

## The Yellow Brick Road by Maya Doghman, Central High School

Along the yellow brick road to Emerald City, Dorothy and her friends, the scarecrow and the tin man, come across what they expect to be the brave king of the jungle. Instead of finding a fearless cat, they discover the "Cowardly Lion," one of the most beloved characters in The Wizard of Oz. More than anything, this four legged mammal desires to be courageous. The Cowardly Lion is expected to live up to a role that he finds entirely too difficult - to be fearless, brave, and able to confront fear, pain, and danger directly in the eye. Just as for the Cowardly Lion, courage is difficult for everyone to demonstrate. Although being able to endure physical pain does require courage, most people would agree that moral courage challenges individuals more. It is difficult because it requires people to step outside of their comfort zones in order to do the morally correct action.

Janusz Korczak is the definition of moral courage. Born in 1878, in Warsaw, to a Jewish family, Korczak was a young man with high ambitions. With determination, he became a physician, writer, and educator. He was attracted to circles of liberal educators and writers in Poland and always worked to help the poor and those who suffered most. Korczak loved children. He worked in a Jewish children's hospital and accompanied groups to summer camps. In 1908, he began to work specifically with orphans, and in 1912, he was appointed director of a Jewish orphanage in Warsaw on Krochmana Street.

Korczak was unique in his treatment of children. He believed that it was essential to understand a child's emotions and to respect them. He did not think that children were to be trained like dogs. Finally, he believed that they should be treated like "someone whose soul was rich in perceptions and ideas."

The 1920's were an important time for Korczak. He was directing two orphanages, instructing at boarding schools and summer camps, and lecturing at universities. He, more importantly, established a newspaper for children, written by children - the *Nasz Przemiad*. At the beginning of World War II, Korczak refused to acknowledge German occupation of Poland and refused to wear the yellow star. This rebellious attitude led

him to spend some time in jail. During the war, he sought to provide children with food and basic conditions of existence, while always striving to keep their spirits high. Although he provided much for the children, he believed that he received more. At this point, he was old and tired. He felt his duty to preserve and protect his orphanage for the children gave him strength. This desire encouraged him to keep the orphanage clean, maintain a roster, and foster close relations with each child. Various friends gave him opportunities to leave the ghetto; however, he would not accept them because he could not abandon his children.

On August 5, 1942, the Germans rounded up 200 children and Korczak and took them to the Umschlagplatz. Korczak informed the children they would be going to the countryside and that they should put on their finest clothes, not allowing the Germans to scare them. He bravely marched, his head held high, with the children. He was strong for their sake, even in the face of death.

As a sixth grader wearing overalls and a red Nebraska Cornhuskers shirt, I watched the twin towers fall to the ground on September 11, 2001. Sitting in my reading class, eyes wide, staring at the screen, I should have realized that my life was going to change after a boy asked if I was related to "those people."

My childhood is similar to the average American's. I have happily married parents, a younger sister, and a dog, and I grew up in a house with a backyard. In sixth grade, I walked to school, had a "boyfriend," and loved social studies. My life was typical of any middle class family. Something though, has always set me apart, especially since September 11th, and that something is my heritage. My father is an immigrant from Lebanon, a Middle-Easterner.

Following 9/11, many Americans, acting in rage and fear, began to discriminate against individuals connected to the Middle-East. My dad's Arab friends received threats of violence, and my family lived with latent fear that something would happen to us. Kids at school criticized me for being "associated" with the terrorists who caused the country so much hurt. Unfortunately, many people cannot make the distinction between terrorists and people of Middle-Eastern heritage, and sadly this ignorance has not faded as years have passed and intelligence supposedly has

increased. I still experience ignorance today. It is not uncommon to be the target of racist jokes dealing with my background.

People stereotype others because of lack of knowledge and understanding and it takes moral courage to stand up against these stereotypes. I am fortunate enough to have a greater empathy for diverse individuals because of my upbringing. My parents always stressed the importance of diversity and accepting others. Through my personal experience with racism, I have found my voice to stand up and educate individuals when they make false remarks about the Middle-East. This empowerment has also allowed me to stand up for others when they face bigotry. I am an agent of change.

It takes great moral courage to stand up against the bully, whether the bully is the big kid on the playground, Nazi Germany, or ignorance. Janusz Korczak demonstrated moral courage when he refused to wear the star and stayed with the children, even on the road to death. Korczak, like the Cowardly Lion, allowed his love for the children to lead him down a courageous yellow brick road. The Cowardly Lion, although terribly scared, showed courage in the Wizard of Oz when he rescued Dorothy from the Wicked Witch. Although a surprise to the lion, he always had courage within himself and love unlocked it. It should not be a surprise to us that we all possess it too.

#### Works Cited:

- "Janusz Korczak." Jewish Virtual Library. 2008. Jewish Virtual Library. 15 Feb. 2008. <<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/Korczak.html>>.
- Lifton, Betty Jean. The King of Children: the Life and Death of Janusz Korczak. St. Martin's Griffin, 1997.
- The Wizard of Oz. Dir. Victor Fleming. Perf. Judy Garland. Videocassette. 1939.