



# Naše rodina

“Our Family”

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## Sundays At Grandma's

By *Karen A. Melis*

My mother was the daughter of Slovak immigrants. She was the third youngest of eleven children born over a twenty-year period, the first American-born generation. Her parents, Mike and Sophia, had emigrated from eastern Slovakia in 1902 and 1910, respectively, and made their home on the South Side, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Here, Mike worked at J&L Steel mill as a straightener, and Sophia kept the home for her children housing as many as eight boarders at a time. Both were active in St. Matthew's Slovak Roman Catholic Church, fraternal societies, and the community. Sophie was even the local midwife. Together, they raised their family.

It was customary that each Sunday the family would meet at our grandparents' home located at 3228 Harcum's Way.<sup>1</sup> To accommodate the large numbers, each family

agreed to a designated arrival time, providing a constant flow of people throughout the day. The dynamics of our Sunday visits left an impression on me that still remains with me. The family was close. My moth-

ers' siblings always referred to each other as our Mary or my John. The cousins naturally socialized with those similar in age. Rarely did anyone miss the Sunday visits or family gatherings. When old enough, a cousin's future spouse would be introduced at these functions and welcomed into the family, which

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*Direct ancestor cemetery search in Slovakia by Karen Melis.*

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## President's Message...continued

group started with one member who reached out to CGSI for some initial help, but now they manage their gatherings on their own. I know there is potential interest to replicate something like this in other locations. Please reach out to me and I will be happy to share how CGSI can help you do that.

The questions do not have to stop just because the conference is over. If there is something you have wanted to know or if something in this message intrigues you, please drop me an e-mail ([president@CGSI.org](mailto:president@CGSI.org)). Thank you for your questions, thank you for your membership, and best wishes in the upcoming year.



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## “Sundays At Grandma’s...”

*Cont. from front cover*

provided a new topic of conversation for Sundays to follow. Plans for the next communion, graduation, or wedding were not arranged by mailed invitations or by telephone but in person on Sunday. These gatherings also took place on holidays like Easter and Christmas. During the week between Christmas and New Year’s, we continued the ancestral village custom of going to an aunt or uncle’s house each night until all the houses had been visited.

Grandma always seemed to have a smile on her face with each new arrival. I would learn later that she frequently turned off her hearing aid to avoid the white noise pounding in her ears as we raced through the house or as conversations grew louder. She wanted to know everything that was happening in the family. While my grandfather knew how to read and write Slovak and English, my grandmother only understood English but spoke to each grandchild in her Goral<sup>2</sup> dialect, a mixture of Polish and Slovak with unique words unknown in either language. Older cousins could reply in Slovak, but those born to the younger siblings would answer in English. We understood each other for the most part. If something wasn’t clear, a mother or father would step in and translate. One of my mother’s

duties on this day was to read and translate any letters to and from my grandmother’s family in Nedec.<sup>3</sup> She had learned to read and write Slovak in St. Matthew’s Parochial School.<sup>4</sup> With each letter read, animated conversations ensued, and I would listen. It was only at these times as a young eight-year-old that I heard firsthand from my grandmother about our Slovak roots. I eagerly listened but did not interrupt the adults to ask questions about our family. How was it possible that my grandparents lived only three miles apart from each other in Slovakia yet never knew one another? What drew both grandparents to live just a few miles from each other on the South Side? Why did they come? I was eight-years-old and never went anywhere without my parents. Did my then thirteen-year-old grandfather really cross an ocean with his eleven-year-old brother in tow, and why were they already called laborers? I learned that my grandmother had three sisters and a brother who never came to America. I knew even less of my grandfather’s family from Frydman<sup>5</sup> because his family letters stopped arriving shortly after his death in 1959. Even at a young age, I was curious but confused. It seemed improbable that this family could have ever been separated from each other. The letters proved that they were close, even if they were distanced by thousands of miles. After my grandmother’s passing in 1965, the letters stopped. I tucked my many questions into my back pocket, waiting for answers.

It wouldn’t be until thirty-five years later that some unanswered questions would be resolved and newly revealed information would prompt even more. By 1998, several of my aunts and uncles had passed. Word spread quickly that our Margie and poor Pete were seriously ill. A few family members decided to have a reunion reminiscent of the family gatherings. Here was an opportunity to ask questions. I felt like I was eight years old again with the same curiosity and enthusiasm but now better equipped to perform detailed research and determined to find the answers. For months, I scoured through the attics, interviewed aunts and uncles, combed cemeteries, and searched for records, old documents, and the letters. Blind letters were written to the last known addresses for the families overseas, hoping for any type of reply.

In many ways, it was sad to realize that what we were searching for were not just names on a family history chart but our family. These were real people who lived on through us but were total strangers. If we could meet them today, most of our family could not converse with them in the mother tongue. Even the new

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letters sent overseas were written in English, as my own mother could no longer remember how to write in Slovak. Many of the customs practiced by my grandparents were not carried forward by my aunts and uncles. Trees are no longer cut down and tied to each house on the first of May. The once traditional parading of the manger and performance of a nativity play with songs and the Christmas message from house to house has stopped. Buckets of water once used to douse the boys and girls on the Monday and Tuesday following Easter Season—followed by the reward of a drink—have been replaced with a civilized sprinkle of water in the face. Oplatky is still broken and passed around the table as a wish is made for the New Year. Most of the customs that we still do practice are not well understood by my generation. The language, customs, and culture were slowly slipping away with the passing of each immigrant ancestor and now the first-born generation.

As my research continued, the uncovered information astonished even my oldest aunts and uncles. They had been totally unaware that their own grandparents, Michael and Rosalia, had actually immigrated to the United States, too. Michael first arrived in America in 1895 and later sent for his wife and daughter, Maria, in 1896. He had followed nearly 19% of his village to America<sup>6</sup>, a significant number of whom relocated to the South Side of Pittsburgh. Their third son, Jan, was born on the South Side of Pittsburgh in 1899. He was their first and only American-born son. Their other two sons, Andrew and Mike (my grandfather), arrived in 1901, crossing the ocean together aboard the S.S. Switzerland.<sup>7</sup> This family unit would only be reunited for a short time. Michael's lungs had been permanently damaged while working as an open-hearth laborer on Furnace Number 14 in Jones & Laughlin Steel Mill. In 1906, Michael and Rosalia returned to Frydman, taking only their youngest son, Jan. The older children, Mike, Andrew, and Marie, remained on the South Side, never to see their parents or brother again. These were family members that the next generation would never even hear about until the research began in 1998.

Finally, two letters arrived from overseas. Not only were both family branches in Frydman and Niedzica shocked to hear from America, but they traveled the three miles to the other village to make sure that the other was aware of our searching for them. Ironically, Jan's descendants from Frydman had actually been searching for the last two years for our family. His eldest son, also named Jan, believed he was the last surviving male member to carry on the family name. We

were told he cried when he later saw the reunion photo of over 300 people. Through combined efforts on both sides of the ocean, Jan's son would eventually obtain his United States passport, since his father was born in America<sup>8</sup>, which he proudly displays to any visitors to his home in Frydman.

In 1999, my mother and I traveled to the ancestral villages together. We were met by many of her first cousins who gathered to greet us with hugs and tears. Most simply could not believe we had remembered them after all these years, yet, silently, I felt somewhat guilty that we had forgotten them for so long. As we visited each home, the rituals were repeated, and we were welcomed to sit at their tables laden with food and drink. The children raced through the house, and the conversations grew animated. Both parties wanted to know about the family, the life stories, and what it was like to live across the ocean. To our surprise, my mother's Slovak kicked in, and she was able to hold her own in the conversations, laughing, crying, and translating for me as I sat back in amazement. I listened to the stories now told in the Spiš dialect, thousands of miles from the South Side, yet in many ways home with family. Thirty-five years later, it was Sunday all over again!

## Epilogue—DNA Testing

I am often asked, "How did I get so interested in my Slovak roots?" The memories of an eight-year-old girl with unanswered questions made me want to know more. For over 25 years now, I have traveled to Slovakia and southern Poland multiple times in search of context, history, culture, traditions, and documentary evidence of our family lines. My mother and I returned to Slovakia two more times together. In our April 2014 visit, we placed permanent headstones on my great-grandparent's graves. In the design we honored not only my great-grandparents but also each grandparent from that village on a small tablet. (See photo, top of page 161).

When DNA testing became cost effective, it was the perfect time to marry DNA testing with the paper trail research — not only for my family but for others who also had ancestry from the same regions. DNA and genealogy do go hand-in-hand. As more people test, distant genetic cousins are discovered and we work to figure out exactly how we are related.

Today, I am the volunteer group administrator for four geographic DNA projects with FamilyTreeDNA: Spiš County Slovakia, Zamagurie Region, Podhale



## About the Author:

Karen A. Melis, chemical engineer and 2011-2012 Fulbright Scholar, is passionate about placing our Slovak ancestors in the very contexts in which they lived. To this end, she spent 10 months studying in Slovakia, speaking the language and embracing the culture firsthand. With each research trip, she actively seeks out records and other documents in the Slovak Republic and Polish State Archives, land and civil registry offices to better understand the very conditions under which so many of our Slovak ancestors lived and decided to migrate. She has over 25 plus years of hands-on

research in over 200 villages of the former Spiš and Orava Counties, Kingdom of Hungary; digitizing records in the Spiš, Polish Spisz (Zamagurie), Orava an. Podhale Regions. Based on her intimate knowledge, experience, and research capabilities, she formed SlovakGenealogy, LLC to help others find their Slovak roots. See <[www.ourslovakroots.com](http://www.ourslovakroots.com)>. She lectures on Eastern European genealogy. As a volunteer group administrator of four geographic DNA projects with FamilyTreeDNA assisting project members to understand genetic matches by combining traditional genealogy and DNA testing.



CGSI-sponsored Courses

## Beginning Slovak Language and Culture



Two Slovak language and Culture courses are offered online via CGSI. Each course consists of 20 hours of class time over 10 weeks. In Beginning Slovak I, participants learn basic Slovak vocabulary and phrases and are introduced to Slovak grammar. The course is designed to be interesting and informative and focuses primarily on learning the Slovak language, but includes various aspects of Slovak culture and traditions. A PDF course book and other materials are included.

A second course, Beginning Slovak II, is a continuation of the first course. It introduces additional Slovak grammar and new vocabulary with the objective of enabling participants to communicate in Slovak on a basic level.

The instructor is Dennis Ragan, who has been teaching basic Slovak language and heritage classes in classrooms—as well as ‘real’ halušky culinary classes—in the greater Pittsburgh area for 17 years and online for CGSI for two years.

The cost of the courses is \$180, a portion of which is remitted to CGSI. These courses are also available to non-members of CGSI at a higher rate. For optimal online learning effectiveness, class size is limited to 10 students.

If you have questions about the courses or would like to register for one, contact Dennis Ragan [dragan322@gmail.com](mailto:dragan322@gmail.com). Additional course details are included in the course syllabus and registration form he will send you.

These courses are sponsored by Czechoslovak Genealogical Society Int'l



Beginning Slovak I*	Jan. 16 to Mar. 26, 2020
Beginning Slovak II**	Jan. 15 to Mar. 25, 2020
Beginning Slovak I*	Apr. 16 to June 18, 2020

\* Thursday evenings 6:30 pm - 8:30 pm CDT  
\*\* Wednesday evenings 6:30 pm - 8:30 pm CDT

## *Future Themes for Naše rodina:*

- March 2020 . . . Genealogists' Most Interesting Findings**
- June 2020 . . . Austrian/Hungarian Genealogical Records**
- September 2020 . . . Czechs and Slovaks in Massachusetts**
- December 2020 . . . Genealogy and Culture Websites**

*Your articles are welcome, although not all can be published*

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or send by U.S. Mail: 8582 Timberwood Rd., Woodbury, MN 55125-7620*