

## Routes To Roots

*Jewish genealogist Miriam Weiner  
will share her experiences  
at this year's Jewish Book Fair.*

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*Special to The Jewish News*

**W**hen Miriam Weiner bought an apartment in Ukraine, she wanted to put down roots — not her own, but those belonging to Jews of the world.

The apartment is a base for her genealogical research excursions, with findings eventually recorded into lengthy guidebooks for genealogy travel. Soon, she will be finished with one on Ukraine and Moldova. After that, Belarus and Lithuania will be her focus.

Weiner's first book, *Jewish Roots in Poland: Pages From the Past and Archival Inventories*, was released in 1997 and is the model for the next two.

The author, an adviser for the TV series "Ancestors," will discuss her work Sunday, Nov. 8, at this year's Jewish Book Fair. Her talk is sponsored by the Jewish Genealogical Society of Michigan.

"I'm glad that the book on Poland is accomplishing what I hoped it would accomplish, which is to dispel the myth that all Jewish documents were destroyed," says the author, 55, whose tome includes historical overviews of towns, color maps, a guide to Jewish sites, lists and locations of surviving archival documents, photographs and reading suggestions.

"The responses I'm getting from people who visit these places and people starting to do some research tell me that my goal is being translated into reality," she says.

The idea for Weiner's book came during a trip to Poland in 1989.

Interested in leading tour groups focused on tracing their ancestry, Weiner met with members of the Polish state archives to explore what assistance they could give.

Although she found enthusiasm for this kind of travel, it soon became clear that Polish officials did not have enough detailed information on a town-by-town basis.

"While there was cooperation and permission to organize these trips — and I subsequently did a few of them — there really wasn't a system to help people decide how to approach genealogy research," says Weiner, who writes a syndicated column on the subject. "It was at that point that I decided I wanted to put together this inventory."

Weiner, who holds a bachelor's degree in historical studies from Empire State College in New York, called upon her work experience as she planned her project, a joint venture of her not-for-profit corporation, The Routes to Roots Foundation, and the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

Besides serving as executive director of the American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors when she was tracing her family's roots, she also had been a licensed private investigator and a road manager for an entertainer.

Soon after she began traveling through Poland, often encountering Old-World living conditions, she realized that the assistance of a translator just wasn't enough.

"There were different fragments of archive inventories either published in a few places or printed and unpublished, so I hired people to go all over Poland and collect this material," explains Weiner. "Some were archivists who would work for me on their vacations, and some were archivists who took time off to do this."

Weiner learned that Poland had 3.3 million Jews before the war. Although 65,000 survived, only a few thousand remain in that country. The odds of finding a living relative, therefore, are minuscule.

The same is not true in the former Soviet Union, where she has located her own relatives, enjoying gatherings where they could compare stories and photos.

Going to Europe several times each year and staying for weeks, Weiner has enhanced her ability to communicate even though she still requires a translator.

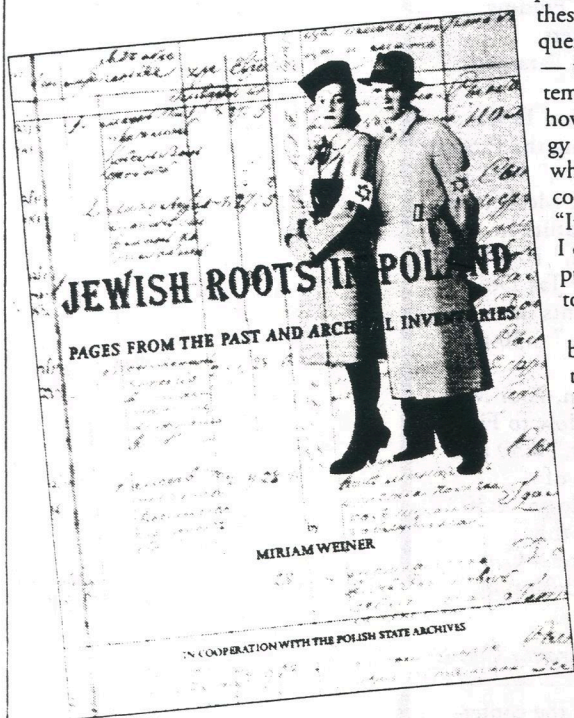
"I've learned to read a few words in Polish," Weiner says. "I've learned to read Russian and can speak about 100 words. I can read documents now and translate vital records and census records, and I can read enough Hebrew to pick out names on tombstones."

As Weiner works with many people tracing their heritage, she finds different reasons for the pursuit, such as a birthday or special event of an elderly relative, a family death that has triggered curiosity or discussions with someone who has gone ahead with a successful search.

One of her most touching experiences was taking a woman to a small town where they expected a difficult time locating facts, but instead found family histories on the first page they touched.

Weiner believes the interest in looking back has grown because the Internet has opened a lot of possibilities and the collapse of the Iron Curtain has opened travel opportunities.

The researcher says she has not encountered anti-Semitism. Rather,







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she has found people very cooperative and helpful.

"I grew up in the Midwest and went to Hebrew school, but I did a lot of things that had nothing to do with being Jewish," Weiner says. "When I got involved in tracing my family history, I developed much more of an awareness and appreciation of my Jewish heritage.

"I work with books that have pages stuck together because they haven't been opened in 50 years, and I visit towns where I was the first Jew to visit in 70 years. These were emotional, historic, exciting and depressing times, and they all had an impact on me." □

Miriam Weiner will speak at 1 p.m. Sunday, Nov. 8, at the Kahn Jewish Community Center in West Bloomfield. For information, call (248) 661-1000. For more information on Weiner's book, call (201) 866-4075.

## Genealogy Conference Coming to Troy

Before Miriam Weiner speaks at the Jewish Book Fair, there will be another opportunity to get insight into tracing ancestry — the National Genealogical Society Regional Conference, which is Oct. 16-17 at the Somerset Inn, Troy.

The Jewish Genealogical Society of Michigan will be a sponsor of the event.

Featured speakers include Elizabeth Shown Mills, author and lecturer specializing in research methodology; Curt Witcher, manager of the Historical Genealogy Department of the Allen County Library in Indiana, which concentrates on the use of government resources; and John Vincent Wylie, author and lecturer specializing in computer skills related to genealogy.

The speaker-subject schedule is as follows. The talks are all on Saturday, Oct. 17, with a choice offered for some sessions. Mills will be the banquet speaker on Friday, Oct. 16:

Families: Methods That Work," 10:30 a.m. Saturday; "Finding Females: Wives, Mothers, Daughters, Sisters and Paramours," 1:30 p.m. Saturday.

• **Witcher:** "Historical Research Methodology: Engaging the Process to Find All the Answers," 8:30 a.m. Saturday; "Mining the Motherlode: Using Periodical Literature in Genealogical Research," 10:30 a.m. Saturday; "Using Your Tax Dollars: Government Documents in Genealogical Research," 3:30 p.m. Saturday.

• **Wylie:** "Rich Man, Poor Man, Beggar Man, Thief: How to Find Them on the Internet," 8:30 a.m. Saturday; "Six Pitfalls of Technology in Genealogy," 1:30 p.m. Saturday; "How the Genealogical Data Model Can Help You Research," 3:30 p.m. Saturday. □

— Suzanne Chessle,

To learn more about the conference, call (800) 473-0060 or