

## **Genealogy and Family History of Jews in Russia**

International Institute for Jewish Genealogy  
Russian Institute for Genealogical Research  
Joint Symposium

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Prof. Benjamin Nathans

From September 10 through 12, 2012, I had the pleasure of taking part in an international conference focusing on the genealogy of Jews in Russia, especially those who lived outside the Pale of Settlement, from the early nineteenth century through the Soviet era, by which time of course the Pale was a historical relic. The conference was novel in two ways: it was jointly sponsored by representatives of two genealogical institutes (Russian and Jewish), and it brought historians and genealogists together in a sustained and lively dialogue. In what follows, I briefly sketch the main contours of the two and a half days of deliberations, focusing on what to my mind were the highlights.

We began with an excursion to the Jewish cemetery of St. Petersburg, a remarkable site of historical memory and an invaluable resource for the genealogy of Russian Jewry, in particular its elites. We were fortunate to have some of the world's leading experts on this cemetery among us. The excursion allowed participants to make or renew acquaintances and reminded all of us of the historical weight of St. Petersburg's Jewish community and that of other communities outside the Pale.

The conference proper began with a keynote address by myself (in Russian), focusing on how Russian Jews came to live beyond the Pale and reflecting on the mutual utility of history and genealogy, along with some proposals for future interdisciplinary as well as international academic cooperation. I stressed the importance of studying the evolving structures and dynamics of Jewish family life, an arena of research between biography and social history. My address also highlighted the transformative impact of the internet and digital technologies on genealogical and historical research, an impact whose potential has, I believe, scarcely begun to be realized.

During the two days of presentations that followed, twenty speakers presented twenty-three papers, all of them in Russian. Given that the speakers included academics, librarians, and independent scholars, the genre of presentations ranged widely - which I found a refreshing contrast to the monotone of most academic conferences. Some papers dealt with sources and data, while others were of a more "applied" nature, and thus more encompassing and argumentative. The range of topics in this latter category was also wide: some presenters focused on a single family lineage while others focused on specific populations or sources. In many instances, I found the Q&A and discussion following the presentations as valuable as the papers themselves.

A number of the first day's presentations, devoted to "Sources and Resources," struck me as especially valuable. This of course reflects my particular set of interests. Let me illustrate by referencing just a few examples very briefly, without meaning to detract in any way from the other presentations. A paper on sources for Jewish genealogy in Russian provincial archives confirmed my hypothesis that genealogists are often ahead of historians, when it comes to exploring life outside the major Russian metropolitan centers. Two studies similarly illuminated the growth of under-investigated Jewish populations in Smolensk, Pskov and Riga. A work on synagogues as sources of social history has broad applications for the study of Jewish life across the pre-revolutionary and early Soviet eras, *inside* as well as beyond the Pale of Settlement. An analysis of applications for Russian citizenship by Jews in the immediate post-revolutionary era offered valuable material for understanding the transition from an imperial to a Soviet conception of political membership. Perhaps the most gripping presentation of the day dealt with Jewish dossiers in Stalin's state security apparatus during the height of the Great Terror, and the ways they can be used for studying the history of Jewish families during the 1930s. A discussion of the intersection of onomastics and Jewish genealogy contained many helpful tips (as well as caveats) for researchers.

The second day of presentations, devoted to "Case Studies," also produced what struck me as a number of highlights. Again let me reference just a sampling of the offerings, given the confines of this necessarily short overview. The genealogies of several extraordinary families among merchants, bankers and in the rabbinate were described in detail on the basis of pioneering archival research. These turned out to be case studies involving lineages that distinguished themselves in multiple arenas, including religious and communal leadership, the arts, entrepreneurship, scholarship, etc. Some presenters cast their case studies in terms of specific social groups, as for example a study of Jewish women and a paper on Jews in the Russian nobility.

Based on my experience with (mostly academic) conferences, I would say that the proportion of substantive, interesting papers was high - more than two-thirds by my estimation. Somewhat disappointing was the low level attendance by people outside the circle of participants. Apparently this was intentional on the part of the Russian organizers, perhaps in an effort to maintain a scholarly tone during the deliberations. Whatever the case, it would certainly be worthwhile to make the fruits of the two and a half days of presentations available to as wide an audience as possible, considering the substantial international interest from historians and social scientists to lay people in Russian Jewry and their history and genealogy, as well as the novel character of this conference, as described above. With that in mind, I strongly recommend producing an edited version of the conference's proceedings in the form of a printed collection of articles and/or a publication on the internet.

Ben Nathans  
University of Pennsylvania,  
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