

What's in a Name?

by Norman Berdichevsky (November 2010)

What's in a name? That which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet.
So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call'd,
Retain that dear perfection which he owes
Without that title. Romeo, doff thy name;
And for that name, which is no part of thee,
Take all myself.

Why do so many Americans and Brits fear family names ending in "ski" or "-witz" or "-off" or "-cu"? There are, of course, many other 'difficult' names and those who bear them know who they are. From a very early age, we realized that we would have to face life full of constant questioning, indignities, silly grins and tens of thousands of requests to "spell it please" and the need for longer signature lines on documents. It became obvious that the only solution would be to shorten our names so as to avoid the embarrassment of so many fellow Americans who are tongue tied and twisted. They frequently give up with a shoulder shrug and stammer "Can I call you Norm?" (of course, even Norman is too long). Almost all telephone calls trying to interest me in a product, service or contributing to charity ask for Mr. Norman.

Our government, media, social organizations, politicians, churches, and various public forums usually insist on 'political correctness' and will use the 'correct' terminology and euphemisms lest they risk public censure, so we now have Afro-American or Black not Negro (except as uttered by some old-timers like Nevada Senator Harry Reid) which at one time was definitely the more polite term

rather than 'Colored' which in turn had been more polite than the previous use of 'Black' – going full circle. Nevertheless, political correctness stops short of appreciating and validating long ethnic names or even making a pro-forma attempt to pronounce them or express a readiness to try.

Our laws and Supreme Court decisions, and "affirmative action" policies have instituted various programs trying to equal the playing field for various 'minorities' defined by race and religion and by ethnic origin (but only on paper). The same policy however holds out no promise for those of us with long names of East European, Slavic, Greek, German, Albanian or Hungarian origin. They definitely make you less acceptable and often mean ridicule and extreme social pressure to make you conform. We ethnic Americans, characterized by long family names, are among the country's most loyal citizens yet we are often unwittingly maligned today. We constantly meet with looks of incomprehension from bureaucrats and sales personnel who give up at pronouncing or spelling them.

The only exceptions to the rule are those sports stars, mostly in ice hockey (Hawerchuck, Niedermayer, Langenbrunner), football (Roethlisberger, Skolnitski, Ronkowski), fewer in baseball (Kluszewski), a few media personalities such as Arnold Schwarzenegger, the military (General John Shalishkavili; more power to him!) and media personalities (George Stephanopolous). A serious political candidate cannot have a name with five syllables. Spiro Anagnostopoulos quickly became Spiro Agnew.

The only attempt by the public authorities to change these attitudes towards long 'strange East European sounding names' or those with such 'crazy combinations' of consonants such as Dz- or Zd- was a televised public announcement cartoon sketch that lasted a minute but was one of my favorite moments watching television at home in the Bronx as a pre-teenager. Perhaps some of you remember it too?

There were a little boy and a little girl sitting together with their lunch boxes and hers said Mary Jones on it, while his said Tommy Popski. In the end, I remember them walking away together holding hands (innocently, of course). The cartoon figures were charming, the melody easy to hum along with and I had the sensation that someone in the government or a position of authority was actually acting on my behalf.

They sang the jingle....

*"I have a little friend,
His name ends with a "ski"
And this is what my father said
As I sat on his knee:*

*A ski, a witz, an off or cu
When added to a name,
Just teaches us the family
Or town from which it came.*

*A name like Thomas Jefferson
In some lands o'er the sea
Would not be Thomas Jefferson,
But Thomas Jefferski.*

*Or Jefferwitz, or Jefferoff or maybe Jeffercu,
So do not let a ski, a witz or off seem strange to you.*

*I feel the same towards every name
No matter how it ends,
'Cause people with the strangest names
Can be the best of friends!*

I don't believe this valuable effort at tolerance had any lasting effect on 99% of the viewers. Have a look below at the last census account in 2000 with data on the most common family names in the United States, we can see that NOT ONE OF THE 50 most common family names has more than two syllables except the four most

common Hispanic names; Rodriguez, Martinez, Gonzalez and Hernandez that all have the same ending, and all have two consonants between the first and second syllables and end in -ez. The only Anglo names with three syllables are the very common Robinson and Anderson.

Even a popular New York Yankee star, Alexander Rodriguez, is called A-Rod by all Yankee baseball fans and sports announcers. It's just too much effort to take two extra breaths (but not for the ice hockey announcers who enjoyed providing second by second coverage of the recent Gold Medal Finals in the Olympic Games in Vancouver in February between the American and Canadian teams and describing in the inflighting along the boards between Niedermayer and Langenbrunner for control of the puck).

Just contrast the typical American double-play combinations easily handled by announcers such as Tinker to Evers to Chance with the coverage of ice-hockey commentators who don't lose a breath following the forward line passing combination on the Pittsburgh Penguins of Panikovarosky to Fedotenko to Goligoski (never the insulting use of a first-name or nick name like A-Rod).

I stopped at rank 50 to save paper but the same pattern continues up to the 100-th most popular name. Names like Zimmerman and Christiansen are the only 'exotic' names in the top 500 and not until we get to rankings in the 400s are there any distinctive German, Irish, East European or Greek name with four syllables, although we know for a fact that the descendents of migrants from these countries are a much larger proportion of the American population than is represented by their typical family names.

CENSUS DATA

A= rank; B=number of occurrences; C= occurrences per 100,000 people; D=cumulative proportion of ; E=% non-Hispanic (Whites only); F=% non Hispanic (Blacks only) ; G=% non-Hispanic (Asia & Pacific Islander Only); H=% non-

JACKSON	18	666125	246.93	6994.47	41.93	53.02	0.31	1.04	2.18	1.53
THOMPSON	19	644368	238.87	7233.34	72.48	22.53	0.44	1.15	1.78	1.62
WHITE	20	639515	237.07	7470.4	67.91	27.38	0.39	1.01	1.76	1.55
LOPEZ	21	621536	230.4	7700.81	5.85	0.61	1.04	0.47	0.52	91.51
LEE	22	605860	224.59	7925.4	40.09	17.41	37.83	1.03	2.3	1.34
GONZALEZ	23	597718	221.57	8146.97	4.76	0.37	0.38	0.18	0.33	93.99
HARRIS	24	593542	220.02	8366.99	53.88	41.63	0.36	0.65	2.02	1.45
CLARK	25	548369	203.28	8570.27	76.84	18.53	0.41	0.94	1.6	1.68
LEWIS	26	509930	189.03	8759.3	60.97	33.83	0.45	1.14	1.97	1.64
ROBINSON	27	503028	186.47	8945.77	51.34	44.1	0.37	0.51	1.99	1.68
WALKER	28	501307	185.83	9131.61	61.25	34.17	0.35	0.83	1.8	1.6
PEREZ	29	488521	181.09	9312.7	5.95	0.48	1.18	0.26	0.48	91.65
HALL	30	473568	175.55	9488.25	75.11	20.75	0.48	0.63	1.63	1.4
YOUNG	31	465948	172.73	9660.97	68.91	23.79	2.95	0.73	1.93	1.69
ALLEN	32	463368	171.77	9832.74	70.24	25.14	0.41	0.83	1.77	1.62
SANCHEZ	33	441242	163.57	9996.31	5.77	0.5	1.01	0.49	0.45	91.78
WRIGHT	34	440367	163.24	10159.55	68.3	27.36	0.4	0.66	1.75	1.52
KING	35	438986	162.73	10322.28	72.8	22.02	0.88	0.97	1.71	1.62
SCOTT	36	420091	155.73	10478.01	62.6	32.26	0.41	1.15	1.9	1.68
GREEN	37	413477	153.27	10631.29	59.33	36.23	0.34	0.61	1.78	1.71
BAKER	38	413351	153.23	10784.51	82.08	13.63	0.45	0.83	1.54	1.47
ADAMS	39	413086	153.13	10937.64	76.17	19.2	0.45	0.79	1.63	1.76
NELSON	40	412236	152.81	11090.46	80.29	14.93	0.51	1.09	1.49	1.68
HILL	41	411770	152.64	11243.1	66.83	28.42	0.42	0.91	1.78	1.64
RAMIREZ	42	388987	144.2	11387.3	4.4	0.29	0.97	0.27	0.4	93.67
CAMPBELL	43	371953	137.88	11525.18	76.47	19.13	0.43	0.65	1.67	1.65
MITCHELL	44	367433	136.21	11661.38	63.55	31.52	0.39	0.98	1.93	1.63
ROBERTS	45	366215	135.75	11797.14	79.56	15.86	0.47	0.85	1.67	1.58
CARTER	46	362548	134.4	11931.53	60.51	34.99	0.39	0.71	1.88	1.52
PHILLIPS	47	351848	130.43	12061.96	78.95	16.36	0.45	0.99	1.68	1.58
EVANS	48	342237	126.87	12188.83	70.65	25.05	0.4	0.68	1.67	1.55
TURNER	49	335663	124.43	12313.26	66.67	29.31	0.33	0.56	1.72	1.4
TORRES	50	325169	120.54	12433.8	6.05	0.58	1.42	0.26	0.53	91.16

The pattern continues for several more pages with only a minor break for the arch-Vietnamese name, Nguyen ranking number 59 and two distinctive but short German names, Schultz (number 173) and Schneider (at number 274).

Where are the Rubensteins, Stashefskys, Rabinowitzes, DiFrancescos, Garofalos, and Feinschriebers of my Bronx childhood? Not until rank 394, can we find a true blooded Gaelic Irishman (McLaughlin) whose name would give many Americans any trouble today (of course, we have to go to the bottom of the barrel to find anything approaching an Irish surname such as MacGhilleseatheanaich; 21 letters) but even the Murphys and O'Briens are not in the top one hundred (only good old Kelly ranks 71st). For a really lengthy Anglo name, you've got to go to the Guinness Book of Records. The 1996 Guinness Book listed this 17 letter surname as the longest English surname: Featherstonehaugh.

The habit of abbreviating names has only grown over the years. I went to Stuyvesant High School in Manhattan (1957-60), and we were all proud to mention our school to friends and relatives. In looking over the last twenty years of Alumni newsletters that I have received, the school is habitually referred to as "Stuy" even by those of my classmates who are my age but want to appear "in." If actor Sylvester Stallone can be called 'Sly,' it certainly should be okay for the old Dutch governor but I can't recall that any of my fellow classmates ever referred to the school by this ghastly short nickname when we attended.

I often wonder though what would be the reaction of my classmates if I referred to our first President as 'Wash' or Franklin Delano Roosevelt as 'Rose?' Of course, initials are even better. Everyone knows who JFK and FDR are. Undoubtedly, many Americans felt uneasy at the prospect of the Democratic candidate Michael Dukakis winning the 1988 election. It would have been the first time someone with a decidedly "real foreign name" (non-Anglo-Scot-Irish-Dutch/German) would occupy the White House, even more so since the only plausible way to have given him a shortened nickname would have been to call him

“Dukey” or “Kokki.” Obama did not have the same problem. A short three syllable name with just an o or a vowel gave his name the sound of another American state like Nevada, Montana, Ohio or Idaho.

For residents of the ‘Cajun’ area of South Louisiana and the Amish of the Pennsylvania Dutch country, the situation is truly hopeless. A great deal of ethnic mixing took place in both areas between immigrants of French and German ancestry with the spellings sometimes lagging behind. Boudreau and Schoendienst (both played in the Baseball major leagues so fans learned to pronounce them), Schexnayder, Boeuff, L?veill?e, D’Entremont Ouellette, Glattfelder, Steinhuesler, Pfothenhauer, Stautenberger, Houldershoults and Zetlymoyer usually don’t count on any recognition outside of their hometown or villages unless a namesake has made it big in the big leagues. On the other hand, Dwight David Eisenhower like General Shalishkavili today, found the military to be an honorable career which unlike others did not demand conformity to the point of changing one’s family name.

A brief look at famous personalities in the entertainment industry make it clear how much a name change was regarded as essential for ‘stardom’

- [Anne Bancroft](#) (Anna Maria Italiano)
- [Charlie Sheen](#) (Carlos Irwin Estevez)
- [Cher](#) (Cherilyn Sarkisian)
- [Dean Martin](#) (Dino Crocetti)
- [Doris Day](#) (Doris Mary Ann Von Kappelhoff)
- [Fred Astaire](#) (Frederick Austerlitz)
- [Fredric March](#) (Ernest Frederick McIntyre Bickel)
- [Gale Storm](#) (Josephine Owaissa Cottle)
- [Greta Garbo](#) (Greta Lovisa Gustafsson)
- [John Ford](#) (Sean Aloysius O’Fearná)
- [John Denver](#) (Henry John Deutschendorf, Jr.)
- [Kirk Douglas](#) (Issur Danielovitch Demsky)
- [Mary Astor](#) (Lucile Vasconcellos Langhanke)
- [Natalie Wood](#) (Natalia Nikolaevna Zakharenko)
- [Paul Muni](#) (Meshilem Meier Weisenfreud)
- [Sophia Loren](#) (Sofia Villani Scicolone)

- [Vic Reeves](#) (Jim Moir)
- [Victor Borge](#) (Borge Rosenbaum)
- [Woody Allen](#) (Allen Stewart Konigsberg)

Would an American audience have accepted a romantic film with the leads being played by Doris Von Kappelhoff and Issur Danielovitch Demsky? Or Sofia Villani Scicolone and Meshilam Meier Weisenfreud? Unlikely.

Sometimes, fiction imitates real life and vice-versa. I was born a Berdichevsky, from the name Berdichev, a town in the Ukraine, historically, one of the most important trading and banking centers in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and later, the Russian Empire. Hundreds of unrelated families (both Jewish and non-Jewish) adopted this as a surname sometime in the 18th century when the Russian authorities required it.

The Berdichevsky name spread world-wide with the great migrations from the Russian Empire and Eastern Europe. In the Buenos Aires phonebook, the last time I looked, there were 69 entries for the name. It was uncommon and very difficult for immigrants in Argentina to change their names and considered 'improper' for them to adopt a traditional Spanish sounding family name (unless they paid the appropriate bribe). In the United States and Canada on the other hand, changing your family name was easy. The result is that there are hardly any more Berdichevskys left. My family changed the name in 1949 to a shortened version of six letters and so did all my uncles and cousins. I changed it back more than 35 years ago. On my mother's side, the family only did a halfway job and shortened the name from Gubernikoff to Gubernick.

Imagine my surprise when I happened to see an old 1938 Yiddish film (made in Poland but largely for an American audience) entitled '*A Brieferle der Mama*' (A Letter from Mother). The plot revolves around the lost child of a widowed mother Dobrish Berdichevsky! Her son Ariyeh is lost in America, becomes a big star in show business and changes his name to Alan Bird! His mother, who has been confused by her many trials and tribulations, does not recognize him until the final schmaltzy seconds of the film when he sings an old favorite Yiddish song

taught to him by his father. This is a film in which fiction imitates real life (or is it the other way round?). In any case, do not let an -off, or -witz, or -cu seem strange to you!

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