

lifestyles

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MIRIAM WEINER

A Leading Genealogist Can Help Find Your Roots

By Judy Siblin-Rakoff

Which of us hasn't wondered what our ancestors were like? Where did they come from? How did they live, work and play? What was their world like? And how did the family name evolve?

Miriam Weiner has not only thought of all these, but has dedicated her life to helping others uproot their family tree to search for their origins. A Certified Genealogist, Wiener believes there are many reasons for Jews to pursue *Roots*-like research, the most obvious being the almost built-in obligation Jews have to remember and record the past for future generations. Genealogy, the science and art of tracing one's forebears as far back as possible, Wiener explains, has reunited families, solved mysteries, located long-lost relatives and even provided clues to family medical problems.

Working from her home in Secaucus, New Jersey, Wiener attempts also to alter perceptions about genealogy.

"When I go speak and lecture, often people say to me, 'Well, I can't trace my family, because the names were changed, and all the records were destroyed in the Holocaust. I don't know where they came from, because the borders kept changing.' But even though the borders changed and many records were destroyed, you *can* trace your family tree. There are records available through national archives both in Washington, D.C., and in Canada. Those records include the town of birth and indicate name changes. There are many sources for records that were destroyed in European communities, but they were microfilmed by agencies in Israel and genealogical libraries throughout the world."

Her craft is not just constructing family trees with a lot of names and dates for branches, or poring over dusty books in library stacks.

"To me, genealogy is the family's history, not when the people were born and when they died, but how they lived, where they



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lived and what happened where they were living that caused them to make changes in their lives. For me, it has become a question of who I am by learning about the people who came before me, and I've learned a lot about them. I've sort of introduced myself to my ancestors, figuratively speaking. I like most of them too, as a matter of fact."

For Weiner, hunting down ancestors has become a combination of adventure and a rugged detective jaunt.

So it seems almost natural that before becoming involved in genealogy, she worked as a private investigator. She also spent three years as a road manager for country singer Bobbie Gentry, travelling all over Europe, Australia and Canada. But as passionate as she was about her work, nothing excited her as much as the study of family history — a study that began some 20 years ago, when her mother asked her to look up some cousins in New York City. About seven years ago, she became so enthralled with what she was doing, that she decided to pursue genealogy as a full-time career.

"I love what I'm doing," she enthuses. "I've found something that nobody else is doing full-time." When already into her new-found career, "two particular things happened that not only made an impact, but helped change the direction of what I was doing, and help change my focus."

The first experience was when Weiner discovered about 100 relatives in the Soviet Union, by "fighting it out with Ma Bell in Moscow," with a lot of patience and determination.

The second and no doubt the most rewarding was reuniting a father and daughter who had been apart for over 40 years. It happened this way:

"I went to a family gathering and began speaking with a man named Nathan Weiner (no relation). At one point in our conversation, he said, 'I want you to help me find my daughter.' And I said that she was in the kitchen, because he had just introduced me to his daughter. He said, 'Oh no, no. Not that daughter.' And then he told me how 40 years before, he had been married and his wife became very ill, and had to be hospitalized for a long time. His daughter, who was then four years old, had been exposed to traumatic events, and had gone to live on her mother's side of the family. It was decided that they would adopt her. It was in the late 30's, times weren't good, and he had a lot of financial problems with his sick wife, so his daughter grew up with this couple. He said he used to go down to Washington where she lived, and he would park down the street and watch her go to school, but he never talked with her. And all his life, he wondered if he had made the right decision, wondered how she would turn out, and would I help him find her, even though I had just met the man 20 minutes before."

Nathan Weiner probably sensed Miriam's caring nature, and trusted her implicitly from that first meeting. With that, Weiner began her search. She travelled, spent six

months writing letters to secretaries and mortuaries, and various agencies.

The last name was not all Weiner shared with her subject. What was really eerie about the whole thing was that the girl she was searching for was also named Miriam Weiner.

Finally, she located a city directory that suggested the girl had moved to Baltimore and then disappeared from the directory in the 1950's. But at least a major clue was found. Weiner found the school that Miriam had attended as a child, and she wrote to its principal for help. When she didn't hear back, she decided to go to Baltimore to find the girl's cousin.

"I went to the school and it was an all-black school. The principal said, 'Yes, we got your letter, but we really don't have the staff to go back in the records.' So I found an old yearbook at the school, and now that I knew what she looked like, I began calling people from her graduating class. Finally, someone said, 'Of course, I remember Barbara. A lovely girl. She married a doctor.'"

But how did Miriam become Barbara?

"Well, her name was Miriam, but when she was adopted into the new family, they changed her name. Anyway, I had her married name, and then I began to worry. 'What am I going to say to this woman?' I must have rehearsed what I would say about a thousand times. Finally, I just said, 'My name is Miriam Weiner. Does that mean anything to you?' I still get goosebumps when I think of how I felt that day. I said, 'I've come a very long way to try and locate you and I have some things I'd like to talk to you about. May I come see you?' I went over there, and she was the spitting image of her father. I told her that I had met this delightful man at a family gathering — her father — and he asked me to help find her."

They both cried, and Weiner showed Barbara (Miriam) pictures of her father, sister and brother, and explained why her natural father hadn't contacted her before. As it turned out, Barbara's adoptive parents had both died. She had lost a husband and she became fascinated with the idea of meeting her real father at last.

The reunion took place between the two families, and according to Weiner, it was one of the most joyous and heartwarming events of her life.

Nathan Weiner died a few years later.

"He was in his 70's. Before he died, he said to me, 'I can finally sleep at night because now I know that I made the right decision.

She grew up in a loving home, and she turned out so well.'"

After the initial reunion, Weiner and Nathan attended Barbara's daughter's Bat Mitzvah.

"We went to the Bat Mitzvah of Diana, Barbara's daughter and Nathan's grandchild. Afterwards, Barbara was walking across the room, introducing her childhood friends to him, by saying, 'This is my father.' I knew I had helped, and it was probably one of the most rewarding events of my life," Weiner notes with pride.

Lecturing extensively around the world, Weiner also writes a column, "Roots and Branches," which appears in over 75 newspapers across North America. She receives countless letters thanking her for the happiness she has brought to people's lives.

*Get a good, small
tape recorder. Go so far
as to ask about recipes
from the old country.*

"I have a book called *The Shtetl Finder*, which I take with me to lectures. It contains almost every town in Europe, and many of the residences. Some people have never seen the name of their town in print before, and they get all excited. It reminds them of things they haven't thought about for years."

Weiner is also co-authoring a two-volume encyclopedia about genealogy. One volume will be geographic. As she puts it, "you'll be able to look up Greece, for instance, and then research your Greek/Jewish roots. I have sections on Germany, Poland, the Soviet Union, Canada and the United States. The other volume will be on visiting your *shtetl*. We want it to be *the* reference book on the subject." Both volumes will be available in 1989.

Asked what she wants to be doing in five years, Weiner laughs and says, "I'd like to have an assistant." Then more seriously, "in five years I hope to be devoting much of my efforts to writing. My secret desire is to learn Russian and Yiddish and to get a Master's degree."

But for now, Weiner's primary goal is to educate people all over the world on how to research their roots. Her advice to fledgling family tree detectives is to first interview your oldest living relatives on tape, and even video tape them if possible. In fact, some video

companies who tape Bar Mitzvahs and weddings are now offering a service whereby they'll come to your home and do a documentary on your family history.

"You gather your family together and get out old pictures and documents. When you show older relatives the pictures, it may jog their memories, and you'll get wonderful anecdotes and family stories."

Weiner also suggests asking open-ended questions, such as ones about where the family lived and what general conditions were like. Go so far as to ask about recipes from the old country. Get a good, small tape recorder. Make an appointment to see "Aunt Gertie" in a quiet comfortable place, preferably her home. Tell her you're interested in sharing some of her memories. You'll want to ask her about everyone, how they celebrated holidays, if their grandparents marriage was arranged, and so on. If you're interviewing Holocaust survivors, it's an entirely different thing, Weiner advises. You'll have to be guided by a greater degree of sensitivity. "What you want essentially is for a Holocaust survivor to recreate the history of a place in a life that doesn't exist anymore."

Weiner sums it up beautifully, when she says, "I have much more of an interest in the history of the family, and not just the living, but of Jewish history and geography. And it's not just the geography we play at parties, but about who's across the ocean and from the old country. I end up finding the history and geography that was not so exciting in school fascinating. Because now, it has a new twist. We're talking about how it relates to our relatives and to our lives. I want to spend the rest of my life motivating other people to care about, to discover and preserve their family history, before it's too late.

"I love it because it's such a non-controversial topic," she smiles. "Everyone has a wonderful story to tell."

Weiner has several booklets available on how to research your family tree. These cover where to begin, what questions to ask, research techniques, a worldwide listing of Jewish genealogical societies, maps and how surnames can provide clues. Who knows? If you do it right, you may end up with a family tree as extensive as Weiner's own: 20 feet long and with over 1,000 names.

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