



At the HMC Library Archive, Dr. Rick Stoler did extensive research on his family's hometown of Bereznitz, a small town in the Ukraine.



Jewish residents of Bereznitz and Sarny met with Moshe Sharett (seated, middle of the front row), who became the second prime minister of Israel, in Sarny in 1935. Some of those shown in the photo have descendants in the Detroit area, according to Richard Stoler.

Links To The Past

Holocaust Memorial Center library educates, connects and preserves memories and history.

Shari S. Cohen
Contributing Writer

When a visitor enters the spacious, bright Holocaust Memorial Center Library Archive, Feiga Weiss, head librarian, is ready for anyone from a teenage student with a deadline for a paper about the Holocaust to an elderly Holocaust survivor who enters with visible hesitation.

Knowledge is enriching, but when it comes to the Holocaust and European Jewish history, it can be very personal and painful as well.

Weiss has the expertise, archival resources and empathy to help genealogists, authors, students, educators, survivors and reporters — all of whom have sought her assistance. She is intimately familiar with the collection she helped to build beginning in 1984 at the original HMC location in West Bloomfield.

“There were only shelves, and I had free rein to make a collection,” she said. “We started with the collection of Philip Slomowitz (the late founder/publisher of the *JN*) and built on his library.”

Weiss of Oak Park had previously worked at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., where she was senior reference librarian in the Hebraic section

of the reference department. Her specialized education and experience were ideal for the HMC Library Archive, now staffed by two full-time employees and seven volunteers. Her co-worker Judy Rosenzweig serves as a cataloguer, and Weiss is responsible for administrative, acquisition and reference functions.

The library and archives include more than 50,000 books, 700 film and DVD documentaries, almost 700 audiotapes of personal oral histories and 1,500 memorial books from European Jewish communities. The memorial books were usually written by a group of survivors from a region or city after World War II.

Family Research

Weiss is highly regarded for her ability to help people research family histories and hometowns in Europe. She provided the “inspiration and guidance” for Richard Stoler, D.O., of Bloomfield Township to investigate the Jewish community of Bereznitz, his grandfather's hometown, and to connect with Bereznitzers worldwide.

Stoler remembers that when he was a young boy, his father pointed out an old vacant building in Detroit as the Bereznitz Center. His grandfather and other relatives had immigrated from Bereznitz, a village

in the Ukraine, to Detroit during the early 20th century. Drawn by the promise of good jobs and opportunities, an unusually large number of Jewish Bereznitzers immigrated to Detroit.

Like immigrants from some other European towns, they formed a *landsmanshaft*, or immigrants' association, known as the Bereznitz Relief Society, that helped new immigrants get settled, provided financial aid and made sure burials were provided for needy Bereznitzers.

In a quest to trace additional relatives and others who emigrated from Bereznitz, Stoler embarked on an investigation that took him to the Detroit Public Library's Burton Historical Collection, the Wayne State University Walter Reuther Library, Temple Beth El Archives and then to the HMC.

With direction from Weiss, he began collecting photos, artifacts and oral histories that gradually expanded to include Bereznitzers and their descendants in many states and several other countries. Stoler praises Weiss for her knowledge and helpfulness.

He visited Bereznitz and the nearby villages of Sarny and Dombrowica with a small group of Detroiters about six years ago. Stoler describes Bereznitz as similar to the village in *Fiddler on the Roof*, with

fields still being plowed by oxen. While the towns remain, the Jewish community is gone — many through emigration early in the 20th century and others killed during the Holocaust or displaced afterward.

Stoler recently returned from Israel where he searched additional archives for material about the Bereznitz area and hired a graduate student to translate Ukrainian documents. His extensive Bereznitz collection of materials is kept at the HMC and is evolving to become a permanent exhibit in the museum. Stoler was honored for his work to preserve Jewish history at the HMC's 30th annual dinner last year.

'Wealth Of Knowledge'

Mark Adler of West Bloomfield had heard about Feiga Weiss and sought her assistance to learn about his father's hometown — Dolne Krskany, outside of Nitra in Slovakia. Adler's father was in a labor camp during World War II, and several close family members were killed during the Holocaust. His father rarely talks about those experiences and can't bring himself to visit the Holocaust Memorial Center, Adler said.

Weiss offered a “wealth of knowledge,” quickly finding books, some in Hebrew, with stories of the Dolne Krskany rabbis.

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In addition, she provided contact information for archives in Slovakia as potential resources for the family. “She is a gem in the community,” Adler said.

Eric Kappaz recently visited the HMC Library Archive seeking sources for



Erik Kappaz

his master’s project in secondary education social studies at Wayne State University. While he has no family connection with the Holocaust, his master’s project is an annotated bibliography about rescuers of Jewish people during World War II. His goal is to provide stories that teachers could use in the classroom.

“I thought it would be uplifting and make the study of the Holocaust more interesting for students,” Kappaz said. “Mrs. Weiss was wonderful. She pointed

out books and articles — more than I could ever go through and use.”

Prior to his visit to the Holocaust Memorial Center, Kappaz had identified approximately five Jewish rescuer stories for his project but that number increased to 16 after his visit to the HMC library. He spent three days compiling information.

Weiss helped Bruce Henderson, an author working on a book about the Ritchie Boys, to find useful photos at the Library. (The Ritchie boys, most of whom were Jewish, were Austrian and German immigrants to the U.S. who served in a special military intelligence unit during World War II.) In addition, she connected him with Guy Stern, one of the Ritchie Boys who now serves as director of the Harry and Wanda Zekelman International Institute of the Righteous at the HMC.

In addition to multimedia reference materials, the library also provides a place



A 1930s photo of the Stoler family farm in Bereznitz shows first cousins of William Stoler, Richard Stoler’s late father. Some of the cousins and their family members emigrated to Palestine during the 1930s and others died in a mass murder of Jews that took place in Sarny, 8 miles from Bereznitz in August 1942.

to preserve donated family or community artifacts. These range from ceremonial objects such as Kiddush cups to displaced person’s documents and anti-Semitic propaganda. Occasionally, someone brings in a collection of Nazi-related memorabilia the owner wants to dispose of safely.

“Some are fakes, but others can be used in the museum,” Weiss said.

Sometimes the library archive opens up the past, both in sad and happy ways.

Weiss described an elderly Holocaust survivor who comes in periodically to look through the memorial book for her hometown in Europe. She cries as she reads it, but returns to read it again.

Weiss’ expertise and the library’s resources have brought about happy outcomes for several Holocaust survivors, when Weiss helped them locate long-lost relatives. She is very gratified that these family members are now reunited. □



The HMC Library Archive is an essential resource for family histories and more.

Comprehensive Resources Accessible To All

The Holocaust Memorial Center Library Archive is a multilingual reference and research collection that is open to the public during the Holocaust Memorial Center’s regular hours. The library’s holdings document the history and impact of the Holocaust, but also contain deep resources about European Jewish history, Judeo-Christian relations and general Judaica. As a reference library and archive, materials cannot be borrowed, but some can be scanned or copied depending on the nature of the item and the applicable copyright laws.

The library has an automated catalogue and many of its collections and databases are searchable online. Detail is provided at www.holocaustcenter.org/library. In addition, library staff and volunteers will help Holocaust victims and survivors who want to use specialized resources, such as the International Tracing Service, to locate relatives. Use of the library is free of charge.

Memorial Book Collection

One of the special resources of the HMC Library Archive is its collection of more than 1,500 memorial books, believed to be the largest in the U.S.

Written in Hebrew, Polish, Yiddish, Dutch and other languages, each book is a written record of a particular European Jewish community before and during World War II.

According to librarian Feiga Weiss, most of these books were compiled by committees comprised of former residents who wanted a permanent record of their once-vibrant Jewish communities. They shared research, writing and editing responsibilities for the books, which were published in limited editions. The memorial books, some of which are available in English, provide a rich resource for individuals tracing family histories.



The memory or *yizkor* books, as they are sometimes known, often contain personal photos, documents and lists of former residents with information about what happened to them during the Holocaust. A separate set of memorial books was created by the German government to provide an official record of Jewish communities in Germany. These include detailed registries of people, places and events.

The Bereznitz Society hopes to produce a memorial book that will include an English translation of a special set of letters donated to the library several years ago. As described in the HMC newsletter, a man brought in a shoebox full of letters addressed to “Mr. Harry Katz, President of the Bereznitz Aid Society of Detroit.” The letters were written by former Bereznitz residents who were living in Displaced Persons camps in Europe after the war, and in later years in Israel. Each one asked Katz how to contact relatives in the Detroit area and many thanked him for his assistance.

Memorial books, like these from Rovno and Sarny, help people learn of life in small Eastern European towns and villages.