
Holocaust Remembrance Day: a book celebrating Korczak's figure

Jim Shepard's new book won the 2016 "Sophie Brody Medal", the literary prize for achievement in Jewish Literature funded by Arthur Brody and the Brodart Foundation and named after his late wife, a philanthropist and key figure in the United Jewish Federation.

Settled in Warsaw Jewish Ghetto during the Second World War, "The Book of Aron: A Novel" describes dramatic life conditions over there.

Warsaw Ghetto was the biggest in Europe: established on April 1st 1940, contained 400.000 people (about 30% of the city population in area that was only about 2,4%).

The Germans closed Ghetto to the outside world on November 16 1940 and in the summer 1942 the liquidation begun with the deportation of 254.000 residents to Treblinka Lager.

On January 18 1943, after almost four months without any deportations, the Germans suddenly entered intent upon a further deportation, so begun the revolt, culminated in burning of buildings, murdering of the resistants, deportation to concentration camps of remaining population and the demolition of the Great Synagogue, on May 16.

Among summer 1942 deported Dr. Janusz Korczak, a celebrated historic figure, successful writer and committed advocate of children's rights.

Henryk Goldszmit (the real name of Korczak) born in 1878 (or 1879) into an assimilated Jewish family. He studied medicine, wrote for several newspapers, and became a pediatrician. He served as a military doctor during Russo-Japanese War and First World War.

After the war he worked on the radio and newspapers for children's rights and against anti-Semitism. He became director of a Jewish orphanage in Warsaw too. In August 5 1942 all 192 orphans were deported to Treblinka, Korczak, thanks to his personal prestige could escape this destiny but he preferred dying with his children.

The protagonist of Shepard's book, Aron, a eight-year-old boy of Warsaw Ghetto, coming from a poor Jewish family and living of smuggling and thievery, was taken under Korczak's wings and redeemed, and followed him since the death.

This book describes the real condition of Jewish minority in Polish countryside or in city suburbs, often characterized by poverty, marginalization and criminality, as far as the tragic epilogue of the Holocaust. In this dramatic reality emerges Korczak's heroic figure.

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