

BOOK REVIEW

Kaposi, J. (2021). *Pendulum Movements – History teaching in Hungary*. Schenk Verlag.

Reviewed by **Barnabas Vajda***

Published online: May 4, 2022

© 2022 The Author(s)



József Kaposi's "Pendulum Movements..." reflects the diverse trends and dynamic character of Hungary's current professional history teaching. What we have on these 196 pages is a fine collection of synthetical studies and textbook excerpts, including some carefully designed didactical resources – in brief, we have here the very essence of József Kaposi's scientific output from the last twenty years.

Needless to say that the political, social, and cultural transition after 1989 in Hungary was not an easy one. Schooling has always been a key social issue, and in Central Europe, which had been struck by over-ideologized history, teaching, history and history teaching often gets into the focus of public debates. Readers can imagine that Kaposi, in his writings, has undertaken an Augean task – in a very uncertain, at the same time a very creative pedagogical environment.

Our author is probably one of the most experienced experts in the field of History Didactics in Hungary. He is one of those who are very well aware of the complete context of Hungarian history teaching: he has worked on strategic decisions on the national level as well as he has been following many earth-bound problems and needs of those at the other end of the system, of those who learn and teach history. Being one of the masterminds behind the most relevant processes and innovations in Hungarian history teaching (National Core Curriculum, school-leaving exams, innovative schoolbooks, nationwide empirical surveys, etc.), he is one of the rare who has a reliable overview of the complexity of our profession. In addition, Kaposi as a President of the Hungarian Historical Society Teachers' Division, and as a co-founder and the vice-editor of the *Történelemtanítás*, and also as a multiple history schoolbook author – he has all rights to make synthetic, or even critical judgements on our way of learning and teaching history. My personal opinion that he embodies "a modernization threshold" in Hungary is not necessary an overstatement.

In this unique book, he proves his firm intention to shape the historical consciousness or historical literacy (as he likes to call it) of the Hungarian professional community, and maybe of international readers too. The content of this book was originally written in Hungarian, and now it is translated into English; thus, Kaposi's papers are made available for international readers, intentionally discussing on an international scale. While dealing with the core issue of how we are supposed to teach history, Kaposi touches upon several additional (and yet often burning) issues, such as historical memory, the way humans learn history, historical skills, and the narrative character of our science. At the same time, he is brave enough to raise dilemmas, too:

*University of J. Selye, Slovakia. E-mail: vajdab@ujss.sk

Why do we learn history? How do we know what we know? What can and what can not be considered historical evidence? And if we think we know something in history, then why does it matter? Kaposi knows very well that these annoying questions concern only some of us – while they should annoy all of us who teach history.

The author of this book has had an extensive overview upon learning and teaching history in Hungary – in a country where history as valuable knowledge and history as an important part of the national pride has traditionally been esteemed very high by ordinary people; he states that “history is one of the most popular school subjects” in Hungary. Moreover, these general factors have to be taken into account as important background information when we state that this country has had (in my personal convictions) one of the richest, the most diverse, and probably the most sophisticated school history teaching systems in Central Europe, if not on our whole continent.

The author smartly incorporated a brief Hungarian history between 1945 and 2004 into his book in the forms of lessons as exemplary excerpts from a Hungarian school textbook (see pages 59–137). As he puts it in his very balanced evaluation, “The textbook chapter presents trends running from the end of WWII until 15 years after the change of system (2004). [...] Almost a decade and a half have passed since 2004, during which time significant changes have taken place in the political, social, economic and intellectual spheres of Hungary. The conditions for processing textbooks in this complicated and contradictory period are not yet in place because of a lack of mature professional academic processing and sufficient historical perspective.” Doing so was a brilliant idea because a very good opportunity was thus created for international readers who want to get acquainted with the Hungarian teaching system from the first and best hand.

József Kaposi is a Central European thinker. Carrying on the best university traditions founded by Ágnes F. Dárdai in History Didactics, he has already made an impact not only in his homeland but beyond its borders too. We must not forget that our author is one of the main driving forces behind the professional journal *Történelemtanítás*, the only professional journal dedicated explicitly to History Didactics in the wider Central European region. Not surprisingly, his references in this volume include quotations from Ranke through Jeismann to Nora and far further. As a member of the International Society of History Didactics, he has been keen on bringing European history teaching trends into his homeland, and I am sure he can enrich European history teaching traditions and best practices with his vision too. Any reader can find his concept-making intentions, beyond his verbal explanations, manifested in and through Kaposi’s own graphs, charts, and tables, which are a smart and smooth synthesis of the most recent Hungarian and international trends of History Didactics.

Finally, one thing that I find fascinating in József Kaposi (let me be a bit personal) is that he has always been a restless initiator of new and even newer tasks. Be him a developer of an entirely new type of source-based history schoolbooks (including digital ones), or a persistent organizer of professional events, both on a national and international scale – he has always kept his one eye on the future of history teaching. Despite being probably one of the most experienced experts in our field, it is simply admirable how firm vision into the future of the Hungarian history teaching he has.

Open Access. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial purposes, provided the original author and source are credited, a link to the CC License is provided, and changes – if any – are indicated.

