LIVING ROOTS

Stories That Remain

7 questions to help you capture your family stories before they are lost—and preserve them for the generations that follow.



A SIMPLE GUIDE TO A FAMILY CONVERSATION

WHY LIVING ROOTS WAS CREATED

You know the dates from your ancestors' lives. But do you know their stories?

I have always been fascinated by family stories. I traced my family tree and am writing a book inspired by my grandmother's life and memories.

As I searched for my roots, I started to see my ancestors as more than just names, dates, or faces in old photos. They were children once. They dreamed, loved, worried, made tough choices, and built the daily lives that shaped future generations.

What interests me most is not just where they lived, but how they lived. I wonder what their homes felt like, what they ate, what made them laugh, and what they hoped to pass on.

I felt this even more while creating the **Slovak Christmas Heritage Kit**. Behind every recipe, custom, song, and family ritual is someone who remembers how it was once lived. Those voices keep traditions from turning into facts without stories.

Many of these memories will never be found in an archive. They live only in the people who can still share them with us, which is why their voices matter so much.

That is why I created Living Roots. It is a gentle invitation to start asking questions about the stories that hold us together.

A single conversation could help you save a story that might otherwise go untold—and keep that root connection alive.

Katarina



BEFORE YOU BEGIN

You are not conducting an interrogation. You are listening to a story.

You do not need a professional recorder or a list of fifty questions.
Choose someone whose story you would like to preserve: your mother, father, grandmother, grandfather, aunt, uncle, or anyone else who carries your family's memories.
Find a quiet time and place where you will not be disturbed.

If the other person agrees, **record the conversation on your phone.**
You will not have to keep taking notes, and instead you can truly listen.
If you can, prepare a few old photographs or family objects.
A photograph, letter, recipe, piece of jewelry, or even an ordinary household item can open a memory that a question alone might not reach.
And most importantly:

Do not rush.

If an interesting memory appears during the conversation, allow yourself to forget the next prepared question.

Follow the story.



WHERE THE STORY BEGINS

What is your very first childhood memory?

What do you see when you think of it? Where are you? Who is there with you? What is happening?

Try asking:

Do you remember how you felt at that moment?

How do you remember your parents and grandparents?

What did they look like? Where did they come from? What did they do? What were they like? How did they speak to one another? What did you learn from them?

Try asking:

What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think of them?

Notes:



HOME AND EVERYDAY LIFE

The Place That Was Home

What did the home you grew up in look like?

Try walking through it in your imagination.

What were the rooms like? What was in the kitchen?
What hung on the walls?
Where did the family gather most often?

Do you remember any object, sound, taste, or smell that immediately comes to mind when you think of home?

Try asking:

Was there anything in your home that held special value for the family?

Notes:



HOME AND EVERYDAY LIFE

One ordinary day

What did one completely ordinary day in your family look like?

Who got up first?
What did you have for breakfast?
Who worked at home, and who worked outside the home?
What chores did the children have?
What did you do after school or after work?
What were the evenings like?

Try asking:
What part of everyday life back then would children today no longer recognize at all?

Everyday life is often the first part of family history to disappear.

Yet everyday life often reveals most clearly how our families once lived.

Notes:



WHAT FAMILY PASSES ON

Family Customs, Food and Celebrations

Which family customs, foods, holidays, or traditions do you remember most fondly?

What were Christmas, Easter, Sundays, weddings, and family celebrations like in your family?
What did people cook?
Who prepared the food?
Were there dishes or customs reserved only for certain occasions?

Try asking:

Was there anything your family did that you only later realized other families did differently?

These small details often hold traces of family, local, and cultural identity.

Notes:



WHAT FAMILY PASSES ON

When life changed

Which event changed your family's life the most?

Some memories may be difficult. Let the person decide what they wish to share.

Was it a move?
A war? A new job?
A marriage?
The birth of a child?
Leaving for another town or country?
The loss of a home, or of someone close?

Try asking:

What was different afterward? And what did your family preserve despite that change?

Sometimes great changes reveal what mattered so deeply to the family that people carried it with them wherever they lived.

Notes:



THE STORY THAT SHOULD REMAIN

What Should Not Disappear

If you could pass on one story from your family to your children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, which would it be?

And then ask one more thing:

What would you like them to know about you and your family when, one day, there is no one left to tell them?

Then do not look for another question.

Wait.

Give the person time to think.

Silence does not have to mean they do not know how to answer. Sometimes, in silence, memories long hidden begin to surface.

Notes:



THE STORY THAT SHOULD REMAIN

One Extra Question

Perhaps the most important question in the whole conversation is not one of the previous seven at all.
It is very simple:

“Tell me more about that.”

When an interesting memory appears, do not rush on to the next prepared question.

You can ask:

What did it look like?
Who was there?
What happened next?
How did you feel at the time?
Why do you think you remembered this particular thing?

And then listen again...

Notes:



YOUR STORY DOES NOT END HERE

One conversation. One story that does not have to be lost.

After the conversation, do not leave the recording on your phone alone. Name the recording with the person's name and the date, and save a backup copy. Write down at least the basic information:

Who told the story:

.....

Date of the conversation:

.....

Place of the conversation:

.....

People mentioned during the conversation:

.....

Places they talked about:

.....

An object, photograph, food, or custom I want to learn more about:

.....

The story from today's conversation that I want to remember:

.....

Notes:



YOUR STORY DOES NOT END HERE

One conversation. One story that does not have to be lost.

Choose one photograph, object, recipe, place, or memory that gained new meaning during the conversation.
Write a few sentences about it.
Add the name of the person who told you the story.
And above all—**ask again.**
Because a family story rarely fits into a single conversation.

Stories that remain.

What we preserve today may one day become a memory that helps the next generation understand where it comes from.

Notes:

CONTINUE THE STORY

Living Roots is only the beginning.

I create English-language resources that help people explore their family stories, reconnect with Slovak cultural heritage, and pass meaningful traditions on to the next generation.

My forthcoming projects include:

THE SLOVAK CHRISTMAS HERITAGE KIT

A collection of stories, traditions, recipes, blessings, family activities, and practical resources for Slovak descendants and families living abroad.

SCAN TO EXPLORE MY PROJECTS



LIVING ROOTS RESOURCES

Discover new conversation prompts and practical ideas for preserving family stories, photographs, recipes, words, and traditions.

TALKS AND WORKSHOPS

Follow upcoming online and in-person activities about family memory, cultural heritage, and Slovak traditions.

STAY CONNECTED

You will receive occasional emails with new resources, sample pages, project updates, and invitations.

WHOSE STORY WOULD YOU MOST LIKE TO PRESERVE?

Reply to the email that brought you this guide. A name and a few words are enough.

Prof. Katarína Slobodová Nováková
Ethnologist and Historian

www.katarinaslobodovanovakova.com
katarina.slobodova.novakova@gmail.com
Instagram: @katarina.s.novakova