

Grandma Sarah and the Maharal of Prague

by Dr. Jeffrey Mark Paull

My grandmother, Sarah Shickman (Americanized from Schichman), was my role model growing up. She wasn't like anyone else that I interacted with in my daily life at home or at school. Although I didn't know what the word meant back then, when I reflect on it now, I realize that she was my idealization of what a *tzadiket* (female *tzaddik* or righteous person) was.

Tragedy had struck my grandmother early in life, when she was orphaned as a child. No one in the family knew what became of her parents. My grandmother never spoke of them to anyone, not even to her own children. The belief among the family was that her parents were killed in a pogrom in Russia.



Despite this tragedy, there was an innocent, girlish quality about Grandma Sarah that made her seem much younger than she was. She was a very petite woman, almost too thin, with a kind face, delicate features, lovely smile, wavy brown hair, and twinkling brown eyes. She was quiet and reserved and spoke very softly. English was not her native language, but she spoke it fluently. She was also fluent in Yiddish, Russian, and Hebrew.

Grandma Sarah and my grandfather, Harry Cohen, did not have an easy life. My grandfather was hard-of-hearing and had little formal education. During the Great Depression, he had trouble finding work, and the family struggled financially. They lived in a very poor section of Pittsburgh, known as the Hill District. By the time I was born, they had moved to a small basement apartment in the East Liberty section of Pittsburgh.

**Harry Cohen's & Sarah Shickman's marriage
Wheeling, WV, July 8, 1922**

Grandma Sarah did not seem at all interested in material things or worldly possessions. The apartment had an intoxicating fragrance from a camphor wood statue of Buddha that her son, Sanford Cohen, had given her upon his return from the Korean war. She had only a few dresses, but they were always spotless and neatly ironed. She didn't drive, so she had no use for a car; she walked every place that she needed to go. B'nai Israel synagogue was directly across the street, and I don't recall her ever missing a Shabbat service. Her faith in God never wavered, she was devout in her religious beliefs, and she kept a kosher home, but she never pushed her religious beliefs or observances on anyone else.

There was a quiet nobility about my grandmother. She was sweet, gentle, kind, and caring. I don't recall her ever being angry or saying a critical word about another human being. Whenever I was at her house, time seemed to slow down, and the cares and worries of the outside world just slipped away. It was the perfect place to read comic books, and to dream of faraway places and other worlds.

Grandma Sarah loved to cook, and she was a great listener. Although I was just a boy, she treated me with the same respect and attentiveness that she gave to the adults. She cared about whatever was on my mind, and she was never judgmental. I had to be careful to be truthful and not exaggerate when I spoke with her, because she took everything that people said literally, and believed every word, without question. I felt comfortable and safe talking with her, and I was very close to her.

When I was in the sixth grade, my father took a new job, and moved the family to South Bend, Indiana. I made some school friends there, but my heart was in Pittsburgh. After the school year ended, I traveled back to Pittsburgh to stay with my grandparents over summer vacation.

When the time came to start school in the fall, I refused to return to Indiana. My parents were frantic. My grandparents could have put me on a bus and forced me to return, but they didn't, and I was always grateful to them for that. Several weeks later, my parents moved back to Pittsburgh, where they remained for the rest of their lives.

I loved my grandmother, but I also sensed that behind her gentle smile and kind eyes, there was an inner sadness. I always wished that I could give her a gift or do something for her that would make her sadness go away, but I didn't know what gift to give her or what to do. As a boy, I was too young to understand the sadness that was in her heart, and my parents never spoke of it, so it remained a mystery throughout my childhood.

In August 1962, my grandmother suffered an emotional breakdown followed by severe depression, and then, early onset dementia. She never regained her health, and my grandfather cared for her in their apartment, around the clock, until the day she died.



My grandparents' tombstones -- Harry Cohen and Sarah Shickman Cohen

In retrospect, my grandmother undoubtedly suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which led to her emotional breakdown, but this term hadn't even been invented back then. Grandma Sarah passed away on August 13, 1977, at the age of 75. I was 25 years old when she died, but I was only 11 years old when we had our last meaningful conversation, before she fell ill, and I missed her greatly at my Bar Mitzvah at B'nai Israel synagogue, just two years later, on November 14, 1964.

It wasn't until I began researching my grandmother's ancestry that I began to truly understand how painful, difficult, and full of hardship life her life was. As a result of being orphaned so young, she knew hardly anything about her past. She may have been told her parents' first names, but she didn't know her mother's maiden name, or even her own birthday. My mother once told me that because my grandmother didn't know when she was born, and because she was so proud and thankful to be living in America, she chose Washington's birthday (February 22nd) as her own.

This nearly complete lack of genealogical information made it extremely challenging to research my grandmother's ancestry. I would compare it to trying to find the birth family of an adoptee, except that neither she, nor any of her biological parents, siblings, aunts, or uncles were still alive, with no American records or family trees to help guide in the search.

Hence, my grandmother's ancestry remained shrouded in mystery until the advent of the internet, and online genealogical databases became available. Gradually, I began picking up a fact here, and a record there. I started out by finding her immigration record on the Ellis Island database. It showed that Sara, age 11, immigrated to the U.S. together with Katie Kurland, age 38, and her daughter Rivke, age 19, on the S.S. *Vaterland*, sailing from Hamburg, Germany, and arriving at Ellis Island on July 29, 1914.

LIST OR MANIFEST OF ALIEN PASSENGERS FOR THE UNITED STATES

ALL ALIENS, in whatsoever class they travel, MUST be fully listed and the master or commanding officer of each vessel carrying such passengers

S. S. Vaterland sailing from Hamburg July 21st, 1914, 1914

NAME IN FULL		Age	Sex	Married or Single	Calling or Occupation	Able to—		Nationality	Face or People	* Last Permanent Residence		The name and complete address of nearest relative or friend in country whence alien came.
Family Name	Given Name	Yrs. Mos.				Read	Write	(Country of which citizen or subject)		County	City or Town	
Potocka	Franz	23	m	✓	boiler maker			Germany	German	Germany	Hamborse	mother: Albertine Potocka Hamborse
Hachert	Maria	36	f	✓	wife			"	"	"	Hamburg	father: Wilhelm Hachert mother: Gertrude
	Ernest	12	m	✓	child			"	"	"	"	"
Lubas	Jan	15	m	✓	plb			"	"	"	"	mother: Jozefa Lubas father: Michal Lubas
Reaschitzki	Isaak	29	m	✓	stone lab			"	"	"	"	father: Isidore Reaschitzki mother: Rosa
Feldmann	Frieda	22	f	✓	dress maker			"	"	"	"	father: Isidore Feldmann mother: Rosa
Luzepanich	Marya	19	f	✓	house maid			"	"	"	"	father: Isidore Luzepanich mother: Rosa
Harzyzowska	Katarzyna	19	f	✓	plb			"	"	"	"	father: Jan Harzyzowski mother: Katarzyna
Posch	Frieda	3	f	✓	child			"	"	"	"	"
Grand	Toba	25	f	✓	wife			"	"	"	"	mother: Rachel Grand father: Isidore
	Hara	9	f	✓	child			"	"	"	"	"
Harzyzowska	Katarzyna	18	f	✓	house maid			"	"	"	"	father: Isidore Harzyzowski mother: Katarzyna
Harzyzowska	Kamelia	33	f	✓	wife			"	"	"	"	brother: Isidore Harzyzowski mother: Kamelia
	Kamela	9	f	✓	child			"	"	"	"	"
	Marya	8	f	✓	child			"	"	"	"	"
	Zosia	5	f	✓	child			"	"	"	"	"
	Stella	1	f	✓	child			"	"	"	"	"
Vogelsang	Wanda	18	f	✓	house maid			"	"	"	"	mother: Isidore Vogelsang father: Wanda
Chomiel	Anna	18	f	✓	plb			"	"	"	"	father: Isidore Chomiel mother: Anna
Schwartz	Regina	20	f	✓	dress maker			"	"	"	"	father: Isidore Schwartz mother: Regina
JURKA	Albina	16	f	✓	house maid			"	"	"	"	father: Isidore Jurka mother: Albina
Paumest	Julius	60	m	✓	joiner			"	"	"	"	brother: Robert Paumest father: Julius
	Anna	57	f	✓	wife			"	"	"	"	"
	Margarete	17	f	✓	child			"	"	"	"	mother: Anna Paumest father: Julius
	Robert	10	m	✓	child			"	"	"	"	"
Hamislawczyk	Tecia	21	f	✓	plb			"	"	"	"	mother: Julia Hamislawczyk father: Tecia
Matusiak	Anna	17	f	✓	maid			"	"	"	"	mother: Anna Matusiak father: Matusiak
Kurland	Katie	38	f	✓	wife			"	"	"	"	brother: Isidore Kurland father: Katie
	Rivke	19	f	✓	dress maker			"	"	"	"	"
	Sara	11	f	✓	child			"	"	"	"	"

Immigration record of Katie Kurland, her daughter Rivke, and her adopted daughter, Sara, July 1914

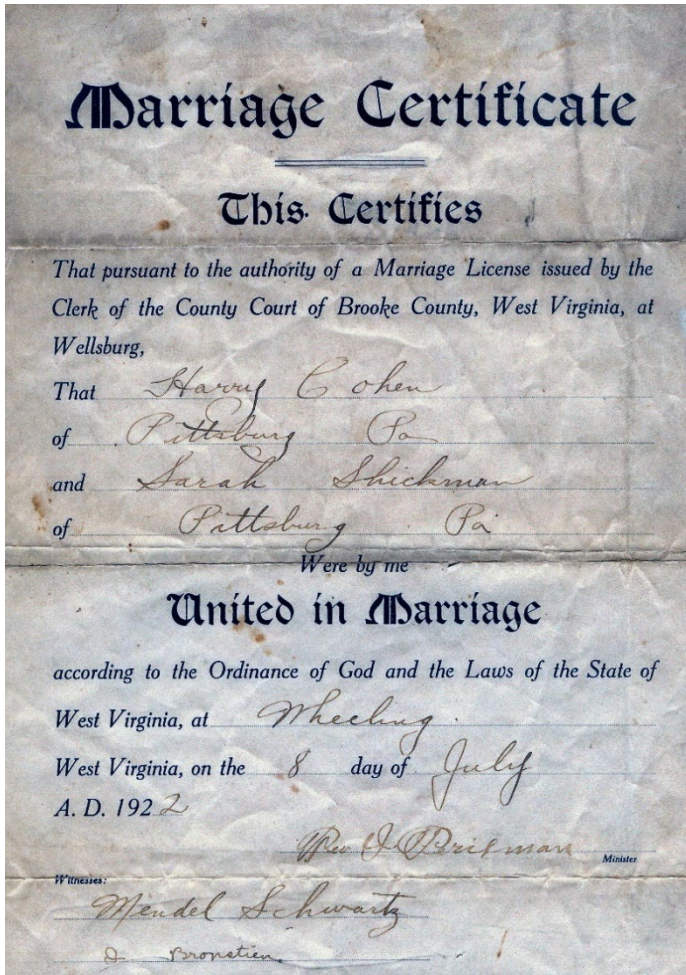
Sara's Shickman surname was listed as Kurland on this immigration record. Katie (Gitel) Kurland's last permanent residence was listed as Tomaszpol, Russia (now Tomashpil, Ukraine); Katie's nearest living relative was listed as Velvel Rosenvelt, of Balta.

After arriving in America, my grandmother was adopted by Max and Katie Kurland. The family first settled in Hartford, CT. According to Max Kurland's Petition for Naturalization, he had moved to Pittsburgh by 1916, and the Kurland family was found living in Pittsburgh in the 1920 census.

Sarah was not listed on the 1920 census with the Kurland family, which posed something of a mystery. The mystery was solved when Sarah Kurland, age 18, was found on the 1920 census, living in the Pittsburgh City Home and Hospitals at Mayview, a former psychiatric hospital. Apparently, the emotional trauma of her early childhood experiences had taken its toll during her teenage years.



Sarah Shickman (far left) with the Kurland family, c. 1918



According to our family's oral history, my grandmother was not treated well by the Kurland family. The legend that was handed down to us was that she was treated as a servant, rather than as a member of the family. That was the explanation given for why she married so young. It is difficult to know how much of this legend is true, although the part about her marrying young is accurate.

Her marriage record showed that she was married to my grandfather, Harry Cohen, on July 8, 1922, in Wheeling, WV. They may have traveled to West Virginia to get married, instead of getting married in Pittsburgh, because Pennsylvania state laws may have required parental consent below the age of 21, and Sarah was only 19 years old at the time of her marriage.

Marriage record of Sarah Shickman & Harry Cohen

The fact that Sarah used her Shickman surname on the marriage license most likely means that she was not legally adopted by the Kurland family, and that her surname was never legally changed to Kurland.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR
 LIST OR MANIFEST OF ALIEN PASSENGERS FOR THE UNITED STATES
 Passengers sailing from **CHERBOURG**, **JANUARY 17, 1923**

No. on list	HEAD-TAX STATUS (The status of each adult male)	NAME IN FULL (Family name, Given name, Surname)	Age	Sex	Color or complexion	Place of birth	Adm. in U.S.	Had she been in U.S. before?	Nationality (Country of which citizen or subject)	Place or place of birth	*Last permanent residence	The name and complete address of parent relative or friend in country whence alien came.	Final destination (Country or port)
1		Heater, Nathan	45	M	A	Poland	no	no	Polish	Poland	Poland	Wladyslaw Podolski, Russia	Conn. Hartford
2		Heater, Nathan	20	M	A	Poland	no	no	Polish	Poland	Poland	Wladyslaw Podolski, Russia	Conn. Hartford
3		Heater, Nathan	17	M	A	Poland	no	no	Polish	Poland	Poland	Wladyslaw Podolski, Russia	Conn. Hartford
4		Heater, Nathan	15	M	A	Poland	no	no	Polish	Poland	Poland	Wladyslaw Podolski, Russia	Conn. Hartford
5		Heater, Nathan	13	M	A	Poland	no	no	Polish	Poland	Poland	Wladyslaw Podolski, Russia	Conn. Hartford
6		Heater, Nathan	11	M	A	Poland	no	no	Polish	Poland	Poland	Wladyslaw Podolski, Russia	Conn. Hartford
7		Heater, Nathan	9	M	A	Poland	no	no	Polish	Poland	Poland	Wladyslaw Podolski, Russia	Conn. Hartford
8		Heater, Nathan	7	M	A	Poland	no	no	Polish	Poland	Poland	Wladyslaw Podolski, Russia	Conn. Hartford
9		Heater, Nathan	5	M	A	Poland	no	no	Polish	Poland	Poland	Wladyslaw Podolski, Russia	Conn. Hartford
10		Heater, Nathan	3	M	A	Poland	no	no	Polish	Poland	Poland	Wladyslaw Podolski, Russia	Conn. Hartford
11		Heater, Nathan	1	M	A	Poland	no	no	Polish	Poland	Poland	Wladyslaw Podolski, Russia	Conn. Hartford
12		Heater, Nathan	1	F	A	Poland	no	no	Polish	Poland	Poland	Wladyslaw Podolski, Russia	Conn. Hartford
13		Heater, Nathan	1	F	A	Poland	no	no	Polish	Poland	Poland	Wladyslaw Podolski, Russia	Conn. Hartford
14		Heater, Nathan	1	F	A	Poland	no	no	Polish	Poland	Poland	Wladyslaw Podolski, Russia	Conn. Hartford
15		Heater, Nathan	1	F	A	Poland	no	no	Polish	Poland	Poland	Wladyslaw Podolski, Russia	Conn. Hartford
16		Heater, Nathan	1	F	A	Poland	no	no	Polish	Poland	Poland	Wladyslaw Podolski, Russia	Conn. Hartford
17		Heater, Nathan	1	F	A	Poland	no	no	Polish	Poland	Poland	Wladyslaw Podolski, Russia	Conn. Hartford
18		Heater, Nathan	1	F	A	Poland	no	no	Polish	Poland	Poland	Wladyslaw Podolski, Russia	Conn. Hartford
19		Heater, Nathan	1	F	A	Poland	no	no	Polish	Poland	Poland	Wladyslaw Podolski, Russia	Conn. Hartford
20		Heater, Nathan	1	F	A	Poland	no	no	Polish	Poland	Poland	Wladyslaw Podolski, Russia	Conn. Hartford
21		Heater, Nathan	1	F	A	Poland	no	no	Polish	Poland	Poland	Wladyslaw Podolski, Russia	Conn. Hartford
22		Heater, Nathan	1	F	A	Poland	no	no	Polish	Poland	Poland	Wladyslaw Podolski, Russia	Conn. Hartford
23		Heater, Nathan	1	F	A	Poland	no	no	Polish	Poland	Poland	Wladyslaw Podolski, Russia	Conn. Hartford
24		Heater, Nathan	1	F	A	Poland	no	no	Polish	Poland	Poland	Wladyslaw Podolski, Russia	Conn. Hartford
25		Heater, Nathan	1	F	A	Poland	no	no	Polish	Poland	Poland	Wladyslaw Podolski, Russia	Conn. Hartford
26		Heater, Nathan	1	F	A	Poland	no	no	Polish	Poland	Poland	Wladyslaw Podolski, Russia	Conn. Hartford
27		Heater, Nathan	1	F	A	Poland	no	no	Polish	Poland	Poland	Wladyslaw Podolski, Russia	Conn. Hartford
28		Heater, Nathan	1	F	A	Poland	no	no	Polish	Poland	Poland	Wladyslaw Podolski, Russia	Conn. Hartford
29		Heater, Nathan	1	F	A	Poland	no	no	Polish	Poland	Poland	Wladyslaw Podolski, Russia	Conn. Hartford
30		Heater, Nathan	1	F	A	Poland	no	no	Polish	Poland	Poland	Wladyslaw Podolski, Russia	Conn. Hartford

Sarah's brother's immigration record shows that Velvel Schichman, age 19, immigrated to the U.S. on the S.S. Olympic, departing from Cherbourg, France, arriving at Ellis Island on January 17, 1923.

Immigration record of Velvel Schichman, 1923



Sarah Shickman Cohen and her brother, William Shickman, Pittsburgh, 1950s

His last permanent residence is listed as Kischineff, Roumania. He listed his brother, Peise Schichman, of Bershad, Podolia, as his closest living relative, and his town of birth as Verkhovka. On his 1928 Petition for Naturalization, he Americanized his name to William Shickman.

According to William Shickman's death certificate, he was born on February 4, 1904, in Russia, and died on February 22, 1984, in Philadelphia, PA.

His wife's name was Clara, and their son, Morris, was born on May 27, 1927. His father's name was Moshe Schichman, and his mother's name was Etel; her maiden name was not listed on the death certificate.

In August 2017, I received an email message from a gentleman by the name of Dr. Peter Basch, informing me that based on FTDNA's Family Finder autosomal DNA test, we are genetic 2nd-to-3rd cousins. He also provided me with a list of ancestral surnames. The only surname that I recognized on Peter's list was the Kurland surname. It was at that moment that the light bulb switched on, and I realized that my grandmother was probably adopted by the Kurland family because she herself was a Kurland descendant.

Peter informed me that his great-grandfather, Max Kurland, had two sisters: Chaie Kurland, from whom he descends, and Etel Kurland. My current theory, for which I am still seeking supporting evidence, is that my grandmother's mother, Etel, was Etel Kurland, and that she was married to Moshe Schichman. This would explain why Katie Kurland brought my grandmother to America, and why the Kurlands adopted her – because she was Max Kurland's niece.



Max (Mordechai) Kurland's tombstone

According to his Declaration of Intention, Max Kurland was born on June 20, 1870. His tombstone inscription reads: “Mourning the loss of Mordechai, son of Pesach Kurland, died (Hebrew date = June 1, 1937).” His death certificate lists his parents as Pesach Kurland and Faiga Burtza, and his second wife as Mollie (maiden name unknown), from whom he was divorced.

If my theory regarding Etel Kurland is correct, then Pesach Kurland and his wife, Faiga, would be Etel’s parents, Sarah Shickman’s grandparents, and my great-great-grandparents. They would also be Peter Basch’s great-great-grandparents, thus explaining our autosomal DNA genetic match at the 2nd-3rd cousin level. Additional supportive evidence for this theory involves naming patterns; Sarah named her eldest daughter Ethel, presumably after her mother, Etel, and her third daughter Faye, after her grandmother, Faiga.

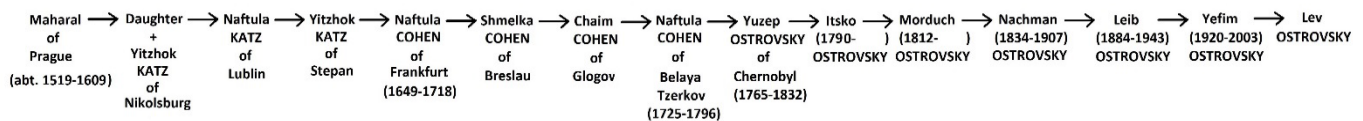
In a twist of fate that occurred a little over twenty years after Grandma Sarah passed away, her second daughter, my mother, Betty Cohen Paull, remarried, after my father, Melvin Paull, passed away. Although neither of them was aware of their family connection at the time, the man she married, Ben Goodman, was the grandson of Max and Katie Kurland, through their daughter, Pauline Kurland, who married Jacob Goodman. If Sarah was, in fact, Max Kurland’s niece, then Betty and Ben were, unbeknownst to them, 2nd cousins.

In December 2015, I ordered a Y-DNA test for my 2nd cousin, David Shickman. David is the son of Dr. Martin (Morris or Moishe) Shickman, who was the son of William (Velvel) Shickman, who was the son of Moshe Schichman, the father of my grandmother, Sarah Shickman.

David’s Y-DNA results were quite interesting. He belongs to the J-M267 haplogroup, better known as J1, and he fits the Cohen Modal Haplotype. Despite the relatively recent adoption of the Shickman surname, his patrilineal line belongs to the ancient priestly class of Kohanim, descending from Aharon, the brother of Moses.

During the interval between David Shickman’s Y-DNA results being reported by the FTDNA lab in early 2016, and the present time, the preliminary results of several of our Y-DNA research studies have become available. One of them involved testing pedigreed descendants of Rabbi Yehuda Heller-Kahana of Sighet (1743–1819). The other involved testing pedigreed descendants of the Cohen rabbinical lineage descending from Naftula Cohen of Belaya Tzerkov (1725–1796).

It was during this latter Y-DNA study that we identified a pedigreed descendant who lives in Russia, with a pedigree so solid and well-documented that we consider him the “gold standard” for our Y-DNA study. His name is Lev Ostrovsky, and his pedigree goes seven generations further back than Naftula Cohen of Belaya Tzerkov (1725–1796), all the way to the Maharal of Prague (c. 1519–1609). His line of descent is shown below.



Line of Descent from the Maharal of Prague to Lev Ostrovsky

With the preliminary results of these two Y-DNA research studies in hand, David Shickman’s Y-DNA results took on an entirely new meaning. Of the 270 genetic matches on David’s Y-DNA match list, his third closest genetic match is Lev Ostrovsky. They match on 35/37 STR markers, and based on the FTDNA time predictor model, their common ancestor most likely lived between 4 and 8 generations (100–200 years) ago.



Y-DNA - Matches

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37 MARKERS - 270 - MATCHES Page: [1](#) [2](#) [3](#) [4](#) [5](#) [6](#) [7](#) [8](#) [9](#) [10](#) ... of 11

Genetic Distance ↑	Name	Earliest Known Ancestor	Y-DNA Haplogroup	Terminal SNP	Match Date
1	Mr. Howard Lapin Y-DNA37 FF		J-M267	M267	3/3/2016
1	Sidney Gottesman Y-DNA37	Mendel Gottesman	J-M267	M267	3/3/2016
2	Lev Ostrovskiy Y-DNA37		J-M267		11/16/2018

David also genetically matches four pedigreed descendants of Rabbi Yehuda Heller-Kahana of Sighet – Moshe, Gabriel, Chaim, and Samuel Kahana, who also descend from the Cohen rabbinical lineage.

These initial Y-DNA results will be confirmed by locating and testing additional descendants of the Cohen rabbinical lineage, and conducting additional DNA analyses, including upgrading from 37 to 67 short tandem repeat (STR) markers, and ordering FTDNA's Big Y-500 test to identify the terminal single nucleotide polymorphism (SNP) for the Cohen rabbinical line.

What these initial results clearly indicate, however, is that although their common ancestor has not yet been identified, David Shickman, like Lev Ostrovsky, is a descendant of the Cohen rabbinical lineage descending from the Maharal of Prague, and so, too, is my beloved grandmother, Sarah Shickman Cohen.

These results also demonstrate what a powerful tool Y-DNA can be for connecting to well-documented ancestral lineages, such as rabbinical lines, even in the absence of a paper trail for the previously unknown or unrecognized rabbinical descendant.

Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel (c. 1519–1609), widely known to scholars of Judaism as the Maharal of Prague, or simply the Maharal (the Hebrew acronym of *Moreinu Ha-Rav Loew* or “Our Teacher, Rabbi Loew”), was an important Talmudic scholar, Jewish mystic, and philosopher who, for most of his life, served as a leading rabbi in the cities of Mikulov in Moravia and Prague in Bohemia. Due to his unprecedented impact on Jewish study, he is considered one of the most important rabbis of all time.

The universe works in mysterious ways. Perhaps it was *bashert*, or destiny, that my grandmother, who was orphaned at a young age, and who knew virtually nothing about her Jewish ancestry, descends from the Maharal of Prague, one of the most important and influential rabbis in Jewish history.

Although her life was extremely difficult, and she suffered many tragedies, Grandma Sarah was the embodiment of goodness and righteousness, a true *tzadeket* in every sense of the word. Her faith in God never wavered, and now, finally, she has a heritage and a *yichus* that is worthy of her. To my dearest Grandma Sarah of blessed memory ... this discovery of your astonishing heritage and illustrious *yichus* is my gift of love to you.