

Miriam Weiner is a modern day pioneer—except her journeys take her back to the “brave Old World” on the other side of the ocean. There she navigates the cobblestone roads and dusty alleys of centuries-old cities and off-the-map towns and villages in the Ukraine and the Former Soviet Union. She is a woman with a mission as she doggedly searches for obscure birth, marriage and death records, as well as other historical documents, later seeking out the descendants of the long buried men and women whose names appear on these papers. In doing so, Miriam is keeping a silent promise to her ancestors to “walk in their footsteps.”

A happy outcome of this work is her own establishing of a personal connection with her roots. Her determination to fulfil this promise has resulted in a written family tree that is over 20 feet long, with a listing of over 1,000 names. She has also been “reunited” with over 50 relatives throughout the Former Soviet Union who traveled from such diverse cities as Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev and Chelyabinsk to learn exactly how they fit on the family tree.

Miriam’s fascination with the past has evolved into a career researching and tracing the lives of those long gone and buried by the avalanche of time. She is currently president of Routes to Roots, a company that organizes tours to ancestral towns. When she is not leading these tours, she is often hired to do the legwork for her clientele, and many of her trips are for the purpose of conducting research for others. She proudly points to a file full of letters from grateful and appreciative clients thanking her for her help in finding family they never even guessed they had.

There have been other surprises and discoveries as well. During a tour to the Ukraine in 1992, four participants found their own birth certificates and while they were initially delighted to obtain these documents, two people did discover their ages were not what they had always believed them to be.

Miriam’s expertise led to her being the first Jewish woman to be certified by the board for certifica-



Miriam Weiner

bringing up the past

by Cheryl Roth Kupfer

tion of genealogists in Washington, D.C. and she is an expert in Jewish genealogy and Holocaust research. She is the former executive director of the American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors and has a column, called “Roots and Branches” that has been published in *Moment*, *Hadassah Magazine*, *Women’s League*, *Outlook* and other national publi-

cations. Numerous awards attest to the quality of her research and the importance of her work.

So how does a Jewish girl raised in the heart of America’s laid-back Midwest, in Des Moines, Iowa, became a super sleuth savvy enough to negotiate her way through the chaotic, mind-numbing maze that is East European bureaucracy? You

photo courtesy of Miriam Weiner



Remains of Rymanow synagogue in Poland.

start in California where Miriam took twelve units of police science courses and was licensed by the state of California as a private investigator. She went on to work for a detective agency, later establishing her own agency for a couple of years in Hollywood. A stint as road manager and publicist for country singer Bobbie Gentry honed her people skills, and work as a paralegal for lawyers and judges taught her to negotiate her way through red tape and other legalistic potholes.

In her zeal to know more about her ancestors and their lives, and to help others to this end, Miriam, who is based in Secaucus, New Jersey, works several months of the year in Ukraine. She stays in local hotels carrying with her what she needs, usually 10 to 15 pieces of luggage containing clothes, office supplies, a copy machine, video, still cameras and food. It is not uncommon to have to lug all this up several flights of steps each time she

photo courtesy of Miriam Weiner



Judaica Exhibition at the Rzesow Archives (formerly a synagogue).

travels. These trials and tribulations, as well as a frequent lack of heat, hot water and time-saving conveniences such as take-out food do not deter her in her pursuit to uncover the past.

Miriam's sacrifice has not gone unrewarded, for her research has filled in the gaps in so many family trees, including her own. She even was fortunate enough to hit her own genealogical jackpot. A correspondence with Natalia Borisovna Elkin, director of the Regional Museum in Priluki, Ukraine led to an unraveling of Miriam's own family history. Elkin sent her 17 birth records of her Odnopozov relatives—Miriam's maternal grandmother's family. This grandmother, whom she never met and for whom she was named, was born in Priluki and had immigrated to the States in 1891. (Sadly she died young as the result of an unsolved shooting. Though newspaper stories of her grandmother's slaying did not mention it, Miriam found some evidence linking the shooting to the Ku Klux Klan.). To her shock, Miriam recognized one of the birth certificates from Ukraine as that of her murdered grandmother's! Along with the family records, Elkin wrote about the lives and deaths of various Odnopozov relatives during the Holocaust, and helped Miriam locate a still-living relative in Odessa.

Another door opened for Miriam through contact with the Ukraine Historical Archives in Lvov, where she found documents from Eastern Galicia and Western Ukraine. She successfully signed contracts with the Moldova National Archives granting her access to the entire collection of archival documents.

A trailblazer, Miriam was the first foreigner to visit many towns that had been out of bounds for generations. Her gutsy determination has led her to pry open doors that seemed closed forever. While trying to get her hands on her grandmother's records, for instance, Miriam had to deal with a hotel that would not allow her to register, and had to take on a clerk that refused her access to these records, despite a previous guarantee

photo courtesy of Miriam Weiner



Collection of Torahs (90+) in the Kiev Historical Archives.

of access. It took a month to finally convince the mayor of the town to order the clerk to comply. Ultimately, it took a year of delicate maneuvering to get these Jewish documents transferred from the local vital records office to the state archives. Only there did Miriam get complete information on the Odnopozov family history, and for her, closure.

From time to time Miriam finds herself thinking about her grandmother. It must have been difficult for her to learn the ways of America in the same way it was arduous for Miriam to learn the ins and outs of Eastern Europe. Miriam never knew this grandmother whose name she bears, but from everything she has heard about her—her inquisitive mind, her interest in the world, the personality that led her to cross an ocean without knowing what was on the other side—there is no doubt grandmother and granddaughter would have understood each other quite well.

Miriam's new book, *Jewish Roots in Ukraine and Moldova: Pages from the Past and Archival Inventories* will soon be released by The Routes to Roots Foundation (Secaucus, New Jersey) and YIVO Institute for Jewish Research (New York). Miriam can be reached at mweiner@routestoroots.com 