

# IJG and the Upcoming Weizmann Institute Genealogy Conference

by Neville Lamdan

The International Institute of Jewish Genealogy (IJG) is looking to the international conference on “Genealogy and the Sciences”, to be held at the Weizmann Institute of Science in December, with the greatest of anticipation. IJG’s mission is to work to advance the study of Jewish genealogy—and genealogy in general—as recognized fields of scholarly endeavor. Hence, it sees the conference as a landmark event. By hosting the gathering, the Weizmann Institute will take the study of genealogy past a significant milestone on the path to recognition in the most prestigious of academic circles.

Not many years ago, most historians and social scientists tended to look upon genealogy with reserve. Skepticism is perhaps a better word. It was not a serious activity. It was

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based, or so they alleged, not on verifiable evidence but on little more than questionable oral traditions and family lore, or what Yiddishists might dismiss as “*bobbe maises*” (grandmother’s tales). It was used, they said, for self-aggrandizement and other ulterior purposes, not for pure scholarly ends. At best, it was a tool, a methodology, of some utility to certain classical historians. To harsher critics, genealogy’s place in the academic universe was roughly akin to that of astrology vis-à-vis astronomy. Scholars engaged in the exact sciences did not have a view. To them, genealogy was irrelevant.

Over the past two decades, far-reaching developments have taken place with regard to the study of genealogy, both from within and without. With interest burgeoning worldwide, its pursuit and practice are now on a different plane. The scientific method has been applied to it. The use of primary sources has become fundamental. The need for demonstrable evidence, documentary or otherwise, has been accepted as critical. Genealogy has emerged as an area for scholarly inquiry. Peer-reviewed journals dealing with the subject are published. A place for the field has been found at international conferences (including congresses of Jewish Studies, from which it was excluded only a decade ago).

In parallel, scholarly attitudes towards genealogy have changed. Above all, the interdisciplinary nature of genealogy, going well beyond the social sciences, has been acknowledged. Its relevance to medicine and genetics is

most obvious. But so too in such areas as criminology and legal investigations, as well as in migration studies, minority and gender studies. With the advent of mega-data, mathematics, statistics, demography and population studies, to mention but a few, have been joined with genealogy. Today, the point has been reached when the Weizmann Institute of Science, a world leader in the field of scientific research, is with great breadth of vision lending its auspices to a conference on the inter-connections between genealogy and the sciences, both “hard” and “soft.” In the history of genealogy this is unprecedented.

IJG sees itself as part of the broader process that has transformed the study of genealogy in recent years. It opened its doors at the Israel National Library in Jerusalem in 2006 with an explicit commitment “to developing Jewish genealogy into a recognized field of academic investigation, within the realm of Jewish Studies and in association with a broad range of other sciences on an interdisciplinary basis.” Its programs and activities have been aimed at broadening the horizons of Jewish genealogy and developing tools and technologies of use to Jewish family historians.

More specifically, through its research, IJG has sought to extend Jewish genealogy beyond traditional genealogy, which tended to focus somewhat narrowly on the lineage of a single individual and his/her family. Thus, it has consciously moved into areas of wider scope and relevance. There has been a discernible progression in its researches from the family unit, through the community, to complete segments of society and even beyond. This trajectory can be illustrated through a few examples of IJG-generated efforts.

- **At the level of the extended family:** Dr. Erzsébet Mislovics of the Hebrew University investigated the spread and influence of two leading Jewish families, the Munks and the Goldzihers, in Hungarian society, Jewish and general, from the demographic, economic and cultural perspectives from modest beginnings in the 18th century until widespread involvement on the eve of World War II.

- **At the kinship level:** Dr. Tomasz Jankowski of the University of Wrocław employed advanced methods of family reconstruction and examined multi-dimensional structures in kinship relationships in Piotrków Trybunalski, a significant town in (Russian) Poland with a sizeable Jewish population in the 19th century (9,370 Jews in 1897).

- **At a community level, with particular reference to the effects of dispersal:** Professor Eric Goldstein of Emory University studied familial and other networks within Darbenai, a shtetl (small Jewish town) in Lithuania, and also the survivability and functionality of those networks after mass emigration to North America and elsewhere before World War I.

- **At the society level:** Dr. Judith Kalik of the Hebrew Uni-

versity utilized Russian records to investigate “Village Jews” (as distinct from “Shtetl Jews”) in 19th-century Minsk guberniya. She was able to recreate the lives and lineages of a significant segment of Jewish society in the “Pale of Settlement,” which has been largely invisible to contemporary research. [See book review this issue—Ed.]

• **At the national level:** In a ground-breaking study, an international team of experts addressed, for the first time, the genealogy of a national Jewry in its entirety—in this case Scottish Jewry—from its emergence in 1817. In the process, a “Family Tree of Scottish Jewry” was generated and a new statistical and factual framework for the historical narrative of Scottish Jewry was elaborated.

IJG believes that by consciously expanding the unit of analysis, it has demonstrably increased the range of Jewish genealogy. At the same time, in its internal debates it has pondered theoretical questions concerning, for instance, the limits of Jewish genealogy, and indeed of genealogy in

general. Put simply, at what point, if at all, is a multifaceted genealogical study eclipsed by the other disciplines with which it interfaces?

The Weizmann Conference is designed to explore the interdisciplinary nature of genealogy today, to draw attention to the interactions between the various sciences and to search for further synergies and collaborative work between them. These objectives sit squarely with IJG’s interests and thus IJG is happy to be among the conference sponsors. Above all, it is IJG’s hope that the conference will inspire new directions and dimensions for the future study of Jewish genealogy.

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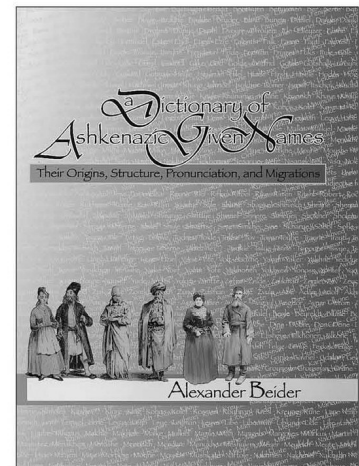
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