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Successful Quest for Ancestors in Aleppo and Baghdad and for Kinsmen in Calcutta

by Lucien Gubbay

After more than 20 years of sporadic research carried out with the help of others, I can now report the success of my quest to trace the mutual relationships of the members of the Gubbay family of Aleppo, to identify their Baghdadi ancestors, and to find a link to their relatives in Calcutta. This article describes some of the methods and sources used and summarizes the results obtained.

It took me a long time to chart this family lineage, because I have no training in genealogy, lack adequate Arabic and Hebrew language skills, and applied myself to the task only intermittently. What also made the search difficult was the indifference displayed by my father's generation to family relationships. Some enterprising Gubbays already had left Aleppo for Europe and the Americas by the early years of the 20th century. The remainder, all British subjects, was expelled from Ottoman Syria upon the outbreak of World War 1 in 1914 and took refuge in Egypt. Some eventually moved from Egypt to the West while others returned to Aleppo after the war.

The Gubbays, who had left for Egypt and the West, took no further interest in those who went back to Aleppo in the early 1920s. The new Europeans looked only to the future and decisively turned their backs on all aspects of their past lives. The less Western-leaning members of the family, who had returned to Aleppo and remained there until driven out by the anti-Israel agitation of 1947, knew little of their cousins in the West until they were made aware of them through this research. Also, Gubbays who migrated to Argentina before the days of easy travel and communication lost touch with and were forgotten by the rest of the family. Their descendants knew nothing of other Gubbays in the world, and I was told that one father lamented to his three daughters that they were the very last of the Gubbays.

First Stages of Research

The first stages of the search were comparatively straightforward. The Gubbays of Aleppo were all British-protected subjects, mentioned frequently in consular correspondence now held in the British Public Records Office at Kew.¹ Nevertheless, locating many isolated scraps of information and then assembling them into a coherent record proved to be an arduous and lengthy process. The earliest Gubbay identified in Aleppo was Reuben Gubbay, who lived in the second half of the 18th century and had worked there as *dragoman* (high-status commercial interpreter) for the British Levant Company before making his own fortune.

I used family memories (often distorted) in conjunction with mainly British documents, with occasional forays into other records such as the Ottoman Customs Register, to build up a complete picture of the Gubbay family of Aleppo

from the late 18th century to its first mass exodus in 1914. I also traced the family's many descendants living all over the world.

The publication of preliminary findings in *The Scribe: Journal of Babylonian Jewry* and in my books, *Origins* and *Two Worlds*, stimulated a further trickle of information from previously unknown family members, which enabled me to complete the survey down to the final destruction of Aleppo's Jewish community in 1947. The last and very valuable cache of information reached me only in 2007, this time from a previously missing branch of the family now living in Brazil. As a result of this further input, I was able to fit a total of well over 700 names of Aleppo Gubbays and their descendants onto a family tree and to satisfy myself that this list is now reasonably complete and that all the Aleppo Gubbays identified so far belong to the same family descended from Reuben Gubbay (died 1799). Unfortunately, there is insufficient space in this article to include any of the fascinating details of my ancestors' lives.

The only early Aleppo Gubbay whose descent it was not possible to identify with certainty is Haim Gubbay, described on his son Meir's British registration document as being from Damascus. Meir was linked to the children of Murad (Reuben's youngest son) in the British Consul's 1870-73 census of British subjects in Aleppo, but my own research into the family established that he was not one of them. A guess, and it is only a guess, is that Haim may have been an unrecorded younger brother of Reuben Gubbay. The fact that both he and Reuben's youngest son, Murad, each named one of their children Meir, a name not previously used in the family, might be a clue.

Finding Gubbay Origins

Proceeding backwards in time from Reuben, the first Gubbay in Aleppo, to the presumed origin of the family in Iraq was far more difficult, despite the help and encouragement of Naim Dangoor (founder of *The Scribe: Journal of Babylonian Jewry*), who guided me in the initial stage of my search in Baghdad and warned that the various Gubbays there were not necessarily related to each other. Gubbay is a generic Hebrew name denoting the office of *gabbai* (treasurer) of a Jewish community or major charity.

Several false starts were made in the process of identifying the progenitor in Baghdad of the Aleppo family. For a long time, Aslan Gubbay, whose grandson, Reuben ben Sheikh Aslan, once appeared to fit the profile of our ancestor Reuben, was accepted as the best possibility. However, the discovery in the Sassoon archive of Reuben ben Sheikh Aslan's signature on a manuscript, dated several years after the death of our ancestor Reuben, proved that assumption to be incorrect.²

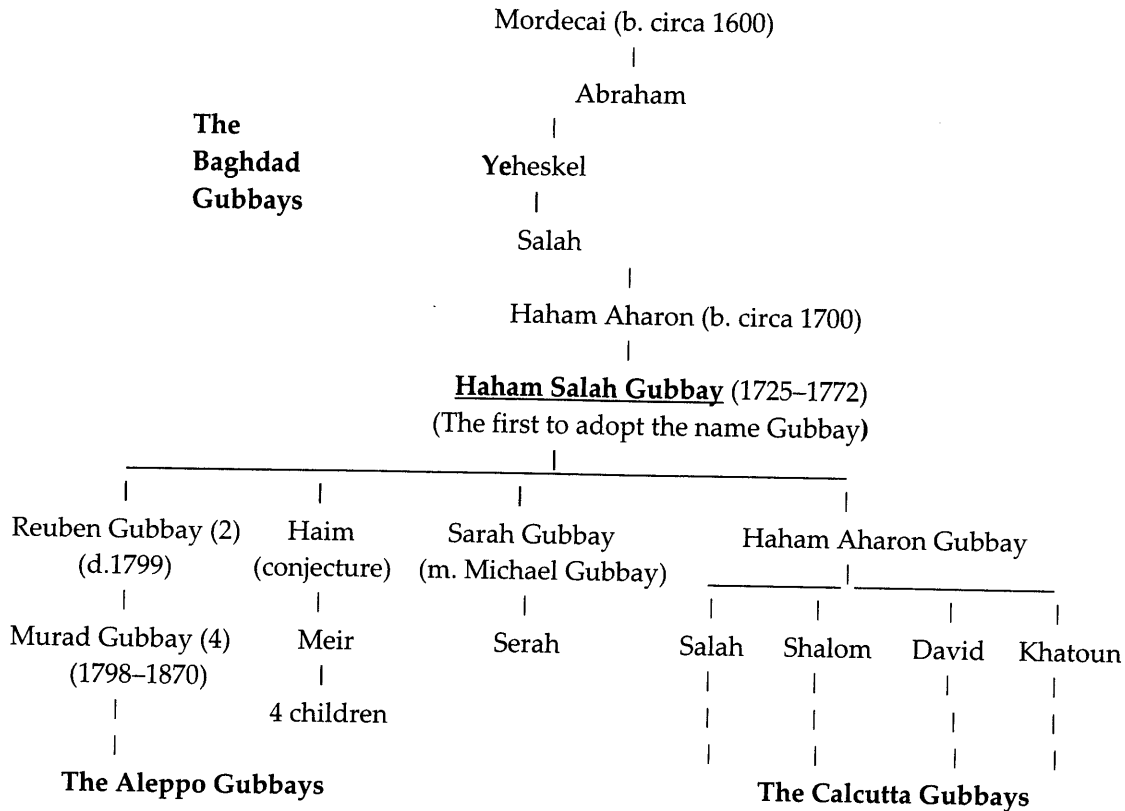


Figure 1. The Earliest Gubbays

The first breakthrough came with the discovery by Lydia Collins (genealogist and author of *The Sephardim of Manchester: Pedigrees and Pioneers*) of a document in Italian recording the settlement of Reuben Gubbay's business affairs with a partner in Aleppo some three years after his death.³ The document showed that Reuben had died on a visit to Constantinople in 1799. An amazing stroke of luck made it possible to locate his grave in an Istanbul cemetery and to obtain photographs of his tombstone.⁴ Its extraordinarily long inscription, carved in relief, stated that Reuben Gubbay was the first-born son of Salah and that he came from "the famous city of Baghdad."⁵ It also contained other valuable data that I was able to use later.

The focus of the search then shifted to an attempt to identify the correct Salah Gubbay from the several Salah Gubbays mentioned in Baghdadi records.⁶ That task was far from easy for, apart from approximate dates deduced from Reuben's tombstone inscription, few other clues offered leads from which to work. All the Salah Gubbays found were investigated in turn and then rejected because they did not fit into the slowly emerging pattern of dates and relationships. One promising theory was derived from an unpublished book by Edmond Gabbay (an English barrister writing in 1993), in which he authoritatively traced his own ancestry back through his father, Joseph Elias Gabbay (a distinguished Iraqi lawyer and politician), to Yeshua (b.

1680), a trader in pearls and gems from Bahrein.⁷ Shmuel Reuven Yoseph, a keen scholar of Baghdadi Jewish families, was then able to trace Yeshua's descent back to a Yehoshua/Yiss'haq (there is some doubt about his name) who was born in Baghdad around 1600.⁸ At first glance, our ancestor Salah Gubbay seemed qualified to fit into this lineage, and I went so far as to plan a paired DNA test with one of Yehoshua's undoubted descendants introduced to me by Shmuel Yoseph, but that test never took place because later research pointed to a far more likely hypothesis. In the course of my investigations, I undertook a paired DNA test with Geoffrey Gubbay of London, whose forebears came from India and had visited Aleppo, but the result was negative.

The clue that pointed directly to the eventual solution of the problem of Salah's identity was a memory preserved independently in two long-separated branches of the Gubbay family of Aleppo (my own branch, deported from Aleppo in 1914 and a recently discovered branch that fled from Aleppo in 1947 and now lives mostly in Italy). The family story is that two Gubbay brothers left Baghdad at the same time to pursue careers elsewhere. The richer brother went to India, where he first made and then lost a huge fortune and ended up working for David Sassoon and Company in Calcutta. The poorer brother went to Aleppo, where he prospered exceedingly. The richer brother was easily

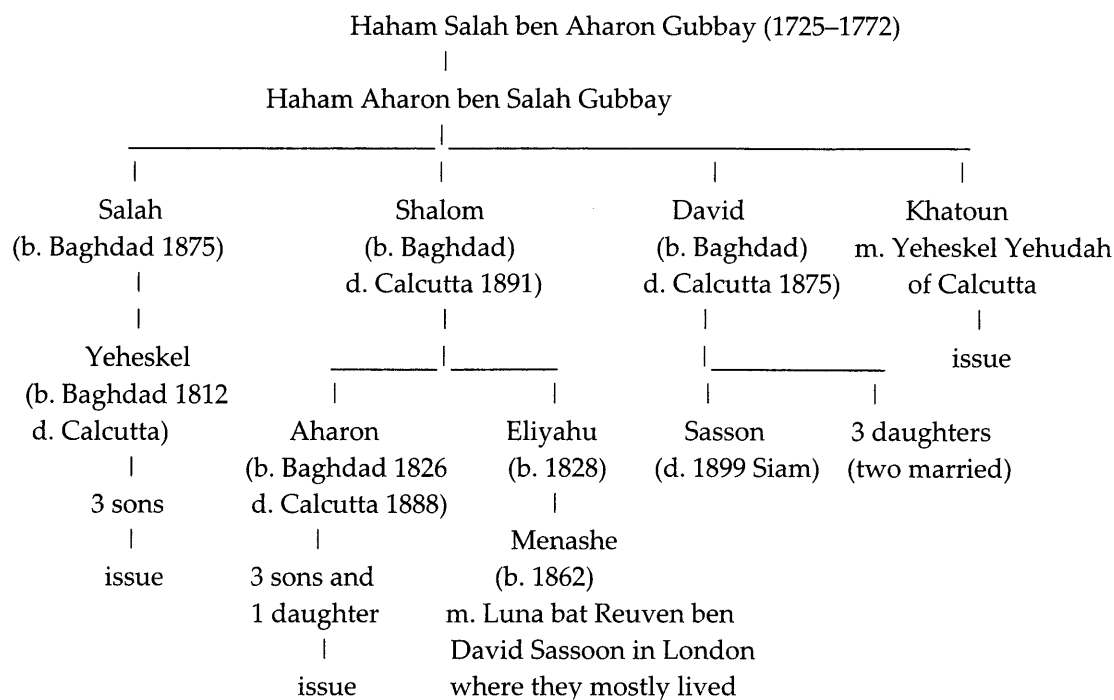


Figure 2. The Founding Members of the Gubbay Family of Calcutta

identified as Yeheskel ben Salah ben Haham Aharon ben Haham Salah Gubbay, whose movements and changes of fortune are well documented in the available sources. Murad ben Reuben Gubbay, who arrived in Aleppo from Baghdad in the early 1840s, was a good fit for the poorer brother. As the youngest son of Reuben—a man who “died in middle age before his due time” (tombstone inscription)—he probably did not start out with much capital but, according to the British Consul, became “the wealthiest and most respected merchant of Aleppo.”⁹ The two men both left Baghdad for their divergent destinations in the early 1840s, and their careers followed the courses described in the story—but my own research into the family had established beyond doubt that they were not brothers, and there is no mention at all of Yeheskel in Aleppo records.

Shmuel Yoseph achieved the final breakthrough by concentrating on Yeheskel ben Salah Gubbay’s antecedents in a further analysis of Baghdadi sources. Yoseph found the crucial evidence in the form of a brief footnote to one of Dr. Avraham Ben-Yaaqov’s surveys of Babylonian Jews,¹⁰ itself referring to another footnote in a document in the Sassoon archive.¹¹ One short sentence refers to Haham Salah Gubbay’s son, Reuben, and closer scrutiny revealed additional references elsewhere to Reuben ben Haham Salah Gubbay.¹² At a stroke, that discovery confirmed that not only did (first-born) Reuben Gubbay of Aleppo have a father Salah in Baghdad, but that Haham Salah of Baghdad also had a son Reuben—and that both Reubens were alive at the same time. The fact that Reuben was the Haham’s eldest son, and that he was renowned for his Torah learning,

was deduced from other data gleaned from Ben-Yaaqov’s surveys, which by then had become our prime source for Gubbay family data of this period. The inscription on Reuben Gubbay’s tombstone in Aleppo also lavished praise on his reputation as a Torah scholar.

Two Salah Gubbays?

Could two distinct Salah Gubbays, each with an eldest son Reuben highly learned in Torah, have lived in Baghdad at the same time? Such a possibility must be remote—especially since, for one reason or another, no other Salah mentioned in the records can be identified as our elusive ancestor. In addition, the conclusion that the two Salahs were one and the same person very neatly confirmed the family memory quoted above—except that a detailed scrutiny of the sources revealed that the two travelers from Baghdad must have been cousins and not brothers! The two men actually were first cousins, with Murad some ten or so years older than Yeheskel. Their description as brothers, an understandable distortion of their relationship, must have arisen during the telling and retelling of the story over more than a century—or possibly arose due to confusion between two different Salah Gubbays, one the grandson of the other.¹³

Shmuel Yoseph’s discovery of that scrap of documentary evidence, in a Hebrew book that I had not read, transformed the possible identification of Haham Salah Gubbay of Baghdad as the father of Reuben Gubbay of Aleppo into what both Shmuel Yoseph and I regard as a virtual certainty—although Lydia Collins maintains that this is “still

not absolutely proven.” Once Shmuel Yoseph and I came to that conclusion, it did not take long before further deductions from data revealed in our sources enabled the remaining pieces of the jigsaw puzzle to fall into place and the lineage of the Aleppo and Calcutta Gubbays established beyond what I consider to be reasonable doubt. Everything in the picture, including dates, now fits well together without strain or loose ends.

Haham Salah ben Aharon—the Progenitor

The first of our ancestors to achieve renown in the Baghdadi chronicles was Haham Salah ben Aharon, born in Baghdad in about 1725 and died in the great plague of 1772. Haham Salah became gabbai of the Charity of the Four Lands, which raised money in Baghdad and Basra for the holy cities of Jerusalem, Hebron, Safed, and Tiberias. The prestige attached to his office prompted Salah to add the title Gabbai to his name at a time when family names were not generally used in Baghdad. The name “Gubbay” was subsequently adopted by him and his children as their family name, and thus Haham Salah became the very first Gubbay of our particular clan.¹⁴ Again, the main source for this information was Avraham Ben-Yaaqov’s book, *Babylonian Jews from the Period of the Geonim until Today*, although Haham Salah is also mentioned in other publications.¹⁵

Family names, usually comprising the given name or occupation of a distinguished member of the family, only sporadically came into use in Baghdad; with some exceptions, this was not until the 19th and 20th centuries. A man was known by his and his father’s given names—unless his dealings with Europeans or trading activity in British India made this too inconvenient. In documents, when necessary for more precise identification, the names of as many forebears as possible were added after a person’s given name. Avraham Ben-Yaaqov records that “perhaps Salah b. Aharon b. Salah b. Yehekel b. Abraham b. Mordecai was Haham Salah, the Gabbai of the Charity of the Four Lands.”¹⁶ Bearing in mind that both Salahs had fathers named Aharon, the repeated succession of the names Aharon and Salah in their two lineages and the fact that no other Salah Gubbay found in Baghdad can be fitted into that framework, the almost inescapable conclusion is that both Salahs were one and the same person. Despite Ben-Yaaqov’s “perhaps,” Shmuel Yoseph thinks that Haham Salah Gubbay was definitely Mordecai’s descendant, Salah Gubbay. Thus, if we can accept that convergence, we know the names of Haham Salah Gubbay’s ancestors in direct line back to Mordecai, born in Baghdad in around 1600 (counting 100 years for four generations). Of course, independent confirmation of this evidence without a qualifying “perhaps” would be preferred; but even in the unlikely event of that assumption proving incorrect, the only result would be to remove four men, about whom we know nothing but their names, from the very top of the family tree. Nothing else would be affected or invalidated.

Haham Salah ben Aharon’s Children

The names of Haham Salah Gubbay’s two sons and one daughter are recorded, but the gap between the likely date of his marriage and the known date of his death indicates that he may well have had other children whose names we have not traced. We know from our research that Salah’s first-born son, Reuben Gubbay, established himself in Aleppo and became the ancestor of the Aleppo Gubbays. From other sources, we learn that the children and grandchildren of Haham Salah’s younger son, Haham Aharon Gubbay, moved in stages from Baghdad to Calcutta, where they formed the clan of Calcutta Gubbays.¹⁷

Several of the early Aleppo Gubbays claimed birth in Calcutta to the British authorities in Aleppo, and other evidence of family links with Calcutta was found in Aleppo records.¹⁸ In addition, the address of a house in Calcutta in which one of the Aleppo Gubbays lived between 1856 and 1858 is recorded in a Calcutta street directory owned by Edmond Ezra, a historian of Calcutta Jews.

The Aleppo Gubbays and their descendants—well over 700 of them—are listed in *Two Worlds* and in *Two Worlds-Supplement 2009*, and their lineage is traced in a family tree¹⁹ produced with the help of Alain Farhi (author of the website *Les Fleurs de l’Orient*, which now lists more than 190,000 mostly Sephardic names, including those of the Gubbay family).²⁰ As explained above, all the Gubbays from Aleppo belong to the same family. This family tree is updated in *Two Worlds-Supplement 2009*. The lineage of the Baghdadi family and its split into separate Aleppo and Calcutta branches is shown in Figure 1.

In contrast to the situation in Aleppo, it appears that several seemingly unrelated Gubbay families lived in Calcutta. According to Ben-Yaaqov:

There are several distinct Gubbay families in Calcutta; the biggest of them is that of Haham Aharon ben Salah Gubbay.... He was the son of Rav Salah ben Aharon Gubbay who passed away in 1772.... Shalom ben Aharon ben Salah Gubbay and his two sons Aharon and Eliya (Eliahu) were known to be one of the richest and most generous families in Calcutta.²¹

More details of the Calcutta Gubbays may be found on the *Les Fleurs de l’Orient* website, in Ben-Yaaqov’s book *Babylonian Jews in the Diaspora*, and in Yehekel Musleah’s *On the Banks of the Ganges*. The founding members of the Gubbay family of Calcutta are shown in Figure 2.

In Baghdad, as in Calcutta, there lived several distinct and most probably unrelated Gubbay families, and we were able to compile family trees for some of them in the course of our searches. In his investigation, based largely on Ben-Yaaqov’s work, Shmuel Yoseph deduced beyond reasonable doubt—but not beyond all doubt—that some Gubbay families of Baghdad (including the Sassoons) were in fact branches of the same large Gubbay family descended from the Yehoshua/Yiss’haq born in Baghdad around 1600. That Gubbay family is unrelated to the Aleppo Gubbays, except occasionally by marriage. Shmuel Yoseph has summarized his findings and conclusions on the lineage of many of the

Gubbay families of Baghdad in a paper yet to be published.²²

Preliminary work on the family tree of the Aleppo Gubbays was published in *The Scribe: Journal of Babylonian Jewry*. The book *Origins*, its information long since superseded by new discoveries, was published in 1989 and was followed in 2004 by *Two Worlds*, packed with much still-relevant detail and history. The recent breakthrough in tracing the early Baghdadi origin of the family, with additional data (the newly discovered Aleppo Gubbay descendants in Brazil) and corrections, is described in *Two Worlds-Supplement 2009*.

Notes

It is not possible to include a full list of the evidence, sources and deductions in one short article, and only the bare bones of the story have been included. For a fuller history of the Aleppo Gubbays and a comprehensive presentation of the sources used, see Lucien Gubbay, *Two Worlds* (London, 2004) and *Two Worlds-Supplement 2009* (in press).

1. National Archives, Public Records Office (PRO) Kew, Foreign Office Records (FO), including Aleppo Consular Register 1861–73; The Society of Genealogists, London; India Office Library, London; Levant Company's Aleppo records, London.

2. Manuscript 483 listed in David Solomon Sassoon's *Ohel David* was signed and dated by Reuben ben Sheikh Aslan (grandson of Aslan Gubbay) in 1810. Our Reuben Gubbay died in 1799, which proves conclusively that Reuben ben Sheikh Aslan was not our ancestor. (*Ohel David* is the two-volume printed catalogue of the Sassoon collection of manuscripts privately published in 1932. See British Library.)

3. SP 110/66 Levant Company's Aleppo Chancery Register, Public Records Office, London, June 1803.

4. Kuzguncuk Cemetery, Istanbul, Lot No. F-7, Stone No. 173.

5. Prof. Raphael Loewe's translation of the inscription appears in Gubbay, *Two Worlds*, 60.

6. Principal records include Ben Zvi Institute, *A History of the Jews in Iraq*; David Solomon Sassoon, *A History of the Jews of Baghdad* (Letchworth 1949); D. S. Sassoon, *Ohel David* (see note 2 above); Ottoman List of Military Taxpayers (courtesy of Naim Dangoor); Ottoman Customs Register (Istanbul); Passport Office Registers, London; London and Manchester Registers of Deaths; David Solomon Sassoon, *Massa Babel*, (Jerusalem 1955); Avraham Ben-Yaaqov, *Babylonian Jews from the Period of the Geonim until Today* (1965); Ben-Yaaqov, *Babylonian Jews in the Diaspora* (1985); and Ben-Yaaqov, *Babylonian Jews in Israel* (1980).

7. The late Edmond Gabbay's unpublished short book, *Ottoman Counsel*, has now been included in full on Alain Farhi's website *Les Fleurs de L'Orient*, <www.farhi.org>.

8. Conclusions, with the full reasoning behind them, appear in an extract from Shmuel Yoseph's paper reprinted in the appendix to Gubbay's *Two Worlds - Supplement 2009*.

9. Public Records Office, Kew. FO 78. 1857. See note 1 above.

10. Ben-Yaaqov, *Babylonian Jews from the Period of the Geonim*, n.40.

11. Sassoon, *Ohel David*, manuscript no. 636, part B, p. 675.

12. See also *Jewish Quarterly Review* NS XV11, 1926, p. 450. Ben-Yaaqov mentions Reuben ben H. Salah Gubbay again in another chapter of *Babylonian Jews in the Diaspora*, p. 422, Part 2: *Babylonian Jews in Other Lands*, chapter 20: Syria. Also, accord-

ing to *Maghid Mesharim* (August 1897), a weekly magazine in Baghdadi Arabic published in Calcutta, "Due to the brutal persecutions of the last Mamluk Pasha of Baghdad, Daoud Faha, (1817–31), many Jews escaped to other lands. Some of these went to Damascus and Aram Soba (Aleppo) and settled there. Amongst these were also families of lineage such as rich and generous Abu Reuben Mordecai-Murad ben Haham Reuben Gubbay who settled in Aram Soba."

Note that Reuben is described here as Haham (the traditional Sephardi title for a Rabbi), implying—as written on his tombstone—that he was well versed in Torah learning.

13. Yehezkel, who worked for David Sassoon and Company, was the son of Salah Gubbay. The later Aleppo Gubbays who first told the story may have confused Yehezkel's father, Salah Gubbay (junior), with Yehezkel's grandfather, Haham Salah Gubbay (senior).

14. See *Two Worlds* also for details of the development of the present spelling of the name Gubbay and regarding Murad Gubbay's Swedish nationality before he was granted British protection.

15. Ben-Yaaqov: *Babylonian Jews from the Period of the Geonim*, Part 1, p. 121;

Sadqua Hussein, Avodath ha Sedaqah, in Sassoon, (*Ohel David*, No. 636); Mordecai Yoseph Meyuhass, Shaar ha Mayim (Salonika, 1769).

16. "Perhaps this is Salah ben R' Aharon Salah Yehezqel Abraham Mordech who donated 'Meghilath Yehezqel' to the *qever* (tomb) of Yehezqel HaNavi." Sassoon archive document #303 (Sassoon, *Ohel David*, Part A, p. 562). This would be an appropriate gift from a celebrated Haham.

17. Noted in Ben-Yaaqov, *Babylonian Jews in the Diaspora*, chapter 6.

18. 1844 FO Registered document. 1856; FO 768 concerning Murad's business interests in India; also 1856, three wills in India Office Library, London; and 1901 FO 861/50.

19. Gubbay, *Two Worlds* (2004) and *Two Worlds-Supplement 2009*, or from the author by e-mail. Also from Heartland Family Graphics of the U.S.A. (check for 2009 update) <www.familygraphics.com>.

20. *Les Fleurs de l'Orient* <www.farhi.org> offers a website containing a treasure-trove of information about families from the former Ottoman Empire and beyond.

21. Ben-Yaaqov, *Babylonian Jews in the Diaspora*.

22. An edited extract of Shmuel Yoseph's unpublished deductions on the lineage of some of the other Gubbay families of Baghdad, including a basic family tree, is included in Gubbay, *Two Worlds-Supplement 2009*. Contact Mr. Yoseph at <sryoseph@012.net.il>.

Born in Buenos Aires, Lucien Gubbay has his roots in the Middle Eastern Sephardic community of Manchester, England. He chairs the Montefiore Endowment, which runs the London Semicha Programme, and is a past president of the Elders of London's Spanish and Portuguese Jews' Congregation. A consulting structural engineer, Gubbay long fascinated by religious history and lectures, teaches and writes. His books include Origins, Ages of Man, The Jewish Book of Why and What, Quest for the Messiah, The Sephardim: Their Glorious Tradition, Two Worlds, Sunlight and Shadow: The Jewish Experience of Islam, and Two Worlds-Supplement 2009.