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MANY OF US ARE DISCOVERING THAT WE HAIL FROM TINY VILLAGES WHERE NEARLY EVERYONE IS SOMEHOW RELATED TO THE REST OF THE VILLAGERS.



Osterna group photo taken at the second reunion in Osturna in 2000.



# BUILDING A Village-Based COMMUNITY

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I have to confess that we never set out to build a village-based community. It was really an accident and an evolution, but over the last decade, a handful of like-minded and hard-working people helped me create a community based on the picturesque village of Osturna in present-day Slovakia. When it dawned on me what we had done, I looked around and realized that others were doing it, too. Now I'm convinced that this is a new wave in genealogy and we will find more and more people who want to create a village-based community.

by Megan Smolenyak Smolenyak

## What Is a Village-Based Community?

What do I mean by the phrase “village-based community”? Simply put, I use it to refer to an organization of people living in a particular village—or descended from immigrants from there—who join forces to perpetuate the history and memories of the place and their common ancestors.

In family history research, we naturally focus on our own families, our own bloodlines. This continues to be the norm today. But especially when we succeed in getting to the old country, many of us are discovering that we hail from tiny villages where nearly everyone is somehow related to the rest of the villagers. For this reason, it is logical and usually quite beneficial to make contact with others having roots in that village.

This is what I began doing around 1993, when I decided to learn more about the origins of my great-grandfather, Peter Smolenyak, who emigrated in 1890 from Osturna, which was then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It started innocently enough. I found others with my surname, learned other names associated with our village, and reached out to them. Even though Osturna is a tiny place with a current population of roughly 400, we soon found it more efficient to use a newsletter to share our discoveries than to try to communicate with everyone on a one-to-one basis. Before we realized what was happening, we had a full-fledged community complete with reunions, a newsletter, website, and assorted joint projects.

## Why Bother?

But is it really worth it? It is admittedly a lot of work to establish and maintain such a community. Ours, for instance, has evolved into a group of roughly 1,000 people, so even basic communication is an effort. Even so, there are compelling reasons to make this investment of time and effort. With a village-based community, you can:

- Recreate the sense of community that existed with the immigrant generation.
- Bring pleasure to the remaining immigrants and their children.
- Involve and help people from the old country.
- Help protect the village for future generations.
- Find dispersed treasures (e.g., photos, letters, music).
- Advance your genealogical research.
- Honor your ancestors.

The Osturna migration to North America was a classic Ellis Island-era migration with later arrivals going to Canada, so at the time we launched, we still had a few living immigrants who had come over as children. Since then, we've lost all of them, but many of their children are still

with us. They grew up speaking Slovak or Rusyn before they went to school, and they listened to their parents' tales of the old country and the journey to the New World. They are an incredible resource for our history and we, in turn, can give them the pleasure of an audience for their stories and the knowledge that their memories will live on.



St. Michael's Greek Catholic Church, subject of a fundraiser by Osturna descendants, was built in 1796.

We have also reconnected numerous trans-Atlantic families and are involved in efforts to help Osturna, such as raising money for church repairs. Because of the size of our community, we have found and shared countless photos and letters that otherwise would have remained in scattered little batches, and have been able to solve many family puzzles because of our ability to gather clues from so many sources. All of this is, I believe, a wonderful means to pay tribute to our forebears.

## The Process

As I mentioned at the outset, this whole process was anything but deliberate. Not surprisingly, we've learned some lessons the hard way. If I knew then what I know now, this is the process I would follow:

1. Find people with common roots and interest.
2. Establish ties with key people in the village, especially the mayor and priest.

3. Launch one or more communication tools.
4. Build momentum with reunions and other projects to involve members.

**MAYORS AND RELIGIOUS FIGURES ARE KEY PEOPLE TO KNOW IN SMALL VILLAGES. MAKING CONTACT AND BUILDING A RELATIONSHIP WITH THEM IS INVALUABLE.**

STEP  
**1**

**FIND PEOPLE WITH COMMON ROOTS AND INTEREST**

The first step is finding some partners. In order to do this, it helps if you can assemble a list of surnames that are common to your village. One of my favorite techniques for doing this is searching the online Ellis Island database at <[www.ellislandrecords.org](http://www.ellislandrecords.org)> or using Steve Morse's complementary site at <<http://home.pacbell.net/spmorse/ellis/ellis.html>> to find others from the same village. You can either search for known immigrant ancestors and look on the manifests for others from the same place, or use the "Town Name starts with" field in Morse's tool to find such people. If you use Morse's site, be sure to read the FAQs as they will help you get a lot more mileage from your research. Even for those whose families came pre-Ellis Island, this tactic works well as there were almost always later immigrants from any given place.

Aside from this, you can simply search the Internet for the village name and peruse whatever turns up. Chances are you will find some names—perhaps as webmaster or through the message board—on the websites you explore. Family History Library records are another good source. The church records for Osturna, for instance, go back to 1787 and provided approximately fifty names that were prevalent there. Similarly, you can do research at the churches your ancestors attended in the United States since immigrants from the same town often clustered together. And of course, you can ask the first people you find for other's surnames from the village.

Once you have a collection of names, it's time to go surfing again, but this time with the objective of finding others with these names. Search engines are an obvious starting point. If applicable to your ethnicity, be sure to search feminine versions of the names. When I searched on Smolenakova, for exam-

ple, I was surprised to discover a Slovak who had competed at Wimbledon. The major genealogy sites are another primary target, as are phone and e-mail directories. I like to search at Telephone Directories on the Web at <[www.teldir.com](http://www.teldir.com)> to find folks in the old country or other popular immigrant destinations such as Canada, Australia, and South America. Heavy e-mail users may also want to include a blurb about names being sought in their electronic signatures.

STEP  
**2**

**ESTABLISH TIES WITH KEY PEOPLE IN THE VILLAGE**

The next step won't necessarily take long, but may be critical to your long-term success. Mayors and religious figures are usually key people to know in small villages. Making contact and building a relationship with them is invaluable. They often have records and knowledge that you would not be able to access elsewhere, and they can make or break your efforts to plan a reunion or orchestrate other projects pertaining to the village. Fortunately, most of them will be delighted to hear from you and will be your greatest allies and supporters.

You may have already happened across their names while searching the Internet, but in most cases, they are not yet directly reachable online. If you're not patient enough for snail mail, locate others in that geographic region and ask them to contact the mayor or priest on your behalf. I



The mayor of Osterna, Jozef Smolenak, presents Mike Smolenak and author Megan Smolenyak with honorary citizenship.

have found that local tour companies are particularly helpful because they usually have English-speaking staff, good communication abilities, and an incentive to help.

Even if you start your contact by e-mail, it's a good idea to exchange a few letters, but the Internet may prove useful for this purpose as well. I have often used it to find postal codes, or in the cases where I'm dealing with a fairly widely spoken language, even for translation.

**FINDING SOME MEANS OF COMMUNICATING WITH EVERYONE IS ESSENTIAL. THIS WILL BE THE GLUE THAT HOLDS YOUR VIRTUAL VILLAGE CLAN TOGETHER.**

It's still more personal to send letters even if you can communicate electronically. Those of us in the new world tend to have a bit of a results-oriented mentality, but your old country cousins will want to get to know you. Spend some time getting to know them. Ask about their family, jobs, and hobbies, and exchange photos, just as you would with a pen pal. Not only will it help cement the relationship, it will be more fun and meaningful for you, too.

**STEP 3**

**LAUNCH ONE OR MORE COMMUNICATION TOOLS**

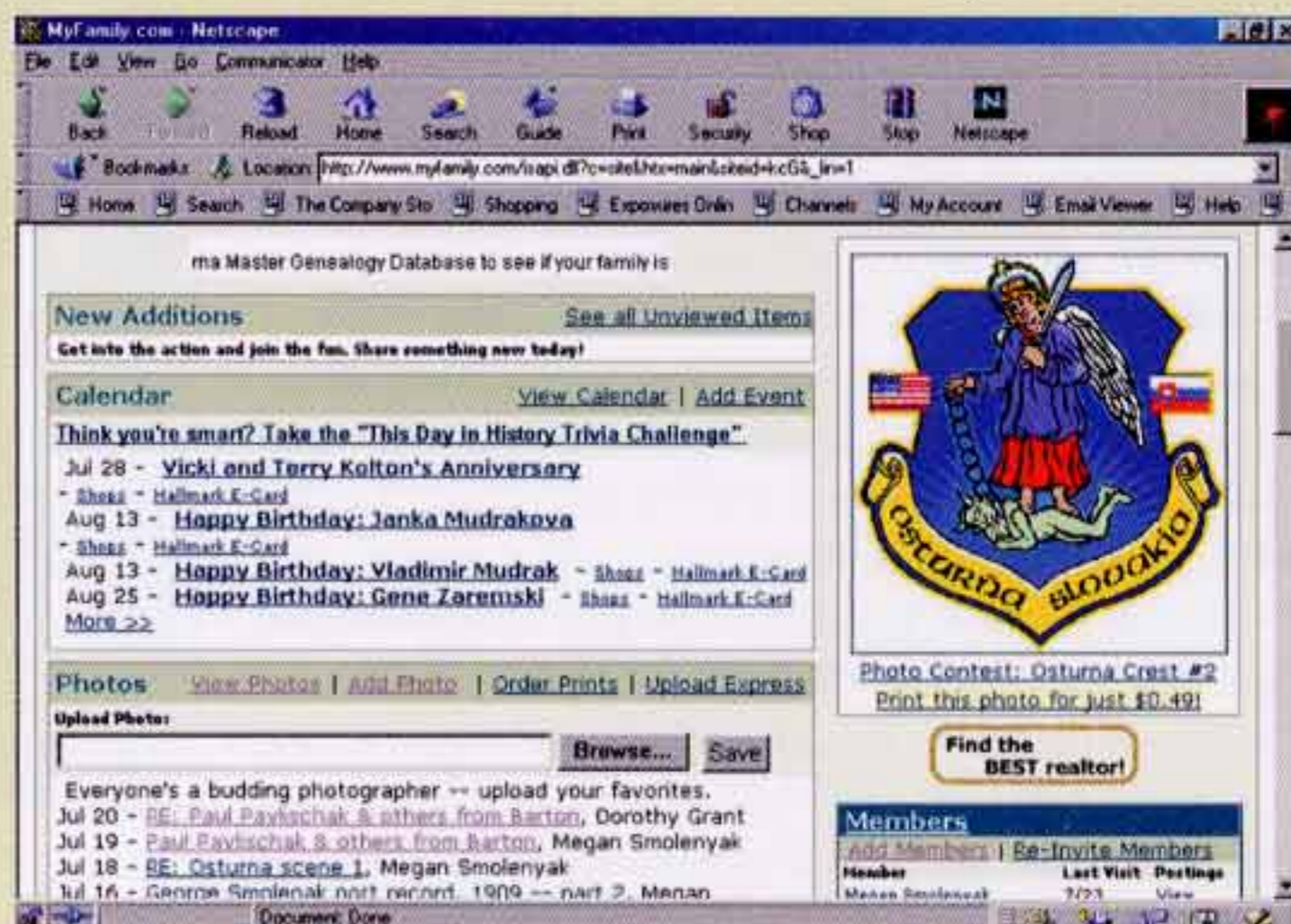
With today's mobile society, you are apt to find potential members of your community sprinkled around the United States and several other countries. For this reason, some means of communicating to everyone is essential. This will be the glue that holds your virtual village clan together.

In the case of the Osturna community, we launched a newsletter soon after starting. It enabled us to tell everyone what activities were underway, share research discoveries, find volunteers, coordinate reunions, and attract other Osturnites into the fold. Later, we started a website, and most recently, an 800 telephone number. We have found our number helpful for on-going networking, fundraising, planning reunions, and obtaining stories and information for the newsletter. While it's less important than a newsletter or website, it's affordable and especially helpful if you have some members on fixed incomes who are reluctant to make long distance phone calls. An 800 number, however, would never be enough by itself. It should only complement a newsletter or website, both of which merit additional discussion.

**Newsletter.** When it comes to newsletters, consistency is the key. When pondering how often to publish, frequency is less important than reliability, so be realistic about what you have the time to do. While we considered monthly or bimonthly, we finally settled on quarterly. Such a schedule means that we are not overtaxed when there are other village initiatives underway. It also means that we always run out of space before we run out of material. This ensures that each issue has a lot of interesting content and appears in members' mailboxes often enough that they have a sense of community, even if they rarely see the others.

At the time we began our newsletter in the early 1990s, a website was not an especially practical option, but newly forming associations might opt to start with a website and debate whether it's necessary to have a newsletter as well. Our website is now nearly three years old and well-trafficked, so we have discussed dropping the newsletter altogether. But given that most of our oldest members, especially the children of immigrants, are not connected to the Internet, we have decided to keep the hard-copy newsletter going for perhaps another five years. We also don't want to lose the pass-along benefit, having discovered that we get a surge in membership about every two years in the months leading up to our reunions. This is when our long-time members are most apt to share copies of the newsletter with their siblings and cousins. In the interim, we have begun uploading .pdf versions of the newsletter onto our website, and are gradually trimming our mailing list and costs in this way.

Perhaps the most important decision you will have to make regarding the newsletter is the cost. How much will you charge? We made the rather unusual choice of not charging at all and operating off donations. Once a year, we remind our readers that donations of money or self-adhesive



The Osturna community website at MyFamily.com



The Osterna community photo library on its MyFamily.com website

stamps are appreciated. We made this decision deliberately because we wanted to reach out to as many Osturnites as possible, and we knew that many of them have limited resources. Once again, you will have to be realistic and consider what you are trying to accomplish. You may find a few generous souls who will become sponsors of a sort and subsidize costs, but there are no guarantees. And you may only want to include those who are interested enough to at least pay a nominal subscription fee. It all comes down to your objectives, the numbers, and your willingness to contribute your own money as well as your time.

**Website.** Even if you already have a newsletter, a website is well advised, and as mentioned above, you could consider doing a website in lieu of a newsletter. The advantages are fairly obvious. It will increase the frequency of interaction among the members of the community and will take some of the effort off your shoulders. An online presence makes it easier to bring in far-flung members, and allows you to “get the word out” quickly and inexpensively. It also opens up more possibilities for group activities. For instance, we recently used our site for a photo contest. Members were invited to upload Osturna-related images and then vote on their favorites. The winning photos were then used on greeting cards that were sold as a fundraiser.

Because they are so affordable, most communities will want to establish a website. In our case, no one was keen on becoming a web guru or the conduit through which all Web content would have to flow, so we launched a MyFamily.com site as soon as they became available.

We’ve been very pleased with this decision as it allows us privacy and is extremely user friendly. We have found that many join in through the News feature very quickly and start contributing photos within a month or two of coming

on board. The uploading functionality has also permitted us to share a master database of Osturnites, .pdf versions of newsletters and relevant articles, bits of video footage, order forms for our fundraisers, and even Slovak music digitized from old 78s.

Those who are more technologically savvy, however, may prefer to create their own site, and there are some wonderful village-focused websites from which to borrow ideas. I am particularly jealous of those with roots in Litmanova, Slovakia, (see <[www.benyo.com/litmanova/indx4.htm](http://www.benyo.com/litmanova/indx4.htm)>) and Maybole, Scotland (see <[www.maybole.org/](http://www.maybole.org/)>). Webmasters Nick Benyo and Rich Pettit have set the bar extremely high for those aspiring to develop their own village sites.

## STEP 4

### BUILD MOMENTUM WITH REUNIONS AND OTHER PROJECTS TO INVOLVE MEMBERS

No matter how outstanding your newsletter and website might be, there’s no replacing the magic of reunions for creating a sense of community. Virtual communities are viable, but at some point you’ll want to be face-to-face to get beyond that e-mail acquaintance level of relationship. And in between the reunions, you’ll want to have some on-going projects to foster the community.

**Reunions.** Our Osturna gang holds reunions every two years, alternating between Slovakia and the United States. It’s just often enough to prevent reunion burn-out (both by organizers and attendees), but still nurture our personal friendships.

It also allows us to either bring folks to our home village or to some place in America where a cluster of Osturnites settled. For the U.S.-based reunions, we are careful to rotate locations to add variety and include those who can’t travel. Holding them in areas where multiple families put down roots also makes activities more obvious and easier to plan. Homes, churches, and cemeteries are all logical places to incorporate into a reunion. For instance, this year, we will have horse and wagon rides through Barton, Ohio, so attendees can see where our coal-mining kin lived, worshiped, and were buried.

Based on our experience, I would encourage you to organize at least one reunion in the village of origin. I







Slovak and American cousins uncover family connections by comparing photos at a reunion.

would hasten to add, though, that you should not try to do it all yourself. When forty of us went to Europe in 1996, we engaged the services of a Slovakia expert who had already arranged and guided about twenty-five trips there. Doing so saved us untold hours of frustration and countless headaches.

### Other Projects to Keep Members Involved

Between our get-togethers we still stay busy. I've already alluded to our fundraisers for the church. Note cards and t-shirts have worked well for us, as have photo contests to pick images to use on such items. Having the contests provides an incentive for members to go digging in their closets and attics as we welcome those old sepia-toned images along with more recent pictures. Mystery photos are also popular and genealogically useful. We include them in the newsletter and upload them on the website. Frequently, at least a few of the unknown faces are identified.

Most communities will have at least a handful of people with special talents and skills who are willing to contribute to the cause. In our case, we have a database whiz who maintains a master file of all Osturnites and their pedigrees. Before he enters a new family, he looks for links to those already in the database. In this manner, we have been able to find cousins for just about everyone in our community. We are also fortunate enough to have a remarkable graphics artist who designs eye-catching logos for our reunions.

Others pitch in with research or record-collecting assistance such as the half dozen people who recently volunteered to copy a newly available set of records pertaining to Osturna. Currently, we are seeking volunteers to mine the Ellis Island database for given Osturna surnames so we can add to our list of immigrants.

Those who have the appropriate equipment—both old and new—are digitizing old music for us and uploading it to the website and burning it on CDs. This will likely be a fundraiser item for this year's reunion. Similarly, we are filming church records both in Osturna and the places where the immigrants settled in North America.

One of our most fun projects was being included in the 2000 PBS *Ancestors* series, and we have now been invited to be in a documentary. Most recently, we have started a village-based DNA testing project to see if we can learn still more than the paper trail alone can tell us. This is just a representative

fraction of the kinds of community-building activities that can be pursued. The key is simply to choose a few that appeal to your group and get started.

### Remember to Enjoy It

I cannot stress enough how important it is to enjoy the process. Be sure to spread the work around. If you write the newsletter, perhaps someone else can copy and mail it. If you manage the website, let others handle the reunion arrangements. Don't try to do it all yourself. Lean on the inevitable core team of "reliables" who will emerge, and ask for volunteers frequently. When they step up to the plate, reward them with some form of recognition, such as the Osturna hall of fame feature we include in our newsletter. And finally, if you get tired, take a break. Contrary to what you may think, as long as you have some momentum going, the world will not fall apart if you skip a single issue of the newsletter. In fact, the ongoing activities of your fellow villagers, in spite of your temporary absence, will prove that you have indeed created a village-based community. ♪

*Megan Smolenyak Smolenyak is the author of the recently released Honoring Our Ancestors: Inspiring Stories of the Quest for Our Roots (Ancestry, 2002), a collection of fifty tales of unique and special ways people have chosen to pay tribute to those who came before them. She can be reached through her website at <[www.honoringourancestors.com](http://www.honoringourancestors.com)>.*