

Domestic Violence within Immigrant Families – USA

József Barsi

József István Barsi (1932–1988) was a Hungarian-born immigrant to the United States who became known posthumously for the tragic 1988 familicide of his wife, Mária Virovacz Barsi, and their daughter, child actress Judith Barsi. His life and actions drew attention to domestic violence within immigrant families and the failures of social protection systems.

Key facts

- **Born:** November 26, 1932, Mezőkövesd, Hungary
- **Died:** July 27, 1988, Canoga Park, California, USA
- **Occupation:** Plumber and machinist (varied labor work)
- **Spouse:** Mária Virovacz Barsi
- **Child:** Judith Eva Barsi (1978–1988)

Early life and emigration

Born in Mezőkövesd, Hungary, Barsi endured a difficult childhood marked by poverty and stigma due to an absent father. After the suppression of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, he fled Hungary, first living in Western Europe and later settling in the United States. Initially he lived in New York, then Arizona, and eventually Los Angeles, where he met fellow Hungarian immigrant Mária Virovacz.

Family and personal struggles

Known to acquaintances as “Arizona Joe,” Barsi’s early charm masked severe alcoholism and a pattern of controlling, violent behavior. His relationship with Mária deteriorated amid frequent abuse. Their daughter, Judith, achieved success in Hollywood, voicing beloved animated characters and appearing in commercials and films, which intensified domestic tensions rooted in Barsi’s insecurity and resentment over his family’s accomplishments.

Murders and death

In July 1988, after years of escalating violence and repeated threats, Barsi shot and killed Judith and Mária in their Canoga Park home before setting their bodies on fire and committing suicide. The incident shocked both the Hungarian-American community and Hollywood, prompting discussions about intervention in domestic abuse cases and the psychological effects of displacement and addiction.

Legacy

While Barsi's name is remembered primarily for the horrific act, the tragedy surrounding his family has been cited in later studies and documentaries on child protection and domestic violence prevention, serving as a somber reminder of the need for effective early intervention.