

המכון הבינלאומי לגנאלוגיה יהודית ומרכז פאול יעקבי, ירושלים



**INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR JEWISH GENEALOGY
AND PAUL JACOBI CENTER**

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“The International Institute for Jewish Genealogy”

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The International Institute for Jewish Genealogy, Jerusalem

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman - and thank you also, the International Academy of Genealogy, for affording me the opportunity of presenting a 5-year progress report on the International Institute for Jewish Genealogy in Jerusalem – a presentation that is very different in kind from those we have heard thus far.

I. Introduction

Our host, Dr. Pier Felice degli Umberti, clearly recognised that Jewish Genealogy goes directly to the theme of this Colloquium. In brief, it is all about “National Identity and Migrations”, not least because of the fact that in the last century or so the Jewish People have gone through the largest migratory and demographic shifts ever experienced in their 2000 years of wandering from place to place.

It would probably take a team of social psychologists to satisfactorily explain why 1,000's upon 1,000's of Jews have been engaging in a quest for their roots, at first in America and then elsewhere since the 1980's and 1990's. Presumably, this extraordinary surge of interest relates, in part at least, to two broad phenomena – first, the length of time it takes for migrants to turn around and look fearlessly at the unhappy pasts they left behind; and, second, the failure of the American “melting pot” experiment, leading to a renewed desire of migrants, not only in the States, to re-discover their roots and revitalise their national identity.

Whatever the reasons, the fact is that since the 1980's Jewish Genealogy has burgeoned. National societies were established; an International Association for Jewish Genealogical Societies was formed, international conferences held (I have just taken part in one in Washington DC, attended by 1,200 people), periodicals proliferated and a semi-scholarly journal appeared. Within this ramified and vibrant infrastructure, a serious lacuna was discerned by more scholarly Jewish genealogists – namely, the absence of an academic institute to consolidate and advance the grass-roots endeavour. To that end, the International Institute for Jewish Genealogy was founded by a group of internationally renowned Jewish genealogists at the National Library in Jerusalem.

The Institute – or IJG, for short - officially opened its doors in January 2006. It did so amidst a fair measure of incomprehension, scepticism and reserve from traditional scholars. Nevertheless, after attending the Institute's first International Symposium in September 2006, Prof. Thomas W. Jones, the current editor of the *Association of Professional Genealogists Quarterly*, wrote that “With clear purpose and objectives, ..., the institute is poised to succeed. Moreover, “As it proceeds, it can serve as a path-finder, perhaps even a model, for the wider field – thus shortening genealogy's long road to academic acceptance.”¹

The Institute set the advancement of the status of Jewish Genealogy, through research and teaching at the university level, as its primary goal. IJG has carried out, or sponsored, a dozen research projects which, taken together, demonstrate that Jewish Genealogy – or any genealogy, for that matter – is not merely a useful academic tool or methodology as some contend, but an illuminating and valid lens through which to view Jewish history and society. The studies have demonstrated that Jewish Genealogy is a scientific activity, which uses the accepted methods and standards of modern historical and sociological research. They have illustrated how an otherwise meaningless litany of names and dates can be contextualised and utilised to produce a comprehensive narrative, enriching our understanding of the unique Jewish experience over the generations and across the globe.

Besides research, IJG has devoted considerable thought to the teaching of Jewish Genealogy at the university level. It has also produced some innovative tools and technologies to assist the Jewish family historian in his/her work. Additionally, the Institute has begun to make a mark on the academic world. For example, its presence is being felt at international conferences such as this, while the number of articles in learned journals, written by scholars associated with IJG or in which credit is given to it, is growing markedly, thus confirming that the Institute's work is of interest to non-Jewish genealogists as well.

Moreover, having established a "track record", the Institute has won the support of wide segments of the Jewish world, as reflected in the membership of its Honorary Advisory Board, which includes Baroness Ruth Deech of Oxford; the world renowned historian Sir Martin Gilbert; the former British Foreign Secretary, Sir Malcolm Rifkin; the former Minister of Justice of Canada; and a Nobel Prize Winner, Prof. Aaron Ciechanover of Israel.

Let me expand just a little on some of these points.

II. Research

As of today, IJG has awarded research grants, of varying sizes, to nine proposals of a historical/sociological nature. The principal criterion for receipt of a grant (beyond originality and academic excellence) has been the extent to which the projects broaden the scope of Jewish genealogical research and the horizons of Jewish Genealogy in general.

The range of the projects in terms of time and space is remarkable – from 14th and 15th century Spain and the Mediterranean Basin after the Expulsion from Spain, through early-modern Italy, 18th and 19th century Hungary and late Ottoman Palestine, to pre-World War I Lithuania and inter-war Latvia, until Europe as a whole during the Shoah.

Several of the research projects dealt directly with the themes of this Colloquium: Migrations and National Identity. For example, a study on "Sephardic Migration and DNA"; or another on "International Jewish Familial and Economic Networks from Ancona in early modern Italy". Then again, a study on "Jewish Kinship Networks, Modernization and Migration in Darbenai and its Diaspora", about which I'd like to say a few words:

Employing genealogical sources and methods, Prof. Eric Goldstein of Emory University in Atlanta has reconstructed 19th century kinship networks in Darbenai, a representative Jewish town (or “shtetl”) in Lithuania, in order to throw light on various issues of interest to Jewish Genealogy - the centrality of family ties to social and economic life, the emergence and maintenance of social categories, including different elite groups, and kinship networks, as well as geographical mobility and patterns of migration into the early 20th century.

This study has shown that that the family network was a vital – if not the critical - factor in the daily lives of average Jews, particularly those who lived in small towns in Eastern Europe and who did not have a highly organized communal structure on which to depend. Moreover, it has analysed in depth the ways in which these networks were challenged by a series of forces, including modernization, urbanization and migration, and were eventually replaced by new frameworks for national and social identity in post-immigration settings.

III. Teaching

IJG's not a teaching institution and does not confer university degrees or professional accreditation. Hence, the Institute's Executive decided that IJG's principal function in this area should be to encourage and assist appropriate universities worldwide to offer academic courses in Jewish Genealogy. An international Teaching Committee. On the assumption that no serious lecturer or professor would agree to have a course dictated to him/her down to the very last detail, the Committee opted to elaborate broad “Academic Guidelines” in order to provide a conceptual framework for a syllabus for BA and MA courses in Jewish Genealogy and to offer informed recommendations as to their components.

The academic work on this initiative was completed in 2008-09, but having failed to identify a major university that would offer a course in Jewish genealogy and having come to the conclusion that computerised “e-learning” courses were beyond IJG's capabilities for the time being, the Executive decided in April of this year to post the Guidelines freely on the Institute's website, in the hope that they will be taken up, in part if not in full, by a teaching institution. If the publication of the Guidelines does inspire academic courses in Jewish Genealogy and if others follow suite, the Institute will have achieved its purpose, at least in part.

IV. Standards, Tools and Technologies

1. As a form of outreach, the Institute has endeavored to provide tools to assist the work of Jewish family historians. It has, for example, proposed standards for the recording of proper names, dates and places, a complicated area not solely in Jewish genealogy.² It has also published a unique system for the absolute dating of generations on a Jewish historical time-line, which addresses a genuine issue confronted by the serious Jewish genealogist.³

2. On the technological front, the Institute can take credit, direct and indirect, for two notable achievements.

First, it funded a project which produced a viable solution to the complex problem of merging incompatible genealogical datasets - in this case, the merging of data culled, first, from headstones in an old Jewish cemetery in the small town of

Zdunska Wola (near Lodz) in Poland and, second, from “metric” data found in the town’s records on the other.⁴

The second technological breakthrough was a spin-off from work being done on one of the Institute’s projects where researchers were confronted with the vexing problem of identifying and verifying Jewish surnames, subject to variable spellings in multiple European languages, especially when in movement or, tragically, on the transport lists of Holocaust victims. A sophisticated algorithm to search the lists phonetically was developed. The system is similar to a digital soundex one but, being phonetic, it yields a much smaller number of false “hits” (false positives), as does a digital soundex. The system is already in use in several large Jewish genealogical websites, including JewishGen, SephardicGen, JRI – Poland and is currently being considered for use in other large databases, both Jewish and non-Jewish, including the Ellis Island Database.

New Horizons

1. Research Policy

The Institute has recently made a major policy shift in the way it solicits and promotes its research projects. Over the last four years, IJG has invited projects, essentially at random, to be submitted from outside through its annual “Call for Research Proposals”. Of late, however, the paradigm has been changed. We have now decided to be “pro-active” and compile, with the aid of prominent scholars, an impressive portfolio of pure research projects and the “Tools and Technologies” projects, which IJG will go out and try to “market” in order to elicit the necessary funding.

2. Scottish Project

Of quite a different order, is an IJG project to conduct a demographic and genealogical survey of Scottish Jewry, which is already under way. This study will focus on the immigration of Jews into Scotland, mainly from Eastern Europe, their dispersal throughout the country, and their successful attempts to preserve their national identity in an increasingly pluralistic society. Among its planned end-products are a scholarly monograph on the results of the survey, a more popular narrative in illustrated book form, a travelling exhibition on Scottish Jewry, and a series of teaching aids for use by other ethnic and religious immigrant groups in Scotland.

This endeavour will likely become the Institute’s “flagship project” over the next few years. If it succeeds, it has the potential to raise Jewish Genealogy to a completely new plane, moving it beyond narrowly defined research projects to a comprehensive study of an entire national Jewry. Again, if successful, this project could become a model for other national Jewries of similar size and age - and hopefully for other immigrant groups aspiring to integrate into the general society, while preserving their particular national heritage.

Some Reflections

Has the Institute delivered on Prof. Thomas Jones’s prediction that it is “poised to succeed” and “as it proceeds, it can serve as a path-finder, perhaps even a model, for the wider field”? The truth is that it is too early to tell and, as they say, “the jury

is still out". IIJG can put a number of feathers in its cap, particularly in the areas of research and technological achievements. Against, it has not yet fully succeeded in field of university teaching. Likewise, it would wish to find better ways in which to reach out to and serve the Jewish genealogical community as a whole. To that end, it is working on the establishment of a Genealogical Repository and also a Genealogical Service, both at the Israel National Library for use by genealogical researchers at large.

As for shortening "genealogy's long road to academic acceptance", that too has yet to be seen – and there are people in this audience better placed than I to make that judgement.

In short, we've come a long way but there's still a very long way to go!

¹ Jones, Thomas W., "International Institute - A Breakthrough for Academic Genealogy?", *Association of Professional Genealogists Quarterly*, xxii, 1 (March, 2007), pp. 41-44.

² Cf. Mokotoff, Gary, "A proposed Standard for Names, Dates and Places in a Genealogical Database", on IIJG's website and also in *Avotaynu*, xxiv, 3 (Fall, 2008), pp. 3-6.

³ Cf. Rapaport, Chanan, "Jacobi Absolute Generations Scale", *Avotaynu*, xxv, 4 (Winter 2009), 3-8 (also on the Institute's website).

⁴ See Klauzinska K., "A Modern Approach to the Genealogy of Polish Jews: Zdunska Wola as a Test Case", *Scripta Judaica Cracoviensia*, vol. 5, 2007, p. 39-51; Wagner, H. Daniel, "Tombstone Identification through Database Merging", *Avotaynu*, xxiv, 1(Spring 2008), 8-10; and Klauzinska K., "Strategies for the Integration of Genealogical Datasets" (on the Institute's website).