Despite the influx of nearly 650,000 Slovak immigrants to North America between 1875 and 1914, few writings document Slovak identity in American culture. What Slovak presence does emerge is fraught with the same negative stereotypes that Slovak immigrants themselves suffered in real life, almost exclusively concentrating on the immigrant male character grinding out his daily existence in the mills or the mines. In Three Slovak Women, Lisa A. Alzo skillfully turns her attention to correcting the lack of both literary and historical written accounts of the lives of Slovak immigrant women.

Alzo sets the life history of her grandmother, Verona Straka Figiar, at the center of her multi-generational tale. Alzo is driven by the fact that Verona's story — no different from the stories of thousands of Slovak women who immigrated to the United States in the early 20th century and adapted to life in urban, industrial cities like Pittsburgh — was never told. While more than half of the book focuses on Verona, Alzo also shows how her grandmother's experiences and choices as a young woman — what she thought and did — also ultimately influenced the life of her daughter, Anna (Alzo's mother) and that of her granddaughter, Lisa (Alzo herself). Anna's and Lisa's stories thus provide a chronicle of Slovak cultural assimilation through the second and third generation of descendants.

Alzo's telling of Verona's story is compelling. Weaving historical research together with oral historical accounts collected from her mother, aunts, uncles, and cousins, Alzo recounts the steps in Verona's life between leaving Milpos, Slovakia, in 1922 and her death in Duquesne in 1983. But as Alzo candidly admits in one of the most striking sections of the book, her interest in her grandmother's story, like many third-generation descendants of early immigrants, came "too little too late," and the opportunity to record Verona's telling of her own story slipped by. As a consequence, Alzo turns to the hybrid craft of creative non-fiction to integrate family stories, thorough historical research, and her "imaginings" of what her grandmother was thinking and feeling as she lived through the momentous turn-of-the-century period of immigration and industrialization. What emerges is the transformation of one family's personal narrative into a moving drama that has larger, more universal scope and appeal.

For example, the description of Verona's leave-taking from Slovakia is set against details of the first World War and a worldwide flu epidemic, and then intertwined with Alzo's own carefully considered views about what her grandmother might have thought and felt as she said goodbye to her mother for the last time: when she descended into steerage class on the ship that brought her to America. Similarly, the story of Verona's backbreaking daily work taking care of boarders, seven children, and an unemployed husband becomes the same story of thousands of other immigrant women — Slovak, Polish, Italian, Ukrainian — when told against the backdrop of the Depression, workplace prejudice against Slovak workers, and cruelty to women in traditional Slovak patriarchal families. In one of the most emotionally open passages of the book, Alzo describes how she imagines her grandmother might have felt as she suffered what we today would call domestic violence. In another section which addresses Verona's death, Alzo connects the intensely personal experience of losing her grandmother to the larger passing of the first generation of Slovak immigrants, their cultural legacy, and the working class culture that they were a part of in steel cities like Pittsburgh.

Lisa Alzo has successfully interwoven the personal story of her family with the larger human story of Slovak immigration to the United States and the assimilation of subsequent generations. At times, the extensive historical details provided in the narrative seem to call out for citations and references, which the genre of creative non-fiction eschews. But Alzo's craft as a creative non-fiction writer is so extensive that the lack of references does not detract from her overall achievement. She writes about real events and people and makes them come to life against the backdrop of historically researched facts. Three Slovak Women binds together the stories of three generations of Slovak women, preserves one family's history, and makes certain that Verona's individual story and spirit are kept alive to reach future generations. It also gives voice to the thousands of silent stories of other Slovak immigrant women and their descendants. Verona would have been delighted with her granddaughter's contribution to keeping the values of family and heritage alive.

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