

THE SEARCH FOR ANCESTORS FROM AUSTRIA-HUNGARY

by, Eric N. Kuns

1907 Wedding of Simeon Vrabel & Susanna Timko



Passaic, New Jersey

My maternal grandparents both came from the Austro-Hungarian Empire, from what is now Slovakia, at the turn of the century. Until a few years ago, I knew little else about them or their origins. Surprisingly, this is despite the fact that they lived in the same town in Pennsylvania that I spent my early childhood in. Although I knew my grandparents, I really didn't *know* them. My mother was next-to-youngest in a large family and "Baba" and "Grandpap" died when I was a child.

By the time I reached adulthood and developed an interest in my roots, the older generation had passed away. Most of us take for granted knowing our grandparents, but when I attempted to find names, places, and other information on my mother's grandparents, I found that even the names of these ancestors were unknown. Neither Mother nor her brothers and sisters knew the identity of their own grandparents. This made my genealogy an especially challenging undertaking.

In 1990, I took my little family from our home in Idaho back to my birthplace in Pennsylvania to participate in a family reunion. I spent considerable time visiting with my Uncle Andy Vrabel, in hopes of obtaining information on our ancestry. Although I did get some insights on our relatives who lived in the United States, I was disappointed there was no detail to link us to the old country. At about 1 am, as I got ready to leave, my Aunt Catharine came down from upstairs with an envelope. She said that the contents of the envelope might be of interest to me. Sure enough, the envelope contained the birth certificates for both of my grandparents, complete with birth date, place, and the names of all four of my maternal great-grandparents! My grandfather, [#SIMEON VRABEL](#) (Americanized to Samuel) was born in Circ, Slovakia. Grandmother, [#SUSANNA TIMKO](#) Vrabel was born in Orlov, Slovakia.

Of course, the birth certificates were not issued at the time of my grandparents' birth. These were official documents sent by the church officials in Czechoslovakia after World War I, as proof of birth so that Baba and Grandpap could apply for U.S. citizenship. As I was to discover later, the certificate for my grandmother, Susanna (Timko) Vrabel was the source of family confusion concerning her birth date and age. When the Orlov priest researched Susanna's birth and baptismal entry, he erroneously took the information for Susanna's older sister (also named Susanna), who was born in 1885 and died the following year. Baba was born in 1888 and was given the name of her deceased sibling.

The fact that I now knew the point of origin for my grandparents allowed me to mount a letter-writing campaign to the Greek Catholic priests of the two towns. I wrote in English, since I knew no Slovak at the time. Both queries yielded names and addresses of living family members still residing in these towns. I found out that

there had been no real contact (other than letters years before) between the family members in America and those in Europe, since 1919. That was the year that my grandmother's oldest brother, Jan was obligated to return home to Orlov after sustaining severe head injuries in a coal mining accident.

When relatives in Slovakia invited us to come to visit them, my wife, Melanie and I were anxious to do so. We were invited to stay for a month or more, but with limited vacation, and four little ones at home, the longest we thought was prudent was two weeks. It was not nearly enough! We spent part of the time staying with second cousins in Kosice and the rest of the time traveling around the rest of the country. Every where we went, family members wanted us to visit with them. Some days, we had five meals in five different homes. Cousins who had heard that we were coming had totally redecorated their flats (apartments) in hopes that we might come to see them. We were treated like visiting royalty. We found it hard to graciously turn down gifts and had to insist that we pay our own way.

I had always associated castles and palaces with Germany and other countries. Little did I know that Slovakia had such treasures in abundance! More than the sightseeing, though, I got to visit the birthplaces of my grandparents. I could tour through the churches where generations of Timkos and Vrabels had worshipped and view the cemeteries where many of my ancestors are resting. It was only after the visit that I learned the term, Rusyn. I noted a distinct difference between the dialect spoken by the older generation in the Lower Tatras Mountains and the Slovak heard from the younger generations elsewhere. Now I know why!

I could go on and on about the details associated with our wonderful trip, but I'll restrain myself. Suffice it to say that my only regrets about Slovakia were that we could only stay two weeks and that my mother and the other oldsters did not feel well enough to share in the experience. Although some people consider genealogy to be mostly a study of our dead ancestors, a very important aspect for me was the renewed association with living family members. It seemed strange to visit with my mother's first cousins...none of whom had she ever met! In a touching farewell, one elderly cousin implored me that we would not again forget our roots and our relations in Slovakia. How could we forget?!!!

1957 Golden Anniversary of Simeon & Susanna Vrabel

