrubieszów ancestor in his *Diary*, Korczak noted: "My great-grandfather was a glassmaker. I am glad: glass gives us warmth and light" (Korczak 2021b: 287). His paternal grandfather, Hersz (Hirsz), was a surgeon practicing in Hrubieszów, and his father, Józef, became a well-known lawyer in Warsaw. Korczak wrote of his father: "I should devote a lot of space to my father: I am fulfilling in my life what he pursued, and what my grandfather so painfully pursued for so many years" (Korczak 2021b: 287). Joanna Olczak-Ronikier also sheds light on Korczak's family heritage:

> He did not recount his grandfather's struggles. These were not the kind of heroic hardships or sacrifices that one would proudly share. Jews who managed to escape the ghetto had to endure so many insults and humiliations—from both fellow Jews and Poles—that there were not enough words to capture it. Therefore, not much is known about these experiences. Or perhaps he was simply too private and modest to share a story that unfolded on the fringes of such dramatic events? (Olczak-Ronikier 2011: 27)

According to Maria Falkowska (1989: 25–26), Korczak's grandfather, Hersz (Hirsz) Goldszmit, was a physician and an active social and educational activist in Hrubieszów. An ardent supporter of the Jewish Enlightenment, known as Haskalah, he ensured that his

children received education in Polish schools while maintaining the Jewish faith of his ancestors. A generous philanthropist, Hersz contributed financially to the construction of a synagogue in his hometown and raised funds for the Jewish Hospital where he worked. Little is known about Korczak's grandmother on his father's side, Chana (or Anna) Goldszmit, née Rajs. However, it is noteworthy that Korczak's father, Józef, dedicated his first book to "The shadows of Anna Goldszmit's most beloved and best mother ... as a token of his deepest reverence and affection" (Falkowska 1989: 26).

In 1866, Józef Goldszmit (1844–1896), Korczak's father and one of Hersz and Anna's sons, moved to Warsaw to study at the Warsaw Central School in the Faculty of Law and Administration. In a memoir published in the weekly newspaper *Izraelita* [Israelite], which was printed in Polish, he recounted his early experiences in the capital city:

> For anyone who has been away from their parents, relatives, and friends for an extended time—especially for the first time, who has left his family home where he spent his most pleasant years, will easily understand how I felt, having suddenly found myself alone in a crowded capital, a stranger, separated from everyone I love and who loves me. With these thoughts, I approached the Throne of the Most High, seeking to unite with those I had left behind in prayer. I went to the synagogue on Daniłowiczowska Street. It is difficult for me to describe the impression it made on me, being in this beautiful Tabernacle of the Glory of God …. Soon, beautiful and melodious singing sounded. That supplication prayer held an unspeakable charm for me (Goldszmit 1866, qtd. in Olczak-Ronikier 2011: 37–38).

During his studies, Korczak's father focused on organizing secular elementary schools for Jewish boys, with instruction in Jewish religion and the Polish language, to replace the existing cheder schools, which were disconnected from Polish culture and knowledge. He believed strongly in popularizing the achievements of outstanding Jews in various branches of science. In 1870, he earned his master's degree in law and administration with a thesis titled "Lecture on Divorce Law under the Mosaic-Talmudic Laws, with a General View of Their Development with Consideration of the Laws in Force," which was highly praised and published the following year.

In 2017, Bożena Wojnowska, with the collaboration of Marlena Sęczek, republished texts by Józef Goldszmit and his brother

Jakub Goldszmit. In the introduction to this collection, it is noted that "they treated writing as a civic act; likewise, their involvement in Jewish education. In both cases, they were responding to the needs of the Warsaw heirs of the Haskalah" (Wojnowska 2017: 7).

Anna Goldszmit (later Lui after marriage) was Korczak's elder sister, a sworn translator proficient in English, French, German, Russian, and Italian. Following the death of her husband, Józef Lui, she returned from Paris and moved in with her brother. In one of his wartime letters, Korczak fondly wrote about her:

> My sister, the only and last relic of my childhood—a memory. She is the only one left on earth who calls me by my name. She … is a meticulous official, always willing to sacrifice personal gain for the greater good (Letter to Abraham Gepner, March 25, 1942). (Korczak 2021a: 120)

In articles discussing Korczak's Jewish ancestors from his mother Cecylia Goldszmit, née Gębicka's family, we find less information compared to the Goldszmit lineage. Korczak's great-grandfather, Maurycy Gębicki (born 1780), was a surgeon, as was his grandfather. His maternal grandfather, Józef Adolf Gębicki (born 1826), was a respected merchant in Kalisz known for his professional, philanthropic, and social activities. Mina (Emilia) Gębicka, née Dajtscher, Korczak's grandmother, was deeply religious and dedicated to her family and to the local community.

The pedagogue's mother, Cecylia Goldszmit, née Gębicka (1857–1920), operated a student boarding house from her apartment after her husband's death. Upon her son's employment as a doctor in 1905, she moved in with him and managed their household. In 1920, during a typhus epidemic in Warsaw, Korczak was sent to the epidemiological hospital in Kamionki, where he contracted the disease. His mother took her unconscious son home and nursed him through his illness but also succumbed to typhus. Sensing her end, she requested to be carried out through the back door to spare her still-ill son the distress. Korczak learned of her death only after regaining consciousness and suffered a severe nervous breakdown, feeling guilt-stricken and even suicidal for the rest of his life (Olczak-Ronikier 2011: 204).

Elżbieta Cichy (1994: 307) suggests that Korczak's work *Alone with God* likely stemmed from one of the most agonizing events of his life—the death of his beloved mother. His bond with her was

exceptionally strong. It is significant that he selected a quote from Juliusz Słowacki's *Anhelli* as the motto for one of his pivotal pedagogical works, *Jak kochać dziecko. Dziecko w rodzinie* [How to Love a Child: The Child in the Family] (first published in 1919, cf. 1993a): "To be born is not the same as to be resurrected; the coffin will give us away, but it will not understand us like a mother." The motto chosen by Korczak speaks of the superiority of birth over resurrection, the irreplaceable nature of a mother's love and the emotions in her maternal gaze.

Extensive research into the pedagogue's Jewish ancestors from both paternal and maternal sides reveals individuals who were highly educated and held significant social and professional positions (including doctors, lawyers, writers, a translator, and a merchant), actively participated in community life. Alexander Levin (1999: 108) observes: "Korczak was acutely aware of his debt to his ancestors and conscientiously referenced his family's heritage, treating it with great reverence." Like many of his forebears, Korczak was sensitive to injustice and misery of others and he considered his involvement in community service—both as a doctor and a pedagogue to be the cornerstone of his life.

The family in *Alone with God*

Alone with God is multidimensional, as it features prayers voiced by a wide array of individuals: young and older women, men of various ages, older and younger children, both boys and girls, all from different social roles and functions.

Family members, their relationships with one another, and their connection to God are vividly depicted in prayers such as the "Prayer of a Mother (1)," "Prayer of a Mother (2)," "Prayer of a Young Child," "Prayer of a Boy," "Prayer of Complaint," "Prayer of a Girl," "Prayer of Gaiety," and the "Dedication."

Focusing on the theme of family, this analysis narrows in on the aspects of the text that relate specifically to familial relationships. As can be seen in the "Dedication", included in the prayer book, the deceased parents are portrayed as dictating these prayers to the writer—representing the prayers of various people those who truly prayed.

> Mommy—Papa. You dictated these prayers to me in a rush; I had to laboriously, from memory—word by word, letter by letter—assemble and write them down. Sometimes I did not hear, often I did not understand, I made mistakes, my memory failed me, and I forgot a lot.—Rarely did you correct them—not much; just enough to make it clearer for me and for others. (Korczak 1922: 69)

A closer analysis of this old religious text reveals a figure of the mother, who is given the voice in two of the prayers. The first (pp. 7–9) is a monologue directed at two addressees: her infant and God. The child is addressed with the most tender and affectionate terms (*baby, sweet one, my one and only,' my dearest child, sincere and only truth of life, dearest memory, tender longing, hope, encouragement, little one, my precious care, you delightful shackles of jasmine and stars, flower of forgiveness, joyful dream of redemption, sunny faith, gentle hope, rosy cloud, lark's song*). The mother's prayer is a desperate plea to God for happiness for her child who is the primary addressee of her words. She apologetically addresses God, saying:

> God, forgive me for not speaking to You. And when I do pray, it is out of fear that a jealous You might harm them. I am even afraid to entrust them to You, God, because You take children away from their mothers and mothers away from their children. Tell me, why do You do this? This is not a reproach, God, but a question. (Korczak 1922: 7–8)

The mother is torn, struggling to decide whether she loves her child or God more. Ultimately, she concludes: "God, in loving this little child so completely, perhaps I am also loving You within him, because You are, You are in this Baby—God, the Greatest Mystery" (Korczak 1922: 8). Deeply in love with her tiny child, she makes a plea—almost a demand: "Give him happiness, God, so that he won't regret that we brought him into this world. I don't know what happiness truly is, but You do, and it's Your duty to know. So give it to him!" (Korczak 1922: 9). Her child becomes her prayer, as she says: "Say you will have no regrets about your life or about me; say it, my child; say it, my heartfelt prayer" (Korczak 1922: 9). Alicja Mazan-Mazurkiewicz writes:

> The child is almost sacralized—it becomes a source of hope. Yet, at the same time, it appears fragile, threatened not so much by death, but by the possibility of losing its own sense of worth. The mother encounters

> God in the ethical realm, sharing the responsibility for the life she has brought into the world. (Mazan-Mazurkiewicz 2017: 95)

The mother's first prayer, as shown above, is for her infant (Korczak 1922: 7–9). In her second prayer, another mother poignantly thanks God for helping her understand the tragedy that had befallen her. She once complained that her son had been killed and that the Fatherland had taken him from her. But now, God has made her see that the Fatherland had not taken her son away—it "adopted" her "dearest child" and gave him a beautiful death (Korczak 1922: 61). Here is the full text of the prayer:

> God, forgive me for my complaints.
> I once said: my son was killed, the Fatherland took my son from me,
> and he sacrificed his life.
> But I didn't understand. Thank you, God, for enlightening me.
> Now, I say: You have called my son to Yourself,
> and the Fatherland has adopted my dearest child.
> It didn't take him away; it gave him a beautiful death.
> I cry tears of joy and pride knowing that my beloved soldier
> stood before You and reported:
> "At Your command, Lord God."
> The Fatherland gave him a beautiful death.
> Thank You for helping me see this. (Korczak 1922: 61)

In the poem "Prayer of a Young Child," a mother is depicted as a merciless aggressor who uses verbal and physical violence against her daughter. In a text stylized as if spoken by a child, a little girl named Zosia prays to God, complaining about her mother who is hurting her. The prayer is a testimony to the child's fear, pain, and sense of guilt, as well as the harm she has suffered. It also shows her resentment toward her own body because of her mother's cruel treatment.

In "Prayers of a Boy," the praying boy asks God to remind his uncle of a promise he made:

> I know it's not polite to ask. But I'm not asking You, good God, for anything else. My uncle promised me a watch if I did well in school. Just help me by reminding him of his promise. I'll do my best, and it doesn't really matter whether he gives it to me now or later. I told my friends I would get a watch, but they don't believe me. They'll laugh at me, thinking I lied or was just bragging. Please help me, God. It's so easy for You—you can do anything. Help me, my Good, my Golden God. (Korczak 1922: 10)

In the pages of *Alone with God*, which is poignant in both content and tone, we encounter several other figures: a mother worried about a child who does not know how to obey (Korczak 1922: 43); a loving mother, filled with trepidation about her infant's future; another mother struggling with the trauma of losing her son; a cruel mother who fails to understand the emotional needs of her young child; and a mother who is vainly called upon in a moment of despair: "I cry out: 'people'.—No answer. I call out: Nothing. With a final cry, I call out: 'God.' And what? Nothing—alone" (Korczak 1922: 26).

In the poem "Prayer of Gaiety," a young girl's longing takes the shape of her mother's face: "After every empty fleeting joy comes sadness and longing. And in that longing, like in a mist, I see my mother's face, and hear the whisper of the Fatherland, feel the weight of people's misery, and see the Greatness of Your Mystery" (Korczak 1922: 50). In "Dedication," we see the author's parents praying, and in "Prayer of a Little Boy," a child prays for his mother, father, and uncle: "Help me, Dear God, not to sin, give Mommy and Daddy long life and good health, and remind my uncle about this watch" (Korczak 1922: 11).

Conclusions and prospects for further research

Korczak's *Alone with God: Prayers of Those Who Do Not Pray* can be seen as a kind of memorial to his parents and ancestors, as indicated by the "Dedication" included in the work. The prayers within this collection represent the legacy passed down to him by the "immortal chain of generations" (cf. Korczak 1929: 10–11). This inheritance encompasses a deep understanding of others— their dreams, desires, and the rich array of their emotions, ranging from the darkest to the brightest. It also includes the ability to articulate these emotions and convey them through language.

In this article, I have examined the structure of *Alone with God* and the semantics of this text, with special attention to the depiction of family within this collection of prayers.

Future research should delve into how Korczak linguistically crafted the prayers of the various characters, including:

- The prostitute in "Prayer of a Light-hearted Woman."

- Those struggling with depression in "Prayer of Sorrow" (cf. "Such sadness. Oh God, such sadness. Gray sadness. Oh God, gray sadness. Neither sounds nor colors; God, neither colors nor sounds. Just sadness, God, sadness"—Korczak 1922: 17), "Prayer of Impotence" and "Prayer of Complaint."
- Individuals rebelling against God in "Prayer of Complaint" (cf. "I lost my way in the gloomy twilight, and God went somewhere far away; and left me alone. I hung my complaint on a string of tears on my neck. This is Your fault, God"—Korczak 1922: 27) and "Prayer of Rebellion."
- Those who meditate in "Prayer of Reflection" (cf. "It is a wonder that one can gaze so long at a forest, at one forest tree, at one tree branch, at one leaf, at one vein of the leaf—and such strange hours flow through the soul"—Korczak 1922: 31).
- Those feeling unity with God in the "Prayer of Reconciliation" (cf. "I have found You, my God, and I rejoice like a stray child who spots a familiar face from afar. I have found You, my God, and I rejoice like a child who, awakened from a nightmare, greets a gentle face with a cheerful smile. I have found You, my God, like a child who escapes the care of a stranger and, after so many hardships, finally nestles against a loving heart, listening to its soothing song"—Korczak 1922: 36).
- Those worshipping God in the "Prayer of Joy."
- The elderly in the "Prayer of an Old Man."
- Humble and modest people in the "Prayer of a Humble Person" (cf. "Oh, God, I do what I can. I can do little, so do little. And You know, Oh God, that I do everything honestly. Not all people can be wise"—Korczak 1922: 53).
- The well-educated in the "Prayer of a Scholar."
- Artists in the "Prayer of an Artist" (cf. "Thank you, Creator, for creating the pig, the elephant with its long trunk, for fraying leaves and hearts, for giving black faces to Negroes(!) and sweetness to beets. Thanks for the nightingale and the bug, for a girl's breasts, for the fish that struggles for air, for lightning and cherries, for the way we are born into this crazy world, for fooling man into thinking things couldn't be otherwise, for giving Thought to stones, to the sea, to men"—Korczak 1922: 63).

Additionally, it is worth examining the different types of prayers represented in this collection. Future research should also consider the few but significant literary influences (e.g., Jan Kochanowski, Young Poland) and the impact of Korczak's work on other artists (e.g., Jan Twardowski). Furthermore, attention should be given to the stylization of the language used in various prayers spoken in the voices of different people—adults, children, the elderly, artists, a prostitute, individuals with mental health challenges, and others).

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CORRESPONDENCE ADDRESS:

Bożena Sieradzka-Baziur
Ignatianum University in Cracow
Institute of Educational Sciences
e-mail: bozena.sieradzka@ignatianum.edu.pl