

# Blood Ties

BY NINA KOCYLOWSKI



endeavors. Lisa A. Alzo's book entitled *Three Slovak Women* happens to be one of these influences. It is the chronicle of a very personal evolution in her family's history: that of her grandmother, mother, and self.

Alzo spent six years researching her book. She includes a gratefully extensive list acknowledging the family and friends who aided her. Her research did not end there; important social, political, and historical contexts are also presented to accompany the years spanned in her book. From the economic condition of her grandmother's village in Slovakia to President Roosevelt's "New Deal," Alzo incorporates the information necessary to provide a holistic view of her family's history.

*Three Slovak Women* first transports the reader to the village of Milpos, Slovakia, where Verona Straka is born in 1899. During this time, Alzo states that "Slovakia had lost over 300,000 inhabitants to emigration." Verona and her niece Mary would soon add to this number.

Verona and Mary set sail for

America in July of 1922. They were on their way to Ellis Island and from there, to Mary's mother's house in Duquesne, Pennsylvania. Alzo does not attempt to sweep anything under the proverbial rug about her family's past, and reveals that Mary is the illegitimate daughter of Verona's older sister Maria, who left for America soon after giving birth, in order to spare the family shame.

Alzo displays her research skills with an intriguing history of the now famous Ellis Island. These little informational blurbs offer an enriching break from the story, while never becoming burdensome to the reader. While understandably lacking in dialogue, Alzo cleverly intersperses factual material with personal narrative to unfold her family's history.

Another interesting fact presented by Alzo is the scarcity of men in Slovakia, as opposed to (as some may feel) the excessive number in America. Both girls, Verona and Mary, married soon after arriving, and Alzo reveals that the marriages may have been prearranged by the family, knowing they would be arriving at eligible ages. The practice of arranged marriages was not uncommon, causing Alzo to question whether or not her grandmother was actually in love with her grandfather when they married. Alzo honors her forebear-

ers with truth, however imperfect or unflattering may be, as opposed to false and incomplete memorial.

Verona's wedding is one of the first instances in the book where Alzo points out the break from tradition, the compromising merger of Slovakian and American customs. The celebration lasted only three days, as opposed to the customary ten days in Slovakia, and the groom asked the bride's sister for permission as opposed to the parents. The couple did, however, preserve many customs, such as the types of dishes prepared for the feast and the traditional dances. Alzo points out how Verona must have missed her own mother on this special day, emphasizing the theme of cultural transition.

The couple soon had children and Alzo's mother Anna was the first born. And Alzo recounts her mother's life in great detail, from adolescence to adulthood. She shares intimate details and doesn't gloss over the disturbing events in her mother's life. Alzo reveals that it was a common occurrence for her grandfather to go to the local bar to have a drink with his friends after work to relax and socialize. Many times he would come home after drinking and, for whatever reason, hit Verona.

The transition of cultures is brought to the forefront again

## BOOK

when Anna marries. There were traditions that were compromised, some even forgotten. Alzo recognizes that this was bound to occur. After many years, Anna came to have Lisa Ann, our author, and the book grows from biography to autobiography.

Admittedly, Alzo came to realize the importance of her family and its strong females a little, yet not entirely, too late. She states that she never got to ask her grandmother about her life, never learned the language that her grandmother spoke, (after one failed attempt), and never got to fully understand her grandmother's story from her grandmother herself. Nevertheless, she was still able to successfully piece together Verona's life and also her mother's. *Three Slovak Women* is a testament to the strength of women—to the strength of family. Through her book, Alzo adds an important facet of not only her family's, but also our nation's history—the role of the woman immigrant and the generations to follow.

While reading this book, I could not help but think of my own grandmothers. I had never before doubted their strength, but after reading Alzo's book I appreciate it in a different way. ■

**T**HERE are very rare instances in our lives when some external influence causes us to take a step back from our comfort zone and reconsider the fundamental issues driving our