TELLING

BRING YOUR FAMILY TREE TO LIFE USING ORAL AND SOCIAL HISTORY

by Lisa A. Alzo, M.F.A.
Each of us has a story to tell, a rich past to explore. The interest in researching one's roots has rapidly increased over the past few years. According to *American Demographics* magazine, genealogy is America's fastest growing hobby. In a poll conducted in May 2000 by Maritz Marketing Research and Genealogy.com (a leading developer of genealogical software and internet tools), 60 percent of Americans said they were at least "somewhat interested" in tracing their family history up from 45 percent of people in 1995 who said they were at least "somewhat involved" with genealogy.

Indeed, family history research is one of the nation's most popular pastimes, second only to gardening. However, while conducting genealogical research, it is easy to become absorbed in finding and obtaining facts about our ancestors and overlook the stories of how their lives were influenced by local, national or world historical events and conditions. Often, the most interesting details are not found in the records or documents uncovered, but in the life stories of family members and individuals who lived through some key events in history such as the first two World Wars, the immigration wave or the Great Depression.
When I set out to write about my own family several years ago, I decided to use a more creative approach to make the facts come to life. The result was a 111 page book, *Three Slovak Women*, a nonfiction account of three generations of Slovak women in the steel town of Duquesne, Pennsylvania and the love and sense of family binding them together. After six years of research, I had gathered a substantial amount of material upon which to base my story. As a graduate student of creative nonfiction writing, I had the advantage of taking courses in how to creatively work facts into an interesting, compelling narrative. As I found out though, you don't have to study in an M.F.A. program to apply the same techniques to breathe life into your own family stories. By simply reviewing all of your research and taking a look at the social and historical happenings of the time period during which your ancestors lived, you can weave a detailed account of their lives.

Genealogical research consists of some basic components. First there is factual research which typically involves searching vital records (birth, death, marriage), perusing official documents such as passports, passenger lists (ship manifests), census, church, probate, tax, and other public records, and consulting other printed sources such as cemetery records, obituaries, newspaper clippings, historical references, and the like. Also, personal information may be obtained through letters, a family bible, or someone’s diary if one is fortunate enough to possess or have access to such items.

Another important component of research is the visual documentation of one's ancestors through photographs. How many stories do you hear about photographs being discovered in a box in someone's attic, or sadly, found at a flea market or garage sale with no identification? If you have your own collection of old photographs, or have inherited some from a relative, take the time to sort through them. Often, you will discover that many old photographs lack identification, unless the previous owner was meticulous about writing down who was in the photograph and when or where it was taken. If you uncover unidentified photographs, don't despair. With a little investigating you might be able to solve the mystery.

There are many ways to identify a photograph. The first is to locate anyone who may have known the individuals in the picture or who lived during that time period. If possible, talk to family members, friends, or neighbors, and ask them if they can make the identification. If the photo was taken hundreds of years ago, or if you are unable to find someone to help, but you know the geographical location for the photograph, consult with a local historian or librarian from that town or city, perhaps he or she can
give you some leads. There are also many excellent print and on-line resources for identifying “orphan” photos. For example, consult the book, Uncovering Your Ancestors Through Family Photographs by Maureen A. Taylor (Betterway Books), and read articles in magazines such as Ancestry, Heritage Quest and Family Tree Magazine for in-depth advice. Checking the World Wide Web can also prove useful. On Genealogy.com’s Web site there is an entire section on Using Photographs: www.genealogy.com/gettingorganized.html#sourcing. Some photo archive sites to explore include: Dead Fred (www.deadfred.com), HeirloomsLost.com (www.heirloomslost.com), Your Past Connections (www.yourpastconnections.com). Auction sites such as eBay (www.ebay.com) also contain searchable categories for photographs and historical memorabilia.

Finally, another excellent method for discovering the details of a person’s life is through oral history. Recording a story in the person’s own words or obtaining accounts from those who knew him/her by asking the important questions of when, where and how they lived is a great way to find out what the records may not reveal.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT
Once you have collected the facts about an ancestor (date of birth, or marriage, immigration year, etc.), the next step is to research the time period during which each event occurred. Take a look at local, regional, national and world events. For example, if you know that your ancestor immigrated shortly after World War I, you will want to look at the cause and effect of the war on his/her immigration. Were they driven to leave their homeland because of particular economic, political or social conditions, or perhaps all three? Did your ancestor choose to leave to avoid induction into the military? Was he or she going to join a relative in America? Another example: Perhaps your parents were youngsters during the Great Depression. How did this impact their childhood? Did economic factors influence where or how they lived and/or how they were raised? If you need assistance in researching the time period, consult your local library, local and regional historical societies. Pittsburgh, for example, is a great place to do this type of research, with assistance from the Carnegie Library, Heinz History Center, the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, and other organizations. You will also want to read history books, newspapers, diaries and other accounts. If possible, visit the location where your ancestor grew up and/or lived. Conduct oral history interviews (see below). Use search engines on the World Wide Web to find information. Sites such as Google (www.google.com) and Cyndi’s List (www.cyndislist.com) are good places to start. The Library of Congress American Memory Historical Collections for the National Digital Library is also an excellent site to visit (http://memory.loc.gov).

After you have researched the time period and have noted significant events, write them down. The best way to record such events is to create a timeline, a visual aid commonly used to illustrate history. Your timeline, however, should be a combination of both external events and personal milestones (see next page). First, decide on what years to include and list these years in chronological order on the top line. On the left-hand side, divide the timeline into categories: World Events (for example, World War I, the Pandemic of 1918, etc.); National Events (for example, the Great Depression, opening of Ellis Island, etc.); Local Events (for example, the Homestead Steel Strike of 1892, Carnegie Opens Library, Storms/Flood, etc.); Personal Milestones (such as dates of births, marriages, deaths, etc.). Next, evaluate the dates and locate the overlap between the world, national, and local events and personal milestones. This will help you to form a picture of the social history – what was going on during your ancestor’s life. Now, turn that picture into a story. For example:
She was often called Veronica, although her given name was Verona. I called her "Grandma." She came to America in 1922 via Ellis Island, just as some 6,000 other Slovak immigrants did that year. It was four years after the end of World War I, one year after the U.S. Congress passed the first Immigration Quota Law restricting the number of any European nationality that could enter the country on an annual basis. Grandma was among those fortunate enough to clear this restriction. Each immigrant had his or her own reason for coming to America: some to escape poverty and political or religious oppression, others to seek employment. While these men and women had in common the universal experiences surrounding emigration from their homeland, each individual also had his or her own story to tell. My grandmother was no different.

She was born on November 10, 1899, the youngest of thirteen children born to Maria Verbovsky and Andrej [ONDRAJ] Straka, a peasant farmer who lived in the village of Milpos, in the western part of Saris County, Slovakia. Like many other small villages throughout Slovakia, Milpos consisted mainly of farmland, some 15-20 homes and a small church. Its inhabitants, including my grandmother's family, came from peasant backgrounds. In fact, just 50 years before my grandmother’s birth, the Austrian Empire (to which Slovakia had been attached since the 16th century) was a feudal society. Feudal lords owned the land and kept the majority of crops for their own use. These lords provided land to the peasants or serfs to cultivate and live on, but their crops were turned over to the lord at harvest time. It was not until 1848, during the time of the Hungarian revolution, that feudalism was finally abolished. ...
Notice how the events in the timeline are reflected in the narrative. During 1899, the year of my grandmother's birth, there were important events taking place in her homeland. The Hapsburg Monarchy, the slumping Slovak economy, emigration and so forth. The timeline provided a view of all the factors in my grandmother's life and enabled a blending of the personal and social histories together into an interesting story.

WRITING FROM A PHOTOGRAPH

Photographs often provide valuable clues about our ancestors. No matter how many facts we acquire, or stories we record, nothing compares to having an image of someone who has gone before, and if you are lucky enough to possess a photograph of one or more of your ancestors consider it a true treasure. A photograph often provides a wonderful reflection of the time period during which your ancestor lived. Rather than just placing your photos in an album or scrapbook, why not create a story about your ancestor from it? Evaluate the image and try to imagine your ancestor sitting next to you and telling you something about their life. I wrote the following paragraph after evaluating a photograph of my great-grandmother, Maria Verbovsky Straka. The photo was an old tintype that my grandmother brought with her from Slovakia (see below).

There is a photograph of my great-grandma – one my grandmother brought with her to America that was eventually passed down to me. I estimate that great-grandma must have been in her late 50s or early 60s at the time the photo was taken, but she looks much older. Her face is sunken with wrinkles surrounding her dark, lifeless eyes and she is not smiling. I can see years of toil on her face. She has the look of a woman who has endured life, but not enjoyed it. There is a sadness, which can be read in her eyes. My great-grandmother at 50 looked almost as old as I remember my grandmother looked when she was 70.

I was struck by how this simple photo could reveal so much about my great-grandmother. Although I had never met her, I felt like I knew her better from describing her appearance in this photograph.

ORAL HISTORY: WRITING FROM AN INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

During the six years I spent doing research for my book, I conducted approximately 30 oral history interviews, many with family members. Unfortunately, my interest in family history began after my grandmother died. I regret that I never capitalized on the opportunity to interview my grandmother and obtain the story of her life and immigration to America in

The author's great-grandmother, Maria Verbovsky Straka. The photo was a tintype the author's grandmother brought with her from Slovakia.
her own words. However, it was fortunate that my grandmother had told her story to my mother, who served as a key source for much of the information I uncovered about my family's past. After five extensive interviews with my mother, I had obtained nearly 100 pages of transcribed material providing a framework upon which to build a compelling narrative. One chapter is written solely from interview transcript. Excerpts from the transcript and chapter follow below.

Excerpt: Transcript of Interview with Anna Figlar Azo, 1991

Anna: So that way I had a little bit of spending money. I saved it and if I wanted a perm - that's how I got my first perm - I went and worked and I was able to go get a perm or go to a show or whatever I needed for spending. They just could not afford to give us any spending money. And that, that was rough because you met up with a friend that maybe was well off, they had more money and they would treat you to stuff. I saved the money and they would treat you to stuff, take you to ice cream and buy you candy and they would expect the same for you and you didn't have the money, so that's where I made my, I made a very terrible, terrible mistake - I took money from grandpap thinking he would never miss it and he, it was only $12 dollars, but you'd thought those $12 was $12,000 because it was hard to put it back that $12 so I had promised that when I got myself a job, the first pay I got was going to be his - the $12. So I did get a job, I got a job at the five and ten, my first pay, I gave it to him and I cried my eyes out. I could cry right now. I cried and cried and cried and I told him how sorry I was and I wanted him to have it. He didn't want to take it and I said, "No, I know it's been awhile, but I made a promise to myself that I was going to pay it back." And I did. And that was my first payday.

Lisa: How old were you when you took the money?

Anna: I don't know how old, it must have been when I was in junior high, maybe I was only 12 or 13 - but we were on Crawford, it had to be I was between 10 and 12 years old.

Lisa: And what did you take it for? Why did you take it?

Anna: Because I had to treat (her) because she expected the same from me. "Now it's your turn to buy ice cream, your turn to buy pop." So we'd come up to Vezdel's and oh, I was a big shot because I was able to treat her.

Lisa: So what did Grandpap do when he found out?

Anna: Well, when he went to where he had this, this money was, he had - I think he was in a lodge, like a lodge and he was like president of the lodge or secretary or treasurer or something and he had this money and he's hollering and hollering and I, I lived up to it, I told him, I said, "I took it." And I got the beating of my life, talk of abuse, I got beat black and blue. I was made to kneel behind a black stove, he beat me with his strap and Grandma was so scared.

Lisa: How long did he beat you?

Anna: Oh, I don't know but I was, I was...

Lisa: Where did he beat you?

Anna: My legs, everywhere. I'll never forget that. That was the one and only lickin' - we called it lickin' - that I remember from him, really bad.

Lisa: Who stopped him, Grandma?

Anna: I guess Grandma did. He was going to send me to Morganza.

Lisa: Where's that?

Anna: That's a place where the bad kids were. But I promised that when I got a job that he was going to get that money back, and he did.

From this interview came the following text for Chapter 8: "Discipline" of Three Slovak Women:

My mother remembered kneeling behind the black coal stove in the basement of the house on Crawford Avenue. Each strike of the leather strap - first across her shoulders, then over her back and legs - stung more than the last one. Large red welts appeared on her body, but the physical pain was nothing compared to her fear and embarrassment. She thought he would never stop. When he finally did, she sobbed and lifted herself from the floor. In spite of the beating, she did not hate her father; she vowed not to do anything wrong again and wanted to please him.

Anna was only 12 years old when she received the beating from her father. It was the most significant event she remembered from her childhood years and one that remained imprinted in her memory. Although it was the first and last time he would hit her with such severity, the beating shaped the way she viewed him from then on. She had not thought he would miss the $12 she secretly removed from the purse in the kitchen cabinet to treat one of her junior high school friends to ice cream at Vezdel's corner store. After all, it was her...
Turn to buy. Her friend, who always seemed to have money, usually bought candy, pop, and ice cream for both of them. Anna did not have the money, but she knew her father did. As treasurer of a local Slovak fraternal lodge, he had cash stored away in a dresser drawer. With her father's money, she too could feel like a big shot.

The year was 1937, hard times, especially hard for a laborer trying to provide for a wife and five children, with another baby on the way. After seven years of pleading with the U.S. Steel employment office in Pittsburgh for work and two years on WPA and Welfare, Anna's father had just obtained a steady job in the cinderling plant at the Duquesne mill.

My mother recalled that under such meager living conditions, the missing $12 seemed more like $12,000 to her father. He repeatedly yelled, "Who took my money?" until she confessed. Then he beat her and threatened to send her to Morganza, a home for bad children. Her mother, Verona, pleaded with him to stop, afraid that he was going to kill his daughter. Anna promised to pay him back as soon as she was old enough to find a job, and she did, once she was in high school and found a job at the local five and dime store in the Duquesne Plaza. When Anna received her first pay she went, with tears welling in her eyes, to her father to apologize and give him the money, which Janos refused to take until she pleaded he do so, saying, "I know it has been awhile, but I promised to pay you back."

This was a very emotional interview. In fact, it took me three tries to get my mother to open up about this event. This is the "Catch 22" of oral history. The more you probe, the more you are likely to learn, and sometimes what you discover can evoke painful memories for your interviewee. This is why at the start of the interview you should always obtain the individual's permission to use the material from the interview, and if you are recording the interview, the permission to do so. You may also want to have them sign a release form if you plan to publish any part of the interview. A great source of conducting oral history interviews is Record and Remember: Tracing Your Roots Through Oral History, by Jane Lewit and Ellen Epstein (Scarborough House, 1994). This book contains examples of questions, and other useful suggestions, as well as sample permission and release forms.

Drawing on the three examples provided above, take some time to think about the stories to be told in your own family. You may find that you have been gathering information for many years but are unsure about how to begin to put it all together. You may be wondering how to develop an intriguing story about your ancestors. Often, when writing family history, it is useful to borrow techniques from good fiction writing. For example, take a minute and think of your favorite novel. Why is it your favorite? Think about plot. What makes the story interesting? Who are the main characters? Why do you like them or don't like them? What makes you care about their story? Apply this to your own family? You might be thinking, "Why would anyone be interested in my family? I don't have anyone famous in my family tree." Whether or not you have a notable person in your lineage is not important, there is still a story waiting to be uncovered.

The question I hear most often in my classes and seminars on "Writing Your Family History" is: "How do I get started?" Typically, I give my students or the audience some practical exercises for starting the creative juices flowing.
1) Character writing.
Pick the most interesting character in your family and try to write a few sentences or even a paragraph or two about this person. For example, I wrote about my grandfather, János Figlyar, who was a prisoner of war during WWI.

During the war, János spent time in a Russian prison where his ability to repair carriages and make wheels saved his life. Eventually he managed to escape and returned to his Czech homeland on foot in 1920.

2) Review a Photograph.
Find one of your favorite old family photographs. Who is in it? What are they wearing? What are they doing? What is their facial expression? Is anyone else in the photograph? Describe it in as much detail as possible. For example, see the wedding photograph at left.

After the ceremony, the couple and the wedding party boarded a train for St. Clairsville where a photograph – the one that triggered the memories of some of the attendees so many years later – was taken in a local studio. I am fascinated by this surprisingly crisp image. This picture, I later learned, caused hard feelings between my grandfather and his brother, Jacob because Jacob's wife, Eve, wanted their infant daughter to sit between the bride and groom in the picture. János refused because he thought a baby in between them would cause false speculation about the reason for the marriage. There are thirty-one people in the photograph – all dressed in their Sunday best. The men were attired in plain, dark suits, and the women wore dresses of varied lengths and colors (some white, some dark). Stephen Troyanovich, János' good friend and fellow coal miner, was the best man. The matron of honor was Helen Zaleta, a friend of Verona's from Pittsburgh. Verona had become close to Helen while working in Pittsburgh and chose her over [her niece, Mary for this distinction]. Although included in the general wedding party photo, Mary did not play an important role. The other attendants included relatives, and several of János' co-workers and their wives.

Typically Slovak couples were married in their best clothing. But often, as part of tradition, the groom paid for the bride's wedding garment. The bride would get a new pair of boots for the occasion – after the wedding she seldom put them on again for fear of wearing them out, but would carry them over her shoulder to church or other special occasions to show that she had them and often saved them to be buried in.

Verona's dress was white covered with beads, as was her thin, sheer veil. She wore the ankle-high lace-up boots, and held a bouquet of...
white carnations in her lap. János was clean-shaven, his mustache gone. He wore a dark suit, with a carnation pinned to the lapel. The look on his face makes me think he was much happier than Verona.

3) Analyze a family document.
For example, at right is a ship’s manifest document for a young woman named Marta Fiegler. The port record comes from the National Archives, in Washington, DC. The following information is listed on the document:

- Name: Marta Fiegler; Age: 22
- Emigrated from Bremen, Germany on January 20, 1912 and landed in NY on January 30, 1912.
- Occupation: Maidservant
- Closest Relative in Old Country: father, Ilko Fiegler, Osturna, Slovakia
- Destination: Boonton, NJ (brother Pavel)
- Misc. Facts: She was 4 feet, 11 in. tall; had $20

The facts above can be turned into a story.

“Marta Fiegler left her father, Ilko in Osturna, Slovakia and set sail aboard a large steamship from Bremen, Germany on January 20, 1912. Ten days later, she arrived in New York with $20 and waited in line with countless other immigrants to be admitted into the country. A demure woman, standing only 4 feet, 11 inches tall, Marta was a 22-year-old maidservant headed to Boonton, New Jersey to stay with her brother, Pavel....”

After completing a few of these exercises, I think you will be pleasantly surprised to find that your ancestors did live extraordinary lives. There are a few additional issues worth mentioning. One is how to handle sensitive information about a family member or ancestor (i.e. the “skeletons in the closet”). The best rule here is to think before you write. If you discover something questionable in your family’s past, take some time to evaluate the potential effects on the person or family, whether or not you plan to keep the written piece for distribution to only family members, or if you plan to publish the piece. Often, writing your family history is an emotional investment, especially if you are relating sensitive situations or dramatic events. Sometimes it helps to have a relative, close friend or literary expert, critique your work. This will help to ensure accuracy, as well as flesh out the story and fill in any gaps.

Whether or not you decide to write small stories about your family for posterity’s sake, or publish a longer family narrative, placing your ancestors in the historical context can breathe new life into your family tree. Using a little creativity to weave story with fact will provide a more meaningful method for honoring your ancestors and preserving the past for future generations.


For a fee the History Center offers a comprehensive oral history service. Contact Naomi Horner at (412) 454-6372.

Lisa Alzo was raised in Duquesne and currently resides in Ithaca, N.Y. She earned a Master of Fine Arts degree in Nonfiction Writing from the University of Pittsburgh in 1997, and spent six years researching her family’s history for Three Slovak Women. Lisa is the recipient of the 2002 Mary Zirin Prize given by the Association for Women in Slavic Studies to recognize the achievements of independent scholars and to encourage their continued scholarship and service in the field of Slavic Women’s Studies. She has taught computer applications, genealogy and writing courses in the Finger Lakes Region of Central New York, and has been an invited speaker for national conferences, and several genealogical and historical societies.