

Iron Curtain parts to let Americans search for family roots

By Robert Weisberg
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Glasnost, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's 5-year-old policy of openness of information, usually is spoken of in grand terms: world peace, East-West relations, the fate of mankind.

But for Miriam Weiner, the changes sweeping the once monolithic communist bloc were personified in a friendly woman from the



Genealogist Miriam Weiner



Miriam Odnopozov Rabkin

Ukraine who helped her obtain the birth records of 17 ancestors, including the maternal grandmother for whom she was named.

And though Ms. Weiner, 47, is a certified genealogist with years of experience filling in family trees and a syndicated column in more than 90 Jewish publications, this responsiveness from an unseen archivist on the other side of the world touched her.

"This is definitely a change. I think this was a definite result of glasnost," she says, speaking from her home in New Jersey.

Miriam Weiner's grandmother was shot to death by the Ku Klux Klan in Tulsa, Okla., in 1924.

"There was a \$100 bounty at the time for killing a Jew," she says. "I felt a special bonding with the grandmother who I never knew.

"Receiving her birth record from the town where she was born had a tremendous impact on me. I can't tell you how important it was to me."

The help she received convinced Ms. Weiner that East-West relations are warming.

"I'm seeing more help, especially from the outlying areas outside of Moscow," she says. "It's the greatest breakthrough in genealogy since the invention of the Xerox."

The missing link

Soon the luck Ms. Weiner says she had may not be necessary for others tracing family roots behind the Iron Curtain.

A direct link between the National Archives in Washington and vast stores of Soviet genealogical information could be established by the end of this year, to aid people with little knowledge about their ancestors other than a few stories of "the old country" from immigrant grandparents.

"This is information which has not been available in the past," says Pat Eames, volunteer coordinator of the Office of Public Programs at the National Archives, who will administer the American side of the planned exchange.

Mrs. Eames led a delegation of American genealogists and archivists to the Soviet Union in March and came back with the framework for the Soviet-American Genealogical Archival Service.

Instead of requesting information directly from the Soviet Union, as Ms. Weiner had to do, Americans will be able to send a standardized inquiry form to the National Archives. The service will review and classify the request, translate it into Russian and send it to the appropriate archive in the Soviet Union.

Organizers hope the formal process will make more searches successful. The National Archives estimates that of 400 requests for genealogical information sent to the Soviet Union in 1987, only 15 percent were even answered.

"The Soviets get many questions in English," Mrs. Eames says. "The requests are handwritten and usually impossible for them to understand. American genealogists who are accustomed to working directly with archives here have tried to write directly to archives there. Now they can write to us."

On the trail

Ms. Weiner says she got lucky just making contact with archives in the Soviet Union, and even more so in actually receiving records.

"It's not the official policy of the Soviet Union to allow on-site access to foreigners who wish to research

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MONDAY, JULY 30, 1990

The Washington Times

family records," she says. But a letter to the director of the Ukrainian state archives in Kiev directed her to a smaller records bureau in the town of Priluki, where her family once lived.

The director of that office, who sent Ms. Weiner the birth records, also went out of her way to help.

"She interviewed a member of my family in the old-age home [in Priluki] and found out [this woman] had a sister in Odessa," a Ukrainian city on the Black Sea, Ms. Weiner recalls. "Now, I've gotten a letter from this sister. I haven't been able to establish my relation with her, but there's no question we're related.

"My goal on a personal level is to have a family reunion for all of my Russian relatives, and to have it in the Soviet Union."

A former private investigator, Ms. Weiner relied on the tools of that trade to track down leads on family records. Her first source was a set of Soviet phone books at the Library of Congress.

Making it easier

Organizers of the U.S.-Soviet archive service anticipate a large number of requests from expert archivists but also plenty from amateurs — many of whom belong to genealogical societies aimed at exploiting the trickle of information from Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.

When the agreement is final, Mrs. Eames says, within six months genealogical societies will be able to distribute forms to their members. The president of one of the largest such groups believes the joint archival service is coming along at just the right time.

"The popularity of genealogy is continually increasing," says Edward Peckwas, head of the Polish Genealogical Society, which has a dozen independent branches around the country and more than 1,000 members worldwide.

Speaking from his office in Chicago, Mr. Peckwas says that of all the communist countries, Poland has been the most helpful to Western efforts to trace family descent.

"Genealogical research in Poland has been easier than genealogical research in Indiana," he says, crediting a strong, Catholic Church-based system of records and a relatively peaceful past with leaving unusually complete records about family and local histories.

High hopes

In mid-August the new attitude of Eastern European governments will be realized in a genealogical tour of Poland for 25 Americans, led by Ms. Weiner and actively aided by the Polish state archives.

"The trip came about as a result of a trip I made there last fall as a guest of the Polish government. I met with the head of the Polish state archives, and archivists in Lublin and Krakow, as well as people in the Polish Jewish community," she says. "I made arrangements for people on the trip so that pictures can be taken of records, they can visit city and town archives," and so on.

The group also will have access to concentration camp records, which are not open to the general public, she says.

"Four or five years ago a group of people trying to put together the same sort of trip couldn't get any cooperation," Ms. Weiner says, "but I have high hopes that this is going to come out reasonably well."

She has submitted an itinerary to Intourist, the Soviet tourist agency, for a trip to the Ukraine, where she wants to visit the towns behind the records. "I'm euphoric. I've always dreamed of going there," she says.

More to say

The fall of the Berlin Wall also will allow new and improved regional and local histories to come to America. Stuart Nixon, owner of a genealogical bookstore in Alexandria, says these accounts are critical for amateur genealogists.

"The idea of these histories is to help you trace your family tree," says Mr. Nixon, whose Hearthstone Bookstore soon will be the only bookshop in the nation devoted exclusively to genealogy. Hearthstone "doesn't have books on particular families," he says, but helps narrow the search.

The genealogical benefits of glasnost will be realized in better and more complete do-it-yourself guides, the bookseller says.

"The impact for us is that people producing the research guides [on Eastern Europe and the Soviet

Union] will be able to update them," Mr. Nixon explains. "It's not that these guides don't exist today, it's just that there is now much more you can say."

And the good news is expected to get better.

"At the present time there's more accessibility," says John-Paul Himka, a visiting professor at the Ukrainian Research Institute at Harvard University. "But because procedures haven't been worked out on how to get access to records, there are probably more problems, though temporary ones, than a year ago."

But Mr. Himka says the situation will change quickly. Already, as Miriam Weiner's experience has shown, it is much easier to get genealogical information from the Ukraine, a Soviet region that historically has been sealed off from the West.

"It is describing a situation in a state of flux," he says.