

Stefania Wilczyńska (Stefa)

Stefania was born in Warsaw in an assimilated bourgeoisie home in 1886. She took a course to become a kindergarten teacher and studied natural sciences at Liege University in Belgium.

In 1910, she volunteered at the Jewish orphanage that had opened at Franciszka 2 Street, and shortly thereafter, at the young age of 26, she became the house manager. She met Januzs Korczak for the first time when he came to the orphanage to watch a play prepared by the children for the general public. In 1912, when Korczak was appointed director of the new orphanage on Krochmalna Street, he appointed Stefa as his assistant and house mother. The children's ages ranged from 7 to 14 years and the house had about 110 children.

When Korczak enlisted in the army as a medical officer in World War I, Stefa was the one who supervised and directed the orphanage.

At the orphanage, Korczak and Stefa complemented one another. In testimonies from their students we can read that Korczak was the intellectual and the philosopher and Stefa the woman of action. She showed devotion and concern for the children whilst at the same time being strict and demanding. It was important for her to make them feel at home. The success of the orphanage in those difficult times should be attributed to both Stefa and Korczak .

Stefa visited Palestine three times between 1931 and 1938. She stayed at Kibbutz Ein Harod. After the Nazi's occupied Poland, the people of Ein Harod managed to arrange papers for Stefania to leave Poland, but she refused to do so and moved with Dr. Korczak and the children into the ghetto. In the ghetto, Stefa was especially active with sick children, setting up a special room for them and sitting for hours besides them and comforting them. On August 5th, 1942, she marched with Korczak, the children of the orphanage, and the rest of the staff to the point of deportation from where they were transported to Treblinka and murdered. As she had done throughout her life, here, too, Stefa devoted her life to others in endless self-sacrifice.