

Looking back on my paternal ancestry

Edward Gelles

My father was a successful advocate in Vienna and his father was chief rabbi of a small town in Galicia. I was told that our Gelles rabbinic line went back to the town of Brody.

My parents had become largely assimilated in Vienna's liberal inter-war milieu. We barely observed the High Holidays and we almost lost touch with my grandparents. However, my father was a Zionist from his student days and became a leading figure in Austrian Zionist circles and a senior member of Vienna's Jewish community.

We were fortunate to get away from Austria shortly after the German take-over or *Anschluss* in 1938. We came to England and settled in Bayswater, made new friends, and I resumed my education which took me to Balliol College, Oxford.

I remember several people asking me in the late 1940's whether I was related to the Rabbi of Finchley, Dr Benjamin Gelles. My reply that I had never heard of him closed the matter for quite a while. In the decades that followed I continued to take an interest in European and Jewish history and current affairs but it was not until I reached my 70th year that I took up a serious study of my family background.

Over more than a thousand years my ancestors have followed complex paths across Europe and I have described some of them in my six published books which can be found on the web-site of Balliol College Archives & Manuscripts - "Papers of Edward Gelles"

Seventy years after being asked about a connection to Rabbi Gelles of Finchley, I can now make reply. This I have done in an essay entitled "Some Gelles and Jaffe family migrations in recent centuries" which can be read on my web page.

About 400 years ago some of my Gelles ancestors migrated from Prague to Poland and Lithuania. From the town of Grodno a family branch moved south to Brody in Galicia, whence my direct line ultimately came to Vienna.

Rabbi Benjamin J Gelles belonged to a related branch that moved west from Grodno to Lissa and Krotoschin in the province of Posen, then to Berlin and later further into Germany. From Moenchen-Gladbach this family also came to England as refugees shortly before the outbreak of the second world war.

According to the data base of *Beit Hatfutsot* (Museum of the Jewish People) my father, Dr David Gelles, and Rabbi Benjamin J Gelles are “two distinguished 20th century bearers of the Gelles name“.

I am pleased to have clarified their connections with the Gelles of Grodno and some of the complex family migrations.