



# The Care and Education of Orphaned Polish Children

## A Success Story

Ongoing changes in the Polish political and economic sectors have led to tremendous changes in its education and health care systems that will likely bring reforms in the care of orphaned children. After the Second World War, many children in Poland were orphaned and an institutional system for their care and education became entrenched. Many problems exist within this system. After providing a brief overview of the care provided to Polish orphans and the problems they face, this article describes an exemplary Children's Home located in Lodz, Poland. This home for orphans has been successful in providing the children with opportunities to become productive adults.

### HISTORY OF CARE FOR ORPHANED CHILDREN

Kelm (1998) explains that the existing model of care for orphan children in Poland was created during the period between World War I and World War II. Two competing concepts emerged. The first concept came from the tradition of orphanages (Sierocinca)—institutions attached to churches and hospitals where orphan children lived. The focus of this approach was providing care and shelter for the orphans. The second concept was grounded in the pedagogical theory of Janusz Korczak and Jozef Czeslaw Bobicki. They advocated for the creation of Dom Dzieka (Children's Homes). These were to be organized as homes for orphans where the children could live in small groups with an instructor who also served as both teacher and caregiver. Bobicki believed that Children's Homes should incorporate the features of a good family, providing each child with an environment that allows them to grow individually and socially while developing strong links between children in the group (Siejda & Bakala, 1998). This approach was presented as one that not only offered care, but also prepared children for their future roles within society (see Lewin, 1985).

In 1921, the Polish Constitution (Art. 103) stated that children without necessary care from their parents had the right to receive care and help from the government. This act was expanded in 1938 when the Child Congress, which supported the research of Korczak and Bobicki,

emphasized the need for including the goals of care and education for orphaned children. This resolution was important because it required the boards of education to be responsible for these functions, thus anchoring these principles in social expectations.

World War II interrupted reorganization. After the war ended and until 1949, orphanages still existed, but Children's Homes were beginning to open. In the years between 1950 to 1952, the government developed most of the Children's Homes and two separate institutions were created: preschool and elementary schoolchildren were placed in Children's Homes, and older children went to the Young Adolescent Homes.

The next reforms took place between 1953 and 1965. Many Children's Homes were opened, while those for adolescents and young adults were slowly closing down (Kelm, 1998). Regrettably, the idea of using foster parents was neglected and providing help for poor families was not considered a priority. In the early to mid 1950s, the government placed its emphasis on caring for orphans in institutions rather than using foster families. It was a difficult time for the operation of Children's Homes, due to caregivers' low salaries, lack of control over the work of the Children's Homes, and lack of evaluation. The work of the Children's Homes that existed between 1951 and 1956 was criticized, especially the incorporation of Russian theories into the Polish system. From 1953-1965, Children's Homes experimented with accepting children under 3 years of age and with ways to involve parents and community in the process of education. The prevailing philosophy in the Children's Homes during this period was based on Makarenko's ideology of eliminating any form of democratization (Kozdrowicz, 1998). In response, Polish educators started looking for their own theories and traditions.

The period between 1966-1980 was a time for development of foster parent programs, adoption, and establishment of small institutions. Moreover, this was a period of economic difficulty in Poland and underground fighting with the communist regime. After the declaration of martial law in 1981, things worsened for young children, as the main national effort was put on

rebuilding the political system and establishing a new, independent (from Russia) Polish government. Other important issues, including the financing of Children's Homes, were put on hold until the new government established by the Solidarity movement took over in 1989. Since then, there has been a gradual elimination of Children's Homes and more and more children have been placed with foster parents.

## OUTCOMES FOR ORPHANED CHILDREN IN POLAND

### Challenges Within the Children's Homes

According to Polkowski (1999), Poland still has 70,000 children living in Children's Homes, 50,000 children in foster homes, and 100,000 children living in homes that are below what is deemed minimum standards. Kromolicka (1998) followed the careers and lives of children who left Children's Homes from two communities. She approached 44 orphans, ages 11 to 18, in Tarnow, and 50 social orphans (social orphans are children who are removed from abusive family situations) in Szczecin, and found that the majority of these children had either a vocational education or did not receive an education higher than the basic elementary level. Half of the children did not start their own families, one out of five was divorced, and several were already single mothers. Thirty-five orphans were asked about their experiences in the homes, and the results indicated the following:

- The caregivers and teachers treated them as objects
- There was a lack of funding
- Children with behavior problems were often sent to the Children's Homes
- The turnover of caregivers and teachers working in Children's Homes was significant
- Many buildings used for Children's Homes were not suitable for small groups
- Children often were returned to pathological families
- The relationship between the Children's Homes and schools lacked a spirit of cooperation
- Lack of education through hands-on experiences and lack of appreciation of goods, since they had little.

According to Makowska (1999) and Kromolicka (1998), the major problems with the Children's Homes are insufficient emotional warmth, poor education, lack of children's preparation for the future, and the fact that children receive little support to help them solve their psychological and emotional problems. Additionally, Czeredecka (1999) has stressed that Children's Homes do not replace a regular family, either in terms of creating a climate of caring or providing education. Czeredecka researched four Children's

Homes located in Przemysl and Krosno, which housed a total of 100 children in grades 4 through 8. The majority of children (75 percent) came from dysfunctional families with drug and alcohol problems. Although abused and neglected at home, many children expressed the desire to return. Just 22 percent did not want to go back home and 3 percent were undecided. Regrettably, just 55 of the children living in the Children's Homes have regular visits from a parent. This research also showed that 22 percent of children living in the Children's Home would not share their problems with anyone, but 30 percent did indicate they talked about what is bothering them with their instructors. While school pedagogues and psychologists all agreed that this form of care is insufficient, Kromolicka (1998) reminds us that Children's Homes will still be needed in Poland for a long time, and the goal is to improve rather than close them.

Caregivers and teachers take leading roles in advocating for major changes in the way the Children's Homes are run (Kromolicka, 1998). Their recommendations start with changing Children's Homes so that they are smaller, with about 20 occupants living in groups of five children. Teachers and children believe it is important for all children to take part in household duties. Children must learn independence and be able to survive and organize their own households after leaving the Children's Homes. Other recommendations include making sure the house contains a dining room and kitchen, and having the children take part in the cooking and shopping duties. Organization of a recreational-sport center open to the community would be ideal, helping to build relationships between children living in the Children's Homes and children from the city.

### Difficulties Facing Foster Parents

Polkowski (1999) stressed that 1999 was a year of crisis for those who care for orphaned children. Recent legislation has not properly regulated or supported family counseling, nor helped families who face poverty and need financial help. For these reasons, Polkowski (1999) criticized taking children from Children's Homes and placing them with foster parents. He suggests that the existing 40,000 foster parents are barely coping with their financial problems. Furthermore, according to Kromolicka (1998), 90 percent of foster parents are elderly. Until 1999, they received a payment for acting as a foster parent, a stipend that constituted a major part of their income. With the new legislation, the budget will be revised and the payment they receive will depend on the total family budget and be subject to a means test. An accurate assessment of the family budget often is difficult to determine, however, and this policy is likely to create hardships for many families.

## EXEMPLARY CHILDREN'S HOME

We cannot forget that many institutions are providing good care for orphan children. When I went to Poland in 2003, I visited three Children's Homes: two (Ruda Pabianicka and Bednarska) located in a former textile city called Lodz, and one in a small recreational town called Grotnicki. All three homes are hosted in very nice buildings surrounded by parks, and are open to the public. The children's rooms were nicely furnished and clean, and the dining rooms and family rooms were spacious. Computer rooms and access to the Internet were available. The children attended local schools and were able to leave the property and visit friends after notifying the teachers on duty. The children were nicely dressed and polite. I did not inform any of the Children's Homes about my visit because it is not necessary to do so in Poland, and I wanted to see the real picture. I was very pleasantly surprised.

I will describe one of the Homes that has been successful in meeting the needs of its children. It is located in Lodz, on 6 Bednarska Street. It has existed for 66 years. At the time of my visit, it served 42 children, ages 5 to 22 years old; it presently hosts 37 children. Over the last 10 years, this Home helped 109 children (Bak, 2002).

### The Setting

The children are sent to this center by the Family Court and the Court for Minors (the age of majority in Poland is 21). Roughly 5 percent of the children living here are orphans and the rest are considered social orphans, coming from dysfunctional families with parents who are not able to take care of or support their children. This Children's Home is very successful in regard to the programs offered to children, the children's graduation rate, and reunification of children with their own families. Recently, the director of this Children's Home (Janusz Bak), the director of the singing and theater group (Jaroslaw Wozniak), and one of the teachers (Malgorzata Dabrowicz) received an award from the Polish Minister of Education for their outstanding work with children.

The children and the faculty publish a quarterly newspaper in which they provide descriptions of the programs offered, highlight recent success stories, and tell about children's field trips and vacations. The newspaper also includes children's drawings, and photographs. This is the only Children's Home with this type of documentation.

Recently, all of the children in the age group graduated from high school, 12 are now at a university, one is in trade school, three are fluent in another language, and one of the girls recently received her license to teach French. The home has very popular singing and theater groups as well as successful soccer and hockey teams. The theater group has won many competitions;

in 2001, they represented Poland in the International Theatre Festival for Children in Helsinki. They were laureates of the Korczak Festival in Warsaw. The children perform on many occasions in different cities. They take vacations in France, Spain, Portugal, Sweden, and Turkey. Some of the children are getting scholarships to undertake studies at private universities in Poland.

### Organization of the Groups

The children are divided into seven groups. They live two or three to a room and are supervised 24 hours a day by caregivers and teachers. It is legislated that care be provided not only by the teachers and caregivers but also by older children. The instructors supervise the children as they do homework, and cooperate with schools, courts, families, and psychologists. All instructors have university degrees in such specializations as mathematics, biology, physical education, and early childhood education.

The faculty also includes school psychologists, who conduct therapeutic play and games with children, assess children's development, and record their assessments; they work with families and school pedagogues, and act as methodological advisers, helping instructors by introducing them to new methods of teaching, informing care, and disciplining children. The school pedagogue works with the teachers, children, and parents to help them with various problems related to the organization of tutoring, special programs, etc. A speech language pathologist is on staff. The Children's Home also has administrative staff: a principal, an accountant, a clerk, a secretary, cooks, maintenance staff, and housekeepers. The children assist in the maintenance of the building by cleaning their rooms.

### Activities

The children are very busy and participate in different types of activities. They have opportunities to participate in the following programs:

**Art programs**—drawing, painting with watercolor and finger paints, making collages, and art therapy

**Music programs**—participating in a singing group called "Go Magnificent" and a theater group called "Theatre of Dancing Touches"

**Sport programs**—playing on soccer and hockey teams (in 2002, the hockey team won first place in a Polish competition)

**Home economics**—cooking, baking, making salads, and preparing beverages

**Carpentry**—learning to use tools, making birdhouses, repairing furniture

**English language**—learning conversational English and writing.

## Celebration of Polish Traditions

The Children's Home celebrates many holidays, treating all of the children as a big family, and reinforcing the ideals of Polish citizenship. Some of the ways they celebrate holidays are:

**Christmas**—Wigilia, a special vegetarian supper, is served on Christmas Eve; communion bread is shared

**Easter**—the children paint eggs and prepare baskets of food to be blessed by the priest on Easter Sunday

**Children's Day**—children receive gifts and go for field trips

**Andrews Day**—the children pour hot wax through a key hole into a pail of water and later look at the wax shape created, telling what it is and what the predictions for the next year are; eating paczki (donuts) and faworki (angel cookies)

**First Communion**—since 96 percent of Polish families are Catholic, children whose parents are (or were) Catholics go through Catholic teaching and religious preparation for their First Communion.

## Alumni Success Stories

Many children believe that the Children's Home on Bednarska Street gave them a second chance in life (Borek & Cyrulka-Duszko, 2002). For example, Adam spent 12 years at Bednarska's Home. After graduating from high school, he received a scholarship from the Rotary Club to study at a private university in Warsaw. He came to the Children's Home when he was 7 years old and he still remembers how difficult the first days were. He is sure, however, that if he had stayed in his own home he never would have graduated from high school or attended university.

Wiola also went to Bednarska when she was 7 years old. She recalls that when she first arrived at the home, she did not want to leave her room. It took her some time to be comfortable enough to talk to people and make friends. Now, after graduating from high school, she has applied for admission to university and says she would like to help others who have experienced poverty and neglect.

Another girl, Agnieszka, has lived in the home since she was in 4th grade. She is now a junior at the University of Lodz, majoring in marketing. She loves music and English language studies. She was very active in the Children's Theater and has been approached by Polish Television to talk about her life.

Marcin just turned 18. He lived at the home for the last three years. His passion is soccer, and he has dreamed of becoming a soccer star since the 2nd grade. He is on the junior soccer team, often serving as captain. He now trains four times a week and is doing very well academically in high school, where he has chosen to specialize in marketing.

## SUMMARY

Kromolicka (1998) believes that the Children's Home should fulfill three functions. They should be therapeutic; focus on remobilization; and provide educational, social, and emotional compensation. Although many of the Children's Homes are not able to fulfill all these functions equally, the Children's Home in Lodz is a model program that provides many children with appropriate care and stimulation of development.

Of course, nothing can replace a good family. Makowska (1999) and Kromolicka (1998) stress that generally speaking, children living in Children's Homes are experiencing insufficient emotional warmth, poor education, lack of preparation for the future, and psychological and emotional problems. Polkowski (1999) would prefer better support for poor families, offering them financial support and counseling, rather than taking children from these homes and placing them in Children's Homes or foster homes.

Caregivers and teachers recently have begun demanding changes in the Children's Homes, including using smaller houses, imitating "regular" homes, and establishing a recreational sport center that could be open to the community (Kromolicka, 1998). Nastula (1997) advises placing children in institutions close to their original homes, helping families with good diagnosis and counseling, and preparing children for independent living and work. Programs modeled on the Lodz home can provide hope for young orphaned children and offer opportunities that lead to success in school and in life.

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