

# My View: A story of a man who truly loved his neighbor

Rabbi Alex Lazarus-Klein Nov 14, 2022 Updated 8 hrs ago 0



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**M**any of us love our neighbors. But how many of us have had an opportunity to truly love our neighbors as ourselves? Let me tell you about one Buffalonian named Tibor Baranski who actually did.

The neighbors in this case were the Szerkeres family, a Jewish family that lived near his family home in Budapest. It was the Spring of 1944 and Germany had just occupied Hungary. Tibor Baranski was 22 years old and rushed back to Budapest from his seminary in Yugoslavia to help in any way he could. His studies to become a priest could wait. Immediately, he was given a task: go to the Papal Nuncio, the Vatican's chief emissary, and ask for letters of protection for his Jewish neighbors.

The local Vatican representative, a man by the name of Angela Rotta, was an imposing figure that very few people would approach directly. Baranski barged into the building and over to Rotta's door. One can only imagine the surprise of one of the most respected Catholic figures in Hungary to see this young seminarian demanding papers for his neighbors. Unsurprisingly, Baranski walked out with nine signed letters, one for each member of the Szerkeres family.



Rabbi Alex Lazarus-Klein  
Buffalo News file photo

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Having had success in saving one set of neighbors, Baranski returned to the Papal Nuncio a week later to see if he could save more. Rotta instructed him to go the next day to a factory to free 50 Jews, all on the shortlist to be deported. Of course, Baranski insisted on going right then and there. He demanded a Rolls Royce and a driver so he'd look as important as possible.

A few hours later, Baranski was threatening to crash into the gates of the factory if they were not opened immediately. After much conversation, they finally complied and offered to take him to where the Jews were being held. He eventually found not 50, but 2,000 Jews, huddled together. Baranski called the names of the people he had letters for, and whispered an explanation to the rest of how to contact the underground.

This began a daring series of rescues throughout Hungary that would have Baranski picking up Jews left and right from the side of roads or wherever he found them, telling off a shocked Adolf Eichman on the phone, and working side by side with the famous Swedish diplomat Raol Wallenberg. Barely sleeping or eating, he spent every possible moment saving as many lives as possible.

For his bravery and ingenuity Baranski suffered immensely. Arrested by the Communists at the end of the war, he only narrowly survived a brutal 16-day, 160 mile death march, alleviated only by the kindness of a Russian soldier. He was thrown in jail again and would remain there until 1953.

Unofficially, Tibor Baranski almost single-handedly rescued between 10,000 to 12,000 Jews, the same number of Jews currently living in Western New York. Yet, years later, when asked about his heroism, Baranski would simply shrug it off, replying: "I only did what God demanded of me. I'm only a useless servant."

Tibor Baranski came to Buffalo in 1961. He died in January of 2019. Recently, Forest Lawn Cemetery dedicated a new resting place for him and his wife Katalin. North of the Rosewood Mausoleum, in between Jewish, Christian and non-sectarian sections, their large stone sarcophagus sits as a permanent reminder of what it truly means to love your neighbor as yourself.