Write Your Family History Step by Step

Lisa A. Alzo, M.F.A.
Presenter’s Background

♦ MFA in Nonfiction Writing, University of Pittsburgh, 1997; freelance writer
♦ Instructor of Genealogy and Family History courses – Central New York
♦ Invited speaker for conferences, genealogical and historical societies
♦ Instructor for myfamily.com online courses and National Institute for Genealogical Studies
Books

- **Three Slovak Women** (Gateway Press)
- **Baba’s Kitchen: Slovak & Rusyn Family Recipes and Traditions** (Gateway Press)
- **Finding Your Slovak Ancestors** (Heritage Productions, Toronto)

See [www.lisaalzo.com](http://www.lisaalzo.com) for more information
Genealogists often focus on facts.
Research often produces nothing but boring lists.
It’s easy to overlook how historical events influenced our ancestors' lives.
Overview

♦ How to organize your material
♦ Dividing your writing tasks into small manageable pieces
♦ Methods for illustrating where your family fits in with local, national & world history
♦ How to blend historical fact with family stories
♦ Selecting the best details
♦ Examples and practice writing exercises
Unlocking the Secrets

♦ We are all storytellers, whether we realize it or not

♦ Stories can be triggered by:
   – Thoughts, images, circumstances

♦ Your story will differ from other’s (spouse, sibling, etc.)

♦ Each person will have his or her own response to a situation or circumstance
One Memory at a Time

- Look at the segments of your life one at a time
- Every life has its own segments - no two lives are alike
Family History

♦ Family trees and genealogy charts provide a framework: names, dates, places, and other facts.
♦ Family histories provide the “stories” - bring names and other facts to life.
Why Bother?

“What do I care about those people? They’re dead. I didn’t know them.”

- John Alzo, 2003
John Alzo (left) with cousin
George Ceyba (right)
July, 2004
Alzo Ancestors from Slovakia (Hungary) c. 1900s

Anna Fenscak (left) with sister Elizabeth Fenscak (right); c. 1900s

John and Elizabeth Alzo c. 1960s

Mihaly Fenscak c. 1900s

Alzo Ancestors from Slovakia (Hungary) c. 1900s

Wedding Photograph of John Alzo and Elizabeth Fenscak January, 1915, Duquesne, PA
One of many newspaper articles about John Alzo's basketball career.

John Alzo
(Basketball star) 1954
Family Trees vs. Family Story

♦ Traditional family trees often not more than just boring lists
  – Many facts
  – Years of research
  – Data collected in many different formats
  – Read very matter of fact (sterile)

♦ Family trees can be transformed from boring lists to interesting stories that reflect the [exciting] lives of your ancestors—lived through important historical events

♦ Most family history research is actually remembering
Sample Family Histories ("Hollywood Style")

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comedy act</th>
<th>Screenplay</th>
<th>Movie</th>
<th>Television Series</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Book (Memoir)</th>
<th>Movie</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Angela's Ashes</td>
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</table>
The “Writing” Part

- You don’t have to be a “professional” writer to write this type of family history, just able to creatively put facts together.
- You don’t have to get every date and time perfect (also sometimes “facts” are incorrect; mistakes in recording).
- Don’t get discouraged if you don’t immediately see how different pieces fit together.
The “Writing” Part

- Stories do not have to be told in an exact sequence
- Don’t worry about the final product - you’ll get there!
- You will succeed, with practice
“Dad and Brother making our coal bin in summer of 1940. Are they working?”
From a family Scrapbook page kept by Lisa Alzo’s Aunt, Sr. M. Camilla Alzo
During the war, János spent time in a Russian prison where his ability to repair carriages and make wheels saved his life. Eventually he managed to escape and returned to his Czech homeland on foot in 1920.
Three Slovak Women is a nonfiction account of three generations of Slovak women in the steel-producing town of Duquesne, Pennsylvania and the love and sense of family binding them together.
Tips for Writing a Compelling Family History

♦ You don’t have to write one large narrative
♦ Break your writing tasks into smaller manageable pieces
♦ Begin w/ exercises from this talk
♦ Create a timeline: highlight key personal & historical events
  ➢ Genelines Software for creating timeline
    <www.progenysoftware.com/genelines.html>
Create a Timeline for Your Ancestors

♦ A timeline helps place your ancestors in an historical context
♦ Write down known info (names, dates, places)
♦ Include significant dates from world, U.S./local history (WW1, Great Depression)
♦ Use your computer to create timeline (Microsoft Word, Microsoft Excel, genealogical software programs such as Family Tree Maker <www.familytreemaker.com> or Roots Magic <www.rootsmagic.com> OR
♦ Genelines:<www.progenysoftware.com/genelines_order.html#http://www.progenysoftware.com/genelines_order.html#>
Genelines

Individual screen

Family screen
Tips for Writing a Compelling Family History

♦ Divide your book into two parts
  ♦ Part I: readable narrative Part II:
  ♦ Part II: Reference section of genealogical reports or summaries
♦ Remember, all good stories have a beginning, a middle, and an end
Tips for Writing a Compelling Family History

♦ Reel the reader in with an exciting, happy, or tragic event, or a conflict

♦ If you have letters, diaries, or an interesting record, you can open by quoting that source

♦ But remember: You are writing nonfiction, so you have to write your family history based on fact
Tips for Writing a Compelling Family History

♦ Apply fiction writing techniques (character, plot, dialogue, detail, flashback, suspense, etc.)

♦ Start in the middle of a story, then flashback and tell the reader how we got to that point

♦ Leave something hanging, either within a chapter or at the end of a chapter
Examples of Using Fact & Family Stories to Unpuzzle Your Past

- Writing from documents
- Writing from photographs
- Using timelines (history)
- Writing from Oral History interview
The Facts

♦ Family Documents
  - Baptismal certificate
  - Passport

♦ Other Records
  - Ship’s Manifest List
  - Naturalization Papers
From Records…

♦ My grandmother was named Verona Straka
♦ Verona was born on November 11, 1899 in Milpos, Slovakia to Maria Verbovsky and Andrej Straka
♦ Youngest of 13 children
♦ Verona issued passport/Visa to go to the United states on July 7, 1922

Presov  ➔  Hamburg  ➔  U.S.
From Records (continued)

♦ Name of Ship: Orduna
♦ Date of Departure: July 26, 1922
♦ Date/Place of Arrival: August 7, 1922, Ellis Island, NY
♦ Passenger List info:
  – Laborer
  – Had $25 in pocket
  – Going to sister’s (“mother’s”) house, Duquesne, PA
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Rok, měsíc a deň</th>
<th>Pokratená — Křesencová — Vřetena</th>
<th>Rodičův mena, zamestnání, náboženství a rodíško</th>
<th>Bydlisko, číslo domu</th>
<th>Krstní rodič</th>
<th>Poznámka</th>
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<td>Verona</td>
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Dátum: zlomek | 10. 11.
Zařízení: právní průkaz
Poznámky:
Documents: Passport
### Ship’s Manifest

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<tr>
<th>S.S.</th>
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<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Calling or Occupation</th>
<th>Country of Origin</th>
<th>Race or People</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Country</th>
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From Family Stories

♦ Father was a peasant farmer and tailor
♦ Father died before she left for America (from Flu Pandemic?)
♦ Left for U.S. to accompany her niece, Mary
♦ Mary was the illegitimate daughter of Verona’s eldest sister Maria (who left for US after baby born - father rumored to be a priest)
♦ Maria wanted her daughter to come to U.S. wrote her a letter, etc.
Historical Facts and Events

♦ Timeline - what was happening in Slovakia during my grandmother’s childhood
  – Hungarian Rule; World War I; Poverty/Employment/Economics;
  – Pandemic (Flu)

♦ How did country/world events contribute to her departure/decision to go to America

♦ Immigration wave: background on why people were leaving Slovakia and going to America
First Carnegie Free Library opens in Allegheny (1890)

Duquesne, PA incorporated (1891)

Homestead Steel Strike (1892)

Emperor Franz Joseph I
Dual Monarchy: Emperor of Austria/King of Hungary

Verona Straka
Born (1899)

First Immigration Wave

Ellis Island Opens (1892)

U.S. Passes First Immigration Quota Law (1921)

Stock Market Crash (1929)

Verona Straka Immigrates to America (1922)

Verona Straka Marries Janos Figlar (1924)

Start of WWI (1914)

End of WWI (1918)

Influenza Pandemic (1918)

Great Depression (1930 – 1939)

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Verona Straka Marries Janos Figlar (1924)
Verona Straka was born on November 11, 1899 in Milpos, (Hungary, later Slovakia) to Maria Verbovsky and Andrej Straka. She was the youngest of 13 children. On July 26, 1922, Verona, along with countless other immigrants, boarded the S.S. Orduna, which left the port of Hamburg, Germany for the United States. When she arrived at Ellis Island, NY on August 7, 1922, she was listed on the ship’s manifest as a “laborer” with $25 in pocket en route to her final destination—her sister’s house, in Duquesne, Pennsylvania.
Writing a Story from Photographs

♦ Photographs also tell stories
♦ Excerpt from TSW:
  My grandmother’s wedding
Oral History: Writing about events from someone’s own words

- Interviewing a person on tape is a great way to get a family story in that person’s own words. (always obtain permission first to audio or videotape interview)

- Capture emotions/feelings

- Transcribe tape as accurately as possible; make notes

- Write from transcript and listening to tape

- Excerpt from TSW: Chapter 8
Excerpt from TSW: Chapter 8

My mother, Anna Figlar Alzo
with me, July 1999
Sample Writing Exercises

♦ Part I
  – Write down some facts you know about an ancestor
  – Make a note of the source where you got the information

♦ Part II
  – Take the above information and turn it into a “story” similar to the two examples I provided
Practice Writing Exercise

♦ Part III

– Locate an old photograph (preferably one you have the details on)

– Try to describe in words the event taking place in the photo (Who, What, When, Where… Take notice of expressions, what they are wearing, etc. then, extrapolate a bit… use your imagination
Practice Writing Exercise: On Your Own

♦ Part IV

- Try to find a relative to interview and ask specific questions about a time period or event in that person’s life.
- Transcribe your tape
- Write about the event from the interview (pay attention to the person’s tone, expressions, etc. and include these descriptions in what you write)
- You can do the above on your own (ask yourself the questions and write down the answers!)
References

♦ Book: “One Memory at a Time” by D.G. Fulford, Doubleday.
♦ Book: “Bringing Your Family History to Life Through Social History” by Katherine Scott Sturdevant and Sharon DeBartolo Carmack, Betterway Books.
♦ Family Tree Magazine. August 2000
♦ Writing the Family Narrative by Lawrence P. Goldrup, Ancestry.
Presentation Available Online

Lisa Alzo

Welcome!

Are you looking for a reliable freelance writer to write articles for your newspaper or magazine? Perhaps you want to tell your life story or that of an ancestor and don’t know where to begin? Need copy for a newsletter or website? Looking for a ghost writer for a book?

With over 15 years experience, I can provide high quality writing services for both personal and professional communications projects. I earned a Master of Fine Arts degree from the highly acclaimed Creative Nonfiction Writing Program at the University of Pittsburgh, have authored three books, and have written for newspapers and national magazines. Although I specialize in the genre of “Creative Nonfiction,” with a background in Nutrition and work experience in the academic disciplines of Chemistry and Computer Science at Cornell University, as well as the medical fields of Thoracic Surgery and Medical Oncology at the University of Pittsburgh, I possess a breadth of knowledge to write about scientific and medical topics...More

If I can help you by providing you with professional quality writing please feel free to contact me.

<www.lisaalzo.com>

“Services”