

Let's Get Started! How to Begin Researching Your Family Tree

Family Chronicle

The Magazine for Families Researching their Roots

July/August 2002

\$5.95 US

\$6.95 Cdn

Genealogical Databases: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

**Jump-Starting
Your Eastern
European
Research**



**Newspaper
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It's All There in
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No Place,
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**What is the
Origin of your
Family Name?**



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PAP Registration No. 10630



**John Philip
Colletta:
At Home with
Your Ancestors**

Jump-Starting your Eastern European Research

Megan Smolenyak charts a logical course to track down your East European roots.

OVER THE YEARS, I've had the opportunity to help several hundred people discover their Eastern European roots. As the former genealogical chair for the Carpatho-Rusyn Society, I frequently received e-mails from folks with roots in current-day Ukraine, Poland and Slovakia, along with inquiries from others whose heritage takes them to that part of the world.

Every once in a while, I would receive a message with a hint of panic: "I'm going to Poland next month and want to see where my grandfather came from and maybe meet some cousins, but I don't know where to begin. What do I do?"

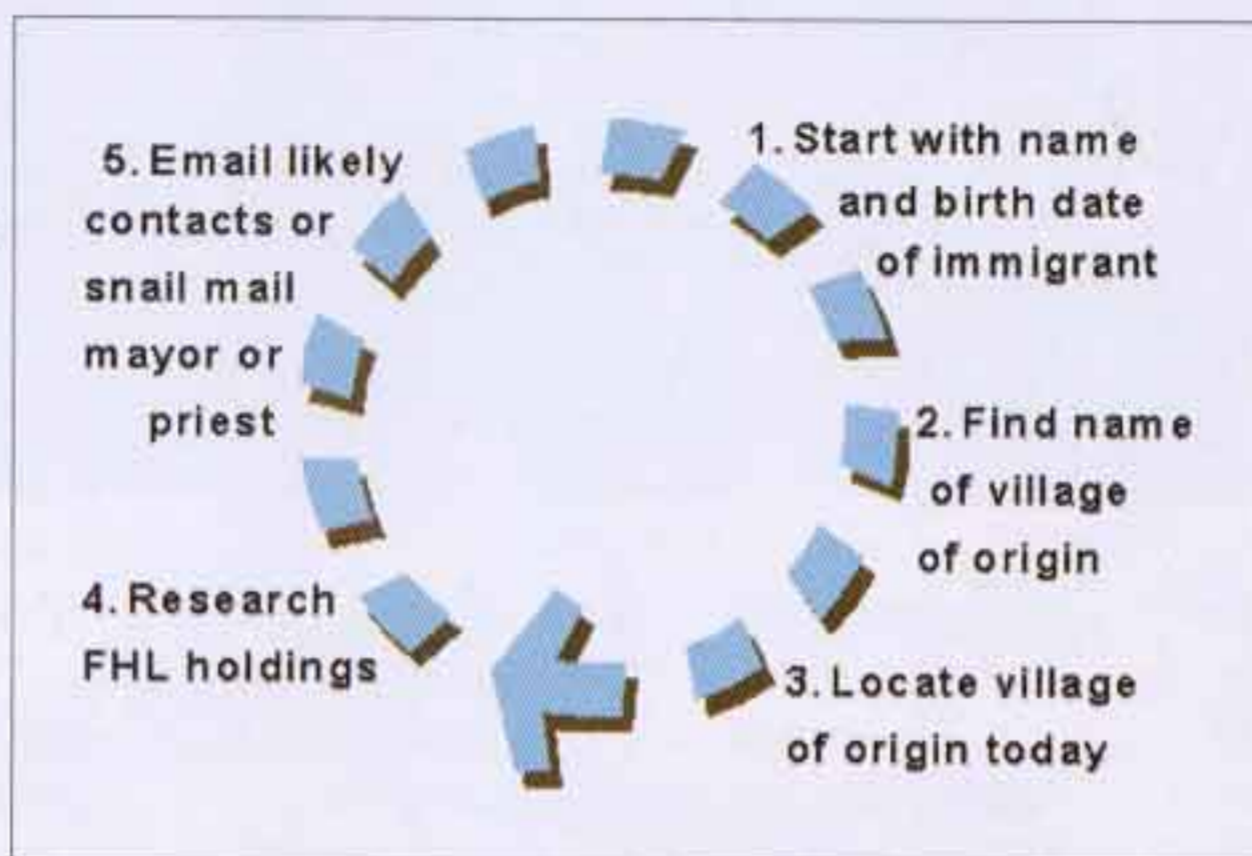
While I don't encourage this kind of last minute research, I always did my best to help, and from this experience, I developed an approach for "crossing the pond" as quickly as possible. Researchers aren't always able to beat the clock in these genealogical races, but the five-step approach covered here will generally speed up the process. And, if you're organized enough to get started at least six months before your journey, your chances of success are excellent.

1. Start with the Name and Birth Date of the Immigrant

If you're trying to cross the ocean, the immigrant is your bridge — the one whose life left traces on both sides — so focus your efforts on him. The three resources most helpful in quickly learning about him are extended family members, the Social Security Death Index (SSDI) and census records.

Extended Family

Even if it's a little uncomfort-



able because you haven't see her since Grandma's funeral, pick up the phone and call your great-aunt Anna. She'll probably be delighted to hear from you and the tidbits she can share may save you months of searching. Unless she's an avid genealogist herself, she has no way of knowing what information might be most useful to you. In fact, she probably assumes you know a lot more than you do, so don't fall into the trap of expecting her to instinctively tell you everything you consider important.

Be prepared with specific questions regarding names, dates and places. Don't just ask the name of the immigrant; ask about other family members who immigrated, name changes, spellings

adopted by various family branches and nicknames. Don't just ask for the immigrant's date of birth; ask for his date of death, marriage and immigration. And don't just ask where the family was from in the old country; ask where everyone settled in the US, Canada or elsewhere. It's not unusual for those of Jewish heritage to discover, for instance, that the oldest children in the immigrant family

were born in Russia, the next pair in England, another child in Canada and only the last one or two in the US. Always conclude by soliciting suggestions of anyone else who might have more information.

SSDI

Once you have some immigrant names and ball-park dates of birth or death from family members, go online to any of the sites that house the SSDI (e.g. www.rootsweb.com, www.familysearch.org, www.ancestry.com, etc.) and start hunting.

Make it a habit to use the advanced search capabilities, taking advantage of the birth date, death date and states of last residence and issue fields. With our exotic names, you'll often find the folks you're looking for fairly easily if they lived until the early 1960s, but if the family adopted a more common, Anglicized surname, date and place data can be used to narrow the field to the ones relevant to you. If your prey remains elusive, try nicknames. You may just find Sarah as Sadie or Jakub as Jack or Jake.

If you're not in last-minute mode, you might want to invest \$27 to request a copy of the immigrant's Social Security



Meeting distant cousins from your homeland is a moving experience.

application. Most SSDI sites conveniently incorporate a letter-generating feature for this purpose. Response time is usually several months, but will provide one key piece of information: the names of the immigrant's parents.

No matter how strange his name may be in the North American context, you can be almost certain that it will be common in his home village. Having the names of his parents could save you a lot of grief trying to determine which Stefan Motyczka is yours. It's true that you can use expedited services (e.g., www.vitalchek.com) to obtain his death certificate, but names of parents on these documents are frequently provided by children who never met their old country grandparents. On the Social Security application, the immigrant himself has provided this information, making it much more reliable.

Census Records

Census records are another tool for finding lots of information quickly and are particularly important for those whose ancestors died pre-1962 or don't appear in the SSDI for other reasons. If you are fortunate enough to be armed with dates from the SSDI, though, you'll be better equipped to pluck out the right John Kovalcik in the census. Depending on the specifics of your family's arrival, you might want to start with the 1900, 1910, 1920 or 1930 census. The 1900 and 1920 census records are usually the most helpful since they're Soundexed.

If your ancestors were among the earlier Eastern Europeans to immigrate, you'll want to start with the 1900 census. Since the family most likely arrived within the previous decade, data pertaining to year of immigration, naturalization status and children's ages and places of birth tend to be slightly more accurate because



Warsaw.

they are more recent. By 1920, memories may have faded.

If your family came post-1900, start with the 1920 and expand your research to the other census years. Plan on getting all the census records for the years your family was in the country, as they will help you iron out conflicting information. For instance, the 1920 census may show your grandfather as having been naturalized in 1900, but his 1910 census may reveal that he had only applied for papers. Or great-aunt Rose may have insisted her whole life that she was born in 1898, but the 1900 census may show that she emigrated as a baby with her parents in 1894.

If you don't have easy access to a branch of the National Archives or a local Family History Center, consider investing in online subscriptions to find census records more quickly. For example, those of Pennsylvania coal-mining stock can take advantage of the 1910 Pennsylvania Miracode and 1920 census search functionality available at www.ancestry.com. If you have the census image subscription, you'll be able to instantly view the digitized images. Those with a 1900 subscription to www.genealogy.com can search for the same family in earlier years and also view the census online. And both Ancestry.com and Heritage Quest are racing to index and digitize the 1930 census for online or CD access.

Don't let the lack of a complete Soundex to the 1910 and

1930 census records deter you from seeking these records. Instead, use finding aids to shorten your search. Many non-Soundexed states in the 1910 census have Miracodes or have been indexed and made available on CD by Heritage Quest. I have found the New York City 1910 Census Index an especially helpful time-saving tool since it seems

someone in everyone's family spent some time there.

Even if your target falls into the cracks, you can always use the geographic approach by obtaining street addresses from city directories, identifying likely enumeration districts, and searching your ancestor's neighborhood. For the recently released 1930 census, add Stephen Morse's Obtaining EDs for the 1930 Census in One Step (Large Cities) site (<http://home.pacbell.net/spmorse/census/>) to your bookmarks. While the title suggests that it's geared to large cities, the simple question-and-answer interface makes it easy to determine your best approach regardless of where your family lived and directs you to the National Archives site for further assistance when appropriate.

2. Find the Name of the Village of Origin

So now you know the name of your immigrant and have at least an estimate of the years of his birth and arrival. Next you'll want to find the village of his birth. Your best options are passenger arrival, naturalization and church records, but with the introduction of new Internet resources, online immigration records are usually the fastest way to uncover the place of origin.

Ellis Island Database

By now, everyone is acquainted with the Ellis Island database site (www.ellisland.org). The May/June 2002 issue of *Family Chronicle* contained an in-depth



Picture courtesy of www.hamburg.de/fhh/international

The Port of Hamburg in 1890.

article with strategies for finding your ancestors if they are among those playing hide-and-seek in the database, so I won't repeat the content here. Suffice it to say that you should visit Stephen Morse's Searching the Ellis Island Database in One Step site (<http://home.pacbell.net/spmorse/ellis/ellis.html>) if you can't find that slippery ancestor by searching directly through the Ellis Island site. If you still can't find the immigrant you're seeking, try looking for others associated with him or others of the same surname.

With its 24 million free, digitized records, the Ellis Island site has naturally garnered a lot of attention and our undying appreciation, but it's worth mentioning two other, underutilized resources.

Hamburg Emigration Records

Emigration records for Hamburg, a point of departure for many of our ancestors, are available for searching on the Internet (http://www.hamburg.de/fhh/behoerden/staatsarchiv/link_to_your_roots/english/start.htm) for the period 1890-1898. If your ancestors came a little later than 1898, check back periodically as they are steadily working their way forward in time. While the database used to be free, you are now charged \$20 to access each record of your selection. Fortunately, you

are provided enough information (e.g., year of departure, country of origin, year of birth, etc.) to usually determine whether it's the person you're seeking. This website is particularly useful for those of us with "early bird" arrivals. My great-grandfather who came in 1890, for instance, came too early to appear in Ellis Island records, but does appear in this database as seen in the results shown on the right.

From this, I could learn that he was from Osztornyn or present-day Osturna. Ungarn indicates that he was from part of the then-Hungarian Empire. It bears mentioning that the information contained here is more accurate than that contained in his corresponding New York passenger arrival record.

Canadian Arrivals

Another handy tool is the Canadian Archives' database of 1925-1935 arrivals (www.archives.ca/02/020118_e.html). This database conveniently picks up just about

where the Ellis Island database currently trails off, largely due to the imposition of US immigration restrictions in the early 1920s. Even if you're certain your direct line ancestors came to the US, chances are you have some Canadian cousins descended from later arrivals. If you can't find the place of origin for your grandfather who came to Ohio, perhaps his brother's Canadian record will have the information you seek.

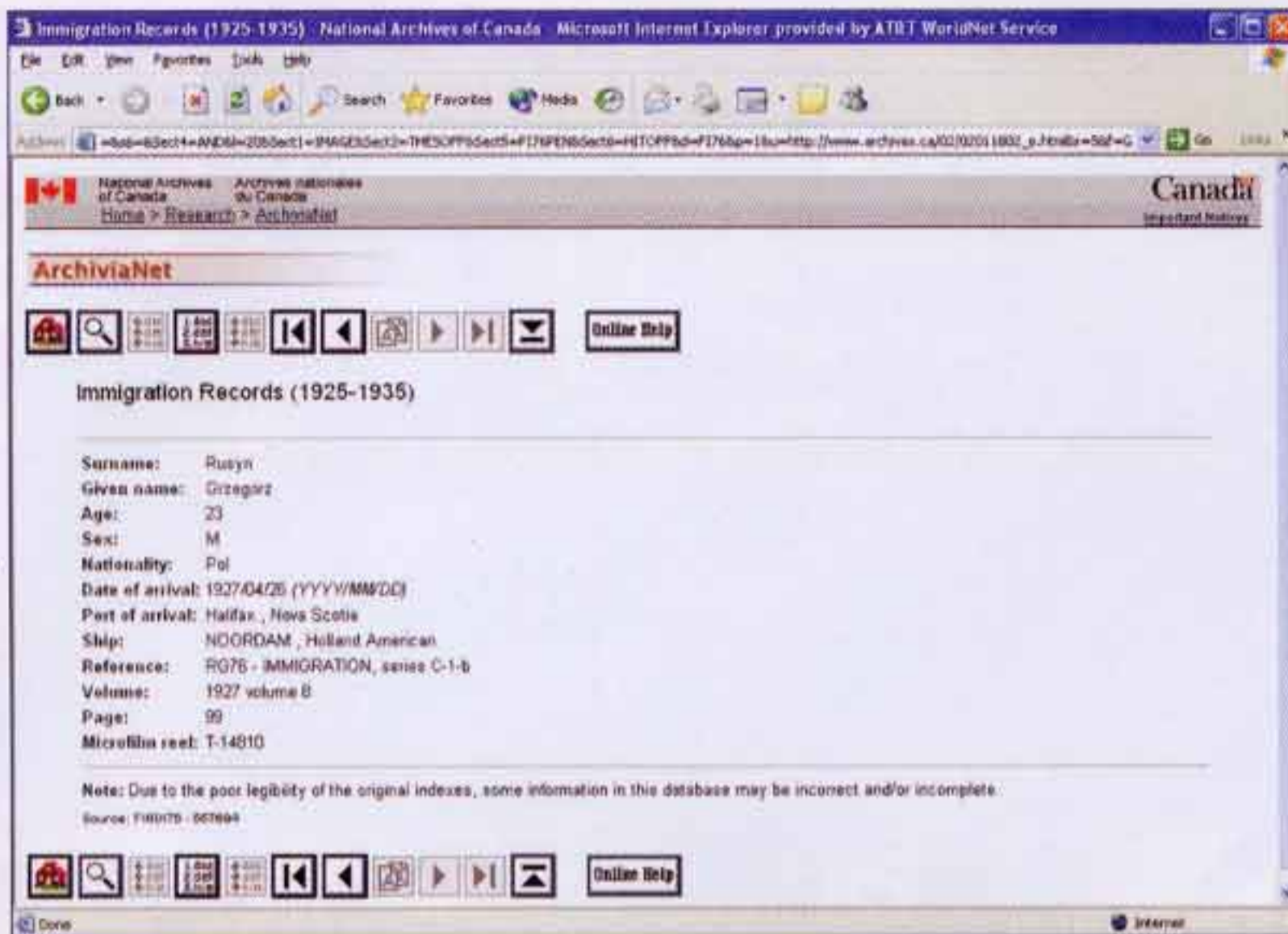
Surname:	Smolinak
Given Name:	Peter
Age in Years:	17
Date of Birth:	
Place of Birth:	
Marital Status:	
Nationality:	
Place of Residence:	Osztornyn
(Federal) State of Origin:	Ungarn
Religion:	
Profession:	Arbeiter
Passenger Number:	01.0083
Passage Number:	A1890.0052
Accommodation:	Zwischendeck
Date of Departure:	24.02.1890
Port of Departure:	
Destination of Ship:	New York
Name of Ship:	Moravia
Ship Type:	Dampfschiff
Shipping Company:	Hamburg-Amerikanische Packetfahrt-Actien-Gesellschaft
Agent:	Hamburg-Amerikanische Packetfahrt-Actien-Gesellschaft
Country Flag of Ship:	Deutschland
Name of Captain:	Winkler

While digitized images of the records are not available online, basic details are and you can place an order by mail or fax to obtain a copy for a nominal fee. Processing usually takes six to eight weeks, so you might want to consider hiring a local researcher if you're in a hurry.

Naturalization Records

Naturalization records are also prime candidates for learning an ancestor's place of origin, but generally require a little more time. If your ancestor came pre-1906, however, it may well be worth a letter to the county courthouse in the area where they lived. Call ahead to inquire about costs and be sure to provide as many details as you have been able to learn, including an educated guess as to when the naturalization occurred.

While response time varies widely, many courthouses are extremely efficient in replying. I have been delighted to occasionally receive results in under a week. Even for those who were likely naturalized after the September 1906 establishment of a federal agency, it often pays to contact the local court houses as many retained copies. You can, of course, make a Freedom of Infor-



mation request from the Immigration and Naturalization Service (www.ins.usdoj.gov/graphics/aboutins/history/natzrec/natrec.htm), but should expect to wait several months for a response.

Another resource for possibly shaving a little time off your search is German Roots' Online Searchable Naturalization Index list (<http://home.att.net/~wee-monster/naturalization.html>), which provides links to online indexes across the country, ranging from 1893-1905 Mineral County, Colorado to 1907-1924 Kings County (Brooklyn), New York records.

Naturalizations occurring in major cities can be especially frustrating to locate due to layers of local, state and federal court systems, so you may want to search the Family History Library Catalog (<http://familysearch.org/Eng/>

[Library/FHLC/frameset_fhlc.asp](#)) for assorted naturalization indexes available for that area. If time is a factor and you can't wait for three-week turnarounds on the microfilms, consider hiring a professional genealogist who specializes in onsite FHL assistance.

Church Records

The birth village may also appear in your ancestor's religious records, particularly if he attended an ethnic church as many Eastern Europeans did. His marriage record or the baptisms of his children may include the place of his birth. As with naturalization records, response can vary widely from almost instantaneous to none at all. You can improve your chances by including a SASE and much-deserved donation, but be prepared for the possibility of your check being cashed with no reply ever forthcoming. Also, you'll want to be sure to specify that you're seeking the name of your ancestor's village. Many churches use standardized transcription forms that do not furnish a space for this information, so you will not get it unless you explicitly ask for it.

3. Locate the Village Today

By now, you probably have one or



Litmanova, Slovakia

more versions of the name of your ancestor's village, so your challenge is to find where this place is today.

Back to the Extended Family

If you are fortunate enough to have older or even immigrant relatives still alive, you presumably queried them earlier, but return to them with your new information. They may have told you earlier that the family came from L'viv, but your research has turned up the name Mosty Wielkie, a village roughly 30 miles from L'viv. Just mentioning the name of the town may open the flood gates to long forgotten memories and fresh details.

Now is the time to probe more deeply. You've discovered that the immigrant came from Barwinek in Poland, but which one? There are three! Ask specific questions such as the name of the largest major city or border and the closest rivers, mountains or other natural landmarks. Which train station did the emigrants use? Did the town ever become part of a different country? Was the town ever known by any other name? How were letters to the old country addressed? Are any old letters available for inspection?

Locating Tools

Now that you have some reference points, you can refer to ethnicity-specific resources. For instance, in assisting Rusyns, I have frequently consulted Dr. Paul Magosci's *Our People* and the Carpatho-Rusyn Research Center's map of Rusyn settlement at the outset of the 20th century.

Regardless of your ethnicity, JewishGen's ShtetlSeeker (www.jewishgen.org/ShtetlSeeker/) is an invaluable resource for those of Eastern European heritage. Giving you several spelling search options (including the Daitch-Mokotoff Soundex, designed to

handle the quirks of Eastern European languages), this site will turn up all towns you should consider, batched by country. Clickable geographical coordinates allow you to view a map of each town. Using the details you've gathered to this point, you should be able to hone in on the right town. For instance, I was able to determine that my great-grandmother came from the Barwinek located 197 miles south of Warsaw because I had learned it was close to the Slovak border.

4. Research Family History Library Holdings

At this point, you're clear on your village of origin, so now you'll want to see what records are readily available. It's worth it at this juncture to use your favorite search engine to see what may have already been uploaded to the Internet.

You may be one of the lucky ones who discovers that someone has already done most of the work for you. Those with roots in Litmanova, Slovakia, for example, will be amazed at all the data and photos Nick Benyo has assembled and uploaded (www.benyo.com/litmanova/), including a list of 596 Litmanova immigrants along with their birth, immigration and death dates, names of parents and spouses and residence in the US.

Assuming you're like most of us, though, you're not going to find a site devoted to your village, so you'll want to go to the online

Family History Library Catalog (http://familysearch.org/Eng/Library/FHLC/frameset_fhlc.asp) and click on place. Once there, try every version of your village name you have encountered. The village might be listed as Kremenets, Kremenetz or some other version.

What you will find will be hit and miss. Looking for Osturna, I was thrilled to find church records dating back to 1787. By contrast, church records for Barwinek only cover the 1830-1855 timeframe.

That's why it's key to search on other layers of geography such as county, region, and country or empire. Searching for Osturna reveals the village's Greek Catholic church records, searching on Szepes (the Hungarian name for the county where Osturna is located) brings up the 1869 census, and searching on Hungary uncovers 1828 land records that include Osturna. Factoring in history and local geography, typing in Austria discloses military records that include some Osturnites and checking on the neighboring village of Velka Frankova turns up the records of a Roman Catholic church with plenty of Osturnites sprinkled in them. Given time constraints, you're going to be most interested in religious and census records, but if you have a little leeway, try exploring land and military records as well.

Once again, if time is of the essence, consider hiring an expert who conducts FHL research. Other-

wise, order the films and start scrolling! Your primary goal is to locate the birth record of your immigrant ancestor and work your way back as far as the records will permit. Make note of any siblings of the immigrant as some of them may not have emigrated. Their children or grandchildren are your best chance for finding living relatives overseas.

A secondary goal is to locate house num-

JewishGen
preserving our history for future generations

ShtetlSeeker
click here to "unlock the potential"

Point to Point
Volume 1, Number 1

Searching for Town BARWINEK (precise spelling)
Run on Friday 26 April 2002 at 11:01:40
Click on the Coordinates to see the town location on a Map
This search request has been made possible through the JewishGen generosity of Anne Kolber

Town	Coordinates	Name Type	Country	Distance/Direction from reference point
BARWINEK	5051 2037	N	Poland	98.1 miles S of Warsaw
BARWINEK	5010 1838	N	Poland	176.5 miles SW of Warsaw
BARWINEK	4926 2142	N	Poland	196.9 miles S of Warsaw

bers associated with your family. In many villages, these have remained remarkably consistent over the years and villagers will be able to help you find these houses, even if your entire clan emigrated a century ago. In those cases where the numbering has shifted, there's usually someone in the village who will know how.

5. Contact the Village's Mayor or Priest

Now knowing your house number and some family details, it's time to go surfing again. This time search on the village name in conjunction with surnames associated with your village (which you will have inevitably stumbled across in your research up to this point).

Use e-mail directories as well to see if you can locate any fellow villagers, particularly ones who still reside in Europe. You may be fortunate and find someone online who lives in the village, but this is still fairly rare, so you will probably have to rely on a go-between.

The aim is to find people associated with your village who can communicate on your behalf with someone actually living there today. If you can't find such a person, look for a tour company in the vicinity of your village. They frequently have an online presence, someone on staff who knows English and a built-in incentive to help you. Keep them in mind for when you arrange your first family reunion in the old country!

Once you find someone receptive, ask them if they would be kind enough to contact the village mayor or priest for you. Tell them that you are from the Zavacky family from house 151, the names of emigrant's parents and siblings, and that you are planning on coming for a visit shortly. Ask for their assistance locating living relatives.

In most cases, your request will reach helpful people. I recently received a plea from a dying woman who wanted to find her old country cousins before she passed away. I sent an e-mail to someone in Slovakia and asked him to contact the mayor by phone. In the interim, I searched

FHL records (which I conveniently had on indefinite loan) to learn details about her immigrant ancestor's family and sent this information by e-mail as well. Within a week, the mayor had located her family. They no longer resided in the village, but mayors and priests tend to know where people went when they left, even if it was decades ago.

Start Packing!

Odds are that the locals will be delighted to welcome you and don't be surprised if the mayor has arranged for your relatives to be there even if they now live elsewhere. At a minimum, your arrival will be expected so you should at least be able to see where your family's house was located.

When you're packing, include some copies of old family photographs. I have heard countless tales of long-lost cousins making the connection when they realized they both had copies of the same 1915 wedding. And don't forget to bring some gifts for the kind souls who helped facilitate your last-minute reunion.

Last but not least, make the commitment to do your homework a little further in advance when you go back looking for your grandmother's village!

Megan Smolenyak, author of Honoring Our Ancestors: Inspiring Stories of the Quest for Our Roots (Ancestry) and the PBS Ancestors companion book, In Search of Our Ancestors (Adams Media), can be reached through her website at www.honoringourancestors.com.