Understanding Names Pays Off Big Time

John M. Hoenig offers information about the dynamics of surnames.

MY MOTHER ARRIVED in America in 1938, two years before the rest of her family. In one of the letters she saved from that period, her father wrote "Say hello to Moses if you get the chance." Who was Moses? My second-cousin Marcia provided the answer: "That must be my uncle, Moses Schwartzfeld." I eagerly started looking for information about him. And while I found two passenger manifests from his trips back to the old country in the 1920s, I couldn't find his original arrival in America. Eventually, by using the advanced search features of Steve Morse's front end to the Ellis Island database, I found him. He arrived as Moses Schwarzfeld — without a "t". Note that searching by Soundex code or by using wildcards wasn't especially useful in this case: I'd have had to search for Moses among the thousands of records for people named Schwartz, Schwartzer, Schwartzkopf, etc. Similarly, I couldn't find Isaac Diener's arrival in New York, even though I knew the year of his arrival. Eventually, I discovered he arrived under the name Diner. Could I have anticipated these problems and searched more effectively? This article provides the answer: yes!

Types of Name Changes
The two cases above illustrate a general principle. In German, the name Schwarzfeld is pronounced as if it had a "t" in it and the name Diner is pronounced as if it were Diener, and not like the place where you buy lunch. Clearly, my relatives changed the spelling so

Passenger manifest showing the arrival of Itzig Diner in New York in 1909. Soon after arrival he became Isaac Diener.

that Americans reading their names would pronounce them properly (or at least closer to the originals), and people hearing the names would be correct if they wrote them phonetically. Therefore, I offer the following guideline: if you know a New World surname but can't find it in Old World records (such as passenger manifests), say the name aloud to several people knowledgeable about the Old World language and ask them to write it down for you. If you know an Old World surname and can't find it in New World records, ask people to pronounce the name for you and write it down phonetically. The New World name may be close to one of the spellings.

It is helpful to consider other ways in which names changed. Sometimes a name that is difficult for Americans to pronounce was modified to contain only sounds found in the English language. Letter combinations that do not occur in English, such as brz or prz in Polish, were replaced by their phonetic (near-)equivalents. Letters were transposed for phonetic reasons, such as the name Saffre becoming Saffer, and vowels were added as needed, as in Judl becoming Yudel. Also, shortening names made it easier for Americans to pronounce and to remember them. The name Peller, for instance, is uncommon and

most Pellers who came to America were Jewish and from the Austrian province of Galicia. What then, should one make of Italian Catholic Pellers? People with names like Pellerano and Pellerito shortened their names to Peller. This made the name sound less "ethnic" and may have helped people assimila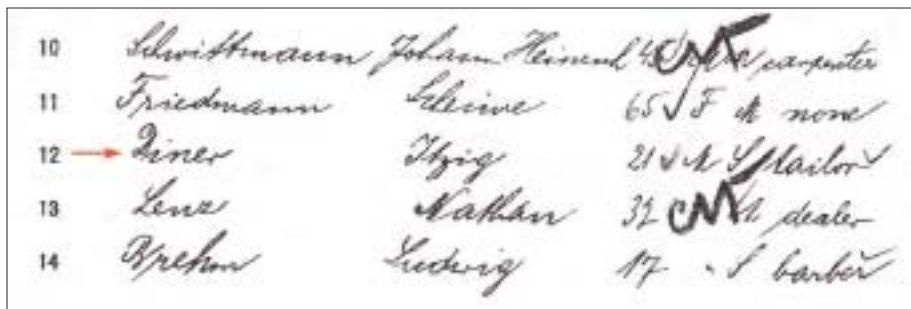te into American society more easily. Anglicizing names was always common in America but it was especially so for people of German ancestry during WWI and WWII. And during WWII, Jewish soldiers in the British and American armies were encouraged to change their names to non-Jewish sounding ones in case they were captured.

My mother told me that when the Honigs became US citizens they had an opportunity to change their name. They heard the name Hennessey and thought it sounded pleasant. Then someone told them it was an Irish Catholic name and they decided there would be no end to people asking why they were Hennesseys if they were neither Irish nor Catholic. So in the end they dropped the accent over the letter "o" and inserted an "e" and became Hoenigs.

My wife's family records date back to 1599 in Belgium. Originally, the name was Le Saffre but by the 18th century there were so many surnames beginning with "Le" that it became fashionable to drop the prefix.

Guessing at a name change can be like looking for a needle in a haystack. However, it is certainly worth a try. My friend Diana Morris had little luck finding the

Zuperskis; checking Zupersky, Zaperski and Zapersky didn't help. Then she tried Superski and, bingo!, she found what appear to be relatives in another state.

It is important to realize that relatives often occur in close proximity in census records (also in land records and in cemeteries). If you find Anna Rockwood, age 23, from Austria, living in the same building as your relatives, you might suddenly wonder if she could be your relative Anna Rakowitz of the same age and citizenship. Notice in this example that both names begin with the same letter, the first syllables of the two names sound similar, and they have a consonant from the middle of the name (w) in common. This is often the case with name changes.

Many immigrants came from areas where the Roman alphabet was not used. Russian, Yiddish, Chinese and other names had to be transliterated before North Americans could begin to read them. The transliterated names may then have been simplified further or Americanized so that an immigrant's name may have evolved through several stages. Other languages use mostly Roman letters but with additional letters or accents. In America, accents may have been simply dropped from the name, and letters may have been replaced with their nearest English look-alike. However, this results in radical departures in the pronunciation of the name so it is likely that additional changes would be made to preserve the original sound as much as possible.

It is important to ask several people to transliterate a name for you, so you have a variety of possibilities with which to work.

Consider two examples. The US Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives has house registry books from Stanislawow, Poland (now Ivano Frankovsk, Ukraine) from 1940. They were written in Russian but the finding aid has transliterations of the street names to English, including many references to houses on "Adolfa Gitler" street. Clearly, the street had been

renamed after Adolf Hitler by the Germans. There is no letter H in the Cyrillic alphabet so the H in Hitler was given the Cyrillic letter which when translated back into the Roman alphabet becomes G. It is important to remember that the letters G and H can be confused

The author's father's certificate of naturalization, which also granted a change of name from Honig to Hoenig.

when names are translated from Russian to English. As another example, Hebrew and Yiddish are almost always typeset without the little marks and dots (the nikud) that serve as vowels and as distinguishers among similar letters. The letter "pay", written with a dot above the letter is pronounced "p"; without the dot it's "f". Thus, a name with such a character could be either Peller or Feller. I found a transliterated list of all the names occurring in a Yiddish book about Stanislawow. There was the name Zishe Feller. I realized that the person doing the transliteration would have had no way of telling whether the name was Feller or Peller so it could be a reference to my great grandfather Zishe Peller. I was right — it was a precious find.

Sometimes, immigrant names are translated into English. For example, the names Schwarz, Mhller and Schneider mean "black", "miller" and "tailor" in German. People with those names might become Black, Miller, Tailor or Taylor in America.

When Did Names Change?
The first thing to note is that names evolve over time so that instead of searching for the ancestral surname in the old country it may be more proper to search for the ancestral *surnames.* A good example of what's involved can be found in the article "Mutilation: the Fate of Eastern European Names in America" by William Hoffman (*www.pgsa.org /Mutilation.pdf*). Hoffman points out that our ancestors moved around Europe for all the reasons that people move today — to escape persecution, the draft, or debt, to look for better economic opportunities and so forth. A German or Lithuanian trying for a better life in Poland would likely change his or her name after a while to fit in better. Hoffman's article tries to catalog the phonetic changes in spelling likely to occur when names are exchanged among the Polish, German, English, Czech, Hungarian, Russian and Lithuanian languages

Passenger manifests were created by the steamship company in the port of embarkation. The clerk there may or may not have been familiar with the surnames of the passengers. Thus, depending on the port, the names may have been anglicized, made Germanic or otherwise changed. That doesn't mean the changed name was necessarily adopted in the new world.

Officially recognized changes of name in America date back as least as far as the early 19th century. Usually, a person would petition the state legislature, and the proceedings would be documented in the legislative record or the "session laws", both of which should be viewable at the state archives. After the US Civil War, name changes could occur in state courts and even city courts. For

example, the Civil Court in New York City has records of name changes dating back to 1887. But, except in modern times, when an immigrant arrived in America, there was little to stop him or her from adopting whatever name was desired whenever it was convenient. As time progressed, the requirements for record keeping became more complex and exacting as regulation of military pensions, social security, passports, taxes and so forth came into play. It became necessary to have a court approve a name change.

Subtleties of Name Usage

There are so many languages, with so many quirks and twists, that I can't possibly review all the subtleties of name changes. My hope is that the following examples will make it clear that everyone should have a wide circle of friends knowledgeable about all the languages pertinent to the family search. In the absence of such good fortune, one can turn to the many books and articles available. Try searching for something like 'Polish + names' or 'Polish + surnames' using a search engine like Google. But nothing beats knowing native speakers. Failure to understand the name rules leads to many missed opportunities.

Today, it is common for North American women to continue to use their maiden names when they get married. This may be comparatively new in America but it has been common practice in some European countries for a very long time. My mother-in-law, a Belgian citizen, can't understand why this isn't so everywhere. She explains that her medical, school, tax, and other records were started before she got married and the continued use of her maiden name makes it easier for everyone to keep track of the records.

The subject of maiden names is far more complex than it may appear. Children could inherit their mother's surname for any of

One of the author's father's Hungarian documents showing the surname is written before the given name.

a variety of reasons. If a child was born out of wedlock the state might not recognize the father's name and the child would bear the mother's surname. Similarly, in 19th-century Austria, if a couple had only a religious wedding ceremony, the state might not recognize the marriage. Civil ceremonies were often avoided because of the fee involved. Sometimes, a couple would undergo a civil marriage ceremony years after their religious one. This might happen, for example, if the couple anticipated applying for a passport. Thus, there could be children of mixed

surnames in one nuclear family. Another reason for using the mother's surname might be to try to avoid the draft, or to avoid responsibility for family debts. My relative Chaim was always known by his mother's surname while his three sisters bore their father's surname. No one knows why this was so. The lesson is that one may have to search two surnames to track one individual.

In some languages, such as Polish, Russian, Latin and Greek, nouns — including proper names — take on different endings depending on their role in the sentence, and according to whether the nouns are plural or singular, masculine or feminine. For example, in Latin we might have the name Petrus (Peter); the son of Petrus would be filius Petri.

Hungarian has two unusual features. First, the surname is written before the given name. My father was William Hoenig; his Hungarian documents specify him as Hönig Vilmos. Second, names can have modifiers tacked on the end. The suffix né means Mrs. Thus, my father's wife would be Hönig Vilmosné (Mrs. William Hoenig), or Hönigné Peller Malvine (Mrs. Malvine Hoenig née Peller). Thus, Hönig and Hönigné are the same surname.

When I search for information about my Schächter relatives, I have to also check the spelling Schaechter because these two names are equivalent in German. The latter form is used when printing the name in a font that does not have the umlaut accent. Similary, other accents can be replaced by "oe" or "ue".

Naming Traditions

Knowledge of naming traditions can pay off big time. It can be as simple as a married woman using her maiden name as a middle name or middle initial, or a couple using an ancestral surname as a name for a child. Thus, Thomas Parker Wentworth may have had

an ancestor whose surname was Parker. Then again, Parker Thomas Wentworth may have had an ancestor with surname Parker.

An English and Welsh naming tradition that came to the Colonies is described by Emily Croome's *Unpuzzling Your Past* (Betterway Books, 2001). The firstborn son was named after the paternal grandfather; the second son after the maternal grandfather. The first-born daughter was named after the paternal grandmother and the second one after the maternal grandmother. Croome tested this theory by examining a number of detailed early American genealogies. She found use of the tradition was widespread but not in any strict sense. It provides important clues to relationships but is not evidence. My friend Kathryn Davis Small described this as a southern US tradition, one that applied to her family which has lived in southeast Virginia since the 1700s. Interestingly, Sharon Carmack writing in the *New York Genealogical and Biographic Record* (July 2002) described a similar tradition in Italy (except that the first-born daughter was named after the maternal grandmother rather than paternal). Debbie Cyr described a German naming system like the Italian one. In the German system, both Catholic and Protestant children were given two names, the first in honor of a saint and the second in honor of a relative. Often, all the children in the family were given the same saint's name. Thus, we had Johann Sebastien Bach's children Johann Christian and Johann Cristoph Friedrich but also Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach.

A well known Jewish naming tradition is to give children the name of a deceased ancestor to honor the relative. You can often see an alternation of names across the generations. This can be extremely helpful as I found out when I tried to locate descendents of my grandfather's cousin Abraham Peller. Abraham had four grown children according to the census records. For various reasons, I could not find them.

Descendants of William Lilly

A portion of Katherine Davis Small's family tree showing use of a southern naming tradition over five generations. William Lilly was born before the American Revolution and William Luther Smith died in the 1920s. In the most recent generation, Katherine Franklin Smith was named for her paternal grandmother; Jessie Lee Smith, for her maternal grandmother; Harriett Ann Smith, for her maternal great grandmother; Ruth Elizabeth Smith, for her mother; Lucy Seabrook Smith, for her paternal great grandmother and father; Mary Virginia Smith, for a maternal aunt; William Luther Seabrook Smith, for paternal grandfather and father; Florence Meads Morris, for paternal step-grandmother; David Walter Murden Smith, for maternal grandfather; Joice Billup Smith, for paternal great great grandmother; and James Wickham Smith, for paternal great grandfather.

But, a phone directory listed an Abraham Peller who, I figured, might be a grandson. He was, and this discovery led to a flood of new information. This naming tradition sometimes lets you determine the year of death with surprising accuracy. Three children of Aron and Beile Peller named daughters after Beile: Isabella, born in 1902; Isabelle, in 1906; and Bella, in 1907. Hence, Beile presumably died in or before 1902. (This is not, of course, considered evidence but it is valuable nonetheless.)

It is important to learn the local variations in naming traditions. For example, the Jewish tradition referred to above is an Ashkenazic (Eastern European) tradition, not a Sephardic (southern) tradition. Furthermore, the tradition was not uniform across the Ashkenazic community. Naming children after deceased ancestors was not customary in Dutch Ashkenazic communities.

Another example of the importance of local traditions was related to me by a Spanish friend who traced his family history back to the 1500s. One thing that startled him was finding a name used more than once for siblings. Thus, a child may be named David to honor an ancestor and, if David died young, the name might be reused for a later born child. Carmack says use of necronyms was common in Italy, too.

Sometimes, children are named for admired, famous people. Thus, identifying a namesake may shed light on family values and tastes.

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