

## **My Mother's People \***

*Edward Gelles*

The 18th day of March in the year 2000 marked the centenary of my mother's birth. I decided to write an article about her, but I lacked knowledge of her family background. I am still finding out much about our ancestry. A brief biographical sketch has turned into a lengthy genealogical study. My parents belonged to a generation of assimilated Viennese Jews, who attached more importance to participation in their contemporary culture than to a study of their family. I had to find my roots largely through my own efforts.

My mother Regina Griffel (1900-1954) was the daughter of David Mendel Griffel of Nadworna (Nadvomaya) and Chava Wahl of Tarnobrzeg. She had an elder brother Zygmunt (1897-1951) and a younger brother Edward (1904-1959).

The Griffels were a large clan who had prospered in 19th century Galicia under Austrian rule. The Nadworna line claimed descent from David Halevi Segal, the 17th century Chief Rabbi of Lvov. My great-grandfather Eliezer Griffel (1850-1918) built up a commercial empire based on oil wells and saw mills. His business interests went far beyond his native town. Many members of the clan worked in one or other of his enterprises.

Eliezer married Sarah Matel (-1940), daughter of Isaac Chaim Chayes of Kolomea

(Kolomyia), from a branch of the Chayes family that was based in Brody.

For many centuries, this family produced distinguished rabbis and flourished in Poland as well as in Italy. Zvi Perez Chayes (1876-1927), a Chief Rabbi of Vienna, was a distant cousin. Eliezer and Sarah Griffel had ten children including my grandfather David Mendel, Isaac Chaim, and Zissel, who are shown in the accompanying Table. Isaac Chaim had many children, and other Griffels were also quite prolific, so that even after world wars and the Holocaust their issue is more numerous than can be accommodated in the text of this article or in the Table.

The Wallis of Tarnobrzeg claimed descent from Saul Wahl Katzenellenbogen and the 16th century rabbis of Padua and Venice. Chava Wahl (1877-1941) was one of six siblings. The progeny of three Wahl sisters is shown in the Table.

My grandparents had moved from Nadworna to Stanislau (Ivano Frankovsk) when my mother was quite young. At the outbreak of World War I, they sought refuge in Vienna and in 1921, their daughter Regina married David Gelles, who had established himself as an advocate there. My brother Ludwig and I spent a happy childhood in Vienna between the wars. We fled to England shortly after the Anschluss in 1938 and my mother died in London in 1954.



*Regina Gnffel (1900-1954)  
with her elder son Ludwig (1922-1942)*

My main theme is the methodology of finding my mother's family connections, but first I must introduce some of the key individuals of my story.

Eliezer Griffel, the patriarch of the Nadworna clan, was known as Zeida (grandpa). He was the head of the Jewish community dominating its religious, political, and economic life. He gave his religious adherence to the Hasidic rabbi of Otonyia (Otynya).

Zeida Griffel was a deeply conservative paternalist, a philanthropist and an outstanding businessman. He is supposed to have gotten on well with the Emperor on the latter's visits to his outlying province. They talked mainly about horses. David Mendel and Isaac Chaim Griffel followed him in the family business and represented the

ultra-orthodox Jewish community in local affairs. While Isaac Chaim's children and some other siblings remained within the Hasidic fold, David Mendel's children were exposed to Viennese enlightenment at a tender age.

Chava Wahl's father and mother, my great-grandparents Shulim Wahl and Sarah Safier, had a traditional Jewish background and their families were also very wealthy. Shulim's occupation was listed in the town records as "capitalist."

My uncles Zygmunt and Edward Griffel prospered in the timber trade in Lvov and in the export-import business in Warsaw. They often came to visit us in Vienna, and I thought that they cut quite a dash. Edward in particular had been all over the world and his cosmopolitan outlook seemed ahead of his

Boston are Zygmunt's and Edward's sons, respectively. The former had a distinguished career in the U.S. Foreign Service, and the latter developed a successful computer software company.

My mother had an interesting set of first cousins. On her mother's side there was Dr. Abraham Low (1891-1954), one of the children of my great-aunt Blume Wahl (1864-1903), who became a distinguished psychiatrist in Chicago and a pioneer of modern community mental health care. His popular work *Mental Health through Will Training* is still selling after half a century. His daughter Marilyn Low Schmitt is a professor of art history and worked for the Getty Museum. She and her sister Phyllis are associated with the institute bearing their father's name.

My great-aunt Rachel Wahl (1879-1965) had two children by her first marriage to Abraham Taube (1873-1906), Rega who lived in Rio de Janeiro and Zyga who made his home in Los Angeles.

Their children are my cousins Viola Sachs, a professor of American literature at the University of Paris and Thaddeus Taube, a Californian businessman who has become a noted philanthropist and benefactor. Rachel Wahl's second marriage was to Chaim Simon Ohrenstein and they had a daughter named Lucia (1910-1988), who became Countess Tripovich and a leading light of 1950's Rome café society.

There could not be a greater contrast between my mother's first cousins Lucia Ohrenstein, the socialite, and Dr. Jacob Griffel (1900-1962), the deeply religious savior of thousands of Jews during the Second World War. But then they were from different branches of the family tree. Jacob was a son of my great-uncle Isaac Chaim Griffel (1880-1930). Jacob's nephew, Andrew Griffel, born in 1942, has also devoted much of his life to charitable and humanitarian work. My mother's first cousins included others of Griffel descent, such as Dr. Arnold Lam (1902-1986), the son of my great-aunt Zissel.

These people and their progeny carry with them the millennial heritage of our people, and more specifically the genetic inheritance of several ancient families. It is tempting to look at some of them in the light of family traits, endeavoring to discern genes from the Griffel, Chayes, Safier, and Wahl lines, particularly because of the high degree of inbreeding which must have reinforced certain inherited attributes. For example, Taube and Wahl are related, and indeed there are more or less distant connections of Chayes and Griffel with the Wahl-Katzenellenbogen clan.

There seemed to be several good reasons for writing this article, not only as a tribute to my mother's memory and as a historical record, but also to set out how I began to construct this family tree.

I had lost contact with my Griffel cousins in the 1950's. I did not know where my grandmother came from or who many of my relations were. The voyage of discovery on which I embarked four years ago has given me much historical insight and self-knowledge. I have also made new friends and come across some interesting personalities.

In the appended summary of my genealogical search, I refer to articles on family branches or individuals, to documents and other primary sources, and to useful addresses. At the beginning was my parents' marriage certificate obtained from the Jewish Community Offices in Vienna. It confirmed my mother's place and date of birth and gave the full names of her parents. I have written brief outlines of the Wahl and Chayes family histories. The background to the Griffel family since the mid 19th century is to be found in the Nadworna Memorial Book and in the Stanislaw volume of *Arim ve-Imahot be-Israel*. Vital records on Eliezer Griffel and David Mendel Griffel came respectively from Rabbi Kolesnik of Stanislaw and from the Warsaw Archives. The Chayes connection with Kolomea is referred to in the Brody Memorial Book and elsewhere. I looked vainly for my grandmother Chava

among the Wahls of Nadworna and it was not until I had discovered some of her siblings that I found her family in Tarnobrzeg. From a World War I postcard written by Abraham Low to my mother in Vienna the trail led via the Austrian Army Museum and the Wellcome Library for the History of Medicine to Chicago and to the Low cousins, who have flourished and multiplied in America for nearly a century.

The connections with our Wahl family gradually emerged. Abraham's mother, Blume Wahl, is recorded in the Strasbourg municipal archives, where her birth and marriage in Tarnobrzeg are confirmed. Then followed a birth certificate of one of Abraham Low's siblings, which stated the full names of her parents and grandparents and located them in Tarnobrzeg. That town's archives are not easily accessible, but through the kindness of the Deputy Mayor I obtained extracts from the 1880 census which confirmed the names and birth dates of most of the Wahl family. I had found my grandmother at last. Furthermore, I now knew who my great-aunts were. I contacted Rachel Wahl's descendants Thaddeus Taube in California and Viola Sachs in Paris, who gave me some additional anecdotal guidance to the fate of other relatives, and particularly to the career of Lucia Ohrenstein. I lost no time in researching her remarkable life story. Abraham Low's daughters then rediscovered their father's ship's manifest of 1921, recorded at the time he emigrated from Vienna to the United States. It contained references to his uncle Moses Wahl. This led me to a probate document in Vienna, which had further data on my long-lost great-uncle. The ramifications of the Wahl family are intriguing in their complexity. My great-grandfather Shulim was the son of Leiser Wahl, who in his time was the richest

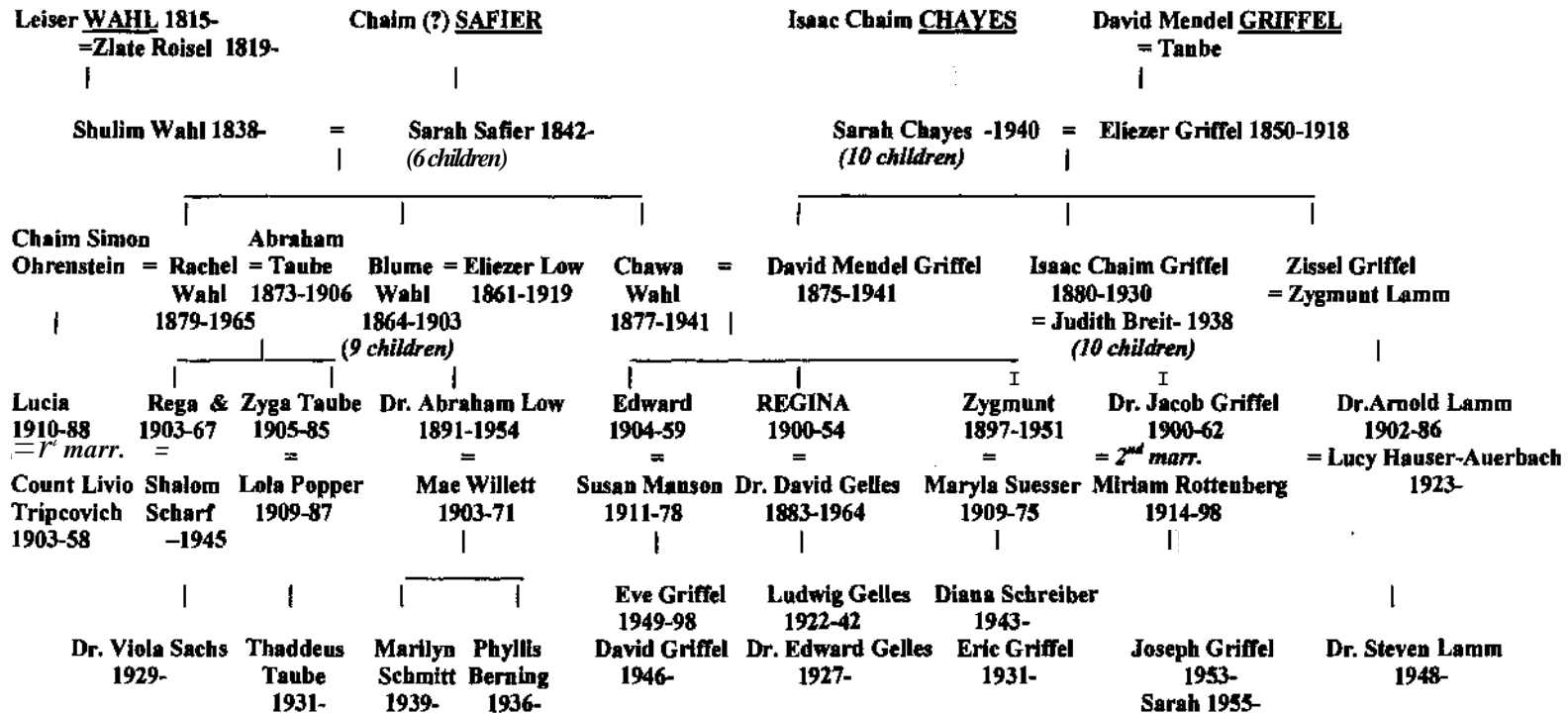
man in Tarnobrzeg, according to the memoirs of the town's mayor. A daughter of Leiser Wahl married a son of Moses Hauser, Count Tarnowski's Arendar. The latter's son-in-law Salomon Lamm was connected with the Lamms who later intermarried with the Griffels. Much work also remains to be done on the Taube connection and on the Safier family.

I found data for my uncles Zygmunt and Edward Griffel on the Internet and in the Nadworna records of the Baron Hirsch Cemetery on Staten Island. Zygmunt's wife Maryla was the granddaughter of the banker Salomon Meir Wohl of Cracow and Vienna. In this way, the Wohls of Cracow are linked to the Wahls of Tarnobrzeg. Edward's wife Susan Manson was connected with the Friedman Hasidic dynasty. So apparently was my father, Dr. David Genes, at least according to his obituary notice in a Viennese newspaper. My paternal grandfather was the last of an ancient rabbinical line from Brody.

There are innumerable cousins descended from Eliezer and Sarah Griffel. The most noteworthy is Dr. Jacob Griffel, whose intellectual and moral qualities and selfless efforts on behalf of his fellow Jews during and after the World War II merit greater acclaim than he has so far received. The following generation includes the grandsons of Zissel, Chaya, and Iaac Chaim Griffel, namely the physician Dr. Steven Lamm, the psychiatrist Dr. Yehuda Nir, and the past president of the American Jewish World Service, Andrew Griffel.

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My Mother's Family Connections



Shulim Wahl and Sarah Safier had six children. The Table has details on three daughters. The other siblings, Zypora, Chaim Leib, and Moses, will be found in some of the references given above. The nine children of Eliezer Loew and Blume Wahl are listed in the article on Abraham Loew's ship's manifest and discussed elsewhere. The Table includes three children of Eliezer and Sarah Griffel. The full list of their ten children is David Mendel (1875-1941), Machla (1876-), Zissel (1878-), Isaac Chaim (1880-1930), Shaya (1883-), Leibish (1885-), Benjamin (1887-), Rivka (1888-), Rachel (1892-), and Chaya (-1918). The progeny of my grandparents David Mendel and Chava Griffel are given in full. Isaac Chaim and Judith Griffel are shown as the parents of Jacob Griffel. The latter's siblings included another David Mendel (born 1902), the Conservative Rabbi Henry (1910-1968), the lawyer Samuel Shmelke (1913-99), and Shalom, Taube, Machla, Rachel, Baila, and Rivka. The children of Jacob Griffel are shown as Joseph Isaac and Sarah, those of Schmelke are Isaac, Baruch, Moshe Eliezer, Judith, and Rivka, while Henry's children are Andrew Griffel (born 1942) and Judy. Reference has also been made to Dr. Yehuda Nir (born 1930), the grandson of Chaya Griffel, and there are many other members of the clan. Two further generations could soon be added to the Table.

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*Dr Edward Gelles was born in Vienna. He fled with his family to England in 1938 where he has lived ever since. He has a doctorate from Oxford University. He was a research scientist, art dealer, and is now devoting himself to writing about historical and genealogical matters. His father's family were Galician rabbis for hundreds of years while his mother's people were in the timber and oil businesses in Galicia and the descendants who survived are now mainly in America and Israel.*