

Reviews and Comments on my books 2006 - 2016

Edward Gelles

An Ancient Lineage

by Edward Gelles

published 2006

includes Letter of Approbation by Rabbi Meir Wunder of Jerusalem
and Foreword by Professor Gershon David Hundert of McGill University

Comments from Reviews

This is a handsome volume by a careful and resourceful researcher.

The Galitzianer, Vol. 13, No. 4, p19 - August 2006

Gelles's book has the virtue of presenting the history of Jews in Europe through the prism of fates of seven families and their affiliations with the rest of the Jewish community. The area we explore by following the author's arguments is very wide: from a geographic point of view it includes significant parts of Europe, and from a chronological point of view – a few hundred years of the continent's history. For easily understood reasons from the Polish point of view, the central place in this area is occupied by Polish Jewry, and in particular Galician Jewry. This is why Gelles's work is an important contribution to the history of our country.

Rafal Zebrowski,

Jewish History Quarterly (JHI, Warsaw), Nr. 4 (220) pp 707-709 – December 2006

The book contains very important notes and a most extensive bibliography of more than 150 items. I strongly recommend this book to all who are interested in Jewish genealogy and rabbinical genealogy in particular. This volume could serve as a prototype for all those who are interested in publishing the story of their own families.

Dr. Yehuda Klausner,

Sharsheret Hadorot, Vol.21, No.1, xxxiii-xxxiv – February 2007

Edward Gelles kommt aus einer bemerkenswerten Wiener jüdischen Familie und er hat in seinem Buch "An Ancient Lineage" ihren genealogischen und historischen Hintergrund genau recherchiert und eloquent beschrieben...

Gelles Buch wird ergänzt durch zwei Vorworte von Rabbi Meir Wunder (Jerusalem) und Professor Gershon David Hundert (Montreal) und enthält zahlreiche Dokumente, Photographien, Stammbäume, Chronologien, Indexe, und Biographien. Es bietet ein überaus reichhaltiges Mosaik, einen Schatz von Hinweisen und Informationen, die für jeden Historiker und an jüdischer Familiengeschichte interessierten Laien von Interesse sind.

Dr. Evelyn Adunka,

David - Jüdische Kulturzeitschrift, Vol.19, No. 73, June 2007

Edward Gelles's book is undoubtedly a tour de force. This work is a treasure-trove, with innumerable tables, extensive notes, and details of genealogical enquiry.

Emma Klein, AJR Journal, Vol.6, No.12, p9 – December 2006

Readers' Letters

1. H.L.H of Chicago wrote on 21 January 2007:

"...I just finished reading the book of monumental connectedness. How is it possible to see through the multitude of names, and more than one for many of them, and the lineages so clearly, and write so interestingly about their history and the world history around them ? It has to come from the honour and respect they all deserve. There is a gentleness in the way you present them, even though on every page one is made familiar with their hardships of relocation, pogroms, and expulsions. I learned so much from reading your book, especially about the expertise of so many Rabbis and rabbinical lineages and how they kept their communities together and flourishing...."

2 M. and G. of New Jersey wrote on 1 April 2007:

" We wanted to wish you a Happy Passover. We hope all is well with you. Our family members continue to be excited by your book. We can't wait to share it with our Seder guests"

3 B.L of Washington, D.C. wrote on 25 May 2007:

“ The book arrived a few days ago. Thank you very much. Your research is very impressive. The amount of information is overwhelming. I am sure I will discover many interesting facts for myself. “

4 Y.M of the YIVO Institute, New York wrote on 18 June 2007:

“We certainly do have your book in our collection. By reviewing the book I have become quite aware of how much effort was spent on the subject as well as the skill required to tackle such a task”

5 E.Z of the London School of Jewish Studies wrote on 16 August 2007:

“It is an absolutely wonderful work of information against a tremendous amount of historical background. It will be an asset to our library. ”

6 B.G of Jerusalem wrote on 20 September 2007:

“ It’s really informative and sheds new light on many issues that I already have a bit of knowledge in. It was great to see how you bridged ancient generations with the recent ones..”

7 L.H.G of Dartmouth College, N.H. wrote on 14 July 2008:

“ I have your *Ancient Lineage* in my hand. It really is a highly readable as well as an informative book – the kind that any Jewish high school should be using to turn kids on to Jewish genealogy. A splendid pedagogical entrée to Jewish history....”

8 M.L.S. of Los Angeles wrote on 8th January 2009:

“ Thank you very much for this prodigious work. I did not understand the depth of your and my family backgrounds until you uncovered them. They deserve the embodiment you have given them. You have made clear a lost panorama of distinguished lives”.

9 R.S. of Sydney NSW wrote on 9th May 2009

“Your book arrived a week ago - and I should have acknowledged receiving it immediately, but wanted to do more than just that - and tell you how very pleased I was to have it. It is really an impressive scholarly piece of work - and your dedication to your task and commitment to record in such detail this family and its history is very moving. And of course it speaks also to the history of our people, all those families and all those generations spread to every corner of the world - such a proud and sad history

10 V.S. of Toronto, Canada wrote on 10th July 2009

“ I recently purchased your book *An Ancient Lineage* and am reading through it. I am enjoying it very much and am most impressed at the research you have done....

Your book has been very valuable for my research. Thank you for publishing it.
“

11 J.M.P of Walnut Creek, California wrote on 20th November 2009:

“ I thoroughly read and enjoyed your first book *An Ancient Lineage*, and I greatly look forward to reading your next two books; I know there will be much in the way of relevant and useful information in them. I have been quite inspired by your research, and have learned a great deal from your book, which has guided me in my own genealogical research. I feel very fortunate to have come upon your book, and even more fortunate to have established contact with you. As a professional writer, author, and genealogist, I hope you don't mind serving in the role of mentor, as well as cousin, and friend, as I try to follow in your footsteps “.

12 D.G. of University of Florida wrote on 6th May 2010:

“ I am currently a Ph.D.student at the University of Florida writing my dissertation on the music of Julius Chajes.. I thoroughly enjoyed your book and am finding it invaluable for placing him in the context of his incredibly talented family. “

13 H.B. of Virginia wrote on 17th November 2011:

“ Your book arrived and I am so glad that you urged me to buy it. It’s delightful and eye-opening. I know a lot but I am learning new things and enjoying your journey..”

14 K.D. of Florida wrote on 19th January 2012:

“I really admire your ability to write books and articles coherently summarizing the results of your work. You have great talent. I understand better how you accumulated 75 cartons of papers. Your book, An Ancient Lineage: European Roots of a Jewish Family, is a huge undertaking. – amazing !”

15 K.D. of Florida wrote again on 25th January 2012 :

“ I'm slowly reading your big book. I just want to tell you that it's marvelous. How did you get to be so clever? It must help to have hundreds of generations of clever, literate ancestors for brain power but my goodness what a huge amount of work you've done. Your talent and dedication are very obvious on these pages. Your book will be appreciated for a long time in the future, rest assured. Congratulations on your huge accomplishment ”

16 N.W. of New Jersey (newly discovered distant cousin) wrote on 8th May 2013:

“ I arrived home about two hours ago and found your book in my mail box. I just spent the last hour reading the first few chapters and skimming through the rest of the book, its 1:25 am now so I need a fresher and clearer mind - which will need to wait until tomorrow, since I wish to internalize your book. Also, since Shvuos is this coming Wednesday and Thursday and I will be in Miami, I plan on bringing it along and reading it on the plane and over the holiday and weekend. I really appreciate this meaningful gift. It holds so much meaning to me as I flip through the pages and see my family name and ancestral background pop up again and again. Now my wife took the book...I hope she doesn't stay up the rest of the night...I know that various family members will line up for the book so it will get passed around.”

17 A.E. (Kristianpoller) wrote from Israel on 3rd June 2013 :

“When you sent me your book a while ago, I looked in it briefly and put it on the shelf, but this weekend I read it from first to last, not every word but enough to make the connections. Its an excellent book and gave me ideas how to present this kind of data in an attractive way.

So, obviously I found the Kristianpoller there but much much more, we are related in so many ways, through the Katzenelenbogen, Berenstein, and all the lineage to the ReMah and Rashi that are in my Kristianpoller (father's father) and in my Biegeleisen (father's mother). The B's are from Baranow-Tarnobzerk and Krakow both are your family location too.

R Meir K. was the Rav of Krystinopol where he got his surname (you have a branch there) All details are on my website

<https://sites.google.com/site/elyasaffamily/>

I asked you once if the Gelles are related to the Gillis in Israel and UK (Prof. Joseph - Weizmann institute - mathematician, Dr. Shmuel - MD killed in a terror attack), this family is my brother-in-law family.”

18 N.W. of New Jersey wrote on 5th June 2013:

“ I have read everything in your book regarding the Wahl families and I must say it is a masterpiece!

Sadly I could not pick up any trace to my family - however hopefully we will get somewhere with Family Finder. DNA results are expected on 6/17 so we are not too far off..”

Family Connections :
Gelles-Horowitz -Chayes
Gelles – Shapiro – Friedman
by Edward Gelles

published in 2008 and 2009 respectively

Comments from Readers' letters

1. M.L.S. of Los Angeles, California wrote on 7th July 2009

“I was away visiting friends over our 4th of July holiday and returned to find your newest book waiting for me. I have leafed through it and it grabs my attention again and again. It has also sent me back to your original hard-bound book to look anew. Your text has become increasingly interesting and connected to the audience. It is fascinating to go through it. Thank you! “.

2 M.R.W. of Dundee, Scotland wrote on 20th August 2009

“I have read your book, though, being tired when I did so, I will need to read it a second time to properly appreciate it. But what a scholarly piece of work it is and what a superb reference book it will make for other genealogists. I also thoroughly enjoyed reading the more narrative chapters - you have a gift for making it all come alive. Between your three books, I, as a non-Jew, have learned a lot. But I will talk to you about specific things when I next phone you.

3 A.H. of Notting Hill, London W2 wrote on 30th August 2009

“Thank you for sending the review of your latest book – we have now both read it and found it very appreciative – even if the reviewer found a detail about which she could display her own knowledge “

[Suzan Wynne reviewed the book for the August 2009 issue of *The Galitzianer*]

4 Y.J.R. of the Jewish Historical Institute, Warsaw wrote (to T.T.) on 9th September 2009

“ Thank you so much for your kind gift of the Gelles book. I am delighted to have a copy of my own : the book is both interesting and helpful.”

5 T.T. of Woodside, California wrote on 15th September 2009

“ Good to have one of the leading genealogists in the world with his own copy of your fine book

6 J.R. of New York wrote on 24th October 2009

“ Reading your newest book at first was a real adventure, with all of the correspondence and pictures. I find myself looking for resemblances family to family....painting a life picture of the rabbis. I am enjoying the process. Good reading. You certainly write in a most engaging manner. I wish we had time together to discuss some of this”.

7 S.R. of Boynton Beach, Florida wrote on 18th November 2009 :

“ I am intrigued by your attention to detail and perseverance in following these leads – qualities which seem essential to this process and which I much admire”

8 A.H. of Notting Hill, W2 wrote on 16th December 2009:

“it is a very good review, and we understand that your books are now correctly placed in the Vienna University Library. You must feel gratified about this. “

[Evelyn Adunka reviewed the book for the Vienna University Judaica Department in December 2009]

9 S.P. of London SW1 wrote on 10th February 2010 :

“ I did read chapter 6 last night and found it fascinating, though a little complicated for one so unused to the complexities of rabbinical and Zionist genealogy and history. Your father was a man of intellect and spirit, qualities that have not been lost on his issue. “

10 JMP of Walnut Creek, California wrote on 13th July 2010:

“I was finally able to sit down and enjoy a thorough read of both of your Family Connections books. Here is my concise 5-word review: interesting, informative, and utterly fascinating! When I have had a chance to adjust back to California time, and compose myself a bit, I will undoubtedly be corresponding with you more about these delightful books. I found them to be very inspirational.”

**Ephemeral & Eternal
Josef Gelles – a brief life**

by Edward Gelles

published 2010

Reviews and Readers' Comments

1 D.S. of Urbino, Italy wrote on 30th January 2010 :

“ I have read the story of your discovery of Josef Gelles with admiration for your assiduity in tracking down these poignant reminders of a world from which both of us hail: the shadow of evil falls across the path of your searching, as do happier things - scholarship, devotedness, human aspirations. I will look at the other documents next, but wanted first to compliment you on your tirelessness.”

2 Dr Eleanora Bergman, Director of the Jewish Historical Institute, Warsaw, wrote on 26th July 2010:

“ ... It will enrich our library and will serve researchers in many fields, family history, local history, Jewish history, holocaust ...”

3 Dr. S.R. of Boynton Beach, Florida wrote on 25th September 2010:

“ Just want to let you know how much I've enjoyed *Ephemeral and Eternal*. I've read it through several times. Somehow the story of our lost cousin Josef and your re-discovery of him has appealed to me on a deep level. It has brought to light certain new insights for me ...”

4 Dr. Penelope Bulloch, Librarian of Balliol College, Oxford wrote on

19th October 2010: “ ...The way in which you have reconstructed your cousin's life from such diverse sources is a model historical study.”

“Meeting my Ancestors: Genealogy, Genes, and Heritage”

by Edward Gelles

published 2011

Readers' Comments

Rabbi Meir Wunder of Jerusalem wrote on 7th May 2011:

I enjoyed reading your new book which the publisher sent me. You are among the first to use the DNA tests in genealogy...

K.D. of Florida, USA wrote on 17th September 2011:

You are doing a wonderful mitzvah for your fascinating ancestors.

I'm reading your book slowly to better absorb the volume of history and genealogy. It must have been exhilarating to find your connections to the rabbinic courts of Europe. How lucky you are to have them and how blessed they are to have you.

The Jewish Journey : A Passage through European History

by Edward Gelles

publishd 2016

Approbation

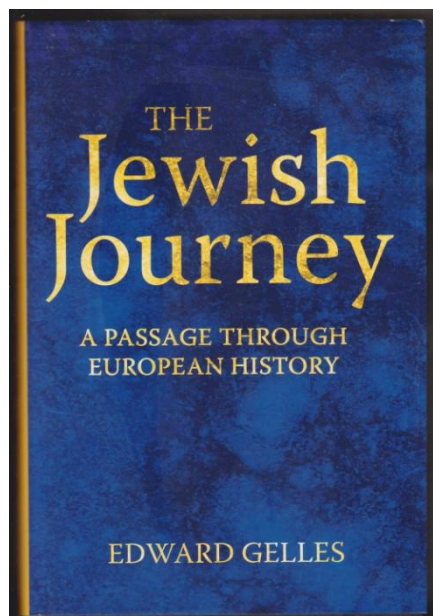
by Jeffrey D. Wexler, www.levitedna.org wrote on 1st January 2016

Dr. Gelles masterfully traces more than a thousand years of Jewish European history through a series of interwoven essays that focus on important Jewish communities and prominent families, many of which Dr. Gelles connects to his own ancestral lines. Through an interdisciplinary approach combining history, anthropology, and traditional genealogical research with the emerging field of genetic genealogy, Dr. Gelles has created a valuable work that will be enjoyed by anyone with an interest in Jewish European history. Dr. Gelles' book will be of special interest to readers seeking insight as to how their DNA test results may evidence their own links to these communities and families, bridging the gaps in the paper trail that prevent the majority of Ashkenazi Jews from tracing their ancestry back to the 18th and earlier centuries.

The Jewish Journey: A Passage through European History

By Edward Gelles

(The Radcliffe Press, 2016)



Edward Gelles was born to liberal Jewish parents in Austria in 1927. They escaped with him to England in mid-1938 following the Anschluss: many relatives vanished without trace in the Holocaust and others were scattered and contacts lost. After schooling in Oxford and London, Edward was elected to a Brackenbury Open Scholarship at Balliol in 1944. His tutor was RP Bell (who was also mine a generation later), and he stayed with

Ronnie for his DPhil.

Edward's parents, Dr David Isaac Gelles (1883-1964), a distinguished lawyer, and Regina Griffel (1900-1954), were born into strictly orthodox Jewish families in Austrian Galicia. But he was brought up in Vienna, geographically, culturally and socially distanced from that background. The gulf between him and orthodox Jewry was very wide by the time he completed his education in England. He knew something of his ancestors, but it was not until he reached three score years and ten that he became seriously interested and embarked on a quest for his roots. Since then he has made up many times over, with a series of scholarly studies, culminating in *The Jewish Journey*, which needs to be read together with his earlier book *An Ancient Lineage. European Roots of a Jewish Family: Gelles-Griffel-Wahl-Chajes-Safier-Loew-Taube* (2006).

TV programmes like *Who Do You Think You Are ?*, popular magazines, and the explosion of online information in recent years, have fuelled enthusiasm for narrow family history studies, but these are often undertaken uncritically and with little appreciation of historical context. The many family trees to be found on subscription sites like *Ancestry.com* are frequently riddled with error, and amateur investigators are inclined to repeat each other's errors. Edward's work is on an altogether superior and critical plane which is interdisciplinary, involving both traditional (ie documentary) and scientific (ie DNA- based) methods, and is placed in historical context.

A full list of Edward's publications with an Introduction may be found on the College website:¹ there is also a brief note there about the *Edward Gelles Papers*, pending their deposit, when there will be full processing and availability to scholars. A long video discussion



with the Master about his work was recorded by Voices from Oxford last year.² The photograph was taken on that occasion. The Master also hosted the official launch of the present book at the Athenaeum on 28

January this year.

Edward's Gelles forbears were Rabbis for centuries; his father's father was Rabbi Nahum Uri Gelles, Chief Rabbi of Solotwina in Galicia for 50 years, who married Esther Weinstein. Their ancestry shows Edward to be a 6th generation descendant of Chief Rabbi Shmuel Helman of Metz, a 7th generation descendant of Chief Rabbi Isaac Horowitz of Hamburg, and a descendant of the 16th century Chief Rabbi Mordecai Jaffe of Prague and Chief Rabbi Samuel

Judah Katzenellenbogen of Padua and Venice. On the maternal side, the Griffels were businessmen who also had connections with ancient rabbinical clans. Edward descends through both his parents from Saul Wahl (1545-1617) son of Chief Rabbi Samuel Judah Katzenellenbogen: he was a key figure in 16th century Poland-Lithuania, and tradition says that he held power during an hiatus between Kings of Poland. Saul Wahl's progeny include Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, Karl Marx, Isaiah Berlin, and Yehudi Menuhin. Wahl was also a descendant of the 11th century scholar Rashi of Troyes, a possible descendant of King David. So Edward's extended family tree is rich with distinction.

An Ancient Lineage set out to map these distinguished roots going back for many hundreds of years. *The Jewish Journey* expands into a wider study and takes in many of the most important Ashkenazi rabbinic families (which repeatedly interacted with each other) and is to a considerable extent a study of Ashkenazi Jewry, throwing light on the genetic admixture acquired by them and other Jews in the course of their European migrations, persecutions, ghettos, expulsions, inbreeding by intermarriage, and conversions. This gives valuable background to the history of Europe, and is a scholarly tour de force on genealogy in broad perspective. It invites comparison with the magnum opus³ of another distinguished Balliol genealogist, Sir Anthony Wagner (Balliol 1927).

Many with Jewish strands to their ancestry seeking to follow those strands back into the past will find specific connections in these books. Of even wider interest to genealogists however are the methodology, the complexities of Jewish onomastics (the origin, history, and use of proper names), and the use of DNA analysis in genealogy, a rapidly developing field.

And there is much food for broad historical reflection: the essay on Davidic descent, to pick but one Chapter, is a fascinating commentary on a grey area between legend and documented fact. Whether what Biblical scholars have postulated about King David and his genealogy is myth or truth matters much less than the reality of its impact. The phrase "the divine right of Kings" will prompt anybody with a passing interest in English history to think of Charles I and our Civil War, but it is an ancient notion which underlies a span of mediaeval and early modern history which is wide in both time and place: it has roots in David's anointment as a God-ordained monarch. And the Tree of Jesse, depicting the descent of Jesus from King David's father is a frequent theme in mediaeval Christian art.

We congratulate Edward, and are glad that the College will be permanently associated with his work, and the whole field of Jewish genealogy through the deposit of his Papers in our Historic Collections Centre at St Cross Church.

John Jones

1.<http://archives.balliol.ox.ac.uk/Modern%20Papers/gelles.asp>

2.<http://www.voicesfromoxford.org/video/the-jewish-journey/639>

3.[AR Wagner ,*English Genealogy* \(OUP 1960,2ndEdn 1972\).](#)