

Newly Found Relatives Through Phone Directories

by Carol Ann Kusky

My first experiences in genealogy resulted from an old habit practiced as a child. Whenever I traveled around the country with my parents, I always searched the local phone directory for the surnames of my grandparents... Pucilowski, Repinski, Sopko, and Bukovinsky. I never did anything with the info, or placed any calls. I just looked the names up in the phone books for something to do.

So years later, when my husband and I first signed up for an on-line service, I browsed the membership listing and found the name of a potential relative living in North Carolina. This time, I wrote to this stranger. Much to my surprise he responded, and I was astonished to find that he was a doctor here in the US on a Visa from Poland. As we attempted to determine whether we were related, I discovered that I had very little information to share. Basically, I only knew my grandparents' names and nothing about where they descended. Thus five years ago, I began my quest to identify ancestral villages and generations of relatives.

I methodically began with my deceased father's families and spent several years making contact with distant relatives in my homestate of Michigan, and writing letters all over the country. I posted notes on internet bulletin boards, used the Michigan Historical Library, and spent grueling hours pouring over reels of microfilm from the Family History Center. My genealogical research became a hobby, and habit during the late fall, winters and early springs when I could not spend a lot of time outside. I felt quite successful, identifying all eight great-great grandparents on my father's side and locating data much further back on several lines.

As my research grew, my mother periodically kept asking "What about my family?" Initially five years ago, the records of her parents' villages were not yet available on microfilm from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. I felt stuck in that direction until they became available, and kept working on my dad's family.



L to R: Carol Kusky, Jarmila Bukovinsky-Majer, Ann Pucilowski, Mary Jewell and Pavol Bukovinsky. Church grounds in Spišské Bystré, Slovakia

However, last summer our good friends had a visit from their eighteen year old, 2nd cousin who traveled from Ružomberok, in north-central Slovakia to their home in Michigan. Their cousin attempted to translate letters that comprised some of my genealogical treasures. These letters had been written in the early 1960's to my maternal grandmother. They were written by her family in Spišské Bystré, near Poprad, and from her husband's family in Dolná Mariková, north of Považská Bystrica. The letters were filled with touching greetings, and sad stories of a close relative's death. Inspired by his translations, last fall I began to research my Slovaks - the Sopko and Bukovinsky families. My mother, who turns 84 this December was thrilled.

Going back to the internet, I found a web site concerning information about the Czech Republic and

Continued on page 6

Slovakia. I posted a note asking for the correct postal codes for the two ancestral villages. I was going to write to the old addresses on the 35 year old letters, using the various surnames, and hope that someone would answer my letter. Then, it came to me... phone directories. Using the resources at this web site, I requested a search of the surnames I was researching. I was supplied with ten precious names and current addresses of potential relatives.

My letters were sent to Slovakia in January, 1997. I sent photocopies of some of the family pictures sent long ago to my grandmother from overseas, to prove who I was. None of the letters were returned because of incorrect addresses. About four weeks later, I began receiving replies. The first came from London and was written by the daughter of my mom's first cousin, Jarmila Bukovinsky - Majer. She wrote in perfect English, and explained how the letter had reached her father, Pavol, through someone who had received my letter in their small village of Spišské Bystré. Since her father could not write in English, he had excitedly called her in London and insisted that she write me right away.

The letters kept coming over the next two months. Six replies were received out of the ten letters sent. Some were written in English, and some in Slovak. Five replies came from my grandmother's village. I felt very lucky, that I received a response also from the only letter sent to my grandfather's village. Imagine their surprise to find pictures of their parents and grandparents in my letters! I was told later, that the letters created quite a stir on the day they hit the village. It was clear from the responses that I would not have heard as readily from these relatives, if I had not included the photocopies. They would have been rather skeptical of my intentions.

Jarmila and I forged quite a friendship through our letters, and we

wrote often. Many times our letters crossed in the mail. I was happy to discover that her father was the genealogist of the Bukovinsky family in Slovakia, and we anxiously shared our information.

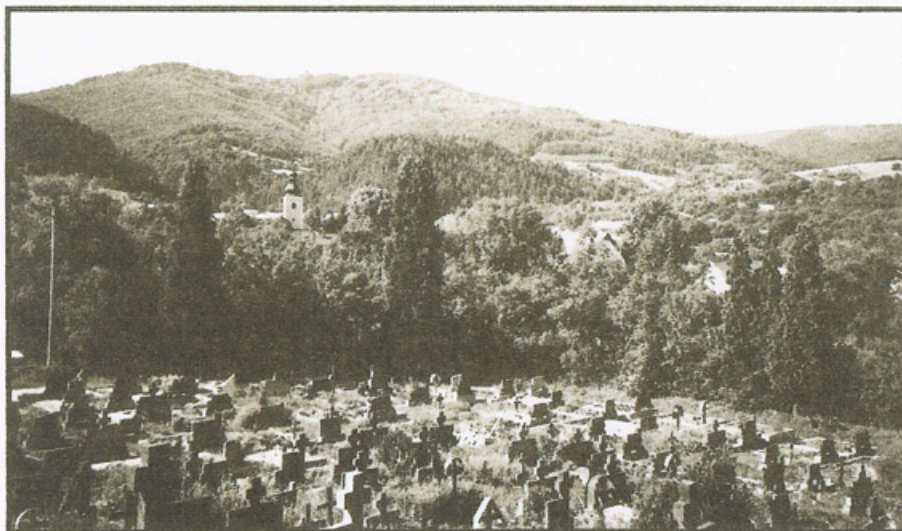
My husband and I decided to travel to Slovakia during the summer, in order to meet these interesting relatives. We wanted to take my mother and her sister with us, while they were still healthy enough to travel. Jarmila planned to travel from London to Slovakia in order to meet us, and help us with interpretations. It would be our second trip to Slovakia. Our trip in 1995 only included two short days skipping through the western border area, so we were excited to be able to spend more time there.

In preparation, I spent countless hours researching my grandfather's family from Dolná Mariková. The birth, marriage, and death records had been micro-filmed since the first time I had checked. I have always used Family Tree Maker to record my entries, and print ancestral trees and reports. I was still having problems obtaining the records from my grandmother's ancestral village.

Armed with lots of pictures and family reports, we left Detroit for Bratislava on June 30th. Our last leg was from Zurich via Tatra Airlines, which was a very pleasant flying experience. Included with our party of four, were seven members of the Horvath family, including our good friends who urged us to take this trip. In Bratislava, we were met by some of their relatives, armed with three vehicles to transport us to our first destination, Ružomberok. The next morning, my husband, mother, aunt and I, were picked up by Pavol

Bukovinsky's son-in-law, and taken to Spišské Bystré.

During the next ten days, we were graciously hosted by several of my mother's first cousins on both sides of her family. She had previously never met or written any of them. Th physical resemblances were



View of Dolná Mariková, Slovakia from cemetery towards church

sometimes remarkable. Our visits were the talk of the villages. We visited the cemeteries, churches, and birthplaces of our ancestors. I collected much firsthand genealogical data.

Much to our surprise, we found that my mother was able to speak and understand Slovak, even after all the years of not practicing it. Although born in Ohio, her immigrant parents had naturally spoken Slovak in the home. Therefore, this was her first language and easily came back to her.

We were impressed with the hard working and diligent work habits exhibited by the Slovaks. After spending so many years under the control of the Communists, their freedom means the world to them. Generations of families lived together in homes that had sometimes been in the family for over one hundred years.

The scenery of the High Tatras was absolutely astonishing. Our travels took us mainly through the ridges of these mountains. The Marian Pilgrimage in Levoča was a remarkable experience, and luckily held on a day when the sun shone brightly. However, much of our trip was clouded with rain. Most of the once a year Východná festival activities were canceled on the day we attended. Believe it or not, one of our stops provided a chance meeting with Mark Bigaouette, President of the CGSI, who was touring the Czech Republic and Slovakia with a large group.

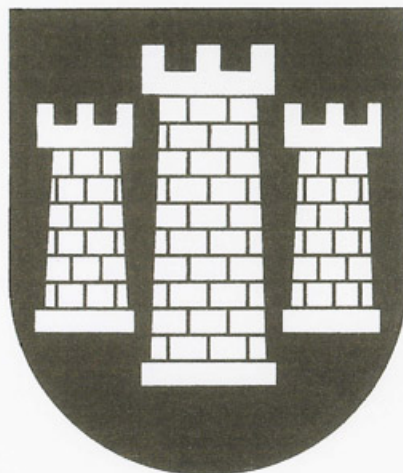
We also drove over the border to Poland, and toured the wonderful city of Krakow. Touring the Auschwitz camp just west of Krakow in Oswiecim was a very moving experience. Even though I felt prepared for viewing the concentration camp, the damp, dreary day just added to the depressing atmosphere. On the way back to Slovakia, we were confronted with the heavy rains and flooding which had just begun in earnest, and plagued Eastern Europe for much of July. We had to make several detours that took us winding through many small villages in mountainous areas. Without the interpretations and familiarity of our cousin, Jarmilla, our trip would have been more of a nightmare. Unfortunately, this trip did not allow time for me to visit my Polish ancestral villages. Maybe next time!

Lastly, we toured Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia extensively. Another second cousin, Darina Orolínová-Papáčová, whom I contacted through my initial letter, works there and gave us a firsthand tour. She commutes there from Spišské Bystré, which is approximately four hours away by train. She leaves her family on Monday

morning, and returns on Friday afternoon. I spoke to several Slovaks who endured similar commutes in order to secure positions with larger companies.

We returned to the States on July 10th, filled with wonderful memories, and lots of newfound relatives. I will treasure the pictures taken at sites frequented by my grandparents and great-grandparents. Most of all, I collected irreplaceable first hand stories and information unavailable through research here in the states. And...it all started with searching phone directories.

Carol Kusky, 5272 Wyndemere Square
Swartz Creek, Michigan 48473-8895



Coat of Arms for Považská Bystrica, Slovakia