

PERSONALITY

REBECCA SCHLAM LUTTO *Staff writer*

Miriam Weiner: Family trees are her business

Your ancestors didn't have to come over on the Mayflower for you to have a fascinating family tree. And being Jewish might help, because then Miriam Weiner can be your guide.

The Secaucus resident is a leading Jewish genealogist who shatters myths and stereotypes. The first misconception she is out to correct is that all records were lost in the Holocaust.

"The Jewish records were not all destroyed," she emphasized in an interview with the Jewish Standard. "Many sources of Jewish vital records from Eastern Europe still exist. They have been microfilmed and are available in Israel and in libraries elsewhere."

And in her own person she shatters the image of the genealogist as an elderly antiquarian as musty as the documents he or she handles.

Miriam Weiner is the antithesis of all that. She is an attractive, modern career woman who uses state-of-the-art technology in her searches into the past. Indeed, her infectious enthusiasm brings the old documents themselves to life.

Through her books, lectures, and "Roots and Branches," her column that appears in 60 newspapers, she shares her prodigious know-how with the Jewish world.

Currently her excitement over finding Jewish roots has carried quite far. She has just received a commitment from the Australian Jewish Times in Sydney to run her

column, and in May she will be flying to Los Angeles to speak at the Simon Wiesenthal Center.

Weiner is soft-spoken, and her advice as to a first baby step for would-be researchers is pleasant and easy. "First, talk to your oldest living relatives," she says. "And write down the information—don't rely on your memory."

She started the search for her own relatives when her mother asked her to look

"People die, but the family lives on."

up some unknown cousins. Now, 15 years later, she has a family tree reaching 20 feet long on a computer printout, and containing 1,000 names.

The search also brought her a new career—she is the only Jewish genealogist certified by the Board of Certification of Genealogists in Washington—and led her to concentrate on Judaic history and Holocaust studies when she went back to college.

Serendipitously, Weiner's earlier work experience had been preparing her with just the skills a genealogist needs.

Born in Los Angeles, she grew up in the Midwest and returned to California, where she worked for a police agency and as a publicist for Bobbie Gentry, the country

singer. Later she was licensed as a private investigator in California.

"Taking witness statements as a private investigator was invaluable training to me for obtaining oral histories later," she said. "And my training in investigative procedures helped me develop unusual sources and caused me to become creative in my approaches to dead ends."

She came to the New York area three years ago to be executive director of the American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors. She remains as a consultant to the organization.

Working out of her Secaucus townhouse where she has 1,500 reference volumes, maps, and her own computer, Weiner also consults other data bases and libraries in her work, which currently includes co-authoring the "Encyclopedia of Jewish Genealogy" with Arthur Kurzweil.

Miriam Weiner warns her lecture audiences at synagogues, federations, and Jewish community centers that tracing their family histories will not be easy. "You need persistence," she stresses again and again. "You need patience."

As to the search for her own roots, is there an end in sight? "I hope not," she said. "People die, but the family lives on."

She has traced all four branches of her family to Eastern European areas. "With glasnost, I hope Gorbachev will not only let Jews out of Russia, but will help thou-



Miriam Weiner

sands of Jews come to Russia and trace their family roots," she said.

"I intend to go to those towns which are now closed to genealogists. I want to find where the synagogue was, are there any Jews left, where the cemetery is."

And, linking the past with the future, she ventured: "I want to talk to the oldest person in the town, to see if they remember anyone in my family. I will organize a family reunion in the Soviet Union, where we will drink vodka and dance the hora."

Editor's note: During the above interview, Miriam Weiner asked Rebecca Lutto if she knew where her ancestors came from. From a few scraps of recollected information—the name of a shtetl in Galicia "near Lvov," the name of the ship her mother came on, and approximate date of arrival—the genealogist was able to assemble the beginnings of a family tree, as shown in the accompanying article.

Genealogist turns tables on Standard's interviewer

To those who say, "all the records were destroyed in the Holocaust and I can't find any information about my family or the town they came from," read on . . .

When the accompanying interview with Rebecca Lutto for the *Jewish Standard* was concluded, I asked Rebecca about her own roots. She said that she knew very little other than that her family came from a small *shtetl* called Kantchika, that her mother, Rose Segal, arrived at Castle Garden just prior to Christmas in 1906 on a ship that sailed from Hamburg and was called the "Amerika." Although she remembered family stories, she had few facts.

I had never heard of Kantchika (also spelled Kontchuga and Kanczuga, I later learned), but thought it would be interesting to see what information I could locate about this *shtetl*.

First, I turned to the "Morton Allan Directory of European Passenger Steamship Arrivals." I found an entry for the "S.S. Ameri-

. . . east of Rzeszow and west of Lvov . . .

ka," which arrived in New York from Hamburg on December 22, 1906.

In a book called "Passenger Liners of the World Since 1893," I was able to locate a photograph of the ship and a brief history that indicated that it was built in April, 1905. It was seized by the United States at Boston in 1917 and converted to a transport with the name Anglicized to "America" in 1918.

The next step would be to order the Ship Passenger Arrival Record from the National Archives in Washington, DC for Rose Segal, since the name of the ship and date of arrival are known.

Next, I wanted to see Kantchika on a map so I turned to my favorite reference book, the "Shtetl Finder Gazetteer" by Chester G. Cohen, and found an entry for this town. The entry tells me that Kantchika is locat-

ed east of Rzeszow and west of Lvov. It lists advance subscribers from Kantchika for the book "Arye Debi Eilai" by name and makes reference to Berl Kagan's 1975 book "Sefer Haprenumerantn" (Hebrew Subscription Lists). The Kagan book consists of a "compilation of about 900 Hebrew books, mostly 19th and early 20th century, in which there were printed the names of persons who had paid in advance of publication for their copy of the book in order to help the author raise funds to pay the printer." The index (in English) lists more than 8,000 European towns.

For Polish towns, my best map reference is "Atlas Polski" (with a scale of 1:500,000). Kanczuga (Polish spelling) was located along with a short description of available services, much as you would find in a AAA travel guide.

It appears that Kanczuga is located about half way between two larger cities of Rzeszow and Przemyśl—perhaps 25 miles from each town. This became important when I began to research what happened in Kanczuga during the Holocaust.

An on-going project of Yad Vashem in Jerusalem is a series of *Pinkas Hakehillot*, which are encyclopedias of Jewish communities. Volume III for Poland, which covers Western Galicia and Silesia, has an extensive article on Kanczuga in Hebrew. The index of towns is in English and the census chart shows that 888 Jews lived in Kanczuga in 1880 and the Jewish population increased slightly to 967 by 1921. The translation of the article should provide an extensive description of life in Kanczuga, including the Holocaust years.

Another publication of Yad Vashem is entitled "Jewish Communities Destroyed in the Holocaust." The entry for Kanczuga indicates 1,200 Jews perished, which would appear to be virtually the entire population, allowing for the increase from the 1921 figures.

As can be seen, I rely strongly on the numerous references published by Yad Vashem and direct your attention to yet

another two sources that are part of a continuing series called "Guide to Unpublished Materials of the Holocaust Period." Volume III (1975) and Volume V (1979) include entries on Kanczuga and refer to testimonies on Jewish resistance and deportation to Belzec. Copies of these documents can be ordered directly from the archives at Yad Vashem.

From Sept. 1, 1941 until June 30, 1943, a center of mass annihilation was located in a wooded area near the Belzec railway station.

In "The Ghetto Anthology," Roman Mogilanski includes a two-page description of the Belzec annihilation center, its prisoners, day-to-day activities and nationalities of the victims. More than 550,000 Jews were sent to Belzec from Galicia, Russia, Austria, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, Holland, Germany, Norway, Rumania, and Hungary.

Earlier I referred to the fact that Kanczuga is located near two larger towns of Przemyśl and Rzeszow. Mogilanski's book also contains references to the ghetto in each of these towns. It is possible that residents of Kanczuga could have gone to either ghetto.

After the war, survivors banded together and compiled Yizkor (memorial) books for their towns. These books include maps, names of residents (both those who survived and those who did not), photos, and articles about life in the town. They are almost always a valuable research tool if one can be located for your ancestral town.

In the "Bibliography of Eastern European Memorial Books" by Zachary M. Baker of YIVO Institute in New York, there are references to Yizkor books for both Tszeszow and Przemyśl. Most Yizkor books included information about the nearby towns and it is probable that Kanczuga is included in one of these two books. Unfortunately, these books were published in limited number, often no more than 1,000. Yizkor books can be found in Judaic libraries throughout the world, with the largest collection be-

ing at Yad Vashem. Both of these books can be found at the YIVO Institute in Manhattan and the Jewish Division of the New York Public Library.

The demand to purchase these memorial books has increased dramatically with the growing interest in family history and roots. The best source for purchase is J. Robinson & Co., 31 Nachlat Benjamin St., 65162 Tel Aviv, Israel. His current listing (#159) indicated that he has Yizkor books for both Rzeszow and Przemyśl.

To locate family members or survivors from your town, an inquiry to the American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors, 122 W. 30th St., New York, NY 10003, can sometimes yield results. The computerized database contains records on more than 60,000 survivors and their families. One person, Leo Rosen from New

York, indicated that he was born in Kanczyga.

Until the search begins, one can never tell how much materials, if any, can be located. In this case, Rebecca Lutto has been provided with copies of all entries from books noted above, maps, and National Archives Form 81 to order the passenger record of her mother.

You, too, can discover and preserve your family history. For many of us, it is almost too late. Please begin now. Perhaps I can help. I have prepared a beginner's guide on how to research your family history that includes charts, list of archives, bibliography, maps, family group sheets, and more. It can be ordered for \$10. You can write to me at 136 Sandpiper Key, Secaucus, NJ 07094.

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