

Leading Jewish families related to the Grand Sanhedrin of the Emperor Napoleon I

by Edward Gelles

In the early years of the 19th century Napoleon I decided to summon religious and secular leaders of Jewish communities to a meeting in Paris in order to integrate the administration of widespread communities which had come under his imperial rule. This conference was held in 1807 - 08 and was called "Grand Sanhedrin" after the Hebrew governing council of ancient times that comprised 71 members.

The list of delegates who attended the Grand Sanhedrin can be found on the web site of GenAmi (the Jewish Genealogy Association).

One of the delegates summoned to this conference was Rabbi Naphthali Hirsch Katzenellenbogen (1750 – 1823) who was a close relative of my paternal great-grandfather Rabbi David Isaac Gelles of Glina and Brody (ca. 1790 – 1868). They were first cousins once removed - both descended from Chief Rabbi Shmuel Helman of Metz (1670 – 1764).

My grandfather was Chief Rabbi Nahum Uri Gelles of Solotvina (Narayov 1852 – Vienna 1934) . His children included my father Dr David Itzig Gelles (Kudrynce 1883 - Vienna 1964).

Since my early childhood I admired a fine miniature in oil of Napoleon I which was displayed on my father's desk together with several smaller mementos of the period.

I was not provided with any provenance for the miniature and sadly all items were lost when the contents of our London flat (6 Queens Court, Queensway, W2) were sold after my mother's death in 1954.

It is not inconceivable that this fine miniature was a memento that could have passed from Naphthali Hirsch Katzenellenbogen to David Isaac Gelles, to Nahum Uri Gelles, and then to my father.

NOTE

Papers of Edward Gelles (Balliol College Archives & Manuscripts)

A18- Some Family Connections with Wahl – Katzenellenbogen

A 39 - Chief Rabbi Shmuel Helman of Metz and his descendants