

villages

by Joseph Katrencik

Vaňovka, Slovakia

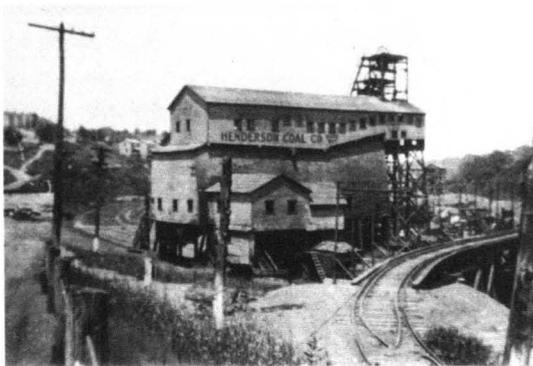
VAŇOVKA, AN AGRARIAN village of 30 to 40 houses in northern Slovakia's Orava Valley, is nestled in the heavily wooded foothills of the High Tatra range of the Carpathian Mountains. A generation ago, all the houses were made of logs; now more than half have been replaced by stucco and masonry. Nearby, on a high rocky cliff above the river, stands the Communist-restored Oravsky Podzamok Castle.¹ The castle, first referenced in 1267, was built to administer the area and protect the ancient trade route leading to the Wieliczka Salt Mine and to Kracow, Poland, about 50 miles distant.

Slovanic tribes arrived in the area in the sixth century, and Gauls, Celts and Germanic tribes had lived there before.² Since about 500 A.D., northern Slovakia has experienced peasant uprisings and invasions by Swedes and Batu Khan's Golden Horde. In 1683, the Polish armies of Jan Sobieski burned 25 Orava Valley villages while on their way to save Vienna from the Turks.³ For a thousand years after 907 A.D., when Magyars defeated King Svatopluk of the Greater Moravian Empire, until 1918, Slovakia was part of Hungary and the Austro-Hungarian Empire.⁴ During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, strengthened Magyarization policies resulted in arrests for speaking Slovak in public, elimination of Slovak institutions, and severe cultural restrictions coupled with economic deprivation.⁵ Today, an estimated 35 percent of the world's Slovaks live in the United States and Canada. At one point, Cleveland's Slovak immigrants and U.S. citizens there of Slovak descent claimed to live in the "world's largest Slovak city,"⁶ and Pittsburgh followed close behind — or perhaps we have just been more humble.

John Katrencik leaves Vaňovka for America

By the early 1900s, my grandfather John and his brothers Stefan and Andre had all left their village for America. Vaňovka

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Above: Coal tipple and buildings of the Henderson Coal Co., in Hendersonville, Washington County, Pa., c. 1935. Right: Many residents, such as Teresa Katrencik holding Marion, youngest of her nine children, were families from Slovakia. They were rural village people, used to growing their own food. Most carried on their way of life in America.



neighbors, all of whom were related in some way, forewarned them of gangsters in New York and especially in Chicago, and of Indians in the West.

According to the family history passed around among my relatives,⁷ John first sought out Slovak contacts in Cleveland, where he had arranged to board, in hopes that he would get a job in the steel mills there. He arrived at a friend's house tired and hungry. A woman spoke to him in Slovak and served hot coffee and buttered thick bread, and from big kettles on the coal stove, *kapusta* (sauerkraut) and potatoes flavored with garlic. When he finished eating, the woman said, "More?"

"No thank you," John politely replied.

"Then the rest goes to the pigs," she said.

Many years later, as my grandmother Teresa Katrencik stirred a ham bone in a kettle of broth, she was often heard to say, "If only we had had this bone in Vaňovka."

John and his first wife, Maria Jurovcikova

Steel mill work was too hot, so John Katrencik left Cleveland to find work in Western Pennsylvania coal mines. He also felt less homesick in Pennsylvania, where the terrain was similar to his native Carpathian foothills. He dug coal and lived in company towns: Federal near Bridgeville, Hackett near Finleyville, and finally for a longer stay, Hazel Kirk on Pigeon Creek upstream from Monongahela (or "Mon City," as it's known locally).

Hazel Kirk was built in 1901 by the Kirk-Wood Co. of Cleveland to house miners for Hazel Kirk No. 1 mine, which began operations the same year.⁸ John had married Maria Jurovcikova, who was also from Vaňovka. In 1904, she gave birth to a son. However, in a few years John took his family and savings back to Vaňovka. He then returned alone to Hazel Kirk to earn more money to buy land in Europe, but in 1910 he received word that his wife had suddenly died. She was 26 years old. Their son was then raised in Vaňovka by Maria's parents until 1923, when he returned to America and his father. There is no photo of my grandfather's first wife. Their only child has been dead for years; the only person in Vaňovka who could have told me something about Maria Jurovcikova died in 1990, before my visit.⁹ A tombstone marks her grave in Vaňovka's small, crowded St. Wendolyn Cemetery, and a rubbing of that tombstone is in my wallet.

John meets Teresa — Jan Misanik's sister

In 1909, Slovak immigrant Jan Misanik was boarding and working in Hazel Kirk. He worked for the mine as a carpenter, making tool handles, wooden spragues, and repairing wooden pit cars. He found time to make furniture for relatives and friends, and carved his own violin. Jan sent money to Vaňovka so that his 24-year-old sister Teresa Misanikova (my grandmother) could come to America. In Hazel Kirk, she boarded with John and Teresa Jurovcik of the Adam clan. To earn her keep, she helped



run a four-room household with as many as 10 boarders at a time, in addition to five Jurovcik children.

Jednota, the Slovak fraternal lodge, held meetings at the schoolhouse in Hazel Kirk. Jan Misanik and cousin Mato Zemencik were members, along with John Katrencik, his brother Stefan, and cousin Andy Snovak. Friends mentioned to the widower John that Teresa was a hard worker and would make a deserving man happy. Although she

was also from Vaňovka, John Katrencik only vaguely remembered her, because she was eight years younger.

Teresa, however, was infatuated with Mato, who had accompanied her to America. In a short time, though, John and his friends convinced her that he could be a fine husband. He brought her smoked sausages on the day he proposed. "I made these for you," he said, "from my pig that I slaughtered, to show I am a good provider."

Jan Misanik returns to Vaňovka

John's brothers had returned to Vaňovka, but Teresa's younger brother and sister arrived in Hazel Kirk from Europe. At the end of World War I, when travel was safe again, Teresa's older brother Jan Misanik returned permanently to Vaňovka. He married Suzanna Sopchakova and they lived in a typical Vaňovka log house. The house was heated by a whitewashed clay stove whose smoke vented into the the attic, where in good times sausages hung from the rafters. In 1932, Suzanna died giving birth to their fifth child, and Jan Misanik soon married his uncle's widow, Rosalia Misanikova. She was 10 years older than he, and according to his daughter, Rosalia did an admirable job raising the young children. Jan was killed in 1959 when his son Wendo's dog barked, frightening the family horse, which pinned him against the barn wall. Jan's father had died in 1940, at 92 years old, also after a farming accident. He had tried to round up stampeding neighborhood cows and was fatally injured. His daughter (my grandmother) often said, "God knows your end from the beginning."

John and Teresa move from Hazel Kirk to Hendersonville

My grandparents John and Teresa Katrencik lived in Hazel Kirk until October 1928. The miners in Hazel Kirk and Van Voohris had been on strike, and the family moved to the coal mining town of Hendersonville in Cecil Township, Washington County, a mile south of the Allegheny County line. The Henderson Coal Co. had built the town in 1913, when the railroad line was completed. John and Teresa and children John Jr., Fred, Sophia, Rudolph and Joseph lived in a wood-framed, four-room company house, and like those in Hazel Kirk, it had no electricity or indoor plumbing. Their eldest son August was by then working and boarding in Pittsburgh, while my grandfather dug coal in the Hendersonville mine with sons John and Fred. Another daughter,

Marion, was born in Hendersonville in 1930. Eventually August would return to Hendersonville and work in the mine, as did brothers Rudolph and Joe when they were old enough.

Jan Misanik's descendants in Vaňovka

Today in Vaňovka, Jan Misanik's daughter Suzanna lives with her husband Tomas Jurovcik in her father's old log house, next to the barn where he was killed. Across the street in a modern house live Suzanna's son Stano and his family. Stano is a crane operator. With his father, he raises pigs and chickens, and harvests hay, vegetables, fruit, garlic, caraway and poppy seed. The family sleeps on featherbeds stuffed by Suzanna. One has to be careful not to step in goose droppings in the village streets.

No one in the village had an automobile in 1990, though Stano once owned a Skoda but sold it when he went to Libya for construction work. Two cousins were attending computer school when I visited, and they came home in the evening to gather hay with hand-made wooden rakes. On a utility pole next to the church cemetery is mounted one of many rusted loudspeakers, from which the Communist Party would broadcast daily news and information. In some Slovak villages, the Nazis were the first to eliminate the town crier and his drum in favor of a loudspeaker system.

Hazel Kirk today

A few occupied houses remain, but my grandfather's house is gone, along with the mine, most of the slate dump, and the schoolhouse where my aunts, uncles and father attended first grade. Few current maps show that Hazel Kirk exists. In the nearby village of Van Voorhis, Misanik and Zemencik relatives tend gardens, can tomatoes, and bake nut rolls for holidays. Down the road in Crackerjack lives "Big Helen" Jurovck Bosdosh, daughter of the people who took my grandmother in as an immigrant boarder in 1909.

John and Teresa's descendants in Hendersonville

The town still seems to survive in its own way, even without the coal mine which closed in the late 1940s. Katrenciks still live there. There is a lower row of four company houses on what has been known as "mine hill," the nearest of three village hills to the coal mine entrance. In the first house lives John and Teresa Katrencik's son Rudolph. Grace, his wife for over 50 years, died in April 1994. On the extra property next to his end house, Uncle Roe (Rudolph) grows tomatoes, onions, beans, peppers and garlic, and every spring and summer bordering areas are glorious with lilac, gladioli and roses that he and his wife once donated to decorate St. Elizabeth Church. (The diocese closed the parish in 1993.) From his teens until his retirement, he had labored in coal mines and steel mills; now he once again hunts for arrowheads, bottles and Indian bones, as he did in his childhood. He has mapped remnants of the nineteenth century "Great Road" which once ran between Canonsburg and Pittsburgh. From his front porch, you can see where it used to be.

The second house has been empty since Uncle Fred Katrencik's widow Irene died in January 1994. If the house is not sold, perhaps Fred's son will again this year harvest potatoes from the garden. The third house has been abandoned since Aunt Grace's Hungarian parents died years ago. The foundation is collapsing and the chimney is nearly gone. The weathered outhouse is still in back and the wreck of a powerboat, of all things, is parked where geese used to roam. The last company house in the row was once my grandparents'. It had been their home and the family gathering place from 1928 until widowed Teresa Misanik Katrencik died in 1983 at age 97. Now the house has an addition and aluminum siding. Teresa's great-granddaughter lives there with her husband and children. In the summer, tomatoes and garlic grow in the garden, toys litter the walk, kids play in the street. You can look down the valley at the worn slate dump from the long front porch. You can see the Mountour Hiking Trail, where the railroad tracks used to be, and imagine a steam locomotive pulling a long line of coal cars.

First photographer

The first person to take photographs in our family was August Katrencik. August was the first child of John Katrencik and his second wife, Teresa Misanikova, and was born in a Hazel Kirk company house in 1911. A German midwife assisted. Slovak was spoken in the household, and in first grade August's English was so poor that Miss Rowse put him into the "Busy Bee" group at Hazel Kirk's schoolhouse with other immigrants' children. In later years, August would point to the first grade report card he had saved — it was labeled "Steve Dietrich," which is evidently the way Margaret E. Rowse interpreted August's pronunciation of his name.

As a young boy, August tended to the family's cow and pigeons, but also sold salve door to door in Hazel Kirk and Van Voorhis to earn prizes. More than halfway to his sales goal he ran out of houses, so his friend Joe Sopchak (eight years older and working in the mine) bought the balance. August's \$21.50 worth of prizes included a Stevens .22-caliber rifle for his father, a set of silver-plated dinnerware for his mother, and a Kodak 620 camera for himself (and for lending to his friend Joe).

August had a problem with the first few rolls of film. After taking all eight shots, he followed written instructions and made sure the film roll was wrapped tightly before taking it to be developed. However, he tightened the roll by unwrapping it from the protective paper backing and rewinding it in broad daylight — exposing the film. On the day that the first developed roll was due to arrive, he put 10 cents in his pocket and ran 3 1/2 miles to the drugstore in Mon City, only to be extremely disappointed and

Opposite page: The family of Stefan Katrencik (c. 1940), who came to America but returned to Vaňovka, Slovakia. Left: Smoked cheese from Vaňovka, 1990.



puzzled. Two more rolls suffered the same fate. After a few years, though, he had learned to print his own photos, and when his first camera developed a light leak, he gave it to his brother Rudolph. Rudolph's early pictures are easy to pick out because of their over-exposure spot from the light leak. August eventually taught his youngest brother Joseph how to develop and print photographs. Joseph, my father, taught me.

When he reached his teens, eldest son August did not join his father in the Hazel Kirk coal mine like most boys his age. Joe Sopchak had left the mine for a hotel job 30 miles away in Pittsburgh. August joined him, roomed on Phineas Street at the north end of the 16th Street Bridge, and worked a series of busboy/ waiter jobs at the Duquesne Club, Hotel Henry and William Penn Hotel. On regular visits with Joe to Hazel Kirk, August cast a long shadow with his suit, tie, Pittsburgh haircut and leather valise. In his parents' kitchen, his mother would bring him plates of *kapusta*-and bacon-flavored potato dumplings from the coal stove, while he described hotel meals in detail.

Later he told brothers John and Fred about Pittsburgh women. There was the pretty auburn-haired North Side Croatian whose father would teach him to play the button box accordion as soon as August bought one. August showed his brothers a German dictionary and told them of the lovely blond barmaid who could flex her buttocks to any musical rhythm and promised to take him to Germany to meet her parents. At social gatherings in Hazel Kirk, young Slovak and Hungarian women would rub their stomachs against August's vest and tell him, "You have good teeth, Gusto!"

August died at age 82 on the evening of March 10, 1993. I had visited him and his wife Mary in Hendersonville that day, and he seemed to be recuperating from a lung infection. While two young grandchildren played on the carpet, we looked at the old photo album and talked about his brother Joe, my father, who had died in 1979. Then August showed me his father's shotgun and Jan Misanik's lunchbox. He said to be sure to stop by before Easter for some homemade horseradish. When he asked if I wanted a plug of his "Five Brothers" chewing tobacco, Aunt Mary interjected, "No, no, how about a bite to eat," and offered *holupbki* (cabbage stuffed usually with ground beef and rice), fried chicken, rigatoni, and salad. "Or I'll make you a sandwich," she said. August replied that "Five Brothers" was the secret ingredient in

the beer his father made in Hazel Kirk.

It was said that August's mother, Teresa Misanik Katrencik, would breathe onto the palm of her hand and observe, "That is how quick life passes."

A traditional Slovak lullaby:

"Dobru noc, ma mila, dobru noc.
Nech je ti sam Panboh na pomoc!
Dobru noc, dobre spi:
Nech sa ti snivaju sladke sny."¹⁰ 🌟

Notes

¹ Peter Huba, *Oravsky Hrad* (Vydavatelstvo, Osveta, 1986). This booklet, published by the former Communist regime in Slovakia, details the history of Oravsky Podzamok Castle and the Orava area.

² Gilbert L. Oddo, *Slovakia and Its People* (New York, 1960).

³ Huba.

⁴ Oddo.

⁵ Oddo.

⁶ Slovak Research Institute, *The Unconquerable Slovaks* (Lakewood, O., 1989).

⁷ Family history information regarding Katrenciks and Misaniks in America was compiled through interviews with August, Rudolph and Paul Katrencik, Steve and Mike Snovak. Teresa Misanik's betrothal to John Katrencik was acquired by the author's wife, Victoria Katrencik, in a conversation with her. The impetus for this ongoing family research was more or less accidental. In the winter of 1989-90, having been denied visas to his mother's ancestral country, Lithuania, which was in the midst of turmoil, the author and his family opted for a trip to the "fatherland," Slovakia, which was also in transition from communism to democracy. Initial attempts to seek language and cultural advice from relatives evolved into a deeper study of the family, family photographs and Slovak culture. For instance, between 2,000 and 3,000 family photographs are being documented.

⁸ Charles Gersna, *From the Furrows to the Pits: Van Voohris, Pa.* (Parsons, W. Va., 1986).

⁹ Family history information from Slovakia has been compiled from interviews and photo identification sessions with Suzanna Misanik Jurovcikova during the author's family's 1990 visit to Vaňovka, during Victoria Katrencik's visit in 1991, and through correspondence with Suzanna.

¹⁰ The author imagines Maria Jurovcikova and Teresa Misanikova singing this traditional Slovak lullaby to their children:

"Good night, my darling, good night.
Let God help you!
Good night, sleep well:
Have nice dreams."

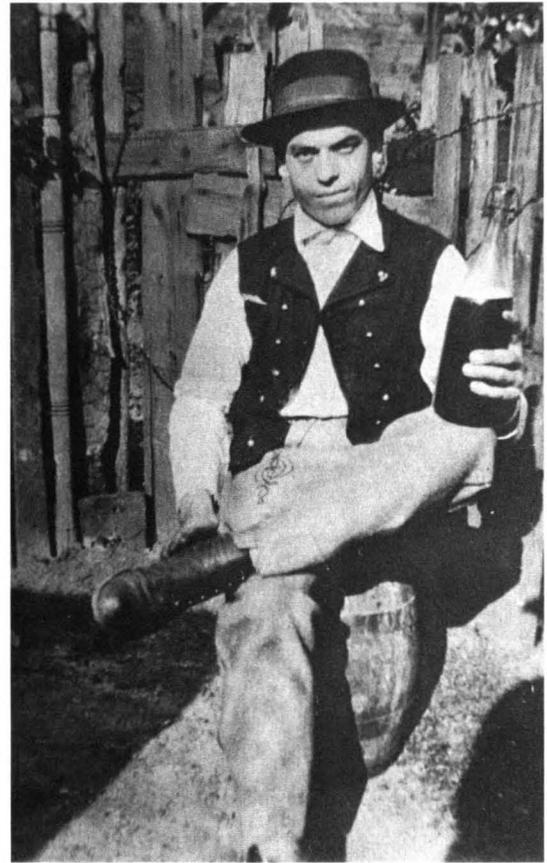
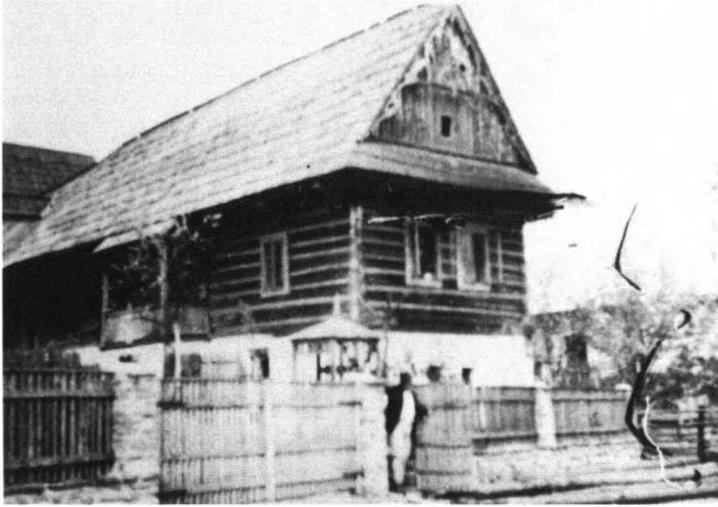
The Slovak text and English translation were provided by Ywette Chalupecka of Karlovy Vary in the Czech Republic. It was a childhood favorite of hers, and she sings it to her son Patrik. Ywette is an avid follower of the Pittsburgh Penguins hockey team, which is how the author came to correspond with her and many others in the Czech Republic and Slovakia — through Penguin fan mail.

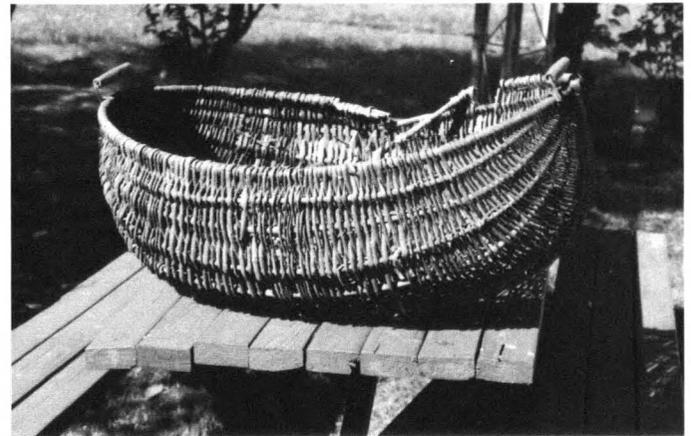


Left: Rudolph Katrencik's garlic from Hendersonville. Right: Hendersonville, c. 1948. Family members pause during construction of an indoor bathroom at the home of John Katrencik (center). Surrounding him are his wife, two daughters, a daughter-in-law, three sons and three grandchildren.



Bottom: Vaňovka, June 1990. Grandchildren of Suzanna Jurovcikova on the porch of the family's log home. **Below:** Vaňovka, 1946. The log house that Jan Misanik's returned to from America after World War I. **Right:** Jan Misanik in his countrymen's clothes and homemade beer, Hazel Kirk, c. 1915.





Left: Vaňovka, 1990. Jan Misanik's grandson, Stano Jurovcik, and his wife Marte Jurovcik, hold a pot of Slovak-style sauerkraut (*kapusta*) in their kitchen. Above: In addition to the photographs for this article, and many other pictures, author Joe Katrencik donated to the Historical Society an 1890's willow and metal kindlingbasket from Lithuania — his mother's ancestors are Lithuanian — and a wardrobe built by Jan Misanik (see article) in Hazel Kirk, Pa. Both objects are in need of conservation work.





Opposite: Helen Katrencik feeds her son (the author), Joseph Jr., 1946. **Above:** Marion Katrencik, Hendersonville, c. 1935. **Below:** Hendersonville, c. 1929. Rudolph's brother August purchased the accordion from Sears. In front is their other brother, Joe. Boy with the tie is Henry Zglorisky; boy in the middle's name is not known.



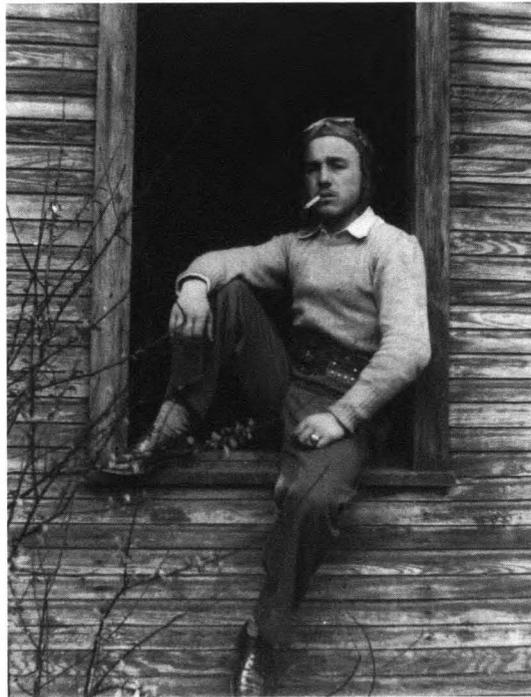




Below: Modern-day Hendersonville, just east of the new Southpointe exit of I-79 at the Washington-Allegheny county line. **Opposite:** Sophia and Joe Katrencik flank cousins Mary Jurovcik and Teresa Misanik, holding Paddy, the family dog, c. 1930. **Left:** Gladden, Pa., 1937, after the baptism of August Katrencik, Jr. **Left to right:** Godmother Sophia Katrencik, Mary Katrenick (August's wife), Kate Stankus holding August, and her corny husband George Stankus.







Opposite: Hendersonville, c. 1955. Teresa Katrencik, right, boarded at the home of Helen Jurovcik Bosdosh's parents in Hazel Kirk when she arrived from Slovakia early this century. **Above:** Joe "Roscoe" Katrencik, c. 1945. **Below:** Rudolph "Roe" Katrencik, c. 1945.





Opposite top: Rudolph in front of his gardening shed, Hendersonville, 1993.

Opposite bottom: The Katrenciks' old hometown, Vaňovka, June 1993.

Left: Poised for butchering are John Katrencik with sons (from left) John Jr., August, Rudolph, Fred and Joseph in Hendersonville, c. 1952.