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LISA A. ALZO DOCUMENTS HOW SHE FOUND HER ELUSIVE GREAT-AUNT

There's Something About Mary

As genealogists, we are naturally curious about our ancestors. We're driven to piece together the details of those who have gone before us. We invest our time and our money in the journey, and along the way, we discover that some ancestors are easier to research than others. Then it happens. At one time or another, every genealogist experiences the "pull". It's that one individual in the family tree you can't get out of your head. He or she seems to inspire you to embark on a quest to research and tell his or her life story. Sometimes you find more than one ancestor doing the tugging. I've experienced the pull several times.

First, it happened with my maternal grandmother, Verona Straka Figlar, who served as the inspiration for my book, *Three Slovak Women*. Then, it was my maternal grandfather's brother, Sam Figlar, whom I wrote about in a previous case study for the October/November 2006 issue of *Internet Genealogy*.

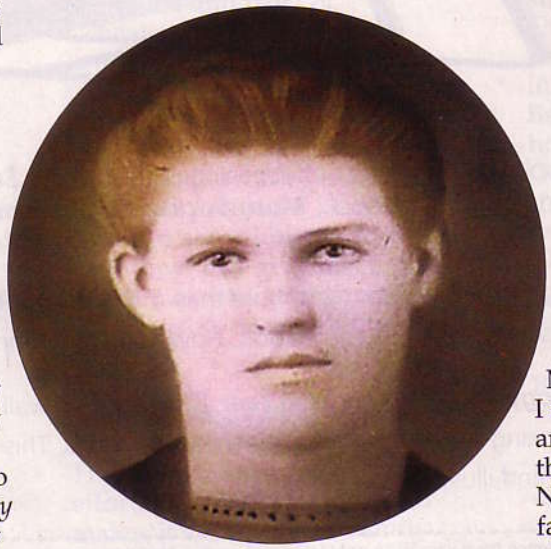
But it was an ancestor on my paternal side of the family — my grandmother's sister, Mary Fenscak Ceyba — who seemed to tug the hardest. Readers of *Family Chronicle* may recall her from my article, "20th-Century Desperate Housewives"(September/October 2006). Mary was the central character in this article about the lives of six women in Duquesne, Pennsylvania. While I told of the trials and tribulations surrounding Mary's life in this other article, I did not detail the research process.

Finding information about the females in your family tree is traditionally a more difficult task than uncovering details about their male counterparts. There are many reasons why this is the case, but one of the main ones is that most historical records have been created for, and are about, men.

Previous case studies published in *Internet Genealogy* have covered sleuthing for male ancestors. I thought it was time for a woman to have her turn. Using mainly online resources, here's how I pieced together my great-aunt Mary's story.

The Inspiration

I first learned about Mary from a 250-word family narrative compiled by my father's sister, Anna Alzo, a Roman Catholic nun, who prepared a one-page, typewritten document in the 1970s. My aunt heard the story from her first-cousin, Mary Hatala. She then prepared a typewritten account using



Mary Fenscak Ceyba, mother of six. She died in 1929, at the age of 38, from tuberculosis.

carbon paper and distributed it to her siblings. This was before genealogy became a popular hobby and oral history one of its most touted components. Edited excerpts from the narrative are shown here:

"Our Family Background: As told to me by Mary Hatala Illa (Helen), our grandmother married Michael Finch, a bootmaker, in Liverpool, England. Mr. Finch was a widower with two children: John and Anna. Mrs. Mary Ceyba was born to them in Liverpool, England. Then they came to Freeland, PA, near Scranton where Anna Bavolar was born. Then they returned to Europe and Elizabeth and Mike were born in Czechoslovakia in Poša.When [grandfather] (Mihaly) died, [aunt] (Mary) Ceyba came to America and was hired out for room and board and one change of clothes per year."

While this account was second-hand, at least it provided me with a place to start. With the story in front of me, I set out on my quest. I wrote down the key details from the narrative:

Mary's Maiden Name: Fenchak
Married Name: Ceyba (Mrs.)
Birthplace: Liverpool, England?
Other locations: Poša, Freeland
Parents' Names: Mihaly/Michael (Finch) Fenchak and Illa (Helen)
Events: Family deaths, Immigration, WWI.

Asking Questions

As with any genealogical project, one of the first steps is to consult family sources and interview any living relatives. At the time I began my quest for Mary, my father was still alive, so I showed him the typed narrative and asked if he could tell me anything about Mary or her parents. Now, I have written about my father's take on genealogy in other articles. His typical response was: "What do I care about those people, they're dead. I didn't know them." Dad couldn't help me at all, but in his defense, he did not remember his Aunt Mary. As I would later discover, she died when my father was just four years old, which supports his claim that he "didn't know her". Nevertheless, I had hit a major brickwall right from the start. Thankfully, I found a way to break through this obstacle.

Turning to the Internet

I immediately decided to do some sleuthing in US records starting with the Internet and Ancestry.com. I found the John Ceyba family as "Chyba" in the

1930 US census, which provided me with some pertinent initial clues:

John Chyba
Age: 38
Estimated birth year: 1892
Birthplace: Czechoslovakia
Relation to head-of-house: Head
Spouse's Name: Mary Chyba
Race: White
Home in 1930: Homestead, Allegheny, Pennsylvania

Taking advantage of the fact that I knew Mary's son, George was still living, I wrote him a letter and included a copy of the census record for him to review.

George wrote back to me:

"That census report is all screwed up. My mother died in 1929. My dad wanted someone to care for us. Mrs. Mazak knew this woman [Mary Dzvonik] who my Dad accepted. She had five children and we were five. If he married her or not? We ended up with 12 in the family — 2 months after we buried my mother. She really screwed our name up. She used 'Chayba', 'Cheba' and 'Ceba'. The real name was 'Chéjba' in Slovak. When my dad got his citizenship papers, they used his name 'Ceyba' — they changed the 'j' to a 'y', so it's been that way right along, 'Ceyba'."

One of the important details from the 1930 census was that the "Mary" listed on the form as John Chyba's spouse was not my grandmother's sister, Mary, but the woman George mentioned in his letter.

I also found John and his wife Mary listed in the 1920 census as "Chebo [Chebe]". The 1920 record indicates that the family had two boarders living with them (confirming the mention of the boarding house in the family lore). The 1910 census has the name recorded as "Csejba".

Now, I was intrigued. I followed up with George to ask more questions, but because his mother died while he was a young boy, he could only provide information that had been passed along to him. However, thanks to George's daughter who found out about my research project, I was able to get my hands on one very important item — a photograph of Mary! When I first looked at Mary's image, I immediately noticed in her face some of my own features — namely the thin blondish-brown hair and very fine eyebrows. I felt the pull again. There truly was "something about Mary" and I knew I had to find out more.

Next Steps

After doing a bit more research, I found out that Mary Ceyba was buried in Holy Trinity cemetery — the same cemetery where my parents, paternal grandparents and other relatives are buried. So, one day, I searched through the older sections of the cemetery and found Mary's tombstone, which listed her date of birth as 1891, and the date of death as 1929. Using this information, I went online to the Pennsylvania Department of Health website, *http://www.dsf.health.state.pa.us/health/site/default.asp*, to get information on requesting death records.

Above: Steve Morse's search tool for "Searching the Baltimore Passenger Lists in One Step". Top: This headstone for Mary Ceyba in Holy Trinity Church Cemetery, West Mifflin, Pennsylvania helped obtain information to order the death certificate.

Using a downloadable and printable form, I sent in a check for $9 US, along with a copy of my driver's license and requested Mary's death certificate, which listed her date of death as "June 17, 1929; age: abt. 38; cause of death: pulmonary tuberculosis." The death certificate also listed the names of Mary's parents "Mihaly Finchak" and "Helen Lesko", and her birthplace as "Liverpool, England".

At this point, things were starting to get interesting. Mary was only 38 when she died from tuberculosis. Her children barely remembered her. I now felt even more compelled to find out everything I could about my great-aunt Mary.

My next course of action was to try to locate Mary's birth record. Online searches of available UK records turned up no results. I had a researcher go to the Liverpool Record office on my behalf and search every variation of Mary Fenchak's name I could think of for 1891 and the surrounding years. No matches. I even requested a search on "Mary Finch", which did turn up some results, but still no exact match.

Matching the Matchmaker

While Mary's missing birth record was a serious brickwall in my research, I was not about to give up. First, I took another, closer look at the 1930 census record and noted that for all of Mary [Fenchak] Ceyba's children, the "Place of Birth — Mother" column listed "At Sea".

I next went in search of immigration records. I went back to Ancestry.com and, by searching their Immigration Collection databases, located a passenger record for a Mike Finchack, who was traveling with his wife, Jovo and infant girl, Mary, to New York from Liverpool in June 1891. There were a few inconsistencies. One was the spelling of the surname, as it was probably recorded at the port of departure. In addition, the place of origin was listed as "Germany", not Hungary as I would have assumed. Perhaps the family had to wait awhile at one of the German ports before sailing to Liverpool. Furthermore, it appears there are some possible transcription uncertainties. For

example, the name "Jovo" could have been the guessed transcription of Mary's mother's first name, "Ilona" (Helen), the estimated birth years are all a bit off according to data obtained from other sources. Also, the indexed record lists Mary's age as "9 years" instead of "9 months" as it is actually recorded on the manifest. These questions aside, I felt confident this was the correct family.

I spent some time searching for Mary's second immigration record. I had a clue to a year (1908) from the 1920 census. I started with the Ellis Island Database because other members of the Fencak/Fenchak family arrived at the Port of New York, so I assumed this would be the case with Mary. It wasn't. Knowing that many early immigrants from Austria-Hungary also came through the Port of Baltimore, I decided to search for Mary in the Baltimore records. At the time of my initial search, the Baltimore records available on Ancestry.com were a relatively new feature. In order to streamline my search, I used Steve Morse's form for "Searching the Baltimore Passenger Lists in One Step" from his website, *http://stevemorse.org/*. The form covers the years 1820 to 1948 and interfaces with Ancestry.com's Immigration Collection (a subscription to Ancestry.com is required to do the search). I chose the "Sounds Like" option for "Last Name" and typed in "Fencak" (a common spelling of this surname). I selected the "starts with" option for First Name and typed in the first three letters, this would cover the variations of Maria and Mary. I could have selected other criteria to narrow the search, but with only 53 results to sift through, it wasn't necessary. After a couple of false leads, I located the following record:

Maria Fenisak
Arrival Date: Feb 1909
Age: 18 years, 0 months
Estimated Birth Year: 1891
Gender: Female
Race: Slovak
Port of Departure: Bremen, Germany
Ship Name: Rhein
Port of Arrival: Baltimore, Maryland
Friend's Name: Jabel Kirsner
Last Residence: Hungary

I later learned through civil records research in Slovakia, that Mary's arrival date was seven years after her father's death.

Searching Sideways: The Sisters

Going back to the family narrative, I was able to pull out a few more details. One of the most interesting parts of Mary's story was how she played matchmaker for her two sisters, Anna and Elizabeth (my grandmother):

"[Aunt] Bavolar was matched for marriage by [aunt] Ceyba. [Aunt] Bavolar went to Europe with Mary because Grandma was sick. [Aunt] stayed because World War I broke out and they wouldn't return to America.

[Aunt] Ceyba sent for Elizabeth (my mother) to come to America. She came, had a job working for a Jewish family but visited [aunt] Ceyba often. Dad came over to America and was a boarder at [the Ceybas' home]. This is where Mom and Dad met and then married."

Mary Ceyba played matchmaker for her two sisters. Top, Elizabeth Fenscak married John Alzo, and, above, Anna Fenscak married George Bavolar.

Doing collateral research, I was able to locate information on three of Mary's five siblings who settled in the US: John, Anna and Elizabeth. Mary's brother Mike moved to Argentina, and her older sister, also named Anna (she was Mary's father's child from his first wife), married Ján Ragan, and stayed in Slovakia. (I know that the issue of two sisters named "Anna" is a bit confusing, but Slovaks were not very innovative when it came to naming their children.)

Again, using the Internet, I was able to track Mary's siblings using the census, immigration records, the Social Security Death index, obituaries and other records. Most of what I found coincided with the details in the family narrative. In particular, two passenger lists for Anna Bavolar. One in 1911 going to her brother-in-law John's house in Duquesne, Pennsylvania (proving the matchmaker story), and the second showing her returning to the US in 1920, after spending several years in Europe caring for her mother who died in 1917.

The passenger list I found for my grandmother Elizabeth in 1914 indicates that she was going to her brother-in-law's house, George Bavolar, again confirming the story about her living with the Bavolar family before she met my

grandfather, János Alsio (John Alzo), who was a boarder at the Ceybas' house.

Birthplace Mystery Still Unsolved

I made good progress in the hunt, but I was still perplexed about Mary's place of birth. While the Internet was instrumental in helping me find Mary in the census and her immigration records, I knew that I would have to follow a more traditional research route in order to track down her birth information.

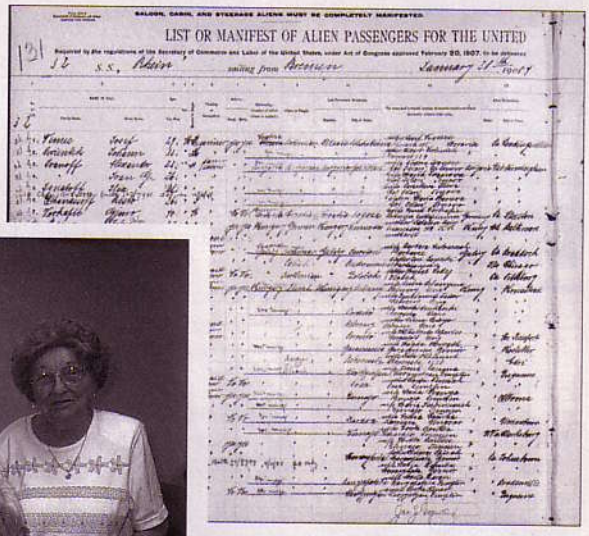
I first went in search of her marriage record in Pittsburgh and struck gold! The application for marriage between John Csepba and Mary Fenchak filed on 18 May 1909 lists John's birth date as 5 April 1887 in "Hungara" and Mary's birthdate and place as 21 March 1888 in "Hungaria". They were married by a Justice of the Peace.

Following this new information, I used the Family History Library Catalog online, *http://www.familysearch.org*, to locate information on microfilms for Poša, Slovakia and was able to order the films from my local Family History Center. In the church records on the film, I found a baptismal entry for "Maria Fenscak" in March 1888. This discovery confirmed that a Liverpool birth was a false lead and that Mary was actually an infant during the trip (as shown in the 1891 immigration record).

I also found another interesting piece of information in this record: Mary's birth mother is recorded as Anna Mali not Ilona Lesko. Some further digging in these church records uncovered that Mihaly's first wife, Anna, died in 1888 not long after Mary was born (noted in a death record). A marriage to Ilona Lesko was also recorded after Mihaly's first wife's death (this quick remarriage after the death of a spouse was not an uncommon practice in Slovak families at the time). This confirmed one part of the family story that Mary's father was a widower; but subsequently challenged that Ilona was Mary's birth mother. For reasons unknown, this fact was never passed down in the family stories. Either nobody on this side of the ocean actually knew this for sure, or they chose to keep it quiet.

Keeping Track

In order to help place Mary's life in historical context, I decided to create a timeline. I used the software program Genelines to assist with the task. With Genelines, I was able to enter data in individual, family, health and historical events screens. I referred to the timeline when writing Mary's profile and when doing the 20th-Century Desperate Housewives article.


LIST OR MANIFEST OF ALIEN PASSENGERS FOR THE UNITED

Above: The Ceyba and Alzo families reunited in 2004, Front Row: John Alzo (left) and his first-cousin, George Ceyba. Back Row: George's daughter, Lorraine Dumblosky (left) and wife, Julie. Top: Manifest page showing "Maria Fenisak" on board the **S.S. Rhein** *sailing from Bremen to Baltimore in January 1909.*

Final Observations

My search for Mary has a bittersweet ending. Thanks to the Internet, I was able to track down many of the key details fairly quickly. Unfortunately, I was just a bit too late. Mary's son George passed away in 2004, so he did not see the fruits of my labor. But, you see, Mary is still playing the role of matchmaker. Perhaps not in the traditional sense, but she has connected me with a new cousin, George's daughter, who is grateful for all my detective work. She wrote to me:

"Wow! Would my dad have loved to have seen how you put that story into a story. Honestly, I'm speechless. Thank you. I do feel that it's a gift and I thank you for that."

The path to Mary was certainly cluttered with brickwalls, false leads and disappointing results. Yet, the pull was strong enough to help me persist, and I learned along the way that even those ancestors who seem the most out of reach can be found.

Yes, I had met my match in Mary. But, she was a worthy opponent.

This case study is based on an article originally published in the *Desperate Genealogist's Handbook* available at *www.deadfred.com*. Parts of this article have been reprinted with permission.

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