

# Tracing German-Jewish Ancestry to the 17th Century— And Much Earlier

by Arthur Obermayer

With the help of Y-DNA analysis, fortuitous acquaintanceship with an extraordinary researcher and the use of some relatively unknown sources, I have traced my Obermayer family history unequivocally to 1655 and, with less certainty, even earlier than that—a feat that seemed next to impossible a few years ago. In 2009, we published a family history, one branch of which—but not my Obermayer line—tracked back to the 17th century.<sup>1</sup> Despite my best research efforts, at that time, I could trace my Obermayer ancestry back only to Isaak Obermayer, my great-great-grandfather, who was born in the Kriegshaber suburb of Augsburg, Germany, where he died in 1836. Now it dates clearly to 1655—and, less certainly, much further back in time. This is how we broke through the barriers in the Schwabian region of southern Germany.

The Kriegshaber archives of family vital records reportedly were lost even before the Nazi era, and I had long doubted my ability to trace further back, although I did accumulate a few additional pieces of data. In 1997, the Augsburg archives director sent me information indicating that, in 1789, Kriegshaber had two Jewish butchers named Isaak ben Meir.<sup>2</sup> To distinguish between them, one was called Isaak Obermayer and the other Isaak Untermayer. Additional records from the Augsburg archives showed that Meir ben Isaak was the father of Isaak ben Meir, and as well, a 1757 archival mention of a Jew named Hitzig (Isaak) who apparently was Meir ben Isaak's father. Although I was pleased to know the origin of my surname, it meant that searching further back than 1789 would be all the more difficult because of the use of patronyms instead of fixed surnames.

Peter Rosenblatt's first American immigrant ancestor also came to the U.S. in the 1840s from Kriegshaber and lived in the same Guggenheimer house. I have some family history connections. When my paternal grandfather arrived in the United States in the 1840s, he stayed at the home of the Guggenheimer family in Lynchburg, Virginia, until he learned enough English language and American culture to hold a steady job. Peter Rosenblatt's first American immigrant ancestor also immigrated to the U.S. in the 1840s, originally from Kriegshaber and lived in the same Guggenheimer house. Rosenblatt's ancestor was Isidor Untermayer [*sic*], who presumably was a descendant of the other Isaak Meir.

Both Rosenblatt and I wanted to preserve the Kriegshaber Jewish cemetery where our ancestors are buried. We became acquainted through an Augsburg friend of mine with a young man named Yehuda Schenef, an Orthodox Jew living in Augsburg who feels that it is his religious responsibility to preserve the earthly remnants of famous rabbis and others buried in the Kriegshaber cemetery many

centuries ago. The U.S.-born Schenef spent a number of years at yeshivas in Israel and moved to Augsburg in 1998, where some of his family resided and where he personally had old genealogical connections. He has spent countless hours uncovering, restoring and recording information about the old Jewish cemeteries in the region.<sup>3</sup>

The Kriegshaber Jewish cemetery opened in 1636 and was the principal regional cemetery until 1868 when the Augsburg Hochfeld cemetery was started. The Kriegshaber cemetery was used by Jews from neighboring communities under the margrave of Burgau, including the important Jewish community of Pfersee. In the 17th and 18th centuries, Pfersee was the center of Jewish scholarship and wealth for the entire Schwabian region of Germany.<sup>4</sup> The Kriegshaber cemetery was the last resting place of many famous rabbis and scholars, particularly the influential Ulmo family, descendants of the Jews expelled from the city of Ulm in 1499. The use of the word "Ulmo" (or Guenzburg, Wallerstein, etc.) in a person's name was a prestigious title or tribal reference indicating the family's origin rather than a surname. Its use would be discontinued when it no longer was highly regarded.

From the first half of the 13th century until 1440, Augsburg had an active Jewish community. In 1440, all the Jews were expelled from Augsburg; many moved to suburbs such as Kriegshaber and Pfersee, while others moved to Eastern Europe.

In early 2010, Schenef told Rosenblatt and me that we had a common ancestor named Meir ben Sanwil Ulmo, born in 1655, and Schenef described the relationship to produce the two ancestral charts (see below). Female links are shown in italics. Schenef came to this conclusion from a review of his newly consolidated Kriegshaber cemetery register<sup>5</sup> of more than 500 burials.

## Obermayer Ancestry

Arthur Obermayer (1931–)  
Leon Obermayer (1886–1984)  
Hermann Obermayer (1829–1897)  
Heinrich Obermayer (1792–1872)  
Isaak ben Mayr (Obermayer) (1764–1836)  
Mayr ben Isaak Ulmo (1720–1790)  
Isaak ben Meir Ulmo (1695–1756)  
**Meir ben Sanwil Ulmo (1655–1735)**

## Rosenblatt Ancestry

Peter Rosenblatt (1933–)  
*Therese Steinhardt* (1896–1948)  
*Adelaide Untermayer* (1866–1920)  
Isidor Untermayer (1811–1866)  
Isaak ben Mayr (Untermayer) (1761–1838)

Mayr ben Simon (1730–1800)  
Shimon ben Meir (1698–1775)  
**Meir ben Sanwil Ulmo (1655–1735)**

Schenef's conclusions were amazing and important, but I hoped for additional corroboration of his results based on cemetery records. Y-DNA analysis seemed the logical path to take. Because Y-DNA of males passes largely unchanged from fathers to sons, to grandsons and so on, patrilineal descent from a common ancestor can be demonstrated if two men have the same (or almost the same) Y-DNA profile. With the creation of a new generation, there is a possibility that a mutation occurs that prevents an exact match of markers. The greater the number of markers analyzed, the more precise the results. When there are fewer mutational differences, the connection is more recent in time.

My connection to Meir ben Sanwil Ulmo is entirely patrilineal, and I previously had done a 67-marker Y-DNA analysis. Rosenblatt is not a patrilineal descendant, but he has an Untermeyer cousin who is a patrilineal descendant, as shown below. This cousin, Daniel Untermeyer, agreed to take a 67-marker Y-DNA test.

Daniel Untermeyer (1951–)  
Samuel II Untermeyer (1912–2001)  
Irwin Untermeyer (1886–1973)  
Samuel I Untermeyer (1858–1940)  
Isidor Untermeyer (1811–1866)  
Isaak ben Mayr (Untermeyer) (1761–1838)  
Mayr ben Simon (1730–1800)  
Shimon ben Meir (1698–1775)  
**Meir ben Sanwil Ulmo (1655–1735)**

Results from the test, conducted by FamilyTree DNA, showed that 65 of our 67 markers are identical. If Daniel Untermeyer and I had been two random persons taking the test, such results would have indicated a 93 percent chance that we had a common male ancestor seven or eight generations ago. When combined with our genealogical evidence, however, the results give a greater than 99 percent certainty of Meir ben Sanwil Ulmo's relationship to me and to the Untermeyer descendants, and as a result more than one hundred additional names peopled my family tree.

Schenef has been searching his own ancestry for many years through the Kriegshaber and Augsburg Jewish cemeteries, rabbinical genealogies, religious documents, and other sources, primarily in Hebrew. A non-patrilineal ancestor of his was the brother of Meir ben Sanwil Ulmo. Schenef now could provide Rosenblatt and me with the benefit of all of his previous genealogical research, which goes back more than 1,000 years. Unfortunately, Schenef did that work without much attention to documenting sources and, furthermore, he lost most of his references in a computer crash a few years ago. For me, as a natural scientist, strong analytical and documentary support for these conclusions is needed, and that is my goal.

The definite establishment of Meir ben Sanwil Ulmo as my great-great-great-great-great-grandfather is the lynchpin for taking my ancestry hundreds of years further back in time. A prime example is the famous MaHaRaL of Prague,<sup>6</sup> Yehuda ben Bezalel Loeb, who appears to be my 10 times great-grandfather.

**Meir ben Sanwil Ulmo (1655–1735)**  
*Esther Mirels Koppel* (1619–1692)  
*Rachel Koppel Heller Wallerstein* (1594–1663)  
Jakob Koppel Fraenkel Heller Wallerstein ( - 1612)  
*Rachel Loeb* (1550–1633 )  
Yehuda ben Bezalel Loeb MAHARAL (1525 –1609)

Not only is Meir ben Sanwil Ulmo buried in the Kriegshaber Jewish cemetery, but so are his parents, Sanwil ben Shimon David Ulmo and Esther Mirels Koppel. It has been well established that Esther Mirels Koppel was the great-great-granddaughter of the MaHaRaL.<sup>7</sup> The MaHaRaL also has been identified as a direct 91-generations descendant of King David,<sup>8</sup> but considerable doubt surrounds the authenticity of this claim; some claim that this *yichus* (distinguished religious lineage or pedigree) was provided by his disciples to honor him after his death. If this ancestry were indeed correct, however, I would be a 103-generations descendant of King David—an intriguing thought.

My Ulmo patrilineal ancestry provided by Schenef does not stop at Meir ben Sanwil Ulmo, but rather continues to Meir Zurich, who died in 1345.

**Meir ben Sanwil Ulmo (1651–1735)**  
Sanwil ben Shimon David Ulmo (1618–1709)  
Shimon David ben Menachem Ulmo (1595–1668)  
Menachem ben Shmuel Ulmo (1570–1642)  
Samuel Zanvil ben Shimon Ulmo (1538–1604)  
Shimon ben Elieser Ulmo Guenzburg (1506–1585)  
Elieser ben Guenzburg (1477–1544)  
Jechiel ben Schmuel (1445–1505)  
Schmuel (Samuel) ben Falk (1418–1478)  
Falk ben Lemlin (1390–1465)  
Lemlin ben Baruch (1355–1410)  
Baruch ben Meir Zurich (1319–1382)  
Meir Zurich (–1345)

Many independent sources have provided me with family trees consistent with four generations of the ancestry listed above.<sup>9</sup> They cover the period from Samuel Zanvil ben Shimon Ulmo (1538–1604) to the time of Jechiel ben Schmuel (1445–1505).

Jechiel's father, Schmuel ben Falk (1418–1478), was born in Augsburg, and his ancestors back to Baruch ben Meir Zurich (1319–1382) and his wife, Guetlin (1328–1417), were born or buried in Augsburg. This was just the time frame (1266–1410) when burials took place in the medieval Augsburg Jewish cemetery, the cemetery Schenef previously had examined.

The possibility exists to go even further back in time through Guetlin (1328–1417), the wife of Baruch ben Meir Zurich (1319–1382), but, of course, it breaks the patrilineal line (Baruch ben Meir Zurich is near the bottom of the previous Ulmo patrilineal list):

#### Guetlin's Lineage:

Guetlin (1328–1417) and Baruch ben Meir Zurich (1319–1382)

Smoe (Samuel) ben Baruch (1295–1385)

Bendit Baruch ben Juda (1269–1335)

Jehuda ben Jitzchak Kalman "Juedlin" Kalonymos Kohen (1248–1328)

Jitzchak Jerachmiel Kalman "Benditte" Kalonymos Kohen (1225–1309)

Eleasar Kalonymos (1190–1266)

Kalonymos ben Moshe (1170–1240)

Moshe ben Schmuel Kalonymos (1145–1215)

Schmuel ben Kalonymos Kalonymos (1120–1190)

Kalonymos ben Moshe Kalonymos (1099–about 1160)

Moshe ben Jechutiel Speyer Kalonymos (1075–1150)

Jechutiel Speyer ben Moshe Kalonymos (1045–1110)

Moshe ben Kalonymos (1022–1085)

Kalonymos ben Meshulam (1000–1075)

Meshulam ben Kalonymos (0976–1055)

Kalonymos ben Moshe (0950–1020)

Moshe ben Kalonymos (0926 - )

Kalonymos ben Jechutiel (0900–0960)

Jechutiel ben Moshe (0876–0940)

Moshe ben Meshulam (0850–0920)

Meshulam ben Itiel (0825–0875)

Ithiel ben Meshulam (0800–0860)

Meshulam (0780–)

Guetlin is a descendant of the well-known Kalonymos<sup>10</sup> family from Lucca in Italy and participated in the establishment of the first Jewish settlements in Germany at Mainz and Speyer. Many of the important parts of traditional Ashkenazi liturgy were composed by them.

During the Middle Ages, many Hebrew manuscripts were produced which established the yichus of prominent rabbis in order to make their interpretations more authoritative. When Yehuda Schenef studied at yeshivas in Israel, he had access to information to establish his own yichus, which, upon sharing with me, has taken my family history back more than 1,200 years. Thus far, I have been able to corroborate independently all portions for which I could find additional information, but it has been difficult to locate most relevant rabbinical documents. I am always seeking further proof that the connections are correct and can be supported by reliable references. Since my patrilineal ancestry appears to go back 700 years, the possibility exists for taking Y-DNA comparisons much further back in time. I have the information about multiple sons of some of my patrilineal ancestors and may be able to locate their patrilineal descendants. For example, the *Pfersee Memorbuch* identifies Rabbi Simon ben Elieser Ulmo Guenzburg (1506–1585) and provides information about his eight rabbinical sons and some of their descendants,

but that would require a comparison of the Y-DNA of someone else whose patrilineal ancestry for twelve generations leads back to the same person. This quest may never be over, but the results thus far have been far more positive and exciting than I ever could have imagined just two years ago.

#### Notes

1. Kenneth Libo and Michael Feldberg. *The Obermayers: A History of a Jewish Family in Germany and America, 1618-2009*. Newton, MA., Obermayer Foundation, Inc. 2009.

2. The spelling of names was not consistent, and this article uses the principal spelling gleaned from the records at the time. Even as late as the 1848 issues of the Augsburg daily newspaper, *Lechbote*, Carl Obermayer's surname was also spelled Obermair, Obermayr, and Obermeyer.

3. See <http://www.jhva.de> or contact Schenef at [yehudaavid@t-online.de](mailto:yehudaavid@t-online.de)

4. <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=247&letter=P>

5. Burial Register (Graebliste) at [http://www.alemannia-judaica.de/kriegshaber\\_friedhof.htm](http://www.alemannia-judaica.de/kriegshaber_friedhof.htm)

6. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Judah\\_Loew\\_ben\\_Bezalel](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Judah_Loew_ben_Bezalel) and [http://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/111877/jewish/The-Maharal-of-Prague.htm](http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/111877/jewish/The-Maharal-of-Prague.htm)

7. See <http://loebtree.com/heller.html> and <http://www.loebtree.com/mirelsf.html> as well as translation of Yom Tov Lipman Heller's autobiography *Megillas Aivah* published as *The Feast and the Fast*, by C. U. Lipshitz and Neil Rosenstein and *Die Grab-schriften des Alten Judenfriedhofes in Wien*, Band I- by Dr. Bernhard Wachstein. Also private communication with Chanan Rapaport who has studied the MaHaRaL's descendants.

8. <http://lubavitch.com/news/article/2027172/The-Maharal-Chabad-Nexus.html> and [http://failedmessiah.typepad.com/failed\\_messiahcom/2006/02/the\\_rebbe\\_king\\_.html](http://failedmessiah.typepad.com/failed_messiahcom/2006/02/the_rebbe_king_.html)

9. *The Pfersee Memorbuch* can be seen at <http://tinyurl.com/42sphba>. Its contents are described in English in *Jewish Identity in Early Modern Germany* by Dean Phillip Bell, Ashgate Publishing Company, 2007, p.78–80 and in German in *Medinat Schwaben: juedisches Leben in einer sueddeutschen Landschaft in der Fruehneuzeit* by Stefan Rohrbacher. It primarily covers Shimon ben Elieser Ulmo Guenzburg and his descendants. Two earlier generations are identified in "Gönbzburg und die schwabischen Gemeinden", *Blatter Jödische Geschichte und Literatur*, Jahrgang III, by Leopold Loewenstein, Mainz, 1902. Additional corroborations and extensions are the result of private correspondence with Werner Frank, Rosanne Leeson, James Bennett and Marianne Salinger resulting from previous genealogical connections and a posting on the German Jewish Special Interest Group of JewishGen.

10. The genealogy and activities of the Kalonymos family between Meshulam (780– ) and Jechutiel Speyer ben Moshe Kalonymos (1045-1110) can be found in [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kalonymos\\_family](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kalonymos_family).

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