

# Mayors and Clergymen

POWERFUL PARTNERS IN GENEALOGY

*By Megan Smolenyak*

## A Happy Accident

One of the wisest moves I've ever made in my decades of genealogical research was an accident. I had finally learned the name of the village from which my great-grandfather, Peter Smolenyak, had emigrated. This was back in the dark ages before the Internet, so I went to the Library of Congress and searched the international phone books for then-Czechoslovakia to find any listings for Smolenyaks. There was one: Jozef Smolenak.

Drafting a letter of introduction, I found someone to translate it into Slovak and mailed it off, not knowing if I would actually receive a response. I had no idea that I had fortuitously written to the gentleman who was the mayor of my ancestral village.

Jozef quickly turned into one of my greatest genealogical allies and together with the help of some other eager folks, we have forged a village-based commu-



Left: Osturna's Mayor, Jozef Smolenak.

nity, centered on Osturna, Slovakia. This community now has roughly 1,000 members, a quarterly newsletter in its ninth year, a Web site at [www.carpatho-rusyn.org/villages/osturna.htm](http://www.carpatho-rusyn.org/villages/osturna.htm) and reunions that alternate every other year between Slovakia and the U.S. None of this would have been possible without the help of the mayor.

And through the good offices of the mayor, I made my acquaintance with the village priest, Father Ivan Bojcuk. He, in turn, has opened up a whole new world of genealogical possibilities and we in North America have done our best to return the favor.

Nor are we the only ones who have benefited from such a relationship. Florida-based Rich Pettit had a very similar experience when he launched [www.maybole.org](http://www.maybole.org), a Web site dedicated to the town of Maybole, Scotland. The word "mayor" has never been used in Scotland, so Rich instead made contact with David Kiltie, whose title is Chairman of the Maybole Community Council.

Although Rich's site was originally designed to help family historians with Maybole roots, the purpose quickly evolved so that it promotes the town as a whole and facilitates communication among Maybole "netizens" scattered around the globe. At latest count, the site contained 3,000 images and almost a thousand pages of Maybole-centered content!

### Why Bother?

While it's fairly obvious that developing a relationship with political and religious figures from your village of origin could be beneficial, it is probably less clear how you can help each other, so I'd like to share some examples gathered from the experiences of the Osturna and Maybole communities.

At first, my letters with the mayor focused on family details, trying to hash out possible connections between Slovak and American Smolenyaks. Over time, however, we began writing about other families,

Osturna history, and other topics. We are very fortunate in that micro-filmed church records for Osturna were released by the Family History Library (FHL) in the mid-1990s, but until then, we had relied on the mayor. I was delighted to discover that he had access to village records and was more than willing to take the trouble to search them for us. Only later did I learn that he had to journey to repositories in three different towns in order to access these documents. In recent years, we have been able in some small measure to repay his kindness by providing him a copy of the records we now have access to in the U.S. This at least means he has to travel less to answer our letters!

Even after the records had been released on microfilm, we continued to ask for Jozef's assistance because he could view the more recent records, which often contained data about the immigrant generation. Moreover, having lived in the village his entire life and been mayor for over a quarter of a century, he seems to know about every family that ever lived there and where they might have migrated when they departed.

His remarkable memory has served us well such as in the situation where a first generation American woman contacted me explaining that she was dying and would like to find her Slovak cousins. The mayor was not yet on the Internet, so I e-mailed an English-speaking Slovak who called Jozef for me. He knew that her cousins had moved to the "big city" around WWII and was able to locate them almost immediately. Within ten days, the American was in contact with her previously unknown first cousins.

How else have we helped each other? Here's a sampling:



- The priest allowed us to make digital copies of the post-1906 records not available through the FHL, so we now have an “insurance” copy in case anything should happen to the originals.
- The North Americans are conducting an on-going fundraiser to contribute funds for the restoration of the only church in Osturna.
- The mayor helped us make all the necessary arrangements for our Osturna-based reunions, both of which entailed 40 Americans visiting the tiny village.
- The North Americans have collected much of the village’s genealogical data into a master database that is available to all through our Web site and are in the process of transcribing village records.

Rich’s experience, although more web-focused, has been of the same vein. He elaborates, “Our partnership in building the Web site has been very strong from the first day we started and our individual skills very complementary. David Kiltie is not only the recognized leader of the community, but was born in Maybole and has lived his entire life there. In addition, he is the part-time news reporter covering the town and other villages nearby. My skills include building Web sites and having knowledge of and enthusiasm for family history research. Together we did what neither of us could have done by ourselves. Based in Florida, I could never have generated the interest or support from the Maybole community that David Kiltie has done with his contacts in Maybole or through the articles that he has written about the Web site in the newspaper. There was no one in the Maybole community with the knowledge or commitment to develop a Web site for the town and with an interest in collecting information of interest to family historians. This is what I have to contribute to this partnership.”

## Photo Galleries

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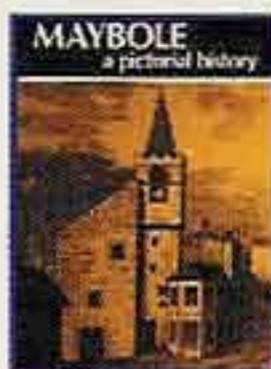
Click on the images below to view each of the galleries. ([Note for Users of Internet Explorer 6.0](#))



The main gallery. A seven page collection of photos in and about Maybole.



Spectacular images about the Carrick region of Ayrshire by Fred Westcott.



Three pages of selected images from the book: *Maybole - a pictorial history*.



An extraordinary panoramic view of Maybole from the top of Town Hall.



Six galleries of superb photos by Brian Wotherspoon. [Winter Scenes](#) [Culzean & Arran](#) [Photos of Maybole](#) [Places about Maybole](#) [Carrick Landscapes](#) [Aerial Maybole](#)



Winter scenes from Maybole - the Millennium's last grand show.



Old Mirishant. A gallery of photos of this village a few miles to the north of Maybole.

The Internet site, [www.maybole.org](http://www.maybole.org) promoting the area of Maybole, Scotland.

Maybole’s success can be seen in that the town’s Web site consistently attracts more than 150,000 page hits a month (sometimes more than 300,000), including visitors from Scotland, the U.S., Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, as well as less expected places such as Peru, Guyana, Turkey, Taiwan, South Africa and Slovenia.

Because Maybole is significantly larger than Osturna, Rich’s experience with religious leaders has been somewhat different. All five churches in Maybole have pages on the Web site, but as you might expect, their level of interest and cooperation varies. Rich notes, “I have not had any contact with some of the clergy in Maybole. On the other hand, the Baptist church contacts me every month with a special Web message, which is often added as a link from the home page. I have exchanged a number of e-mails with another of the ministers for the Church of Scotland in Maybole and was given a tour of the church where many of my ancestors worshiped 150 years ago.”

## How to Find Them

So how would you go about locating these potential genealogical partners? The first step is to simply search the Internet for Web sites pertaining to the community. General search engines such as [www.google.com](http://www.google.com) work well. If you are fortunate enough to be overwhelmed with hits, narrow your search by using terms such as mayor, official, government, town hall, election, priest, pastor, minister, and reverend. Rich also advises searching church or diocesan Web sites, which might have directories of local clergy.

If you are among those of us who hail from tiny places still under-represented on the Internet, you might want to try online e-mail and telephone directories. A good starting point for this is [www.hansaprint.fi/eypeng.html](http://www.hansaprint.fi/eypeng.html) where you can search for directories by country. Even if there are only Yellow Pages available for your country of interest, it still may be worth a search. For instance, if I search the online Slovak

business listings for Osturna, I won't find the mayor or priest, but I will find six listings for local businesses, including the fire department. There's a good chance that someone there would know the mayor and would be willing to give me his contact information, if I were just beginning my search now. For villages and towns in Western Europe, there is an excellent chance that these directories will include the addresses of local churches.

If this tactic fails to produce the desired results, search the Internet again for anyone having an affiliation with the town. Then e-mail them and ask for their assistance finding local officials. Rich suggests librar-

## If You Don't Speak the Language

Unless your ancestors come from Scotland or other English-speaking countries, this will naturally be a factor. In such cases, it's best if you take on the responsibility of having communications translated. In the case of Osturna, the mayor was so delighted to hear from his trans-Atlantic cousins that he would have gladly taken on this burden, but it would have been extremely difficult and comparatively expensive for him, so we found Slovak translators in the U.S.

If you're in more of a hurry, you can always use online translation Web

If you're dealing with a less popular language, you may be able to find sites on the Internet that help with that language, but there's a reasonable chance that you will have to find a volunteer or hire a professional. If so, you can get a running start at Cyndi's List of language resources found at <http://cyndislist.com/language.htm>.

## What Next?

You've finally managed to find contact information for the mayor or pastor, so now you're ready to write that first letter or e-mail. How do you start? As North Americans, we operate at a faster pace than much of the world. Because of this, we are often tempted to find the mayor and get right down to business, but it's best for all concerned if you take the time to establish a relationship first. I am particularly weak in this area as is evidenced by the fact that one of the first phrases I master in many languages is the equivalent of "Let's go!" or "C'mon!"

But I encourage you to resist the urge to ask the mayor about the local records until after you've exchanged a few letters or e-mails, and perhaps photos. Tell him about your life, your family, your occupation, and the like. On the surface, this may seem as if it's for his benefit, but you'll probably find that you were glad you did this just for the pleasure of getting to know him.

When you do get around to asking questions, Rich recommends doing your homework, being as precise as possible, and not overwhelming them with too much at once. As he points out, "Mayors and pastors potentially have less time to respond to questions and so the need to keep questions specific and short is all the more important." Rather than ask for an entire family tree in a single correspondence, consider asking for



The priest gives tour to Americans.

ians, cemetery caretakers, and other local residents in addition to mayors and clergy members. And I have found that nearby travel agencies are especially useful because they tend to know the notables in their district, often have English-speaking staff, and may be a little more interested than most in helping you due to the prospect of future business.

sites, although you shouldn't expect the translations to be letter perfect. My favorite is Babel Fish at <http://babelfish.altavista.com>, which works for Spanish, French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Russian. Although there are other such sites, experimentation indicates that Babel Fish tends to be slightly more accurate.

a search to locate a life event such as your great-great-grandmother's birth or baptismal record.

Rich goes on to say that you should expect mixed results: "Ultimately, the help you receive will be determined by the information available to the individuals you are dealing with, the time they have available to spend with you, and their willingness to assist you. Be prepared for disappointments in some cases and a few great surprises in others."

On balance, though, both Rich and I have had very positive experiences. Rich believes that if you work with political and religious officials over time and gain their trust, they will be more likely to share their insights on community life or other things affecting the community not known to most residents. For instance, as he was giving a tour of parts of Maybole last year, a local minister shared details of a plan to consolidate the two Church of Scotland congregations in Maybole. Rich was naturally concerned that he might never again see the church that his ancestors had attended as the building might be torn down, so he was sure to take a few more photos than he would have otherwise done. This plan of consolidation has now been published in the newspaper and is known to all affected, but Rich was careful not to break the confidence the minister shared in the interim.

## Return the Favor

Assuming you are one of the fortunate ones who receives a warm reception, you will quickly find yourself looking for ways to repay the kindnesses that come your way. You may wish to ask what you can do or dream up some ideas of your own, particularly any that might make the mayor's or clergyman's job easier in the future. By way of

example, Rich suggests, "Offering to index church or other local records or somehow make them easier to use might be a way to return the favor of having access to them. Putting them on the Internet might allow the priest to refer others to this source instead of putting the original records through more wear." Alternatively, churches and other local entities are frequently low on funds, so donations are always appreciated, especially in those countries where the dollar goes a long way.

While returning the favor in some fashion is simply a considerate thing to do, you may well find that it also helps with further requests for assistance either to these same community leaders or others you may contact down the road.

## Count Your Blessings!

Many who contact local politicians and clergymen will do so to learn more about their own family. In such cases, the rewards will be obvious, as you will hopefully learn the details

you've been seeking. For those who become more involved such as Rich or myself, the rewards will be more abstract, but no less fulfilling. As something of a North American facilitator for Osturna-related projects, I have received far more gratitude than I deserve simply because I'm visible, and my "partners in crime," Jozef Smolenak and Father Ivan Bojcuk, are the ones who make it all possible.

Rich has found much the same. For him, the most rewarding aspect of working with the Chairman of the Maybole Community Council has been "the opportunity to serve and help others that are also looking for information about the town, whether it is travel advice for a trip to Maybole to walk the streets their ancestors walked, finding living relatives, or tracing deceased ones in the cemetery." He concludes, "The words of thanks and grateful comments received daily from site visitors by both of us have not stopped for the nearly three years we

Below: Translation of the letter from Mayor Smolenak of Osturna, Czech Republic.

Dear Megan

I was very happy to receive a letter from you and I thank you very much, I am also very proud. I hope that being in contact with you, we will know more about each other. The only contact we had so far, was with Michal Smolenak in Prague. Once again I want to thank you very much for your letter.

I received Smolenak newspaper from Miša from Prague it was already translated in czech language, for which I thank him very much and let us hope that we will know more about your life, working conditions and about your and our life.

Now something about me. I am single, my mother died, when she was 82 years old, in 1981. My father died in 1984, he was 80 years old, since that time I live alone in my house. Since 1974 I am a mayor of Osturna and I like it.

In this village lives my sister Žofia Barčák, she has 11 childrens - 8 boys and 3 daughters. I also have

have worked together. I could ask for no better partner in building the site than David Kiltie.”

Here's wishing you the best of luck in finding and teaming up with your political and religious partners! ■



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**Megan Smolenyak Smolenyak** (yes, that's her real name!) is the author of the recently released *Honoring Our Ancestors: Inspiring Stories of the Quest for Our Roots and In Search of Our Ancestors*, the companion book to the 2000 PBS Ancestors series. She can be reached through her Web site at [www.honoringourancestors.com](http://www.honoringourancestors.com).