

townsouth/mon valley



Franka Bruns/Post-Gazette photos

Lisa A. Alzo poses with her book, "Three Slovak Women," at her parents' home in Duquesne. The six-year effort began as the thesis for her master of fine arts degree.

Duquesne

Family's Slovak heritage is captured in her book

By Jim Hosek
Tri-State Sports & News Service

Six years of interviews, travel and research have paid off for Duquesne native Lisa A. Alzo with publication of "Three Slovak Women" about her grandmother Verona Straka Figlar (1899-1984), who came to this country from Milpos, Slovakia; her mother, Anna Figlar Alzo (1925-2000); and herself.

"Writing the book was a real labor of love," said Alzo, 36, now living in Ithaca, N.Y. "But the publication is bittersweet, because my mother died last September. I'm sad that she's not here to see it."

The 110-page, softback book just released by Gateway Press of Baltimore chronicles the struggles of Slovak and Rusyn families in Slovakia coming to, and dealing with, America.

"Like most kids, I really didn't know my grandmother, despite spending a lot of time with her," Alzo said, noting that, after her death, "I wanted to give voice to her silence."

She writes not only about her grandmother and mother but also about many other family members and provides interesting, detailed historical information.

Alzo describes her mother and grandmother as "Slovak women who served not only as the money handlers by controlling the family's finances, but who also became the backbone of the family with responsibility for rearing their children."

She found little had been written about immigrant Slovak women who "performed work that was not only tedious and endless but also essential." They regarded their lives as generally unimportant and didn't think of themselves as contributing to this country's history.

Yet their stories are important and should be recognized as historically significant, Alzo said.

"For them to overcome the language barriers and the cultural differences was significant. They taught family solidarity, religious faith and the continuity of ethnic tradition."

She recalls a male-dominated world and severe conditions that led her grandparents to the United States. The came from a country controlled by Austria-Hungary before World War I which became depressed Czechoslovakia after the war.

Alzo describes the 1922 boat trip by her grandmother and her niece, Mary, who were steerage passengers on the Orduna; their seven-day stay at Ellis Island; and grandmother Verona's name change at Ellis Island to "Veronica."



Family memorabilia includes, from left: A wedding picture of Alzo's mother, Anna Figlar Alzo; at right in center photo is Alzo's grandmother, Verona Straka Figlar, who also owned the Czechoslovakian passport at right. Figlar's image from the center photo was used as part of the cover of Alzo's book.

"The publication is bittersweet, because my mother died last September. I'm sad that she's not here to see it."

— Lisa A. Alzo

er moving to Duquesne, then to Ohio and a 1924 arranged marriage to Janos Figlyar, a Rusyn miner whose name had been changed to John Figlar at Ellis Island.

Financial blues led the couple to Wilkes-Barre, then to Duquesne, where he became a steel worker. Tough times living in Duquesne during the Depression also are detailed.

Alzo's mother, Anna, and her siblings were strictly disciplined in a household where their parents seldom spoke English.

Anna's childhood was toughened by witnessing her mother and the rest of the family being ill-treated by Janos, who grew fond of bars and quarts of Kasser's 51. His payday were feared because of the extra alcohol and welcomed for the ability to pay bills and buy essentials.

Despite the drinking, her grandfather was "intelligent, very determined and a very hard worker, and he encouraged his family to learn English and to advance through education," Alzo said.

She weaves the experiences to show

how they made her the person she is.

She said her grandmother was "the glue that held the family together" and lamented her death because it "sealed the death of the first generation [Americans] and, in a way, the family's heritage."

Alzo said she's doing everything possible to keep the Slovak heritage alive, and the book is one way of doing that. She was encouraged to write while attending Serra Catholic High School, where she graduated in 1983.

"I always knew I'd come back to writing," she said, despite having earned a nutrition degree from West Virginia Wesleyan in 1987. So, she went to work with MacMillan Publishing and the daily Ocean County Observer in Toms River, N.J.

Back in Duquesne, while working on her master of fine arts degree in nonfiction writing from the University of Pittsburgh, she decided her thesis would deal with family genealogy. That was the start of the book.

Now, in Ithaca, Alzo is a computer applications consultant and teaches adult education and genealogy writing courses. She speaks at many genealogical and historical societies and, in that role, will be in Pittsburgh for the Czechoslovak Genealogical Society International 2001 Genealogical/Cultural Conference on Nov. 2 and 3 at the Hyatt Regency Hotel.

The book and e-book diskette are available for \$16.95 and \$5, respectively, via e-mail at tswbook@hotmail.com. Additional information and photographs are available at the "Three Slovak Women" Web site: www.members.trinod.com/tswbook.