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Escape from Fear to Freedom: Sisters of Social Service as Refugees¹

Margit Slachta², or Sister Margaret, as she was known in the United States, was reburied in the Fiumei Road National Cemetery in December 2021. When I heard about the reburial, attended by Cardinal Péter Erdő, Archbishop of Esztergom-Budapest, Deputy Prime Minister Zsolt Semjén, Márta Mátrai, First Officer of the Hungarian National Assembly among others, and live-streamed³ and broadcast on national television, I was wondering who Margit Slachta was and why was there a ‘need’ for reburial. The first Hungarian female Member of



Fig. 1. “Hazahozták és újratemetik Slachta Margit hamvait”
[Magyar Kurir, 2021. november 16.](#)

Parliament who founded the congregation Sisters of Social Service (SSS) in 1923, played also a significant role in the rescue efforts of about 1,000 Jews, and in the resistance to Nazi ideology, had been missing from history textbooks in Hungary before the political changes in 1989, or she had been mentioned in the footnotes at best, if at all. Recent research—almost exclusively in Hungarian—has been supported by the

Barankovics István Foundation, and some of her activities are covered in English by Louise O. Vasvári,⁴ Éva Petrás,⁵ and George Csicsery whose documentary called *Angel of Mercy* is

¹ This article is based on the paper presented at the 46th Annual AHEA Conference on Zoom in April, 2022. I’m grateful to Judit Kesserű Némethy for bringing this topic to my attention and all the encouragement she gave me; to Mária Kórász and Andrea Vida at the Vasváry-gyűjtemény in Szeged for combing through the collection for relevant documents; and to Lujzi Vasvári, Éva Petrás, and Jim Niessen for their comments and suggestions. The paper was prepared in the framework of the project entitled The Post-1956 Refugee Crisis and Hungarian Emigrant Communities during the Cold War (NKFI-1 FK-135586).

² The spelling Slachta will be used within the text, unless a primary source or direct citation requires otherwise.

³ Slachta Margit újratemetése. Edited version of video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vMxDQSQKnEg>
[Last visited: June 14, 2022.]

⁴ Vasvári, Louise O. “Constructing Narrative Identities in the Holocaust Memories/Memoirs of Three Women.” *Hungarian Cultural Studies*. e-Journal of the American Hungarian Educators Association, Volume 13 (2020) DOI: 10.5195/ahca.2020.389

in production and scheduled to be completed in 2023. Due to lack of communication on the one hand, and the lack of access to primary sources, on the other hand, the activities of Sister Margaret in exile between 1949 and 1974 can be based on secondary literature⁶ and various internet websites at the moment, until the archive of the Sisters of Social Service becomes available for research, hopefully in time for the 100th anniversary of its foundation in 2023.

Sister Margaret died in Buffalo, NY in 1974, and her original—temporary—grave was in the Holy Cross Cemetery (Figure 1). Still unclear to the author when and why, a memorial plaque was dedicated to her in the Alba Regia Chapel in Berkeley Springs, West Virginia by the Hungarian Freedom Fighters Federation⁷ (HFFF). Although she wasn't as active as before in Hungary due to her failing health, she was still a respected figure among American Hungarians—at least this is my educated guess and working theory for the time being.

As a pioneer in the field of social work, Margit Slachta joined the Social Mission Society as early as 1908. She became politically active and was the first woman to be elected as a member in the National Assembly of Hungary on March 25, 1920. In her first speech in Parliament on April 23, 1920, just two months short of signing the Treaty of Trianon, she emphasized the rebuilding of Christian Hungary, highlighted the role(s) of women in society, described the social-moral problems of the early Horthy-era, and discussed the issue of school reform. She gave 28 speeches altogether during the first term between 1920 and 1922.⁸



Fig. 2. Church of the Holy Spirit, Máriaemeté

⁵ Petrás Éva. Legacy of Margit Slachta, a Pro-Active Social and Political Representative of Modern Catholic Thinking, paper presented at the 46th Annual AHEA Conference on Zoom in April, 2022.

⁶ Slachta's biography written by Ilona Mona (1921-2019), published in 1997, is based on archival material, but several issues could and should be more detailed and further discussed.

⁷ Hungarian Freedom Fighters Federation. <https://www.hungarianfreedomfighters.org/> [Last visited: 14. June, 2022.]

⁸ Petrás Éva-Slachta Boglárka Lilla-Szabó Róbert (eds.): Slachta Margit beszédei a magyar parlamentben [Speeches of Margit Slachta in the Hungarian Parliament]. Barankovics István Alapítvány—Gondolat Kiadó, 2021.

As a member of the Social Mission Society, she wasn't allowed to run in Parliamentary elections, so she decided to leave the Society and found a new congregation, the Sisters of Social Service in 1923. Her vision was to organize women not only to help the poor in general, but to work toward changing the conditions that caused poverty and social inequalities. The main sources of their income were a can factory at Erzsébet királyné Street, making and selling handicraft, and fundraising overseas. As a result of these activities a Motherhouse at 69 Thököly Road could be purchased, and Holy Spirit Church in Pesthidegkút

was built between 1937–1942 (Figure 2).



Fig. 3. Margit Schlachta.
Rádió Ujság, 6. évf. 49. szám, 1929.
Source: adt.arcanum.hu

The SSS started to expand internationally—to Slovakia, Romania, then to the USA and Canada—already in the 1920s: first in 1922–1923, Sisters Gertrúd Horváth, Paula Rónai (1886–1968), Hedvig Vozáry, other sisters and later Sister Friderika Horváth (1897–1970) went to the United States, to Buffalo, NY.⁹ Friderika Horváth, later known as Sister Frederica traveled to California and started the foundation in Los Angeles in 1925–1926. Sister Margaret visited the foundations overseas three times as part of her duties as head of the congregation, with fundraising in mind with lecturing, and handicraft campaign:

- November 4 1924–December 12 1926
- November 1928–April 1929
- September 3 1935–September 30 1936

After returning home from her first visitation, she started the "Mindenki Karácsonyfája" [Everyone's Christmas Tree] action in 1927. She wanted to introduce public Christmas trees as early as 1921, but her idea was not supported by city authorities. She saw many examples in the States, and when she returned, a committee was organized right away. The 1st year there were 13 or 14 Xmas trees decorated on the streets and squares in Budapest, food, candy, clothes, even coal was distributed. Not only 800-1000-2000 gifts were collected and shared under each tree, but performances by choirs and orchestras were presented, and speeches were

⁹ Máté Anita: Az amerikai magyar katolikusok és az óhaza (1918-1939). METEM, 2011. pp. 82–86.

delivered by the Sisters themselves. In the 2nd year out of the 25 Xmas trees in total in Budapest, 7 of them were sponsored by American- and Canadian-Hungarian communities, such as St Paul, Wakaw, Békevár, Stockholm, Los Angeles (CA), Trenton (NJ); c. 10,000 presents, including mainly bread and kalács were shared. In 1929 Sister Margaret had a Christmas reading program on the radio. (Figure 3). The annual event, which was organized up until 1947, was covered by newspapers early on (Figure 4–5), while later by the Hungarian World Newsreels.¹⁰

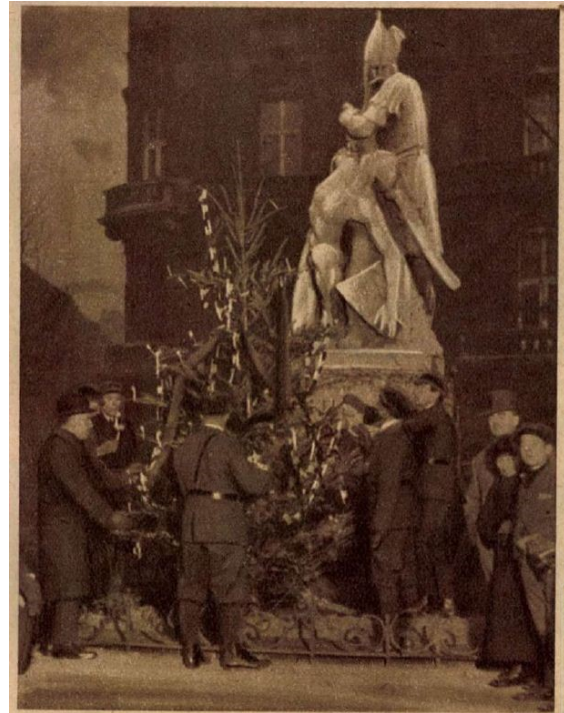


Fig. 4. Pesti Hírlap Képes Melléklet, December 28, 1928.

During the Second World War and the terrible years of persecution of the Jewish people, the Sisters of Social Service rescued about a thousand of individuals, among others they sheltered and saved Fanni Gyarmati (wife of Miklós Radnóti); actress Emília Márkus and her husband, Oszkár Párdányi; Jenő Heltai with his family; conductor Antal Fleischer; sculptor Tibor Wilt and his wife Erzsi; István Ruzsnyák, President of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences between 1949 and 1970. One of the rescued children was Holocaust survivor and 1956 refugee Marika Somogyi, whose story has been featured by both scholar Louise O. Vasvári and documentary film-maker George Csicsery. She became a sculptor and medal-maker in the United States, and self-published her memoirs in 2019.¹¹ Yad Vashem recognized Margit Slachta as Righteous Among the Nations in 1985. Her rescue efforts are commemorated by memorial plaques at the Motherhouse (69 Thököly Road in District 14), and at 5 Ulászló Street in District 11. The Danube embankment on the Buda side between Árpád and Margit bridges has been named after Margit Slachta since 2010.¹²

¹⁰ The Hungarian World Newsreels between 1931 and 1943 were renovated and digitized by Hungarian National Film Archive. The first coverage of the public Christmas trees decorated by the Sisters of Social Service I could locate is from December, 1937 and available free of charge at <https://filmhiradokonline.hu/watch.php?id=2594>

¹¹ Somogyi, Marika: A Charmed Life. 2019. <http://marikasomogyi.com/book/> [Last visited: June 14, 2022]

¹² Rátonyi G. Tamás: Az alsó rakpartok elnevezése. Utcák, terek: Budapesti utcanévblog. 2017. március 04. https://utcakterek.blog.hu/2017/03/04/pesti_budai_also_rakpart_jane_haining_sztehlo_gabor_salkahazi_sara_car_l_lutz_esterhazy_janos [Last visited: June 14, 2022]

She served two more terms as a member of Parliament after World War II, her third term, however, was cut short: she protested the secularization of church schools in her last speech, delivered on June 16, 1948. History was not kind to religious institutions and individuals:

“After World War II there came a drastic change in the political climate of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Soviet occupation gave rise to communism, which brought along the persecution of the Church, the nationalization of Church run institutions, and the suppression of religious orders. Many Sisters in the three European districts were arrested and imprisoned for long terms (10-13 years), and some had to flee their countries. In 1949 Sister Margaret was forced to leave her native Hungary for political reasons and she moved the general government of the Society to Buffalo NY, where some Sisters had lived and worked since the 1920’s.”¹³



*Fig. 5. Everyone’s Christmas Tree on the steps of the Hungarian National Museum, 1929
(Pesti Hírlap Képes Melléklet, December 28, 1929.)*

What were the circumstances of her fleeing Hungary? Her requests for a passport to visit the foundations overseas were rejected, so on June 22-23, 1949 she left Hungary illegally as Etelka Tóth with 2 other sisters: Klementina/Klementin/Clementin Molnár (1896–1979) and Natália/Natalie Palágyi (1909–2001), stayed in Vienna until September 6, when she went to Rome, met Vilmos Juhász—who had been rescued from deportation—about an exhibition for the Holy Year 1950. She offered and later sent him 3,000 newspaper clippings about the persecution of Cardinal Mindszenty. The exhibited items unfortunately got lost after the exhibition was over. She arrived at New York on September 16. She was determined to return to Hungary: “I didn’t want to leave my country.”—but as we can see, she didn’t have a choice.

¹³ SSS International. <https://2021.sssinternational.org/history/> [Last visited: June 14, 2022]

In the meantime, she dealt with organizational issues, fought for captive nations, and arranged affidavits for Displaced Persons in European refugee camps. According to her biographer, she received lots of letters of request for help, including from Mrs. Bálint Hóman.¹⁴ Between November 1951 and May 5, 1953, she stayed in Vienna, even tried to cross the border, but her hopes to return to Hungary were in vain. On December 8, 1952, three Sisters, including Anne Lehner (1924–2020) tried to cross the border into Austria on foot when they were spotted by guards. Sister Anne could avoid the bullets by finding a hole in a fence and crawling through it, however her two traveling companions were not so fortunate: one was shot and killed, the other arrested and imprisoned.¹⁵ She joined Sister Margaret in Vienna, and the two traveled to the United States together months later. Sister Anne was elected general moderator of the order in 1975 the first time and reelected in 1991 when community life and ministries were reorganized in Eastern Europe. After she retired, she started to translate Sister Margaret's writings.

¹⁴ The widow of the prominent Hungarian scholar and politician of the interwar era, Borbála Dáni (1891?–1981), in *Mona* 1997, p. 197.

¹⁵ Netburn, Deborah. "Anne Lehner." *Los Angeles Times*, 25 Jan 2021. <https://www.pressreader.com/usa/los-angeles-times/20210125/281586653261006> [Last visited: June 14, 2022]

Sister Margaret gave talks in the Radio Free Europe under the pseudo name Borbála Nemes, according to Ilona Mona, but I've had no luck so far with finding an independent source to confirm it.¹⁶ She kept herself busy writing a memorandum to President Truman and the bishops of the USA, to draw their attention to the hard situation of people living in communist states. She not only organized petitions against the imprisonment of Archbishop Joseph Mindszenty, but she also tried to help the refugees of the 1956 Revolution. I was wondering what Slachta's involvement was with the refugees. We can imagine that even if her intention was to act, it was not easy at the age of 72. Nine novices and five sisters fled Hungary after the revolution was crushed, and arrived in Buffalo, NY in 1957¹⁷—two of them were still alive as of December 2021.¹⁸ One of the refugees was Sister Elizabeth Kovacs



Fig. 6. Katolikus Magyarok Vasárnapja, February 3, 1974, p. 8. Source: adt.arcanum.hu

(1929-2019), whose obituary reads—among others—that “After the Hungarian revolution at the end of 1956, with four other »underground novices,« Sister Kovacs fled her native country, arriving in the United States in May 1957. She continued her novitiate and made her first vows in Syracuse in 1960.”¹⁹ Elizabeth was born into a Catholic family as the second of three daughters and she attended an all-girls Catholic high school in Veszprém, run by the Sisters of Loretto. She was twelve or thirteen years old when she first thought about becoming a sister. She joined a youth group in high school, and after graduation, when she worked in an office, she continued to participate in

the youth group activities after office hours on weekends, and during summer vacation. One of the summer retreat directors was a Sister of

Social Service who later played an important role in her life. In her reminiscences entitled *From Fear To Proclamation* and published in 2011, she describes the hardships of the early

¹⁶ I consulted Gyula Borbándi's *Magyarok az Angol Kertben: A Szabad Európa Rádió története* [History of Radio Free Europe]. Európa Könyvkiadó, 1996, and the Research Services Team at Hoover Institution Library & Archives, Stanford University, but my search turned up empty so far.

¹⁷ Mona 1997, p. 202.

¹⁸ Based on email communication by Sister Magdolna Kővári, General Moderator on December 31, 2021.

¹⁹ Elizabeth Kovacs Obituary (1929-2019)—Kenmore, NY. Published by Buffalo News on April 3, 2019. <https://www.legacy.com/us/obituaries/buffalonews/name/elizabeth-kovacs-obituary?id=5944268>. [Last visited: June 14, 2022]

1950s, how she learnt that one of her colleagues was an informant who was keeping track of her religious activities, and how she was followed by the secret police. Late night on December 15th, 1955 secret police searched her home, her documents were collected and her typewriter confiscated. Two weeks later, on December 26th, 1955 she was arrested and taken to the prison at Fő utca in Budapest, where she was in solitary confinement for three months. Following months of interrogations, sleepless nights, and lots of prayers, one day the same Sister came to her cell. Sister Lenke Gobel, one of the leaders of the Community shared a cell with Elizabeth for months, during which Elizabeth could prepare for her novitiate. Although there was a trial on September 17th, 1956 where she was sentenced to one year, two days later she was released from prison. This is how she expressed her feelings during the days after imprisonment: “I had no contact with previous friends and had no one with whom to share my hardships.”²⁰ Elizabeth stayed in a mining village during the Hungarian Revolution. She had two days to make a decision to leave Hungary and say good-bye to her father and sisters (her mother had died in 1955).

Her autobiography includes the details of the group she had escaped with after the Revolution was crushed by the Russian forces: “...the journey of five novices, Irene Boza (1930–?), Maria Bakacsi/Bakacsy (1931–?), Ilona Riszt (1928–2014), Katalin Kovacs and myself, along with Sister Rebeka Zsold (1910–1993), began [on December 26, 1956]... Finally, in May of 1957, we received our visas to America.”²¹ Elizabeth traveled together with Sister Rebeka Zsold and novice Katalin Kovács on a military airplane, as part of Operation Safe Haven. According to another flight manifest, two of the sisters, Iren Boza and Maria Bakacsy traveled by chartered airplane to Idlewild, NY on the 28th of May 1957 under the auspices of the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration, after Operation Mercy ended, during which some 32,000 Hungarian refugees from Austria were transported to the United States. Both were sponsored by the National Catholic Welfare Conference (NCWC), and their profession was registered as clerk.²² All the Sisters, who escaped together, worked at the same institution, supporting each other in their individual ministries.

Since Sister Margaret suffered from arteriosclerosis for the last 20 years of her life, she retired in Buffalo, where she died on January 6, 1974, preceded by her biological sisters Borbála in 1961 and Irén in 1971. Associated Press shared her obituary with 6,200 US local newspapers

²⁰ Kovacs, Elizabeth: *From Fear to Proclamation: Remembering & Living with Hope*. Buffalo, NY : Sisters of Social Service, 2011. p. 30.

²¹ Kovacs 2011, pp. 32, 37.

²² Ancestry.com

which was unusual in itself to let the general public learn about her legacy.²³ (Figure 6). Three sisters from California, 15 from Canada, representatives from Puerto Rico and Cuba, and everyone but the sick in the US attended the funeral. Funeral mass was concelebrated by the bishop of Buffalo with 30 priests on January 9, followed by the funeral service in the Holy Cross Cemetery. Sister Margaret was eulogized by a Hungarian Jesuit father and a refugee at the gravesite.

There is no proof—yet—whether the founder of the Alba Regia Memorial Chapel and past secretary of the Hungarian Freedom Fighters Federation (HFFF), Ilona Mária Györík (1925–2011)²⁴ knew or met Sister Margaret. Ilona, together with her husband, József, an engineer, and their four children, decided to leave Hungary in 1956, after József had been imprisoned for 20 months and feared of being imprisoned again. According to Mrs. Györík, after narrowly escaping death, when she reached Austrian soil, she vowed to devote the rest of her life to the service of mankind. The Györiks joined the Hungarian Freedom Fighters’ Federation, and since they lived in the DC area, their group attended the National Cathedral for services. They, however, wanted to build “a chapel of their own”—a Hungarian chapel, like the ones they left behind when they fled the Iron Curtain.²⁵ The Alba Regia Chapel was built and dedicated in Berkeley Springs, WV on the 25th anniversary of Hungary’s fight for freedom. Alba Regia is the only memorial chapel in America, which honors Hungarian Freedom Fighters on the land HFFF purchased in 1972 near Mount Tabor. Inside the chapel, carved wood with Hungarian motifs and coats-of arms decorates the interior, while the underground crypt is covered with burial plaques for Hungarians like Ilona Massey (1910–1974), the 1940s Hollywood actress who was a supporter of anti-communist causes before and after the 1956 Revolution; András Pogány (1919–1995), a lawyer by profession who arrived as a refugee together with his wife and six children to Camp Kilmer on December 9, 1956, became a university professor and chief librarian at Seton Hall University in South Orange, NJ, who also served as president of the HFFF and the World Federation of Hungarian Freedom Fighters; and Sister Margaret Slachta who always and everywhere helped those in need. The remains of Livia Jancsó (1907–1989)²⁶, who used to type the manuscripts of

²³ Báchkai Béla. “Margit nővér emlékére.” *Katolikus Magyarok Vasárnapja*, Febr. 3. 1974.

²⁴ Ilona Mária “Sali” Szabó Györík (unknown-2011) <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/71834926/ilona-m%C3%A1ria-gy%C3%B6rik>. [Last visited: June 14, 2022]

²⁵ Byers, Robert J. “A vision of home.” Jul 10, 2005. [wvgazette.com]. [Last visited: June 14, 2022]

²⁶ A play by PanoDráma was produced in 2015 based on Csalog Zsolt: *Keserű boldogság* [Bitter happiness], published in *Doku56* (interview with Livia Jancsó). “Hungary Civil Registration, 1895–1980,” database with images, FamilySearch (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:6QDF-K3ZM> : 11 May 2022), Némethy

Cardinal Mindszenty while working at the U.S. legation in Budapest during and after the Hungarian Revolution in 1956, later was arrested, interrogated, and even deported before she could leave Hungary with a so-called world passport in 1962 and became a librarian at George Washington University, rest in the crypt of Alba Regia Chapel. The memorial cemetery includes at least 34 graves,²⁷ including Ilona Győrík, but a complete survey of all the gravesites with images and inscriptions should be finished as long as there is someone who takes care of the place.

It's probably not a coincidence that two months after the reburial service of Sister Margaret, a temporary exhibition opened in the House of Terror Museum on February 9, 2022, which presents Margit Slachta as “the most modern of Hungarian women”. The exhibition includes quotes from her speeches and writings between 1919–1949, covering the walls and the ceiling, while one of the walls is covered with pictures in frames, very much like in a home. In addition to traditional artifacts such as her uniform and Richárd Juha’s bust outside the building (Figure 7), oral history interviews with three sisters, recorded in 2010, have been added: Ilona Mona (1921-2019), Ágnes Sztrilich (1942–2015), and Franciska Berkecz (1956–2021) give crucial testimony on why Margit Slachta should be remembered as a Christian feminist, the “only man in the National Assembly”,²⁸ and the foundress and leader of a global network of sisters of social service, which will celebrate the 100th anniversary of its foundation in 2023.



Fig. 7. *The most modern of Hungarian women —Margit Slachta (temporary exhibition in the House of Terror Museum). Author’s photo.*

Livia in entry for Jancsó Vilmos, 21 May 1931; citing Marriage, Archiv der Stadt Budapest (Archive of the City), Hungary. [Last visited: June 14, 2022]

²⁷ Alba Regia Memorial Chapel Cemetery in Berkeley Springs, West Virginia.

<https://www.findagrave.com/cemetery/2245341/alba-regia-memorial-chapel-cemetery>. [Last visited: June 14, 2022]

²⁸ The origin of the saying is uncertain: either Jenő Némethy said during a debate on the rights of Hungary forced to live in minority outside the borders in July 1946, or György Parragi during Slachta’s speech on the value of religious education on April 16, 1947. Maybe both of them felt the same way.