

Spotlight:

Miriam Weiner, CG

Former private detective, legal secretary, and road manager for Bobbie Gentry, a country and western singer, Miriam Weiner, CG, is the person the Jewish press describes as “the genealogist who lifted the archival iron curtain.”¹

Miriam’s extraordinary achievement began with her untiring, but mostly frustrated quest for her own family in Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova. Her “dormant interest” was awakened at a funeral some thirty years ago where, she met many cousins for the first time, all descendants of her grandparents’ siblings who were not known to her.

Understanding how important it was to become both knowledgeable and professional in her work, she enrolled in a program of Judaic and Holocaust studies at Albany’s Empire State College, part of the New York State University system. It was clear to her that the strict criteria and guidelines of the Board for Certification of Genealogists also provided a vital educational tool. With the support of her mentor at the university who suggested she could receive credit towards her degree if she succeeded, she accepted the challenge of certification even though she felt overwhelmed by the requirements. Despite the obstacles presented by the “archival iron curtain,” Miriam managed to produce the required four-generation compiled genealogy and in 1985 became the first board-certified genealogist specializing in Jewish research. She has been very pleased by the feedback provided and describes the renewal process as an important part of her continuing education.

In the late 1980s, Miriam took a position as executive director of the American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors in New York. After two years, she left to

work full time in genealogy. She began writing a column that was eventually syndicated in more than 100 Jewish newspapers worldwide and became a frequent lecturer on Jewish genealogy. She was gratified to learn that the skills acquired in her earlier work were valuable assets in her career as a professional genealogist. As a detective she had learned to interview witnesses, write reports, analyze documents, and not to allow a closed door to stop her from getting a job done. With Bobbie Gentry, she dealt with the press and did marketing and promotion, just what was needed when she published her books.

In 1989, the Polish National Tourist Office asked her to help develop Jewish genealogy tours. She reflects that it was fortunate she didn’t realize how much she didn’t know. She knew not a word of Polish, and she says, “I wasn’t a historian, I wasn’t an archivist ... not that I knew anything about organizing tours either ... I just went over there.” In a meeting at the Polish State Archives, she boldly informed the director that she would love to bring a group over and asked to see the town-by-town inventory of archive documents, in English. Nothing of the sort existed. After the archivists “recovered from the notion of such a naïve idea,” they agreed to cooperate with her plan to create the inventory. The following year Miriam took her first group to Poland, and the next year expanded the tours to Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus. In 1997 she published *Jewish Roots in Poland: Pages from the Past and Archival Inventories*. Her second book, *Jewish Roots in Ukraine and Moldova: Pages from the Past and Archival Inventories*, appeared in 1999.²

In 1991, Miriam discovered information on Priluki, the village where her



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grandmother was born, in the Ukraine volume³ of Patricia Kennedy Grimsted’s series on the archives of the former Soviet Union. She wrote to the local museum. The woman who received the letter was Jewish, and apparently interested in practicing her English. At the Priluki town hall she located fifteen birth records for Miriam’s family, including that of the grandmother for whom she is named.

Almost ten years ago, when Miriam developed her Web site (www.rtrfoundation.org) and created a database of the archival information she had collected for her books, she decided to add information on two new countries, Belarus and Lithuania. She traveled to those countries and met with archivists who provided extensive inventory data and verified the data she had previously amassed, all of which has continued to be updated and expanded. The archivists in all five countries have provided articles which were placed online in the same format as those excerpted from her books. The direct link to “Accessing the Material in the Archives” is <http://www.rtrfoundation.org/archdata1b.html#2>.

Not long after her first trip to Ukraine, Moldova, and Belarus, Miriam bought an apartment in Mogilev-Podolsky, a town in Southern Ukraine on the border with Moldova that is centrally located for her research. Since then she has traveled to Ukraine and neighboring countries

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every few months to meet with archivists to correct, update, and expand her databases, and conduct client research. She works with a translator, who also manages her tours for clients visiting their ancestral homes.

Today she receives inquiries from people all over the world wanting help finding their own roots. Some requests may be as limited as, "My family came from Russia, and that's all I know." The search is complicated by the absence of Jewish surnames in Eastern Europe until the late 1700s; by later name changes; by records for a single town residing in archives of multiple countries because of border changes; because Jews had large families that dispersed over different towns once they married; and by emigration.

Miriam encourages clients to reach out to all branches of the family, including those with whom they have not had recent contact. It is essential to the research, and it is important to her to reunite families and to discover their history in their countries of origin.

ARLENE V. JENNINGS, CG

NOTES

¹ Steve Lipman, "People: The Genealogist Who Lifted the Archival Iron Curtain," *The Jewish Week, Inc.*, 28 June – 4 Jul, 1991, p. 2.

² Both books were published in Secaucus, New Jersey, by Miriam Weiner Routes to Roots Foundation.

³ Patricia Kennedy Grimsted, *Archives and Manuscript Repositories in the USSR: Ukraine and Moldavia* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988).