

**Dedication of the Plaque of House of Life
House of the Generalate
April 26, 2017**

We gathered here today to remember and to celebrate.

We remember those Sisters of Social Service who saved at least on thousand Jewish people from deportation during the time of Shoa.

We celebrate not only our Foundress, Sister Margaret Slachta; our Blessed Sister Sara Salkahazi; and Sister Roza Katali Peitl, who provided safety to many people exactly in these houses of the SSS in the Batori Street; we also celebrate those sisters who helped by offering their baptismal certificates or other personal documents to those who were persecuted because of their ethnic or racial background. We celebrate those sisters who offered their sleeping quarters or provided for the physical and spiritual needs of those in hiding.

We celebrate the coworkers of the SSS¹: those who offered their houses or vacation houses to shelter the persecuted; those who accompanied them to safe places in the countryside; those who prepared free passes or forged documents for them.

We celebrate the upright, good hearted neighbors, the grocers and other service providers who in spite of the unusual movements, the increasing number of the residents, the new faces they surely noticed by their good will kept quiet and thus became sort of “accomplices” of the SSS, because they did not put obstacles to the service of saving lives.

This ministry had started much earlier in the form resisting and fighting dangerous ideological trends

As early as the 1930-ies Sister Margaret recognized the dangerousness of the Nazism and raised her voice against “*nationalist madness*”.

In her teaching on the yearly motto of the SSS for 1941 she expanded on how one has to fight for justice *amid the false prophets, fallacious directions, destroying ideas*. For this reason she maintained that it was very important that the sisters stand on the ground of solid principles. “*Those who have solid principles do not swim along with the current trends, do not bow head and kneel before earthly powers even at the price of losing everything.*”

In January 1942 in her address to the Christian Women’s Corps Sister Margaret said among other things the following:

“It is necessary that on a Christian base the natural rights would be protected for every citizen of the country – including Jewish persons – such as the right to live, the right to support oneself, to have family and children... The Christian Women’s Corp walks on the path of Christian truths and believes only in Christ. At this point we are beneficiaries of a big political power but it might happen that tomorrow we will be cheated out when this power will consider us unnecessary...Now an ideological trend is marching over our country leaving behind smoking ruins, bleeding stumps, crying people and destruction.

Our program for this year: to use printed or living words in order to bring back the masses to the Christian faith and help them to recognize and live out the essence of truth. The masses only attend liturgy and worship but they are not conscious of the truth of our faith... they do not understand how the truths of faith and politics are connected.”

What instruments did they use?

The periodical “Voice of the Spirit”, courses and lectures on ideological trends led by the sisters in Budapest and in the countryside; later, starting from 1943 the so called Movie Front (a movie show followed by discussion, applying moral values to the story)

¹ SSS is the official abbreviation for Sisters of Social Service

Sister Margaret and the SSS got actively involved in saving people's lives

- After the start of World War II when Hitler attacked Poland, the Polish refugees were welcomed in Hungary – our Sisters also received them in their houses (and the Catholic Parish here in our neighborhood also received some of them)
- 1941: Jewish families were deported from Miercurea Ciuc (now Romania) to Körösmezö in Carpathia-Ruthenia: Sister Margaret used all her influence to save these people (most of the families could return home at the time)
- 1943: In her “New Year’s Letter” she argued for more humane treatment of those in forced labor camps in Hungary. In general her letter was well received; however the deputy lieutenant of Pest County denounced her. As a response Sister Margaret sent an open letter to the members of the municipal authority in the National Newspaper.
- In 1943 she traveled to Rome to ask for the help of Pope Pius XII on behalf of the Slovak Jews. At her request the pope ordered that all Slovak Bishops protest at the president of Slovakia and issue a pastoral letter also protesting the deportations. As a result the deportations were stopped.
- After March 19, 1944 - the German occupation of Hungary – there starts the concrete sheltering of Jewish people in the geographical triangle of Budapest - Oradea - Lake Balaton: in towns and villages wherever sisters or their coworkers ministered.

Sister Margaret moved the sisters from the motherhouse to provide space for the persecuted – only a few sisters stayed to keep the operation going. The motherhouse was placed under the protection of the Vatican and Sweden.

How did the sisters relate to this activity?

From the notes of Sister Natalie: *“Around Pentecost 1944 every sister had her yearly retreat in Oradea. While in the middle of the city people were forced into the ghetto and deportations started to take them to unknown places outside of the country, in the silence of the retreat Sister Margaret asked us: Is it the conviction of every sister that moral values in a certain area can be protected and passed on to the future only through its moral capital? Love for the neighbor compels us to take the risk that we ourselves would be interned, carried off, exposed, the community could be disbanded and even killed, however, with the genuine ideal of Christianity in our hearts we do believe that the Society of the SSS will continue to live on intact even if only one single sister survives. But what good would it serve for us if we save our institutions, properties and lives but we have to hide in shame before God’s gaze that calls us to give account of our deeds? The sisters offered unanimously all that they had for the service of neighborly love.*

In September 1943 **Sister Sara Salkahazi** offered her life to God *from love and gratitude to God and the Society of the SSS...as the victim of the Society in that case if persecution of the Church, the Society or the sisters would happen.*

Sister Sara – like the rest of the sisters – participated wholeheartedly in the ministry of saving lives. She was hiding Jewish persons in the home for working girls in the Bokreta Street (Budapest). One of the working girls betrayed and reported her to the authorities because Sister Sara rebuked her for her licentious life style. In the evening of December 27, 1944 the Hungarian Arrow Cross (fascist party) carried Sister Sara off with her coworker Vilma Bernovits – a catechist – and four refugees. The same night they were executed at the Bank of the Danube. Their bodies were thrown into the icy river.

Sister Sara was the only one from among us who paid with her life for saving Jewish people.

Sister Róza Katalin Peitl belonged to the founding generation. She had always been entrusted with pioneering ministries; she would start a project and when it was up and running, she handed it over to the next sister. She was the leader (religious superior) of these two houses in

this neighborhood during the time when the ministry of saving the persecuted started. Sister Margaret sent several people here. Sister Roza Katalin was hiding those persons without credentials and food-tickets amidst war conditions (the siege of Budapest was going on). Sister Margaret had told her: *"I cannot ask you to do this under obedience; you do it only if you yourself would want to help willingly."* One of the refugees testified how much Sister Margaret was confident in Sister Roza Katalin's good will manifesting itself in actions: *"Sister Margaret told us at her first visit that she entrusts us into the hands of Sister Roza Katalin; she said that we can trust her to the same degree as we trust Sr. Margaret."* She took all the risks as she participated in this ministry of saving Jewish people. At Christmas 1944 she encouraged them *"Feel yourself in safety. It was not I but God who brought you here in order to save you."*

In the relatively small house which is now the motherhouse and the novitiate of the Sisters of Social Service in Hungary, where normally 10-11 sisters can live permanently, she saved the lives of ninety people. It was close to a miracle that nobody reported them. In the place of this building (Batori 10) there stood the little house of the Slachta family; she hid people on its attic as well.

During the post war years, when she retired from active ministry her very small pension was supplemented with monthly smaller donations from those grateful people whom she had saved.

This day the Sisters of Social Service receives the honor of "House of Life". This plaque is now attached to the house of the Generalate; however, this house represents all those houses where the sisters of Social Service sheltered, hid the persecuted Jewish persons putting their own security and lives at risk in the hell of holocaust.

As their late successors we bow our heads before the integrity, moral greatness and heroism of the sisters, coworkers and neighbors.

We plead the Heavenly Father of all people that we might become worthy successors of Sister Margaret, the beatified Sister Sara, and Sister Roza Katalin, who held their ground during those very difficult times. We pray that we too may safeguard our moral capital...

Sister Agnes Pataki