

American Jews have long struggled with their European roots. The immigrants from the shtetls of Eastern Europe came to America in several waves, with most of them arriving at the turn of the century. They tried, often successfully, to preserve something of the past in a world that was strange to them. They gathered in *Landsmanshaften* with other immigrants from their native towns, to be with someone who remembered the villages, who could sing a familiar song or pray with the proper intonation—someone else for whom the sights and the sounds of the Old World could evoke a sense of nostalgia.

In truth, those immigrants broke with their European roots. They left behind parents and siblings, even spouses and children, to journey forth to an unknown land. Often when they parted with their parents, they knew that this was their last meeting, their final goodbye. They would not return for illnesses or funerals, they would not be there when needed. The break was not without guilt. Separation by an ocean so large was usually final. Communication was confined to letters.

Their children were first-generation Americans, embracing all that was American. Even if they arrived in school speaking only Yiddish, they soon spoke an unaccented English fluently and eagerly absorbed American culture. Bernard Malamud wrote *The Natural*, still one of America's great baseball stories. Chaim Potok began *The Chosen* with a confrontation between Hasidim and more worldly Orthodox Jews on the baseball field—not quite a diamond, but a concrete schoolyard. These first-generation children of immigrants entered the American mainstream. They moved from the Lower East Side and other such Jewish enclaves to less “intense” neighborhoods—more Americanized, less ethnic. They regarded everything American as progressive and their European roots as backward, something to throw off, to abandon and leave behind. Only the future was of interest. The past did not beckon.

The second generation, however, and later the third and the fourth, sought to remember what their parents had chosen to forget. They turned back to Europe in search of something. But it was a different Europe to which they looked back. The fires of the Holocaust had consumed the world that was. Only the ashes remained—abandoned graves, former synagogues and memories. Poland was the home of dead Jews, of graveyards and concentration camps.

The Holocaust, the systematic, state-sponsored annihilation of the European Jews, destroyed the world that would have permitted American Jews access to a living past. The Holocaust looms large in American Jewish consciousness, larger in the past decade than when I



Dr. Michael Berenbaum, President and CEO of Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation, Los Angeles; former Director of the Research Institute at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, D. C.

was growing up in the fifties and sixties, larger still than in the seventies and eighties. Thus interest in the European roots of American Jews grows as the ties that bind us with our European roots become ever more attenuated.

In recent years, a new ritual has arisen. Or, more precisely, an ancient ritual has been renewed. Pilgrimage is among the most ancient religious acts. One journeys to and one journeys from. Pilgrimage, a part of all religions, is an essential part of Judaism.

The first call to the first Jews, God's summons to Abram, was *Lech lecha*—Journey forth from your land, from your birthplace, from your father's house to the land that I will show you. Hasidic sages offer a different reading: *Lech lecha*—Go unto yourself. We leave everything behind in search of the unknown, yet it is the great unknown, ourselves, that we take along.

Our ancestors journeyed from Egypt to the Sinai Desert to the Promised Land. Save for two, Caleb and Joshua, those who began the journey did not enter the Land. Even Moses could not bring them but to the edge. He then had to cede his position to Joshua, his disciple.

In our generation, pilgrimage has returned as an essential religious act, along with a new path. If our ancestors went from Egypt to the Promised Land, if our

parents, grandparents or great-grandparents went from Europe to America, we, their descendants, follow the tortured path of modern Jewish history from Auschwitz to Jerusalem.

We go as pilgrims back to Europe. For many of us, planes, trains and buses provide the means of return. For those of us who cannot make the pilgrimage physically, it is the discovery of documents that allows for the return, for the encounter with the past, for the sense of self-discovery.

Thus, Miriam Weiner's painstaking work, *Jewish Roots in Poland*, is as timely as it is valuable. She has initiated and made available to the public for the first time, in a concise and readable form, the inventories of records relating to the Jewish experience in Poland that are held in archives throughout Poland. She has taken us through these archives and offered us a peek at their treasures. And she has empowered fellow pilgrims—scholars and novices alike—to begin their own searches, to commence on their own journeys.

We travel with Miriam on the path that she has taken. We traverse the cities of Poland with their once vibrant Jewish populations, and we explore their remnants—physical buildings and documents—in a way that permits those of us who trace our roots to Poland to rediscover our past, to touch the generations that preceded those who came to America.

These efforts must be celebrated. Miriam was brave and bold, persistent, disciplined and demanding. She has opened to us an entire world for exploration and saved all of us, even the most informed, months of effort and false starts. She has made a daunting task appear ever more possible, even more beckoning.

This book is not Miriam's first contribution to memory, but it must surely rank as her finest. I first met Miriam when she worked with the American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors as it was beginning to gather what is now known as the Benjamin and Vladka Meed Registry of Jewish Holocaust Survivors, located in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. She worked with skill and dedication. She created order and empowered the survivors, most especially Benjamin Meed, the indefatigable president of the American Gathering, to do so much. I admired her then, and that was just the beginning.

She then wrote on the subject of genealogy. Still later, she became a guide, a mentor and a leading authority. She assisted people to find their past and, in turn, she discovered her mandate, perhaps even her destiny.

Jewish Roots in Poland is Miriam Weiner's singular achievement. Yet she did not work alone and did not

write the book on her own. She asked for and received the assistance of the Polish State Archives and of individual archivists in Polish archives throughout the country. From archives large and small, from scholars of distinction and ordinary paper pushers, she received splendid cooperation. Only one who has worked in these archives and with these people can understand the magnitude of her achievement. She must have been cajoling and persistent. She must have persuaded by force of reason and of personality.

Generally, archivists belong to one of two schools. They are hoarders or sharers. The hoarders gather treasures that they deem all the more valuable because they are unknown and unexamined. They recognize the mystery of what they have, and they have a sense of power in knowing its importance and how only a handful of people understand the true value of what they possess. From these men—and they were mostly men—Miriam demanded the ultimate sacrifice, to reveal the concealed, to make known their treasures, to share what they have.

For the sharers, she became the midwife, the vehicle through which their treasures could come to light, their documents explored. Reading page after page, I could sense the depth of their gratitude as well as the anguish of those archivists for whom sharing is so difficult.

Miriam Weiner's book is a gift to all of us would-be pilgrims. The true measure of its value is to be found in the journeys we undertake, the secrets we uncover. These acts of pilgrimage return us way beyond the world of the Holocaust, to the moments when more than 3 million Jews lived in Poland, when Warsaw was the home of Jewish theaters and the Jewish press, when Hasidim and Misnagdim, secularists, Zionists and Bundists walked its streets and the small alleys of the hundreds of Jewish towns, villages and hamlets. With her aid, we return not to the world of destruction, but to a time when the world was whole. We can taste its spiritual richness and be charged by its vibrancy. After all, Jews lived in Poland for a millennium, and their sojourn was not always marked by antipathy and anti-Semitism. The murderous end of Polish Jewry is not all there is to the life of Jews in Poland. We must return not only to the ghettos, the concentration camps and death camps, but also to the towns, villages and hamlets where Jews dwelled for so long.

Such a journey can change our sense of who we are, of where we have come from, and, above all, of what we must become.

Michael Berenbaum

Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation
Los Angeles, California