

International Institute for Jewish Genealogy Opens Its Doors by Neville Lamdan

For the last two years, the International Institute for Jewish Genealogy has been a gleam in our eyes. Now it is a reality. In January 2006, the Institute was launched at the Jewish National and Hebrew University Library in Jerusalem.

The history of the Institute goes back a few years. In the latter half of the 1990s, people began to appreciate the extraordinary wealth of primary source materials that had become accessible after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Certain Jewish institutions realized that they possessed genealogical resources of relevance to the growing number of Jews researching their family roots. Pioneering research projects were set in motion. Within that developing context, various people began to wonder, in AVOTAYNU and elsewhere, whether Jewish genealogy should not be put on a more systematic and academic footing.

Early in 1999, I wrote to Dr. Sallyann Sack, an old friend from my days as an Israeli diplomat in Washington, DC, and editor of

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AVOTAYNU, suggesting that the time had come for a professional research institute for Jewish genealogy and proposing that one be established at the Hebrew University. Sallyann was very taken with the idea and shared it with AVOTAYNU publisher, Gary Mokotoff, who also was supportive and initiated some private talks on the subject. Then, in May, Sallyann wrote an informal paper on the “Creation of a Center for Jewish Genealogical Research in Israel,” which she sent to one or two experts. That autumn, I came to New York to attend the 54th General Assembly of the United Nations and joined the discussions. We found interest in the idea of a research center, but also reservations. Among others, questions were raised about the very existence of “professional” Jewish genealogists who would work at the center and serious doubts were voiced as to whether the Hebrew University, or any university for that matter, would recognize Jewish genealogy as an academic discipline. Others asked why the center we contemplated should be set up in Jerusalem and not the States, for example. At the same time, we identified sufficient support for me to be tasked with exploring our proposal with the Hebrew University, which I did upon my return to Jerusalem early in 2000.

For various technical reasons, the idea of working with Hebrew University fell through. But the question marks raised in our various conversations had brought certain things into sharper focus. Beyond research, it was clear that the center would have to engage in teaching at a graduate level if we wished to produce a new breed of trained Jewish genealogists. Moreover, we would have to develop a solid track record to convince skeptical scholars that Jewish genealogy is a genuine academic discipline and a legitimate branch of Jewish Studies. And indeed, why Jerusalem? Because, we argued, Jewish genealogy is about the entire Jewish people throughout the generations, and Jerusalem is the only place in the world that commands the attention and support of Jews everywhere.

Later in 2000, however, I was appointed Israel's ambassador to the Vatican, and further progress had to wait until I retired in 2003. I again teamed up with Sallyann Sack who remained as enthusiastic as ever about the idea. Together we looked for a group of prominent Jewish genealogists to form a “Founders Committee.” For practical reasons, we decided that this committee should be compact (a dozen or so members) and that it should be as representative as possible, from an international

point of view, resulting in just a couple of member “slots” for the United States and Israel and single “slots” for a few countries elsewhere. Inevitably, and much to our regret, there were those who felt left out.

Sallyann was appointed chair of the Founders, while I was nominated director-designate of the Institute. As such, I embarked on a search for a suitable institution in Israel with which the center could be affiliated. After several unsuccessful probes, we were fortunate to find a warm welcome in the Jewish National and Hebrew University Library, which already was home to a number of research institutes in diverse fields. Not only does the library possess significant materials and collections for Jewish genealogy, but it also houses the Paul Jacobi Center for Jewish Genealogy, with its treasure trove of Jacobi's unpublished researches into leading Ashkenazic families and his vast collection of more than 12,000 printed works on genealogy in general. Thus, the decision was made to combine our institute with the Jacobi Center, under the somewhat ponderous name of the “International Institute for Jewish Genealogy and Paul Jacobi Center.” Relations with Dr. Chanan Rapaport, who heads the Jacobi Center, have been cordial and productive.

The next stage, toward the end of 2004, was to launch a fund-raising campaign to fund projects and take on qualified researchers. This has not been easy going. Rightly or wrongly, many potential donors do not see Jewish genealogy as high on Israel's list of priorities or on the agenda of the Jewish people at present. Equally, and understandably, they hesitate to contribute to an institution which until now has existed only on paper. Fortunately, this was not entirely the case. We have, in fact, received a fair measure of financial support, notably from the Lisa and Douglas Goldman Fund. With that funding in hand, we have now opened our doors with a view to “earning our spurs” over time and expanding our activities as we go along.

One major project planned for this year is a two-day academic symposium in Jerusalem on “Jewish Genealogy: Research and Teaching Priorities,” to be held in Jerusalem jointly with the Centre for Jewish Migration and Genealogy Studies Centre, under the auspices of the Isaac and Jessie Kaplan Centre at the University of Cape Town. Leading genealogists, academic and others will take part in this event. Additional projects, some in collaboration with other institutions, also are in the pipeline.

Since first publishing our mission statement in AVOTAYNU in the Spring 2004 issue (Vol. XIX, No. 4) and going out on the fund-raising trail, we have had to address many searching questions. The Institute's relationship with other organizations and frameworks involved in Jewish genealogy emerged as distinct areas of concern—to which our answer is that the Institute will not be in competition with them, as it will be engaged in purely academic research and university teaching. On the contrary, it will strive to complement and nourish the remarkable work of others, in the hope of advancing and raising Jewish genealogy to completely new heights—together.

As a result of this constructive dialectical process, our mission statement has evolved. It is reproduced here, as it stands at present, preceded by a section on the Institute's goals and rationale:

I. Goals and Rationale

The International Institute for Jewish Genealogy and Paul Jacobi Center, affiliated with the Jewish National and Hebrew University Library, has a number of interrelated goals:

- To engage in the research and teaching of Jewish genealogy at the university level
- To make Jewish genealogy a recognized academic discipline
- To help enrich and advance the endeavors of enthusiasts in the field

(left to right) *International Institute of Jewish Genealogy* director, Neville Lamdan, with chairman of the *Jacobi Center*, Chanan Rapaport.

- To encourage interest in Jewish genealogy and family history in contemporary Jewish life as a means to Jewish continuity

There was a time when Jewish genealogy typically was confined to rabbinic families who were proud of, and concerned for, their pedigrees. A generation ago, most Jews did not believe that they could trace their roots. Until the collapse of the Soviet Union, it was all but impossible to gain access to vital primary sources for serious Jewish genealogical research. Before the “Information Revolution,” it was difficult to database and make available large quantities of genealogical data. On all these fronts, things have changed radically.

In the last 25 years, Jewish genealogy has captured the imagination of tens of thousands of Jews, with the resultant birth and growth of organized Jewish genealogy. In parallel, Jewish genealogy and family history have matured significantly. Expertise has developed, resources have been uncovered, a popular literature has emerged, scholarly works and reference books have been published. The number of Jews actively engaged in the field has grown—and continues to grow—dramatically. JewishGen, which operates on the Internet, is a phenomenon in itself. Local and national societies have been formed; international conferences are held. The International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies (IAJGS) has, at last count, 75 member associations in some 15 countries. Several societies produce quality publications. AVOTAYNU ranks as a leading journal, while AVOTAYNU's *Nu? What's New?*, an electronic magazine, has 7,000 Internet subscribers. In brief, Jewish genealogy has entered the mainstream of Jewish life and activity.

Beyond that, evidence suggests that, for some, exposure to Jewish genealogy can be a life-changing experience. Certainly, research into one's personal and family history powerfully enhances Jewish awareness and can serve as a potent countervailing force to the intermarriage and assimilation that characterize so much of Jewish life today. As Israeli Nobel Laureate, Prof. Aaron Ciechanover, has said: “A nation without a past has no future.” Similarly, the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial Authority has noted: “In recent years, genealogy has become increasingly significant in strengthening Jewish identity worldwide.” In a word, Jewish genealogy is a bridge—not just to the past but to the future.

At the same time, after 25 years of tangible progress, involvement in the field is moving well beyond the amateur enthusiasts. Serious practitioners and specialists have emerged who work with

primary sources and publish scientific articles. In the medical field, geneticists are seeking reliable family trees to use in their DNA research and to pursue investigations into so-called Jewish genetic traits and diseases. Organizations that seek to help “lost Jews,” such as conversos, to reconnect with their roots, also look to genealogists for assistance. More recently, college professors in Jewish history have sought help in designing courses in Jewish genealogy. Such courses are now offered on rare occasions at the bachelor's level.

Curiously, while certain Jewish institutions do exhibit some receptiveness to Jewish genealogy (mainly by making their document collections available to genealogists), a scholarly research center, wholly and exclusively dedicated to Jewish genealogy and family history has been patently lacking. The International Institute for Jewish Genealogy and Paul Jacobi Center, launched in January 2006, comes to answer that need and fill that gap. Its physical location is in Jerusalem, the one place on earth that can command the attention of the whole of the Jewish People, but its outreach will be global.

The Institute aims to provide the energy, direction and leadership to effect the transformation of Jewish genealogy into an academic discipline and a legitimate branch of Jewish studies. Beyond research of an empirical and analytical nature, a major goal will be to nurture the teaching of Jewish genealogy in Jewish studies programs at major universities worldwide. Collaborative, interdisciplinary research projects will be embarked upon, and strategic partnerships established with other relevant institutions. The results of all projects and any research tools or products developed will be made available to the public. The Internet will be the major mode of communication.

In addition to developing the academic aspect of Jewish genealogy, the Institute will seek ways to be relevant and helpful to family historians. To that end, it will foster and maintain close working relationships with existing Jewish genealogical organizations and frameworks, with the aim of nourishing and complementing their work—and, in the process, raising Jewish genealogy as a whole to new heights, together.

II. Mission Statement

1. Resources: Wherever possible and without duplicating other efforts, to locate, collect and acquire primary and secondary source materials from all quarters and make them available to researchers from relevant disciplines

2. Repository and Library: To create a central repository of Jewish genealogical records and resources, and to develop a central library and catalog of Jewish genealogy

3. Research:

a. To conduct and support systematic research into Jewish genealogy and family history, encompassing the whole of the Jewish world in all eras

b. To carry out academically approved projects on an interdisciplinary basis in pertinent areas, including medicine and genetics

c. To encourage genealogical research through scholarships and competitions

4. Teaching:

a. To foster the teaching of Jewish genealogy at the university level and to promote the establishment of teaching posts, including endowed chairs of Jewish genealogy, at universities with strong programs in Jewish studies

b. To develop curricula and to design courses at the university level in Jewish genealogy, among other goals, with a view to training certified Jewish genealogists

c. To make available for non-specialists, primarily by Internet and through distance learning (e-learning), practical courses on Jewish genealogy and the techniques required to embark on family research

5. Standards: To develop, disseminate and encourage the

application of standards for conducting and documenting Jewish genealogical research

6. **Symposia:** To conduct international symposia and academic seminars on ongoing research and related topics

7. **Publications:** To publish a scientific journal of Jewish genealogy on a periodic basis, together with a series of scientific monographs on an occasional basis

8. **Cooperation:** To cooperate closely with existing Jewish genealogical organizations and frameworks, with a view to complementing their work and making the Institute accessible to individual family historians.

Note

* See, for example, Lawrence Tapper, "Call to Arms," AVOTAYNU XI, No. 1 (Spring 1995), 3-5; Boris Feldblyum, "Jewish Treasures in the Former Soviet Union," AVOTAYNU XI, No. 2 (Summer 1995), 7-8; and Sallyann Sack, "Jewish Genealogy on the Eve of the 21st Century," AVOTAYNU XIII, No. 3 (Fall 1997), 3-7.

Neville (Yosef) Lamdan is Israel's former Ambassador to the Vatican. An avid genealogist, he has special interest in 19th-century social and family history of Jews in the area that is Belarus today. He has contributed to AVOTAYNU on a number of occasions.