

Origins

*I am the family face;
Flesh perishes, I live on,
Projecting trait and trace
Through time to times anon,
And leaping from place to place
Over oblivion.*

Thomas Hardy — *Moments of Vision*

The vast majority of Calcutta Jewish families, mine included, are of Middle Eastern Jewish stock, most of our forbears having gone to India from the countries that are now known as Syria and Iraq, though at the time they were part of the Ottoman Empire.



The link with Spain

One branch of my family, the Duck Cohens of Calcutta, often referred to as the Dukes,² have long maintained that their ancestors went to the Middle East after the Inquisition had forced them to flee from Spain towards the end of the fifteenth century and that they are descended from an ancient ducal family. What truth is there in these claims?



In the absence of documentary evidence, it is impossible to be sure. But it is an historical fact that when the Jews were expelled from Spain in 1492, many of them made their way ultimately to Aleppo and other parts of the Ottoman empire via North Africa. The Duck Cohens have long been regarded as one of the most distinguished Jewish families of Aleppo. In 1964, when Flower Elias, a prominent member of the Jewish Community of Calcutta, visited Aleppo, her enquiries there elicited the information that there was a married Jewess, a Duck by birth, living in Aleppo, and that the local Jewish community accepted that her ancestors had come from Spain. This belief is held even more widely. In December 1981, a Rabbi Pelkowitz from Israel, during his brief stay in Calcutta, visited the Jewish cemetery there with me and Raymond Jacob, one of the joint honorary secretaries of the Jewish Burial Board of Calcutta. He was being shown the tomb of the Rev. Elias Moses Duck Cohen, a great religious leader of local Jewry in his days (about whom there is more in this book) and as the Rabbi read out his name, he said that the name 'Duck' signified that its bearer or his family came from Spain. This aspect of the Dukes' claim thus seems to have a reasonable basis.

On the question of descent from a duke there is only a belief to go on. If the belief is well founded, there must, at the very least, have been a Jewish duke in pre-Inquisition days. Whilst the existence of such a duke would not by itself prove that the Dukes are descended from him, it would show that there may have been some basis for the belief. If, however, no such duke existed, it would immediately demolish the belief.

Such limited enquiries as I have made in London suggest that there was no Jewish duke in Spain before the Inquisition. But more intensive research, probably in Spain, will need to be carried out before the point can be conclusively determined; and it must be left to someone else who is sufficiently interested to investigate the question more closely than I have been able to do.

For the present, let us assume *for the sake of argument* only that such a duke did exist and that the lingering belief of the Calcutta Dukes at least merits consideration.

An expression of this view is to be found in an inscription on the tomb of the same Rev. E.M.D. Cohen mentioned above, who died on 14th January 1927; it describes him as 'a scion of ancient Spanish nobility'. Folk memory — or family memory, which is a segment of folk memory — sometimes turns out to be rooted in fact. Is there anything at all to sustain this particular belief?

We have noted in the previous chapter that, apart from some family names such as Cohen, the Jews of the Middle East had no surnames until fairly recent times. A man's great-great-grandson, for instance, even if in the direct male line of descent, might well not have a single name in common with his great-great-grandfather. Yet this family retained not one family name but two; Duck and Cohen. One can understand the name Cohen descending in perpetuity, but why Duck as well? Why not drop it after a few generations if it were simply the first name of some ancestor?

A possible explanation is that the name Duck was retained as part of the family name because it possessed a special significance which it was desired to preserve. And the surest and simplest way of keeping alive this association would be by making it descend from generation to generation as a surname. Duck is close in sound to *duque*, the Spanish word for duke, as it is indeed similar in sound to the word duke in several other languages; and the phonetic similarity provides a reason for supposing that that was why it became part of the family name. But that is certainly not proof that the bearers of that name or their descendants had a Spanish duke as an ancestor.

Other views have also been expressed, Dr S.D. Goitein of the School of Historical Studies, Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, New Jersey, has put forward two explanations, the second of which is not inconsistent with the hypothesis stated in the preceding paragraph.³ He has said that the name is the Syro-Palestinian pronunciation of the Arabic *Duwayk*, which is the diminutive for *dik*, a cock, and that it was originally a nickname denoting a 'cocky' person or a person with some characteristic connected with a cock. His other explanation derives from an eleventh century letter in Arabic, preserved in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, which speaks repeatedly of a distinguished merchant called al-Dukki the Cohen. Dr Goitein has explained this as denoting a man having dealings with the Norman duke of Sicily and Southern Italy, which at that time, together with Spain and North Africa, formed a single world for the Jews, many of whom, as already stated, settled later in Aleppo, Damascus and other parts of the Middle East. Dr Goitein has also said that while various other explanations are possible, the derivation of the name from duke can hardly be doubted and that Duck could go back to an ancient 'little duke'.

It would seem that the only conclusion one can reasonably come to on this interesting question is that while there may, perhaps, be grounds for associating the name Duck with a duke, it does not necessarily follow that the original Duck was either a duke or descended from one.

Even if it transpires that there was a Jewish duke in Spain before the Inquisition, the truth of the belief is unlikely ever to be known. I, for one, although descended from a Duck Cohen, do not share the belief. And today it matters nothing in practical terms whether the Dukes had a duke as one of their ancestors.



The move to India

The various branches of my family, then, went to India from the Middle East, one branch having lived for some time in Spain before that.⁴ What sort of people were these early ancestors, not only of mine, but also of many other Jewish families in Calcutta? They appear to have been mostly traders — self-reliant men, deeply conservative in their outlook and extremely orthodox in the practice of their faith. The women were generally content to play a subordinate role to their husbands, but they were nonetheless strong-charactered women, devoutly religious, the very heart and core of the family — which has always played such an influential part in Jewish life — and more often than not, a source of strength to their husbands.

It is necessary to stress the orthodoxy in religion of these early ancestors, for religion was the very warp and woof of their lives as, indeed, it was with their descendants for several generations — until it became a matter of convenience as a result of the