Family History Made Easy:
An Interview with Miriam Weiner, President of the Routes to Roots Foundation, author, lecturer and columnist

Q. You are one of the preeminent Jewish genealogists in the world. What makes you excited about working on a family history search?
A. No two projects are ever the same, and each project brings different challenges, different discoveries and is a learning experience for me. The excitement is in both the discovery and in the presentation to the client, because seeing their reactions brings great joy to me.

Q. What advice would you give to people who want to know more about their family history?
A. First and foremost, interview living relatives, particularly older ones. Identify old family photos, often sitting in shoeboxes that no one has looked at in ages. You want to get the name of the person in each photo and identify their relationship to other family members. If your research plans include a visit to your ancestral town in the “old country,” don’t delay, because the people in the town who might know or remember something are aging fast. Preserve the documents you acquire by keeping them in acid-free, archival-quality sheet protectors.

Q. What do you tell people when they have hit dead ends in their searches?
A. I ask them to tell me what they’ve done to date, and usually I can suggest additional avenues for them to pursue. Often, people forget that an immigrant relative’s tombstone generally includes both the Hebrew name of the deceased and their father’s name. This information can take you back another generation on your family tree.

Q. As someone who has conducted an in-depth search into your own family history, what was the most compelling moment in your search?
A. Standing in the mayor’s office in Priukhi, Ukraine and holding a birth registration book that included the record of my grandmother, Mira Odnopozov, who was born in 1875. I’m named for her. This was in 1991, when foreigners were not permitted to travel more than 25 miles from Kiev. I was about 75 miles from Kiev, shaking and scared to death. I was traveling with a portable photocopy machine, an electrical transformer and a translator. After significant negotiations, I was permitted to photocopy my grandmother’s birth record.

Then, the mayor came into the office. According to my translator, he said, “Please wait. You are ‘invited’ for a meeting with the KGB.” I said to the mayor, “I’m really very busy today. Tell them thank you for the invitation, but maybe another time.” My translator later explained to me that the word “invited” doesn’t mean what it means in the United States. It’s not an invitation you’re allowed to refuse.

Q. You’ve created one of the most important historical databases for research on Eastern Europe. What’s next for your Routes to Roots Foundation?
A. A. In addition to the hundred-plus pages on the Foundation website (which include articles, maps and book excerpts), there is an archive database (www.rtrfoundation.org), where one can search by town name to see what type of documents have survived for a particular town, the years available, which archive has the documents and the archive file number. Until recently, countries included were Poland, Lithuania, Moldova, Ukraine and Belarus. In the last few months, I have also added archival data from Romania. Additionally, the website includes an extensive image database, also searchable by town name. My future plan is twofold: to continue expanding the database entries and reference material on the website and to eventually find a “new home” for the website, where all this information can be preserved and updated.

Q. You have been doing research at the Center for Jewish History for over a decade now. What do you think are the most important resources available at the Center?
A. There are many advantages to visiting the Center for Jewish History and working in the Ackman & Ziff Family Genealogy Institute or using its resources via the website. I find that the fact sheets that have been developed both by geographic area and subject matter are comprehensive and full of information that can save any researcher hours or days. At the same time, I am impressed by the volume of the collections, which offer researchers access to a vast library of books, maps, documents and other items pertaining to Jews of German-speaking lands, Jews of Eastern Europe and Jews of Sephardic genealogy. You can also learn about your family members who lived in the United States and about their ancestors.

Q. Since the time you became the first Jewish genealogist to be certified by the Board for Certification of Genealogists in Washington, D.C. more than 25 years ago, genealogy research has evolved. How can institutions like the Center for Jewish History continue to play a vital role in this expanding field?
A. It is extremely important for the Center to continue to acquire genealogically-relevant data (both electronic data and archival material) as well as to expand its large list of databases and electronic resources of interest to genealogists. There’s no question that computers and the Internet are here to stay, so the more research people can access online, the better.

However, there is still the thrill of picking up a book, document, or picture of your relative or ancestral town and holding it in your hand. Somehow, it is not the same as looking at it on a screen.