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Planting Seeds for Family Trees

BY CAROL UNGAR

Miriam Weiner is the Johnny Appleseed of family-tree planting. A U.S.-board certified genealogist, Weiner has drawn up her own 1,000-member family tree.

She teaches others to do the same through her column, "Roots and Branches," which appears in 90 North American Jewish newspapers, and in lectures she gives across the U.S. She is also co-authoring a five-volume encyclopedia of Jewish genealogy due in mid-1990.

In Jerusalem in September as a guest of the Tourism Ministry, the petite and soft-spoken genealogist said, "I want to motivate people to discover and preserve their family histories."

Her highly organized presentation consists of a "show-and-tell." "I take documents and books with me. I show people what I've done and I give them the material to do it themselves," she said.

Born and raised in the midwestern U.S. to American-born parents, the 46-year-old family historian began her own search eight years ago following the death of an elderly cousin. "I realized that when he died everything he knew was gone," she recalled.

She started interviewing other aging relatives and wrote away for documents. Although she speaks neither Hebrew nor Yiddish, she succeeded in tracing her own roots back to the mid-19th century. "I can read enough to pick out the names of towns, and then I get others to translate for me," she explained. Her curiosity is insatiable. In her Seacaucus, New Jersey, townhouse she has 2,000 books related to Jewish history and genealogy, and the collection is growing.

A former private investigator, Weiner feels that her background has helped her research immensely. "Taking witnesses' statements requires the same skills as taking oral histories," she points out.

Weiner insists that anyone who delves deeply enough into family history is bound to uncover some surprises.

One of her own unexpected discoveries was that her maternal grandmother, Miriam Odnopoulos Rabkin, after whom she is named, was murdered by the Ku Klux Klan in 1924, and not shot accidentally, as



Miriam Weiner

Weiner had been led to believe. Weiner eventually traveled to her grandmother's hometown where she read front-page newspaper accounts of the murder, the subsequent trial and the acquittal of the accused.

"People often ask me whether I am the child of [Holocaust] survivors. I am not, but my grandmother was a victim of the same kind of anti-Semitism, and I feel a special obligation to learn as much as I can about her."

Weiner has traced her maternal lineage back to 1840, discovering Odnopoulos relatives in Denver, Colorado; Holland; Latin America and Herzliya.

"The Herzliya relative whom I found through the Jewish Agency's Search Bureau for Missing Relatives calls himself David Ud, which [in Hebrew] means 'firebrand,' left over from the fire [the Holocaust]," she says.

Using Soviet telephone books she found in the Library of Congress, Weiner contacted 12 relatives living in the Soviet Union. "One of my goals is to visit the Ukraine [where the family comes from]. I'm waiting to get in the door to the little places that are off limits," she says.

"My research enabled me to discover my roots and understand more about my Jewish identity," she added.

Miriam Weiner is currently advisor to the Museum of Jewish Heritage. A living Memorial to the Holocaust.

For further information on tracing your family history send a self-addressed stamped envelope to Miriam Weiner, 136 Sandpiper Key, Seacaucus, N.J. 07094.

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