

# International Institute for Jewish Genealogy

## Reports on Its First Two Years

by Neville Lamdan

The International Institute for Jewish Genealogy and Paul Jacobi Center opened its doors in January 2006. In these first two years, it has established itself at the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem, embarked on a series of pioneering research projects, held an international colloquium attended by world-renowned genealogists, awarded major research grants and broached the question of teaching Jewish genealogy at the university level. It also has created a presence on the Internet <www.ijg.org> and begun to make a mark in the academic world, both Jewish and non-Jewish.

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A little background is called for. The suggestion that some form of center or institute for Jewish genealogy be created first appeared in AVOTAYNU in the mid-1990s.<sup>1</sup> The idea stemmed from the extraordinary upsurge of interest in Jewish genealogy over the previous 25 years or so, which was given further momentum by the advent of the Internet, the PC revolution and new-found access to historical archives in Eastern Europe following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Where such an institution would fit into the growing infrastructure of Jewish genealogy worldwide, what exactly it would do, and who its clientele would be was not fully thought through at the time.

It took some years for the notion to germinate and come to fruition. Thinking among certain proponents of the idea moved in the direction of a center for academic research, mainly on the grounds that Jewish genealogy had reached a sufficient level of maturity to sustain such an advanced institution. In turn, this would raise Jewish genealogy to new heights by demonstrating that serious work could be done in the field, beyond the tracing of individual lineages at the hobbyist or family historian level.

In the fall of 2004, Gary Mokotoff and Sallyann Amdur Sack, both founding members of the Institute, announced in these columns that a group of Jewish genealogists and scholars from around the world had earlier that year formed the International Institute for Jewish Genealogy whose aim, as they described it, was to make Jewish genealogy “a bona fide scholarly discipline, a subset of Jewish studies that draws upon a multiplicity of other disciplines.”<sup>2</sup>

Founding the Institute on paper was one thing, but it still

took another year and a half of intensive organizational work and fund-raising before I could report, as the Institute’s newly appointed director, that we had officially opened our doors in January 2006 and that the Institute was “up and running.”<sup>3</sup> By then, we had gone through the process of seeking a home for the Institute, which in theory could have been at one of several venues in Israel and abroad, or even in cyberspace. After exploring various options, we discovered, to our good fortune, the Paul Jacobi International Center for Research on Jewish Genealogy at the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem, established in 1998 through an agreement between the Library and Chanan Rapaport together with the other executors of the Jacobi genealogical papers.

The Library as a location for the Institute seemed to us to be ideal, both as a Jewish national institution situated at the very root and source of the Jewish People and in the light of its rich collections of direct relevance to Jewish genealogy. Negotiations between Dr. Rapaport and ourselves quickly led to a harmonious merger between both bodies—and to our present existence at the Library.

### Initial List of Tasks

We quickly compiled an impressive, and perhaps overly ambitious, list of tasks for a fledgling institute. They included collecting sources and resources for Jewish genealogy; acting as a repository for those resources; research into topics of broad interest to Jewish genealogists; teaching; promulgating Jewish genealogical standards; publications, including a peer-reviewed journal, and more.<sup>4</sup> Beyond that, we declared that the Institute would seek to “cooperate closely with existing Jewish genealogical organizations and frameworks, with a view to complementing their work and making the Institute accessible to individual family historians.”<sup>5</sup> Imbued with a sense of almost pioneering mission, we took ourselves very seriously and gave much thought to our objectives, the nature of academic genealogy, Jewish or otherwise, and the need to become a significant player in the sphere of scholarly genealogy, again Jewish or otherwise.

To be honest, we were still feeling our way, and it took yet another year for us to define our aspirations clearly and enunciate them in three sentences, as follows:

- To strive to develop Jewish genealogy into a recognized academic discipline, within the realm of Jewish Studies and in association with a broad range of other sciences on an interdisciplinary basis.
- To endeavor to do so by conducting scholarly research into all aspects of Jewish genealogy, both independently and collaboratively, with other institutions and individuals, as well as by promoting the teaching of Jewish genealogy at

the university level.

• To enrich and advance the work of family historians and, in the process, to make a contribution to the future of the Jewish People by nurturing and strengthening its roots. These still remain elevated goals presenting a great challenge, but we believe that, over time, they are attainable.<sup>6</sup>

Throughout the planning stages, we were dogged by naysayers who argued that genealogy could never become an academic discipline because it is merely a useful analytical tool or a methodology, but no more. For our part, we decided to proceed as if Jewish genealogy as an academic discipline were a given—and held an international colloquium in September 2006, with a view to determining directions and priorities for Jewish genealogy.<sup>7</sup> The event was an intellectually exhilarating experience attended by some 20 leading genealogists from Europe, Israel, South Africa, and the United States, who reviewed the “state of play” of genealogical research in various areas, ranging from Jewish history, through rabbinical genealogy, onomastics, migration studies, demographics and genetics, to the exact sciences, computerization and archives. Where relevant, topics were examined from both the Ashkenazic and Sephardic points of view. More than 130 suggestions were made of topics meriting investigation in the various fields discussed. Thomas Jones, a professor of education at Gallaudet University in Washington, DC, and a past president of the Association of Professional Genealogists, discussed teaching genealogy at the university level. He came away with the sense that the occasion was a breakthrough for academic genealogy altogether and that the Institute, if it stayed the course, could become a standard-bearer for the scholarly genealogical world as a whole.<sup>8</sup>

Naturally, we recognized that acting as if Jewish genealogy were an academic discipline did not make it one. To establish the field as a legitimate field of scholarly endeavor within the framework of Jewish Studies and have it accepted as a fully-fledged academic discipline requires the Institute to prove itself—primarily by conducting or sponsoring Jewish genealogical research, which meets the strictest standards of academic excellence; and also by demonstrating that the subject can be taught at an advanced level in leading universities. In brief, recognition of Jewish genealogy as an academic discipline will only come through scholarly research in Jewish genealogy and teaching the subject in institutions of higher learning. The Institute has, therefore, been working on both these tracks during the past two years.

### Research Activities

• **Sephardic DNA.** Even before the Institute was opened officially, it sponsored and participated in a DNA study led by researchers from the University of Haifa in conjunction with the company Family TreeDNA, that was attempting to identify a characteristic haplotype among Jews with documented lineages going back to pre-expulsion Spain and to

track the migrations of those Jews after the expulsion in 1492. While the Institute is still awaiting a final scientific report of that study, a preliminary description of some of the results was published in AVOTAYNU in the summer of 2007 by Alain Farhi, creator of the remarkable Fleurs d’Orient site <<http://www.farhi.org/genealogy/index.html>> and a founding member of the Institute, who was responsible for our part in the project.<sup>9</sup>

• **Reconstituting Destroyed Communities.** In 2005, the Institute developed an ambitious project designed to recreate, in a virtual environment, the network of kinships that characterized European Jewish communities on the eve of the Shoah. A year later, Sallyann Sack volunteered to lead this project.<sup>10</sup> It rapidly became apparent that to achieve its objective, highly sophisticated software needed to be created for the merging of millions of discrete data from diverse and non-compatible sources. To that end, Sack assembled a world-class team of genealogists and computer scientists who, after more than a year’s work, have come to the conclusion that the technical challenge can be met; they are on their way to achieve their goal. Theirs is very much a work in progress.

• **Indexing the Jacobi Collection.** In mid-2006, Chanan Rapaport launched a project to index the names and reference the sources in the approximately 400 workbooks and family trees investigated by the eminent Jerusalem genealogist, Dr. Paul Jacobi (died 1997). The work on this potential gold mine of information for genealogists researching leading families, most of them rabbinical, from the broad region of “Ashkenaz” (Middle Europe) is complicated by Dr. Jacobi’s atrocious handwriting and the poor state of preservation of much of the material. Dr. Rapaport spent the bulk of last year tackling technical problems and training a team of readers to work with the material. To enhance legibility, much of the material was digitally reproduced in color.

• **Promulgating Standards for Genealogy.** Following the 2006 colloquium, Gary Mokotoff undertook a project to produce a standard for recording dates, places and names in a genealogical database. His approach was to strive for a general standard for entering genealogical data in order to demonstrate, among other things, that the Institute can contribute to the genealogical world at large. Mokotoff has developed the standard and is now showing it to selected members of the genealogical community for comments.

### Academic Committee

In the wake of the colloquium, the Institute set up an international Academic Committee of ten distinguished scholars from cities as far apart as Chicago, Leeds, Paris and Jerusalem. Professor Sergio DellaPergola, the renowned Jewish demographer at the Hebrew University, agreed to serve as chair, and Dr. Jeffrey Malka, a leading Sephardic genealogist living in Washington, DC, as deputy chair. The Committee’s first task was to assess research

proposals submitted in the framework of a competition which the Institute ran in the spring of 2007.

### Research Grants

With a view to maintaining high standards of academic excellence, the committee decided to award just two grants, for innovative studies of broad interest to Jewish genealogists, on:

- “The Ties that Bind: Jewish Kinship Networks and Modernization in Darbenai and Its Diaspora” now being conducted by Professor Eric Goldstein of Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. The research will involve the creation of a comprehensive genealogical database documenting the family ties of the Jews of the small town of Darbenai/Dorbyan in Lithuania between 1760 and 1941. It will seek to demonstrate how these ties influenced those who came to reside in the town, who stayed and who left, as well as determining occupations, status, power in communal affairs, and ways of meeting the disorienting challenges posed by modernization, industrialization and migration.

- “Strategies for the Integration of Genealogical Datasets,” being led by Professor H. Daniel Wagner of the Weizmann Institute, Israel,<sup>11</sup> with two co-researchers in Poland, Drs. K. Klauzinska (Jagiellonian University, Krakow) and J. Zajdel (Silesia University, Sosnowiec). Although the project ultimately will have general applications, at first it will focus on a well-defined issue—namely, the merging of metrical death data and cemetery records for the town of Zdunska Wola, Poland. To that end, algorithms will be developed for full data extraction from various genealogical/Jewish-oriented databases and for processing the data to merge separate datasets and progressively reconstruct family trees. [See Wagner’s report, this issue—Ed.]

### Academic Committee

In fall 2007, members of the Academic Committee conducted an in-depth discussion in an attempt to develop an overall design for the Institute’s research over the next two years. Although it did not prove possible to produce such a framework at this stage, the Committee did identify six areas for the Institute’s research which, in its view, should be given priority—namely, Jewish history from a genealogical perspective, rabbinical genealogy, onomastics, interdisciplinary aspects of Jewish genealogy, Jewish genealogy and computer sciences, sources and resources for Jewish genealogy. On March 1, 2008, the Institute issued a “Call for Research Projects” in these areas, with the offer of grants of up to \$10,000 for successful proposals. Successful candidates will be announced by July 31, 2008.

### Teaching

With the research program well under way, the Institute turned its attention last summer to its second major goal: teaching Jewish genealogy at the university level. Professor Aaron Demsky, the well-known expert in Jewish onomas-

tics, recently retired from Bar Ilan University, agreed to head a working group to consider the issue, which turns out to be far from simple.

As the Institute is not a teaching institution, the first question was how to interest and encourage universities with strong Jewish Studies programs to offer courses in Jewish genealogy. An alternative approach might be for the courses to be offered through the Internet, either by the Institute itself or by an institution of higher learning specializing in distance teaching and licensed to grant degrees.

The next question related to the level of the courses—with possible options ranging from a simple BA course and/or a BA major in Jewish genealogy, to an MA course within a Jewish Studies master’s program and/or a full, free-standing MA program, possibly leading to certification in Jewish genealogy as a career option. Complex questions arose concerning the structure of these courses and the material that should go into each of the options.

Finally, in the light of the answers to those questions and others, there was the issue of what the Institute should supply to enable the courses to get off the ground elsewhere. Again a range of possibilities existed, starting with little more than a syllabus and a course outline and ending with a complete package, consisting of textbooks, source books, bibliographies, tests and other teaching aids.

Professor Demsky consulted a number of experts and also brought into his working group faculty members from Israel and abroad with a variety of skills and backgrounds, including curriculum building. He also wrote a working paper touching on a number of the issues mentioned above, which members of the working group then discussed. His own recommendation was to strive for and produce a one-year MA course within a Jewish Studies program, that could serve as a base, either to be scaled down to an introductory course at the BA level (“Jewish Genealogy 101”) or, alternatively, to be scaled up gradually to a fully-developed MA program in Jewish genealogy as such. The prevailing view in the working group is that the MA course should initially be taught in the traditional way (lectures and seminars) rather than through the Internet, at one or two first-rate universities (perhaps one in Israel and one abroad) in the hope that it will resonate within the academic world and that other universities will wish to follow suit. The working group still has much to do, and it is evident that we are at least two, if not three, academic years away from the first experimental university course of studies at whatever level.

### Repository of Family Histories

Certain other things happened almost spontaneously over the past two years. Professor George Sackheim of Chicago, who has researched the Zack/Sack family for half a century, offered his papers to the Institute for safe-keeping. Similarly, Chava Agmon of Tel Aviv, who has investigated the Caro family for decades, has offered us her archive to be put at the disposal of other scholars. About 30 individuals

donated privately printed editions of their family histories to our modest library. The Institute very much welcomes other offerings of this kind.

### Other Factors

The Institute has made strides over the last two years and has something to show for itself. At the same time, it has experienced some disappointments. For example, we had expected, naively it seems, that as the Institute's work became known, academics with an interest in Jewish genealogy or even using genealogical methods as a matter of course in their research would step forward and seek to be associated with it. For whatever reason, this has not happened.

Additionally, we still have not found the way to cooperate with, and be of help to, Jewish family historians, either as individuals or through their national and local societies. At the outset, the Institute received a somewhat mixed reception. Beyond the sceptics (and they were many), there were the "territorialists," particularly certain Jewish organizations and institutions involved in genealogy in one form or another, who evidently worried that the Institute would intrude onto their turf. These attitudes and apprehensions, I believe, are changing, but by and large we still must open channels of communication in various directions to become an integral part of what I have called the infrastructure of the Jewish genealogical world and a contributing force within it.

On quite a different plane, we have found fund-raising very tough going. We have been fortunate in finding donors whose names are posted on our website, who together provided the Institute with enough funds for it to function for three academic years (until the summer of 2009), but we now must strengthen and stabilize our funding in order to guarantee the Institute's ongoing activity.

That said, the Institute is looking confidently to the future. Our aims for the next two-year period can be summarized as follows:

- To expand and diversify our research program
- To hold another international colloquium on a central issue, possibly over New Year's 2009
- To launch a scholarly series of occasional papers or a peer reviewed journal of Jewish genealogy
- To help bring about the teaching of Jewish genealogy at university level
- To raise the Institute's profile in the academic world and draw more scholars into the family history sphere
- To develop strategic partnerships with certain relevant organizations and frameworks
- To find ways to cooperate effectively with Jewish genealogical societies and their memberships at various levels.

Hopefully, all this activity will bring us closer to our ultimate goal of making Jewish genealogy a recognized academic discipline—well before the coming of the Messiah!

### Notes

1. For references in these columns, see, for example, Lawrence Tapper, "Call to Arms," AVOTAYNU, Vol XI, No. 1 (Spring 1995), 3–5; Boris Feldblyum, "Jewish Treasures in the Former Soviet Union," AVOTAYNU, Vol XI, No. 2 (Summer 1995), 7–8; and Sallyann Amdur Sack, "Jewish Genealogy on the Eve of the 21st Century," AVOTAYNU, Vol. XIII, No. 3 (Fall 1997), 3–7. Private proposals are known to have been circulated separately in the late 1990s by Chanan Rapaport and Meir Wunder, both of Jerusalem. Others may also have been floated elsewhere.

2. Gary Mokotoff and Sallyann Amdur Sack, "The Next Step: Jewish Genealogy Goes Academic," AVOTAYNU, Vol. XX, No. 3 (Fall 2004), 3–4, where the names of all the original founders are also given.

3. Neville Lamdan, "International Institute for Jewish Genealogy Opens Its Doors," AVOTAYNU, Vol. XXI, No. 4 (Winter 2005), 3–5.

4. For the full shopping list of tasks, in the form of a Mission Statement, see Lamdan, loc. cit, p. 5.

5. *Ibid.*

6. For an exposition of the "Challenge Before Us," see my paper on the Institute's website <[www.iiig.org](http://www.iiig.org)> under Events/Symposium/electronic link at bottom to "Selection of Papers."

7. For a description of the event, see Claire Bruell, "International Institute of Jewish Genealogy Holds Symposium in Jerusalem," AVOTAYNU, Vol. XXII, No. 3 (Fall 2006), 3–4.

8. See Thomas W. Jones, "International Institute: A Breakthrough for Academic Genealogy?" *Association of Professional Genealogists Quarterly*, xxii, 1 (March 2007), 41–44. An abridged version of Prof. Jones's presentation at the colloquium was published under the title "Postsecondary Study of Genealogy: Curriculum and Its Contexts" in AVOTAYNU, Vol. XXIII, No. 3 (Fall 2007), 17–22.

9. Alain Farhi, "Preliminary Results of Sephardic DNA Testing," AVOTAYNU, Vol. XXIII, No. 2 (Summer 2007), 9–12.

10. For an early description of the project, see Sallyann Amdur Sack, "Reconstituting the Destroyed Communities of Europe," AVOTAYNU, Vol. XXII, No. 2 (Summer 2006), 7–9.

11. For Prof. Wagner's views on genealogy and the exact sciences, see H. Daniel Wagner, "Genealogy as an Academic Discipline," AVOTAYNU, Vol. XXII, No. 1 (Spring 2006), 3–11.

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