

# **Talking about my Work in March 2015**

## **Edward Gelles**

**I have something to say about the millennial history of the Jews in Europe. First of all, I would like to introduce myself and my books, a list of which can be found on the internet.**

**My name is Edward Gelles. I was born in Vienna in 1927 and I came to England with my parents in 1938, shortly after the annexation of Austria.**

**The formative influences of my early childhood included learning about the myths and legends of the Jews, Greeks, and Romans. I enjoyed regular Sunday visits to Viennese museums and readings of German poetry, and later, in my teens, English literature and a wider study of European history. I completed my education at Balliol College, Oxford, where I was a Brackenbury scholar and obtained degrees in physical Chemistry, which remained my primary interest for a decade.**

**The main purpose of my talk is to explain how a search for my ancestral background that has occupied me for the past 15 years gradually led me to a better appreciation of the Jewish role in the history of Europe, not only in the evolution of our common Western culture but also of the ensuing ethnic admixtures. In other words, a search for family roots has become a much wider study linking Jewish genealogy with European history and genetic anthropology.**

**My parents came from orthodox Jewish families. My father's people had been rabbis for centuries and in fact hailed from millennial rabbinic lines. Their names were Gelles, Jaffe, Halpern, Weinstein, Horowitz, Shapiro, Margoloth, Loew, Kohen, and Halevi. My mother's immediate forebears were wealthy entrepreneurs whose ancestry also included notable historical figures. Griffel, Wahl, and Chayes, looked back to some of the same rabbis of the past as my paternal Gelles line. DNA tests confirm that my father and my mother were indeed distant cousins.**

**Our in-laws are among a few dozen families that formed the bedrock of the Jewish people living in central and eastern Europe over the past millennium. Quite a few of these so-called Ashkenazi Jews had connections with the medieval Kalonymos family and Sefardic Jews of the Iberian peninsula such as the Shem Tov Halevi and Benveniste.**

**My father, and his younger brother and sister were all doctors of law of Vienna University. They were from a generation that broke away from their orthodox origins and their chief spiritual influence was probably Moses Mendelssohn, the philosopher of the 18<sup>th</sup> century German enlightenment. But they also carried with them to their legal careers the legacy of a rabbinic ancestry devoted to Jewish ethical teaching. My maternal ancestors, the Chief Rabbis of renaissance Padua and Venice and the scion of their line, Saul Wahl, formed a part of my recent studies, and their descendancy reaches through centuries of European history to the present day.**

**The Jewish Theological Seminary in New York has a fragment of the Records of the Rabbinical Court of Brody in Galicia from the early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century This manuscript opened up searches for my paternal Gelles line. On my mother's side, my ancestor Saul Wahl, came alive in the pages of the manuscript written by an 18<sup>th</sup> century descendant that is in the Bodleian Library at Oxford.**

**From these starting points I followed the course of traditional genealogical research - studying personal and property records in archives all over Europe, the Records and Memorial Books of individual Jewish communities, tombstone inscriptions, town censuses, taxation, school, and business records, ships' manifests, searches of the rabbinical literature and specialist monographs, and ephemera such as old newspapers and private correspondence. These extensive searches gradually built up a picture of many families linked by intermarriages during their millennial migrations across Europe.**

**My first book called “An Ancient Lineage : European Roots of a Jewish Family” gives a detailed account of searches for my paternal line going back to the early 18<sup>th</sup> century in Galicia where Moses Gelles was a scholar of the prestigious study group called the *Brody Klaus*. In tracing this descent I came across my 18<sup>th</sup> century ancestors Shmuel Helman (Halpern) and Isaac Horowitz who were respectively Chief Rabbis of Metz and Hamburg, while further back in the 16<sup>th</sup> century my trail leads to several Chief Rabbis of Prague - Jaffe, Loew, Horowitz, and Chayes.**

**My maternal grandmother was a Wahl, of the old Katzenellenbogen from Hesse-Nassau in Germany who later flourished in Italy and Poland.**

**Her ancestor Saul Wahl was not only of some importance in the 16<sup>th</sup> century Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth but also had distinguished progeny, including in later generations Moses Mendelssohn and his grandson Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, Karl Marx, Martin Buber, Yehudi Menuhin, Isaiah Berlin, and many others.**

**One of my great-grandmothers was a Chayes, whose millennial journey from Portugal, to Provence, Bohemia, Poland, Tuscany, and Austria continues today in America and Israel. Oscar Chayes of Brody was a Chess Grand Master, Guido Chayes of Livorno and his son were ennobled by the last two Kings of Portugal, Zvi Perez Chajes became Chief Rabbi of Vienna between the two world wars, while the composer Julius Chajes and the Harvard law professor, Abram Chayes, were among other notable members of this family.**

**Many cousins from the various branches that I have mentioned achieved distinction in European public life, scholarship, and the arts, and the stories of their lives are woven into the tapestry of my ancient family background.**

**I followed up this book, which was seven years in the making, with four paperbacks, at roughly annual intervals.**

**The first provides more detail on Gelles-Horowitz-Chajes links. From medieval Iberian origins the Halevi Horowitz and the Chajes followed similar routes to Prague and then to points further east.**

**The second paperback is on Gelles-Shapiro-Friedman links. The Shapiro and Friedman are also connected with other ancestral lines such as the Katzenellenbogen. This book contains valuable material on Jewish life in Vienna largely gleaned from contemporary newspapers with biographical sketches of my father, who was an advocate and a Zionist, and of my grandfather Nahum Uri Gelles, who was a Chasidic Rabbi and adherent of Grand Rabbi Israel Friedman of Chortkow. Our Gelles rabbinic line was linked by marriage with that of Rabbi Pinchas Shapiro of Koretz, one of the most important 18<sup>th</sup> century Chasidic leaders.**

**My third paperback is hardly more than a pamphlet in length, but it is very important to me. “Ephemeral & Eternal : a brief life of Josef Gelles” records how I reconstructed the lives of two first cousins from a number of old postcards which recently turned up on an e-Bay web site. I was able to buy some of the cards that were written in the 1930’s. Josef and Giza Gelles vanished in the Holocaust and their very existence was previously unknown to me.**

**The emphasis of my fourth paperback “Meeting my Ancestors” is on Solotwina in Galicia where my grandfather and his father-in-law Hirsch Leib Weinstein had been Chief Rabbis. It also deals further with the cousins descended from Rabbi Pinchas Shapiro of Koretz whose daughter married Rabbi Shmuel ben Mordecai Gelles. The common Gelles ancestry of my paternal line and of a descendant of this Polonsky branch was confirmed by Y-DNA matches.**

**Over the past years I have published forty articles in historical and genealogical magazines. I have now incorporated revised versions of some of these essays in my sixth and last book which will be published in the near future. It is called “The Jewish Journey : A Passage through European History”.**

**The millennial journey of the Jews across Europe and their integral part in its cultural and indeed ethnic history is presented in a loosely connected sequence of impressions. On this journey we meet Romans, Goths, Franks, Norsemen, Moors, and many others. We go through times of cultural and ethnic admixture and periods of persecution and endogamous inward looking communities.**



**The book begins with the origins of Charlemagne's line and connections with the Jewish Princes of Narbonne, and proceeds to some Sefardic origins in Spain and Portugal. After many centuries of a glorious multi-ethnic Iberian history came persecutions and Inquisition which resulted in the flight of many Jews to the Low Countries and to the Ottoman Empire and in conversion and intermarriage of many of those who remained. The story of the House of Mendes and the career of Joseph Nasi, Duke of Naxos falls in this period. Then we have a vignette of renaissance Venice and migration to Vienna, Prague, and Cracow. The story of David and Chaim Gans takes us from Bohemia, to England and America in the days of Queen Elizabeth I. The glory days of Prague's Jewish community are recalled in the life of Rabbi Judah Loew and his contemporaries. From Padua to Poland we review the history of Saul Wahl and the legends surrounding his life, including the mooted affair of his daughter with the Swedish Prince Sigismund Vasa who became King of Poland in 1587. There are chapters on Jewish community life in eastern Europe, and on Ashkenazi roots in Germany.**

**Important movements in the 18<sup>th</sup> century include the conversion to Catholicism of many Frankists, the heretical followers of Jacob Frank, many of whom later married into the Polish nobility, and the beginnings of the Enlightenment in western Europe, side by side with the flourishing ultra orthodox Chasidic movement in Poland and beyond.**

**Jewish and Christian admixture is further exemplified by the story of Trieste, an ethnic melting pot of Austrians, Italians, Croats, Jews, and Greeks.**

**A chapter on Jewish names and naming customs introduces the subject of onomastics which is an essential part of Jewish genealogical research. The final chapters are devoted to the increasingly important subjects of genetic genealogy and anthropology. I have applied the results of commercial DNA tests on myself, my close cousins, and scores of other people in conjunction with traditional methodology to confirm, support, or disprove numerous historical findings.**

**The haplogroup revealed by a simple Y-DNA test can point to a place in the genetic history of the human race. Specifically, it might indicate a Jewish priestly (Kohanic) ancestor of an unbroken father to son line. Comparing Y-DNA test results for two men may immediately disprove a mooted common ancestry or may confirm a common paternal ancestor and allow an estimate of his generational distance.**

**Several commercial companies offer autosomal DNA tests which find ancestral DNA on both father's and mother's side (irrespective of sex) and compare the results with those of others on their data base. The size of the total matched DNA and the largest shared segments point to the closeness of genealogically significant relationships. For example, I found that I have autosomal DNA matches indicating some common 18<sup>th</sup> century ancestry with a group of people who have proven descent from a nexus of prominent families from the Rhineland that included Guggenheim, Oppenheimer, Wertheimer, Rothschild, Salomon, and others.**

**The importance of these tests for genealogy is matched by their application to genetic anthropology. Numerous models have been developed and are becoming accessible on different web sites which relate an individual's autosomal DNA test results to different sets of bio-geographical reference groups. It has therefore now become quite easy to obtain a rough and ready picture of a person's genetic origins.**

**In line with major genetic studies I have found that numerous Ashkenazi Jews in my wider family circle show a well defined genetic admixture of Eastern and European DNA, determined by the circumstances in which we encountered other ethnic groups on our journey and largely set during a so-called genetic bottleneck in the middle ages.**

**The study of genetic admixtures thus connects directly both to the genealogy and history of individuals and their families and to the influence of the major European migrations extending over many thousands of years.**

**In common with many Ashkenazi Jews my genetic mixture reflects origins in ancient Mesopotamia spreading to Anatolia and the Caucasus and to Egypt and the Arabian peninsula. But our long history in the time of Greek influence and Roman Empire extended our admixture to the entire mediterranean littoral and gave our genetic makeup a larger south European affinity than we generally show with central and particularly east European DNA, where in more recent centuries ghettos and endogamous shtetls inhibited intermarriage.**

**Italy and the Iberian peninsula, and south western France, Greece, and the afore mentioned Anatolia and Caucasus feature among origins of my personal genetic admixture which also shows a little Moorish influence, perhaps from our sojourn in Spain, traces of Scandinavian affinity, and DNA matches indicating a small North Atlantic element from old interactions in Normandy, the Low Countries, and the British Isles.**