

# Moses the servant of God

by Edward Gelles

## Introduction

This article is about Moses Gelles of Brody and some of his descendants who had connections to leading figures of the Chasidic movement from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The city of Brody gained in importance in the early 1700's as a trade entrepot between east and west. By mid-century the Jewish community had become one of the largest in Europe and developed a vibrant cultural life. The so-called Brody *Klaus* was a study group of Talmudic scholars and enjoyed considerable prestige. One of its members was my ancestor Moses Gelles, who probably died in the late 1750's. So many records have been lost in the holocaust and in earlier times of trouble that we are lucky to have a fragment of the Records of the Brody Rabbinical Court (*Beth Din*) for the years 1808-1817. This manuscript is in the library of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York and contains valuable information on Moses Gelles and several generations of his descendants (1). It can be supplemented and to some extent dovetailed with surviving tombstone inscriptions (2), and with birth, marriage, death and property records for Brody to be found in the archives of Lviv (3). An analysis of these data is included in my books (4). It appears that the scholar Moses Menachem Mendel Levush married a daughter of a Rabbi S. Gelles and was thereafter called Moses Gelles.

The name Levush can be shown to be indicative of descent from Rabbi Mordechai Yaffe of Prague (1530-1612), whose epithet was derived from the title of his major work, *The Levushim* (5).

The Rabbi S. Gelles just referred to may have been Shmuel Gelles, the ABD (*Av Beth Din* or head of the rabbinical court) of Siemiatycze. He was a great-grandson of Uri Feivush, the Chief Rabbi of Vilna,

thought to be the rabbi of that name who became *Nasi* ( an honorific title for head) of the Ashkenazi community in Jerusalem near the end of his life in the 1650's (6).

### **Moses and Samuel – two grandsons of Moses Gelles**

Some of the children and grandchildren of Moses Gelles used the epithet Levush as an alternative name, or side by side with the family name Gelles. The three sons of Moses Gelles were Michel Levush, whose son Mordecai Levush married a daughter of Rabbi Yehuda Leib Zundel Ramraz (7), Joseph Gelles *Vaskievonie*, who ran the family chandlery or waxworks, and finally Mordecai Gelles, who was the father of Rabbi Samuel

Moses Gelles of the Brody Klaus had a grandson who married a daughter of Moshe of Glogau, the eldest son of Shmuel Helman, the Chief Rabbi of Metz. This younger Moses Gelles was probably a son of Mordecai Gelles, and hence a brother of Samuel (8).

From Moses a line of descent goes via Rabbis David Isaac and Nahum Uri to my father Dr. David Gelles. My grandfather and his father were close to the Friedman Chasidic dynasty of Czortkow. The Friedmans and the venerable Shapiro rabbinical line both go back to Nathan Nata Shapiro (1585-1633), a Chief Rabbi of Cracow, and to his grandfather Nathan Nata of Grodno (died 1577) (9). A direct Shapiro descendant, Rabbi Pinchas of Koretz and Shepetivka (1726-1791) was a towering figure in the Chasidic movement that swept through eastern Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (10). Chasidism remains a vibrant part of Judaism, as exemplified at the present time by the world-wide Chabad -Lubavich movement. Pinchas Shapiro was of the generation following that of the founder, Israel ben Eliezer (1698-1760), who was known as the *Baal ShemTov* (master of the good name).

## **The Gelles – Shapiro line**

The connection between the Gelles and Shapiro rabbinical lines includes the marriage of Samuel Gelles (d.1811) to a daughter of Rabbi Pinchas of Koretz. Several generations later, my first cousin Joseph Gelles (1912-1941) studied under Rabbi Yehuda Meir Shapira (1887-1934), the distinguished founder of the Lublin Sages Yeshivah, who was a direct descendant of Rabbi Pinchas (11). My grandfather Nahum Uri Gelles and Yehuda Meir Shapira were both adherents of the Czortkower Rebbe Israel Friedman (1854-1933).

The Gelles – Shapiro marriage is well documented. Rabbi Levi Grossman noted that “Rachel Sheindel, daughter of Rabbi Pinchas of Koretz, married Rabbi Samuel, son of Rabbi Mordecai Gelles, son of Rabbi Moshe Gelles, one of the scholars of the Brody Klaus, whose epitaph refers to him as Moses the servant of God “ (12).

Pinchas Shapiro moved from Koretz to nearby Shepetivka in his later years. Not far away were Polonnoye and Koniow (Kunev). The latter was a few miles to the south-west of Meseritz and Ostrog, *shtetls* that also featured in the lives of the Chasidic leaders. Further to the south was Medzibozh, the home for many years of the Baal Shem Tov.

Samuel Gelles of Koniow became Av Beth Din of Kalnibolet (Katerynopol) with responsibilities in a substantial surrounding area situated about 100 miles SSE of Kiev (13,14). This area included Zvenigorodka, Talnoye, Shpola, and Mokra Kalyhirka. The Jewish names for these towns were Kalnibolet or Kalnibolota, Zvenigorodka, Tolna, Shpole, and Kalerka. The distances between them were of the order of 10 to 20 miles, and in the later 19<sup>th</sup> century they severally harboured several thousand Jews. Samuel’s family held this rabbinical post in direct line of succession for five generations. The letters of appointment of himself and of his grandson Eliyahu Pinchas are reproduced in the book of the sayings of Rabbi Pinchas of Koretz. It appears that Samuel obtained this post with the backing of Rabbi

Jacob Samson of Shepetivka, whose daughter Sarah had married Rabbi Yehuda Meir, the son of Rabbi Pinchas Shapiro (15-17).

Samuel and his son Ahron were followed by Eliyahu Pinchas and then by Menachem Nahum, who adopted the name Polonsky, presumably from the district of Polonnoye or Polonne, the Volhynian town lying between Shepetivka and Berdichev. Menachem Nahum's son, Abraham Isaac Polonsky, was the fifth incumbent of the line (14-18).

Books touching on the Gelles – Shapiro line include the works of Rabbi Samson Aaron Polonsky, son of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Polonsky, and of Rabbi Matityahu Yechezkiel Guttman, who was a descendant of Eliyahu Pinchas Gelles and his wife Sima Wertheim, as well as of the famous Chasidic Rabbi Levi Isaac of Berdichev (14,19).

The known ancestral connections of the Gelles line, the status of Moses Gelles as a noted scholar, and tombstone inscriptions of his descendants that include phrases such as “of distinguished lineage “ or “descendant of Moses Gelles of the Brody *Klaus* ” indicate a *Yichus* (pedigree) in keeping with the marriages of his descendants. . Glenn Dynner in his recent book discusses the importance of family *Yichus*, to Jews in general and to Chasidic leaders including Pinchas Shapiro of Koretz in particular (13).

### **Moses Gelles – the servant of God**

Moses Gelles of Brody clearly had a standing beyond the ambit of his community, but the available records could not throw additional light on his life in Brody. An intriguing clue to his later movements comes from *Shivhei HaBaal Shem Tov*, the collection of stories about the *Besht* and his disciples first published in 1815 (20). I am indebted to my Hebrew translator for drawing my attention to a passage about an episode in the Baal Shem Tov's travels and for subsequent correspondence on the subject.

“ He was proceeding from Polonnoye to a “new town” The road passed its Jewish cemetery and the Baal Shem Tov perceived a great pillar of fire over one of the graves. He sent his attendant to look at the tombstone and he found that it said a Tzaddik (a wholly righteous man) was buried there who was described as “Moshe the servant of God “

The authors of a recent edited English translation of the collected tales tentatively identify the “new town” with Novograd Volynsky (formerly Zviagel, known as Zvihl to the Jews), situated about 30 miles north of Polonnoye (21).

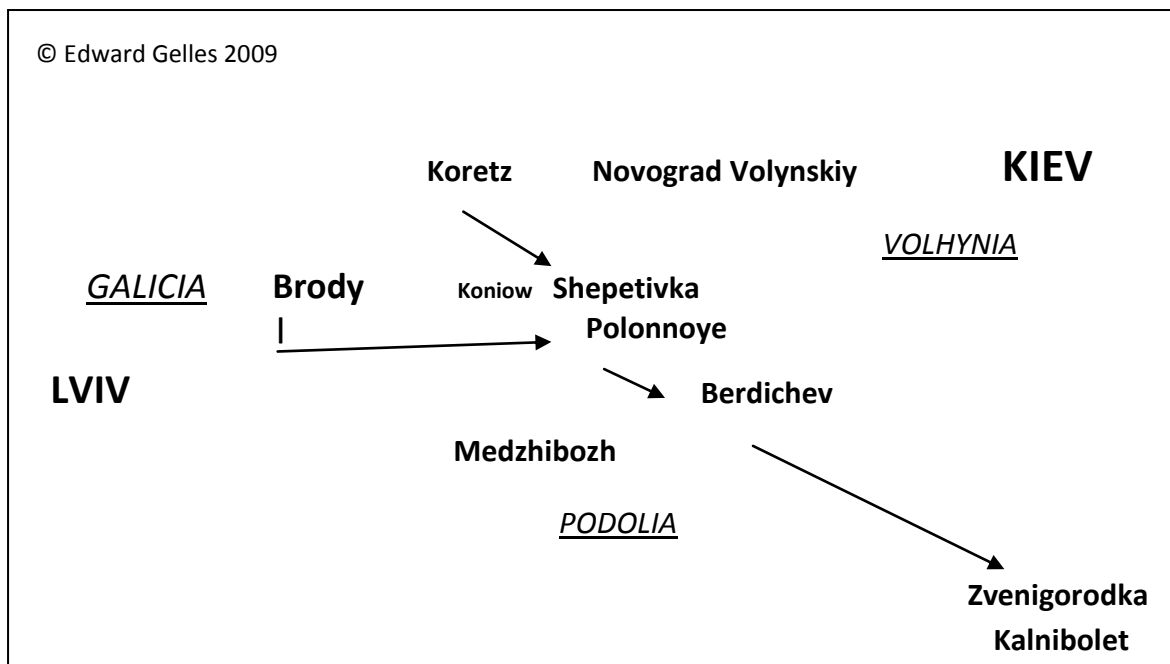
Could this have been the grave of the scholar, Moses Gelles of the Brody Klaus ? Local enquiries confirm that it would be a miracle if the site could now be located, let alone its tombstone.

Rabbis were very mobile in earlier times. They travelled great distances to fulfil professional engagements, to visit other rabbis, or for family reasons. The Baal Shem Tov himself had lived for some time in Brody, and married the daughter of a rabbi there, before settling at Medzhiboz not far from Polonnoye. We recall that the descendants of Samuel Gelles adopted the name of Polonsky, from family connections with Polonnoye.

The sketch indicates the relative locations of Lviv (Lemberg) and the city of Brody in eastern Galicia, and the towns of Novograd Volynskiy, Koretz, Shepetivka, Koniow, and Polonnoye in the neighbouring province of Volhynia. Berdichev and also the area around Kalnibolet and Zvenigorodka are indicated in the provinces that border Volhynia to the south. All this land is now part of the Ukraine. After the 18<sup>th</sup> century partitions of Poland, Galicia was for a lengthy period a part of Austria, while Volhynia and Podolia were for some time within the Russian Empire. This is the geographical background to family connections over a long period of time that saw many political upheavals and frontier changes.

## Summary

From Moses Gelles, a scholar of the Brody Klaus, several rabbinic lines take their descent. These include a Galician line from his grandson Moses Gelles to my grandfather Rabbi Nahum Uri Gelles of Solotwina near Stanislau. The last rabbi of this Gelles line was Nahum Uri's grandson and my first cousin Josef Gelles, whose tragic life story has recently emerged (22). There are links of this line with the Friedman Chasidic leaders of Czortkow and with rabbis of the ancient Shapiro line. Our Gelles cousins in the Ukraine descend from another grandson of Moses Gelles of the Klaus. This was Rabbi Samuel, who married the only daughter of the great Rabbi Pinchas Shapiro of Koretz and Shepetivka. The present study brings out the links between these two lines and connections with other Chasidic leaders



### A Lineage descended from Moses Gelles of Brody and Pinchas Shapiro of Koretz

- (1) Pinkas of the Beth Din of Brody. Manuscript BN 4037 in the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary, New York
- (2) The Brody tombstones include that of my great-grandfather Rabbi David Isaac Gellis. a photograph of which was kindly made available to me by Rabbi Dov Weber of New York. The inscription indicates his Chasidic connections in similar terms to those on the stone of my grandfather Rabbi Nahum Uri Gelles in Vienna (4, 8). Other Brody tombstone inscriptions include that of Aryeh Leibish “a young man of distinguished family”, a son of Rabbi Chaim Naftali Gelles, and of Leah Gelles, “a descendant of Moses Gelles of the Brody Klaus” (see the first appended chart.
- (3) Brody vital records. Extensive searches in the Lviv Archives were carried out for me by Alexander Dunai and covered birth, marriage, death, and property records for Gelles – Levush from the late 18<sup>th</sup> to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (4).
- (4) Edward Gelles, *An Ancient Lineage : European Roots of a Jewish Family* (Valentine Mitchell, London 2006). Referred to as AL.

Family Connections : Gelles-Horowitz- Chayes  
(Shaker Publishing B..V., The Netherlands, 2008). Referred to as FC.

- (5) Edward Gelles, Finding Rabbi Moses Gelles, *Avotaynu*, xviii, No.1, Spring 2002.
- (6) Jewish Community Life in Brody, *Sharsheret Hadorot*, Vol. 18, No.4, Nov 2004
- (7) Hillel Noach Steinschneider, *Ir Vilna* (Vilna, 1900), pp. 3-4  
David Tebele Efrati, *Toldot Anshei Shem* (Warsaw, 1875), pp. 35-38  
AL, *loc cit.* p. 215. See Table 27. “Zundel Ramraz”  
Rabbi Yehuda Leib Zundel Ramraz was grandfather of Shalom Rokeah, the first Grand Rabbi of the Belz Chasidic dynasty.
- ((8) AL, *loc cit.*, pp 19-20. Figures 3, 4, and 5 showing the tombstones of my father and grandfather in Vienna, and of my great-grandfather . The inscription on the latter gives my great-great-grandfather as Rabbi Moses Gelles.  
He was a grandson of Moses Gelles, the scholar of the Brody Klaus, of whose three sons Michel and his immediate descendants used the name Levush, Joseph Gelles had a son called Moses Gershon, and Mordecai, the father of Samuel, was therefore probably also the father of my great-great-grandfather Moses.
- (9) The second chart is adapted from FC, *loc cit* Table 3.  
The Gelles connection to Moshe of Glogau and Shmuel Hillman of Metz is given in FC, Table 4, taken from Shmuel Noach Gottlieb, *Ohalei Shem* (Pinsk, 1912), pp 261-262. Shapiro, Friedman, and Gelles have a common ancestral Shapiro connection. My grandfather was close, in life and death, to Rabbi Israel Friedman of Czortkow, FC, *loc cit* Table 6.
- ( 10) Martin Buber, *Die Erzählungen der Chasidim* (Zurich, Manesse Verlag, Consett & Huber, 1949).  
Rabbi Pinchas ben Abraham Abba Shapiro of Koretz, article in *Encyclopedia Judaica*.



Susan K. Steeble, *Two Tzaddiks : The Teachings of Rebbe Pinchas of Koretz and of his disciple Rebbe Raphael of Bershad* < [www.twotzaddiks.org/](http://www.twotzaddiks.org/)

- (11) Ben Giladi (ed), *A Tale of one City : Piotrkow Trybunalski, Poland* (New York, 1991) pp.73-78. Profile of Rabbi Yehuda Meir Shapira (1887- 1934), founder of the Lublin Sages Yeshiva.  
Yehuda Meir Shapira, *Imrei Da'as* (Bnei Brak, Israel, 1990)  
(the list of students in the appendix to this work contains the name of Josef Gelles, son of Ehraim Fischel Gelles of Solotwina - see also ref. 20)
- (12) Levi Grossman, *Shem U' She'erith* (Tel-Aviv, 1943), p. 92-93  
Refers to the epitaph of Moses Gelles, the scholar of the Brody Klaus, whose grandson Rabbi Samuel married Sarah Rachel Scheindel Shapiro.  
Details are given of five generations of this couple's descendants:  
Their son Rabbi Ahron married Henya, daughter of Rabbi Daniel David, son of Rabbi Shemarya of Verchifka, and their son Rabbi Eliyahu Pinchas married Sima, a daughter of Rabbi Aryeh Leib Wertheim of Bendery. Their son Rabbi Menachem Nachum was the father of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Polonsky, the fifth rabbi of the line. A brother of Menachem Nachum was Rabbi David Samuel whose marriage formed a link to Rabbi Levi Isaak of Berdichev.  
Links of the Gelles – Shapiro line with the Heilprins include the marriage of a daughter of Samuel and Scheindel to Rabbi Abraham Halpern of Sudilkov (AL, table 36). A daughter of Eliyahu Pinchas and Sima, named Chana Chava, married Rabbi Israel Nachman Halpern of Brzezany, who became ABD of Zvenigorodka and later of Odessa (died 1870).
- (13) Glenn Dynner, *Men of Silk: The Hasidic Conquest of Polish Jewish Society* (Oxford University Press, 2006), Appendix 1, pp 234-.235  
Refers to Rabbi Samuel, Av Beth Din of Koniow, Kolinblat, and Zwenigorodka as the husband of Rabbi Pinchas Shapiro's daughter.  
The locations of Kalnibolet (Katerynopol) and Zvenigorodka are indicated on the sketch map. Koniow is quite close to Shepetivka (see 15 below for the possible sequence of Rabbi Samuel's marriage and appointments).  
Dynner's book contains a valuable discussion of *Yichus* under the heading of "The social composition of Hasidic leadership" pp. 117-135
- (14) Samson Ahron Polonsky, *Chidushei Horav Miteplik* (Jerusalem, 1984)  
" Rabbi Shimshon Ahron Polonsky, son of Rabbi Abraham Yitzchak Polonsky, son of Rabbi Menachem Nahum, son of Rabbi Eliyahu, son of Rabbi Ahron, son of Rabbi Samuel of Kolnibolet (son-in-law of Rabbi Pinchas Shapiro of Koretz), son of Rabbi Mordecai Gelles of Brody, son of Rabbi Moshe Gelles, member of the famous Brody Klaus".
- (15) Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Yiwo Bletter*, Vol. 36, p. 124 *et seq.* *Unbekannte Dokumente zu der Geschichte des Hasidus*  
Yechezkel Shraga Frankel (ed), *Imrei Pinchas* (Benei Brak, Israel, 2003)  
Vol.2, pp 486-488.  
AL, *loc cit.* The letters of appointment of Rabbi Samuel (1793) and of his grandson Rabbi Eliyahu Pinchas (1831) are reproduced in Figures 42 and 43.  
It is stated in the second document that the initial appointment of Rabbi Samuel was at the behest of Rabbi Jacob Samson of Shepetivka, who had ordained him

This famous Rabbi of Shepetivka was a *mehutan* of Rabbi Pinchas Shapiro of Koretz, his daughter Sarah having married the latter's son, Rabbi Yehuda Meir.



It would appear from the times and dates given in the Yiwo Bletter and the letters of appointment that Rabbi Samuel and his bride were already living in Kolnibolet prior to the date of the official appointment in 1793. Perhaps the marriage took place around 1788-89 (when the bride was 16-17 years of age) and 2 years or so before the death of Rabbi Pinchas.

It is also mentioned in the book that Rabbi Pinchas said “ I am giving a protective gift to the Ukraine, my only daughter, to stop Haidamaks [bands of Cossacks and peasantry] from inflicting damage there, and so it was”.

According to Imrei Pinchas, Vol. 2, pages 171 and 485, two sons of Rabbi Pinchas were connected by marriage to Polonnoye - Rabbi Moshe's wife was the daughter of Rabbi Isaac, a dayan (judge) in that town, and Rabbi Isaac Ezekiel married a daughter of Rabbi Josef, the Maggid (preacher) of Polonnoye.

(Glenn Dynner, reference 13, v.s.,p.235 gives Rabbi Moshe of Slavuta's father-in-law Isaac as a rabbinical judge in Prague and son of Saul, ABD of Cracow. Isaac's children included Rachel, wife of the above-mentioned Rabbi Moshe Shapiro. She was a sister of the tzaddik Rabbi Gedaliya of Iliniec (near Polonnoye), a disciple of Rabbi Dov Ber of Meseritz)

- (16) Menachem M. Brayer, *The Jewish Woman in Rabbinic Literature. A Psychohistorical Perspective* (KTAV Publishing,1986), note on p. 233 Sarah, the daughter of Rabbi Jacob Samson of Shepetivka and wife of Yehuda Meir Shapiro, son of Rabbi Pinchas of Koretz, was extolled by the Chasidic sage Meir of Przemyslany as “the woman who has a say in heaven” and her *mechutan* Rabbi Israel Friedman of Ruzhin described her as a “tzaddeket [female tzaddik] with no equal in the entire world”. She was the sister-in-law of Rachel Sheindel Shapiro and her husband Rabbi Samuel Gelles.
- (17) Grossman, Shem U' She'erith, *loc cit*, p. 95 Zippora, a daughter of Yehuda Meir Shapiro and Sarah, married Chaim Hager of Kosov, and their son Menachem Mendel Hager (1830-1884), the 1<sup>st</sup> Rebbe of the Chasidic Vishnitz dynasty married Miriam, daughter of Rabbi Israel of Ruzhin, thus linking the families of Rabbis Pinchas Shapiro of Koretz and Israel Friedman of Ruzhin.
- (18) Harry W Rabinowitz, *Hasidism : The Movement and its Masters*. (Jason Aaronson, 1988). Rabbi Pinchas of Koretz married firstly Trani Weil [a descendant of Rabbi Moshe Meir Weil, known as the Maharam Ashkenazi Weil of Stühlingen], by whom he had two sons, Rabbi Judah Meir of Shepetivka and Rabbi Moses of Slavuta. This book suggests that Rabbi Pinchas married secondly Yuta, and that his other three sons and his only daughter Sarah Rachel Scheindel were from the second marriage
- (19) Matityahu Yechezkiel Guttman, *Rabbi Pinchas MiKoretz* (Tel-Aviv, 1950) The author was a descendant of Rabbi Levi Isaac of Berdichev (1740-1810) and of Rabbi Eliyahu Pinchas (Gelles), whose wife Sima was a daughter of Rabbi Aryeh Leib Wertheim of Bendery (died 1854), the head of a Chasidic line in Bessarabia. see AL, *loc cit*., Table 34
- (20) Shivhei HaBaal Shem Tov (Tales of the Baal Shem Tov - a Hebrew edition published in Jerusalem, 1969), p.142
- (21) Dan Ben-Amos and Jerome R. Mintz, edited English translation *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov* (Schocken Books, New York, 1984) Tale No 216 (pp 219-220) and notes on pp 339-340
- (22) Edward Gelles, End of the Gelles rabbinic line. *The Galitzianer*, Vol.16, No.1, November 2008 (see ref.11)