

Introduce Miriam Weiner

Hi! My name is Susan O'Connor and I'm the president of the Massachusetts Genealogical Council.

I am very pleased to welcome you to this M.O.R.E. presentation whether you are here in person or attending via Zoom. This presentation is co-sponsored by the Jewish Genealogical Society of Greater Boston to whom I am grateful for everything they did to generate this incredible turnout.

When MGC began this program of quarterly educational presentations, we went looking for a catchy, yet simple name. We settled on M.O.R.E--**MGC: Open Records and Education**—which completely summarizes our mission statement and provides the shortest elevator speech I've ever heard.

A bit about logistics for this afternoon...

- Restrooms are on the left as you walk out the door.
- There are handouts for this presentation and a link to them has been posted in the Zoom chat. For those of you here, if we've run out of copies, I will send you an email with the link before tomorrow morning.
- There will be a Q&A portion after Miriam finishes speaking. For those of you on Zoom, please put your questions into the chat and Barbara Mathews, who's helping out, will pose them for you.

Today's session has a lot of "firsts:"

2024-11-10: Miriam Weiner – You Have been Invited to a Meeting with the KGB

- This is the first time that we have co-sponsored a session with JGSGB and I sincerely hope we can do this again.
- This is the first presentation for which we've had an in-person component—almost 50 people have said they were coming in-person.
- This is the first time that over 400 people have registered to attend virtually.
- This is the first time that a M.O.R.E. session has occurred during daylight hours.
- And, most importantly, this is the first time that we've had a speaker who has her own, and I may say extensive, articles on **Wikipedia**—in multiple languages.

It is my great pleasure to introduce Miriam Weiner. For many of you, Miriam needs no introduction as you have used her legendary work to further your research into your own family histories.

Just in case you don't know her, Miriam Weiner has been described as "The Genealogist Who Lifted the Archival Iron Curtain" and the "Indiana Jones of pre-war Polish Jewry." She is an internationally known author, lecturer, syndicated columnist, tour guide, and journalist. She currently serves as the president of the Routes to Roots Foundation.

With the fall of the Iron Curtain, Miriam was the first to connect with archivists and chief archivists in formerly closed-off countries, helping to establish access to their records. Through her ground-breaking efforts she created a town-by-town inventory of archive documents in official cooperation with the archives in Poland, Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus and Lithuania.

The searchable database based on her work can be found on the website of the Routes to Roots Foundation. Miriam is the author **Jewish Roots in Poland** and **Jewish Roots in Ukraine and Moldova**. She is the former Executive Director of the American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors, and her syndicated column "Roots and Branches" appeared in more than 100 Jewish newspapers worldwide.

I am intrigued to learn how her skills as a licensed private investigator facilitated her legendary work and how she dealt with "an invitation to meet with the KGB."

I give you Miriam Weiner.

Miriam's Lecture Presentation (In-person & Zoom)

Miriam's Live Audience Input

Q & A

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Shirley M. Barnes Award (Intro by Susan O'Connor)

We have one more “bit of business” relative to records access and preservation before we conclude this afternoon.

At its annual meeting in 2019, the Massachusetts Genealogical Council (MGC) established an award to be given annually in memory of Shirley M. (Armstrong) Barnes. Shirley was committed to advocating for record preservation and access. Her work brought about the 1983 Massachusetts vital records law which mandated the transfer of vital records to the state archives in five-year intervals. The award recognizes people who emulate Shirley's volunteer spirit and whose dedication to records access has made a significant impact for genealogists. The award takes the form of a **wooden book clock**, a replica of the award MGC gave to Shirley when she retired from the Civil Records Director job after 25 years of service.



Now, I want to introduce Sonia Lipetz, president of The Jewish Genealogical Society of Greater Boston, to say a few words about the impact of Miriam Weiner’s work on Jewish genealogists everywhere.

Remarks from Sonia Lipetz

I'd like to highlight five things about the intrepid Miriam:

1. She is **GUTSY**. She pursued records in the face of hostile bureaucrats who were protecting their fiefdoms within hostile governments, or were just plain lazy and couldn't be bothered, and she even fended off the KGB. She went where no Americans had been seen. And I'd venture a guess, she risked not being seen again!
2. She is **RELENTLESS**. Using whatever tactic worked: creative ruses and charm, or power and might, or a little sneakiness, and always with enormous patience, she had a mission and refused to take no for an answer. That was decidedly **NOT** the standard reaction to an official "no" in that place at that time.
3. She is a **VISIONARY**. Miriam recognized the value of identifying these records for a worldwide community. The records were generally handwritten in Eastern European languages (Polish, Russian, Ukrainian), often in Cyrillic or sometimes Hebrew or Yiddish. Different alphabets. She saw a way to get them translated and indexed to be useful to genealogical researchers.
4. She is **GENEROUS**. Access to the information she assembled has always been open and without charge. She continues to tirelessly encourage researchers to use her free website.
5. She is a **MYTH-BUSTER**. When Miriam began her work, most Jews believed that records of their families were destroyed by the events of WW2 and then the Soviet regime. Her work opened the ability to trace ancestors, and contributed to reuniting Holocaust survivors with their own histories and with distant living relatives.

Tikkun olam is a Hebrew phrase that translates to "repair the world" or "mend the world". It is a central concept in Judaism suggesting that humanity has a shared responsibility to repair and transform the world. In a small but meaningful way, Miriam Weiner's life work did just that.

Presentation of Award by Susan O'Connor

*MGC is delighted to present the **2024 Shirley M. Barnes Record Access Award** to:*

"Miriam Weiner, Certified Genealogist (CG) Emeritus, "The Genealogist Who Lifted the Archival Iron Curtain," who through her courage, insightfulness, volunteerism and dedication to records access and preservation has significantly impacted genealogists everywhere."



Congratulations, Miriam!

Miriam's Acceptance Remarks

Thank you, Susan. I am so very honored to have been selected as the person to receive the **2024 Shirley M. Barnes Records Access Award** this year.

Document Records and their access are the cornerstone of a genealogist's work and in my case, it was the pursuit of my grandmother's birth record in Ukraine that changed the direction of my life.

In the 1980s I began trying to determine if that birth record existed, where was it and how I could travel there to find it. At the same time, the Jewish communities worldwide were waking up to genealogy and family history and soon we were banding together into genealogy societies and research groups who were eager to search their family history in "the old country."

The first question, generally, was "did Jewish records survive the Holocaust for my ancestral town and if so, for what years and where were they?"

It was that question that drove me to develop expertise in "multiple-entry business visas" and how to work with older archivists raised and trained during the Soviet and communist times where everything was a "secret."

One thing that has stuck with me during several decades of working in archives of six countries is that, in general, and particularly in the 1980s & 1990s, the archivists worked under very difficult conditions, such as having to wear gloves in the winter with the finger tips cut away so they could page through books – I saw this in Kishinev, Moldova and in Kamenets Podolsky, Ukraine. There was often no heat available.

Sometimes in smaller archives or branch archives, toilet facilities were an outhouse "out back" – as in Nezhin, Ukraine.

Some archivists told me what their salaries were and it was all I could do to not show a "horrified" expression on my face (and this was in Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova)."

In summary, while I was often disappointed at the lack of progress in finding aids and inventories, soon I developed a sympathy and understanding of working conditions that most Americans never saw.

Therefore, I wish to acknowledge the assistance and friendships I developed "in the old country" with archivists who understood my passion to "walk in the footsteps of my ancestors" and often cooperated in ways I only dreamed of.

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This award for records access is a personal joy for me to receive and I thank the **Massachusetts Genealogical Council** and its Board of Directors for choosing to honor my work in this way. And, a special bouquet of thanks to the **Jewish Genealogical Society of Greater Boston (JGSGB)** for nominating me for this prestigious award and co-sponsoring this presentation.

While I never had the privilege to know Shirley Barnes, there are people here today who told me about her and her work, which made me wish I had known her.

Thank you all, again.



*L-R: Sonia Lipetz (President, Jewish Genealogical Society of Greater Boston)
Miriam Weiner (with award)
Susan O'Connor (President, Massachusetts Genealogical Council)
Photo Credit: Keren Weiner*