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# Miriam Weiner: the genealogist with a desire (and a copy machine)

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**By: Tasha Ackerman**

*That's why I'm still working: because this gets to me emotionally. There is a satisfaction in what I do that I never anticipated, and I couldn't duplicate it anywhere else.* Miriam Weiner's voice resonated with a profound sense of purpose as she reflected on her ground-breaking journey in genealogy. For Miriam, the search for family history is not merely a profession; it is a deeply personal calling intertwined with her Jewish heritage. Her dedication to uncovering the past has illuminated the lives of countless individuals, revealing the stories hidden within their family trees. The work she does sheds light on the specific challenges that families face in reconnecting with their roots, particularly in Eastern Europe, Miriam's boots-on-the-ground approach has enabled not only her research clients to access previously unknown or inaccessible records but also through her books and her website, [www.rtrfoundation.org](http://www.rtrfoundation.org), she has created a lasting resource that will serve generations to come.

For those active in Eastern European Jewish genealogy, the name Miriam Weiner hardly needs an introduction. Weiner has won over a dozen awards for her ground-breaking work in Jewish genealogy, including most recently the "Outstanding Project/Resource/Program Award 2024" from the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies (IAJGS).

When The Together Plan CEO, Debra Brunner, saw Weiner speak at the annual IAJGS conference located in Philadelphia, USA this past August, she could attest to the admiration in the packed room, where people were scrambling to bring in more chairs to accommodate the large audience to hear her presentation on "Jewish Roots in Belarus, Poland and Ukraine: What's New and Where is it?" Debra became interested in Miriam's work through her

work with The Together Plan's mission of reconnecting Jews with their Belarusian Jewish ancestry. She recognised in Miriam the tenacity it took to navigate the complexities of these archives, especially before the fall of the Soviet Union.



Miriam Weiner receives the Individual Achievement Award from Ralph Jackson, President of the National Genealogical Society (NGS), 1991. NGS is the main genealogy society in the U.S. This was her first major award and has since received two other major awards from them. Photo with permission of Miriam Weiner.



Miriam Weiner receives Outstanding Project/Website Award, from the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies (IAJGS), 2024. She has received 4 awards from IAJGS; one for each of her books, a Lifetime Achievement Award, and most recently for her website. Photo with permission of Miriam Weiner.

In 1989, Miriam Weiner made history through her ambitions to unlock genealogical archives in Poland. What at first was a personal mission to locate her grandparents' records who had come from modern-day Ukraine and Belarus turned into a five-decade-long career, so far. After some preliminary research, Miriam got her first break when she reached out to a Ukrainian scholar who had written about the archives in the Soviet Union and found that the town where her grandmother was from, Priluki, had a small regional museum, so she decided to write a letter to inquire. She couldn't believe it when she got a response. Since the letter was in Russian, she called a friend who over the phone helped her translate. It turned out that one of the museum's workers had a fourteen-year-old son who studied English in school and helped his mum understand Miriam's letter. Among the documents Miriam received was her

grandmother's 1875 birth record. From that point, Miriam was hooked and began investigating how to get a visa to travel to Ukraine and investigate further.

Miriam began travelling to Eastern Europe before the fall of the Soviet Union, a time when accessing archives, especially in places like Ukraine, Poland, and Belarus, was incredibly difficult for Westerners. The Soviet Union had tight restrictions on foreigners and restricted access to historical records. Miriam's work in these archives was ground-breaking because she obtained records that had long been buried under Soviet bureaucracy. Many Jewish families in America believed that all of the records had been destroyed during the Holocaust, but as Miriam went from town to town, breaking barriers through a balance of generosity and determination, she discovered that was a false belief. The fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked a significant turning point, and for Miriam, this political shift came at a pivotal moment as she had already begun laying the groundwork to access these archives, thanks to the relationships she had begun to nurture over time.



Miriam Weiner with the director of the USC archives (aka Urząd Stanu Cywilnego) located in the local town hall in Nowy Sacz, Poland, 1990. Photo with permission of Miriam Weiner.



Miriam Weiner with one of dozens of Torahs stored randomly on a shelf in the Lvov (now Lviv), Ukraine Historical Archives, 1992. Photo with permission of Miriam Weiner.

Miriam has since worked in archives across six countries, in Eastern Europe: Belarus, Lithuania, Moldova, Poland, Romania and Ukraine in addition to her work in the archives in the U.S. and Israel. Her work hasn't been just about extracting documents; it's been about building trust and forming relationships with archivists who were often sceptical and who sometimes took a risk in order to help Miriam on her mission. When she began her trips to

Ukraine, Miriam faced the enormous challenge of not speaking the language while attempting something unprecedented in her field. In the early years of her work, particularly when visiting small villages, she knew she might be the first American that many archivists and residents had ever encountered. Compensating for her lack of Ukrainian language skills, she arrived with big smiles and hugs. At a speaking engagement in New York, a rabbi once introduced her with the anecdote, "When she sees a door that says 'employees only,' she goes right in." Miriam knew that she had travelled over 5,000 miles for answers, not rejections. When met with resistance, she found that returning with gifts and approaching people with empathy opened doors that both literally and figuratively had been closed. There was one mayor who wanted *Post-It* notes from America and Miriam would bring office supplies as well as medical supplies such as *Tylenol* and *Band-Aids* which were welcome in these smaller towns. In turn, the local town mayors wanted to give Miriam a souvenir and as a result, Miriam now has a large collection of local telephone books and town maps. She would even bring *Barbie* dolls in case someone had a granddaughter who would appreciate them.

The Polish Consul General and Embassy in New York City approached her with the idea to set up genealogical tours to Poland, hopeful that American Jews would want to visit Poland and walk in the footsteps of their ancestors which would also benefit the local economy as tourism generally does. When Miriam sat with the head of the Polish State Archives, she requested a town-by-town list of available records in English for Jewish genealogical research. While she was speaking through a translator, she could tell the archivists were bewildered. They didn't laugh, Miriam recalled, but I could tell they found the idea amusing. The head of the archives, through a translator, explained that no such list existed and that their records were not organised in that system. Yet, despite the disbelief in the room, Miriam persisted. In what she described as a "rash moment," she asked if these archivists would collaborate with her to produce such an inventory. Despite their initial scepticism, they agreed. Miriam held up her end of the bargain, and when she approached them nine years later with her book, "Jewish Roots in Poland" the deputy director said, frankly, Miriam, we never thought you could do this because you didn't speak Polish, you were not a historian, you weren't an archivist nor a librarian – but we see that you had the desire, the persistence and the professionalism.



Miriam Weiner and Hennadii Boriak, Director, Ukraine State Archives, 2000.

In this photo, taken in Hennadii's office in Kiev, they are discussing the recent publication of Miriam's book "Jewish Roots in Ukraine and Moldova."

Note: Miriam and Hennadii have been long-time colleagues for many years!  
Photo with permission of Miriam Weiner.



Miriam Weiner and archivist, Ludmila Chumak, working in the Priluki Archives in Ukraine, 1991. Note the condition of the book bindings. Photo with permission of Miriam Weiner.

Miriam has spent a lot of time in Belarus, where she has found it particularly challenging to access the archives. For example, in the early 1990s when she began working with the Grodno archive in Northwestern Belarus, she was denied entry despite bringing a permission letter from the Head Archivist in Minsk. Upon entry into the Grodno archive, she was told that she could not work there. Miriam eventually found a workaround involving a local Jewish man with archival experience. Miriam explained that from her many years of experience, she generally found a way to accomplish her research goals, without making enemies. Her achievement in Poland paved the way for her work in other countries. So, when she approached the archives in Ukraine and Belarus, archivists were already aware of her ground-breaking success. "By the time I got to Belarus, the archivists there knew what I was doing," Miriam said. The Director of the Belarus State Archives, in particular, welcomed her warmly, eager to help. "He didn't have any of those old Communist views about keeping secrets or needing permission from higher authorities. He just wanted to know, 'How can I help you?'" In an [article](#) appearing on the RTRF website, Vladimir I. Adamushko, Chairman of the Committee for Archives and Records Management, wrote: "We were always interested in Jewish history in Belarus; however, since 1995 we have acquired a new in-depth perspective on this subject. This occurred when Belorussian archivists met with Miriam Weiner"

History is a discipline with humanity at its core. It is the stories that give historical data significance. Miriam's work had begun with a curiosity to find her grandparents' records. As Miriam formed relationships with government officials and proved the significance of her mission, she built a large network of support across the countries where she worked. Almost 40 years later, she remains close with those who have become like family to her. For example, when she bought an apartment in Ukraine, her translator, Vitaly, who later became her business partner, came with her to the government office in order to transfer the heat and electricity into her name. Miriam asked later what he and the officer had been speaking about, and Vitaly explained that everyone in the office would love to go live in America and none of them could understand why Miriam would buy an apartment to come live in Mogilev Podolsky!





Miriam inspects a goat at the outdoor bazaar near her apartment in Mogilev Podolsky, Ukraine, 1991. Note: She did not buy the goat!

Miriam's journey in genealogy, however, is also deeply personal. In her late teenage years, she learned that her maternal grandmother had been murdered by a member of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) in Oklahoma, USA, decades earlier. The KKK is an American terrorist organisation originally formed to attack Black Americans and those that the Klan were politically opposed to. Over the centuries since they were formed, their discriminatory and violent approach has become known for its racism, antisemitism, and anti-immigrant ideologies. Founded in the 19th century, the KKK gained prominence through violent acts of terror aimed at maintaining white supremacy, often targeting Jewish, Black, and other minority communities. Miriam's discovery of her grandmother's murder became an integral part of her motivation to reconnect with the past. Even though her grandmother had escaped the antisemitism that was rampant in Eastern Europe at the time, it was the same hatred that led to her murder in America.



Left to Right – Miriam Weiner, 1988, and her maternal grandmother, Miriam Odnopozov Rabkin. c. 1905 Note resemblance from the top half of both faces Photo with permission of Miriam Weiner

Miriam's work in the archives and extensive time in Eastern European countries made her incredibly grateful for the sacrifices her grandparents made to come to America, all four of them having emigrated between the late 1800s and early



Left to right – Miriam Weiner, 1988, and her maternal grandmother, Miriam Odnopozov Rabkin. c. 1905 Note resemblance from the top half of both faces Photo with permission of Miriam Weiner.

1900s. Miriam explained how her genealogy research clients have

often returned from the trips she organised with a deeper understanding of their ancestors' lives, having seen places they had only heard about, along with the remnants of these towns and villages. These trips gave clients an opportunity to visit archives and sometimes find historic family documents as well as the emotional experience of walking through the same streets and landscapes as their ancestors. When organising heritage tours for her clients, Miriam would often send Vitaly to the town first to try to find distant relatives and people who might remember her client's ancestors. One successful trip was planned for a member of the Board of Directors of the Routes to Roots Foundation where they were able to identify some locals in Byten, Belarus who remembered the client's family and could tell them personal stories. For Miriam, these meaningful connections keep her actively working even as she nears the age of 82.

Miriam's work, though rooted in gratitude for the life her grandparents built in America, carries with it a deep pain, knowing that the antisemitism her family fled in Europe ultimately took her grandmother's life in the U.S. Yet it was the compassion and mutual respect she fostered in Europe that allowed her to build lifelong friendships and relationships that paved the way for others to access their own family histories. Her stories serve to remind us the past is not just something to learn from, but a tool that helps inform us how to live in the present.

As our call came to an end, Miriam turned the questions towards me. She asked about my ancestry, and I suddenly felt like one of her research clients. I admitted that I didn't know much about my great-grandparents. She gently pushed me to think more deeply—where did they come from, when did they emigrate, and why? When I told her that they had settled in Minnesota, a state in the midwestern region of the United States, she smiled and noted how much easier it would be to find records in a less populated area. Miriam re-ignited a desire in me to learn more. That evening, I spent hours researching and digging up photos of their graves. I was reminded of Miriam's ability to not allow language to be a barrier, so I read the Hebrew inscriptions on their gravestones, learning my ancestors' Hebrew names and the names of their fathers.

After the call with Miriam, I felt a renewed sense of determination, realising that achieving your goals requires not only drive, but also the relationships built along the way. Miriam's work is not just about discovering the past; it's about making the past accessible to those who seek it, enabling individuals to understand where they come from,

and in turn, more deeply understand who they are. She showed how something as personal as investigating one's family history can also be a collective journey that we embark on together.

To access Miriam Weiner's website Routes to Roots Foundation – [click here](#)

For help locating ancestral records in the Belarus archives – [click here](#)

If you or your family came from Belarus and you would like to share your story – please fill in our contact form – [click here](#)

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