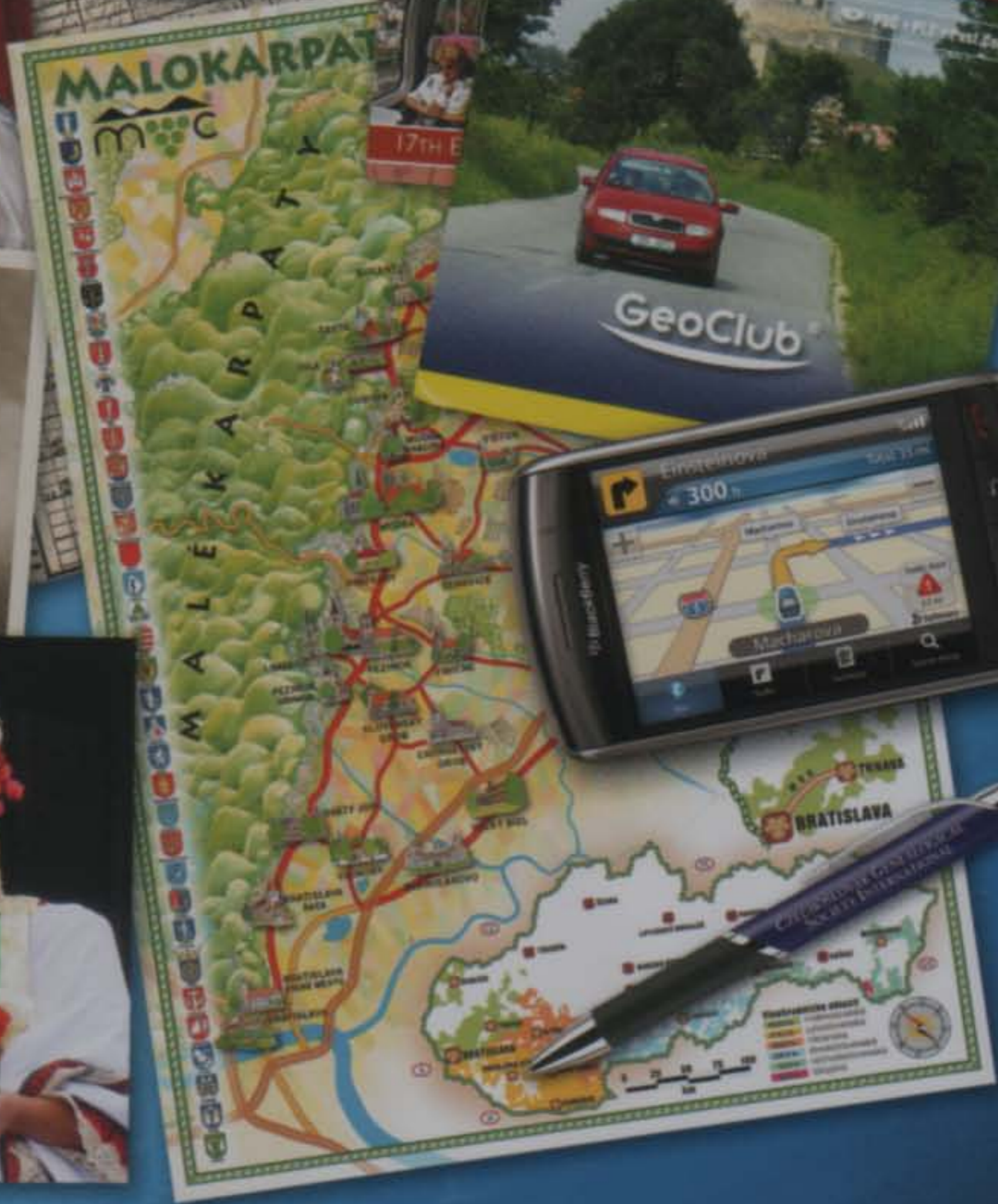
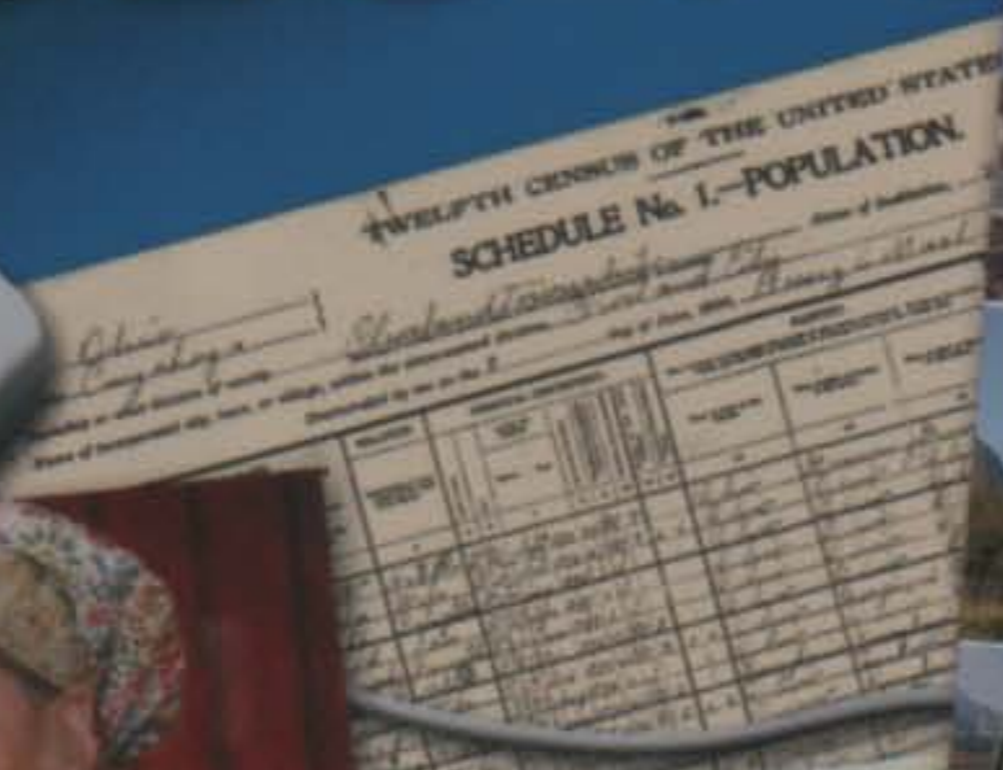


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# Slovo



## REDISCOVERING CZECH & SLOVAK ROOTS:

*adventures in genealogy research  
and heritage travel*

100 Years of Gratitude:

## A GRANDDAUGHTER'S GENEALOGICAL JOURNEY

By Lisa A. Alzo



Janós Alsio married Elizabeth Fencsak in January of 1915 in Saints Peter & Paul Byzantine Catholic Church, Duquesne, Pennsylvania.

On October 29, 1910, 16-year-old Janós Alsio from "Also-Kocsen," Hungary, arrived at Ellis Island in New York onboard the ship the Kaiserin Auguste Victoria. He had \$25 in his pocket and was headed to McKees Rocks, Pennsylvania.

The search for work eventually took Janós to Duquesne, Pennsylvania, where he secured a job as a millwright in the Bar Mill of the Carnegie steel plant. While staying at a boarding house owned by Mary Ceyba, he met Mary's sister, Erzsebet (Elizabeth) Fencsak, who came to Duquesne in 1914 from Poša, a village about a mile from Janós' hometown. The two were married in Saints Peter & Paul Byzantine Catholic Church in January of 1915.

Janos was the first of my four grandparents to emigrate to the United States. But I'll get back to his story later.

### *The accidental genealogist*

I've been researching my roots for over 20 years. I wish I could say that some family experience, medical reason or particular question inspired me to search for my Slovak ancestors, but to tell the truth I became a genealogist quite by accident.

I was in my second year of a Master of Fine Arts degree program in non-fiction writing at the University of Pittsburgh and enrolled in a class, "The Literature of Pittsburgh." One of our assigned readings was *Out of This Furnace*, Thomas Bell's classic historical

novel about three generations of Slovak men working in the steel mills of Braddock, Pennsylvania. Bell's book prompted me to wonder about my own family's Slovak background.

Unfortunately, like many who begin the process, I started too late — after the generation who could tell me what I wanted to know had passed away. But I did not let the lack of firsthand information discourage me.

Thanks to my mother's close relationship with her parents and her pack-rat tendencies — (she saved everything including my grandparents' baptismal certificates and passports) — I subsequently learned about the life of my grandmother, Verona Straka Figlar, who emigrated to the United States from the tiny village of Milpoš, Slovakia, in 1922. After barely making it through Ellis Island, Verona began her life in America as a domestic, and, through an arranged courtship, married Janos Figlyar, a hardworking but stern Carpatho-Rusyn coal miner/steelworker, who had arrived a year earlier. Once married, Verona struggled to raise seven children during the Depression while withstanding her husband's fondness for alcohol and frequent violent outbursts.



The Alsio family  
of Kučín, Slovakia.

As the details of Verona's background, journey to America and struggles as an immigrant woman were revealed to me, I came to appreciate her as more than just my grandmother, but as someone with a poignant life story.

Thus I embarked on my genealogical journey, researching my maternal grandmother's side of the family. This was in the days before the Internet was an integral part of daily life. Before the availability of hundreds of genealogical Web sites, online census records and immigration databases, I searched courthouses, viewed microfilm, visited libraries and archives, conducted more than 30 oral history interviews, and studied Slovak history and culture.

After six years of diligent research, I was able to successfully trace my Slovak ancestry. I earned my degree and subsequently wrote about my ancestry in the book *Three Slovak Women*.

### *Why genealogy matters*

I confess. I'm now a genealogy junkie. And, as it turns out, I'm not alone. Millions of people around the world are catching the genealogy bug. The interest in researching one's roots has increased rapidly, especially over the past decade.

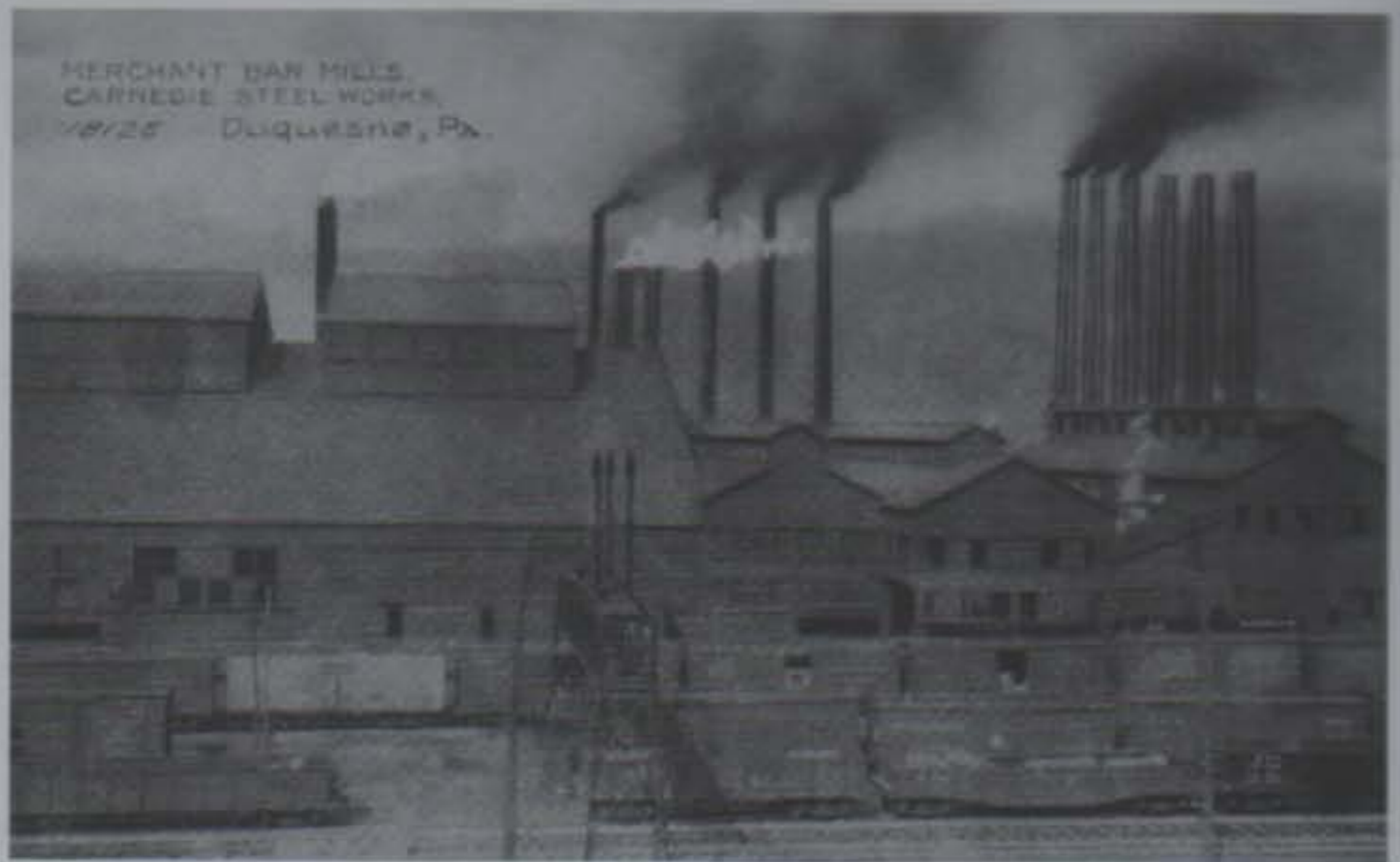
There are those who may ask, "Why bother?" or "What's to be gained from digging up the skeletons in our closets?" My own father was a bit of genealogy skeptic. Several years before he passed away I asked him about his ancestors in Slovakia. When he replied that he knew nothing, I persisted, "Didn't you ever ask your mother or father about their parents or grandparents?" I was stunned by his reply: "What do I care about those people. They're dead. I didn't know them." Dad's response was funny, disappointing and frustrating all at the same time, but sadly, not an uncommon one. Many genealogists have experienced a similar lack of interest from their relatives.

Genealogy is more than just the researching of names, dates and places. It's the thrill of discovering where you've come from, or perhaps why certain traditions have remained in your family through the generations. But beyond that, genealogy serves a larger purpose. We learn how our ancestors' decisions affected us, how their lives intertwine with our own. Peering into our past gives us a better understanding of the world and our place in it.

After six years of researching her family's genealogy, author Lisa Alzo's wrote a book chronicling her Slovak ancestry.



An early 1900s view of the Merchant Bar Mills of the Carnegie Steel Works in Duquesne, Pennsylvania, where Janós Alsio (John Alzo, Sr.) was employed for more than 40 years.



Genealogical research often results in discovering unexpected family connections. In this 1921 photograph, the author's paternal grandfather, Janós Alsio (left) served as a pallbearer for his neighbor Michael Sivak, who was crushed to death in an accident in the Duquesne steel mill. Michael Sivak was married to Maria Straka (fourth from right), the sister of the author's maternal grandmother, Verona Figlar. The author was surprised to learn that the Straka family knew the Alzo family prior to the marriage of her parents in 1947.



Detractors aside, genealogy is often cited as the second most popular hobby. For many, genealogy is an obsession. Some family history enthusiasts go to great lengths to learn the details of their ancestors' lives. Genealogy has even made its way into pop culture, and recently has made an appearance in two mainstream television programs: *Faces of America* (PBS) and *Who Do You Think You Are?* (NBC).

You might think that because I've written a book, I'm done searching. Not so. Typically, the more information you discover, the more you want to know, and I have continued making wonderful discoveries about my family. Indeed, with more resources available than ever before, there has never been a better time to be a genealogist. For those just starting out, the journey begins at home. Start pulling out those documents and asking your older relatives those important questions. Then, tap into the power of the Internet — it will



This wedding photograph of the author's grandparents, Janós Figlar and Verona Straka, was taken on November 1, 1924, in St. Clairsville, Ohio.

literally open up the world to you during the quest to find your ancestors. Each new discovery will inevitably lead to more questions, because with genealogy, you're never truly done.

### *Getting to know grandpap*

Now, back to that young man, Janós. He left his home in Kučín before his 17th birthday. This was significant because at the time in Austria-Hungary, males were eligible to be drafted into military service at the age of 20, and young men could volunteer for the Army as early as age 17. A few of Janós' relatives had already settled in America, so to avoid mandatory military service, he set sail to join them. He remained in Duquesne and worked for more than 40 years in the mill until he retired in 1959. He became a United States citizen in 1928, complete with an Americanized name — John Alzo. John and Elizabeth had five children: Anna, Elizabeth, Helen, John (my father) and Agnes (who died in infancy). Sadly, I never knew my grandfather because he died before I was born. At age 67 he suffered a heart attack while painting his back porch one Saturday afternoon. Ironically, he had just returned home from a funeral where he served as a pallbearer for one of his closest friends. From stories told to me by relatives and family friends, I learned that I missed out on knowing one terrific man.

However, thanks to my interest in genealogy, I've had the opportunity to learn about all the details of my grandfather's life. Furthermore, thanks to the Internet, I have connected with a newly discovered cousin (the granddaughter of my grandfather's youngest brother, Andrej) and we are planning to meet for the first time this summer in Slovakia. With the anticipated travel back to Janós' village, my story — and his journey — will come full circle. I owe everything I have become to him and my other grandparents: If they had not had the courage to get on those boats, I would not have the opportunities I enjoy today.

To Janós and Elizabeth, Janós and Verona, I simply say: *Ďakujem!* ■

### TEN TIPS FOR FINDING SLOVAK ANCESTORS:

1. Exhaust all U.S. sources first (talk to relatives and check for documents).
2. Get the immigrant's original name right (names may not appear the same way as you know them).
3. Learn naming practices.
4. Brush up on history.
5. Study geography.
6. Bypass foreign-language barriers (use translation aids to read/interpret old country records).
7. Find online records (mostly U.S. but more from overseas are being digitized) and use the Internet to connect with cousins.
8. Use Family History Library microfilm ([www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org)).
9. Write to the relevant archives (or research there in person).
10. Hire a professional to get what you can't.

These tips are from the article "Victory in Europe" by Lisa A. Alzo for *Family Tree Magazine*. Read more at: [www.familytreemagazine.com/article/Victory-in-Europe](http://www.familytreemagazine.com/article/Victory-in-Europe).

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