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*Alice Masaryk in
Chicago, 1904.
Courtesy, The Lilly
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In Quiet Pursuit of the Good: A Profile of Alice Garrigue Masaryk

by Carol Jean Smetana

In 1994, twenty-eight years after her death, Alice Garrigue Masaryk's ashes were returned to her native land and reburied in the family plot in Lány, Czech Republic, next to her father Tomáš, her mother Charlotte, and her brother Jan. Alice had died in Chicago in 1966, after living nearly a third of her life in exile in the United States. Throughout those difficult years of exile, Alice longed to return home to a free Czechoslovakia.

Of the four Masaryks buried at Lány, Alice is perhaps the least

known. Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk (1850 – 1937) is familiar to many Americans as the founder and first president of Czechoslovakia. Some know that he married an American Charlotte Garrigue (1850 – 1923). Some know, too, that their son Jan Garrigue Masaryk (1886 – 1948) was a Czechoslovak diplomat – perhaps they have heard of his mysterious death in 1948. But Alice is relatively unknown.

Tomáš and Charlotte met in Germany in 1877 and married in

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Generation to Generation: The Slovak Woman's Role in Preserving Culture and Traditions

by Lisa A. Alzo, M.F.A.

Some of my fondest memories from childhood are the times spent in my Grandma Figlar's kitchen. The delightful smells of whatever she was cooking filled the air. The aroma of her "bottomless" pot of chicken soup slowly simmering on the stove, or the smell of browning butter in her old black iron skillet, which she used for *pirohi* or mixed with sweet cabbage for *haluski*, and especially the fresh homemade buns-golden brown and dusted with flour, which she baked almost daily. Dressed in her blue and white cotton housedress, quilted slippers, and a white *babushka* around her head, Grandma would stand over that stove for what seemed like hours. It was a given that there would always be something delicious to eat during a visit to Baba's house.

Due to cultural stereotypes, certain images are evoked when one thinks of the Slovak woman: the *babushka*, the colorful, elaborate *kroje* generally worn during special occasions and holidays, the angled face with kind and generous eyes, yet expressing a certain edge, reflecting years of toil and hardship. And finally,

as I have reflected above, the association of the Slovak woman and the kitchen.

Slovaks began their migration to the United States, sometime after 1870, and great numbers settled in states such as Illinois, New York, Ohio and Pennsylvania, and took mostly to the coal mines and steel mills for employment. In cities like Cleveland, Chicago, and Pittsburgh (my hometown), Slovaks began to build their own communities. By 1907, over 50 percent of Pittsburgh steel workers were Slovaks. Because of their peasant backgrounds and lack of schooling, Slovaks often earned the lowest wages in the mills and the plight of the "Hunky" (a negative moniker used to describe immigrant steel workers from Austro-Hungary region), was revealed in books like Thane Williamson's *Hunky* and Thomas Bell's novel, *Out of This Furnace*. In order to compensate for low earnings, Slovak families typically sought cheaper housing and spent more on food.

In researching my book, *Three Slovak Women*, I discovered that the Slovak woman was frequently overlooked when it came to the intensity of day-to-day labor. Yes, Slovak men worked hard, but so did their women who coped with heavy workloads- caring for family, their homes, and often boarders taken in for extra income. As a consequence, Slovak women often chose foods easy to prepare-filling foods like bread and meat. For Slovaks, food is richly entwined with tradition. For generations, extensive meal preparations were a part of special events such as baptisms or marriages, and holidays-especially Christmas and Easter-were always about food and family.

More than just being a homemaker, the Slovak woman took on even greater responsibilities for her family. She was often the comforter, the teacher, the disciplinarian, financial manager, instiller of religious teachings, morals and values, and the one who ensured that the culture and traditions from the Old country continued on in America and were passed down to successive generations. She taught by example.

Like many Slovak immigrant women, my grandmother was a wonderful cook, but more than the food, it was the love and pride that went behind the foods she prepared. A continuation of the customs and tradition she brought with her from Slovakia.

I remember spending many Friday nights at Grandma's two-story house on Hill Street, surrounded by my aunts, uncles and cousins. While we all enjoyed her soup, those mouth watering golden buns, or her *palacinka* (crepes filled with cottage cheese and jelly and drizzled with that browned butter), or her home-

made lemon pie—all made without a recipe—we also just looked forward to being with her and being together. Grandma was the center of the family.

On Christmas Eve, we celebrated the traditional *Vilia* supper. As she had with her family in Slovakia, Grandma, often assisted by my mother and aunts, spent all day preparing the meal, a meatless supper in keeping with her religious belief that Christmas Eve was a time for fasting. According to custom, the foods prepared for this supper were based on the elements of nature and the fruits of the year's labors.

Before the meal, we would ask God to bless the food. The first course consisted of the sour soup or *kapusnica* made of sauerkraut and the *pagach*, (which my Irish uncle likes to call the "Slovak pizza"), filled with sauerkraut or a potato and cheese mixture and baked to a golden brown. Next came the perfectly baked little balls of dough or *bobalky*. Depending on which area of Slovakia you came from, *bobalky* were either steamed with milk and coated with poppy seed and/or honey, or browned in butter and mixed with sauerkraut. My grandmother followed the sauerkraut recipe. Finally, our main course was *pirohi*, which to non-Slovaks I explain as pillows of dough similar to ravioli, filled with cabbage, prunes, dried cottage cheese or potato and cheese and drenched in browned butter. We often ate our *pirohi* with a serving of fried fish. For dessert we were treated to walnut or poppy seed rolls and all sorts of *kolaci* (cookies). Christmas Eve supper was always a sacred ritual which tied together religious observances and these special Slovak customs.

Easter was my favorite holiday. My grandmother baked the *paska* or Easter bread. Grandma's *paska* always seemed to be perfect—a nice round loaf with a golden crust and a yellow center made from eggs, butter, and white raisins. The kitchen also smelled of freshly baked nut and poppyseed rolls. Another part I looked forward to was coloring and decorating eggs, in Slovak called *pisanky*, and especially liked to watch my grandmother prepare the custard-like round cheese called *hrudka*, or *syrek*, made from eggs and milk sim-

mered slowly until it separated into curds and whey. She would spoon the curds into a cheesecloth and shape it into a ball. The corners of the cloth were then tied together and she would hang the ball in the basement over the laundry tub until it became firm. Grandma also prepared *chren* (beets mixed with horseradish), and finished off the preparations with baking the special sausage, *klobassy*, and a large ham.

On Holy Saturday afternoon, my mother would pack a large wicker basket filled with these foods, cover it with a special crocheted cloth (which, to this day, is still in the family), and take it to our church to be blessed by the priest. Grandma would pack a small basket for me with a tiny *paska* and a sampling of the other foods. It made me feel so special. On Easter Sunday, we would all visit Grandma after church to celebrate in the joy of the risen Lord, exchanging with one another the traditional greeting of "Christos Voskres" (Christ is Risen!) and partaking in the blessed Easter foods.

The church blessing was indicative of the fact that the foods were more than just something to eat for the holiday. Each item in the basket symbolized a part of Easter. The *paska* was made to commemorate the fact that Jesus is the living bread from heaven in the Eucharist. The *hrudka*, with its bland but sweet taste, symbolized the moderation that Christians should have in all things, the *chren* a reminder of the bitter herbs which the Israelites had during their Passover supper, and also of the bitter drink the Lord was given while he hung on



Christmas Eve supper at the Alzo house, late 1990s. Photo Courtesy of Lisa Alzo.

the cross. The *klobassy* was indicative of God's favor and generosity and the ham celebrated the freedom of the New Law, which came into effect with the resurrection of Jesus. Slovaks typically ate ham instead of lamb, which is the traditional Passover meat because lamb was not readily available to them in the old country and they carried the custom to the New World. It was those very customs that were cherished and respected in my family as well as many other Slavic families and passed down through the efforts of the women-women like my grandmother and mother.

When my grandmother passed away in 1984, my mother took over the roles of "expert cook" and cultural "torch passer."

Our kitchen became the gathering place for Christmas Eve and Easter Sunday celebrations, as well as the occasional Friday night dinner.

Mother would don her own *babushka* (scarf), pull out Grandma's large wooden board and rolling pin and prepare the various Slovak dishes to which we had become so accustomed. The precision with

which she cut the squares for the *pirohi*, or mixed together the fillings (using the right amount of cheese for the potatoes and cheese filling or perfecting the amount of sugar so that the cottage cheese would be just sweet enough), was something only acquired through years of practice. Inevitably, there would be more filling and she would have to make more dough. Then we would run out of dough and need more filling until we got it exactly right. But she didn't mind, and neither did we—because it meant more for us to enjoy. At Easter we would all joke about the "panty hose with the cheese mixture hanging down over the laundry tubs in the basement."

Just like Grandma, my mother could make all the

dishes to perfection and although she opted to keep her "recipes" handy, she probably could have prepared all of the dishes without reference. Of course she had a great teacher.

My mother passed away in 2000, but prior to her death, she tried to teach us those of us in the family who were interested, how to prepare our favorite dishes and the significance behind them. While I admit that I am not as dedicated a cook as my mother and grandmother, I have attempted to make some of the dishes on my own. Mother taught me how to make the buns and also the *hrudka* for Easter, and we made nut and poppyseed rolls together. My aunts have now taken over the responsibility of preparing the dishes for Christmas Eve.

And also, like many third generation Slovak-Americans, I see how these traditions are disappearing, as time spent with loved ones at the holidays and other occasions becomes more limited and our family becomes more scattered. We seem to have more to worry about today—different work and travel schedules, other family and personal obligations and so on. But, despite the

modern times, we recognize the importance of passing on the traditions to future generations.

It is often said that you do not truly appreciate a person or something you own until he or she or it is no longer present. I often find myself longing for my childhood days and those wonderful Slovak dishes. The area where I currently reside is more culturally diverse than the neighborhood where I grew up in Pittsburgh. I have to drive an hour or more to find churches or groups that hold special Slavic festivals or prepare the traditional foods. Even more so, for me, the special times such as holidays just aren't the same without my mother and grandmother. Although those of us who are left give our very best efforts, I can't help but feel a deep sadness that these



The careful dropping of Pirohi into the pot of boiling water (hand of Geraldine Figlar Abbott, December 2001). Photo courtesy of M. Augenstein

two special women are no longer with us. I also now have a greater appreciation for my mother and grandmother and the time they spent laboring over the stove, cooking countless Slovak meals, or making the delicious pastries, as well as for all of the other lessons they tried to teach us along the way: loyalty to family, responsibility for one's actions, a strong work ethic, the virtues of being a good and caring person, last but not least, a tremendous sense of pride in our Slovak background and humble beginnings.

So whenever I smell *haluski* in that browned butter, or taste the sweetness of the *hrudka* or freshly baked nutrolls, in my mind I am transported back to Grandma's kitchen and my first exposure to those homemade Slovak dishes, which are more than just great foods to enjoy, but special symbols of my rich heritage.

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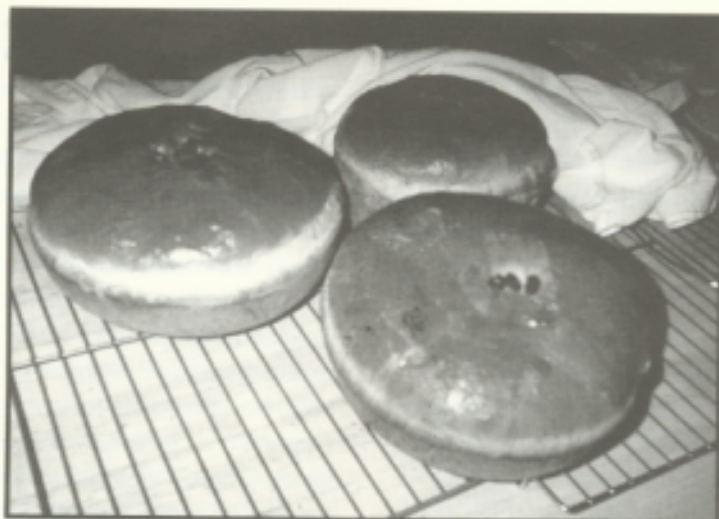
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About The Author

Lisa A. Alzo, M.F.A., is the author of *Three Slovak Women*. Lisa was raised in Duquesne, PA and currently resides in Ithaca, New York with her husband, Michael, where she works as an editorial assistant at Cornell University. She is also an instructor of Genealogy and Family History courses and has been an invited speaker for several genealogical and historical societies, including the 2001 CGSI conference in Pittsburgh. See www.members.tripod.com/tswbook for more information about Lisa and her book.



Caption for page 108: Lisa's grandmother, Verona Straka Figlar, in her kitchen. Photo courtesy Lisa Alzo.

Paska (Easter Bread) prepared by Helen Figlar Lizanov, April 2002. Photo courtesy of H. Lizanov.



Watch for some of these family recipes in the December Naše rodina.