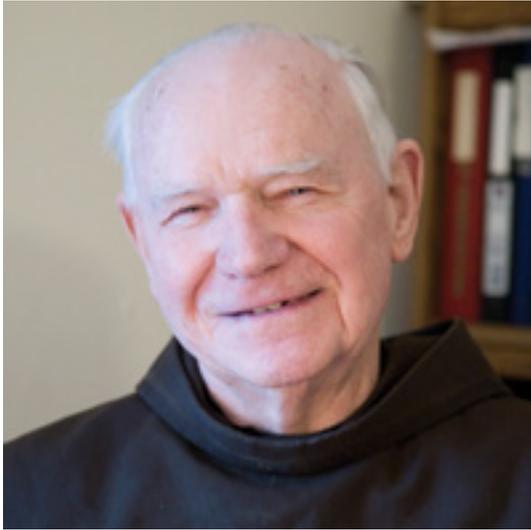


## Fr. Emeric Szlezak, OFM



How I became involved with Franciscanism is a long story. My father Kalman Szlezak and my mother Elizabeth Beck were married in St. Francis Church in Budapest, Hungary, and I became their fourth child on Dec. 17, 1917.

Our family lived in what was called the Francis district of Budapest, named after the former king of Hungary, Francis Joseph. In 1920, we moved into the inner city of Budapest, a few blocks from the Danube River. My parents became janitors of an apartment house. Around the corner from us was a Franciscan church administered by the friars of the Marian Province.

After a few months of kindergarten, I left home with my father for America with the expectation that the rest of the family would follow a month later. On Nov. 20, 1923, we arrived at Cherbourg, France, where my father and I boarded the Leviathon, one of the largest ships of the United States Lines. We arrived at Ellis Island on Thanksgiving, and were escorted by an elderly couple, friends of a relative, to their apartment in lower Manhattan.

On Christmas day, the rest of the family - my mother, sister, and two older brothers - arrived, and since there were now six of us in one room, we could not stay there very long. My parents obtained jobs as janitors and an apartment in Brooklyn, and when they found out that they also had to pay rent, they obtained a second janitor's job and an apartment elsewhere. This lasted only a few months.

Finally, my parents obtained a janitor's job in a larger apartment house in the Greenpoint section of Brooklyn. Meanwhile, after a year and a half in three public schools, in January 1925, I was enrolled in the second grade of St. Alphonsus School on the same street where we lived.

In Greenpoint, there were other Hungarian families with whom we soon became acquainted. Through them, we learned about the Hungarian church of St. Stephen on East

82nd Street in New York. In 1928, we bought an old two-family house and renovated it from top to bottom.

Next door to us was an Irish family that had a son called Fr. Cletus Hughes, a member of Holy Name Province, who in the autumn of 1932 went with other friars as missionaries to Shasi, China.

In 1930, my older brother decided to enter St. Joseph Seraphic Seminary in Callicoon, N.Y. Often being his shadow, I followed him there in 1932. After four years, my brother changed the course of his life and entered an engineering school in New York City.

In May of 1938, the novice master, Fr. Gerard McGlynn, interviewed our class in preparation for entrance into the novitiate. He inquired how I was doing with the Hungarian language, because, he said, the province may need me at St. Stephen Church, New York. I responded that I could hardly read or write Hungarian, even though it was my spoken home language. He warned me to start doing something about it. How could I, I asked myself, with no books, no grammar, no vocabulary, and no dictionary?

At the end of my third year of theology at Holy Name College, our class of 27 students was ordained on June 11, 1944 by Archbishop Cicognani. No sooner had I started my fourth year in September, when I was assigned by the guardian to help out twice a month as a parochial assistant to the Hungarian-speaking parishioners of St. Stephen of Hungary Church. This meant that besides daily classes, I had to prepare sermons in the Hungarian language which I hardly knew. With the help of the Holy Spirit, I managed somehow until January 1945 when I left Holy Name College and was assigned full-time to St. Stephen of Hungary.

For the next 40 years, I continued my primary ministry to the Hungarian-American community in New York and then did the same while serving at St. Emery Parish in Fairfield, Conn., for 19 years. In 2005, at the age of 88, I was told it was time to retire. I chose St. Anthony Friary in St. Petersburg, Fla., a good choice, however, since I soon found out that my days of priestly activity were not over.

I was contacted by Bishop Attila Mikloshazy, S.J., who had been appointed to administer to the spiritual needs of Hungarians living outside of Hungary. He asked me to celebrate Mass and the other sacraments for the Hungarians dispersed in the southwestern part of Florida, particularly in the Sarasota area. I am still active as a volunteer chaplain, as I have been since 1956, of the Catholic War Veterans and Auxiliary, having served as county, state (N.Y.), and several times national chaplain. I am also chaplain of the local Knights of Columbus.

To sum up, 75 years ago, when I dedicated my life to my Blessed Lord, to do with me what he wanted, I am sure his merciful providence has led me by the hand, and has often reminded me what he told the Apostles: "You did not choose me; I chose you and appointed you to go and bear much fruit, the kind of fruit that endures." (John 15:16)

– Fr. Emeric, who lives at St. Anthony Friary in St. Petersburg, Fla., celebrates his 90th birthday in December. This essay appeared in the December 2007 issue of The Anthonian magazine.