

Book Review

Lisa A. Alzo. Three Slovak Women. Baltimore: Gateway Press, 2004. 115 p. ISBN 0971063702.

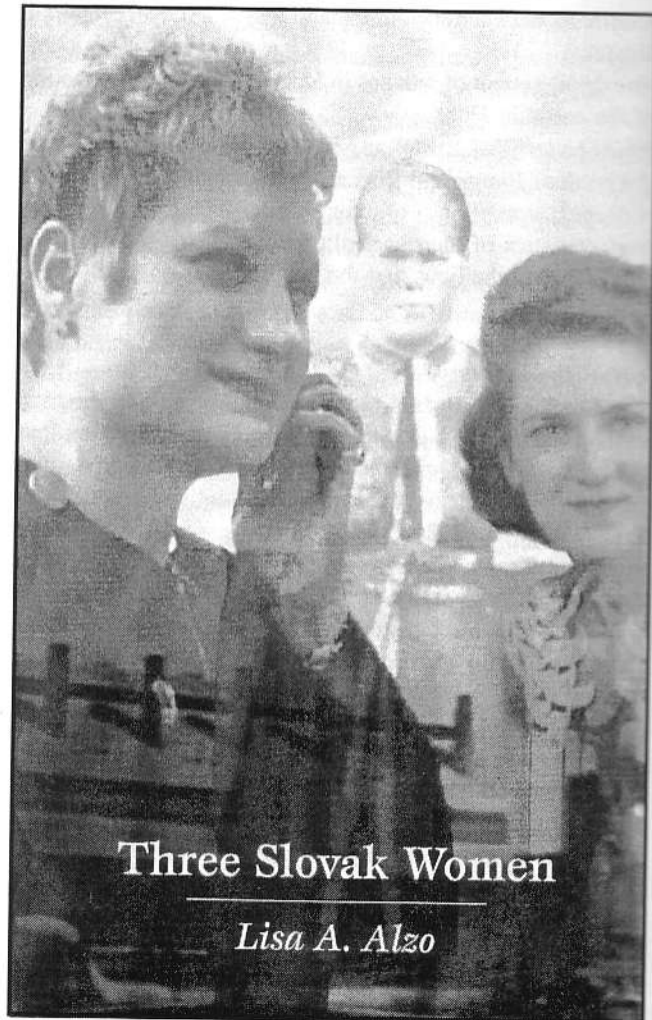
Reviewed for the FEEFHS Journal by Thomas K. Edlund, Associate Professor, East European Local and Family History, Brigham Young University.

Abstract: *Three Slovak Women* is a collected biography of the author Lisa Alzo, her mother Anna Figlar, and maternal grandmother Verona Straka. The text, based largely on oral history and family tradition, documents the lives of these women in the steel town of Duquesne, Pennsylvania. The book begins with the birth of the author's grandmother in 1899 in Milospuszta, Sáros county, Hungary [today Milpoš, Slovakia]. Verona immigrated to the United States in 1922. She settled in Duquesne, where she worked as a housekeeper. In 1924 she married János Figlyár, an immigrant from Oszturnya, Szepes county, Hungary [now Ostruňa, Slovakia]. A coal miner and steelworker, Figlyár was a man dedicated to his family, yet prone to alcohol abuse and domestic violence. The story turns next to Alzo's mother Anna, the oldest daughter of János and Veronica. Discussed are Anna's challenges as a first-generation American, the angst she experiences in relating to her father and mother, and how those relationships expressed themselves in the choices she made as an adult. The book concludes with Lisa Alzo, showing how her childhood in a bi-cultural tradition created a sense of identity woven of both American and Slovak heritages.

Slovaks have immigrated to the United States in large numbers, with over 535,000 arriving in this country between 1880-1924. Most had no plans to remain on a permanent basis, and renewed their stay year by year. Peasants, who chose to enter employment in industry rather than agriculture, they came to fill the unskilled and semi-skilled jobs left vacant by labor strikes and the declining influx of northwestern Europeans. Over half of all Slovaks immigrating during this period settled in Pennsylvania.

Lisa A. Alzo's Three Slovak Women documents the experiences of an archetypical family within this Pennsylvanian Slovak population. Her story is well articulated, and relates in detail the struggles common to the East European immigrant: crossing the Atlantic, Ellis Island, learning the English language, negotiating American culture, enduring social and economic discrimination and surviving the catastrophe of the Great Depression. Alzo successfully weaves her personal knowledge of self, mother and grandmother into a captivating and touching story that transcends the specifics of her own family and takes on a broad human appeal. Unique and most effective is the author's presentation of this story from the vantage point of the family's matriarchs.

The book suffers slightly from a lack of editorial direction regarding historical detail and is parsimonious in illustrative content. These shortcomings, however, are more than offset by Alzo's fluid narrative style and contagious empathy for vanishing ethnic traditions in the United States. Perhaps the book's greatest strength is its power to convince the reader that these traditions indeed have value, that they in large part have defined our personal identities, and that we are collectively diminished by their loss.



Three Slovak Women is an excellent read which I highly recommend to anyone interested in family history. The book is more than a documentary of a Slovak family, and is best understood independent of ethnic focus. For Alzo's story above all else is an evocative enticement to document and understand our own family stories, and illustrates the way that each of us, while studying the lives of our progenitors, discovers the meaning of our own.