

TRANSFORMATION OF GENEALOGY AS AN ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE: THE CASE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF HRADEC KRÁLOVÉ

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Abstract: The author shares her personal, almost a quarter of a century long, experience with genealogy and its teaching at the universities. As a student, she experienced “the standard courses” where genealogy was given only a minimal space. She encountered a very similar situation after becoming a university teacher at another university. After few years of “standard” teaching, she started to try to change the perception of genealogy as a kind of “leisure-time discipline”. And finally, during the last five years, she has begun to turn her ideals into reality in the role of a guarantor of the Bachelor’s degree study program of Historical Sciences at the Philosophical Faculty of the University of Hradec Králové. She explains why – from her point of view – genealogy used to be marginalized as an academic discipline and what the consequences have been. The text is not a lament over the dismal situation, but it tries to offer new perspectives for the development of genealogy as an academic discipline and to present one of the possible approaches how to implement such a transformation, using the example of the University of Hradec Králové. She and her colleagues no longer understand genealogy as a peripheral discipline, but as one of the essential historical sciences. Students are supported in their own research, and the knowledge of genealogy use teachers in other subjects. They also see a future in the development of genetic genealogy and other interdisciplinary attitudes. The purpose of this paper is to initiate a broad discussion about the possible forms of teaching genealogy and about its benefits and pitfalls in the 21st century.

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Genealogy as an academic discipline is virtually non-existent.^[1] This is what the participants of the “genealogic panel” agreed on at the Congress of Czech Historians which took place in Ústí nad Labem in September 2022. During the panel

[1] The study is the result of a specific research project No. 2122/2023 called *Where are you from and where are you going, man? Transformation of genealogy at the beginning of the 21st century*, carried out at the Philosophical Faculty of the University of Hradec Králové.

discussion – which drew more attention than expected by the organizers – presentations and ideas were heard from archivists, historians, academics as well as professional genealogists. The mere fact that genealogy is an auxiliary historical discipline, taught at universities, but at the same time a favorite hobby of the general public, incites debate. Therefore, archivists reflected on their professional experience with those interested in genealogical research, who, from their point of view, are usually not sufficiently equipped for such research. Many researchers cannot deal with paleographic problems or foreign languages, and even history students do not have a good methodological background. The wide range of opinions of historians, many of whom teach at universities, is difficult to describe and present easily. While some support the development of genealogy at universities and include it in their teaching, others see it as superfluous. In the end, the individual perspective often depends on one's field of study. Professional genealogists themselves are often graduates of historical disciplines, and that is why they have a first-hand experience with the teaching in the field.

I went through genealogy classes at one of the universities myself, and although it was more than twenty years ago, I still remember how minimalist, formal, and ultimately insufficient they were. After starting my teaching career at another university, I found out that the situation is actually not much better elsewhere. The reality of education in genealogy both clashed with my ideas about how useful it could be in historical research, and contrasted with the ever-growing demand for teaching genealogy, too, a trend that was reflective of the discipline's popularity among the general public. Today, I am a teacher with fifteen years of experience. In addition, I am a guarantor of the Bachelor's degree study program "Historical Sciences", I have participated in the development of the structure of the program. Implementation of changes is slow and gradual. Many of my colleagues still take a conservative approach, yet especially together with younger colleagues, I have an opportunity to push for the implementation of important changes.

In the following pages, I will share my own experience how teaching of genealogy has been transformed in recent years and what lies behind a certain mistrust towards its level of expertise. Finally, I will introduce possible approaches to how to develop and fructify genealogy within the education of future historians and archivists and demonstrate it using the example of the University of Hradec Králové, where I work.

Genealogy naturally is part of curricula of historical sciences study programs, especially of archival science. It is necessary to distinguish between individual study programs and their focus. As part of their studies, students of history or teaching candidates usually get to know auxiliary historical sciences only in an overview. For students of archival science and auxiliary historical sciences, in-depth study is expected.

Since the 1990s, the historical science curriculum usually includes a course on the auxiliary sciences of history in which genealogy is also mentioned. For

students of the archival science and auxiliary historical sciences genealogy regularly forms part of the teaching together with related disciplines of heraldry and sphragistics. It usually belonged and still belongs among compulsory courses (Ryantová, 2011).

The basic teaching materials used are relevant chapters from the comprehensive publication *Vademecum pomocných věd historických* [The Auxiliary Sciences of History VadeMecum] written by Ivan Hlaváček (Hlaváček – Kašpar – Nový, 2002: 141–153); archivists use the compendium *Základy heraldiky, sfragistiky a genealogie* [The Basics of Heraldry, Sphragistics, and Genealogy] by Jarmila and Tomáš Krejčík (Krejčíková – Krejčík, 1987: 199–227; the chapter on genealogy, contains a basic overview of genealogic research in Europe). Students thus have the opportunity to get acquainted with this discipline. However, the issue is the importance given to genealogy in this type of teaching. The approach promoted by the German-language historiography, which is prevalent in the Czech Republic, understands the auxiliary sciences of history as a discipline focused mainly on analyses of written documents of official nature. This is the reason why diplomatics and paleography have remained in the center of attention of the auxiliary historical sciences ever since they were established as an independent study field (Sekyrková, 2018: 18–20).^[2] Other disciplines of the auxiliary sciences of history get more or less attention, depending on the professional focus of educators teaching at a given institution.

In practice, the teaching of genealogy – as I also had the opportunity to experience – was contracted and somewhere is still being contracted into a few teaching blocks of varying lengths.^[3] The students received a definition of the discipline; they got acquainted with basic terms, graphic symbols used in graphic depictions of family successions, and received a basic overview of genealogic sources and an equally brief overview of the existing genealogic research from the Middle Ages to the present. State final examinations have included genealogy in a similarly minimalistic form. It thus comes as no surprise that genealogy taught in this way has left minimal traces in most students. According to Václav Černý, the cause is “the negative perception of genealogy among the experts who do not see it as an independent science with its specific methods and terminology” (Černý, 2018: 154).

[2] This approach is also mirrored in modern German textbook of *The Basics of Auxiliary Sciences of History*. This book has the total of 250 pages, out of which around four fifths are dedicated to diplomatics, palaeography and source studies, whereas to genealogy it is only one and half pages (Rohr, 2015: 254–255).

[3] According to the publicly available parts of the study systems of individual universities, one can get a general idea of the present form of genealogy teaching and its slow transformation.

By contrast, *lay* or *practical* genealogy, also known as family history,^[4] is becoming a popular discipline among the broad public. Since the middle of the 90s, numerous books intended for lay genealogists were published within the *vademecum genealoga* series under the auspices of the Czech Genealogy and Heraldry Society, including basic explanations of this issue (Lutonský – Melichar, 1999; Lutonský et al., 1999), foreign language dictionaries (Lutonský – Černý, 1995; Mareš, 1996; Kasalický – Lutonský, 1997) or a paleographic reading-book (Collective, 1998). A series of other –to varying degrees successful – handbooks and manuals followed.^[5] However, these publications did not resonate in the expert circles. Possibly because seen from the perspective of the historians, their authors were mostly nonprofessionals, just as the readers for whom they were intended. I am of the opinion that it was in this period when deep ditches between the *scientific* and *practical* genealogy – that is between genealogy as a field of science and family history as a free-time activity – came to exist.

People eager to get to know their past started to visit archives on a mass scale and demand access to various registers, land books, chronicles, and other materials. As a result, occupancy of study rooms in archives has grown, but this interest has also significantly contributed to digitalization of these sources. Nowadays, many regional archives operate e-study rooms in which researchers can comfortably study at least registers – i.e. the basic genealogy sources – on-line from one's home. The problem lies in the fact that despite the availability of manuals with instructions, many people were helpless when it came to reading and interpreting the documents.

At the same time, the market reacted to the increased demand and came with its own offer.^[6] Part of the researchers, joined by some university graduates in historical disciplines, started to be professionally active in the area of family history. However, universities did not seem to be affected by this public interest and did not feel obliged to react to the situation.

The current result is that the family history is nowadays conducted as a gathering of data that are compiled into requested family successions, mostly into an *ahnentafel* (ancestor table) and less frequently into a tree chart or a pedigree chart. Yet the clients as well as many researchers lack the knowledge of historical

[4] The term family history is used for exploration of one's own ancestors usually done by the lay public. Within the text, terms "lay" or "practical" genealogy are used as synonyms for the term family history, in order to – with a slight exaggeration – stress the difference between mere collection and alignment of data without further ambition to interpret them and genealogy as an independent discipline based on elaborated theoretical foundations that uses its own methods and terminology. (Which is non-existent, though, according to many.)

[5] Their list, together with a brief evaluation, is offered by (Černý, 2018: 154).

[6] Comp. with the description of the situation in Slovakia, which corresponds to the situation in the Czech Republic (Nagy – Ragač, 2010: 190–194).

context and the ability to evaluate the given source correctly, namely its relevance, purpose of its creation as well as its actual content. This holds true also for researchers from among trained historians. This is possibly the reason why university professors participating in the genealogic panel at the Congress of Czech Historians in Ústí nad Labem were confronted with embitterment from the archivists who are at the frontline of the current interest in genealogy.

This embitterment and displeasure of professionals actually stems from the presumed vulgarization of genealogy that materializes itself in the form of family history. Both Ivan Hlaváček and Václav Černý as representatives of the educated professionals point to the – according to them essential – gap between scientific and lay genealogy. Hlaváček observes: “genealogy reconstructs hidden family ties and relations without any particular *public demand*; it puts emphasis on its long-term trend and ensures more general aspects of course” (Hlaváček, 2002: 142). V. Černý, influenced by Hlaváček’s approach, also recommends to strictly differentiate between genealogy and family history (Černý, 2018: 153–154). Yet at the same time, Hlaváček is aware that genealogy – which has so far focused only on the study of social elites and their family ties and relations – has reached an impasse. In order to get out of this hostile place, he correctly suggests focusing the research on broad groups of population where genealogy can be linked with demography, historical statistics or social history (Hlaváček, 2002: 141). I am of the opinion that this thinking actually constitutes the nub of the problem as well as its solution.

What I have observed over the last five years is that students who currently come to study historical disciplines – in our case especially the auxiliary sciences of history and archival science – frequently show enormous interest in genealogy. It is prevalent among the students of combined (part-time) studies, since it is often the main reason why they have applied in the first place. Yet it resonates among the full-time students as well, who are usually fresh from high schools (Pajtinka, 2010: 206–207). Genealogy offers us, the teachers, an opportunity to open up a way to complex understanding of history for the students of historical disciplines. Genealogy constitutes a discipline which educators can use for educational aims in relation to other sciences of history, as well as an intersection at which various methods of historical work and historical (and other) disciplines meet.

The key to this new approach is a story and its narration (Iggers, 2002: 91–92). Stories of other people and their interpretation through narration can be done only if we first look at our own story and understand it. Within the classical approach to the teaching of auxiliary sciences of history, a mere thought of subjective elements may cause great resentment. The auxiliary sciences of history remain in the comforting arms of *von Ranke’s approach* with an ambition to reveal the past events as they really happened without any value judgements (Iggers, 2002: 29–31). The standard within the field is still the positivist approach based on thorough excerption of sources, collection of data and description that *de facto*

excludes any subjectivity.^[7] This is where the roots of the strict differentiation between lay – i.e. non-scientific – family history and professional genealogy lie, yet it has brought the discipline on the verge of actual non-existence.

An important and welcome reflection is offered to the praised objective approach by oral history, which has established itself in the Czech environment in the past twenty years and is a very sought-after field of study among young people nowadays. Within genealogy, oral history fulfills the function of an important method for getting data, the main criteria for the selection of narrators being their family ties (based on blood or relationships) to the initial studied individual or married couple (Vaněk – Mücke, 2022: 22–24). It shows to genealogy that it cannot stagnate in discovering new methods if it wants to find its place among (not only) the auxiliary scientific disciplines again (Nodl, 2007: 173).

A similar challenge to genealogy currently presents the genetic genealogy. It has the same aims as the *traditional* genealogy, yet it uses methods and findings from genetics and molecular biology. Genetic genealogy has its limits; it cannot replace the traditional genealogy nor wants to replace it, but rather to supplement it (Henning, 2005: 99–100). It constitutes an attractive motivational element for the young generation of students of historical disciplines enthusiastic about the development of technologies (Vaněk, 2016: 16, 24–26).^[8] This is also where the transformation of genealogy resides in. The science of statistics that used to be passed on in a virtually unchanged form for many years is transforming into a dynamic discipline with unpredictable future. The connection of genetic and *traditional* genealogy gives an interdisciplinary status to this science and thus also the opportunity to emphasize its social benefit to the public via its connection to the currently adored natural sciences.

Teaching of Genealogy at Universities, the Case of the University of Hradec Králové

The National Accreditation Bureau for Higher Education, established on September 1, 2016, assesses, approves and grants accreditation for the teaching of individual study programs. It has replaced the former Accreditation Commission, which was operating until then.^[9] In the first years of the Bureau's activity, individual higher education institutions reaccredited their study programs, to a large extent because of an expiring validity of the existing accreditations, or because

[7] Subjectivity does not necessarily mean neglecting subjectively conceived sources such as ego-documents, but the way of working with them to which students have been guided so far.

[8] At the University of Hradec Králové, we have a talented student, Pavel Anděl, who has decided to devote his research to genetic genealogy. He is the first one so far, but for sure not the last one.

[9] For further information, see: <https://www.nauvs.cz/index.php/en/> (September 6, 2023).

they tried to obtain the so-called *institutional accreditation* for a certain field of education.^[10]

Within the framework of the newly prepared or more significantly modified study programs of Historical Sciences and Archival Studies, genealogy is starting to gain a more prominent place in recent years. The change in attitude cannot be attributed only to the “sudden insight” of teachers and guarantors. It is rather a reflection of the above-mentioned growing interest of the public in the creation of family trees, when many students have already started their studies having their own experience in this area. This can be the motivation for changing study curricula and the previously underestimated discipline could be included in them. This significantly increases the attractiveness of these study programs.

The specific form of teaching genealogy also depends on the professional orientation of the teachers. Some of them have decided to apply a more progressive approach. This is the case of the Masaryk University or University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice. At the Masaryk University, they offer a subject that contextually cultivates the well-known compilation of a family tree.^[11] At the University in České Budějovice, they have created a new course focused on a specific type of sources with which genealogists often come into contact, the so called ego-documents, and teach students how to use them as a very important type of genealogical sources.^[12] By contrast, some universities maintain a traditional conservative approach. This is the case of the University of Pardubice^[13] or Charles University in Prague.^[14] The way of partial innovations was chosen by

[10] This institutional accreditation enables the university to accredit individual study programs in an approved field of education based on an internal process. Institutions that have received an institutional accreditation do not have to turn to the National Accreditation Bureau (NAB); NAB “only” supervises the setting of the internal environment of the given institution, its quality and stability.

[11] At the Masaryk University, it is a course called *Creating family trees in practice*, which has been taught there since 2013. For more detailed information, see <https://is.muni.cz/predmet/phil/jaro2024/AR1B65> (September 6, 2023) (also including information about older versions of the course). They continue to teach “standard” courses with standard content as well.

[12] At the University of South Bohemia, students have the widest offer of different subjects concerning at least partially genealogy, moreover at different levels. For more detailed information, see <https://wstag.jcu.cz/portal/studium/prohlizeni.html?> (September 6, 2023).

[13] They teach two courses concerning genealogy, the *Heraldry and Genealogy* course and the *Heraldry, Sphragistics and Genealogy* course. For more detailed information, see the study system of the University of Pardubice. <https://portal.upce.cz/portal/studium/prohlizeni.html> (September 6, 2023).

[14] For more details, see <https://www.ff.cuni.cz/studium/studijni-obory-plany/studijni-plany/> (September 6, 2023).

the Palacký University in Olomouc.^[15] Lectures of genealogy are also available for students of the Jan Evangelista Purkyně University in Ústí nad Labem.^[16]

At the Philosophical Faculty of the University of Hradec Králové, genealogy has been included – in line with the classical scheme – in the subject *Basics of the auxiliary sciences of history 2*, together with heraldry and other disciplines of auxiliary sciences; it happened within the creation of the study program of historical sciences, which was accredited in 2018, already according to the new rules. Future historians and archivists attend this subject together.^[17] In addition to the aforementioned standard theoretical content (it means definition of the discipline, basic terms, graphic symbols used in graphic depictions of family successions, and basic overview of genealogic sources and an equally brief overview of the existing genealogic research from the Middle Ages to the present), they also have to complete practical tasks. They have to compile their own lineage (usually in the form of a tree chart) with an instruction to attempt to map their ancestors in the direct line of descent up to the fourth or fifth generation, i.e. approximately to the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. During their first year of studies, the students also attend other basic subjects from historian's portfolio – historical proseminar, paleography, the basics of Latin and German, the basics of archival science, and other subjects from the auxiliary sciences of history. The task from genealogy gives them the opportunity to naturally practice all of the above-mentioned. Moreover, it is becoming apparent that processing at least a segment from their own past leads them to thinking about history, its interpretation, and its importance for contemporary people.

In the subsequent years of their Bachelor studies, the students have the opportunity to take a facultative seminar focused solely on genealogy. Virtually all of them use this opportunity. The axis of the course is again *practical* genealogy – family history, this time in the form of a detailed elaboration of their own family succession to the oldest point evidenced by sources. Contrary to family histories done by amateurs, in this case the lecturer pays attention to methodological guidance and historiographic context. The risk of entanglement in undesirable subjectivism is counterbalanced with training in methods of philological criticism in *von Ranke's*

[15] Genealogy is being taught there together with epigraphy. Sepulchral monuments are supposed to be the link between the two disciplines. For further information, see <https://stag.upol.cz/portal/studium/prohlizeni.html> (September 6, 2023).

[16] Genealogy in Ústí nad Labem can be studied by students of the archival specialization as part of the follow-up Master's programme in Historical Sciences. For more details, see <https://portal.ujep.cz/portal/studium/prohlizeni.html> (September 6, 2023).

[17] Bachelor studies in historical sciences are carried out at the Philosophical Faculty of the University of Hradec Králové within the study program of Historical Sciences with two specializations, History and Archival Science plus Auxiliary Historical Sciences. The first year of study is common for both specializations; students profile themselves in the chosen specialization in the second and third years only.

style and with general emphasis on a criticism of sources (Iggers, 2002: 29). The course gives higher importance to methodology and context than to particular data, since without the context and further processing these data are meaningful only for a given student. This is where the students encounter procedures of oral history both in theory and in practice for the first time. They also learn about genetic genealogy, and some of them get tested and attempt to interpret the results. An integral part of the seminar is the correlation of genealogy with other disciplines studying the human past or one's functioning within a society, be it in any respect. The standard approach of auxiliary historical sciences stresses the link with heraldry and sphragistics, which is insufficient nowadays. We accentuate the connection with prosopography that studies all people living in a delineated space and time and constituting a community, while also focusing on their family relationships and social-political consequences of these relationships (Nodl, 2007: 173–181, especially pp. 175–176). Researchers have been aware of this bidirectional connection for a longer time, but now it should also become a reality in teaching (Szymański, 2001: 89–90). Equally indisputable are the links between historical demography and genealogy, which have not yet resonated that much in the Czech environment (Černý, 2018: 157–159). One of the principal elements of genealogical research is the mapping and changes of personal names used in a given lineage or family. Using anthroponomastics, names can be perceived as a consequence of family history, cultural heritage, a particular social situation, etc. (Szymański, 2001: 81–88). Considering historiographic approaches, genealogy has the most “contact points” with microhistory (Nodl, 2007: 203–216), history of everyday life, history of mentalities, historical anthropology, regional history, and historical statistics.

By applying these approaches, family history steps out of the criticized public demand and becomes genealogy, an independent discipline and a rightful member of historical sciences. The connection of genealogy with genetics has (not)surprisingly also revealed a broader interdisciplinary dimension of genealogy. There is a possibility of genealogy cooperating with psychology, psychotherapeutic theory and practice (Henning, 2005: 93), and sociology. The choice of particular methods and approaches depends on primary genealogical findings.

Genealogy also offers us the opportunity to be concerned with the ethics of science, moreover in a field that seems by definition harmless. Proving of one's noble origin according to required criteria (the so-called *průba*, which means *a kind of examination*^[18] in older language) as a prerequisite for getting a certain office or rank does not – from today's perspective – appear problematic. A stain on the face of genealogy is its abuse by the Nazi ideology.^[19] Searching for one's

[18] A special type of ancestor table (Ahnentafel), especially for those of noble birth, compulsory for entering certain offices.

[19] This is the reason why the post-WWII interest in genealogy was revived only in the beginning of the 1970s in Germany, which is little later than for instance in Belgium, France, or the

ancestors and submitting evidence of family origin in order to attain a suspicious racial purity of the society should be a memento even today when the possibilities of genetic genealogy are only emerging and start to be revealed.^[20]

Upon finishing the courses taught in the above-described form, students want to write Bachelor theses on genealogic topics. In Hradec Králové, they can do so. These theses show whether we have managed to fulfill the educational aims and use family history as an opportunity to engage young aspirants in historical thinking, or not. In the future, we can consider making this a part of curriculum of the subsequent Master's degree studies, in this case already in the form focusing on interpretation and use of interdisciplinary cooperation. As an example of good practice for the upcoming times, I can mention a dissertation that connects genealogy with (not only) historical demography and maps families of yeomen in Moravia.^[21]

We regularly evaluate the approach we took five years ago, which was initially at least partly a response to students' interest. Five years on, we are now organizing a range of extra-curricular activities in addition to the lectures and seminars, such as tutorials with expert lectures, discussions and workshops where students can present their research results and get feedback to other students. We have several mini research teams, made up of teachers and students that tackle small regional projects focusing on topics such as the recent past of some of the communities in our region. They use the knowledge of genealogy. Personally, I consider the greatest contribution of our approach, that we have been able to present genealogy as an attractive discipline, an important part of the study of history, a science that makes sense even at the time of the development of modern technologies at the beginning of the 21st century.

The discussion, which the panelists and expert public have opened up at the Congress of Czech Historians in Ústí nad Labem, is very important. Yet we cannot only discuss. It is necessary to act as well. It means to actively include genealogy courses and to link the teaching of genealogy with other auxiliary historical disciplines and with the teaching of history, and to try to redefine the content and tasks of genealogy in the 21st century even when being aware that some of these attempts may turn out to be dead ends in the future. As I have attempted

USA. Two generations were needed to overcome the trauma caused by the abuse of this science (Henning, 2005: 90–92).

^[20] As Eckart Henning implies in his text, we are treading on thin ice in connection with the using of genetic genealogy and with modern methods of conceiving a child via in vitro fertilization, often using donated genetic material, and future development is hard to assess. All these aspects constitute a challenge for genealogy, namely if and how to redefine family ties that have been firmly based on a bond by blood or marriage (Henning, 2005: 101–102).

^[21] Since the 2022/2023 academic year, this topic is dealt with by Mgr. Markéta Burešová. The author of this article is the supervisor.

to outline above, in recent years, the perception and position of genealogy as an academic discipline, even under the pressure of enormous public interest, is gradually changing. Genealogy as a historical discipline has much to recommend and it deserves to be perceived as such by the broader academic community. However, the fruits of the new approach will be evident in the professional work and private or commercial activities of the graduates only in a few years. Perhaps the following Congress of Historians – which will very likely take place in České Budějovice in 2027 – will provide us with a valuable reflection in this direction.

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