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A 20-year Adventure

BY ESTHER YU SUMNER

IN 1989, MIRIAM WEINER, an American from New Jersey, accepted an invitation from the Polish National Tourist Office (PNT0) to visit Poland. Twenty years later, she's still on her journey.

Along the way, Weiner, whose invitation came as a result of a column on Jewish family history she'd been writing for more than 100 newspapers, started the Routes to Roots Foundation. Its goal? To preserve Jewish heritage and research and document the variety of records available in each Eastern European archive, from land records and marriage records to Holocaust records.

When Weiner accepted the invitation from the PNT0, she had no known roots in Poland, couldn't speak the language, didn't know the culture, and wasn't familiar with the way Poland organized its records. But the PNT0 wanted someone like Weiner to give family history tours of the country. After her visit, Weiner said yes.

"I knew there were literally thousands of people worldwide who wanted to walk in the footsteps of their ancestors," says Weiner, "I wanted to help them."

But Weiner realized how great a challenge her new task would be when she went to an archive director for a list of archives in Poland. No list existed.

Weiner decided to make those lists herself — she needed them for her tours. She hired a translator, spent hours in archives, and was greeted with a bit of wariness. Her initial project, detailing all of Poland's Jewish and civil records from town to town, took 10 years to complete.

Today, Weiner and her Routes to Roots Foundation have researched archives in Poland, Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, and Lithuania. The work has resulted in photos, transcriptions, maps, resource books, and a database of other information about the five countries.

You can access Weiner's Routes to Roots Eastern European Archival Database, including references to civil and Jewish records in Belarus, Lithuania, Moldova, Poland, and Ukraine at Ancestry.com by visiting www.ancestry.com/jewish, where you'll find quick links to the site's numerous — and newly updated — Jewish family history resources as well.