Silent Voices: Identifying the Historical Significance of Slovak Immigrant Women  

Introduction

Nearly two million Americans claim Slovak ancestry. I am one of them. This vast number is not surprising, given that some 650,0001 Slovaks came to North America between 1875 and 1914. The Slovaks have been counted among the category of new immigrants called "Slavs," emigrating from Central and Eastern Europe and speaking a Slavic language. The terms "Slav" and "Slavic" are generic terms used to refer to the peoples of various different nationalities, which include, in addition to Slovaks, Poles, Croats, Czechs, Slovenians, and Ukrainians. The languages and cultures of these people have tended to be lumped together in America, but there are actually marked differences between. The Slavs were the third largest group to immigrate to the United States during this period from 1875 to 1914, ranking behind only Italian and Jewish immigrants. The Slovaks are the second largest of the Slavic-speaking groups in the United States, outnumbered only by the Poles.

Some Slovaks emigrated for economic reasons, others to escape political repression. The majority of the immigrants to the United States arrived before World War I. Many returned home after earning enough money to buy land back in Slovakia, but eventually some 500,000 Slovaks settled permanently in the New World. Many of their stories are compelling and engaging, yet only a few have been told.

Despite the influx of Slovak immigrants to this country in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, American literature of the time shows a definite lack of Slovak identity. A possible explanation for this is the generalized view of turn-of-the-century America that Slovaks were poor, downtrodden and living in misery. Such stereotypes resulted and were sustained primarily by the prejudice from the leadership of the Irish Catholic church. Moreover, labor unions excluded from their ranks the less skilled and under-educated, non-English speaking Slovak peasants, who were often labeled as "Hunkies." The term “Hunky” comes from the habit of calling Slovaks "Huns," (in reference to Attila the Hun and his Asiatic followers) by people disgusted by these immigrants' cramped living quarters. The term "Huns" was often even preceded by the epithets "miserable" or "murderous." The slur had its origin with those early Slovak immigrants who settled in the Northeastern and Midwestern states, particularly in and around industrial centers such as Pittsburgh, Cleveland and Chicago. Slovak immigrants lived in the poorest neighborhoods, typically in those places abandoned by the Irish. The Irish denigrated the Slovaks because they feared that these new immigrants would take away their jobs. Eventually "Hun" was softened to "Hunky," which became the name given to a foreigner or immigrant laborer, first popular in Pennsylvania, where it designated Hungarian, Lithuanian, and other "Slavic" workers who were not really Slavs. “Hunky” was often interchanged with “Bohunk,” which, in turn, was formed from two words: "Bohemian" and "Hungarian", and was then reinforced by the derogatory word "hunk", which meant a stupid or clumsy person.

There was an even more serious form of prejudice toward Slavic immigrants than the ethnic slurs hurled at them by the Irish and other groups. A group of young Harvard graduates, and wealthy Bostonians, alarmed by the influx of new arrivals from Eastern Europe, formed the Immigrant Restriction League (1890 - 1924), to help develop laws to exclude aliens they considered "undesirables." Such groups had friends in high places, who shared their views. Even Senator Henry Cabot Lodge has been quoted as saying, "The Slavic immigrant threatened to contaminate America."

The Portrayal of Slovaks in Literature

Such real-life stereotypes as the above were further reflected in literature. In some 100 works published between 1900 and 1965 (not written by immigrants or hyphenated Americans), the Slav portrayed is often the Pole. Furthermore, Novels and short stories written for both adults and juveniles during this period provide stereotypical images of the Slav. In adult fiction the image of the Slav, whether man, woman, worker or priest, is typically marked by negative stereotypes, and the Slav is often used as a symbol or as the representative ethnic for immigrants in general.²

For example, in Upton Sinclair's novel, *The Jungle* (1905), Slovak voices are not identified as Slovak but are blended into a chorus of other Eastern European groups. When they are identified, the Slovaks were shown as the newest immigrant group, forced to endure a dismal existence like that of the other immigrant groups which had preceded them.

"The Poles, who had come by tens of thousands, had been driven to the wall by the Lithuanians, and now the Lithuanians were giving way to the Slovaks. Who there was poorer and more miserable than the Slovaks, Grandmother Majauszkiene had no idea…" *The Jungle*, Chapter 6, page 2.

In a 1985 essay, dealing with the Slovak immigrant's view of work, Patricia Ondek Laurence asserted that "Prejudice, stereotypes, and 'silence' about Slovaks persist even today because no writer of Slovak-American heritage has achieved significant stature in American literature to carry the voice and images of Slovaks into the mainstream." In fact, according to this writer, only a small body of Slovak immigrant literature (about 15 works) focusing on the turn-of-the-century immigrant experience is available in English. Among such written works are Father Andrew Pier's autobiography, *The Woodlands Above, the Mines Below* (1975), which describes his family's life among the mines in the small town of Blandburg, Pennsylvania; Thames Williamson's *Hunky* (1929), about a Slovak worker in a bakery; and finally, Thomas Bell's *Out of This Furnace* (1941), a classic novel which chronicles the lives of three generations of Slovak men working in the steel mills of Braddock, Pennsylvania.

In reviewing each of these poignant sagas, I noticed that a strong emphasis is placed on the Slovak immigrant male, whose daily existence was a mere backdrop to the work he did in those places most familiar to him—the mills and the mines. For it was there, in the depths of the

² *American Xenophobia and the Slavic Immigrant*, Josephine Wtulich.
black pits or near the chasms of the hot blast furnaces, that the Slovak male performed the backbreaking tasks of digging the coal that provided fuel or producing the metal and steel which were the signature materials of industrial growth.

In early literature, only Bell's book mentions, in any detail, the Slovak woman. In one section of his book, entitled "Mary," he devotes 50 pages to the thoughts, struggles and daily activities of Mary Dobrechak, who was a first generation American Slovak. The focus on the woman, however, is still secondary to the overall story of the three men in the story. We see Mary as a widow who is left to deal with life after her husband is killed in the mill. She is shown taking up where her husband left off in trying to support herself and her children and is enthusiastically encouraged to marry again rather than try to make it on her own. In Part 3, “Mary,” Bell writes:

“She was at this time a few months past thirty. She had four children, the oldest eleven, and the youngest not yet two. She had something over a thousand dollars in the bank, knowledge of housework and dressmaking, and her two hands. Thus equipped she took up where Mike had left off.” Out of This Furnace, p. 210

With Mary, Bell gives us a only glimpse—albeit a moving and accurate one—into the lives of 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. These women performed work that was not only tedious and endless, but also essential.

After reading Bell's book several years ago, I yearned to know more about all of the other "Mary's" that life and literature had left by the wayside.

Except for general history books dealing with immigrants, and the occasional collection of biographies in which she is counted among women from various other ethnic groups, I have come across only a few modern and contemporary works concentrating on women: Icon of Spring by Sonya Jason (1993), an autobiographic account of a young Slovak girl's coming of age as a first generation American and her discovery that she is really a "Rusyn" and not a Slovak; and the fictional Sorrows of Marienka, written by a man, Vasil Koban (1979), which follows a young girl from her wedding in Slovakia through her subsequent immigration to America. Koban writes:

“It wouldn’t be easy to raise five sons without his help. But already her mind turned to plans of how she would manage by keeping boarders… So she did what she had to do.” The Sorrows of Marienka, p. 201

I can only speculate on the reasons why such a comparatively small number of texts have been written about Slovak immigrant women. Perhaps these females thought their lives unimportant or unworthy of mentioning, or perhaps the mere struggle for day-to-day survival left them with little time to concern themselves with writing their memoirs. They often lacked the time or enough education to create written literature; some were literate neither in English nor in their native language. Thus, if these were obstacles to writing for immigrants in general, then
they were certainly much more profound for those women who stayed at home and had little exposure to the English language or to formal education. A third possibility is that others did not view Slovak women as significant contributors to this country's history. As women, they were already looked upon as a minority, but they had an additional strike against them because they were also foreigners.

Some documented sources put forth an interesting theory. Before 1965 most traditional historians considered the immigrant to be a "problem" that could only be solved by assimilation, a circumstance that left the ethnic American to fall victim to discrimination. Much of the literature on immigration has, in general, centered on the male, taking men’s experiences as the norm and assuming that women’s experiences were either identical to men’s or not important enough to warrant separate and serious attention. The distinctive experiences of immigrant women were usually placed under men's history or treated with indifference or condescension. Women were forced into and kept in the background by cultural and societal barriers. In the case of Slovaks in particular, the family was patriarchal in nature, and served by the age-old practice of male domination and the belief that the man was the boss. Since women were typically undervalued in traditional Slavic culture, it is plausible to assume that contemporary literature reflected such treatment in newer society as well. While I have not found any definitive statements to corroborate this assumption for "Slovak" women, Paul R. Magocsi in his book, *Rusyn-American Ethnic Literature*, does discuss the portrayal of women in Rusyn-American literature along these lines. The Rusyns once inhabited portions of several counties in Northeastern Hungary and, like their kindred Slavs, came to America as part of the massive, pre-World War I immigration from eastern and southern Europe. Regarding the treatment of women in Rusyn culture, Magocsi writes: "Women are disparagingly treated. In almost all instances describing male-female relationships, the courtship stage is marked with promises by the suitor that he will give his fiancée everything in life. After marriage, however, the standard characterization reveals a disrespectful husband who treats his passive wife as chattel and can only address her as the old lady (stara) or grandma (baba)."3

It was not until the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, that two movements emerged to alter the way in which female immigrants were viewed: the rise of a "new ethnicity" and the revival of the women's movement. As a result, many scholars began to rethink the way they approached the history of immigration in general and the history of women in particular. Whatever the reasons for the lack of written accounts documenting the lives of Slovak immigrant women in the past, I believe it is both illuminating and important for some stories to finally be told. This does not mean that men should be completely forgotten, because they indeed played pivotal roles in shaping such women's lives. Rather, these early Slovak women immigrants need to be shown as human beings with their own feelings, hopes, dreams and desires. Their stories are personal and at the same time universal—a genuinely human representation of 20th century American history. For this reason, if none other, Slovak immigrant women must somehow find their place in historical literature.

**The Image of the Slovak Woman**

When one thinks of the “Slovak woman” the first image that typically comes to mind is that of the grandmother (baba). My own grandmother, Verona Straka, came to America from Slovakia in the early 20th century. She left behind the world most familiar to her to make a new home in this country. Yet in all the time that I spent with her before she died, I never thought about her as someone who had her own identity or interesting stories to tell. I saw her only as my grandmother. Until a few years ago, I knew nothing about her life as a young girl back in Slovakia, the story of how and why she came to America, or her experiences as an immigrant trying to survive in a culture that was new and different from her own. In this respect, my grandmother was no different from the other Slovak women whose stories were never told.

In reality, although often overlooked, the Slovak woman was often the “backbone” of the family in the New World—serving as not only the homemaker, and often the breadwinner, especially during the Depression, but also the comforter, disciplinarian, financial manager, instiller of religious teachings, morals and values, and the one who insured that the traditions from the old country were preserved in America and passed on to successive generations.

Upon evaluating the circumstances of my own grandmother’s life, I was able to determine that she assumed all of the roles mentioned above. After making it with some difficulty through immigration at Ellis Island, my grandmother began her life in America as a domestic, and through an arranged courtship, married Janos Figlyar, a hardworking, but stern Rusyn coal miner/steelworker. Once married, she struggled to raise seven children during the Depression, and coped with her husband’s fondness for alcohol and frequent violent outbursts. As the details of my grandmother’s background, journey to America and struggles as an immigrant woman were revealed to me, I came to appreciate her as more than just my grandmother, but as someone with a poignant life story. On the one hand, she endured as a wife and mother despite her domestic situation; on the other hand, she was very strong and astute financial and household manager. Below are two transcripts from interviews with my mother describing my grandmother as her children viewed her.4

**Interview #1**

LISA: “So would you say he had this anger streak in him?
ANNA: Yes, he had a very bad temper when he was drinking.
LISA: What did grandma ever do about it? Did she ever stand up for herself or did she just take it?
ANNA: She just took it. She just took it.
LISA: Did she ever talk about it?
ANNA: Yeah, she talked about it, but she just took it.
LISA: She just accepted it?
ANNA: She accepted it, but in those days there was no such thing as a divorce, you didn’t hear of a divorce; there may have been, but you didn’t hear, you just, you just took it, you had your children to raise, your family to raise and you just -- I guess they figured that was their duty. It wasn’t like the women’s lib today.”

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4 Oral History Interview with Anna Alzo, November 1991.
Interview #2

ANNA: "She was the master of the house, not him. He gave her the money, but she, it was remarkable how she was able to do things with so little and sometimes he demanded money from her and she didn’t want to give it to him because she knew what he would spend it on and she wanted to save her money, because all our life we rented and she, they both, both not only her but both wanted us to have a house -- our own house, our own home and this was what her main goal was—to save enough money so she could have a down payment on a home someday, for us."

In order to tell my grandmother's full story, I explored how her experiences and choices as a young woman—what she thought and did—ultimately influenced not only her daughter's (my mother's) life but also that of her granddaughter (me). My grandmother's influence was undoubtedly a profound one that created lasting ties and affectionate bonds between the generations, as I would hope the influence of other immigrant women did for their own families."

Researching the Immigrant Woman

In general, women are difficult to research.6 Most historical records have been created for and/or about men. Also, few women left diaries or letters. Because of the scant information available on women in general, the Slovak immigrant woman may also be difficult to write about, but, as I have shown with Three Slovak Women, it can be done.

First of all, we take an inventory of all home and family sources, such as family documents (birth, death, marriage records, deeds, and tax records) and any family photographs, bibles, diaries, letters, and other important papers, and possessions, such as clothing and jewelry. Secondly, if possible, we interview family members, friends and/or neighbors or anyone who may have known the woman whose life you are interested in researching. Next, we peruse public documents (birth, marriage and death records) and are sure to check church records in cases where civil records are not accessible or available. Also we look at U.S. Federal Census records (and/or state census records), immigration and naturalization records and other civil records (probate, property, tax). We always check everything under the woman’s husband's name as well, because many times the woman is listed only under her husband’s records. Finally, we review other printed sources such as newspapers, library/historical society collections, books and Web sites about Slovaks and/or Slovak women, oral history accounts, and fraternal society publications.

What Can We Do Now to Break the Silence?

There are a number of ways to make the lives of Slovak women more visible. First, we can encourage more women (or their descendants) to research their histories and write them down. We can join Slovak organizations and attend conferences to publicize our goals. We all

5 Oral History Interview with Anna Alzo, November 1991.

need to explore our family histories, and then document our findings for future generations in order to give voice to the stories of the silent women from our past. As I wrote about my grandmother in the Three Slovak Women:

“I want to be the one to finally tell her story, perhaps not in the way she would have told it had she been given the opportunity, and maybe not as eloquently as she deserves. But I hope that my account has captured her experiences as accurately as possible to show, above all else, that she mattered.”

References


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About the Author:

Lisa Alzo, M.F.A., grew up in Duquesne, Pennsylvania, and currently resides in Ithaca, New York with her husband, Michael. She has been working on her genealogy for over 12 years, and earned a Master of Fine Arts degree in Nonfiction Writing from the University of Pittsburgh in 1997. In addition, she spent six years researching her family's history for her first book, Three Slovak Women (published by Gateway Press in 2001). She 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.

Ms. Alzo has worked as an editorial assistant, assistant editor, instructor, and freelance writer. She is a published author and has been a guest on several radio programs.

Ms. Alzo has taught computer applications, genealogy and writing courses as an adult education instructor in the Finger Lakes region of central New York State for over five years and speaks at national conferences and at genealogical and historical societies. She is currently an instructor of Slovak genealogy research for myfamily.com’s online genealogy training site.