

Local woman pioneers records research in Eastern Europe

By Al Sullivan
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Miriam Weiner, a resident of Secaucus's Harmon Cove, needs no H.G. Wells time machine to travel to the past, no magic spells to take people with her. Through post cards, old photographs, birth, marriage and death certificates, certificates of employment and other such documents, Weiner walks through streets and cities that have largely ceased to exist and meets people whose lives and faces have mostly been forgotten, hoping to restore them as living memories.

Weiner has been called the Indiana Jones of prewar Polish Jewry, and many people have come to admire her dogged pursuit of information as she searches old and sometimes confusing Eastern European archives for threads of information in order to uncover the trail of documents that records a past many thought lost as a result of Nazi atrocities.



After years of crisscrossing the countryside visiting state archives, old cemeteries and synagogues, Weiner has published two books, *Jewish Roots in Poland* (1997), and the most recent, *Jewish Roots in Ukraine and Moldova*, the product of her non-profit organization called "Routes to Roots." Both books, to many Jewish archivists, have become key tools in Jewish genealogical research. Yet beyond tools for research, her books attempt to paint a portrait of a people, and glimpse their lives before and after the holocaust.

A diverse career

Long before she put her pen to her first book, Weiner had already had a remarkably eventful life. Growing up in Des Moines, Iowa, she tended to have as much contact with horses at rodeos as she had with the Jewish faith.

"My life wasn't devoid of Jewish culture; it just wasn't the center of my life at the time," she said.

Weiner's early life was spent in a sequence of changing careers. For a while, she worked as a clerk in the sheriff's department in Orange County, Calif., then as a paralegal for lawyers and judges. She became a private detective for a time with her own agency. After answering a newspaper ad in 1967, Weiner found herself as the road manager to country singer Bobbie Gentry.

When Weiner moved to Secaucus in 1986 to take a job as the executive director of the American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors, she had no idea how much the job would change her life or how her co-editing *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Genealogy* would bring her back in touch with her own Jewish culture.

Weiner had just graduated from the State

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AN UNCHANGED WORLD – Haywagon (Top) travels the roadways in Ukraine same way wagons did 100 years ago and Miriam Weiner (Left) sits with a goat at the bazaar in Mogilev Podolskiy, Ukraine. The markets are much the same as they were 100 years ago. (Right) Miriam Weiner presents a copy of her book, *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Genealogy*, to Alex Haley during production for an upcoming PBS series in 1991.

Uncovering the
Jewish past

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WEINER *from cover*

University in Albany with a BA in Jewish Studies and was looking for a place that was both peaceful and yet near enough the city for her to complete her duties.

Personal mission

While attending a funeral of a family member in 1988, Weiner discovered that she knew very little about her family's background. She decided to seek information about her family's Eastern European ties. This was before the fall of the Soviet Union, and requests to see documents in Eastern Europe had to be made through an office in Moscow – which routinely denied access.

Weiner, persistent as well as personable, changed most of that. She just happened to be at the right place at the right time as the Cold War thawed and the centralized power structure began to crumble.

While researching her own family history, she saw an address in a reference book and contacted the museum in the town where her grandmother had been born. During her first trip to Poland in 1991, she was first Jew to visit many of the towns since before World War Two, when Poland was the heart of Jewish life in Europe. Three out of every four Jewish families worldwide can trace at least one grandparent to 1939 Poland.

Weiner – like many people – previously believed all the records relating to Jewish life had perished with Nazi and Soviet occupation. To her delight, she found many still existed, although most lacked the organization to make them accessible for genealogical purposes.

"There was this overwhelming sense of emotion, standing beside all of these unopened books from before the war," she said.

When she opened the books, pages stuck together. No one else had opened them in 50 years. In them, Weiner found a trail of records that led her to find relatives she'd not known of before, and reports of her grandmother who immigrated to America at the turn of the last century.

A taste for the Old World

In her trips to Eastern Europe, Weiner found that life there hadn't changed much in the last 100 years. People still used horses and wagons, still dug wells for water, and still used outside toilets. While some of the goods sold have changed, the market places often look much like pictures seen on post cards from a century ago.

"Going to that part of the world was like thinking of going to the moon," she said. "Never in my wildest dreams did I think I would go behind what was then called The Iron Curtain."

When she arrived, she found a very practical people, people whose values seemed to center upon the basic necessities of life: where to get medicine, education, and repair of highways. She also discovered that the Nazi had failed to eradicate Jewish life, and Weiner found that there was much left of the old culture.

"People presumed towns were wiped off the maps, and they were not," she said. "But many of the places sacred to the Jewish faith have suffered over time, Jewish graveyards turned into soccer fields, synagogues into gymnasiums."

One thing that did surprise her was the lack of obvious anti-Semitism. After hearing all the history associated with the Jews in that part of the world, she was a little startled when she found people cooperating with her.

"I made it very clear that I was researching Jewish history," she said. "People were very cooperative. In fact, I felt an overwhelming sense

of hospitality. Busy people stopped what they were doing to help me. I was very moved and deeply grateful for their sharing their time and their knowledge with me."

People often invited her into their homes for tea or vodka.

Diplomatic

In dealing with local officials, Weiner said she's tried to be very diplomatic.

Most mayors have been eager to help, partly because Weiner was the first American to come to many of these towns since the end of World War II. She also makes it clear that she is not seeking to recover property, only historical information, and the mayors – she said – responded with "civic pride."

But Communist habits die hard. Police stopped travelers routinely.

"This was not because we made any mistakes, but because they wanted to check our papers," she said, noting that because she was a columnist for over 100 Jewish newspapers, she had press credentials and, therefore, had a little less trouble than she might otherwise have dealt with. "Journalists have power," she said.

Wiener maintains an apartment in Secaucus as well as one in the Ukraine, and makes frequent trips, carrying many of the automotive and home repair items she needs.

"I've developed a strong connection to the land of my ancestors," she said. "If I'm here in Secaucus for two or three months I get an itch to go back."

Searching for other people's relatives

Weiner now makes her living by doing individual research for people.

"Most people, even those who will take a trip over there later, can't do the research themselves," Weiner said.

Part of this is the lack of experience, part of this is because Weiner has developed connections that allow her access many other people can't get, she said.

The cost depends on how much material is available, how many archives she has to search, how many countries she has to go to and how many last names she has to find. There are hotel costs and other costs that have to be calculated into the price. For those unable or unwilling to make the trip abroad, Weiner provides reports, including videos, photos, document analysis and accounts of all interviews, and research.

"Everyday people contact me – by telephone, fax or letter – requesting information about how to trace their Jewish roots," she said. "Most people are in the beginning stages and some have no idea where their family originated from in the old country and do not know what the original family name was."

A one-town ancestral search takes about three days, Weiner said. The first day is dedicated to researching documents, the second, to interviewing and video taping, the third, to putting all the material together into a report.

Research is tedious. It involves going through all the documents name by name, line by line, in very massive books.

Yet Weiner said this has become a passion for her.

"I can't stop," she said. "Something is pushing me, driving me, and sometimes I feel like I don't have a will of my own. I am the midwife helping to give birth to something that many people thought no longer existed. That is exciting to me."