

Genealogy Rock Star Discusses Digging up Jewish Roots December 19, 2019

Fred Blum may be a private investigator, but this was a case he couldn't crack. The genealogy enthusiast had reached the limits of what he could uncover about his family's history from the United States. Seeking to learn more about his family's life in the old country, he turned to Jewish genealogist Miriam Weiner for help. With the name of an ancestral town and some other basics, she soon discovered relatives previously unknown to Blum, including an aunt of his mother's who was still alive.

Fred Blum and Miriam Weiner pictured at the Steve Schechter Memorial Lecture at Main Line Reform Temple on Dec. 15 (Photo by Eric Schucht)

Weiner is something of a rock star in the Jewish genealogy world. She was the first Jewish genealogist to collaborate officially, by contract, with archives in Eastern Europe. She is also the founder and president of The Routes to Roots Foundation and creator of the Consolidated Eastern European Archival Database. For her work, the Secaucus, New Jersey, resident has been called "the Indiana Jones of pre-war Polish Jewry" by The Forward and "the genealogist who lifted the archival iron curtain" by the Jewish Week in New York.



This week, she spoke at Main Line Reform Temple for the annual Steve Schechter Memorial Lecture to members of the Jewish Genealogical and Archival Society of Greater Philadelphia. (The organization was previously known as the Jewish Genealogical Society of Greater Philadelphia until finalizing a merger in July with the The Philadelphia Jewish Archives Center.) The lecture was open to the public.

"All of our (events) are for education," said Blum, who has served as the organization's president since 2007. "We want to educate the Jewish community on how to do research, on how to find families, to go deeper into their family history."

Weiner grew up in Des Moines, Iowa. She became the first Jewish genealogist in 1985 to be certified by the Board for Certification of Genealogists in Washington, D.C. Her notoriety first began to spread with "Roots and Branches," her syndicated column that appeared from 1987 to 1996 in Jewish publications throughout the country.

In 1989, the Polish National Tourist Office invited her to visit the Polish archives as preparation for arranging genealogy tours to the country. Prior to Weiner's visit, it was believed much of the Jewish records had been destroyed during World War II. But she discovered much of it survived; it was just uncatalogued and inaccessible. So she got

to work and created a town-by-town directory of surviving Jewish and civil records throughout Poland, Belarus, Ukraine, Lithuania and Moldavia. This information was published in two books, "Jewish Roots in Poland" (1997) and "Jewish Roots in Ukraine and Moldova" (1999).

Weiner has made a lot of the resources she's compiled available at rtrfoundation.org. In her lecture she gave a tutorial on how to use the site along with retelling some quirky mishaps that happened during her genealogical adventures. One of the stories she shared was when she was invited to a meeting with the KGB and she declined. "As you can see I got out of the gulag and am here today," she said jokingly.

Weiner's appearance marked Blum's last event as the society's head. Taking over for Blum is Felicia Mode Alexander of Langhorne, a retired history teacher and trained Holocaust educator, who will serve as the organization's first female president.

This year also marks the 40th anniversary of the founding of the organization. Founding President Harry Boonin can remember when the society had just seven members. Now, events like Weiner's lecture draw crowds of nearly 200 people. Boonin's passion for genealogy was sparked in 1977 after reading "Finding Our Fathers: A Guidebook to Jewish Genealogy" by Philadelphia editor Dan Rottenberg. He borrowed the book from his mother, who got it as a birthday present. That night, he stayed up until 3 a.m. reading it.

"I never had any interest in genealogy, and it all came about because of this one book," Boonin said.

He wanted to join a Jewish genealogy group, but as there were none in the area, so he started one of his own in 1979. A formal anniversary celebration will be held on May 3, 2020, at the National Museum of American Jewish History.

Weiner is a lifetime member of the organization and first spoke at one of its meetings in 1986. Now, the field is bigger than ever.

"It's connecting the young people," Weiner said. "It's giving them a sense of their own Jewish identity and their heritage. It makes them want to travel to these places and now it's possible. And of course DNA testing has caused another explosion."

For those interested in pursuing genealogy, Weiner's advice is to interview the oldest members of their families, preferably on video. She also encouraged people to find unlabeled old pictures and have relatives identify the people pictured.

"Once the source has gone, that person has died, that information is lost," Weiner said. "So to me, the most important thing is preserving pictures and oral histories."

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