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Name Fluidity and its Effect on Ashkenazi Genealogical Research

It is commonly believed that genealogical research has become easier and more popular than ever before, and with more and more records being digitized and available over the internet, the ability to research family history can be done by anyone with an interest and a computer. Where one might have had to travel to the places that housed the records that trace family life, now many of those records are online, with the data store growing all the time. Similarly, relatively inexpensive DNA testing is bringing family background and history to the masses.

However, while science and technology have revolutionized genealogical research, it can still be very difficult to research one's family history. Specifically, for Ashkenazi Jews, those from Central and Eastern Europe, there is a history of name changes, both given and surname, which makes the search for one's ancestors a difficult challenge. Exploring why and how the Ashkenazi took multiple names, both in Europe and after immigration, shows an additional level of complexity added to genealogical research. For genealogists of Ashkenazi descent, experienced by this author's personal search, understanding the background and issues of having multiple names makes the difference in being able to successfully document one's family tree.

Background

Like countless other immigrant groups, many Ashkenazi left their homes in Europe and moved to America. My family is amongst those immigrants. Growing up in Orange County, California, there was not much of a Jewish community. There was my extended family, and that

was the extent of my Jewish experience. Interested in Jewish history and culture from an early age, I loved hearing family stories about the move to America, as well as exploring Jewish life through books and movies.

Surrounded by many cousins, aunts and uncles, and more, I heard many family stories over the years, but it was not until 2008, when I joined Ancestry.com, that I began researching my family history in earnest. Attempting to fill in my family tree from memory, I did not get very far. With Ancestry.com, one enters any known family information, both exact and less specific, and the site searches a number of connected databases for possible matches. Successfully finding any hits at all required many hours of searching. The problem was uncertainty about my ancestors' actual names; in most cases, I had heard them, or one of them, but not seen them written down. It is unfortunate that I waited until later in life to begin my search, as most of the earlier generations of my family are now gone.

Hitting roadblock after roadblock, it seemed my family was possibly too difficult to find. However, as I continued my research for the past decade, I have learned that the challenge of Ashkenazi ancestors with multiple names is a common problem for family researchers. As I continue to utilize the various genealogical databases to build my family tree, the timeline of my family's move, from Europe to New York and then to California, is getting clearer. Searching for each little tidbit of information often feels like a treasure hunt, with each nugget a precious gem. The process is slow and often frustrating because more often than not, I find more than one name per person. Slowly, over a number of years, I have been able to document information about my grandparents and great-grandparents, as well as aunts, uncles, and cousins. While successful searching is tough in America, it is even harder outside of the United States where access to

information is less available and what is found is in unfamiliar languages and alphabets. One of the keys to finding family information is gaining an understanding of their history and origins. For example, learning the history of Ashkenazi Jews helped me to see the context that caused all these multiple names to exist, therefore informing variations in search criteria needed to make progress in search results.

About Ashkenazi Jews

Ashkenazi are the Yiddish-speaking diaspora population of Jews, who flowed north into Europe during the Roman Empire and continued to move eastward, in response to varying political and religious issues. They eventually settled in the vicinity of the Russian Empire, in an area called the Pale of Settlement, or just the Pale, around the current countries of Russia, Latvia, Lithuania, Belarus, Poland, Germany, and Ukraine. These are the people from which I come, based on DNA tests, through both Ancestry.com and 23andMe, which both show I am ninety-seven percent Ashkenazi Jew. The other three percent are European, North African, and West Asian, which not surprisingly follows along the path of the Jewish diaspora.

Name Changes - Surnames

Before the late eighteenth century, Jews in the Pale did not really have surnames, as we think of them today. Until this period, Jewish names generally changed with every generation, with the use of “son of” or “daughter of” monikers. For example, if Abram and Sarah had a boy and named it Samuel, the child would be called Samuel son of Abram, which in Hebrew would be Samuel Ben Abram. In Yiddish or German, the Ben would be “son,” so Samuel Abramson, and in most Slavic languages, like Polish or Russian, it would be “witz,” or Samuel Abramowitz (Muraskin, Jewish Surnames).

As both Imperial Russia and the Austro-Hungarian Empire began to modernize, they insisted that Jews take last names so that they could be taxed, drafted, and educated. Jews had to comply with rules of the government as they began to create their official surnames. They could use one based on parentage, or they could use other options such as their occupations, a physical characteristic of a person or landmark, or something that might just appeal to them personally. There is also some evidence that officials, when approving and documenting the names, gave the best names to those who could pay, or conversely giving the worst names to those who did not pay, as punishment. Some Jews might have also wanted to change names to appease bad luck or to improve the meaning attributed to those names (Muraskin, Origins and Meanings).

While other cultural groups might have a similar history when it comes to relatively recent surnames, Ashkenazi Jews also have an additional challenge with the multiple first names that may be associated with a given person.

Name Changes - Given Names

Whilst the practice of surname changes has been the subject of much study, first name changes are at least as common, if not more common, than changes to last names. This is mainly attributed to the multilingual state of most Jews. Ashkenazi first names can be loosely categorized into Hebrew and Non-Hebrew. Hebraic names would be generally the sacred names from the Bible, like Moses, Jacob, Sarah, or Rachel. They may have localized spelling or pronunciation but would generally be recognizable as biblical names. Non-hebraic names could be historically used names, like Alexander or Helen, names varied in local languages, like Frederick or Anna, or familial names and nicknames (Esterson).

A common practice amongst Ashkenazi is to name a baby after a deceased relative. One would not name a child after a living relative, as that would be considered a bad omen. The tradition of choosing a name from someone who has passed is not an exact naming, but a method of using the first letter of the name as a starting point. For example, I am named after my uncle Max, which means my Hebrew name is the feminine of his. Often, a family names a child after a relative using both Yiddish and Hebrew names, but also gives a familial name in the local language (Adams). In my case, my given legal name is Meredith, my family calls me Meri, my Hebrew name is Masha, which is the feminine of Moshe, my uncle Max's Hebrew name, and my Yiddish name is Miasha.

For Ashkenazi, there is also considerable complexity added when factoring in the Yiddishizing of names, like adding a diminutive suffix to another name. Yiddish is a unique language, and to understand how it affects names, we must look at its history and qualities.

Yiddish

Yiddish is the historical language of the Ashkenazi. It is generally considered a German dialect, but with words from Hebrew, Aramaic, Slavic and Romance languages. Ashkenazi also brought in local words from their current area of residence. It was originally an oral language with its origins around the year 1000. When it became a written language, it was scribed with Hebrew letters, as this was the alphabet most familiar to Yiddish speakers (Rich).

Decline of Yiddish

Until the late nineteenth and twentieth century, Hebrew was mainly used to study the Torah. It was generally considered an historical or ancient language, with a few isolated populations actually using it outside of a religious context. Along with the effort to establish a

Jewish homeland in Palestine, there was an effort made to modernize Hebrew for everyday use. The pioneer of this effort was Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, born Eliezer Yitzhak Perlman in Belarus, who immigrated to Palestine in 1881.

While some thought that Yiddish should be the language of modern Jews, because the number of speakers was larger than those who spoke Hebrew as a conversational language, the actual use of Yiddish was declining. Yiddish was the language of the Diaspora, and as Jews continued to assimilate into the cultures where they lived, it was used less and less. In addition, the largest Yiddish-speaking population was decimated by the Holocaust. With many Jews returning to Palestine and working towards a modern Jewish homeland of the State of Israel, it was finally determined that Yiddish should be relegated to history, while Israelis would speak this modernized form of Hebrew pioneered by Ben-Yehuda (Philologos).

The thinking has expanded a bit since the mid-twentieth century because there is so much richness in the Yiddish culture. Many Yiddish plays, books, and other writings are now recognized as classic literature. There is an effort to keep the language alive in order to have access to these original writings, as can be demonstrated by the availability of Yiddish classes online or in areas with significant Jewish populations.

Beginning the Search

Based on the possible multiple names associated with a person, we begin to see how searching for Ashkenazi family members can be onerous. For example, my father signed his name as James Jay Dreyfuss; however, his birth name is James Irving Dreyfuss, but everyone called him Jay. He also has a Hebrew name and a Yiddish name that comes from a deceased relative. His parents, whom I knew as Louis Dreyfuss and Sadie Stutz, were born in Rzeszow,

currently in Poland, in an area called Galicia. I was thrilled when I found Rzeszow, because I had only heard it in discussions, and phonetically it sounded like Zhezhev. Looking at the map of Poland, with only a pronunciation in mind, was daunting, as I had no idea how it might be spelled. I might never have found this town except that one of my relative's records, on Ancestry.com, listed the town they were from. Afterwards, I verified the town name by listening to an audio file with the pronunciation on Wikipedia. Knowing the town, from where my paternal grandparents originated, helped provide a wealth of information on family names.

My father's father, Grandpa Louis, died during the Depression, so I never knew him. I was lucky enough that his wife, my grandma Sadie Stutz, lived until I was ten years old, so I remember her. An interesting story my dad told me was that the original name of Louis' father was Alexander Sussman Barzalai, but he was ill when he arrived at Ellis Island, and was detained and sent back because of his illness. The story goes that he recovered and made the trip again, but being hesitant to use his name, took the maiden name of his wife, Sarah Dreyfuss. I could find nothing on Louis' father during my research, until very recently when I found my grandparents' marriage license. There under Louis' father's name was Ziche Brazilian, which, given variations in transliteration and pronunciation, could be a validation of the name I heard, Barzalai. In addition, another record referring to Louis' father had his first name as Sigmund. The confusion around this man's name seemed like a mystery we might never solve.

Luckily, my daughter, also named Sarah Dreyfuss, learned Hebrew in school. She recognized some similar Hebrew roots possible in these disparate names, and after a search through some Jewish genealogy Google groups, she found a discussion that gave some information that helped shine some light on my great-grandfather. The discussion determined

that Ziche, Alexander, Sigmund and Sussman may all be the same name when it is looked at in Hebrew, Yiddish and German. They have overlapping letters, sounds, and meaning; therefore, the conclusion of the scholarly discussion was that they were simply variations on the same name. Voila! Ziche, Sigmund, Alexander, and Sussman were just variations, so Alexander Sussman or Ziche or Sigmund were different names for the same person (Esterson).

As my grandfather died in 1930, most of my elders, even in childhood, did not refer to him by any given name, so I have no idea what name he actually called himself. I did search through the Ellis Island detainee records, but I could not find him under any of the names I tried. Finally, a breakthrough was discovered in a recently digitized set of documents from Rzeszow, Poland, accessed through Jewishgen.org. What I found is a list of surnames of people born in Rzeszow. Some names caught my eye: Brazilien, Brazylie, and Brazylier. All could be seen as pretty close to Brazilian or Barzalai. Also found were the names Dreyfuss, Sussman, Kugel, and Grad, but amazingly, no Stutz.

My grandmother, Sadie Stutz Dreyfuss, seemed to have even more mysteries surrounding her names than Grandpa Louis' father! Every early record I find for her has a different name. She was born in Rzeszow in 1898, to Golda Grad and Josef Stutz-Kugel. It seemed odd to see a hyphenated name on my great-grandfather Joseph. However, it was apparently common to use both mother's and father's name in one's surname. Maybe this is why Alexander/Ziche/Sigmund felt it was appropriate to use his wife's maiden name after coming to America.

It is assumed that Joseph had one parent who was a Stutz and one who was a Kugel, although so far no further evidence has been found. What is known is Joseph and Golda married in about 1895 and Joseph died young, in 1907. Since they had multiple children, this would

mean that Golda had four or five children to care for, alone. Interestingly, my Grandpa Louis died when he was forty, leaving my Grandma Sadie to care for four boys. How must that have been for mother and daughter to both be widowed with a number of children to care for? Golda died in 1913, and is buried in Vienna, Austria, hours away from Rzeszow by automobile. Oy, another mystery!

After Golda died, Sadie, as well as her siblings, made the trip to America. I have a picture of my Grandma Sadie after she arrived. She is seventeen years old, standing in front of a life preserver with the ship's name, Amerika. When she died in 1968, the family bought a memorial plaque in her honor at Ellis Island. Therefore, one would think it would be easy to find her on the ship's manifest; however that was not the case. It took much digging until finally she was connected to a name in the manifest, Sabina Kugel, who was on that ship and of the right age. We will probably never know why she took the Kugel name from her father, or where the name Sabina came from. In 1917, my grandparents married, and the name on the marriage license is Shaindel Stilz, another name of mystery. Shaindel may have been a Yiddishized version of her name and Stilz could be a misspelling of Stutz; however, these are just educated guesses based on years of experience in learning Ashkenazi name variations. An additional similar first name seen on some documents is Sara. What is an interesting fact about this woman of many names is that after she married my Grandpa Louis, she only used the name Sadie Dreyfuss. After settling in America, she must have finally felt safe and secure enough to decide on a name of her choosing.

The Need to Emigrate

Having previously looked at Ashkenazi history, it is important to look at the political and economic situation that prompted many Jews to want to leave Europe. Jews had frequently moved around because of varying levels of anti-semitism, which increased after Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire. The issues ranged from restrictions on where one might live, or which occupations one could choose, to actual violence and murder. Therefore, Jewish history is one of frequent movement, based on the level of anti-semitism of an area. Possibly this history gives us the term "Wandering Jew," played out in ballads, novels, and even early movies, with varying levels of anti-semitism, about how the Jews are forced to wander the earth (Kilcher and Safran).

Jews settled long enough in the Pale of Settlement that from the Middle Ages until the Russian Revolution, the Ashkenazi population grew substantially. While the Jewish population settled and grew in the Pale of Settlement, they were still persecuted by anti-semitism. In the late nineteenth century, Jewish settlements were plagued by pogroms, which were targeted episodes of persecution, from violence against property to actual massacres. These pogroms, and increasing anti-semitism, prompted a new wave of movement. In the case of my family, and many others, the movement was westward, to America.

My family are part of this wave, with my mother's family arriving from Russia around 1880 and my father's family arriving from Poland just before World War One. My family's story is just one of many, as today, most Jews in America are descended from the Ashkenazi Jews of the Pale of Settlement. Life in the Pale came alive for me in one of my favorite movies, *Fiddler on the Roof*. As a matter of fact, when asking my elders what it was like in the old country, they

would say, "You watched *Fiddler on the Roof*, didn't you? Well, that's what it was like." While family stories about moving to America were common, there were few about life in the old country, so life in the fictional "Anatevka" is what I picture when I imagine my ancestors in Europe.

Documenting Names

Based on the previously discussed history of the many possible names associated with a given person, there could also be variations based on who and how the names are documented. Someone from the Russian Empire would write using a Cyrillic alphabet, someone from another country in Eastern Europe may use a Latin alphabet, or a rabbi may use Hebrew. Once a name is documented, it also may be transcribed to another language, and that version of the name could be based on the language of the person doing the transcribing. In addition, Hebrew is often written without vowels, so a familiarity with the roots and patterns of the language is needed to interpret in order to give an exact name. To add just another bit of complexity, some Hebrew words actually have Aramaic roots.

Therefore, depending on what was being documented, people may have picked one of the many names associated with them. For example, on a religious document, they may have used the Hebrew name, whilst a census record may show a legal or familial name.

Census Records

A key primary source used for genealogical research is census records. Knowing the issues of multiple names helps to analyze what is found in census records.

Census taking is actually required per our Constitution. Article I, Section 2 of the United States Constitution states that representation and taxes will be apportioned according to the

numbers gathered in the census. It started soon after the first meeting of Congress and is required every ten years.

While there are many census records to see, there are a few challenges known with the census data. First, census data was taken manually, by a person going door to door to gather the information. Mistakes could be made, based on innocent human error, or perhaps the interviewee might provide erroneous information on purpose.

Anomalies in Census Records

One family mystery is seen in census records for my mother's maternal grandmother, Katie Rich. In the 1900 census, Katie is listed as white, from New York, with no children, and married for three years. However, in the 1910 census, Katie is from Russia, speaks Yiddish and English, and has five kids, between the ages of twenty and five. In addition to the possible human error when taking the census, the questions on the census can change from year to year. A question on the 1910 census, not found on the previous census, asks not just how many children, but how many children were born to the mother. In this census, the number of children born to Katie is nine and the number living is five. Additionally, her twenty-year-old is also from Russia and speaks Yiddish and English. At times, there are additional censuses taken, outside of the requirement to have them every ten years. New York City has a 1905 census. In this census, Katie also has five children and is white and from Russia. The key connection that validates these are all the correct Katie Rich is that her husband's name is an exact match, Henry Hoffman.

How Jews are represented in the census is another mutable issue. Some censuses showed Jews as a Hebrew race, while others considered them White. Even while listed as White, if the

mother tongue was Yiddish, the person was basically Jewish. However, not all Jews spoke Yiddish, so Jews can be hard to identify if they were not called out specifically. Years of census data provides a vast data store of rich family information. One must just learn the successful methods of searching through the data, to reap positive results.

The Immigrants

Both my paternal grandparents, Louis and Sadie, had multiple siblings, and I found it curious that while my father said his parents came from Poland, children of their siblings sometimes said they were from Austria or Hungary. I have since learned of the many border changes during the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which explains how one could be born in the same town as one's sibling but be from a different country. The partitions of Poland, a series of territorial changes between Habsburg Austria, the Kingdom of Prussia, and the Russian Empire, began toward the end of the eighteenth century, and lasted until about World War One. Because of the frequent border changes and the multinational Austro-Hungarian Empire, it is understandable how one could say one was from Poland, but also consider it Austria or Hungary. I also remember the abundance of Polish jokes I heard around in my childhood, so there may have been some sort of stigma attached to being called a Pole or the derogatory "Polack." Understanding these border changes was another bit of contextual information that helped when looking at census records.

While my ancestors living in the United States can often be tracked by the census, European countries did not always have regular census data to rely on; therefore, tracking my family before they arrived in America is very difficult, if not impossible. This issue is worse in the Russian Empire, where data has not been digitized and is more locked down. On the positive

side, other Eastern European countries have begun digitizing records, and there is an effort to fund projects to put online any records of Jewish people in Eastern Europe.

Having a famous relative can often help when searching for family history, as there may be more documentation about that person. Based on that idea, I hoped my relation to the photographer and painter Man Ray would offer up some additional facts. I know he was born Emmanuel Radnitzky, in Philadelphia in 1890; however, I also knew he spent most of his life and career in Paris. He was a close cousin of my mother’s mother, Elsie Hoffman, although that was as much as I knew. Unfortunately, Man Ray changed his name, as did his family, and he did not want his early life to be known, so that gave me little to go on when trying to make some connections. These types of research ideas and dead ends are all part of family research, sometimes reaping reward and sometimes not.

Anti-semitism in America

While Jews immigrated to America to escape persecution, the new world was not without anti-semitism. I believe some Americans forget that we did not join the fight against Hitler because of the Nazis’ anti-semitism. We entered the war only after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, and the Japanese were allied with Germany, thus Germany became our enemy. By the time World War Two began, America had a number of laws and restrictions in place, rooted in deeply ingrained anti-semitism. For example, there was a limit placed on the number of Jews to whom we would provide asylum when so many were trying to flee the Nazis. Also, In 1922, Harvard’s president, A. Lawrence Lowell, implemented a quota system, limiting the number of Jews who could be admitted each year. Many colleges and universities joined suit, specifically in the Northeast (Harvard's Jewish Problem).

My father was one victim of these quotas. When he returned from World War Two and wanted to go to law school at Brooklyn College on the G.I. bill, he had to wait a year or more, since that period's quotas had already been met. He did eventually attend Brooklyn College and obtained his law degree. Fortunately, the era of Jewish quotas at universities eventually came to an end; however, the existence of those quotas does help illustrate why many Jews changed their names in order to assimilate.

Assimilation in America

Between World Wars, in New York City, the number of people and families changing names increased exponentially. Between 1917 and 1942, the city court files show about sixty-five percent Jewish-sounding names in name change petitions. Anti-semitism was on the rise in America during this period, just as it was in Europe. It is not surprising that anti-semitism would prompt some Jews to anglicize their names. It was not required to legally change one's name, however. One could just start to use the new name consistently, and as long as it was not done to perpetrate a fraud, one was permitted to do so. Looking at the political and economic situation at the time, one can surmise what prompted one to legally change one's name. Having the ability to go through a legal name change does show the general economic strength of these Jews. Since it would require a lawyer, or at the very least a filing fee, to legally change one's name, one can assume that those who were financially able would be more inclined to legally change their name. In addition, a legal change might be necessary if people needed the documentation because they were under some sort of scrutiny or persecution.

Whether a name was changed to reduce discrimination, anglicize the pronunciation, or just to better assimilate, it was a common practice in the late nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries. The number of names changes for Jews was exponentially higher than other ethnic groups, as recorded in New York City. While this may seem an extreme solution, to give up one's link to one's past, it is more understandable knowing the recent history of surnames amongst the Ashkenazi population.

We know, based on the historical fluidity of names in Ashkenazi culture, that Jews may have seen last names as alterable. However, they were an identifier of one's Jewish heritage. One can imagine that giving up an identifier of one's heritage might have caused some hesitance, along with the desire to assimilate. On one hand, the act of assimilating helped many Jews economically, reducing barriers for employment, housing, and education, while on the other hand, many Jews used the identifying Jewish names as a sort of network to give access to jobs and other opportunities. Actor Edward G. Robinson changed his name from Emanuel Goldenberg when he was an eighteen-year-old drama student. He is quoted as saying, "It was suggested to me, ever so tactfully, that Emanuel Goldenberg was not a name for an actor. Too long, too foreign, and I suspect. . . . too Jewish." He has described, with remorse, the decision to change his name, even if he did have a very successful career with his anglicized name. Looking at the differing choices regarding Americanizing surnames, one can see there were multiple paths to assimilation for Jews (Fermaglich).

When I look at how relatively close my elders were to the new edict to take surnames in the old country, I can see how they could historically see surnames as relatively fluid, and not as something passed down from previous generations. Therefore, I can understand why the stability of surnames might not have been as important as we think of them now, and that changing them was a common occurrence to help begin a new life in America.

Unlike my father, who was first-generation American, my mother's parents were born in New York. I am confident, with documented evidence, mainly from census records, that my mother's maternal grandparents immigrated to America. I am less sure of my mother's paternal line. I can find very little evidence of them at all. My mother's father was always called Pop-Pop by his grandchildren, and Paddy by everyone else. I believe his birth name was Samuel P. Rabinowitz. Sometime between World War One and Two, he changed his last name to Robbins. I have found no specific evidence of the name change, which could mean that he did not legally change it but just began to use it. Often with changes in surnames, a whole family will make the change together for consistency. I do not know if Pop-Pop's siblings also changed their names.

I always thought it rather ironic that my Pop-Pop changed his name from Samuel Rabinowitz to Paddy Robbins, from a Jewish-sounding name to an Irish-sounding name, when the Irish had similar issues of prejudice affecting them. I wonder if he ever experienced anti-Irish issues. My sister Elia once visited Ireland, and many folk there thought she had Irish blood, with her diminutive size, ruddy cheeks, and sparkling blue eyes. She responded to inquiries about whether she was Irish quite often on her trip, where she would be required to state the names of her parents and grandparents. When she said her mother's father was Paddy Robbins, they would exclaim in all earnestness, "Aha! That is an Irish name for sure!" This was almost certainly followed by another round in the pub.

Creating Name Patterns

While the many name possibilities can seem daunting to the amatuer researcher, there are some scientific methods that scholars have developed, which help make sense of differing names for the same person. Soundex coding, first proposed by Robert Russell in 1912, is a phonetic

algorithm for indexing names by sound, which is a way to help programmatically categorize similar-sounding names. There have been many variations and improvements developed to the original soundex coding. One, specifically the Beider-Morse Phonetic Matching (BMPM) developed by Alexander Beider and Stephen P. Morse, looks at Jewish names. BMPM improves the algorithm by adding linguistic properties of the various languages where the Ashkenazi resided, plus Hebrew. Alexander Beider is a scholar in the field of Jewish onomastics and the linguistic history of Yiddish (Beider and Morse). His work is helping some researchers make sense of all the differing data and the many false positives found in earlier methods. For example, Jason Greenberg based his masters thesis on the subject of Ashkenazi first name patterns, and he cites Alexander Beider's work as one of his key sources (Greenberg).

Beyond learning about soundex algorithms, there are more common methods to learn patterns used to identify Jews by name. Most of these methods are learned from a young age, within the family. A common and lively game I played with my family was one in which we tried to point out famous people who were Jewish. If you have ever heard Adam Sandler's Hanukkah song, you will know it is an upbeat little ditty that is about the practice of identifying Jewish celebrities. I suppose that this practice of determining those who are "Members of the Tribe" is more common than one might think.

One method of identifying Jews is by a person's name, if it was not changed. Even some that have changed are part of known demonstrated patterns for Jewish names. For example, the first name Irving, which is my father's middle name, is generally thought to be a Jewish name. Famously, Irving Berlin, born Israel Beilin, who wrote the song "White Christmas," among many others, was a Jewish immigrant from Imperial Russia. I do not believe I have heard of

many non-Jews, or Gentiles, named Irving. Irving Berlin, like so many others, wanted to assimilate into American life. I would suppose writing a song about Christmas would be a good start. As a young child, it was difficult to wrap my head around a Jew writing a song about Christmas. But such is the dichotomy that is the American experience for Jewish immigrants.

The development and understanding of patterns and themes for Ashkenazi names is another tool used to vary search criteria, in order to increase the number of successful results needed to document family history.

Ashkenazi Subgroups

As is common amongst many ethnic groups, there exists smaller subgroups within the larger group. For example, while my dad's family came from Rzeszow, my mother's family came from Russia, or more specifically from Riga, Latvia. These two regional areas had regional nicknames; Rzeszow was in Galicia and the people are called Galitzianers, while those from Riga are Litvaks. These regional names were based on perceived differences in social, cultural, linguistic, culinary and other staples of everyday life, which caused negative attitudes toward one another (Issroff). The subgroup identifier is another data point to detail themes and patterns for Ashkenazi names. While the Litvak-Galitzianer attribute always appeared to be relatively lightweight and almost tongue-in-cheek, the way I heard it as a child is that there was some concern at my parents' union of a Galitzianer with a Litvak, and it was a slight point of contention and teasing for years.

The Holocaust

While I rarely heard much detail about pogroms from my elders, the Holocaust was recent history, and details were still being learned as I grew up. I was told all our family had

moved to America, so we did not have anyone back in Europe. That may or may not be true, based on my recent research, but regardless, the suffering and trauma were like an raw, open wound, of which I was always aware.

Families affected by the Holocaust continue to try to find information on relatives. These researchers find the same challenges that others experience: under which name, as well as what language, would they find their relative? There are a few nonprofits working to fund efforts to document records from the Holocaust period. Finds of stored records are being digitized, known names are being added to lists from Jewish towns, and there is much discussion about how to solve the challenges involved in Jewish family research. The documented efforts of researchers, adds to the shared body of knowledge that Ashkenazim are developing, to overcome the challenges of name fluidity.

A Homeland

The horror of the Holocaust, helped cement the belief that the State of Israel was a necessity. Support to give the Jews a homeland, a place to call their own after centuries of persecution and searching for a place to live, became more popular. Many Jewish American families supported Israel with Israeli savings bonds, a frequent gift for birthdays or other celebrations. These bonds were a huge factor in the development of the Jewish homeland during the nineteen-fifties and ‘sixties. In the January 21, 1957, issue of *Time* magazine, an article about a meeting of Israeli officials in New York, here to try to raise more money through bonds, talked about how these bonds were an important factor for needed development and accounted for about thirty-five percent of the country’s development budget.

Therefore, it is no surprise that a young Jewish girl, raised in Orange County, California, grew up with a strong sense of family and a yearning to experience the Jewish homeland. I was a voracious young reader and movie watcher. I gobbled up stories about Jews, the Holocaust, and Israel. When I did ask my elders what they knew of the old country, I rarely heard more than that it was like *Fiddler on the Roof*. Thus, when I was thirteen and visited Israel, my experience there only cemented the images in my head, and made me yearn even more for a place to call home. At one point, when I was a teenager, I began taking Hebrew lessons as preparation for moving to Israel. Of course, like many passionate teenagers, by the time I finished high school, my attention had moved from Israel to other things. However, I never lost my interest in all things Jewish. I must explain here that I am not a religious person. When I speak of being Jewish, I am referring to my culture, my roots, and my history. While I know that Judaism is mainly associated with the religion, I relate to the people, the history, and the stories, more than the religion. This interest in Jewish culture is one of the guiding forces behind my genealogical research, which has, in essence, taught me much about the challenges involved in said research.

While the majority of Ashkenazi who emigrated went to America, many also went to Israel, or Palestine as it was called before the State of Israel became official in 1948. Family researchers of Israeli immigrants have similar issues with multiple names as do American researchers. The main difference is that instead of anglicizing their names, they took on Hebrew names that may or may not have any association with their names in Europe.

My favorite book, as a young girl, was Leon Uris' *Exodus*, a fictional story about two brothers who basically walk from Russia to Palestine in the early twentieth century. Their lives parallel the history of the time, needing to leave the old country to avoid persecution, the horrors

of the Holocaust, and the beginnings of the State of Israel. This book was one that began my love of historical fiction, especially a history that mirrored my own, at least from what I knew. The brothers even took on new names after emigrating, similar to my family. Jewish history, as experienced through novels of historical fiction, was likely the spark that fueled my interest in finding my own family stories, when online genealogical research became available to the masses.

DNA Testing

I was quite excited to see the results of my DNA test. I was hoping for some helpful information for use in my genealogical search. In all honesty, I also was hoping for some really surprising results that were completely unexpected. For example, maybe the Brazilian name actually had a connection to Sephardic roots from the Iberian peninsula. However, when I received my results, the only surprise was the lack of surprises. There was no doubt that I was a European Jew, through and through, at ninety-seven percent Ashkenazi. It was interesting to see my place in the long historical timeline of the human cultural evolution. While there is a lack of specifics in these long-range timelines, it does provide some context to the known stories.

Regardless of the lack of anything really juicy, in my case, DNA testing has opened a door to solving many family mysteries, even some that were meant to remain hidden. A close friend, who was adopted at birth, has now found her biological mother and has been introduced to a whole family that she may never have known. Another friend, whose background is similar to mine, was quite surprised that her test showed only forty-six percent Ashkenazi. Her father had passed away, but her mother was still around, so she asked her mother to explain the findings. After much probing, the truth finally came out that her father was not her biological

parent. It turns out that back in the 1950s, there was little support for infertility. Her father had been sterile, so without any process, on the quiet, their doctor arranged for a donor. This was done twice, each time with a different donor. The couple did not tell anyone and raised both children as siblings. Therefore, it was quite the surprise for my friend and her brother to learn they were actually only half-siblings. If the donor(s) had been Ashkenazi, this information may have never been known. My response when she told me this story was, “They couldn’t find a Jewish doctor nearby to be the donor?”

Stories of others who find these types of surprises in their DNA results would be an interesting study on its own. A number of people I have met seem to be hesitant to test their DNA because they feel the information could be misused in the wrong hands. I can understand their hesitancy, based on fear that the cultural, racial, or health data could be used to discriminate against them. However, there is much to be learned from one’s DNA, and new findings are surfacing regularly, from both the learning of ways to fight disease to the history of humans.

With the popularity of DNA testing increasing, the growing information on shared datastores of DNA results are providing connections to near and distant relatives. These connections are another method one can use to identify variations in family names.

Conclusion

Based on the current popularity of family research, it must be that we are fascinated by learning our connections to the past, especially as it relates to our own self-identity and how we fit into the larger picture of human history. Whether through searching databases, DNA testing, or taking oral histories of living relatives, finding connections to those who came before gives us something solid to hold on to, in this rapidly changing world.

Regardless of the challenges of finding ancestors, we amateur genealogists are helping to make it more accessible for others. By supporting projects that digitize records, developing name patterns and themes, or sharing our findings in genealogical discussions, we are helping to elevate the level of success for others. Those from immigrant families, especially Ashkenazi Jews, know that we are in a race against time to document stories of immigrants before they are just vague memories.

The stark reality is that genealogical research is more easily accomplished by the dominant group of an area, those who have lived in that area for generations, and more specifically, those who had some wealth, as well. Wealthy, prominent families have a paper trail to follow. The masses mainly had their children at home, and often died at home, with no guarantee that a document with those details would be filed and kept for us to find. Therefore, for the majority of us, there can be many challenges in finding details of our family past.

Diaspora populations, like Ashkenazi Jews, face difficult challenges in documenting their family history. Without access to a specific place or language, it is difficult and sometimes impossible to find the data that helps build a family history. For amateur historians, like this author, overcoming obstacles and contributing to shared knowledge feels a worthy effort, and is an inspiring adventure in itself.

The process of researching the detailed history of my family may go on for many years. It is a passion and a challenging treasure hunt that helps me to fill in the holes in what I know of my family timeline. It is important for my own self-identity to feel connected to previous generations. Learning specific family stories, of struggles to survive, of traveling to foreign lands, leaving everything one knows, and learning new languages, helps me to feel an immediate

connection from the past to the present. The names of the ancestors help to make the stories real. It is both a very personal search and a connection to something bigger than just my family. The names and their stories help me to see them in terms of human traits, family traits, and those traits that are uniquely mine.

I am aware that if we go back far enough, we are all connected to each other through that original ancestor we share with every other person, who may have lived many thousand of years ago (Rohde). At some time in history, there was a person to whom we are all related. What happened after that is just human stories. Humans love a heartwarming or heartbreaking story, as can be seen by the number of emotional videos shared around the world through social media. These stories help us feel more connected as humans. Maybe that is really what a genealogical search is actually providing: both a personal connection to those names we can trace, as well as the larger connection to humanity in general, and those nameless and timeless human stories that we all share.

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