The Children's Republic of Gaudiopolis: The History and Memory of a Budapest Children's Home for Holocaust and War Orphans

By Gergely Kunt.

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In this insightful work, Gergely Kunt highlights a little-known educational experiment in post-war Hungary: The Children's Republic of Gaudiopolis. Led by the Lutheran minister Gábor Sztehlo, the republic offered children in his post-war orphanage the opportunity to explore democracy, develop as responsible citizens, and heal wartime trauma. Kunt's analysis of the republic draws extensively on its wider context, showing how the experiment was influenced by – and defied – the Christian Churches', the Hungarian state, both German and Soviet occupiers, and Sztehlo's own personality.

The book is split into four sections, providing a roughly chronological approach to the history and memory of Sztehlo's work. Kunt begins with Sztehlo's personal history. By outlining his work as a Lutheran minister in a Hungarian town that had no Jewish population, Kunt nuances our understanding of Sztehlo as a rescuer of Jews, showing him as a 'passive minister who concentrated solely upon his Church's or his own aims' (26). Through telling the history of how Sztehlo established children's homes to protect Jews in late 1944, Kunt problematises the categories of bystander and rescuer during the Holocaust, exposing the process through which Sztehlo moved from one to the other. He then shows how the wartime children's homes became the post-war orphanage in which he could establish Gaudiopolis.

In the second section, Kunt describes the diverse group of children in the orphanage. While most of them had been labelled Jewish during the war but converted to Christianity, there was an influx of new children, including those of Hungarian perpetrators. Kunt presents short biographies of some of them, showcasing this variety. He then takes a similar approach to understanding the everyday activities of the orphanage and its connected school, detailing the personal histories and professional activities of Dr Margit Revesz, the orphanage psychiatrist, and Zoltan Rakosi, their Hungarian literature teacher. By doing this, Kunt reveals how their wartime experiences influenced how they related to the children and approached their care and education.

Delving deeper into the structure of Gaudiopolis, Kunt then describes how Sztehlo established various 'ministries' that were led by democratically-elected children and which performed practical roles in the orphanage. These ranged from organising workshops (Ministry for Industry) to running events and programs (Ministry for Social Welfare). Kunt argues that these activities enabled children to 'experience what it meant to have rights as a member of a minority group or to uphold the ways as a member of the majority' (140). Finally, this section closes with a survey of the media coverage on Gaudiopolis, which overwhelmingly reflected the taboos of the era, omitting fundamental elements of the experiment's philosophy, including its Christian roots, Jewish connection, and the fact that it sheltered children from all social classes (152).

The final section charts the plot, inspiration, and characteristics of the Communist propaganda film *Somewhere in Europe.* Produced in 1947, the film presents the conflict between children and adults in a village, where a gang of 'street urchins' are given sanctuary by an elderly conductor in his castle, but are pursued by village residents. Kunt argues that the film talked directly to the orphanage children, as 'this plot was their story' (173). Indeed, he shows how some of these children were used as actors in the film, whose real life stories were included. To close the book, focus shifts to the

public reception of the film and how it visualised children as war victims. Kunt argues that Gaudiopolis acted as a tool for the politics of memory in early post-war Hungary, enabling the filmmakers to represent taboo topics – including Jewish victimisation, rape by Soviet forces, and religion – despite political pressure.

Indeed, a key theme throughout the book is that of how Sztehlo's humanitarian work went against the prevailing systems and authorities. Brought into sharp focus by his initial passivity, Sztehlo's later work clearly strove against the Hungarian Arrow Cross, both Lutheran and Jewish interest groups, the Hungarian education system, and Soviet influence. Because of this, Kunt paints a picture of Sztehlo as a fiercely independent man, yet one who knew how to manoeuvrer within different organisations of religion, party, and state. Because of this, Kunt's book provides an important contribution to our understanding of how people could navigate shifting political environments in Hungary.

Although the book focuses on an educational experiment that gave immense power to young people, children's voices are markedly missing from the narrative. This is due to a lack of sources, which Kunt mitigates well by including quotes from children's writings in the orphanage newspaper. Nonetheless, this source base frames the type of history the book can tell, creating a narrative largely about the instruction of children, rather than a life from their perspective. One important exception to this is a powerful collection of children's poems written in a nonsense language known as *Halandzsa*, which Kunt includes in an appendix. Despite the fact that these poems are not translatable, their very inclusion is a poignant connection to the children's words themselves that is otherwise lacking in the book.

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