

The Journey and Awakening Along the Way

by Miriam Weiner

My life (at least the professional part of it) was pre-terminated, I think, long before I ever realized it. I grew up in Des Moines, Iowa, as part of a middle-class family with two children (both female, to my father's frustration). Maybe it was because I read *Nancy Drew Mysteries*, I wanted to be a detective or policewoman when I grew up. I eventually went to work for the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department where I typed crime reports, sent out APB bulletins via teletype, and still thought about detective work.

I had an interesting work history: legal secretary to judges and attorneys (I worked as a paralegal for the attorneys representing Daniel Ellsberg in the "Pentagon Papers" trial), road manager to country singer Bobbie Gentry, private investigator licensed by the State of California, and executive director at the American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors (AGJHS) in New York City—all of which contributed to the person into which I evolved.

In the mid-1970s, I left California and went back East for the first time to the New York area to meet some relatives I had recently discovered. I eventually learned of Rabbi Malcolm H. Stern widely considered to be the Dean of American Jewish Genealogy. I wrote to Rabbi Stern and he responded by telling me about an upcoming Jewish genealogy conference in Washington, DC. I met Rabbi Stern at the conference and from then on, he was my mentor, teacher, friend and at times, a "surrogate" grandfather.¹

In the early 1980s, I met Benjamin Meed, president of the American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors in New York City, asking if I could give a genealogy lecture at an upcoming Holocaust survivor gathering in Washington, DC. He arranged the speaking engagement in DC but also invited me to visit his office. During that meeting/interview he offered me a job if I would be willing to move to the New York City area, which I accepted.²

Although I knew what the word "Holocaust" meant, it was never a subject mentioned throughout my high school days in Iowa; working with Ben Meed was an indoctrination and immersion into that horrific period in Jewish history. Simultaneously, although I wasn't aware of it at that time, the increasing knowledge of all of those relatives that I would never know propelled me into the pursuit of information about people who survived the Holocaust and where they are now.

My career formally began in 1985, when I became the first Jewish person to be recognized by the Board for Certification of Genealogist (BCG) as a certified genealogist³ and retained that status for 30 years, until I received emeritus status from the BCG in 2015.⁴

This brings me to a chapter in my family history that probably had the most influence in pointing me in this direction. In my late teens, my mother told me about her mother, Miriam Odnopozov, who came to America and married my

grandfather, Alexander Rabkin. From New York, they eventually settled in Oklahoma in the early 1920s. In those days, alleys ran between the streets and small houses were accessible off the alleys. One night, my grandmother was taking a walk and as she walked down an alley to return home, her neighbor called to her from her kitchen window; she and my



Miriam Weiner, ca. 1985



Miriam Odnopozov Rabkin
ca. 1910

grandmother began chatting over the fence. At this time, a neighbor opened a window in his house and shot his pistol at my grandmother. She died the next day in the hospital. I have newspaper articles from almost every day that week—the first one where the neighbor claimed that he thought my grandmother was a prowler peeking in his window, a couple of days later when the murder trial was held, and then, after a few more days, when the jury returned a "not guilty" verdict. My mother told me that approximately 20 years later, a local man told my grandfather, "I was formerly a member of the KKK, but when they shot your Minnie (my grandmother's nickname), I quit the Klan."

Through the years, countless people have asked if I were a child of Holocaust survivors because of my passion for

this work. My reply, "It was the same anti-Semitism; whether my grandmother died in the gas chambers at Auschwitz or in the alley in that Oklahoma town." The hate was the same, and the resulting pain and loss were the same for those she left behind. When I look at photographs of my grandmother and myself, I see a similarity (but maybe it is because I want to see it).⁵

In the late 1990s, a television station in Salt Lake City, Utah, that was producing a new series to be hosted by Alex Haley, tentatively entitled "Ancestors" contacted me. After a year of participating in planning meetings and long-distance consultations, I was asked to come to the Haley farm in Tennessee for a three-day weekend of meetings⁶ and strategy for the series.

I was still the young girl who grew up in Des Moines, Iowa, and had not spent much time in the company of celebrities; this encounter further motivated me to trace my family history. During this planning meeting, it was proposed that one of the eight segments involve a camera crew accompanying me to visit my ancestral town in Eastern Europe. My excitement about this project grew and ultimately caused me to think about things in a way that I had not thought of before—about my work and the impact it could have on others. Imagine the emotions that overwhelmed me when Haley died suddenly from a heart attack, a few months after that meeting on his farm. The series eventually evolved into something else, along with different people and a different host.

About this time, I began to travel to Eastern Europe three or four times a year and eventually bought an apartment in Mogilev-Podolskiy in southern Ukraine.⁷ I immersed myself in Jewish history, geography (including changing borders), name derivations, cultural traditions and archival holdings. I learned enough Russian to embarrass myself in conversation efforts, although it has never stopped me from babbling away in that language. In the “old country,” I can read road signs, menus (mostly) and best of all, I can translate Russian documents preferably in columnar format.

Very occasionally, I may think about what if I had not discovered genealogy (or it had not discovered me), and simply stated, I cannot imagine that life. I think I was born to do this, but it wasn’t until my 40s that I knew it. The joys that came from this work were many and varied. I loved the teaching aspect that initially came through my syndicated column, “Roots and Branches,” which appeared in more than 100 Jewish newspapers during the 1980s and early 1990s.⁸ Also in the 1980s and 1990s, I lectured often at Jewish genealogy societies, Jewish community centers, synagogues, Holocaust survivor groups and others. Pre-internet, I carried suitcases full of maps and reference books with me so that lecture attendees could look through them to find their ancestral town name on a map; the meaning of their surname in a book and other genealogy references. It was so much fun when someone at a lecture said “my family comes from Vinnitsa,” for example, and I could tell them about hotel conditions there as well as remaining Jewish sites.

Organizing individual or family tours to the “old country” was challenging and often unpredictable regarding potential discoveries (both in the town itself and in the archives). What was particularly meaningful to me was hearing how these discoveries and the town visit in particular affected the lives of the tour participants as well as their extended families.⁹ The people I have met during this “journey,” the archivists, historians, authors, genealogists, colleagues, editors and so many others confirm that it really does “take a village,” at least I believe this. The friendships that have formed, developed and in some cases became “family,” all are part of this journey in way or another. As I have evolved (is that another word for “aged”?), I have mellowed, become more patient and appreciate some people and events that appear differently to me now.

Every now and then I think about turning points in my career; I believe a major one was the one-hour battle with the director of the local town hall in Priluki for permission to photocopy my grandmother’s birth record. In spite of the fact that I had a “permission letter” from the Ministry of Justice in Kiev, the archive director initially refused. Finally, she advised me that she was “stepping out of the room for a meeting.” I took this to mean that I could make document copies on the portable copy machine that I had brought from America with an electric converter and plug adaptor.¹⁰

Much of my career was spent in Eastern Europe, visiting archives and small towns; collecting archive data and interviewing local Jews throughout six countries and ultimately publishing the archival data in my two books: *Jewish Roots in Poland* and *Jewish Roots in Ukraine and Moldova*. Both books received major awards from the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies.¹¹ Following the books, the Routes to Roots Foundation website (www.rtrfoundation.org) was created which included archive data from the foregoing books and additional data from Belarus, Lithuania and Romania along with ongoing updates. In 2003, I was honored by the IAJGS with its Lifetime Achievement Award.¹²

For the past several years, I have been planning, debating and discussing about what to do with the 25-plus large file drawers, 20-plus bookshelves, maps, photographs, antique vintage postcards, archive inventories, thousands of archive document copies and other archival-related items I have brought home from the “old country” over the past 30-plus years. The time for this decision is now, of that I am certain. I finally have some plans “in the works” and I am hopeful that some day before I forget who I am, I am able to say that I am “fully retired.”¹³

But not yet....

Notes

1. <https://www.rtrfoundation.org/mhs.shtml>
2. www.rtrfoundation.org/amg.pdf
3. www.rtrfoundation.org/bcg.shtml
4. www.rtrfoundation.org/bcg.pdf
5. www.rtrfoundation.org/int-110.shtml
6. www.rtrfoundation.org/webart/haley2.pdf
7. www.rtrfoundation.org/lipman.shtml
8. www.rtrfoundation.org/selected.shtml
9. <https://www.rtrfoundation.org/webart/Weiner-Tour%20client%20letters.PDF>
10. www.rtrfoundation.org/grandmother_birth_record.shtml
11. <https://www.rtrfoundation.org/bcg.pdf>
12. www.rtrfoundation.org/news2.shtml
13. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Miriam_Weiner_\(genealogist\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Miriam_Weiner_(genealogist))

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