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Unearthing Jewish roots

Genealogist digs through tangled history in Eastern Europe's church archives, tax documents, birth records

BY GARY SOULSMAN
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By the time Miriam Weiner decided to become the Indiana Jones of Jewish genealogy she had grade-A credentials as a jill-of-all-trades.

She'd been a paralegal, a private investigator, a rancher, a real estate agent, a newspaper columnist and a booking agent for singer Bobbie Gentry, who wrote the "Ode to Billie Joe."

In 1986, Weiner became executive director of the American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors in New York and deepened her understanding of what it means to trace one's roots to Eastern Europe.

In a few years, she was traveling widely -- to Poland, Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus -- where she discovered a trove of records. There, she worked on her own family history, published books on genealogy and led trips for those wishing to walk in an ancestor's shoes.

"As I was driving through the Ukraine I was passing through my family's life," she says. "It was a remarkable experience."

All this has given the Glendale, Calif. native a unique perspective on what it means to connect with one's past. The 63-year-old Weiner will share some of what she's learned in a free talk April 30 at the Jewish Community Center. The event is open to the public and is sponsored by the Jewish Historical Society of Delaware, which is holding its annual meeting prior to her 3 p.m. talk.

"She's one of the leading Jewish genealogists and can help people who've lost track of where their families came from," said Howard Kristol, president of the Jewish Historical Society of Delaware. "There's great interest, among Jews in particular, about how you go about doing this sort of research."

Every few months Weiner gets on a plane to the former Soviet Union to work with Jewish records or escort individuals on tours. She often drives around Eastern Europe in a van with a translator in search of old churches, synagogues and archives.

Her study of Jewish records only became possible with Glasnost in 1985 (the opening of the Soviet Union to the west) and the dissolution of that empire in 1991.



COURTESY OF MIRIAM WEINER
Genealogist Miriam Weiner visits towns like Mogilev, Belarus, tracing Jewish roots.



Miriam Weiner gathers Jewish genealogical records from cemeteries, churches and synagogues.



PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF MIRIAM WEINER
The cemetery in Dolina, Poland.

Unearthing Jewish roots

"It was stunning," she said. "No one thought the Berlin Wall would fall. It was more likely you would go to the moon."

It was up to Weiner to create it. So she returned to the United States and began raising \$250,000 to create "Jewish Roots in Poland," a compilation of photos and footnotes of Jewish history, proving just how much information survived Nazi and Communist regimes.

"Her book is user-friendly, a one-volume filing system and 'road map' that pinpoints the location of documents in Poland -- marriage certificates, birth records, tax records, real estate papers and more," wrote reviewer Janette Friedman for the Jewish Book Council in 1998.

Among 1,248 Polish towns, Weiner documented 75 archives. And having proved such a book could be done once, Weiner did it again. Two years later she published "Jewish Roots in Ukraine and Moldova."

"My wife and I have bought her two books," Kristol said. "They're marvelous, with lots of old photographs."

Today much of her work can also be found online at the Routes to Roots Foundation (www.rtrfoundation.org), a nonprofit that's publishing a town-by-town inventory of Jewish documents in Eastern European archives.

And her efforts have earned the praise of authors such as Leon Uris ("Exodus"), Chaim Potok ("The Chosen") and Elie Wiesel ("Night").

"It was a real battle at first to convince archivists that I was not interested in whose grandparents were collaborators with the Germans," she said.

In the United States, Weiner works from a two-bedroom town house in Secaucus, N.J. (She can see Giants Stadium from her balcony.)

This contrasts with towns of the former Soviet bloc, where she has often worked with little hot water, heat or electricity.

It's not unusual to find her sitting in a 200-year-old place of worship, wearing gloves with the fingers cut out, opening record books that have not been cracked for 70 years.

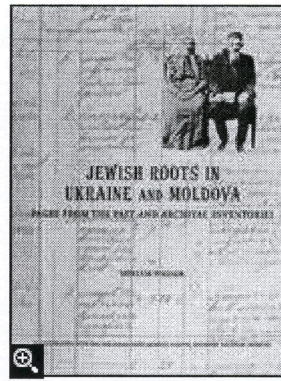
At first, archivists had so few resources that Weiner bought them fax machines and paper. And it was often useful to pay archivists a stipend for their assistance.

"I had no problem in doing this," she said. "We have no idea how good we have things in this country unless we experience other conditions."

If her searches have opened doors to others, they've also deepened her understanding of her roots. In Priluki, now in the Ukraine, she's visited the synagogue where her grandmother worshiped.

Miriam Weiner, who is named for this grandmother, also found the book with Miriam Rabkin's birth certificate and held it in her hand.

"There's nothing to compare with that," she says. "It's this experience that so many of us are searching for."



Miriam Weiner has published two books on tracing Jewish roots.

IF YOU GO

WHO: Miriam Weiner, an expert on Jewish genealogical research in Europe. She talks about "Routes to Roots: Tracing Jewish Genealogy."

WHEN: 3 p.m. April 30.

WHERE: Jewish Community Center auditorium, 101 Garden of Eden Road, Talleyville.

INFORMATION: 655-6232. Routes to Roots Foundation is at www.rtrfoundation.org. Weiner's travel business to Eastern Europe can be found at www.routestoroots.com

TRACING ONE'S ROOTS

Here are genealogist Miriam Weiner's tips for tracing one's roots:

- Begin with interviews and meetings with senior family members.
- Ask questions about all relatives, including Hebrew names, occupations, ancestral towns and distant relatives.
- Ask to see old family photos and make copies (front and back) when possible.
- Request copies of old family documents such as naturalization and immigration papers, passports, school records and birth, marriage and death certificates.
- Visit cemeteries where family members are buried and photograph tombstones, which often show the names of parents of the deceased. Look at other tombstones while you are there for additional information.
- Passenger records are especially important, as these often list family members left behind and/or those already in the United States. (The records can be searched at the National Archives and Records).
- Naturalization records give date and place of birth, names and place of arrival into the U.S., including the name of the ship. (Consult the Immigration and Naturalization Service.)
- Once you determine your ancestral towns, more resources are available, such as those offered by Holocaust survivor groups, and published histories, such as those Weiner has documented.