

Dr. Paul Jacobi

1. Dr. Paul Jacobi

Dr. Paul Jacobi (1911-1997) was born in Koenigsberg in Germany and emigrated to Palestine/Eretz-Yisrael in 1929. After finishing his law studies in England, he served as the Legal Adviser of the Jewish National Fund for more than fifty years. He was active in the "Israeli Genealogical Society", from its inception in 1937 as the "Palestine Jewish Genealogical Society".

In the last decades of his life, he devoted most of his time to genealogical research of European Jewry from early times as it spread throughout in the various European communities.

2. The Man

At the unveiling of Dr. Jacobi's gravestone (August 25, 1997) Dr. Chanan Rapaport, a friend and colleague (and subsequently an executor of the Jacobi estate) delivered the following obituary:

"We have lost a wise man. As it is written in the ancient Babylonian Talmud: "A scholar takes precedence over a king of Israel; for when a scholar dies, no one can replace him, while, if a king dies, all Israel is eligible for monarchy".

"Dr. Jacobi was a Renaissance man. His personality combined in great harmony the wide knowledge of world and Jewish history based on deep acquaintance and familiarity with ancient and modern cultures - together with remarkable curiosity and exact thinking, which contributed to a bold research approach in making hypotheses while relying solely on facts and findings.

"If books and the deep understanding their reading promotes are the true reflection of a person's spiritual ambiance - Dr. Jacobi was a true Renaissance man in the full meaning of this concept. Were there any vital fields of interest and knowledge missing from his rich library? We find there books with his handwritten notes on each of them, in the fields of archaeology, history, music, theater, cantorial music (*chazzanut*) and liturgical poetry, art in all its branches, architecture, philosophy and theology, jurisprudence and literature.....And I am sure now that I forgot to mention many additional humanistic fields which he studied most assiduously all his life.

"His extensive and deep interest was not satisfied merely with book research and facts delivered by authorities in many scientific fields, but extended into the fields of empirical work. This expressed itself through his many journeys in Europe, Russia and Asia, including personal investigations of ancient caves with their paintings, thousands of years old, as well as his incessant visits to every archaeological dig in Jerusalem and Israel. As he searched, he always compared local finds with archaeological digs in neighboring countries, such as the Ebla archaeological finds in Syria, in which he could not visit personally.

"There was an insatiable curiosity which enabled his very sharp mind, trained on exact thinking, combined with daring hypotheses to provide confirmation or refutation uncompromisingly, even if this process contradicted his own original positions.

"In the case of Dr. Jacobi, an organic combination between his power of analytical logic and his creative imagination produced beautiful, powerful and innovative synthesis. It merged the best of classical cultures - East and West alike. This was a wonderful synthesis between the formalism and analytical thinking of the Greco- Roman tradition and the creative imagination, typical of Oriental cultures.

"To all the above, he combined a God-given memory and a wonderful ability to sift the chaff from the wheat, while maintaining a panoramic perspective, which enabled him to find the implicit outline of the whole structure, thus enabling him to refute or verify suggested or accepted hypotheses or theories.

"Another strong asset of his personality was his complete sense of equality with people or authorities in fields in which he felt himself to be knowledgeable. Yet, at the same time, he was modest and humble while for ever manifesting a readiness to broaden his horizons and to learn from those people whom he felt to be his superiors in a given subject.

“Had he not been so meticulous and uncompromisingly self demanding in order to consolidate his positions and prove his hypotheses, he could have become, in his lifetime, the most read, the most referred to and the most controversial personality in the fields of Jewish genealogy and history.

“Yet, all these traits prevented him from publishing hundreds of books - which he called “Chapters”*- on over a hundred Ancient Jewish families** and almost four hundred family monographs which needed streamlining, standardizing and completion with the additional data accumulated by him.

“In contrast to many fine researchers in the field of Jewish Genealogy, he was not satisfied merely to create “Family branches and trees”, which he dismissed as “Mormon Genealogy”.

“Because of the importance, which Dr. Jacobi attributed to the historic significance of Jewish migrations, and the life experiences and functions of Jewish Kehilot (Communities and Congregations), as well as the interwoven fabric of Jewish family life, he thought it most basic and appropriate to combine detailed biographical stories on each leaf on every branch of Jewish family cluster. In his view, justifiably, only such a combination was the true “Jewish Genealogy”.

“He was not honored with any professorship in Jewish history and genealogy. Had he published the bulk of his research work, such an honor would certainly have been bestowed upon him. Nevertheless, he was a scholar whose advice was sought by many famous professors of Jewish history.

“Once, a famous research scientist approached him and said: “I do not understand how these two similar names, seemingly one person, are inserted in these 15th century manuscripts, which I found in a New York archive. When I expressed my amazement to my Hebrew university colleagues, they advised me to approach Dr. Jacobi who would help me solve the riddle”. Then to his amazement he heard that, by coincidence, Dr. Jacobi had just finished writing a monograph containing the answer to his question.

“Through no fault of his own, he was not given a professorship, many respected professors regarded him as their equal in debate and discussion. However, he was never too proud to admit an error or fault - a characteristic which very few among us possess. This was yet another astonishing trait revealed to those of us who had the privilege of knowing him intimately. This was especially amazing as we were used to his self-assurance, vast knowledge and definitive opinions.

“Again, to those of us who had the privilege of close friendship, he was always a warm, caring person, concerned with the welfare of others - not to be expected from his external appearance as a cold “Yekke” (a German Jew), who was frequently short-tempered, austere and exact with his time and speech.

“His readiness to help and yearning to respond was so great that he was afraid, at times, to open his mail box. The reason was that, as a true gentleman and scholar, he would not even consider refusing or rejecting anyone, even if many of the queries were sometimes troublesome.

“Last year, because of his heart attacks and physical weakening, his table was full of unanswered letters, in spite of the fact that he continued to work almost until the last moment. Judging from the hundreds and thousands of queries which he received from all around the globe, he was, undoubtedly, The Doyen of Jewish Genealogy worldwide. So many fine people saw him as the authoritative judge and mentor for their problems in the field of genealogy, that he will be greatly missed in our world.

* He called them “Chapters” and not books or monographs, since he saw them as a part of a vast scientific Jewish Encyclopedia, containing many volumes, covering the last millennium of Jewish History around the world.

** The Monographs of which, have already been typed and bound.

3. Dr. Jacobi’s Genealogical and Historical Outlook

In a lecture on “Jewish Genealogy and Jewish History” to the Israeli Genealogical Society in 1986, Dr. Jacobi presented some of his approach to the subject:

“One begins with the present – myself, my parents, my four grandparents, my eight great-grandparents and so on. It is a mistake to omit less celebrated branches of one’s family. Every individual has historical relevance, which is how genealogy helps supply material for history.

"While working on my own genealogy, I happened to notice that the same family surnames kept reappearing in the different countries of Europe. I collected, therefore, material on approximately 400 European Jewish families and recorded their genealogy. I followed the patrilineal line, since a Jewish wife typically enters her husband's family and carries his surname after the marriage.

"Families, acting as a group, were instrumental in the spread of Ashkenazi Jewry all over Europe. Between 1490 and 1590, Jews were expelled from most cities in central Europe. Poor families stayed on in near-by villages, eking out a living by serving as simple artisans or engaging in the cattle trade and similar occupations. Richer families went to Renaissance Italy. Still others headed directly eastward to Lithuania, Moravia and Poland, where they founded Yeshivot [centres of rabbinical learning].

"Again and again, we see that members of the same families chose and led the path of Jewish wanderings. Those families served as the main reservoir from which the [local] communities drew their important community leaders as well as their rabbis.

"By following the genealogy of Ashkenazi Jews, it becomes very clear that a relatively small group of families wielded a decisive influence in Vilna, Lublin, Brisk, Krakov, Przemysl, Metz, Frankfurt, Padua, Amsterdam, Copenhagen and the rest of Jewish settlements all over Europe.

"This elite, comprised of only about 80 families, dominated the whole of Ashkenazi Jewry. I categorised these [leading] families, which were already recognized as such by the sixteenth century, in descending order – [calling them] the Founding, Ancient, Old, and Earlier Families.

"..., the Jewish family "clan" served as the elite which occupied the place [in society] held by other historic elitist collectives, like that of the military elite in the Mameluke kingdoms or the Catholic priesthood in the Christian kingdoms.

"There is no transmission of values without an elite. The elite of Ashkenazi Jewry was linked by kinship, holding a carefully considered marriage policy".