

The Record
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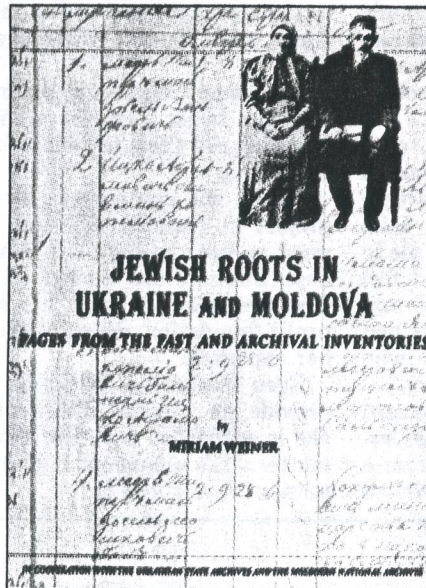
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North Jersey

An old-country sleuth

STAFF PHOTOS BY DANIELLE P. RICHARDS

Miriam Weiner with a portrait of her great-grandparents, Judah Leib and Berto Rabkin, and, right, the cover of her latest book. The Secaucus resident is planning her next book, an archival guide to Belarus and Lithuania.



Genealogist helps Jews uncover the past

By **PAUL ROGERS**
Staff Writer

Before the fall of the Soviet Union nearly a decade ago, it was all but impossible to gain access to pre-World War II archives in Eastern European nations such as Poland, Moldova, and Ukraine. Requests to see birth and death certificates or military records were referred to Soviet officials in Moscow, and summarily denied. For American Jews searching for clues about their ancestors, many of whom were killed in the Holocaust, the situation amounted to a slammed door.

Enter Miriam Weiner.

A dogged genealogist who once was a private investigator and a road manager for country

singer Bobbie Gentry, Weiner was intent on preserving pre-Holocaust Jewish history in Eastern Europe. She began traveling extensively through the region, determined to chart a network of documents offering details of vanished Jewish lives, including those in her own family.

After years of crisscrossing the countryside with a translator and visiting state archives, old cemeteries, and synagogues, the Secaucus resident in 1997 wrote a 446-page book titled "Jewish Roots in Poland."

Now, she has produced an even larger and more ambitious volume, "Jewish Roots in Ukraine and Moldova: Pages From the Past and Archival Inventories." With both projects, she hopes to spark interest in the rich Jewish

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heritage of Eastern Europe, a heritage decimated, but not fully erased, by the Nazis.

"There's this perception among Jewish people that all the documents were destroyed, towns were wiped off the map, there's nothing left to see — and that's not the case," Weiner said. "Certainly, many people were killed and lots of documents were destroyed, — but on the other hand, many documents survived, as did people."

The thick, oversize hardcover book, which has just been published, includes 1,200 photographs and illustrations — many drawn from Weiner's personal collection of antique postcards — showing innocent market-square scenes of the pre-Nazi era and the towns, with their Holocaust memorials and crumbling Jewish cemeteries, as they appear today.

Weiner also provides inventories of the archives of 1,400 towns. She details which documents exist and where to find them, including military registrations; birth, marriage, and death records; and, in some cases, Holocaust materials such as lists of confiscated property and the Jews who were deported or killed.

For years, Weiner has divided

her time between her town house in Secaucus and an apartment near the border of Ukraine and Moldova. She wants to encourage American Jews to visit Eastern Europe and seek out not only their ancestral past but relatives who remain there.

"There's still something to see," she said, "and there are hundreds of thousands of Jews still in the former Soviet Union — and they're related to somebody."

With Weiner's assistance, more and more Jewish families in the United States are heeding her call.

In addition to writing books, Weiner, 57, runs a private business which offers genealogical research and customized tours of Eastern European towns. She also will travel to someone's ancestral home and take photographs and videotapes and interview local elders about the family.

Marjorie and Alan Goldberg of Westport, Conn., hired Weiner to research and plan an ancestral trip to Russia, Poland, and Ukraine. Working with only an immigrant ship's manifest papers and a petition for naturalization by Marjorie Goldberg's grandfather, Weiner determined that Goldberg's maiden name — Sovel — originally had been Zavelsky and that her grandparents came from the Ukrainian towns of Gluchov and Nezhin.

The Goldbergs ultimately tracked down and visited 26 rela-

tives in Eastern Europe. "It was probably the most emotional trip we've ever taken in our lives," Marjorie Goldberg said.

She also discovered that a number of her relatives fled to Siberia to escape the Nazis and that many others were killed in a forest in Gluchov. The Goldbergs visited the forest and had a plaque placed there as a memorial. "We felt we wanted to do something so the name Zavelsky wouldn't die," Marjorie Goldberg said.

For Joan Krotenberg, a retired teacher from Woodstock, N.Y., Weiner located the gravestone of her great-grandmother, in a Jewish cemetery in Warsaw. Weiner also steered Krotenberg and her husband, Sandy, to a pair of towns in Ukraine where Joan's grandparents came from. There, the couple met with the mayors, a Jewish historian, and an elderly woman who had known the family of Krotenberg's maternal grandfather.

Krotenberg said she felt connected to a distant past. "Jewish life was so destroyed and disrupted by the Holocaust," she said. "It's sort of a vindication for me to go back to these towns and feel that, well, some of us lived and some of us survived and have had children and grandchildren who will live into the 21st century."

Judith Polisar of Mountain Lakes wrote to Weiner after returning with her husband from a trip to Belarus, where they visited

the town from which her father had emigrated in 1921 — and where her grandfather was shot in 1942.

Accompanying her was her 96-year-old uncle, who had left the town a year after her father. The uncle still recognized their house and the scent of the lilacs growing nearby.

Weiner has traced her own roots to Eastern Europe, particularly the Ukrainian town of Priluki. There, she discovered the birth certificate of her maternal grandmother, Miriam Odnopozov, after whom she was named. Weiner believes her grandmother was murdered by the Ku Klux Klan in Tulsa, Okla., in 1924.

"It was such a powerful feeling," Weiner recalled. "I have gone back to my own ancestral towns many times, and I haven't gotten over it yet."

Ever busy, Weiner is planning her next book, a similar archival and pictorial guide to Belarus and Lithuania.

Before she can embark on the project in earnest, she said, she must go back to her private business. She said she worked on her first two books through her non-profit foundation, which paid only her expenses.

Even though her books do not provide an income, Weiner said she is enthralled with the subject matter. "It's a passion. It's an obsession. And I love it."