

Routes to Roots

NEW GUIDE OFFERS RESOURCES FOR RESEARCH IN UKRAINE AND MOLDOVA

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When the plane lands in Kiev or Lviv, I feel like I'm coming home," remarked Miriam Weiner. Weiner, who lives here, also maintains an apartment in Mogilev Podolskiy, on the Southern border of Ukraine, adjacent to Moldova, so she can pursue her life's work: documenting Eastern European Jewish communities before and after the Holocaust. She has already published two large volumes on these topics, "Jewish Roots in Poland" and her latest book, "Jewish Roots in Ukraine and Moldova." Weiner and her partner and translator, Vitaly Chumak, also organize customized tours for people who want to learn more about their Jewish roots in these, and neighboring, countries.

REVIEW AND INTERVIEW

Ten years ago, it was all but impossible to obtain genealogical information of any sort behind the Iron Curtain. The dissolution of the Soviet Union changed all that, making archives accessible, and enabling Weiner to complete the research needed to publish her latest book.

"It's a book about what was and what is," reflected Weiner. "The old antique postcards are a graphic picture of what these places looked like before the Holocaust. And the pictures of devastated cemeteries, or synagogue buildings used for something else, are a graphic reminder of what is now."

This ambitious project on Ukraine and Moldova weighs in at more than six pounds (600 pages) and contains a wide range of useful and interesting information. For instance, there are sections on how to read metrical books (containing vital records on birth, marriage, and death), a list of "Place-Name Variants in Eastern Galicia" (e.g., Lwow Lvov Lviv in Polish, Russian, and Ukrainian, respectively), an introduction to eight foreign alphabets, and an extensive bibliography.

And it's also a travelogue. "There are a thousand color photos in the Ukraine book," boasted Weiner. "Even if you have roots in [only] one particular town, I've had people write, call, e-mail me, saying, 'You know I couldn't put your book down because I was looking at the faces and the various towns.' It's a really graphic picture of life, in general, from the old country."

The photos, and the 20 color maps of Jewish Eastern Europe at different periods help to shed new light on Eastern European Jewish history. The book brings these areas alive, serving as part travel book, part coffee-table book, part history and geography book, and an important source of genealogical archive data. It provides a smorgasbord of information for the novice or experienced genealogist, or for someone who is simply interested in that part of Europe — and its past and present Jewish communities.

The "Jewish Roots" books are, first and foremost, guides for archival research. Weiner has extensively documented where to find many of the remaining records of Jewish life in the areas.

"Many people were under the impression that all the documents were destroyed; they think, 'My town was wiped off the map,'" explains Weiner.

Photos of overgrown cemeteries with "toppled and damaged tombstones" abound. Postcards of stately synagogues in the early 1900s are displayed next to modern photos of former synagogues (e.g., one in Berdichev which is now used as a glove factory), and ruins of synagogues. In many communities Weiner documents the "only operating synagogue" in town. It is gratifying to note that Holocaust monuments abound in Ukraine — they are being erected all over the country, and Weiner has photographed and documented many of these as well.

She recommends that aspiring genealogists who "want to search out [their] Jewish ancestry ... have very specific information about family names and towns of origin. Armed with that information, it's still possible to pick up a genealogical trail through some very



Miriam Weiner visits Sudilkov, Ukraine, the birthplace of her paternal grandmother. All photos are by from Weiner's book.

"In truth, many documents were destroyed, many towns were devastated and damaged, but an extremely large percentage of these places are still there with a town sign identifying them."

I used "Jewish Roots in Ukraine and Moldova" to conduct research on a Wahrman ancestor, Rabbi Avraham Dovid Wahrman (1771-1841), who lived in four different towns in Ukraine: Nadvornaya, Jazlowiec, Buchach, and Berdichev. All four towns were listed, and I discovered from these listings that in order to study the archival information on that Wahrman ancestor and his descendants, I would have to travel to Lvov, Warsaw, Ternopol, Zhitomir, Kiev, and Berdichev and look through existing records dating from 1785. Those records could include army and draft registration books, land and property records, birth, death and marriage records, pogrom files, Kahal [Jewish community] records, school records, and local government records. The list of archives for those four towns, and the records they contain, underscored what an enormous undertaking this type of research can be.

By concentrating on those four communities, I also confirmed that the book is much more than just a list of archival data. The Ukraine section presents modern photos and antique postcards of Berdichev, Buchach, and Nadvornaya. The "old country" comes alive in street scenes of the early 1900s, juxtaposed with modern photos of the same streets and buildings 80 or 90 years later.

Turning the pages from town to town, one is struck by the similar fates and stories of the Jews and their hometowns pre- and post-Holocaust. Pre-Holocaust Jewish population figures are provided for many towns and cities. Lvov, for example had 109,500 Jews, representing 33 percent of the general population in 1939.

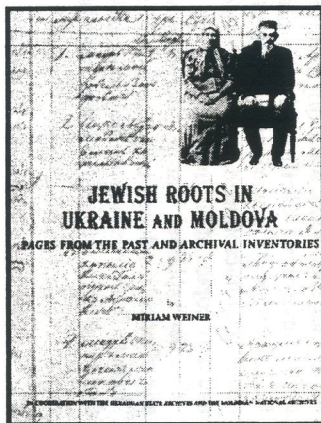
Weiner reported that the post-Holocaust picture is one of "people who live in pathetic hovels, people at work...." She tells of a "90-year-old who still works in the fields...." The Jewish community consists of remnants who are striving to maintain, or rediscovering, their Jewish identities.

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rare documents in archives all over Eastern Europe.”

Weiner explained how and where to start the research process. “You would do this by interviewing family members, by obtaining copies of documents in [the United States], such as immigration records, [that is,] both naturalization records and ship passenger arrival lists. Once you pin down the exact town, then we can determine if there are any documents still left for that town.” At that point, the research process moves to the country of origin.

And depending on the country of origin, the next step can prove to be quite challenging. Weiner emphasized the many logistical problems involved in travelling in certain parts of Eastern Europe. “You go into the [former] Soviet Union, and I wouldn’t drive, I wouldn’t take a step without my translator and security guard,” Weiner cautioned. “You still have a feeling of the old communist ways in so many different aspects, [for instance,] the car being stopped constantly by the police on the road just to examine the documents, to find some minor infraction.... It’s a different world and it’s not easy travel.”

“If your car breaks down, there are no roadside phones, no AAA,” noted Weiner. “The condition of the car is critical, as well as the mechanical aptitude of the driver.”

Other obstacles encountered include the lack of certain archival resources routinely found in the West. “In the archives don’t expect microfilm machines, copy machines,” Weiner warned. “Don’t expect archivists fluent in English outside of the capital city.”

Weiner recalled that immediately after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, there was a “window of opportunity” when archives were open and accessible. After a few years, the situation changed. “The archives have become less accessible for some obvious reasons. In this country, when you go to the National Archives or some other research institutes you put your papers, etc. in a locker, and there is tremendous security to make sure that original documents don’t walk off from the archives. They don’t have those facilities in the places, Ukraine or Belarus, where I’m working.... Much of this material has never been microfilmed, so you’re working with original and only copies of documents.”

Weiner explained that in order to prevent theft or damage of priceless documents, access has become restricted. “I guess from experiences they may have had, they found that to let everyone off the streets that they don’t know, is

not in the best interests of preserving or protecting these valuable records. Now, many archives require that you have a letter of permission from the archive director. And that letter is based on having a letter of introduction from some academic or research institute stating what your purpose is.”

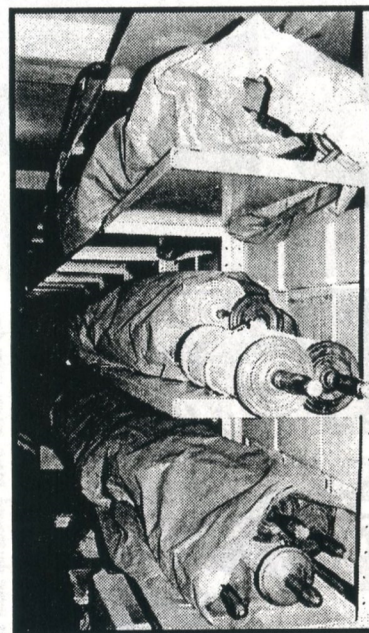
For those who find the pursuit of genealogical research in Eastern Europe too daunting, one option would be to have an expert, such as Weiner herself, conduct the family research for you.

“This costs a lot of money,.... [because] I’m paying my translator and security person,” explained Weiner. Genealogical research involves going through mountains of old records. “Someone would have to physically go through, name by name, line by line, every single page” of the gigantic census books, the metrical records of numerous communities, “immigration records, property records, school records, tax lists, lists by occupation, Jewish hospital records, so a complete search of ... records could take as much as a month.” Expenses would include hotel, parking, and salaries for the genealogist, the translator, and the security person. “It’s an expensive proposition. That’s why people have to be extremely sure of ancestral towns and the original family name,” Weiner emphasized.

Finding the town of origin is absolutely necessary to start a search. However, finding the town intact is still no guarantee for success in terms of uncovering ancestral roots.

“There are gaps all the time, and books that are fragmented. This is from documents that were destroyed during the war. These are not complete sets of records,” remarked Weiner. “There are certain towns where nothing remains. My paternal grandfather comes from an area in Ukraine called Shepetovka, and there is not a birth, marriage, or death certificate for this town that has survived.”

“Sometimes the Jewish region has been burned down or destroyed either during the war or during the normal process of tearing down old buildings and building new ones, as we do in this country.” Weiner noted. On the other hand, “often there are buildings that are 100 years



These Torahs are stored on shelves in the Central State Historical Archive in Kiev, Ukraine.

old, and it’s not difficult to imagine that your grandparents lived in places like these.”

In addition to genealogy study, Weiner’s first volume, “Jewish Roots in Poland,” has had several unanticipated applications since its publication in 1998.

“I’ve had people write to me and say ‘because of the chapters on the Holocaust where you gave addresses and information about the archives at Auschwitz and Maidanek, I was able to write to these places and receive confirmation of the death of a relative,’” recalls Weiner. “It gave some kind of closure to an unknown variable. People have obtained copies of documents because of the archive inventories [in the book] that have enabled them to trace their family back many more generations,” Weiner reported. “I was asked by the New York State insurance commissioner to give a program on the Poland book to his employees because survivors who were trying to apply for reparations for reclaiming assets ... often needed to provide documentation on who

they are and where they lived. And this book was a guide book to help them find these documents. So even though that wasn’t my original purpose in researching this book, which began 10 years ago, it’s a wonderful outcome.”

In Ukraine and Moldova, the significance of Weiner’s work is appreciated by local authorities. “When I go to Ukraine this month, the director of the archives has arranged a meeting of all the archivists who are coming from around the country,” said Weiner. “I’m giving each one a copy of the book ... and I’ll give a presentation to them which will be translated explaining how to use the book. Then I’ll be going to Moldova, because the Moldovan representative to the U.N. will be organizing an official diplomatic [ceremony] in conjunction with publication of the book there.”

“Jewish Roots in Ukraine and Moldova” was co-published by the Routes to Roots Foundation, a non-profit organization, and the YIVO Institute. It can be ordered for \$60 plus shipping and handling from the Routes to Roots Foundation, at (800) 742-5403 or www.rtrfoundation.org. It is also available at Judaica House in Teaneck and through Amazon.com.