

Using New Technology to Write About the Past

Staffer's recently published e-book focuses on her roots

Laurel Parker

Editor, genealogist, computer applications consultant—all are apt descriptions for Cornell staff member Lisa Alzo.

The granddaughter of Slovak immigrants who settled in steeltown Duquesne, Pennsylvania, Lisa discovered, while taking a course on nonfiction writing, the dearth of literature on the immigrant experience from the women's point of view. Class reading included a book about 3 generations of steelworkers; coincidentally, Lisa had been talking to her mother about her grandmother's experience and while listening to her mother share those stories, realized there was a niche to fill. Her response was to write "Three Slovak Women" first as her masters thesis, now as an e-book.

Each generation grew up differently. Lisa's grandmother left behind everything that was familiar to her (language, culture, family) and through incredible resourcefulness raised seven children during the Depression. Her mother, the oldest of the seven, grew up in a tight-knit family headed by a stern and sometimes violent head of household who placed a great deal of value on education as a means of improving the way of life of his children. Lisa grew up in a generation that had vast opportunities for education and employment. These opportunities

took her away from the family and steeltown culture where she grew up and eventually landed her in the Fingerlakes region. Lisa's book pays homage not only to the women in her

family, but also to a culture that is disappearing along with the old steelmills around Pittsburgh.

While chronicles of the immigrant experience in America may be plentiful in print and TV movies, there is no lack of interest. Indeed, Ms. Alzo is in demand as a speaker at local genealogical societies, and her e-book (though only 2 weeks old) has already received email reactions from readers with similar experiences growing up. The contrast between her grandmother's life and her own is vivid to Lisa. "Here I am putting out the old story with the new technology. I wonder what my grandmother would have thought of that?"

Why an e-book?

According to Ms. Alzo, the process of publishing electronically builds on her own skills and interests in computer technology as an applications consultant; as well as being the latest genre in publishing. The e-book allows her more flexibility as an author.

Nicola Kountoupos/U. Photo



Lisa holds a photograph of her grandmother's wedding, which was an arranged marriage. Other keepsakes include her grandmother's passport which brought her from Slovakia to Ellis Island, her mother's wedding dress and engagement ring.

The book gets out to the audience faster than the traditional print medium, but Lisa retains print rights if, down the road, she wants to put it out as a traditional trade book. As a new writer, e-publishing is easier to break into. And finally, the cost to the reader is more reasonable: For \$5, each customer may purchase a diskette of the book, loaded in PDF format.

Those interested may visit Ms. Alzo's website and view a sample chapter of the book at <http://members.tripod.com/tswbook/>. "I chose the chapter because it's one of the more powerful in the book and gives an idea of what my mom went through with her father. My mother died before this came out, though she knew it was going to be published; this is actually a very bittersweet moment for me."

Lisa Alzo is an Editorial Assistant, Tetrahedron Letters, in Cornell University's Department of Chemistry and has been a staff member at Cornell since 1995.