Mały Przegląd - A Little Review with a Big Impact

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While a newspaper for children written and edited by children with a little help from grown-ups may seem like a utopian idea, thanks to Janusz Korczak such a publication was made possible in the tumultuous era of the early 20th century. For 13 years Mały Przegląd was distributed every week with a run of 50,000 copies, giving many children a voice in a world of adult strife and political unease.

Mały Przegląd (The Little Review) was a Friday supplement to Nasz Przegląd, the largest Polish-language Jewish daily newspaper published in Warsaw before World War II. The first issue of the weekly came out on October 9, 1926. A week prior to its release, Janusz Korczak, the originator of the whole idea and the first editor-in-chief of the weekly, introduced the concept:

There are many adults who write only because they feel no shame, and there are children who have many great ideas, remarks and observations, but don’t write, because they lack courage or just don’t feel like it. Our newspaper will encourage them to write. Encourage and embolden them.

Korczak was convinced that children should write for children without the mediation of adults. An attitude that was revolutionary at the time and still to great extent unparalleled. Furthermore he saw writing as a mode of engagement in the world, and The Little Review was to play a crucial role in helping children speak for themselves. Through writing kids learned to address their problems and express their feelings.

The children could either send their letters by mail, telephone, or simply come to the The Little Review editorial office and personally say what was on their minds. The room and the adjacent corridor in Nowolipki 7 in Warsaw were always crowded and full of bustle typical of a newspaper editorial office. Here under the guidelines of Korczak and the deputy-editor Jerachmiel Wajngarten a group of young editors, such as Chaskiel Bajn, Madzia Markuze, Edwin Markuze and Emanuel Sztokman, did all the work necessary for a newspaper to appear in print. The general idea was that every issue of the weekly was to be composed of the letters sent by the readers to the Review’s office, or excerpts, sometimes arranged in elaborate ways. This premise remained over the years unchanged: the stuff of The Little Review was the authentic material produced by young readers, correspondents and reporters.

Korczak encouraged children to write about their everyday problems and worries, address them and eventually overcome shame and isolation. “Sometimes one doesn’t want to tell everything your friends and family, and yet one needs to complain about something or talk about one’s life, thoughts and needs”. He saw to it that the children wrote using their own words – their natural language, untainted by linguistic rules endorsed by adults. Korczak was also adamant about the genres used in the paper: no poems, no novels - no writing marred by the pedagogical interference of adults. The stuff of the Little Review was to be personal. Effectively, The Little Review could be called an early instance of authentic non-fiction literature in children press, where many of the articles did really have a say.

This was the case with the reportage published in the first year of the weekly run. An article about the barbed wire set up around the playground in Ogród Krasiański spawned a series of follow-up articles, and several months later the fence was effectively torn down. In another letter sent by a certain Natus, the boy complained about having to wear an apron to school. Supposedly, in consequence of an intervention on the part of the Little Review’s reporter, the boy’s mum stopped making him wear it.

In retrospect, The Little Review may seem reminiscent of a sort of community platform avant la lettre, connecting children from different backgrounds who yet all shared the same problems. One can’t stop but wonder about the amazing interactive character of the flow of communication between the editorial staff and its readers. The paper constantly addressed its readers, asking them about their feelings and relying on their feedback. This may also be reminiscent of contemporary 2.0 culture, as known from the Internet, in which the traditional roles of active and passive engagement (author - consumer) intermingle. The Little Review endorsed communication tactics in which readers also became writers and vice versa.
Looking for further parallels and analogies, one can compare The Little Review to an internet forum on which the children could openly speak out their minds and connect with each other. Especially in the first period of the paper’s existence, the children could always count on Korczak to answer their letter personally: share his thoughts, give an advice or criticize. If the analogy linking The Little Review with today’s online forum is to work, one has to make one important provision, namely that this platform was a completely safe environ moderated by Janusz Korczak, an exceptional figure with a very sensitive ear to all children’s needs.

In the ‘30s, after Igor Newerly took over the editorial seat, The Little Review took on a more political profile. With the readers getting older and the political situation in Europe getting tenser, the weekly drifted towards more socialist stance, relating to the spectres of surging fascism and anti-Semitism, as well as the growing menace of the impending world war. Throughout the ‘30s the anti-war strain manifested most clearly in May, when the paper celebrated the international Day of Good Will, publishing letters from children from all over the world calling for peace and solidarity among people. At that time Mały Przegląd became also involved in promoting Esperanto, the artificial language devised by Polish-Jewish scientist Ludwik Zamenhof, as the new language of communication and mutual understanding for all mankind. Those two aspirations were shattered by World War II.

In spite of the fact that the paper was focused mainly on Jewish children, it appears also to have been a place of dialogue between Polish and Jewish children. The letters of Polish Catholic children helped to articulate the difficult issues and overcome harmful stereotypes, bridging the gap between two cultures.

The Little Review was also a complex administrative project engaging elaborate marketing techniques. Korczak understood the importance of creating a community of readers and correspondents around the paper. He developed ways of gaining the loyalty of these readers. One of those attachment-building techniques was a motivational system for all who started writing for The Little Review. It started with the first letter sent to the weekly: the names of the authors of those letters were printed in the paper - it was indeed a rare opportunity to see one’s name printed in the newspaper. Those who kept writing were ascribed pen names. The motivational system included some more straightforward incentives like trips to a ham and sausage shop in winter and to ice cream parlors in summer. The authors of the most interesting letters received books, chess sets, and special postcards which often served also as tickets to the movies.

The last issue of The Little Review came out on September 1, 1939. Most of the young correspondents and editors of The Little Review perished in the Holocaust: renowned reporters like Harry Kaliszer, Kuba Hersztajn, Lejzor from Gęśia (Lejzor Czarnobroda), along with thousands of anonymous correspondents known to us only by their pen-names.