

## 2021 - Margit Slachta Memorial Year at the Barankovics István Foundation

Year 2021 was declared a memorial year for Margit Slachta by the Barankovics Foundation. At the end of the year, Dr. József Mészáros, the chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Foundation, spoke to public service media about the inspiration for the memorial year. According to him, the character of Margit Slachta deserves attention, because the nun, a well-known public figure in her day, always redefined the Church's social teaching in different periods of Hungarian history according to the times. As she once did, such is our task today.

As part of the memorial year, the Foundation implemented several programs that introduced the public to the life of this undeservedly forgotten politician and her message, which is still relevant today. We established a partnership with the Society of Social Sisters, a monastic order founded by Margit Slachta in 1923 and still operating in several countries. We published her parliamentary speeches from when she was also a Member of Parliament, and a series of short films is being made about her oeuvre as well. The work of Margit Slachta was studied by the staff of the Foundation's Christian Democratic Knowledge Base and published in a series of articles on the organisation's website. At the initiative of the Barankovics István Foundation, an international chapter of the Society of Social Sisters met in August 2021, and supported the repatriation and reburial of Margit Slachta's earthly remains, to be organized by the National Heritage Institute and our Foundation. Her reburial took place on Tuesday, December 7, 2021, at 4 p.m., at the Fiumei Road National Graveyard.

### Who was Margit Slachta?

Margit Slachta was a public figure in Hungarian history whose career spanned different eras. Her career began at the turn of the 20th century and ended with forced emigration due to the establishment of the communist dictatorship in Hungary. As a young girl, her Christian socialism led her to take on social roles. She first took part in charitable work as a member of the Social Missionary Society, and in May 1923 she herself founded a semi-secular order of nuns; the Society of Social Sisters, which still operates in several countries. Among other things, the renewal of social work in Hungary can be linked to her name. Thanks to the Society's activities, social professions started on the path of professionalism. Slachta recognized that solving the social issue is not possible with mere charity, it must first and foremost be addressed at a structural level, the causes of poverty must be eliminated, but this requires public-political activity. Since 2021, the National Institute for Social Policy has borne her name.

Margit Slachta's name is intertwined with the Christian feminist movements of the turn of the 20th century. It is to her great credit that she represented the social dilemmas, arising from the changing situation of women, in Catholic political discourse through the magazine *Magyar Nő*, which she edited herself. One of these dilemmas was the issue of what the role of women was who were now entering public life and, closely related to this, the issue of women's suffrage. As both a writer and a Member of Parliament, she fought for women's advocacy and for creating the conditions for women's political self-determination.

Last but not least, she made her name in Hungarian history with her intransigent attitude towards Nazism and her rescue efforts during the Holocaust. The semi-secular nunnery of the Social Missionary Society saved hundreds of Jews during World War II, and the Christian Women's Camp, a political organization Slachta founded, from 1939 openly pursued an anti-Nazi policy. As early as 1969, the Holocaust Victims and Heroes of the Yad Vashem Institute

in Jerusalem named her one of the “Righteous Among the Nations”. Her colleague, Social Sister Sára Salkaházi, who was shot beside the Danube by the Arrow Cross with her protégés, was beatified in 2006.

After the end of World War II, and after the “brown neo-paganism,” she had to contend with the forces of “red neo-paganism” as a politician of over sixty years of age at the time. She was a Member of Parliament between November 1945 and June 1948, interrupted for two months because she was expelled from the National Assembly on the recommendation of the Immunity Committee. In her speeches, she represented the aspects of a Christian worldview, she condemned the catastrophic effects of materialism on social life, she stood up for the protection of those unjustly persecuted by the system, she pointed out the shortcomings of communist tactics that violated the rules of the democratic game and the rule of law.

In February 1949, she left the country under a pseudonym and everything she had fought for in her life seemed to collapse. She settled first in Austria and then in the United States, where she drew attention to the conditions prevailing in communist dictatorships. She spoke under the pseudonym of Borbála Nemes on Radio Free Europe. She terminated her anonymity in 1956 and was elected an honorary member of the Buffalo Actio Hungarica. She died in 1974 at a convent of the Social Sisters in Buffalo. In 2021, in accordance with her will, she was reburied in Hungary.

The message of Margit Slachta’s life

The funeral ceremony was performed by Cardinal Péter Erdő, the Prime Minister and the Archbishop of Esztergom-Budapest. Zsolt Semjén, Deputy Prime Minister and President of the KDNP, gave a commemorative speech at the event. Márta Mátrai, first officer of the Parliament, Magdolna Kővári, mother superior of the Society of Social Sisters and Dr. Emma Németh, the Hungarian head welcomed the return of the remains.

In addition to the Catholic archbishops and several bishops, the funeral service was attended by representatives of Jewish denominations and other historical Churches, the Israeli ambassador, and representatives of the Hungarian state.

In his speech, Péter Erdő emphasized that reburial is not only an opportunity to rethink the message of Margit Slachta’s oeuvre today, but also to reflect on our reality today. He emphasized that the founder of the order represented the ideal of Christian love in an active way throughout her life; she carried out thoughtful organizing work in order to support the poor and save the persecuted. “In the life of Sister Margit, there were such light as usually accompanies only true saints. She was perhaps the first to notice a program of planned genocide among the atrocities during the outbreak of war. (...) The eyes of saints with a prophetic vision notice deeper events behind the signs of the times. “May Sister Margit’s example be encouragement and inspiration in the struggles of our time”, he said.

“Reburial is solace and a recompense and is a twofold duty,” said Deputy Prime Minister Zsolt Semjén. Then he referred briefly to those Hungarian public figures, including István Barankovics, whose last honours could be paid by the Hungarian state only after the change of regime in 1990. He highlighted the start of the Hungarian Catholic women’s movement from Slachta’s career rich in significant works. He emphasized that this Christian politician’s feminism differed from the radical feminism of her age in that “she did not rip the special value and interest of women from the natural order, or from the family, or from society.” As

an example of the nun's "advocacy charisma", Zsolt Semjén recalled that Margit Slachta, upon learning of the deportation of Slovak Jewry, had travelled to Rome, and managed to be received by Pope Pius XII, who on hearing about the threats to Slovak Jewry, instructed the Slovak bishops to protest.

Magdolna Kővári, mother superior of the Society of Social Sisters, gave a memorial speech on behalf of the Order to honour Margit Slachta's spirituality. "For us Social Sisters, Sister Margit is primarily the founder of our Order. She is an embodiment of the divine gift of charisma, which brought the ancient monastic idea out of hiding in the plains to the centre of life. She aimed to encourage professional and skilled workers into public life, standing up for the interests of the church, the rights of women, the family and of children through modern means, the power of speech, preventive action and in the legislature." She emphasized the theoretical and practical achievements of the founder in the field of social work and at the same time she pointed out the work of the Order in the social mission of the church.

Márta Mátrai, the first officer of the Parliament, emphasized Margit Slachta's thoughts on politics, the role of women in politics, and then provided an insight into her struggle for women's suffrage. She also pointed out that, despite the attacks on her, she held out as long as possible in Parliament, which was increasingly dominated by the Communists. "Her life is an example and a human success whose value can only be understood in the light of 1956, 1990, and ultimately in relation to eternity. (...) Many people worked and are working in the Parliament. Margit Slachta was one who believed in serving the nation." she praised her work.

Dr. Emma Németh thanked the Barankovics István Foundation and the National Heritage Institute for bringing home the remains of Margit Slachta and organizing the salute. "Duty takes you away and brings you back", she quoted Margit Slachta's idea penned in 1949 and went on to say that the nun's homecoming in 2021 would provide guidance to those living today on how to exhibit eternal values in a "Europe that is slowly losing its Christian roots". She explained that lack of Christian foundations results in a variety of conflicting legal interpretations and legal uncertainties. Man alone cannot guarantee human dignity and rights for another person, as Margit Slachta testified in 1943: "Man cannot dictate morality." If man tries to, Dr. Emma Németh continued, it is not about eliminating discrimination and equal treatment for all. On the contrary, "it disconnects a person from his social and biological roots, thus pushing him into aimlessness and hopelessness. By legalizing abortion and euthanasia, and by denying biological sex, it also threatens human dignity received from God. It is a culture of death that leads not only to the scrapping of individual people but also to the collapse of societies sooner or later. With the homecoming of Margit Slachta, she is still at work today. She calls on us all to take a stand, to be independent of the zeitgeist and to act," emphasized the Hungarian leader of the Society of Social Sisters.

#### The media's response to the event

The nun's reburial had a broad response in the Hungarian public. Magyar Nemzet, Magyar Hírlap and Origo wrote about her, and she was also remembered in her specific homeland in Upper Hungary, which was detached from modern Hungary in Trianon. An article in Felvidék Ma newspaper concluded: "With her homecoming we celebrate a character who fought against both totalitarian regimes while not losing sight of Christ's teaching. Let's bow our heads today and keep her in our memory!" The Hungarian site of Vatican News published Dr. Emma Németh's funeral oration in full. The National Association of Hungarian Jewish Communities was one of the first to respond to the news of the event, commemorating the

nun's activities in rescuing Jews, expressing "the eternal gratitude of Hungarian Jews". The Jewish political and cultural weekly Szombat and also Neokohn reported on the reburial, attended by the Israeli ambassador. Margit Slachta was remembered by the public media with the only sound recording attributed to her and with the live broadcast of her reburial. Margit Slachta's 1947 election speech was played on Kossuth Radio on the day of her reburial at 5 pm and on Duna Television on Sunday 12 December at 8 am in the programme "In God's Hands", which is the only sound recording of her currently known. Public Service Television made a short film about Margit Slachta's life entitled "Naturally Supernatural", which was screened by Duna Television on December 12, 2021, and was also commemorated by the historical magazine Múlt-Kor. "The Question at Hand" on M5 television dealt with the topic twice. The guests invited onto the show on the day after the reburial were President József Mészáros from the Barankovics István Foundation, Dr. Emma Németh from the Society of Social Sisters and Gábor Móczár, Director General of the Institute of National Heritage. The chairman of the Board of Trustees of our Foundation spoke about why the BIA had initiated the repatriation of the earthly remains of Margit Slachta. He said that everyone is worthy to rest in domestic soil if they so willed. Margit Slachta was an extraordinary personality, more than a simple woman, a prophet, and "we always need prophets."

The journal of the Mathias Corvinus Foundation, the Corvinas, paid homage to the oeuvre of Margit Slachta with the following: "The return of the earthly remains is not only the fulfilment of Slachta's desire, but also a sign. She, who did not consider herself a politician, but merely kept in mind the search for truth, reminds us of this truth by her return. Her chief legacy, then, is the realization that politics can only be a tool, and where power forgets this, truth is pushed into the background."