

Jewish Genealogist Discovers Roots, Makes the Past Come Alive

By Leon E. Brown

Jewish Times Editor

Unless you're a king, the President, or some other notable, finding your ancestors and making sure a family tree is kept for future generations may be difficult. As Jews, we are frustrated as to how far back do we want to go: are we all descendants of Adam, or trace our lineage to Abraham, or back to the Great Flood and Noah's survival?

Genealogy is defined as a chart or recorded history of the descent of a person or family from an ancestor or ancestors. While Jews have a long history, most American Jews want to trace their family roots back to Europe within the past century. There has been an upswing in interest and involvement in genealogy and family roots since Alex Haley's book and popular television series "Roots" a few years back.

TRACING YOUR FAMILY tree is a very personal quest. That shoebox full of musty old photographs from about the turn of the century saved from your parents is puzzling. Who are those people in the old photos who never seemed to smile? It seems like an unsurmountable task when grandparents and parents are now deceased and there is no one left to identify the odd-looking people in the pictures. But today's generation is searching for identity not only as Jews, but back to their family roots in Eastern Europe and the *Yiddishkeit* that has almost totally disappeared.

Miriam Weiner is a one-of-a-kind, the only Jewish genealogist to be certified by the Board for Certifi-

cation of Genealogists in Washington, D.C., as an expert in Jewish genealogy and family history. She's also sincere and dedicated to the point of obsession, and as she advises people, "you have to be persistent to the point of stubbornness if you want to be successful in your search."

Weiner, a resident of North Jersey, will be the first to tell you that trying to trace your family tree is not easy. The name changes and problems caused by border changes in Eastern Europe, combined with the devastation of records in the Holocaust, makes the location of records that much more difficult, though not impossible, as she has discovered time and again.

THE NEVER-ENDING search for roots and branches has prompted this young woman to apply her previous skills as a private investigator in tracking her own family trees, both maternal and paternal. She has gone a step beyond, now helping many others to discover the satisfaction of knowing where their family came from, and more important, who they were and why they left the "Old Country."

Like her ancestors, Weiner has been a "Wandering Jew" in more ways than one. Born in Los Angeles, she moved with her family to Des Moines, Iowa, where she grew up and then later attended the University of Oklahoma. She returned to California where she worked for the Sheriff's Department and as a road manager and publicist for country singer Bobbie Gentry. She was then licensed by the State of California as a private investigator, where she garnered her techniques that ulti-



MIRIAM WEINER

mately became the tools she would use in her career as a genealogist.

"TAKING WITNESS statements as a private investigator was invaluable training to me for obtaining oral histories later," she said during a recent interview. "My training in investigative procedures helped me develop unusual sources and caused me to become creative in my approaches to dead ends."

Seek and you shall find is a biblical adage which Weiner has taken to heart. Her penetrating eyes have scrutinized thousands of documents and books as she has successfully traced her own family history in a relatively short period of time. Those old sepia-toned pictures have not only been restored, but Weiner has breathed life

into them. Faces and names previously unknown to her now have personal meaning. The Winikur, Rovin, Odnoposoff and Rabkin families from the towns of Sudilkov, Shepetovka, Faleshti, Priluki and Konotop -- all in the Ukraine, have been brought to life. It is a past that now lives.

WEINER'S PERSISTENCE has led her behind the Iron Curtain where she has added another 100 names to the Odnoposoff family tree. These new relatives were discovered through Soviet telephone books at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

The genesis started about 15 years ago when Weiner, who was living on a horse ranch in Northern California, made a trip to New York and was asked by her mother to look up some unknown cousins. While in Albany, she began to sketch the family tree. Starting with a list of less than 100 names, she produced a family tree with 1000 Weiners, Rabkins, Winikurs, Menochins and Rovinskys. She met many of her newly found relatives in travels to Europe, Israel and throughout the U.S. She built a personal library of 1500 reference books, became an expert in Jewish history and geography and redefined her Jewish identity.

"BUT IT WAS REALLY five years ago that I began in earnest," she said. "Older members of the family were dying, and with them part of my heritage died. There was no one to answer the questions I should have asked years ago. I realized too late that it was time to interview the older members of the family who were left. I wanted

to know where they came from, who was left behind in Europe and what their lives were like in those Ukrainian towns."

Her curiosity was stirred, her interest rejuvenated. History and geography had not been her favorite subjects in school, "but what was dull and boring in school now became alive and had meaning. In fact, I'm still researching my family history. It's a never ending task," she added.

"MY PATERNAL grandmother came to St. Louis with four small children. What prompted them to leave Sudilkov? That town was destroyed during the Holocaust and all the Jews who had remained there perished. Thus I have a responsibility to know more about my ancestors and pass that legacy to the next generation of my family," she said.

Weiner received her B.A. degree in historical studies with a concentration in modern Judaic history and Holocaust studies from the State University of New York in Albany. She is also currently co-authoring the "Encyclopedia of Jewish Genealogy" with Arthur Kurzweil.

HER COLUMN, "Roots and Branches" appears in 50 newspapers throughout the country and will begin next week on a monthly basis in the *Jewish Times*. She is also a regular contributor to *Avotaynu*, the International Review of Jewish Genealogy and is the author of its "Ask the Expert" column. Her articles are published in genealogical journals nationwide and she serves on the board of directors of

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the Jewish Genealogy Society of New York.

Through the 30 Jewish Genealogy Societies, including the one in Philadelphia headed by Jon E. Stein, of Elkins Park, she has been able to establish an informal network of people-finders. She offers her vast knowledge and advice to persons interested in digging up their own roots.

LAST NOVEMBER, she led a workshop on the subject at the General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations in Miami Beach. Lecture programs have taken Weiner to synagogues, Federations, Jewish Community Centers, historical and genealogy societies all over the country. "It seems that wher-

ever I go, when the subject of 'roots' comes up, somebody has a story to tell about their family," she said.

Armed with her own computer, a vast, invaluable library of books, maps and reference material, Weiner believes that in order to do personal research the first and most important task is organization. It has become her life's work. Her enthusiasm is contagious and after hearing her speak, you start thinking about who is left in your family to interview and where exactly was that shtetl! Weiner, who is almost totally immersed in her search for roots, passes her passion on to others.

WHERE DOES ONE begin the tracking? "Start by talking with your oldest family members," she

advises, "after getting other family names from your relatives. Start with what you have and work back. Be sure to identify photographs with names and dates on the back.

"Most of the family oldtimers want to talk about the past, to share their memories with you which will give you many clues in a family search. If you have large libraries nearby, they're good sources to start. In addition, microfilms of births, marriages, death records along with wills are on file in municipal offices," she says.

Weiner also points out that the National Archives in Washington and its 15 regional branches have passenger ship manifest records along with many other genealogy-related documents. The Immigra-

tion and Naturalization Department houses the "first papers" to become a citizen which include the name in the "Old Country," name of ship and port of arrival, date of arrival and court where naturalization took place.

SHE ALSO NOTES how helpful computers have become in tracing roots, for both recording your own information and providing access to previously inaccessible collections. Thanks to sophisticated programs and data bases, these records are now only a fingertip away. But her most important advice: "You need persistence," Weiner stresses, again and again. "You need patience."

Weiner's research inevitably led to family members who perished during the Holocaust. Her lecture programs include sources for obtaining birth, marriage and census records from Poland, Germany and Hungary, often the only tangible proof of a victim's existence. For two years, she was employed by the American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors as executive director, a position which heightened her awareness and opened up additional sources.

For a girl who wasn't excited

about history in school, Miriam Weiner has become aware of her own roots and those of most Jews. She has strengthened her Jewish identity by rediscovering her own roots. "My past helped shape me," she says, almost with a tear glistening in her eye. "I really believe it."

IS THERE AN END in sight? "I hope not. People die, but the family lives on. All four branches of my family came from behind what is today the Iron Curtain. With *Glasnost*, I hope Gorbachev will not only let Jews out of Russia, but will help thousands of Jews come to Russia and trace their family roots. Someday 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 is the cemetery?"

"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," she concludes in explaining her hopeful quest, which continues unabated.

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