

KORCZAK ZIOLKOWSKI: THE CRAZY MAN ON CRAZY HORSE

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The case discussion focuses on the different goals held by Korczak and Standing Bear. While Standing Bear had proposed the project to honor his relative Crazy Horse, Korczak grew to have a broader vision of the project focusing on all natives. Social injustices have occurred throughout history, and involving many different minority populations, but discussion of these topics in the classroom remain difficult. For example, recent protests, and particularly the response by the media, highlight that there is still a lack of understanding regarding what Native Americans value and how others can contribute to maintaining their unique culture.

INTRODUCTION

It was the winter of 1949 and the artist Korczak Ziolkowski had just completed a successful open house, celebrating the first blast on what will become the largest mountain carving in the history of the world. Although support for the project had led to much contention in the media, with many saying that Korczak was taking advantage of the native people, the fact that the memorial honoring Crazy Horse was proposed by an Indian chief had buffered the public attacks.

As Chief Henry Standing Bear frequently reiterated, “this idea was conceived by me and I insistently begged the sculptor to study and advise me as to the possibility of a movement to promote the project and for what assistance he might wish to give.”¹ Yet, after a decade of interactions, the relationship between Korczak Ziolkowski and Henry Standing Bear had become strained. Korczak felt he needed consistent Indian involvement in the project but was not receiving the promised assistance. Korczak repeatedly tried to involve Standing Bear in the project, asking him to move to the site, but Standing Bear insisted that financial and health constraints limited his participation.

Following the official open house, Korczak knew that his relationship with Standing Bear was at a critical juncture. Was the partnership helping or hurting progress on the memorial? What resources, social and otherwise, did Standing Bear bring to the partnership? Although the monument was “to be entirely an Indian project” under Standing Bear’s direction, did Korczak actually need Standing Bear

in order to make the memorial a success? These are important questions that Korczak needed answered before continuing the partnership.

History

Social injustices have occurred throughout history; and nobody understands this better than Native Americans. The plight of the American Indian continues to affect the United States to this day. Recent protests, and particularly the response by the media, highlight that there is still a lack of understanding regarding native values and how others, not of their culture, can appropriately support native identity, history, and traditions. Those proclaiming to support the native people often do so for personal gain, leaving the situation worse than they found it.

The goal of sustaining native traditions became prominent in the 1930's, with the Indian Reorganization Act passing in 1934. Prior to this time the focus had been on assimilation into American society rather than maintaining their unique culture. This new policy gave natives more control over tribal lands and promoted an ethos of cultural self-sustainability. Natives were finally becoming empowered to speak for themselves and stand up for their beliefs.

Korczak Ziolkowski's echoed what was becoming a new understanding in society. Korczak stated, "The Indians received a dirty deal from the White Men. The more I study their history, their traditions and their legends, the more I am convinced that we, the White Men, [must] do something to honor their name."²

This opportunity came to Korczak on Nov 7, 1939 as Chief Henry Standing Bear, a prominent member of the Oglala Lakota (Sioux) in South Dakota, sent a letter to the well-known artist as he was residing in West Hartford Connecticut.

Dear Sir,

According to a newspaper notice I note you have won honors at the New York World's Fair in sculpture work. A number of my fellow chiefs and I are interested in finding some sculptor who can carve a head of an Indian Chief who was killed many years ago. We do not believe Borglum³ <the artist who had recently finished Mount Rushmore> is the only living man that can do that kind of work. This proposition is mine to be pushed by these certain chiefs and myself under my direction.⁴ Would you care to correspond with me on this project? There is a great amount to be explained of course. Perhaps you can help me in some way? This is to be entirely an Indian project under my direction. Please write at your earliest convenience. This is a matter of long standing in my mind which must be

brought before the public soon. The main thing now is to know if someone can do the work when money raised. We do not believe Borglum is the only living man that can do that kind of work. Please write me at your earliest convenience advising whether or not you care to correspond on this matter.

Yours Truly, Henry Standing Bear⁵

Shortly following receipt of the letter from Henry Standing Bear, Korczak made a three-week trip to the Black Hills of South Dakota to determine the potential for building a monument honoring the native people. Korczak was already a famous artist in Boston before he made his first trip to South Dakota, and some might say that committing so much time to single project could hinder his growing career.

Over the next decade Korczak continued correspondence with Standing Bear, met with politicians (both native and other), as well as making repeated visits to South Dakota. The proposed undertaking would take many years and unknown resources, yet on the third of May 1947, nearly ten years after he was first contacted by Henry Standing Bear, Korczak Ziolkowski moved to the Black Hills, dedicating the remainder of his life to building a monument for the honor and legacy of the Indian people.

KORCZAK ZIOLKOWSKI

As described in the Boston Sunday Post,

“He is, although he would throw a mallet at you if you called him one to his face, a genius, almost a throwback to the giants of the old world’s glorious Renaissance. Only a rash man would say that Korczak Ziolkowski, the orphan boy from Boston, won’t see it through, God willing, to completion.”⁶

As Korczak began to establish a base of operations near the mountain, there was an immediate rise in both national and international interest. Much of the press related to the project focused almost exclusively on Korczak, rather than the overall mission of the monument. Newspapers wanted to learn more about this artist who was proposing to carve a mountain.

Starting in April 1947 articles about Korczak began showing up in both Time and Life magazines, in the New Yorker, as well as newspapers from many major cities across the country. Korczak quickly became the focus of “countless news stories and pictorial features in nearly every daily newspaper in the English language.”⁷ He even became a regular reference in Ham Fisher’s nationally syndicated Joe Palooka comic strip published in 900 newspapers across the country.⁸

While many of the reviews were positive, other reports attacked Korczak, and suggested that the project would desecrate the land and the people he claimed to be honoring. The most hurtful of these reports were likely those suggesting that Korczak was imposing himself upon the Indians to boost his own fame, stating that “The Indian, we feel certain, liked his Black Hills untouched.”⁹

Such reports suggested that the sculptor was using the native people to expand his own celebrity and for financial gain. “The Indian has been abused and exploited by the white man - isn’t this just one more method of exploitation? The white man used the Indian to his advantage - isn’t Mr. Ziolkowski doing this all over again in a little more subtle form?”¹⁰

Other writers drummed up scandal, for example by debating the depth and relevance of Korczak’s involvement with Mount Rushmore. The media seemed giddy, publishing accounts from Mrs. Borglum (wife of Mount Rushmore sculptor Gutzon Borglum) calling Korczak a “faker” and claiming, “Mr. Ziolkowski never assisted my husband in any way.” These reports were juxtaposed with statements by others (including her son Lincoln Borglum) thanking Korczak for his efforts on the Rushmore project.

Despite the media’s focus on Korczak, rather than the mission of the project, the publicity seemed necessary to begin the work. Korczak had committed not to take federal funds and instead hoped to finance the project through private contributions, a nominal entrance fee, and the sale of souvenirs.

The business model required visitors, yet during the early days of construction much of Korczak’s time was spent building the underlying infrastructure needed to begin his work rather than the more exciting tasks related to blasting and carving. For example, with no road to the top, Korczak would spend days simply carrying supplies up the mountain.

Tourists wanted to see more than the blank canvas the mountain provided and Korczak himself, the “Crazy Man On Crazy Horse” as the newspapers defined him, became the attraction.

HENRY STANDING BEAR

Whenever Standing Bear explained the project, it was clear that this “is to be entirely an Indian project under my direction”. Standing Bear firmly believed that the project should remain entirely in the hands of Crazy Horse’s descendants or near kin. Standing Bear believed that if he was not personally involved in the

project then, "The high ideals will be abused and ignored and not properly understood... and may fall finally into the control of white man, and the project exploited in manners contrary to the honor and dignity of the purpose."¹¹

One of the first press releases associated with the project echoed this sentiment stating, "The actual work of carving the great memorial will be one entirely by the hands of Sioux Indians. Thus, this vast monument will become more than ever outstanding in the fact that it is the only Indian memorial in the world to be made by the very descendants of those who are thus honored." Regrettably, Standing Bear admitted there was no sculptor among them, nor could any of Crazy Horse's relatives handle the controls of the necessary political machinery.¹² As such it was necessary for an outsider to assist on this great work.

Standing Bear clearly articulated his anticipated role in the memorial in a letter to Korczak's first wife Dorothy Ziolkowski dated Nov 24, 1947

I shall try to locate myself in Custer <as> soon as possible and open a shop... The project now in your hand is the biggest thing ever <to> be brought about in the world's history and there will be times I may be brought to meet people who would want to know something about me - how I live, where I live, what I do and that part must be so that what you are doing may not be hurt in the dignity and greatness of the project in your hands.

Standing Bear recognized the importance of representing the native people at the memorial. Despite his stated desire to be at the memorial himself, Standing Bear concluded this letter by providing Dorothy with an explanation of his financial constraints, such as his difficulty disposing of property on the reservation. He explained that this wasn't meant as an excuse, but rather he stated, "I just want you to understand why I have been so much helpless at times."

As construction began on the memorial, and Standing Bear was still unable to be physically present at the site, Korczak and Dorothy continued to do everything within their means to involve Henry in the project, including paying for his transportation to the site on numerous occasions.

In a December 11, 1947 letter, Dorothy Ziolkowski stated:

We need you here, and the project would be the better for your presence on its site. I still feel that you should not consider living anywhere but at the Crazy Horse Memorial and helping the project here. We want you to feel

that this is your home. If you would like to have a relative with you to keep house for you, that would be perfectly satisfactory. The principal thing is that you are a part of the Crazy Horse Memorial project and a very important part, and you are needed here. The assistance which you would render by being here should remove from your generous spirit all feeling of obligation.

In addition to the immediate assistance Chief Henry Standing Bear could provide with tourists, having him live on site would assist to buffer the growing focus on Korczak, which at times overshadowed the mission of the memorial. Dorothy requested that Standing Bear write to newspapers reaffirming that he was the impetus for the project:

“Korczak wants me to ask if you will please send letters to the New York Herald-Tribune, and to the Mitchell Daily Republic ... It is urgently important that you should do this, and over your official signature, explain that the vision and the desire to memorialize one of the great men of the Sioux Nation came from you and was not a whim of the sculptor’s... and that you and your fellow chiefs had made the request of the sculptor in 1939 etc... Please put these ideas into your own words, you can do it so beautifully... please send similar letters to all newspapers which you may hear of (we cannot hear of all of them) which may be publishing articles opposing the project. They should be answered immediately, and by you. Korczak can say nothing, for, as you can see, his position is much stronger if he maintains his silence.”

THE OPEN HOUSE

In the early part of 1949 Korczak Ziolkowski began to plan an open house to celebrate the first blasting on the mountain. The occasion was highly publicized, with many local and tribal leaders in attendance. Henry Standing Bear was scheduled to play a significant role in the event. Standing Bear’s role was so important that in response to rumors that the Governor would set off the first charge of dynamite, Dorothy wrote a letter dated May 20, 1948 reassuring Standing Bear that “you will be the one to set off the charge of dynamite”.

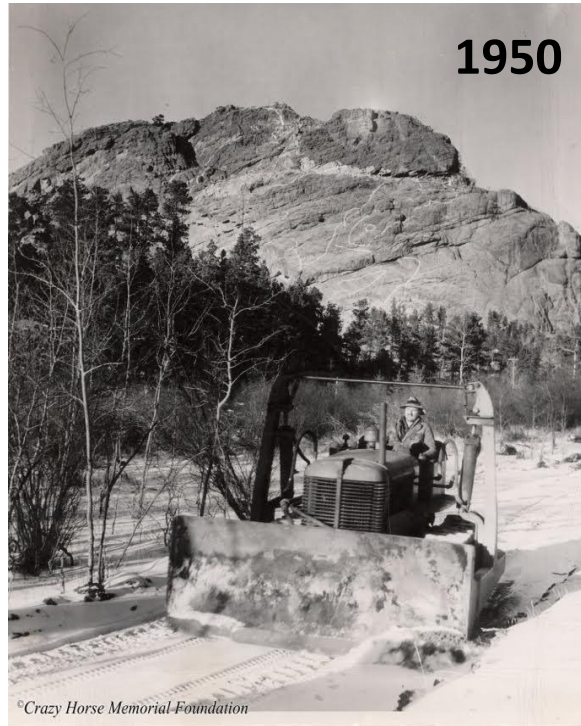
Finally, in a letter dated June 13, 1949, Standing Bear expressed to Korczak, his regret and inability to participate due to both health and financial constraints:

Now, Korczak, what ever your ideas <are> about me in regards to the project I am not afraid. I have at times <been> lying in bed without sleep

for hours and hours thinking over many things if I can do anything that can be a contribution towards the success of your carving even in the hours of my miseries in my troubles but I can not <and> did not do much for I am poor in money - too poor to sacrifice much - but I must pay my debts.”

Despite this letter, Korczak continued efforts to have Standing Bear participate in the open house, and even sent a check in the amount of \$10 to cover travel costs and other expenses. Unfortunately, aside from a brief note of “thanks” and a promise to talk about the matter later, there is no indication that Standing Bear could be persuaded.

The open house took place on September 20th, 1949 - without Chief Standing Bear in attendance.



(author photo)

ENDNOTES

- ¹ From a letter published Dec 11, 1947 in the Custer County Chronicle, Custer SD "Henry Standing Bear Tells of Crazy Horse Memorial Plan".
- ² Korczak Ziolkowski letter published in The Custer County Chronicle Sept 15, 1947
- ³ The letter refers to Gutzon Borglum, the artist responsible for leading the Mount Rushmore project. At the time of the letter, Borglum had recently completed carving the faces of Mount Rushmore bringing attention to the Black Hills of South Dakota. Prior to reaching out to Ziolkowski, Luther Standing Bear (Henry's Brother) had been unable to receive a response from Borglum about participating in a Crazy Horse sculpture.
- ⁴ According to Lakota tradition only the family of a Native American can decide to have a memorial built to honor their ancestor. Descendants of Crazy Horse's extended family have repeatedly disputed Standing Bear's authority to make this decision.
- ⁵ This and all following letters, unless otherwise noted, come from the archive at The Crazy Horse Memorial Foundation library located at 12151 Avenue of the Chiefs, Crazy Horse, South Dakota 57730-8900; used by permission
- ⁶ April 6, 1947 - Boston Sunday Post "He Plans to Carve a Western Mountain" by: John Kelso.
- ⁷ July 22, 1948 - Custer County Chronicle "Work Starts on Crazy Horse Mountain Memorial"
- ⁸ April 26, 1949 - The Hill City News "Let's Not Belittle A Masterpiece"
- ⁹ Nov 22nd, 1947 - New York Herald-Tribune referenced in personal communication from Dorothy Ziolkowski to Chief Standing Bear
- ¹⁰ Constance Major , Letter to the Editor, Rapid City, S.D., Daily Journal. March 1948.
- ¹¹ Letter from Henry Standing Bear to W. O. Robers Supt. Pine Ridge Agency regarding the construction of the monument. June 28, 1943
- ¹² Letter from A. R. Ziolkowski to Geraldine Zapata, August 7, 1997 as referenced by John Swanson <http://www.aaanativearts.com/sioux/henry-standing-bear.htm>