

People

The genealogist who lifted the archival iron curtain

By STEVE LIPMAN

MIRIAM WEINER, granddaughter of Jewish immigrants from the Ukraine, dreamed of meeting distant relatives who remained in the Old Country. Miriam Weiner, award-winning genealogist, dreamed of opening archives in the Soviet Union to Jewish visitors from the West.

Both dreams came true this spring for Weiner, world traveler.

Weiner held reunions with some 50 long-lost relatives in three Soviet cities during a recent two-week visit to the U.S.S.R., her first. She also gained access to several archival sites, obtained their agreement to cooperate with a genealogical tour she will lead next year and discovered a trove of Torah scrolls.

"Throughout the Soviet Union, I encountered a pioneer spirit among the people interested in doing business with the United States through the travel industry and other creative business ventures," says Weiner, 47, of Secaucus, N.J. "The euphoria of meeting dozens of new relatives and visiting ancestral towns culminated years of hopes and dreams."

She traveled with a camera, video camera, tape recorder and portable copying machine. Her trip, she says, marked the first known time an American Jew was allowed such free access of Soviet archives.

A syndicated columnist, author and lecturer on Jewish genealogy, Weiner already had done research in Israel, Poland, Spain and Holland. She coordinates Isram Travel's "Routes to Roots" genealogy tours.

Her work has won awards from the National Genealogical Society and the Council of Genealogy Columnists.

A meeting with previously unknown New York cousins in the 1960s led Weiner to start building a family tree. She discovered that her family, which she thought had entirely left the Ukraine by the early 20th century, still had members behind the Iron Curtain.



Miriam Weiner

Through Russian-language phone books in the Library of Congress, she located addresses of persons who bear her maternal grandparents' name — Odnopozov. Attempts at correspondence with them during the Cold War proved fruitless.

The glasnost-era opening of Soviet society prompted her to schedule a trip to the Soviet Union this year — she went via Warsaw on Lot Polish Airlines — and to write nearly 20 of her supposed relatives, informing them of her arrival.

"The word spread by wildfire," she says. One relative, a man her age, unexpectedly met her at the Kiev airport carrying a bouquet of flowers. Other relatives came to her hotels in Moscow, Leningrad and Kiev. Some traveled all night by train and airplane. They gave her gifts — candy, wooden dolls and colored yarn. "Some of them just showed up. They knocked on the door. They brought [family] pictures and documents."

Relatives who couldn't come called. One woman, who heard too late about the reunions, wrote Weiner afterward, offering a collection of town records kept by her late father. Weiner will pick up the books this summer, following a Polish visit.

In Moscow, Leningrad and Kiev, Weiner hosted reunion dinners for her kin — probably third or fourth cousins — most of whom had previously not met each other. "They were anxious to learn about their family," she says. "They were intrigued with each other."

Weiner answered possible emigrants' anxious questions about life in Israel and about the fate of relatives who had settled in America. She learned how one family of relatives perished in the Holocaust. She heard tales of life in the Soviet Union since World War II.

"I'm so glad my family left," she says.

Weiner's newfound relatives are middle class — an architect, a television producer, an artist, a journalist and several engineers. They

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Weiner

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exchanged addresses, added 100 names to her family tree and said they may arrange their own gathering in the future. One offered a dinner toast: "We want to thank you for bringing our family together."

In Kiev, she visited the city's remaining synagogue. She noticed a group of people in the courtyard. A wedding was taking place. Though casually dressed, she was invited to the ceremony.

"When it was explained to the bride, Yana Shapiro, that I was a journalist for Jewish newspapers, her face lit up and she excitedly said, 'My father, Yefim Shapiro, now lives in St. Louis, and he would be so happy to read about our wedding and see a photo.' Who could refuse such a request?"

As a side trip, Weiner visited Priluki, Shepetovka and Sudilkov, small towns where her ancestors lived. She went to cemeteries in disrepair, synagogues that no longer serve as houses of worship and Jewish neighborhoods where Jews no longer live.

"I was literally walking in the footsteps of my ancestors," she says.

Armed with letters of introduction from several organizations, Weiner visited archives in Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev and Lvov, which had been closed to foreigners as well as the Soviet public. Her visits were a dry run for a genealogical-home towns tour she plans to conduct at those sites in 1992.

"Nobody knows what's in the So-

viet archives," she says, adding that archive directors fully cooperated with her requests to copy some documents and agreed to allow future visitors to do similar research there. "It was much easier than I expected."

Weiner says the archivists are anxious to duplicate the arrangement she established last year with the Polish State Archives, opening the files for a fee, with her bringing in capital to buy modern equipment.

She uncovered Jewish birth registries, marriage and death records, street listings and myriad other documents.

A tremendous number of documents survived the Holocaust and communist era, Weiner says. "There is an unknown amount of Jewish material throughout the Soviet Union. It's valuable to anyone ... who comes from Russia."

In Kiev, an archive official invited her to inspect the holdings in a climate-controlled room two stories underground. The official led her to a shelf where a pile of Torah scrolls lay rolled up, covered by sheets of brown paper.

The scrolls appeared to be in good condition.

"How many of these do you have?" Weiner asked.

"About 100," the official answered.

"I must get my camera."

"We don't allow photographs in the archives."

"Nobody will believe this," Weiner says she insisted.

Upstairs, she got permission. "I went back and started snapping pictures." The official handed her a

scroll. "I was allowed to hold it."

Weiner didn't inquire where the scrolls came from or why they're still stored in the archives of an officially atheistic state. "I didn't ask a lot of questions. Frankly, I was in a little bit of shock."

Weiner's interpreter, an escort from the Kiev Jewish community, "was speechless. She couldn't wait to get back and tell the other people in the Jewish community what she had seen."

In the Lvov archives, Weiner found about 20 old Torah scrolls. She estimates that several hundred or more scrolls, also unregistered and unknown to the Jewish community, are stored in other Soviet archives. "I personally think they're all over the Soviet Union."

What was the highlight of Weiner's trip?

Priluki.

In the home town of her maternal grandmother, Miriam Odnopozov Rabkin, Weiner visited the town hall where archival records are stored. She talked her way inside and found the birth certificate of her grandmother, who was born in 1875, immigrated to the United States in 1897 and died in 1924.

No copying of documents is allowed, the clerk said.

Weiner broke into tears. The clerk said she had other matters to attend to. "She left the room." Weiner copied the handwritten birth record — a daughter, Miriam, was born to Israel and Guda Odnopozov.

"The most important thing I came back with," Weiner says, "was my grandmother's birth certificate."