Varga, Zsuzsanna. "Kunt, Gergely. *The Children's Republic of Gaudiopolis: The History and Memory of a Budapest Children's Home for Holocaust and War Orphans*. Budapest-Vienna-New York: CEU Press. 2022. 236 pp." *Hungarian Cultural Studies*. Journal of the American Hungarian Educators Association, Volume 17 (2024) DOI: 10.5195/ahea.2024.583

# Kunt, Gergely. *The Children's Republic of Gaudiopolis: The History and Memory of a Budapest Children's Home for Holocaust and War Orphans.* Budapest-Vienna-New York: CEU Press. 2022. 236 pp.

**Reviewed by Zsuzsanna Varga[1], University of Glasgow**

Gergely Kunt's engaging study offers an account of the work of Gábor Sztehlo, the Budapest-based Hungarian Lutheran minister who arranged accommodation and shelter for over 1,500 Jewish children during the last months of World War II with the help of the Swiss Red Cross, and with great risk for himself. After the war and under rather austere circumstances, Sztehlo continued his work with those "children in need" who became orphans during the war or were of parents who disappeared or were imprisoned. In Gaudiopolis [lit. the 'city of joy'] children were looked after with much care while learning the practices of grassroots democracy and self-government, which could be legitimately nurtured in the post-war Coalition period (1945-1948) but which were systematically eradicated after the 1949 political turn in any educational establishment as well as in the more broadly understood society. Kunt's book testifies to Sztehlo's work as a Righteous among the Nations (a title he was awarded by Israel in 1972) as well as the experimental educator of orphans under less dangerous but still demanding circumstances. Sztehlo's work is shown through historical experiences as it was shaped by political forces as well as contemporary or pioneering knowledge of responding to individuals' historical trauma.

Of these two separate yet morally and pedagogically closely connected activities, the sheltering of Jewish children is much more widely known in Hungary. Sztehlo, using his German-speaking Swiss parentage and upper-middle-class status, organized and secured thirty-two safe houses. The children and the caregiving adults all survived while many of the children became prominent in their profession, such as the Nobel Prize-winning chemist György Oláh. Sztehlo's capacity to provide shelter stemmed from his status as a Lutheran minister. The Good Shepherd Committee, which served the spiritual and social welfare of Reformed Church Christian converts of Jewish origin, had exercised its agency since 1942, and it was this organization that approached Sztehlo to use his influence on the Swiss representative of the Red Cross, Friedrich Born, to secure Red Cross assistance for accessing safe houses. Though Sztehlo was commissioned to offer protection to children already converted, his Christian conscience extended to all denominations without religious distinction.

Post-war conditions showed that children who lost their parents due to war and post-war circumstances also required sustained care, and it is this stage of Sztehlo's career to which Kunt devotes most of his attention. Sztehlo secured the use of several villas belonging to the leading industrialist Weiss family in the leafy suburbs of Buda, where, partly inspired by the 1938

[1] zsuzsanna.varga@glasgow.ac.uk



ISSN 2471-965X (online)

American movie *Boys’ Town*, showing a Catholic man of the cloth giving home to runaway children, he established a proper republic for his children where the (child) Minister of Finance handled the earnings of the other children and the (child) Minister of Culture organized theater visits and other cultural pursuits. Two educators offered their own therapeutic methods to the traumatized inhabitants of the homes: Dr Margit Révész, a psychiatrist, and Zoltán Rákosi, the Hungarian literature teacher. Rákosi introduced art therapy and writing therapy to help scared and distrustful children come to terms with their losses. These compositions were then published in their periodicals (*Our Newspaper* and *On our Own*), much to the dismay of the educational establishment, whose representatives condemned the free writing and the apparent lack of respect for adult authority emanating from the compositions.

The book’s final section addresses Géza Radványi’s internationally acknowledged feature film *Somewhere in Europe* (1947), which stages the journey of a gang of runaway children from stealing and pillaging on the streets to establishing their own independent community and gaining solace from organized work as well as from the teachings of a classical musician who uses the magic of music to help them heal. It is in the realm of responding to fundamental differences between out-there history and its fictionalized counterpart where Kunt, a historian by profession, is the least at home in this otherwise meticulously researched book.

Certain perspectives of the story of Sztehlo’s pedagogical work pique the reader’s curiosity. The man comes across as a formidable person of great courage and inventiveness, always slightly at odds with his official environment, be it Arrow Cross Hungary or his own church. But what remains to be understood is the strategies or qualities that helped him to effect change and maneuver the political and material conditions around him to help his causes. Oddly, he himself remains vague in the narrative, and the total absence of personal memories—despite the widely available publication of recollections by Sztehlo children in 2019—is striking. A similarly underexplored dimension is Sztehlo’s faith, which would refine the contours of a mind equally successful with children bitten by historical vicissitudes and authorities exercising power under little external control. The curiosity to see more of an intellectual biography of Sztehlo the minister and Sztehlo the educator remains unmet. However, despite these absences, the volume is an intriguing work about an important and inspiring subject.