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Book Review: Cleveland Slovaks

Michael J. Kopanic, Jr., Ph.D.

Sabol, John T., and Alzo, Lisa A., *Cleveland Slovaks*. (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2009), 127 pp. ISBN: 13 978-0-7385-5242-2

A familiar expression states, "A picture is worth a thousand words." Many of us thoroughly enjoy a good picture book, and we often preview the books we read by glancing at its photographs. The recently published *Cleveland Slovaks* is history at its best – through the lens of the camera. The work is a sparkling accomplishment of several years of splendid research to document the history of one of America's largest ethnic communities, Slovak Americans in the Cleveland area.

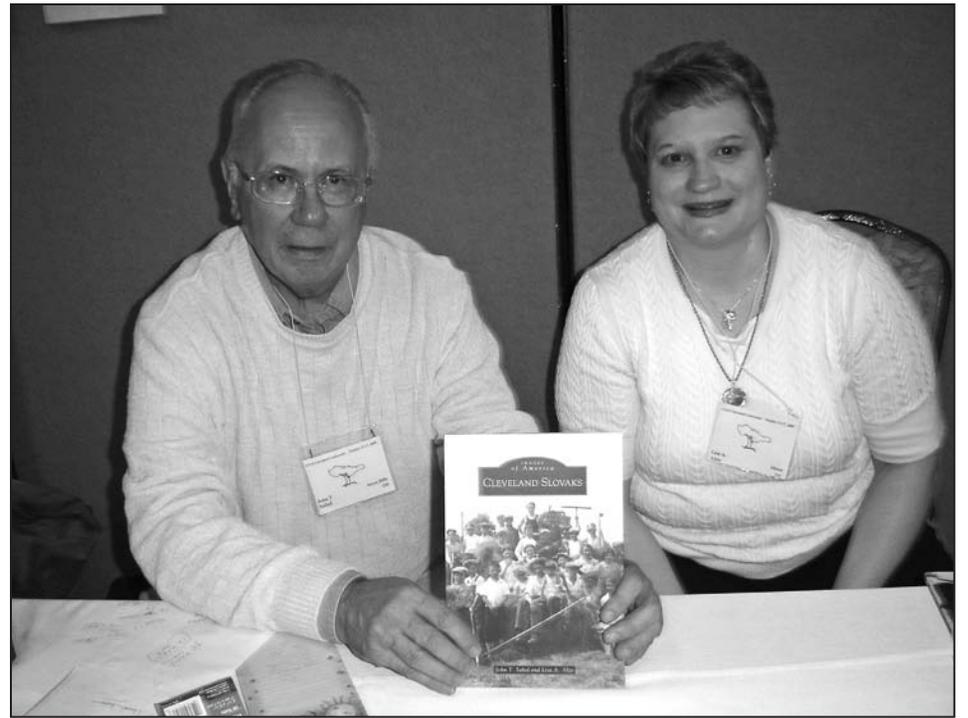
The two authors, John T. Sabol and Lisa A. Alzo, were both eminently qualified for this task. A native of Cleveland and long-time parishioner of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary parish, Sabol has written a number of church histories and has published articles on genealogy. His co-author, Lisa A. Alzo, is a free lance writer and lecturer who has published six books and many magazine articles. Her works include the award winning *Three Slovak Women*, a family history that mirrors the experience of many Slovak-American women over three generations, and the wonderful cookbook, *Baba's Kitchen*. She also serves on the board of directors for the Czechoslovak Genealogical Society International, and both authors appeared at the CGSI's recent conference in Independence, Ohio.

Their book appears at a most auspicious time, for the Diocese of Cleveland has been closing the Slovak parishes which served the immigrants and several generations of their descendants. As more and more parishioners moved to the suburbs and attendance dwindled, the memory of their churches and their vibrant life needed to be preserved, for they depict a story not just for historians, but for all interested in immigrant history and the Slovak-American experience.

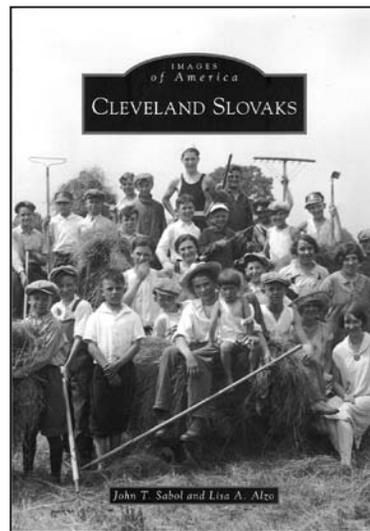
The book also helps bring life to several of my articles which I wrote on Cleveland Slovaks, including the chapter in "The Slovaks," in *Identity, Conflict, and Cooperation: Central Europeans in Cleveland, 1850-1930* (Cleveland: Western Reserve Historical Society, 2003): pp. 249-306. Much of research I did was in 1988-89, and the book was finally published over a decade later. Unfortunately, my chapter contained only one photo, for at the time, we authors were told that photos would make the book too expensive. Since that time, technology has reduced costs and has made the publication of photography much more affordable. A few years after my research, Cleveland native Joe Hornack helped arrange the translation and publication of the best early history of Cleveland Slovaks, *Ján Pankuch's History of the Slovaks of Cleveland and Lakewood*, translated by Rasto Gallo. (Minneapolis and Cleveland: Czechoslovak Genealogical Society International and the Western Reserve Historical Society, 2001). Hornack, who has worked with Andrew Hudak at the Slovak Institute at the Slovak Benedictine Abbey, also offered considerable assistance to Sabol and Alzo in obtaining photos and information for the *Cleveland Slovaks* book, so his contribution merits recognition as well.

The story of Slovak Cleveland deserves attention, for according to the 2000 U.S. Census, about 93,500 people from the region confirmed their Slovak ethnic background. The book documents their history in photographs with full explanations of each scene, which the authors meticulously researched for accuracy. Prominently featured are Slovak neighborhoods, the ethnic churches, and family and fraternal life. The book also offers a fine introduction to the history of early Slovaks in Cleveland, beginning with a brief summary of the story that Jacob Gruss told to Pankuch about the first settlers who established communities near the mills and factories where they labored.

Thanks to Arcadia Publishing, many communities and ethnic groups throughout the country are documenting their story and history in pictures. Arcadia has assumed the role as the leading publisher of local and regional history in the United States. It aims "to make history



Authors John T. Sabol and Lisa A. Alzo with their recently published book, *Cleveland Slovaks*.



Cleveland Slovaks features years of research and photographs that document the history of one of America's largest ethnic communities, Slovak Americans in the Cleveland area.

accessible and meaningful through the publication of books on the heritage of America's people and places." Arcadia has published more than 6,000 local history titles. For further information or to purchase this book or others, one may also visit the website: www.arcadia-publishing.com, or one may write to:

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Book Corner

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In July of 1948, Jan Kocur died of pulmonary disease exacerbated by his exposure to poison gas during WWI. His funeral was attended by dignitaries and representatives from every Slovak organization in the US including Jednota and the National Slovak Society.

The funeral Mass was conducted by no less than 9 priests. It was presided over by Fr. Theodore Kojis, Abbott of the Cleveland Benedictines. Burial took place in the Slovak cemetery in Tarentum, Pennsylvania.

This 265-page book is a glowing tribute to the man whom Karol Sidor dubbed as "a gallant secretary." The 20 short chapters read quickly, although sometimes the text gets bogged down with too many details like in the chapter "Citizen Kocur;" and the "Doughboy" chapter reads like a textbook at times. Yet one cannot fault Kocur, Jr., for his diligent footnoting work; he has certainly done his homework.

The use of diacritical accents is uneven throughout the book, such as the hacek is missing from the "C" in Konstantin Culen's name. And the spelling of Masaryk in the book—Massaryk—is unusual, indeed. I found it curious as to items left out of this biography like mention of the 1915 Cleveland Agreement, Milan Stefanik's mysterious death in 1919 and the Slovak National Uprising in 1944 which spelled and the of Slovak statehood.

A brief account of the history of the SLA would have been appropriate at the outset of the story and I would have liked to read more about Andrej Hlinka and the People's Party's role in Slovakia during this timeframe. Another person I'd have liked to learn more about was Amelia Kocur, Jan Kocur's daughter who stepped in to help with the secretarial role when Kocur fell ill.

The use of the hyphenated form of Czecho-Slovakia throughout most of the story is problematic, for the hyphen was officially "dropped" from the name in 1920.

These quibbles aside, Jan Kocur is a paen to a grandfather who achieved much in his lifetime and has proven to be a true Slovak patriot.

Answer to Puzzle

Solution to Puzzle from page 11

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