

Reflections on my ancestral background

Edward Gelles

Introduction

I am writing this essay in my 90th year, and while I am not ready to write about my own life's *What* and *Why* the time may have come to summarise what I know about the *When, How, Where* and *Who* of my ancestral background.

My father was David Itzig Gelles, *Dr. Juris* of Vienna University and advocate in that city, and my mother was Regina Griffel. I came to England with my parents in 1938 and we were naturalised as British subjects in 1948. My childhood schooling in Vienna impressed upon me some of our ancient Jewish traditions and the debt our European culture owes to ancient Greece and Rome. My English education took me to the City of Oxford High School, Haberdashers Aske's School in Hampstead, and Balliol College Oxford, where I was a Brackenbury Scholar, and obtained my M.A. and D.Phil. degrees in 1951. I was a research fellow and lecturer in physical chemistry at several universities. Later I developed my interest in fine art and antiques, and for the past 20 years I have devoted myself to the study of history and genealogy.

The foundations for my recent studies were laid in childhood when I was a passionate reader of European history and also looked at a few books by some well known Jewish writers of that time, including the histories of Graetz and Dubnow. My parents rarely spoke about our ancestors. My father told me that our paternal line were rabbis from Brody in Galicia and my mother occasionally mentioned her descent from Saul Wahl, who according to legend was made "king for a day" during a Polish interregnum. This story, described as "bizarre" by Simon Dubnow, provided a stimulus for my researches 60 years later.

The study of Jewish genealogy will not take one very far without some background knowledge of European and of specifically Jewish history. Linguistic skills are essential but deficiencies can be circumvented by employment of translators. More difficult for those without the relevant cultural background are Jewish naming customs. While the uninitiated reader will be familiar with the use of patronymics, the adoption of a wife's or father-in-law's family name was not infrequent in earlier times. Matronymics and the adoption

of surnames in general, their changes for dynastic, family, or political reasons, personal epithets, nicknames, transliteration between different languages, and so on, can give rise to problems in genealogical research, but their resolution may provide useful information. So the subject of onomastics is an essential ancillary to genealogical research.

More recently the use of DNA tests has become another essential research tool. It must be understood that some tests are more likely to provide genealogical insights when part of a proband's family background is already known. Usefulness of tests may depend on the size of the test provider's data base and on the extent that test results of relatives are available

An outline of my studies can be seen on the Balliol College web site – google “Edward Gelles” and click on “Balliol College archive & manuscripts”. A list of my published books and articles is accompanied by notes, genealogical charts, and updated accounts of recent work. There is a Video of an interview on “Voices from Oxford”.

My ancestral background

The family names of my eight great-grandparents are Gelles, Weinstein, Horowitz, (Horowitz) and Griffel, Wahl, Chayes, Safier.

As mentioned below, a paternal ancestor of Jaffe descent became known as Gelles after adopting his father-in-law's name. My maternal grandmother's Wahl family were a branch of the Katzenellenbogen

My forebears were part of a closely woven tapestry through inter-marriages with many old families. From the middle ages to modern times these included the Halpern, Shapiro, Treves, and Katzenellenbogen rabbinic lines who took their names from Heilbronn, Speyer, Trier, and the eponymous town of Katzenellenbogen in Hesse-Nassau. My ancestors from this bedrock of Ashkenazi Jewry included Chief Rabbis Mattityahu Treves of Paris (d.1385), Meir Katzenellenbogen of Padua (d.1565), his son Samuel Judah Katzenellenbogen of Venice (d.1597), and Nathan Nata Shapiro of Cracow (d.1633). Meir Katzenellenbogen was a grandson of Jechiel Luria of Alsace, who became Chief Rabbi of Brest-Litovsk (d. ca 1470).

Prague was a very important staging post in our millennial journey and I am descended from three of its Chief Rabbis, Judah Loew (d.1609), Isaac Chayes (d. 1617), and Mordecai Jaffe (d.1612), but not directly from the most distinguished rabbi of the Horowitz family, Isaiah Halevi Horowitz of Prague, Frankfurt, and Safed (d.1627), known as the *holy Shelah*. He was a second cousin of my ancestor Pinchas Halevi Horowitz (d.1618), who moved from Prague to Cracow and in due course became President of the Council of the Four Lands (effectively the Head of Polish Jewry).

Some of these leading families in Ashkenaz could look back to their ancient Sephardic connections. The Horowitz family was descended from the Shem Tov Halevi of Gerona and Benveniste of Barcelona of the 10th and 11th centuries. My ancient Jaffe forebears were in Bologna before they went to Prague and in earlier times some Jaffe were recorded in the *Sangre Judia* of Spain. The Chayes began their journey across Europe from Portugal which they left in the 15th century.

An ancestor of my paternal grandfather Rabbi Nahum Uri Gelles (1852-1934) was Moses Menachem Mendel Levush (d.ca.1760), a supposedly direct descendant of Mordecai Jaffe, who was Chief Rabbi of Prague, Grodno and Posen, and was known as the *Levush* after the title of his magnum opus. Moses Levush was a scholar of the talmudical study group called the Brody Klaus. He became known as Moses Gelles of Brody, when he adopted the surname of his father-in-law, Rabbi S. Gelles, whose line went back to Uri Feivush ben David, the Chief Rabbi of Vilna. This rabbi travelled to Jerusalem in the mid-17th century where he held the title of *Nasi* as Head of the Ashkenazi community.

A grandson of our ancestor Moses Gelles of Brody married the only daughter of Rabbi Pinchas Shapiro of Koretz (d. 1791), who was a descendant of Nathan Nata Shapiro of Cracow.

From the families that married into my immediate Gelles line I have ancestors that include Shmuel Helman, the Chief Rabbi of Mannheim and Metz (d. 1764), who had Halpern, Shapiro and Katzenellenbogen connections.

And there are several Horowitz, including Isaac Horowitz, the Chief Rabbi of Brody, Glogau, and Hamburg (d. 1767), whose line goes back to the above-mentioned Pinchas Halevi Horowitz and his wife Miriam Isserles, the sister of Chief Rabbi Moses Isserles of Cracow (d.1572).

Nahum Uri Gelles was Chief Rabbi of the little town of Solotwina near Stanislau in eastern Galicia. He succeeded his father-in-law Rabbi Zvi Aryeh Weinstein (d.1884) in that post, and related incumbents go back to the Rabbi Moshe Heilprin (Halpern) of Berdichev and Solotwina (d.1752), of whom I am a 10th generation descendant.

I am grateful to my maternal great-grandfather Eliezer Griffel (d.1918), head of the Nadworna community in Galicia, for wisely choosing Sarah Matel Chayes as his wife and Chawa Wahl as bride for his eldest son David Mendel Griffel.

The Chayes produced outstanding rabbis, business men, and noted scholars. As already mentioned, Isaac ben Abraham Chayes was Chief Rabbi of Prague and his sister married the famous Rabbi Judah Loew. The Chayes later flourished in Brody, Livorno and Florence, Vienna, and elsewhere.

The Wahl family of Tarnobrzeg in Galicia were acknowledged descendants of Saul Wahl (1545-1617), born in Padua to the above-mentioned Rabbi Samuel Judah Katzenellenbogen and his wife Abigail Jaffe. I have written about Saul Wahl's life and times. His eldest son Meir Wahl Katzenellenbogen (d.1631) married Hinde, the daughter of Pinchas Halevi Horowitz, thus linking Poland – Lithuania's two leading Jewish families of their time. Meir Wahl was Chief Rabbi of Brest and founder of the Jewish Council of Lithuania.

Saul Wahl's later descendants include Moses Mendelssohn, Karl Marx, Yehudi Menuhin, Martin Buber, and Isaiah Berlin amongst others. I have particularly close connections with Felix Mendelssohn's ancestral background.

Among my more distant connections of note are influential Court Jews of the 17th and 18th centuries, including Leffman Behrens of Hanover (d.1714), Daniel Jaffe Itzig of Berlin (d.1788), Samuel Oppenheimer (d.1703) and Samson Wertheimer (d.1724) of Vienna.

In addition to these separate above-mentioned strands, my wider ancestral background included other Levites (*Halevi or Halevi Segal*) and many Cohens (*Hakohen or Katz*, the latter being an acronym for *Kohen Tzedek* meaning "righteous priest"). For example, Chief Rabbi David Halevi Segal of Lwow, ancestor of the Griffels, Halevi Landau, the Hakohen Rapaport, Rabbi Shabbatai Katz. (called the *Schach*) and so on.

Several of my ancestral lines go back to Judah Loew of Prague (known as the *Maharal*) and to the 11th century Rabbi Salomon ben Isaac of Troyes in France (known as *Rashi*), these two being among the small number of frequently quoted links to ancient times which, according to time-honoured legends, descend from King David.

The Kalonymos (“of the good name”) were an ancient family who moved from Lucca in Italy to Mainz in Germany and Narbonne in *Septimania* in southwestern France. They were the leading Jewish family there from the 8th to the beginning of the 14th century. Their origins from Davidic Exilarchs of Baghdad were believed to link them by marriage to the Carolingian dynasty. Rashi of Troyes was descended from them and they had connections to the aforementioned Shem Tov Halevi, Benveniste, and others in Spain.

Our millennial journey and genetic admixture

My ancestors had taken a long time before they came out of the middle east and embarked on their millennial European journey. Y-DNA tests show that my paternal descent is characterised by haplogroup R-M124 (previously referred to as R2a), which is rare among Ashkenazi Jews, but is found among those with paternal roots in Anatolia, Caucasus, Iran, or India that go back many thousands of years.

I have studied the autosomal DNA results of about a hundred probands. Many were fairly close cousins of known Jewish descent (for at least a few generations), others were of more distant connection and some non-Jewish probands were included for reference purposes. This study was particularly useful for confirming that my forebears were part of a nexus of prominent families whose origins appeared in Germany.

These tests also provided ancestral names and locations for quite a few probands who had significant autosomal DNA matches with me. While individual autosomal DNA tests are generally of limited use for earlier periods, the posted ancestral movements of related probands that have thus become available support the scant direct family evidence that I have for the movement of my forebears in the period before and after the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions. We know that in this period there was increasing pressure leading to forced or voluntary conversions of Jews or expulsions. Jews went north to the Low Countries or east to the Ottoman Empire, to cities like Salonika, to the Greek islands, and later some moved back to Italy and to old Jewish

communities on the North African littoral. In the 16th century there was increasing migration of converted Jews, the so-called New Christians or Marranos. It appears from the ancestor lists of matching DNA probands that some of my people were among those who left Portugal for Antwerp and later Amsterdam, where some reverted to their original faith. In due course some continued to Britain and the New World while others moved to Germany and beyond.

Genetic genealogy is seen as developing new utilities. Commercial providers, such as GED.match take autosomal DNA results and relate these to biogeographical reference populations to come up with a proband's genetic admixture proportions. This provides a rough and ready approach to the study of millennial pan-European migrations of different ethnic groups.

My own GED.match Eurogenes tests indicate genetic admixture related to Portuguese and Dutch milestones on my ancestral journey, followed by traces of a British connection. Results of genetic admixture tests are supportive of some of the other known historical stages of our Jewish journey -

Lebanese, Kurdish and Georgian Jews harking back to the dispersion of the "ten lost tribes of Israel" after the destruction of their northern kingdom by the Assyrians / the Babylonian captivity (leaving a Jewish community in Baghdad that survived for many centuries) / Seleucid rule and the spread of hellenised Jews to Egypt, Sicily, and further afield / the Roman Empire, destruction of the second temple and large numbers of Jewish prisoners taken to Italy, some sent to Sicily, thence moving to and from North Africa / Italian Jews spread to the Rhineland and south western France / interaction with the Visigoths and Franks / the rise of Islam, the Moorish conquest of southern Spain, and the Sephardic culture in Iberia / the Normans in Britain, Sicily, and principalities in the Levant, mixing with Normans, Arabs, Armenians and others / the crusades and increased persecutions of Jews / decline of Byzantium and rise of the Ottomans / Spanish and Portuguese inquisitions leading to conversions and genetic admixture as well as far flung dispersion / ghettos and expulsions in western Europe and long drawn out migrations to Poland and beyond / the age of enlightenment / the Napoleonic period / retracement from east to west, the rise of nationalism, ethnic anti-semitism, and modern Zionism / two world wars, and the world after the Holocaust.