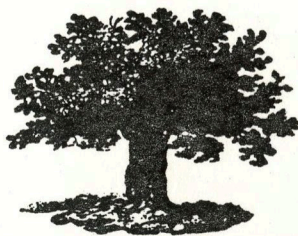


Shtetl Geography Made Easy



Roots and Branches

By MIRIAM WEINER



All four of my grandparents came from small villages in the Ukraine. I never knew the names of the towns — they were always referred to as the “old country”. As I got older, I wanted to know more about the old country. Where was it? Is it still there? What is it like now? Is it on the map?

I learned that my paternal grandfather, Morris Weiner, came from Sudilkov, a small village, and that it was a few kilometers from Shepetovka, which later became an important railroad center. I was helped by an unusual reference book called “Shtetl Finder Gazetteer” (Los Angeles: Periday Co., 1980), by Chester G. Cohen. In his 145-page book, Cohen lists the names of hundreds of cities and towns where Jews lived in the Pale of Settlement of Russia and Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Galicia and Bukovina including some names of residents. Both Yiddish and native spellings are provided along with locations and miscellaneous information (mostly obtained from Yiddish periodicals) about Jews who lived there.

Next I consulted the Geography and Map Division of the Library of Congress as well as the fine Map Division of the New York Public Library and was ultimately able to locate detailed maps with references to the villages of my grandparents. Sudilkov was virtually destroyed

during the Holocaust and what little remained was absorbed into neighboring Shepetovka.

In the Library of Congress in Washington DC, I was able to find small street maps of Priluki and Konotop — towns where two of my grandparents had lived. The maps showed the names of the major streets, the locations of breweries, cemeteries, chimneys and some factories.

I wanted to meet people who had lived in these towns and of course, it is not feasible for me to travel there now. I went YIVO Institute in New York City and inquired about the existence of Landsmanshaftn Societies for these towns. Even though many of the societies are now defunct, I was given names and addresses of the officers of several still in existence.

I contacted these people and found them eager to share their memories of our mutual roots. One man in Brooklyn, a William Weiner from Sudilkov, spent several hours showing me old photos and documents that he had saved. At the end of our

visit, he gave me a Souvenir Journal of the Sudilkov Sick Support Society published in 1948 on the occasion of its Fiftieth Anniversary. The jewel in this book was a beautifully detailed rendering entitled “Our Sudilkov Synagogue”. I was very touched that this man, who apparently is not even related to me — though we tried hard to find a connection — would part with something so special that he had saved for so many years.

Now I had maps and I knew exactly where these shtetls were — but I had no idea of what life was like there. All four of my grandparents are gone and there is not one left from the immigrant generation in my family.

I decided to advertise for help. I placed ads in fifteen Jewish newspapers throughout the country asking former residents of

Sudilkov, Shepetovka, Priluki, Konotop, Semenovka and Falesti to please contact me. Those ads were the beginning of some fascinating correspondence. There was the man in California (Murray) who responded because his cousin in Florida sent him my ad. He was from Sudilkov and wrote me detailed letters describing life there, the number of synagogues, the daily routine he remembered as a child. Best of all — he remembered the mill my great-grandfather had owned and remembered playing with the children in the family, who would be my cousins.

Murray shared his memories with me in many letters and I wanted to share something with him too. So I sent him the photo of the Shul in Sudilkov and a copy of the roster contained in the Souvenir Journal. He wrote

back and said “thank you for the sweet bon bon you included in the letter...the roster of the Sudilkov Society. What a wonderful thrill and delight for me, but also sad to realize that most of the familiar names are long gone.” Murray goes on to talk about the Shul in Sudilkov and states that the rendering I send him “must have been done by a remarkably talented artist. I do not remember the fence and gate, but with pogroms every now and then, it was probably destroyed.”

I think what surprised me most in the responses to the ad was the number of people who were eager to talk about their life in the old country. I have met several of these “landsleit” and find that the hours spent with them, to some extent, replace the long conversations I should have had with my own grandparents. I never knew two of them and by talking with their contemporaries, it is easy to imagine that their lives were somewhat similar since they came from the same towns and background.

My ads appeared in newspapers in London, Canada and Israel as well as all across the United States. Some of the people who write to me are related to each other and neither knows the other is responding to my ad.

In one case, a doctor from Boston wrote and described details of his family history that were very familiar to me. I had read almost the identical set of circumstances in a letter from a man in Chicago. I put the two in touch with each other and it turned out that they were second cousins and neither knew of the

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A Beginner's Kit (55 pages) on how to start researching your family history which includes charts, list of archives and libraries, bibliography, maps, family group sheets and more can be ordered from: Miriam Weiner, 136 Sandpiper Key, Secaucus, NJ 07094. (201) 329-1100.