

HOW JEWS GOT THEIR LAST NAMES

By David Zax • March/April 2008

You may have heard the story of the Jewish immigrant. On the boat to America, a fellow steerage passenger tells him his name sounds too Jewish and suggests that he choose a new one before he arrives in New York. But when the Ellis Island clerk asks him his name, the immigrant becomes flustered, crying out in Yiddish, “Sheyn fergessen!” (“I already forget!”). And so he ends up with a new name—Sean Ferguson.

Plenty of Jewish and other immigrant families recount such stories. The only problem is, they aren’t true, says Gary Mokotoff, a leading figure in the study of Jewish names and publisher of the genealogical review *Avotaynu*. “No one ever got their name changed at Ellis Island,” he says. “The Ellis Island process was very mechanical; there wasn’t some Irish clerk saying, ‘What’s your name?’” Rather, the registrar searched for names on the ship’s manifest—recorded back in Europe, where officials were familiar with the spelling of Jewish names. “If you said your name was Sheyn Fergessen, they’d check the list.”

This isn’t to say that Jewish family names didn’t change when they reached North America’s shores: Many did. But these changes owe nothing to the putative incompetence of Ellis Island officials and everything to deliberate efforts by the immigrants. Like many with foreign-sounding names, pressure to assimilate led Jews to Anglicize them. These new names weren’t invented at the precise moment immigrants set foot in their new country—though there’s a nice storytelling economy to such a tale—but later.

Myths abound in the study of Jewish names, or Jewish onomastics, one of the rare fields where firm conclusions are often drawn from the dim memories of a few utterances of a great-aunt. Often, too, personal bias comes into play: “What people are hoping to discover is some specific etymology which would be pleasing for their mind,” says Alexander Beider, 45, a leading onomastician and author of several dictionaries of Jewish surnames. He has found that people prefer etymologies that “make their family different from others.” Many in monolithically Ashkenazi communities leap on any suggestion that they have a Sephardic root or two to their family tree; others prematurely conclude they descend from rabbinical families. There is also a yearning for connection to biblical figures. Beider can’t count the number of times he has met someone named Wasserman—literally, “water man”—who is convinced his name suggests lineage from Moses, who was fished out of water by the Pharaoh’s daughter and later drew water from a rock. The onomastician then tells them a less exciting, but more likely, explanation: In Europe, he says, “water carrier was one of the most common Jewish occupations.

In recent decades the study of Jewish names has flourished along with its sister science, genealogy. The genealogical fervor that has gripped many Jews has fueled fascination with understanding Jewish names. And these Jews are learning that, in addition to being a valuable genealogical tool—along with oral history, folklore and research into records—onomastics can be rewarding in its own right.

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This Golden Age of Jewish onomastics has been sparked by recent academic research like Beider's. Trained as a mathematician in Russia before emigrating to Paris, he was hailed as a sort of wunderkind when he emerged on the onomastics scene in the 1990s, and he continues to lead the field today. Another major figure in Jewish onomastics is Aaron Demsky. A professor at Israel's Bar-Ilan University, Demsky came to onomastics through the study of Biblical history and established an annual interdisciplinary conference on Jewish names. The interest in Jewish names is ubiquitous, he notes: there are "people in Yiddish studies, people in the social sciences, people in all sorts of fields who work in names."

But the surge of popular interest in Jewish onomastics has been largely fueled by the Internet. The ease of searching digital databases (see "A Name Detective Starter Kit" on p. 45), along with the release of previously unavailable records from the former Soviet Union and other European nations, can provide tantalizing rewards for the amateur researcher. "Now the results are so rich and good and so important that it's really a treasure," says Beider. It's also exciting: "The investigation of a Jewish family name is charged with all the suspense of a thrilling detective story," writes Benzion Kaganoff in his *Dictionary of Jewish Names and Their History*.

The central truth is that Jewish names are far more than mere tags. "Jewish names can serve as clues for deciphering the cultural patterns of Jewish history," adds Kaganoff. "From them we can determine whether people's sentiments inclined toward religious separateness or assimilation or Jewish nationalism. We can tell when Jews are loyal to the Hebrew language and when indifferent. And names also reveal something about the political and economic situations of Jews throughout the centuries." A name is "a historic text," agrees Demsky. "Names also are a sort of living being, in a sense: they carry with them a message."

Portraits of Emperor Joseph II—who ruled the Austrian Empire near the end of the 18th century—show an apparently urbane, somewhat weary man draped by the pomp of courtly garments. Influenced by the ideas of Voltaire and the Encyclopedists, the heir of the Hapsburg Dynasty fancied himself an enlightened ruler, a reformer and modernizer. From his palace in Vienna, he issued decrees abolishing the death penalty and demanding religious tolerance. Though Catholic, he was by no means a fervent one. Once, given a tour of the Sorbonne library by an archivist who apologized for the dim lighting conditions, the emperor quipped, "Ah, when it comes to religion, there is never much light."

One of his goals was to "emancipate" the Jews living under his rule, by granting them equal rights and making efforts to assimilate them. This may not have been pure benevolence; the geopolitics of fragmented Europe actually made it a brilliant tactical move. Some historians see Joseph's Jewish policy as "a shrewd maneuver," writes Kaganoff, "to have the Jews serve as the Germanizing element in Poland to offset the Polish influence."

One part of the emperor's grand plan for Jews involved a law he promulgated in 1787. The decree circulated to Austrian Christian officials throughout the vast empire; it was then relayed to the rabbis of various villages, who in turn alerted their congregations:

"With regard to Jews in all provinces. By January 1788, fixed hereditary surnames should be taken by every head of household for his family....Every person without exception must have a German given name which cannot be changed during the entire life."

The emperor's law applied only to Jews living in the Austrian Empire over which he presided, but similar laws were issued elsewhere. Czar Alexander I issued a ukase making hereditary family names mandatory in 1804

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(30 years later, the law had to be reissued, implying that not all Jews heeded the law at first). Jews living in regions subject to Napoleon were required to declare family names in 1808; the several German states issued similar laws in the early 19th century.

For thousands of years, most Jews had simply been known by their given names, the word *ben* (meaning “son of” in Hebrew), and their fathers’ given names. Shmuel *ben* Moshe was, say, the son of Moshe *ben* Jehudah, who was the son of Jehudah *ben* Phinehas, and so on. For women, *bat* (“daughter of”) took the place of *ben*. In addition to these official names, Ashkenazi Jews often had a Yiddish *kinnui*, or nickname, used by friends and family. But with the notable exception of Cohen and Levy (and their many variants)—ancient names prized by descendants of members of priestly castes—the notion of a family name was foreign to most Ashkenazi Jews.

The new laws making names mandatory cut both ways. Equal rights came at the price of assimilation, since Emperor Joseph’s law required that all names be German—not Hebrew or Yiddish. The recording of family names also aided efforts to levy taxes and conscript Jews for military service.

The mechanism of name adoption was different in each region. In czarist Russia, for instance, names were created within the Jewish community, either by the bearers themselves or by their leaders. “In many aspects,” writes Beider, “these acquired names gave a panorama of Jewish life at the beginning of the 19th century testifying to the places where Jews lived, the first names they were using, the applied nicknames, their occupations and the languages spoken inside the community as well as with their Gentile neighbors.”

As suggested by this list, surnames derived from a variety of sources. Names drawn from places are called “toponymic” by linguists; an example would be “Stepinski,” from the village of Stepy. (Of course, naming everyone in Stepy “Stepinski” would be rather unhelpful to the people living there; the name would have been adopted by one who moved from Stepy, settling elsewhere.) Names also derived from occupation; “Rabin,” from “rabbi,” is a fairly obvious one. As with religious names, these new family names were often derived from the father’s name (or, more rarely, the mother’s); names ending in “-ovitch,” which means “son of,” are examples. Names could also be derived from Hebrew acronyms—a technique sometimes used to code Hebrew when its use in names was forbidden. A common acronymic surname is Katz, which stands for Kohein Tzaddik (righteous priest) and explains why many Katzes have Cohen status. Names could also be based on personal characteristics, or they could be sheer inventions.

A young student attends “a ball in Tarnopol in East Galicia, where numerous Jewish dignitaries of the city are gathered.” So begins an old tale repeated in Karl Emil Franzos’s 1888 *Studies on Names*. The student is introduced to a lovely young lady, but misses her name. While dancing a quadrille with her, he asks for it:

“The pretty child looked at him sorrowfully and whispered blushing: ‘Küsse mich! [Kiss me!]’ ‘You... You mean?’ stuttered the young man. ‘Küsse mich!’ she repeated somewhat louder. ‘Shh!’ whispered he confused. ‘I...gladly... but...’ ‘Nannette Küssemich,’ she repeated... ‘I am the daughter of the businessman Abraham Küssemich.’”

The hapless student moves on, facing similar embarrassment with another oddly named woman. With a third, he wisely chooses not to ask her name, but he becomes so impressed with her poise and good humor that he decides she will be amused by the story of his earlier faux pas. Quite wrong: The woman berates him and

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refuses to speak to him. The student is again confused, until a friend who hears his story laughs, explaining to the tactless young man that the woman was born with the surname Wohlgeruch (“good smell”), but married a man named Mist (“dung, manure”).

While this story is unlikely to be true in all its particulars, the names throughout it did flourish in Austria, wrote Franzos. Based on a selection of names drawn from court documents and school lists, those in his tale are hardly among the most bizarre or derogatory he found. Jews were named Bettelarm (destitute), Maschinendraht (machine wire), Fresser (glutton), Säufer (boozer), Taschengreifer (pocket grabber) and Todtschläger (killer). Beider, who was unable to replicate most of Franzos’s findings, insists that only “a small series of surnames were totally contemptuous.” Still, what a series! They include Kaker (crapper), Harn (urine), Hoden (testicles), Wanzreich (realm of bugs), Schmutzbank (dirty bench) and Affengesicht (monkey face). He supplies others that are not derogatory, just extremely bizarre; among these are Denkberg (thinking mountain), Krebsfang (hunting of crabs) and a number of names that mean “friend of X,” where X may be deer, children, leather or most anything else. In Kolomyja, Beider found both the names Sommerfreund (friend of summer) and Sommerfeind (enemy of summer).

One reason why Galicia—that part of the Austrian empire which today makes up southeastern Poland and western Ukraine—has provided so much enjoyment to the onomastician is that Jewish surnames there were typically assigned by commissions made up of Christian Austrian clerks, not by the Jews themselves. It was likely a tedious job, suggested Franzos, so the clerks did what they could, at times, to entertain themselves. He included a record written by such a clerk:

“The Jew Eliuser, son of Naphtali, a Levite, was called up. He is 50 years old. Nicknamed Der Lahme (the lame). Has a wife Rebekche and daughter Gitel. Lives in his own little house near the water (the Sered River). Earns a living as a teacher of the Talmud and biblical writing. He was asked what he wanted to be called. Gave no answer. Was asked again. Cried (weinet) and groaned (stöhnet). Gave no answer. The name Weinstein was given to him and all his descendants; recorded.”

Some commissions chose names with “malicious irony,” according to Franzos. “The more ruined were [a man’s] circumstances, the more valuable gemstone name he received....An old rabbi called the Fromme (religious one) was given the family name Gottlos (godless); a man who was lame became Schnelläufer (quick runner),” and so on.

It is likely, too, that the clerks were not above taking a bribe here and there in exchange for a more attractive name. Previous generations of onomasticians went so far as to claim that there were specific “cheap” or “expensive” surnames, but Beider’s research challenges this. Still, he has little doubt that bribery took place.

The most common sort of name meted out in Galicia was the “compound artificial surname”; that is, a name with its basis in two words (compound) that have nothing to do with characteristics of the named person (artificial). The percentage of artificial surnames was as high as 82 percent in parts of Galicia, probably because it made the task of the naming commissions formulaic and simple. Just throw one pleasant-enough word (Gold, Silber, Fein, Rose, Blum, Sonne) together with another (terms like –au [meadow], –bach [brook], –berg [mountain], –garten [garden], –haus [house], –zweig [branch]), and presto! You’ve got yourself a family name that should be unique, at least in your village.

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Whatever the names bestowed, they meant little to Jews at first, who saw them as foreign impositions, even annoyances. “They were just labels,” says Beider, pointing out that Jews didn’t even begin recording these new surnames on tombstones, by and large, until the 20th century. And this apathy in turn explains why many immigrant Jews were happy to alter or abandon their names entirely—if the new times and places in which they found themselves seemed to demand it.

As seems common with Jewish onomasticians, Jeffrey Malka didn’t commence his career until later in life. A professor of orthopedic surgery at Georgetown University in Washington, DC, he felt drawn to the subject in the 1990s to counter the then-prevailing (and very wrong) notion that few documents remained that would allow Sephardic Jews to research their roots. “Jews probably came to Christian Europe around the 8th, 9th, 10th century,” explains Malka, author of *Sephardic Genealogy: Discovering Your Sephardic Ancestors and Their World*. “As late as the 1100s, multiple cities in Spain had Jewish populations of 12,000 each....Ninety percent of all Jews at that time were Sephardic.”

Sephardic surnames are older than Ashkenazic ones, says Malka, since “hereditary surnames exist since the 12th century in the Sephardic world.” In fact, the use of hereditary surnames is ancient, he says; think of how many Caesars ruled Rome. But the Christian world abandoned the Roman naming system: To ensure that converts would be loyal only to the church, Christian leaders insisted that the only names of importance should be baptismal names. The Muslim world, however, prized family and tribe, and family names were common among the Moors of Spain. And it was under the Moors that many Jews lived, at least until the Christian Reconquest, which was complete in 1492 after Ferdinand and Isabella’s conquest of Granada. By this time, following the lead of the Muslim society surrounding them, most had adopted surnames.

Sephardic last names from this region often bear the imprint of centuries of religious persecution—a long trail of anti-Semitic fervor, forced conversions, Inquisitions into whether these “conversos” continued to practice Judaism, and expulsions. Surnames from the Iberian Peninsula can be divided into two groups: newer names adopted by conversos—Jews who converted, forcibly or not, to Christianity—and truly ancient names, belonging to families who remained Jewish. Names like Rodriguez or Enriquez are typical of the first group; they are common Spanish names that conversos took from “godfathers” responsible for their conversion. By the time these conversos returned to practicing Judaism, sometimes a hundred or more years later, many had forgotten their original names.

Names from the other group, those whose families did not convert, derive from Hebrew (as with Cohen, which means priest; Gabbay, which means tax collector; and Shalteal, which means asked of God), Arabic (as with Maimon, which means lucky) or Aramaic (as with Malka, which means king).

But what is true, by and large, of names in the Iberian Peninsula is not true of other parts of the Sephardic world. In Turkey, for example, no mandatory-surname law was on the books until 1935—the government apparently simply didn’t see any need.

In addition to Spanish, Arabic and Aramaic, Sephardic names (a category which has come to include all non-Ashkenazi Jews including Mizrahi from Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East) can be Biblical, Portuguese, Greek, Berber, Latin or Italian in origin. They can be found as far afield as Azerbaijan and India, because the story of the Sephardim is often one of successive migrations and dispersions within dispersions.

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To make matters more confusing, some Sephardic Jewish families adopted aliases. In the 16th century, when conversos were at last allowed to leave Portugal if they wished, branches of merchant families fled to Amsterdam. Most maintained close economic ties to their families back in Portugal, essentially expanding the family business. When those who moved to Amsterdam converted back to Judaism, they often returned to their original, pre-converso names. But this created a fear that their families back in Portugal—still nominally Christian—would be targeted by the Inquisition if it became known that they had family members who had reverted to Judaism. Therefore, in business dealings with their relatives back in Portugal, these newly Dutch Jews often used aliases (“much to the dismay of the genealogist,” writes Avotaynu’s Sallyann Sack). For example, one ex-converso named Yosef Cohen became “Jeronimo Henriques.” When descendants of these Dutch Jews again dispersed throughout the world along commercial routes to Brazil, the Caribbean, the United States and elsewhere, they often simply adopted their aliases. “It was safer that way,” says Malka.

Malka, who is half-Sephardic and half-Ashkenazi, finds the study of Sephardic surnames especially rewarding. “If you’re Jewish today, you’re likely to be Ashkenazi. What’s ‘Goldberg’ mean to you? Nothing, it’s recent: ‘gold mountain’—so what?” he says. “But Sephardic names are so old, they do mean something.”

In 1900 in his hometown of Plonsk, Poland, a feisty 14-year-old named David Green organized a youth group dedicated to speaking only Hebrew. He made aliyah six years later, determined to put the Zionist theory preached in his parents’ home into practice.

A year later, when he visited Jerusalem for the first time, he was dismayed by what he found: Jews “speaking to each other in 40 different languages,” he later recalled, “half of them unable to communicate with the other half.” Some time after, as an editor at a newspaper dedicated to reviving the Hebrew language, he decided that his family name, which he had brought from Poland, had to go. He replaced “Green” with a fierce-sounding Hebrew name meaning “son of a lion cub.” That new name was Ben-Gurion.

In the earliest years of Israel’s life as a nation, David Ben-Gurion, its first prime minister, demanded that those with high-ranking positions in government and those in diplomatic roles Hebraicize their names. This wasn’t merely a matter of promoting Hebrew. As he and many others viewed it, the birth of the Jewish nation was a turning point in the history of its people, a time for forging ahead with a strong new identity and turning one’s back on the dark centuries of exile and oppression.

Ben-Gurion was by no means the first Zionist to insist that those who stood with their new country change their names. Word has it that when Haifa’s future mayor Abba Chushi led a group to Palestine in 1920, he declared “the Diaspora is history” and demanded that they all burn their Polish passports on the spot and choose Hebrew names.

The number of Israeli Jews who changed their names around the birth of Israel was significant, but not a majority, estimates Ruvik Rosenthal, a language columnist for the Israeli paper *Maariv* and author of a Hebrew slang dictionary. If Americans or others have the mistaken impression that the vast majority of Israeli Jews changed their names, it is likely due to the policy that required certain public figures to do so. Rosenthal recalls that members of the Israeli soccer team were forced to adopt new surnames for a game in Russia in the 1950s. It sounded absurd to the average Israeli, he says—it would be as though Roberto Clemente had been made to change his name to Bob Clement for an international baseball game. “It was a farce,” says Rosenthal, who never Hebraicized his family name, recalling his feeling that “though you are in a Zionist state, you don’t

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want to cut the chain of generations.” “I am the only one left with this name” in his family, explains Rosenthal, whose father died when he was four and whose brother died in the 1973 Yom Kippur War. “I’m part of this chain.”

For some, though, the pull of nationalism tugged with a force great enough to break the chain. Raphael Nir, a professor of linguistics at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, recounts that when Israel was founded, he and his brother decided to change their family name, from Strauss. Their father, a physician, was widely known in the community as “Dr. Strauss” and thus could not change his own name, but as a Zionist, he encouraged his sons in their patriotic zeal. In general, says journalist Ori Nir, Raphael’s son, there was a desire to rid the new country of “all the ‘-vitches’ and ‘-steins’ and all these names that smelled of diaspora,” replacing them with “fresh, earthy names like Nir,” which means “plowed field.”

By the 1960s, the requirement that some government employees Hebraicize their names slackened to a recommendation. But even into the 1980s, Israeli Defence Forces policy demanded that military officers who reached a certain level of seniority Hebraicize their names. And organizational culture at places like El Al, the Israeli airline, long exerted pressure on employees to change their names.

But the tide has steadily shifted in recent decades, says Ori Nir. As Israel became more Westernized, it embraced the West’s view of the centrality of the individual, not the nation, and the yearning for roots took hold as firmly in Israel as elsewhere. With that came an interest in family origins, so much so that a small but significant number of Israelis have decided to revert to those “ghetto names,” as detractors had labeled them. Raphael Nir says that his late son Ofer, Ori’s brother, had been seriously thinking about changing his name back to Strauss. A number of Israeli Jews have done so, sometimes hyphenating new names with old ones. In a strange twist, the names that were foisted upon Jews by imperial powers are sometimes being lovingly re-adopted by later generations, even if their own fathers never loved those names. “We are in an era in Israel of identity,” says Ruvik Rosenthal. “There is a feeling that being an Israeli is not enough.”

Juliet, pining for Romeo, famously said that a rose by any other name would smell as sweet—that simply changing a thing’s name wouldn’t change the actual thing. But with Jews, when their names changed, their smell changed, so to speak (and not just for the unfortunate Galician who ended up with the name “Rudolph Stinker”). A Rosenberg by any other name could be someone quite different: Rosen or Ross in the United States, or Ben-Shoshan (Hebrew for “son of the rose”) in Israel, each alteration indicating a profound change in the circumstances and the character of the bearer. So we may respond to Juliet: That’s what’s in a name—for Jews, at least.

Jewish names are more than a window into history. In Judaism, a name is considered to be deeply tied to the spirit. To many Jews, names are even “more than identity,” says Jeffrey Malka. For instance, Eastern European Jewish folklore held that a person’s name was intimately bound up with that person’s soul, which explains why Ashkenazim will name a child after a relative only after that relative has died. At some points in history, Jews have encouraged the very ill to change their names, so as to fool the Angel of Death (the practice continued, though more rarely, at least up to the last century). Maimonides urged those who wanted to reform themselves to change their names. According to Rabbi James Ponet, this action was meant to convey, “I am other. I am not the man who did these ugly deeds.” Biblical characters took new names at moments of redefinition: Abram became Abraham; Sarai, Sarah; Jacob, Israel. And Kabbalists ascribe incredible power to the name of God; in versions of the legend of the Golem, the proper incantation of God’s name animates mere matter.

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In an essay called “Parshat Shemot,” Ponet meditates on why the Hebrew title of the book of Exodus should be Shemot, or “Names.” The simple answer, of course, is that as with Genesis (Bereshit), this is one of the first words in the Hebrew text of the book.

But digging deeper, Ponet suggests that “Names” is a fitting title for the story of the struggle for freedom and redemption. The declaration of a name is an assertion of life. To be stripped of a name is to be treated as less than human. In his book *If This is a Man*, Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi wrote, “My name is 174517.” He is only one of many who, in a dark time, lost their identities to numbers. But as Ponet points out, Yad Vashem, Israel’s memorial to Holocaust victims in Jerusalem, “is the place where the namelessness of the Holocaust is undone.” That memorial takes its name from Isaiah 56:5, “And to them will I give in my house and within my walls a memorial and a name [yad vashem] that shall not be cut off.” With a name, one is alive, rooted—an individual with a sense of family and cultural history. Says Ponet, “The loss of name, anomie, is the great Jewish curse.”