

International Institute of Jewish Genealogy Holds Symposium in Jerusalem

by Claire Bruell

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A two-day joint symposium was held September 10–12, 2006, by the IJG and the Centre for Migration and Genealogy in the Isaac and Jessie Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research at the University of Cape Town. The venue was Beit Belgia, at the Givat Ram campus of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. The purpose of the symposium was to examine the current state of Jewish genealogy study and to establish the way ahead for the Institute.

The symposium was intended to be action-oriented—to develop research policies and directions for the Institute over the next two to three years and, within that, to produce, in a prioritized order, a list of recommended research topics in each area under discussion. On the teaching side, it sought to elaborate the necessary elements for university courses in Jewish genealogy as well as the tools and technological aids required for the teaching of those courses.

The speakers comprised an international group of academics and genealogists eminent in their fields, and attendance at the symposium was by invitation only. Gary Mokotoff, principal of Avotaynu, the publisher of many books on Jewish Genealogy, began his presentation by saying that the conference would be remembered “as the day genealogy emerged from a hobby to an academic pursuit.” Topics discussed included research priorities in the Ashkenazic and Sephardic realms, rabbinics, onomastics (the origin and history of names), genetics and medical issues, humanities and the exact sciences, migration studies and how information technology can be involved across all of these.

Neville Lamdan, Institute director and former Israeli ambassador to the Holy See, raised the question of how to teach genealogy. He stated that the greater challenge is gaining recognition of Jewish genealogy as a distinct field in Jewish studies and as an equal academic partner rather than as a mere hobby. At present, there are more than 60 universities with strong Jewish studies programs, but not one teaches genealogy.

The history of a Jewish family at an intimate level can be extended to communities and then to the whole fabric of Jewish social history. Genealogy can now move from the “micro” model, studying a particular family, to the “macro,” studying multiple families and then applying the knowledge gained to draw conclusions about groups of people in particular times and places. If we extrapolate the study of individual families, we can find shifts and patterns in populations and then examine possible reasons for these.

For instance, in 1791, the Jewish population of Odessa was five. By 1897, Odessa had the largest population of Jews in the Pale of Settlement. Most had come from Belarus or White Russia. On further study, it can be shown that the mass emigration of Jews from Eastern Europe was preceded by the increased aggression of the Russian Empire. In another example, we can see that in Eastern Europe there were two cases of cholera in 1831. In 1865, thousands of Jews perished from Odessa to the north. This is evidenced in many local sources, and it is obvious to see how the plague influenced the Jewish demographics.

Thomas W. Jones, past president of the Board for Certification of Genealogists and a teacher at Samford Institute of Genealogy and Historical Research in Alabama, spoke on issues relating to curriculum and professional development. He reported that Brigham Young University in Salt Lake City is currently the only university that offers a degree in genealogy, and genealogy is now emerging as an academic discipline.

Jones stated that today most genealogists are unschooled, genealogy is unregulated, credentials are voluntary, standards are optional, anyone can claim to be a genealogist and expertise is discretionary. For most genealogical research, searches are haphazard, errors abound, publications are substandard by academic standards, documentation is incomplete or unknown, conclusions are premature or unduly tentative, traceable ancestors are believed to be unfindable and shortcomings are unrecognized. He stated that to have an academic curriculum requires a rigorous discipline, scholarly journals, a corpus of knowledge, credentialing programs, honor societies, professional associations, codes of ethics and libraries devoted to the subject. Can genealogy fit into the mold of academia? Jones said “yes.” It is closely aligned to the social sciences and has elements of both academic and professional paradigms.

Yoav Yair described the activities of the Open University of Israel, an accredited Internet-oriented institution. He implied that a genealogy curriculum would fit well in the institution's philosophy which focuses on distance teaching and the self-study method which permits students to operate at their own pace. Students may study a single course, a battery of courses, or pursue a full program of study toward a bachelor's degree. Enrollment does not require matriculation or any other certificate from another educational institution. The method is not space- or time-dependent, as it is not based on a central campus where lecturers and students gather or on an established and uniform schedule.

AVOTAYNU editor Sallyann Sack, who is president of IIJG, spoke about some initial projects to be undertaken by the Institute. One of these is known as the Project to Reconstitute the Destroyed Communities of Europe. Until now, Holocaust memorialization projects have focused mainly on the retrieval of the names of Shoah victims. These efforts have culminated in Yad Vashem's three-million-name database. The Institute proposes to mobilize genealogical science and skills to recreate destroyed Jewish communities throughout Europe, primarily by reconstructing the webs of kinship that bound the victims to others living in their community (and beyond) on the eve of the Holocaust. Family trees will be developed for the victims using new technology that merges genealogical information from several extensive databases now available on the web and elsewhere. An exploratory study is underway on three selected communities to test the feasibility of the project design. The three communities are Pusalotas, Lithuania; Ostrow Mazowiecka, Poland; and Zdunska Wola, Poland. Dr Sack is director of the Project.

The importance of this symposium lies in that this is the first time a complete program has been devoted to discussing the study of Jewish genealogy as a whole and the elevation of such study to the tertiary level. The practical implications of this and the prioritizing of research projects are practical steps on the way to achieving the goal. Genealogists are hybrids who must integrate knowledge over many fields—oral history, economic history, intellectual and military history. It connects to social disciplines and humanities as well as to exact and medical sciences. Genealogy is “multi-disciplinary, inter-disciplinary and cross-cultural.”

Claire Bruell is the AVOTAYNU contributing editor for New Zealand and wrote the chapter on New Zealand for the Avotaynu Guide to Jewish Genealogy. Bruell also has been involved in a project to interview Holocaust survivors in Auckland where she lives and is an active member of a Second Generation group in that city. She contributed a chapter to Mixed Blessings: New Zealand Children of Holocaust Survivors Remember, published by Tandem Press in 2003.