

# Chairman's Report: Weizmann Institute Conference On Genealogy and the Sciences

by H. Daniel Wagner, Chair

The “Genealogy and the Sciences” international conference, which took place December 17–18, 2018, in Rehovot, Israel, is over. The meeting was, to the eyes and ears of many, extremely successful. For a number of reasons, I view it as a milestone for the field of genealogy. First, because it is the first time that so many lecturers from around the world, all respected scholars in their own fields, from a wide range of disciplines, gathered in a respected academic setting to exchange their thoughts and views about genealogy, a field usually considered as a simple hobby like stamp collecting. Well, stamp collecting it was not, quite far from it.

There were representatives from the hard (“exact”) sciences sitting side-by-side with scholars from the social sciences, the arts and the humanities. What a mixed audience it was; mathematicians, biologists, engineers, physicists, chemists, forensic experts and medical doctors on the one hand, anthropologists, geography experts and historians, psychologists, archeologists and onomastics experts on the other. See Table 1 for a wide-ranging list. Yes, what a blend, and what a (slightly worrying) challenge it was not only to bring all these people together, but to make them listen to each other! How could we find a way to optimize communication and information sharing?

Faced with such a challenge, the key was to run one session only (in other words, no parallel sessions) over two days, with each block of lectures an amalgam of different topics. The plan was that each attendee would be interested in at least part of the lectures in a given block and, hopefully, would stay for the other four or five lectures in that block. Lastly, since multi-disciplinary means differences not only in background, approach and thinking, but also in scientific language, each lecturer was asked to start his/her talk with a few minutes of general introduction to the topic of the talk, including clarification of some challenging specific terms and jargon.

It worked quite well, as all blocks of lectures were packed with 50–80 participants. It worked also because despite the differences in background, attendees shared a common intellectual objective, that is, to learn as much as possible about the many aspects of genealogy. This was the challenge of such an experimental conference and, in the opinion of most, it indeed was met. The results made me think that our differences are, in fact, stimulating; they generate large driving forces and creativity that inevitably should lead to new interactions.

The meeting took place at the Lopatie Conference Center on the grounds of the Weizmann Institute of Science (WIS). The WIS, where I have worked since 1985, was the right

Hard sciences	Social sciences	Art and humanities
Genetics	Communication studies	History and Migrations
Forensics	Psychology	Archaeology
Microbiology	Geography	Art
Computer science	Linguistics, Onomastics	Literature, Theater, Music
Physics	Anthropology, Sociology, Demography	Anthropology
Chemistry	Ethnology	Religion
Mathematics	Economics	Philosophy

Table 1. The Multiple Fields of Genealogy

place for the initiation and organization of such an interactive, multidisciplinary conference, because of its structure, the freedom given to scientists driven by curiosity to do research the way they prefer, the administrative and financial support provided for events such as this one, and so on.

One of the sponsors of the conference was the Braginsky Center for the Interface Between Science and the Humanities, which funds multidisciplinary projects such as neuroscience and psychology, chemistry and archaeology, and now also genealogy and the sciences. All this makes the WIS not only a creative place, but also a home for scientific leadership.

Owing to significant relevant contributions from the exact sciences, the field of genealogy is now in the midst of a serious mutation and is visibly turning into a rich academic field. This was made very clear at the symposium. It is my hope that both genealogical “cultures” (the “hard” and the “soft” scientific approaches) will benefit greatly from the synergistic interaction that was generated at this symposium. The message that should result from this first-of-a-kind international conference is that genealogy is a multidisciplinary field that definitely belongs to the academic world.

*Daniel Wagner has researched his Polish roots since 1995, is a member of the Israel Genealogy Research Association (IGRA) and was a co-chairman of the 2004 International Conference on Jewish Genealogy held in Jerusalem. Wagner is a Professor of Materials Science at the Weizmann Institute in Rehovot, Israel.*

