

Back to the future As they confront their own mortality, boomers are looking back toward their ancestors, often traveling to their birthplaces.

were growing up, my parents would talk about this small town in Sicily, and because we didn't travel much, it was almost mythical, it seemed so far away and alien," he says. Vetrano travels the world like any successful boomer, but the trip back showed him something different, an alternative universe he might have inhabited if his parents' lives had been a little different. On his first trip, driving through the town of Corleone (yes, that Corleone) on a Sunday afternoon, he stopped at a café and saw a typical Sicilian scene: a crowd of men in their Sunday best pulled up in a circle around a man entertaining them with jokes and stories. Vetrano, fluent in the Sicilian dialect, sidled up to listen, and was struck by the sudden realization that had his father not gone to America, he might have been in that very group, listening to familiar stories, his life bounded by comfortable village routines. "It was a trip back in time to when my parents lived there," he says, "because these small towns in Sicily are very much the way they were then."

FAMILY CONTEXT: Gelfond in Ukraine, a street corner in Lviv



back to her family's ancestral home, although she'd like to someday—but it's been about 160 years since her great-great-grandfather came over from Carrick-on-Suir in County Tipperary, so most of her encounters with kin would most likely take place in graveyards. It's very different for her when she goes with her husband to his family's hometown

of Isari, "smack in the middle of the Peloponnesus." Nick Sakellariadis, a first-generation Greek-American, has numerous relatives and friends to visit in Greece, and even though Isari itself is gradually emptying out as young people move to Athens for jobs, there's still a priest to show them the church where Nick's father was baptized.

AMERICAN JEWS TYPICALLY have a different kind of experience; most of their ancestors came to America several generations ago from places where almost every trace of Jewish life was wiped out by the Holocaust. "Going to the country where your parents or grandparents were murdered isn't exactly a vacation," observes Michael Schudrich, the American-born chief rabbi of Poland. Nevertheless, many are doing it, and some are even having success in tracing their long-forgotten roots. Eric Greenberg, 50, director of interfaith affairs at the Anti-Defamation League, went back to the town in Poland from which his grandfather had emigrated in 1921—a project that required him first to discover exactly what town it was.

