



## Roots and Branches

By MIRIAM WEINER



### "Researching Russian Roots with 'Ma Bell' in Moscow"

The phone books from six Soviet cities enabled Miriam Weiner to "reach out and touch someone" and locate far-flung kin in the Soviet Union from Central Asia to Siberia.

Miriam Weiner began her search into her family roots fifteen years ago when she went to visit relatives in New York City and her mother suggested she look up some "cousins." As a result of the meetings with these new "cousins," she began constructing a family tree, delving into the history of her family and their origins in the Ukraine while becoming a pioneer in the development of professionals in Jewish Genealogy. The pursuit of her Jewish roots has fulfilled a sense of family and historical continuity and awakened a resurgence of pride in her Jewish heritage.

Since the phenomenon of Alex Haley's *Roots*, millions of Americans have begun the search for their own origins. We are motivated for different reasons. For some, there is an in-born need to go back and find out where our ancestors came from—not just the name of the country, which they probably already know, but the *exact* place in that country—the name of the "shtetl." They want to know what they did, how they earned a liv-

ing, and why they left.

No one can predict how far back one's search will lead, as so much depends on the information available within each family and on the records still available in the "old country."

The frustration of researching family roots in the Soviet Union is shared by many Jewish Genealogists and in an attempt to bridge that gap Weiner wrote to the Library of Congress requesting a search for her grandmother's family name through their collection of Russian telephone books. She received a reply which included photo copies of the pages with the name she requested. She had a letter written in Russian to all twelve, carefully explaining how she obtained their name and then waited anxiously for a reply. A long year passed with no response.

Meanwhile, she located a member of this same family who had emigrated from the Ukraine in the 1960's. He now lives in Holland and invited her to visit immediately in order to interview his mother who was old and in failing health. Within a few weeks, Weiner was on a plane and while in Holland was able to accomplish something far beyond her expectations. For three days, Weiner and her cousin

placed calls to the people listed in the Russian phone directories although these listings were all over ten years old. The first step involved calling directory assistance for each city to verify that the numbers were still correct. This procedure was handled through a central telephone operator in Moscow. Her cousin spoke with nineteen members of this family, all of them indicating roots in the same small town in the Province of Poltava. The Russian operators were not cooperative, but persistence paid off and Weiner returned home armed with a wealth of new information, invitations to visit her "cousins" and a lead on a cousin who had immigrated to the U.S. in the early 1970's. Thereafter, she requested assistance from HIAS and within a few weeks she received a call from a cousin in Colorado who is enthusiastic about her research and has offered his assistance in communicating with their mutual relatives in Russia.

Weiner recently completed her B.A. in History (Judaic and Holocaust Studies) in Albany, New York, where she was allowed to develop her own course outline as part of the degree program of Empire State College, a division of the State University of New York. During this same period, she became the first professional Jewish Genealogist to be certified by the Board for Certification of Genealogists in Washington DC through a lengthy process requiring extensive documentation of her research capabilities and work.

"There are many reasons for Jews to engage in genealogical research," Weiner said. "I believe we have a historical obligation to remember and record the past for the future generations."

Jewish Genealogy Societies have grown throughout the U.S. and at the present time, there are over twenty-five with membership in the thousands. In addition, the societies have sponsored annual conferences in New York, Washington DC, Los Angeles, Jerusalem, Chicago and Salt Lake City.

Most Jews think it is difficult or impossible to trace their roots because:

- 1) their name was changed at Ellis Island (or before);
- 2) they are unsure of the exact location of the "shtetl" of their grandparents; or
- 3) all the records of the

September, 1987

Jewish Civic Press

New Orleans, LA

towns destroyed in the Holocaust. This myth has been refuted through genealogical research.

A number of Jewish "how to" books have been published and all emphasize the point that the researcher needs to first establish the family name—as it *was* rather than what it became in the United States. Even within a few generations of a family, the spelling of a name as well as the actual name itself often changed which makes our research even more difficult.

Upon arrival in the United States, names were changed by immigration inspectors, by school teachers, and even by the immigrants themselves.

Relatives don't always remember dates when incidents occurred, but can often tell of some major incident at the same time. Many family stories evolve around politics, pogroms, edicts and laws passed. Many times I have consulted history books to try and pin down a date or to understand why a person might suddenly leave town or change names. The continually changing borders of the countries in Eastern Europe caused me to spend hours looking for small towns in maps and gazetteers.

"My interest in Jewish Genealogy has led me to book fairs, library sales and used book stores throughout the world. My library at home now exceeds 1,500 volumes relating to Genealogy, Jewish History, and Eastern European History, along with a large section on the Holocaust. Additional reference material occupies ten file drawers—all of

the ceiling of the room below because of the weight."

"It is unlikely that most American Jews can trace their roots without coming to the realization that they lost family members in the Holocaust. This becomes very evident when you realize that one out of three Jews in Europe alive in 1939 had been murdered by the end of World War II."

Weiner was formerly employed by the American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors—the national organization representing Holocaust Survivors throughout the country. Her extensive knowledge of archival sources and her vast personal collection of reference material and books serves her well by enabling her to provide answers to the many inquiries she receives from Holocaust Survivors and others who are looking for sources of information regarding family members and towns in Europe.

Miriam Weiner currently writes a column entitled "Roots and Branches" which appears nationally. She lectures throughout the country on the subject of Jewish Genealogy. In addition, she is co-authoring a book with Arthur Kurzweil entitled "The Encyclopedia of Jewish Genealogy."

For a beginner's kit on how to start researching your family tree, send \$5 to: Miriam Weiner, 136 Sandpiper Key, Secaucus, NJ 07094 (includes ancestor chart, list of archives and libraries, maps, bibliography, family group sheets and more). □

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