

The Truth Is the Most Interesting

About years of false accounts regarding the march of children with Janusz Korczak from the Orphan House to the Umschlagplatz, the original reading of these events by Andrzej Wajda in the film „Korczak” and the superiority of truth over myth, we talk during the 28th History Book Fair with Agnieszka Witkowska-Krych, author of the book “Mniej strachu. Ostatnie chwile z Januszem Korczakiem” [“Less Fear. The Last Moments with Janusz Korczak”], honoured with one of the KLIO prizes for the best history book.

“Less fear. Facts and myths about the last way of Janusz Korczak and his charges” was the title of the meeting of Agnieszka Witkowska-Krych and Jarosław Abramow-Newerly – an outstanding creator and witness of the era – with the audience during the 28th History Book Fair, in the Kubicki Arcades Cinema Hall at the Royal Castle on Saturday, 30 November. The writer mentioned his mother Barbara Abramow, teacher and actress of the “Baj” Theatre, who as a little girl lived in Janusz Korczak’s Orphan House, where she also met her future husband, an associate of the Old Doctor, Igor Newerly. During the meeting, the writer and playwright also talked about Cavalry Captain Witold Pilecki. It was thanks to his intervention that the blackmailing of a shmaltsownik who threatened the safety of the Newerly family, ceased. Jarosław Abramow-Newerly knew Janusz Korczak, because his father was the pedagogue’s secretary and stenographer, and he also ran the Mały Przegląd – a magazine for children and youth. He edited articles of children’s authors, which were rewritten by Barbara Abramow. As a child, Jarosław Abramow-Newerly visited the Orphan House run by Korczak, and last saw him during the summer camp organized by this institution in Gocławek in 1940.

For many decades there has been a myth of the heroic Janusz Korczak, who thanks to this mythologisation appears to be the only defender of Jewish orphans in the Warsaw ghetto, without hesitation choosing death together with them and going to the Umschlagplatz, and from there to the death camp in Treblinka. Why, in your opinion, nobody was interested in verifying this myth before you?

I'm unable to answer the question why it happened. I think that the knowledge of those events was sufficient for the people. A nicely told heroic story was needed. The demand for it was also covered by the visually beautiful film "Korczak", directed by Andrzej Wajda. For me it was important to find out as much as possible. I correlated what I was able to find out. I verified the accounts that have remained from that time, for example, the one by Mrs. Irena Sendler. It does not seem likely to me that during the so-called Grossaktion in the Warsaw ghetto, she could have been there.

And see how they "turned from Żelazna into Leszno street"...

Yes. But the fact that she said that and throughout her life she maintained the truth of this account is also some piece of information – that, like the others, she wanted to participate in this heroic event, she wanted to be part of it. On that day, children from other orphanages in the ghetto were taken to Treblinka with their tutors. I am sure that the letter sent in the 1960s or 70s to the editorial office of the Polityka weekly did not contain facts, although its author gave many details. It is not possible that he was there at that time. He also wanted to be part of this story.

This is a topic for a separate dissertation – how and why so many people, often with well-known names, confabulated on such a scale...

Yes. Such a dissertation could answer the question why we want to be part of such a story and testify to ourselves about its truthfulness, although we were not present there at all. It's a fascinating topic.

Since we already know from your book how, with a high degree of probability, it really was, should Wajda's „Korczak”, with Agnieszka Holland's script, the outstanding film awarded in Cannes, strongly affecting the emotions be considered simply a false oeuvre?

I have never considered it to be a documentary, so it is not false because it had never been

meant to be true. It was supposed to be a personal story about what Korczak's last days might have looked like. For a person like me who deals with this topic, the factual errors in Wajda's film are obvious. But the director wanted to lead this story just as he did it and that's it.

In Poland, people don't like demythologising widely adored heroes. Are you not afraid of unfavourable acceptance of the book verifying the myth of the march of children about to die with a song upon their lips, following the proudly erect Korczak?

The truth is the most interesting. We can stick to the vision that has been maintained for years, but is it worth doing so when we know for sure that the story was different?...

Interview by Anna Kilian

Photo: WGM