

Immersion Genealogy

Lisa A. Alzo shares her thoughts on a more complete way to explore your ancestry



*Lisa Alzo, holding her book **Three Slovak Women**, in front of the sign for her maternal grandmother's village of Milpoš, Slovakia in June 2010. (Courtesy of author)*

Creating Your Own Immersion Genealogy Experience

Family history is so much more than just names, dates, and places, or boxes, lines, and charts. For 21st century genealogists, it is easy to limit our research to the documents or other facts we find online, or rely on information others share in their family trees, or via social media. Immersion genealogy gives us the opportunity to take our research a step further to help us to truly understand our ancestors' lives.

I know that I'm not alone when it comes to appreciating those "up close and personal" moments of genealogy — the ones you can't get from a book, computer screen, or microfilm reader. As Blogger Heather Rojo wrote on her Nutfield Genealogy blog, "How can you understand your ancestor's life if you don't step into the churches they attended, have a pint at their neighborhood pubs, walk the lanes where they walked?" [See <http://nutfieldgenealogy.blogspot.com/2014/06/why-did-i-travel-3128-miles-to-attend.html>.]

Family Chronicle editor, Ed Zapletal, also relates to the immersion genealogy experience. During a trip to the Czech

For the longest time, I imagined what it would be like to travel to my ancestral homeland of Slovakia and visit my maternal grandmother's village of Milpoš. I had seen pictures of this area — a beautiful place nestled in the southwestern slopes of the mountain Cergov in Eastern Slovakia. I also heard stories about the families living there from others who had visited, so I thought I had an idea of what to expect. I finally made it to Milpoš in June 2010, and what I found there far exceeded my expectations. As I stood in front of the village sign, and then walked along the same roads where my grandmother once walked, it was simply the most awesome feeling — something only I could experience for myself. During that trip, I also visited Kučín and Poša in

the Vranov nad Topľou District in Eastern Slovakia — the respective birthplaces of my paternal grandfather and grandmother. I was on a genealogical journey, meeting cousins and extended family for the first time, experiencing the food, language, and culture, and tracking down new records for my ancestors in the places where these events actually occurred. This moment was uniquely my own, and I searched for the perfect way to describe it and eventually decided on "immersion genealogy", which I have defined as "the process of discovering where and how our ancestors lived, worked, and worshipped, and experiencing first-hand those customs and traditions they passed down through the generations".

Republic in 2014, he met Jaroslav Kocourek, the father of Věra Colledani, who runs the museum in the village of Krumvíř, the village where Ed's grandfather was born. Jaroslav took Ed on a walking tour to see his grandfather's birth home and as they were leaving, he grabbed Ed by the arm and said to him in Czech: "You are walking where your grandfather and great-grandfather walked." As Ed reflected on the experience, he noted, "I understand enough Czech to know what he meant, but his son-in-law Pavel Colledani translated it for me at the time. I felt goose bumps when he said it. Had he not been there to say it, I'm not sure it would have been quite the same."

Lasting Impressions

My own trip to Slovakia in 2010 was so inspirational that I decided to travel there again in 2012. This time, I visited Osturňa, my maternal grandfather's village — the one place I did not get to see in 2010. I spent time looking through the church records, I visited the Mayor's office, and ate authentic Rusyn foods.



Sign at the entrance of the village of Osturňa, Slovakia, birthplace of the author's grandfather, János Figlyar. (Courtesy of author)



Lisa Alzo writing about her visit to Kučín, Slovakia at the Mayor's office, 17 June 2012. (Courtesy of author)

If you are thinking about or are in the process of planning a trip to your ancestral homeland, here are some suggestions for how you can include "immersion genealogy" in your itinerary.

HOME – If possible, go inside the ancestral home, learn about daily life. How did your ancestors cook? Where did they sleep? How did they deal with personal matters (bathroom, bathing, etc.)?

WORK – Where did your ancestors work? In the fields (farmers, shepherds, etc.)? In a mine, factory, or other industry? Did they own a shop, tavern, or pub? Did they work with their hands (tailor, boot maker, or craftsman)? If possible, book a tour of a workplace or talk to a town historian.

WORSHIP – Did your ancestors attend church or synagogue? How far away was their place of worship? What was their religion? What rituals did they observe? Ask to meet with the priest and go inside the church. Attend a service.

FOOD – What foods did they eat? Did they grow/produce their own food? Were there special meals for holidays or other occasions? If visiting family, try to enjoy a meal with them, or go to a local eatery.

DRESS – What type of clothing did your ancestors wear for work, church, special events? Did they make their own clothing? Is there a nearby museum you can visit? Or ask those who live there if they still make or have traditional costumes.

COMMUNITY – Who lived near your ancestors? What was life in their community like? Were there community celebrations? What did they involve? Make contact with the mayor in advance and try to get an appointment to see important places in the town/village.

ENTERTAINMENT – Did your ancestors experience music and dance? What did they do for entertainment? Is there still a local pub or meeting place you can visit to talk with the locals?

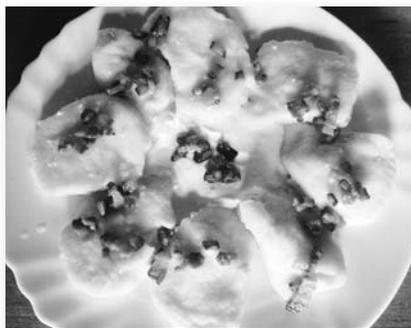
FOLKLORE – What stories, superstitions, or folklore were a part of your ancestors lives? Ask for books or pamphlets at town offices or archives.

CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS – Were there certain customs or traditions specific to your family or the town or village (for example, what did they do for baptisms, weddings, funerals, military honors, or to say goodbye to people who left for America or other countries)? Talk to families living there, or seek out places in the area such as churches or social clubs that may be hosting festivals or other commemorative events.

For more information on creating your own "immersion genealogy" experience, go to www.immersiongenealogy.com.

I also returned to Kučín and visited with relatives I had met on the first trip. This time, I was accompanied by my cousin Jack Berta and his wife, Shirley. I had the opportunity to watch them have their own “immersion” experiences. One of the main highlights was taking a photograph with Jack (who is also my godfather) in front of the baptismal font in the church where our grandfather, Jan Alzo, was baptized in 1894! This was particularly meaningful as it was Father’s Day. At the time, I was missing my father (it was the seventh Father’s Day since he passed away) and so I was glad to be able to share the day with my godfather in my grandfather’s church!

My grandfather died before I was born, and traveling to his hometown helped me to get to know him and feel closer to him. The second visit to his birthplace was just as special as the first. During my first visit in 2010, I was so overwhelmed with emotion; this time I still had some “lump in my throat” moments, but I was able to really think about the significance



Fabulous food: Pirohy served in Osturňa, Slovakia, June 2012. (Courtesy of author)

of each key place we visited. As a genealogist, you can search as many documents as you can find, cite all the sources accurately and completely, gather a long list of names and dates, but truly, nothing compares to physically being in fields where your ancestors walked, worked and played, or stepping inside the buildings where your ancestors lived and worshipped. For me, it’s all about “connection”, and I am grateful for the opportunity I had to see firsthand those places where the people

from my past experienced the good, the bad, and the in-between of their lives.

Summary

As genealogists, we hear a lot about methodology, obsess about proper source citations, and spend many hours searching for those elusive ancestors and trying to solve those proverbial “brick walls”, — the seemingly unsolvable research problems that wherever we look, we find no answers. With “immersion genealogy”, we have an opportunity to go beyond the same old research strategies and discover those details we can’t get from online databases, books, or microfilm. We experience those “goose bump moments” — the deepest connections that bring us in sync with our ancestors, and those unique experiences that define who we are.

How will you immerse yourself in your genealogy? ■

Freelance writer, instructor, and lecturer, **LISA A. ALZO** is a frequent contributor to *Family Chronicle*. You can read about her immersion genealogy experiences on her blog, *The Accidental Genealogist*, www.theaccidentalgenealogist.com (search on “Sojourn in Slovakia” July 2010, and “Sojourn in Slovakia: The Sequel”, July/August 2012).



LEFT: Visitation of the Virgin Mary Church (original church dates to 1300) in Kučín, Slovakia. (Photo courtesy of Andy Rabatin, 2010)



RIGHT: Jan Alzo’s grandchildren, John (Jack Berta) and Lisa Alzo pose in front of the baptismal font in Visitation of the Virgin Mary Church Kučín, Slovakia in June 2012. (Courtesy of author)