

# Strong Canadian showing at Israeli genealogy meeting

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SPECIAL TO THE CJN, JERUSALEM

Hundreds of Jews from more than 25 countries around the globe gathered in Jerusalem earlier this month for the first international conference on Jewish genealogy to take place in Israel in more than a decade.

With some 900 delegates in attendance, the 35th International Conference on Jewish Genealogy featured hundreds of talks, workshops, special-interest-group gatherings, birds-of-a-feather meetings, family reunions and excursions to Yad Vashem, the Central Archives of the History of the Jewish People and other institutions over the course of five days from July 6 to 10.

Topics included resources in scores of countries across the Jewish Diaspora from Belarus to Zimbabwe, as well as more generic discussions of DNA research, writing family histories, Jewish surnames, the history of Yiddish, and dozens of other subjects.

Former Chief Rabbi Israel Meir Lau, who gave the keynote address, told the assembly that the Mishnah tells us to “know where you came from, and where you’re heading and to whom you will have to be accountable... It is the duty of every one of us to know our roots.”

Other headliners included Randol Schoenberg, the L.A.-based specialist in the recovery of looted Holocaust art whose success with Gustav Klimt’s *Woman in Gold* painting was depicted in the recent film of the same name, and Gilad Japhet, Israeli founder of the hugely successful My Heritage family history website, which was a two-person startup when the conference was last in Israel in 2004 and now



**As many as 30 Canadians attended the IAJGS Conference on Jewish Genealogy in Jerusalem in July, including these attendees of the Canada Birds of a Feather meeting.**

employs some 210 people, boasts 80 million registered members worldwide, and was the leading sponsor of the current conference.

“We’re simply delighted by the outstanding number of international participants,” said conference chair Michael Goldstein, an ex-president of the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies (IAJGS), which organized the gathering.

A former Montrealer who made aliyah in 1989, Goldstein told *The CJN* that members of the organizing committee were somewhat nervous last summer when registration opened amid the tumult of the Israel-Gaza conflict.

But instead of the worst-case scenarios that were being envisioned, Jewish genealogists turned out in droves, Goldstein said. Israelis comprised about 40 per cent of the attendees, with another 35 to 40 per cent from North America, and the

remaining 20 per cent from Europe and the rest of the world. There were about 20 delegates from Australia, he said, and representation was also good from the United States, Canada, England, France, Belgium, Africa and New Zealand.

Goldstein expressed amazement at the high number of Canadians and Canadian ex-pats at the conference – perhaps as many as 30 – which he said exceeded the number at last year’s gathering in Salt Lake City and the 2013 conference in Boston.

The Canadians included Montrealer Stanley Diamond, founder of the award-winning website JRI Poland (Jewish Records Indexing Poland), whose team of more than 200 volunteers and paid transcribers have indexed some 5.5 million 19th- and 20th-century records from about 550 towns across Poland. Diamond gave a talk to a capacity crowd in a large hall on the first day of the conference.

Toronto-born Stephen Glazer, who has been living in Israel for 36 years, is involved in a project called Giving A Face to the Fallen, which is trying to learn more about 660 servicemen about whom little is known beyond the fact that they gave their lives in defence of the nascent Jewish state. “These people deserve some attention,” he said. “Who were they, where did they come from? Unlike the rest of the soldiers in the military cemeteries, we know very little about them. Nothing appears on their tombstones.”

Pnina Zilberman, former director of the Toronto Holocaust Museum and now a resident of Israel, gave a talk about the town of Sighet in the Transylvanian region of Romania. Earlier this year, Zilberman staged the second Holocaust memorial in Sighet for about 150 people, most of whom trace their roots back to the town.

Ex-pat Paul King lives in Jerusalem, where he has been compiling a biography of his great-grandfather, the notable 19th-century businessman Charles King of Whitby, Ont., as well as of Edmund Scheurer, the famed pillar of Toronto’s Holy Blossom Temple and pioneer of Reform Judaism in Canada.

Other Canadians in attendance included Lorne Hanick, ritual director of Toronto’s Beth Tzedec Congregation; Ala Gamulka, a Torontonian who gave a talk on her Bessarabian research; Les Kelman, president of the Jewish Genealogical Society of Toronto; Rolf Lederer, a former president of the Toronto society who has attended about 30 previous conferences; and the present writer, who was president of the Toronto society when it hosted the international conference in 1993. ■