

Tracing pasts: Myths keep ancestors a mystery

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Genealogist Linda Pazics Kleback formerly was a researcher at the Bay County Public Library. She now lives in Maryland. For an archive of her columns, go to

<http://www.newsherald.com/search/?q=Kleback&fistype=site&x=23&y=5>

Attending a genealogy program is a great way to get inspired. In Maryland, we are lucky to have many opportunities to learn from a variety of speakers. This week I had an especially fun experience.

The Maryland Department of the Pratt Library is sponsoring a free series of genealogy workshops on Genealogy and Ethnic Heritage. Saturday's program was "Crossing the Pond: Techniques for Finding Your Elusive Eastern European Ancestors" presented by Lisa Alzo. Since half of my ancestry is Slovak, I enjoyed the chance to brush up on my research techniques.

Lisa and I discovered that we had a lot in common. We both grew up not far from Pittsburgh, and we are both writers and genealogists who actively research our Eastern European ancestry. I started working on my family a few years before she did, and I didn't have the Internet resources available that she used. We both, however, made extensive use of microfilm from the LDS Family History Center. Even in these days of digitization projects, LDS film and fiche remain a mainstay of Eastern European research and other ethnic work as well.

Lisa shared a list of reasons why many researchers hesitate to try ethnic research, particularly Eastern European. There are challenges with language, spelling, geography and history. She had a great list of myths about this type of research, including the idea that all our ancestors came through Ellis Island, that we need to start our research "across the pond," that a place of residence is the same as a place of birth, and that Eastern European immigrants all stayed permanently in the U.S. after their arrival.

She discussed the fallacy of these myths, and the sizeable audience realized that the information she shared applied to other immigrant research as well. More than 12 million immigrants came through Ellis Island, but that is certainly not all of our ancestors that came to America.

Lisa named many other ports that were popular with immigrants, including Philadelphia and Baltimore. She discussed the many sources that need to be checked here before trying to research overseas, since finding the name of the ancestral village is key to success.

I knew that immigrants were often said to be from a place that turned out to be their point of embarkation instead of their place of birth. I didn't know that many immigrants actually came to port cities to work and earn money for their passage and could be there for quite some time.

The idea that immigrants all stayed put can cause some brick-wall research problems. Many of these individuals were true "birds of passage" who made many trips back and forth between their ancestral homelands and their new American home. Some of these went back to Europe permanently when they had earned enough money to give their families a better life there. Others were trapped on one side of the ocean when wars broke out. All of these facts might help you locate a relative who has disappeared.

For more information on Lisa Alzo and Eastern European research, visit her Web site <http://www.lisaalzo.com>. There are links to many of her articles, lists of her publications including a great cookbook, and a link to her blog, The Accidental Genealogist. If you ever get a chance to attend one of her lectures, you'll have a lot of fun and gain some great information.