

Some Jewish family names and their origins

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The study of family names and their evolution through the ages is an essential prerequisite for Jewish genealogical research. This essay is about some of the names in my wider family circle.

Well over a thousand years ago Greek, Hebrew, and Catalan versions of the “good name, **Kalonymos**, **Shem Tov**, and **Bonnet**, were passed down the generations in Southern France and the Spanish March. The names implied distinguished and ancient descent.

Many of the rabbinic dynasties that formed the bedrock of Ashkenazi Jewry took family names from the towns they came from in the middle ages. For example, the **Treivish**, **Shapiro**, **Halpern**, **Katzenellenbogen**, and **Landau** originally hailed from Trier, Speyer, Heilbronn, and eponymous towns in Germany. But most Ashkenazi Jews were known by patronymics. This practice was part of their ancient naming tradition *.

In later times first names were adopted as family names, for example the German Hirsch, Wolff, Baer, and Loew (from Zvi, Zeev, Dov, and Aryeh, being the Hebrew names of stag, wolf, bear, and lion).

In some medieval towns residents were called after the names of their houses. Examples are the *red shield* of the house of **Rothschild** in Frankfurt, the *goose* on the house sign of the **Gans**, and the *ox* that in German and Hebrew gave its name to the **Ochs** and **Schor** families.

* ben / bat = Hebrew for *son of* / *daughter of*
bar = Aramaic for *son of* ,
ibn = Arabic for *of the tribe of* (used by some Sephardic Jews in Spain)

Nicknames referring to personal characteristics were common from earliest times. Adaptation to the languages of different countries are shown by the medieval Hebrew Chalfan or **Halfan** (money changer) that became Wechsler or **Wexler** in German. The Jewish Wachsman or **Waxman** (candle maker or wax chandler) became Voskoboinik in Russian. There are many examples of such occupational name origins.

Different spelling customs and name suffixes characteristic of German, Czech, Polish, Lithuanian, and Russian Jews provide obvious clues for genealogical research.

Matronymics within old lineages may pose peculiar problems to genealogists which DNA studies may sometimes clarify. For example, **Gelles** has been taken as a matronymic of the German medieval girl's name Geyle or Gele (yellow or fair haired).

It was not until the end of the 18th and the early decades of the 19th century that the governments of central and eastern Europe were led by the exigencies of taxation and military conscription to impose compulsory registration of permanent family names on their Jewish subjects. In earlier times Ashkenazi Jews, living in relatively small inward-looking communities, found traditional seemingly haphazard naming practice quite compatible with interest in their own and their neighbours' family connections.

Lineage (*yichus*) has been of importance to Jews since biblical times. Its religious significance is indicated by the age-old phrase "may the merit of our ancestors protect us" with its implied obligation to be a credit to one's forebears. Rabbinic families in particular valued their lineage and tried to improve it by marriage. There were, of course, some distinguished rabbis or scholars of modest background, but very often they would strive to ally their children to one of these families. The recognition of inbred moral and intellectual qualities was part of

the ethos of the Ashkenazi rabbinical elite. It led at times to the establishment of family dynasties in which rabbinical posts and other appointments passed unchallenged to sons or sons-in-law. It was a common occurrence for a promising pupil to marry his teacher's daughter and in due course to inherit his father-in-law's post. This preferment was not so much an exercise of nepotism as an accepted form of recognising talent and honouring the memory of predecessors. The name of a son-in-law might be changed to that of the father-in-law but occasionally the two names would run side by side for several generations, as for example with **Munk / Horowitz**

Incidentally, Chief Rabbi Meshullam Issachar Horowitz of Stanislau (1808-1888), avowed that only members of his family should ever occupy his seat, and his dynasty did survive until the second world war. Furthermore, about a dozen little *shtetls* around Stanislau, including Bohorodzany and Solotwina, often had rabbis who were Horowitz or were related to them by marriage.

Arranged marriages between rabbinic families of similar standing are exemplified by the union of Rabbi Samuel ben Mordecai Gelles, a grandson of Moses Gelles of Brody with the only daughter of Rabbi Pinchas Shapiro of Koretz. The progeny of this marriage adopted the name of **Polonsky** after the town of Polonnoye in the Ukraine.

Rabbis of pan-European standing whose influence reached across the continent included my 18th century ancestor Samuel Helman, the Chief Rabbi of Mannheim and later of Metz. He gave one of his daughters in marriage to the son of Chief Rabbi David **Mirels Fraenkel** of Berlin, another to Rabbi Eliezer Katzenellenbogen of Hagenau and Bamberg, a third to Rabbi Isaac **Rapaport** of Hanau, and a fourth to a grandson of Chief Rabbi Naftali Hirsch **Katz** of Frankfurt and Posen, who was of the ancient Kohanic (sacerdotal) line connected to the Horowitz and to the famous Rabbi Judah **Loew** of Prague. One daughter of Samuel Helman's eldest son, Rabbi Moshe

of Glogau, married Jehiel Michael, a son of Asher Lemel **Halevi Segal**, the Chief Rabbi of Glogau and Eisenstadt, and another daughter was the wife of Moses Gelles, a grandson of the Brody scholar of that name. A daughter of Samuel Helman's younger son, Uri Feivush, who was in turn Chief Rabbi of Hanau, Lissa, Bonn, and Cologne, married Samuel, the son of Ezekiel Landau, the Chief Rabbi of Prague.

The progeny of Samuel Helman adopted the first name of Helman as a family name in the form of **Hillman**. Samuel Helman of Metz was traditionally taken to be the son of Israel Halpern of Krotoschin and grandson of Nathan Nata Shapiro of Cracow. He was in any case undoubtedly of the Halpern-Katzenellenbogen family nexus.

His contemporary Moses Menachem Mendel **Levush** of Brody married a daughter of Rabbi S(hmuel) Gelles, and was thereafter known as Moses Gelles. The use of an epithet such as Levush to indicate descent from the author of an important rabbinical work was quite common in certain parts before the era of obligatory family names. In this case the ancestor was most probably Mordecai **Jaffe**, the 16th century Chief Rabbi of Grodno, Prague, and Posen and author of *Levushim* (Rabbinical robes of learning). The immediate progeny of Moses Gelles were known by either or both names of Levush and Gelles.

The adoption of a mother's family name by her children was not unusual, particularly when her family was perceived to be of higher status by lineage, scholarship, or wealth. When Beile, a daughter of Isaac Horowitz (1715-1767), the Chief Rabbi of Brody, Glogau, and Hamburg, married Rabbi Menachem Mendel **Rubin** of Lesniow and Lesko some of their issue opted to be known as Horowitz.

The first name of a female relative had been used as a second name in earlier times by Chief Rabbi Joel **Sirkes** of Cracow, whose mother

was Sirka **Jaffe**, and Rabbi Samuel **Eidels** of Chelm, Lublin, and Ostrog, who adopted the first name of his mother-in-law in appreciation of her support. A mother's first name was used as an epithet for Rabbi Aryeh Leib *Sarah's*, an 18th century Chasidic mystic.

The family name of Professor Sigmund **Freud** appears to have been adopted by his forebears from **Freidel**, the Yiddish first name of their early 18th century Galician ancestress

Occasionally a father-in-law's first name was added as an epithet, as in the case of Rabbi Moshe Reb Zelig's of Brody who married a daughter of Rabbi Ahron Zelig ben Yehuda Zundel Segal. An acronym of Rabbi Moshe Reb Zelig's (**Ramraz**) became the family name of his descendants. His son, Rabbi Yehuda Leib Zundel Ramraz was a grandfather of Shalom **Rokeah** (1779-1855), the first of the Rokeah Grand Rabbis of Belz, and of Moshe Levush aka Gelles, a great-grandson of Moses Gelles.

In old families the descendants of siblings sometimes adopted different second names for their respective lines (e.g. **Fraenkel**, **Ornstein** and **Ashkenazi**). Changes of name could distinguish progeny of a particularly important member of the main line or of the branch of a family that established itself in a new location.

Thus, the descendants through the male line of the Maharam of Padua, Meir Katzenellenbogen, were known by the eponymous name of the German town of their origin. The Maharam's grandson, was known as Saul **Wahl**, and his Wahl-Katzenellenbogen descendants retained the epithet as a family name (Wahl meaning the "Italian" in medieval German)

The noted Chief Rabbi of Cracow, Abraham Joshua **Heschel**, son of a Rabbi Heschel had progeny that used the Heschel name. This notable Rabbi was descended through his father and mother from Saul Wahl

and Saul Wahl's grandfather Meir Katzenellenbogen. Abraham Joshua Heschel's son was referred to simply as Yissachar Ber of Cracow. The latter's son was known as Isaac **Krakower**, after the city of his birth, though he became Chief Rabbi of Brody and the progenitor of a separate family called **Babad**.

This name was an acronym of the Hebrew for "sons of the Av Beth Din" (head of the rabbinical court) and rendered in the vernacular as **Rabinowitz**. So his family are sometimes referred to as Rabinowitz-Babad.

The Horowitz family are believed to be a sprig of the Shem Tov Halevi of Gerona (Levites of the good name) who were allied with a number of other ancient families such as the **Benveniste**. From the Spanish March and Provence a family of these Levites found their way to Bohemia in the late 15th century and settled at the little town of Horovice near Prague from which they took their new name.

The Halevi Ish Horowitz (the Levites, men from Horovice) flourished in Prague and subsequently in Cracow and elsewhere. They married with other leading Prague families.

Of particular interest in the present study are their marriages with the Chayoth (**Chayes**) family, whose Isaac ben Abraham Chayes had been a Chief Rabbi of Prague and whose sister was the first wife of the famous Rabbi Judah Loew.

The Chayes family, like the Horowitz, had ancient roots in Iberia and Provence. A branch of this family were called **Altschuler** after the Prague synagogue they helped to build with stones of their old prayer house which they had brought from Provence (*Schul* = the German word for school, which is Yiddish for synagogue).

A daughter of Judah Loew and Mirl Chayes-Altschuler married Isaac ben Samson Katz, of the millennial sacerdotal family. From the

offspring of that marriage there descended Katzenellenbogen, **Margolies**, **Fischel**, **Zausmer**, and Horowitz lines. In the glory period of Prague Jewry that extended into the first part of the 17th century Gelles are also recorded in that city and on its tombstones. One tombstone refers to the honourable Rabbi Mendel, son of Zalman Gelles, emissary of the *Beth Din* (the Rabbinical Court). Other tombstone inscriptions refer to Gelles Katz. The Katz (**HaKohen**) connect a number of families that mingled in 16th century Prague and came together again in 18th and 19th century Galicia.

My mother's family name of **Griffel**, being the German word for the writing implement called stylus in Latin, suggests that they had an ancestral maker or user of the same. The names of my maternal grandmother and great-grandmothers were Wahl, Chayes, and **Safier**. Close cousins on this side of the family included Low and **Taube**.

In view of the variety of ways surnames developed over the centuries, it is not surprising that there are numerous instances of families sharing the same or a very similar surname, who are not closely related. For example, if Gelles is a matronymic indicating descent from Gele or Geyle, a not uncommon German /Jewish name, various families could be descended from different ladies called Geyle. Referring again to another example from my family, our cousinly Gelles-Shapiro line adopted the family name of Polonsky after the town of Polonnoye in the Ukraine, but there are other Polonsky families of quite different origin.

The derivation of some of the above mentioned "family" names can be categorised as follows:

Ancient descent

Kalonymos, Shem Tov, HaKohen, Halevi

from kings, prophets, ancient priests and their attendants

Babad , Levush , etc *from specific distinguished rabbis*

Country of origin

- Fraenkel *from Germany (Frank)*
pan-European branches including Teomim-Fraenkel,
Mirels-Fraenkel, and Fraenkel-Heller- Wallerstein
- Wahl *from Italy (descent from Katzenellenbogen of Padua*
and Venice)

Towns of origin

- Katzenellenbogen, Treivish, Shapiro , Halpern, Landau, Horowitz,
Krakower, Polonsky – see text
- Luria *of Italian origin and linked with Katzenellenbogen,*
Shapiro, and Treivish back to Kalonymos
- Epstein *after the town of Eppstein and perhaps descended like*
the Horowitz from Shem Tov Halevi and Benveniste
- Oppenheim(er) and Wertheim(er) *after Oppenheim and Wertheim*
in the Rhineland
- Rapaport *from the Renaissance union of German Rapa [raven]*
and Italian family from Porto
- Zausmer *from Jewish name for Polish town of Sandomierz*

Other Toponymics

- Popper *after the river Poprad (Popper)*
- Tauber *after the river Tauber*

House signs

- Rothschild, Gans, Schor - see text
- Stern, Spiegel, Schloss and many others derived from house names
in Frankfurt

Occupational connections

- Griffel – see text
- Safier . *from sapphire*
[a sapphire was one of the 12 precious stones set in the ancient
high priest's breast plate symbolic of one of the 12 tribes of Israel

From a male first name

Hillman - *from the first name Helman* - see text

Ramraz - *acronym of first names* - see text

Marx - *derivations include adaptation from first name Mordecai*

Benveniste *Sephardic first name and also family name*

e.g. Benveniste ibn Benveniste of Saragossa, fl. ca 1200, held the Jewish title of Nasi and was an envoy to the King of Morocco

From a female first name

Freud - see text

Eidels - see text

Margolies [Margulies, Margolioth]

from Margole [Pearl] , daughter of Naftali Hirsch Shor

Matronymic

Sirkes - see text

Taube - *child of Taube*

(German -Yiddish girl's name meaning dove)

ditto the name Taubes and Taubman,

*but the latter can have other derivations (the German word *taub* means *deaf*)*

Gelles [Gelles, Gellis, Gelis, etc]

from child of Geyle [medieval German-Jewish girl's name meaning the fair - haired]

but see below for other derivations of the name

Chayes *from child of Chaye*

but according to the legend of this ancient rabbinic family, who trace their name back to their Portuguese and Provencal roots before they came to Prague and thence to Galicia and became known as Chayes (Chajes), their original Hebrew name of Chayyut was a nickname with the meaning "wild animal" which was given to four

brothers whose commonly used first names were those of the four animals, namely the lion (Aryeh), the stag (Zvi), the wolf (Zeev) and the bear (Dov)

Miscellaneous

Altschuler - see text

Loew *from the lion, symbol of the tribe of Judah*

Jaffe *Hebrew meaning “beautiful” with various spellings ancient family in medieval Spain and Northern Italy, in the 15th century to Bohemia and thence to Poland Mordecai Jaffe of Prague whose descendants had a variety of names, viz Jaffe, Levush (as in Gelles-Levush) and Itzig (as in the family of the 18th century Court Jew Daniel Itzig)*

More on Gelles name origins

Transliteration from the Hebrew into the vernacular produced variant spellings of my family name in 17th to 20th century Jewish and civil records. These included Gelles, Gellis, Geles, Gelis, Guelis, or Gillies. These variants within one and the same family may confuse latter day readers but was fully understood within Jewish communities. The principal reference works on Jewish onomastics (such as those by Beider and Guggenheimer) take the Gelles name to be a matronymic of the medieval German or Yiddish Geyle or Gele. I have no doubt that some Gelles families are indeed descended from an ancestral Geyle. Such a family may be the Gellis from Grodno who emigrated to the Holy Land and have now been there for over ten generations (see my first book, *An Ancient Lineage*, London 2006, pp 317-319).

My historical reading indicates that some Gelles ancestors flourished in 16th to 18th century Prague. Some of these Gelles later moved to Lithuania. So did Jaffe descendants of Mordecai Jaffe of Prague. The Levush, as he was known after the title of his magnum opus, became

in turn Chief Rabbi of Grodno in Lithuania, Prague in Bohemia, and Posen in Silesia. Gelles and Jaffe were both in Grodno, moved north to Kretinga, Gorzd and other towns near the Baltic coast, to Memel in East Prussia, then westwards to Silesia and Germany. Around 1700 some Lithuanian Jews went south to Galicia. Among these were Gelles who flourished in Brody for a couple of centuries, and spread further afield to the Ukraine, the Bukowina, Austria, Hungary and the Burgenland, Moldavia, and to Odessa on the Black Sea. The incidence and approximate dates of the Gelles name in central and eastern Europe is shown on a chart in my latest book *The Jewish Journey*, London 2016, chapter 20 (1).

Tracing my Gelles ancestors back from Bohemia becomes more speculative and so does the derivation of the Gelles name. The migration patterns of related families suggests that the European part of our millennial migrations in earliest times began in Italy and the Rhineland, the Iberian peninsula and southern France, and that the migrations of the Norsemen, the history of the crusades, and the expulsions of Jews from Spain and Portugal were major factors in taking us to Holland and Britain in the west and to eastern Europe including the Ottoman Empire in the east.

Possible linchpins in our journey from the historical and onomastic perspective may include St Gilles (between Nimes and Arles) in the south of France, where there was a Jewish rabbinical yeshivah, and the nearby Abbey of Gellone (St Guilhem-le-Desert) associated with the name of Charlemagne's cousin William of Gellone aka Guillaume d'Orange (755-812), Count of Toulouse, who was a grandson of Charles Martel. His lineage, according to ancient writings, was believed to have been linked to that of descendants of Jewish exilarchs from Baghdad who were of royal Davidic descent (1, chapter 1).

My paternal Gelles forebears in later times were related to a nexus of families descendant from Samuel Oppenheimer whose geographical origins included the land between the old Duchy of Guelders - Gelderland - and North Rhine-Westphalia – see reference 1, chapter 15 and notes on Cleves and on Heinrich Heine’s connections through his maternal van Geldern..

The name of Gelles with variant spellings was found in the British Isles from the time of the Norman conquest and seem to have had several different origins. Possible links to the Low Countries appear to be of particular interest in so far as my ancestral background shows traces of early genetic connections that have so far not been fully explored by traditional genealogical methodology. The chart 20.1 in *The Jewish Journey* shows my ancestral origins across Europe as derived from autosomal DNA tests by FamilyTreeDNA. I go into more detail of my genetic admixture in a later chapter, but the chart suggests that my DNA matches in the United Kingdom and the coast line of Northern France and the Low Countries, are genetically significant but go back many hundreds of years.

This story is continued in essays such as “Two Oxford Alumni : A.D. 1450 and 1950“ that are to be found in my collected papers on the web site of Balliol College Archives and Manuscripts (2).

References

- (1) Edward Gelles, *The Jewish Lineage : A Passage through European History* (I.B.Tauris, 2016).
- (2) Edward Gelles, *Collected Papers*, Balliol College Archives & Manuscripts.