

One of the Nazis suggested, “Why don't we finish them off here in the yard?” Another gestured, ‘No.’ Sister Sára and Catechist Vilma Bernovits were arrested by the Arrow Cross Party, with several of the individuals she was sheltering. They were driven to the Danube Embankment near the Szabadság Bridge (Bridge of Liberty) in Budapest, stripped naked in the night and shot, and their bodies were thrown into the icy Danube, never to be recovered. Circumstances of Sister Sára’s martyrdom were recounted at a War Crimes trial some 20 years later: Before the shooting took place, she turned to her executioners, looked them in the eyes, knelt, and made the Sign of the Cross.

A neighborhood youngster brought the news to the Sisters on December 28. It seemed God had accepted her sacrifice, because none of the other Sisters of her Community was harmed. Every year on the anniversary of her martyrdom, the Sisters of Social Service hold a candlelight memorial service on the Danube Embankment. The voluntary offering of their first martyr had saved not only many Jews, but also her Religious Community.

In 1969, Sister Sára Salkaházi was declared “Righteous Among the Nations,” the highest award given to non-Jews by Yad Vashem, Israel’s official Holocaust Remembrance Center located in Jerusalem.

#### Some words of Blessed Sára

It is not dynamite, not ecrasite, not the bomb that destroys and lays waste, but the spirit that governs them: hatred. Hatred leads us into grief and pain. Love wipes away tears, comforts. We want love. And we want to build with truth.

My Christ, please reign within me! Please destroy the narrow walls of my pettiness. Make me to be generous, big-hearted, so that I may be able to love everyone and overlook everything! Amen.

I am short-tempered, vehement, nervous and passionate but still I love you!  
I am disobedient, stubborn and defiant yet I love you!  
I am restless, hasty and confused but I love you!  
I am dark, envious and making comparison but I love you!

**Socials with the Saints**  
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Sources include: Vatican.va, Sisters of Social Service,<sup>3</sup> Aleteia article by Larry Peterson (Sept. 12, 2016), CathlicSaints.info and ModernDaySaint.com



### ***Blessed Sára Salkaházi***

**Born:** May 11, 1899 in the Kingdom of Hungary  
**Died:** December 27, 1944 at the River Danube  
**Beatified:** September 17, 2006 by Benedict XVI in Budapest, Hungary  
**Memorial:** December 27

She was born Sarolta Klotild Schalkház in Kassa-Kosice, Kingdom of Hungary, Austria-Hungary (now Košice, Slovakia) on May 11, 1899. Leopold & Klotild, her middle-class parents, owned the Hotel Schalkház. Sára was the second of three children in this family of German origin. Her father passed away when she was only a year old. From a young age, Sára was fiercely independent. Her brother described her as “a tomboy with a strong will and a mind of her own; when it came to play, she would always join the boys in their games of tug of war.” She began writing plays as a teenager, and at the same time developed a deep prayer life.

Sára earned a degree and taught elementary school for a year. She learned through her students about the social problems of the poor, which she publicized by writing newspaper articles. She left teaching because she refused to take the “loyalty oath” demanded by the Czechoslovakian government after the Treaty of Trianon. She became a bookbinder’s apprentice, where she was given the hardest and dirtiest work. After learning that trade, she worked in a shop making and selling women’s hats. She continued writing articles for newspapers, finally in 1926 becoming editor of the official paper of the National Christian Social Party of Czechoslovakia (A NÉP, i.e. THE PEOPLE) and of the publication *Catholic Women* (*Katholikus Nő*). She also published her first short story, *Black Recorder* (*Fekete furulya*). At this point in her life, she was not religious at all. In fact, she was mostly agnostic, tending toward atheism. She was akin to what would later be called a ‘beatnik.’

Sára became engaged to be married, but broke it off when she discerned a call to a different life. She had encountered the Sisters of Social Service, felt a strong call to be part of their group, and asked how she could join. The Sisters of Social Service was a new Catholic religious order dedicated to charitable works, and social and women’s issues. Sára, a “fast-talking, chain-smoking bastion of unbridled energy, was rejected as a possible candidate. She would not be deterred.”<sup>3</sup>

After a great struggle, Sára quit smoking. Finally, in 1929, aged 30, she was admitted to the Sisters. Her motto was from the Prophet Isaiah (6:8): “*Alleluia, Ecce ego mitte me* / Here I am! Send me!” Her first assignment was to her native Kassa (which at the end of World War I had been incorporated into Czechoslovakia) to organize the work of Catholic charities; later, she was sent to Komarom for the same task. Additionally, she wrote, edited, and published a Catholic women's journal, managed a religious bookstore, supervised a shelter for the poor, and taught.

The Bishops of Slovakia then entrusted her with the organization of the National Girls’ Movement. She thus began giving leadership courses and publishing manuals. In one year alone, she received 15 different assignments, from cooking to teaching at the Social Training Center. It all exhausted her, physically and spiritually. When several novices left the Sisters, Sára also considered leaving, especially since her superiors would not allow her to renew her temporary vows (she was deemed “unworthy”), nor permit her to wear the habit for a year.

Nevertheless, she continued to live the life of a Sister of Social Service without vows, accepting her hardships and making up her mind to remain faithful to her calling for the sake of the One who called her. Her faithfulness paid off, as she received permission to renew her vows.

Sára wanted to go to the missions, to China or Brazil, but World War II made it impossible to leave. She worked instead as a social lecturer and administrator in Upper Hungary and Sub-Carpathia (which had also been part of Hungary until the end of World War I). She professed her final vows at Pentecost 1940. As national director of the Catholic Working Girls’ Movement, Sister Sára built the first Hungarian college for working women, near Lake Balaton. In Budapest, she opened Homes for Working Girls and organized training courses.

At this time, the *Arrow Cross Party* (Hungarian Nazi Party) gained strength and began to mistreat Jewish people. The Sisters of Social Service provided safe havens for Jews. Sister Sára opened the Working Girls’ Homes to them where, even in the most stressful situations, she managed to cheer up the anxious and discouraged. In 1943, she smuggled a Jewish refugee from Slovakia, disguised in the gray habit of the sisters, and the woman’s son, out of the Sisters’ house in Kassa, which was being searched by the Gestapo, and brought them temporarily to Budapest.

To protest the rising Nazi ideology, Sister Sára changed her last name to the more Hungarian sounding “Salkaházi.”

As if her days were not busy enough, Sára managed to write a play on the life of St. Margaret of Hungary, who was canonized November 19, 1943. The first performance, in March 1944, was also the last, since German troops occupied Hungary that very day and immediately suppressed this religious production. The life of St. Margaret may have provided the inspiration for Sister Sára to spiritually offer herself as a victim-soul for the safety and protection of her fellow Sisters of Social Service, a vow which her superiors granted permission for her to make. At the time, they alone knew about this self-offering.

Meanwhile, she kept hiding refugees in the various Girls’ Homes, under increasingly dangerous circumstances. Providing them with food and supplies became more complicated every day, given the system of ration cards and the frequent air raids. Nevertheless, Sister Sára herself is credited with the saving of 100 Jewish lives. She also had a leading role in the resistance to Nazi ideology, giving talks and organizing study days & courses on Gospel values and on the evil of racism. During this time of persecution, the Sisters of Social Service rescued about 1,000 individuals.

The Russian siege of Budapest began on Christmas 1944. On the morning of December 27, Sister Sára delivered a meditation to her fellow Sisters. The topic? Martyrdom. For her, it would become a reality that very day. As the sister responsible for the house, she secretly made a formal pledge to God in the presence of her superior to be prepared to sacrifice herself if only the other sisters were not harmed during the war. The fact and text of the pledge have been preserved in her journals.

Before noon, Sister Sára and another Sister were returning on foot from a visit to another Girls’ Home. They could see in the distance, armed Nazis standing in front of the house. Sister Sára had time to get away, but she decided that, being the director, her place was at this Home.

Upon entering the house, she saw the Nazis were checking the papers of the 150 residents. About 10 of them were refugees with false papers. Some were declared suspicious and were to be taken away, while those in charge would have to “give statements at Nazi headquarters before being released.” As she was led out, Sister Sára managed to step into the chapel and quickly genuflected before the altar.