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NAME CHANGES IN SEARCH OF A NEW IDENTITY: SOUTHERN AND
EASTERN EUROPEAN IMMIGRANTS AND THE FASHIONING OF WHITE
IDENTITY IN THE UNITED STATES

A thesis submitted to
Regis College
The Honors Program
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for Graduation with Honors

by:

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Introduction

On November 23rd, 1945, Steven and Anna Elizabeth Psenicnak filed an application to the District Court of the County of Hennepin, Minnesota, to legally change their last name. Their occupations, residency, property, and birth dates are listed in the application. What is missing is any indication of the intent or purpose motivating this change. With the judge being satisfied that there was no outstanding judgements or litigation against them, the Psenicnaks became the Penicks in the eyes of the law. The changing of one's name legally may seem to be a surface-level shift, but the implications of this change are deep and significant. One can imagine that these Psenicnaks were motivated by a desire to change their Eastern-European sounding name to one that was more ethnically ambiguous, more "Americanized", in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. This story is not unique to the Psenicnak/Penick family but is part of a larger pattern of name changes and shifting identities in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Names are an essential marker of identity; they inform the way we perceive others and ourselves to a great extent. A name can indicate origin, confer status, and signify a shared sense of identity. As Pratyusha Tummala-Narra eloquently explains, "in the context of migration, names and changes in names across time and generations implicate cultural adjustment, ethnic identity, transition from 'foreigner' and 'other' to 'American', loss of heritage culture, and the hope of re-making identity" (151). Names are personal, yet they are also deeply social and political. They are "indicators of internal, affective experiences, interpersonal relationships, acculturation, and identity" (Tummala-Narra,

152). Therefore, a change in a family name does not impact only the family members themselves, but is also indicative of and actively shaping broader cultural, social, and national contexts.

This pattern of immigrants changing their ethnic surnames to an anglicized and/or Americanized family name contributed in part to the creation and reshaping of a homogenous white identity in the United States. This was a two-way process, in which white identity was both acquired and shaped through time. This whiteness often came at the cost of native languages, customs and traditions, and connection to a larger family identity. Perhaps there is a deeper loss as well- one arguably loses a part of themselves in the process of giving up something as intimate and meaningful as a name. Conversely, what is gained in this transaction is unprecedented access to social, cultural, and political power. On a personal level, “immigrants’ and refugees’ choices of names are thought to at times produce social capital in ‘mainstream society’. In other words, a name can afford an individual greater access to social networks that facilitate social and economic opportunities and privilege within mainstream culture” (Tummala-Narra, 155). The cost of acculturation was high, but in many cases, it was a price that some immigrants were willing and happy to voluntarily pay. Additionally, the ability of immigrant groups to achieve an identity of whiteness was largely at the expense of other groups that were classified as non-White. Given that Whiteness has largely been defined by what it does not include, many other racialized groups were demonized and denigrated when contrasted with “white” traits and characteristics. The intersections of race, immigration, law, and identity are as important and meaningful today as in the heyday of Ellis Island.

Again, Tummala-Narra explains, “A name often signifies fantasies, wishes, and fears rooted in family and social histories” (151). In the immigrant story we know so well, the fantasy of working hard to achieve the American Dream is central. What we often ignore is the fear of *not* making it, the fear of being perceived as inferior and un-American, and the harsh reality of the cost of assimilation to the White mainstream. “Ethnic groups both segregate themselves by using names unique to their community and acculturate themselves by choosing names typical in the host society” (Gerhards & Hans, 1103). Therefore, a name is a choice between maintaining cultural and ethnic ties to the old country or buying into the social and cultural norms and patterns of the new country. The aforementioned Psenicnaks were my great-grandparents. As immigrants born in then-Czechoslovakia, they were likely seen as a racialized Other in the new country. They probably feared the social ostracization and material barriers that non-White status in America entailed. And so, despite the price, they traded their ethnic surname and all that it meant for an Americanized, anglicized, simplified family name. This new name, and the implications of this remade identity, I carry with me today.

There is a great deal that this thesis cannot cover. The immigrant story is not universal- differences of national origin, time period, social capital, and many other factors create a vast array of divergent immigrant experiences. This thesis speaks to the reality of a particular group of immigrants, at a specific time, and in a distinct American context. There are important questions raised in light of this history. Who decides when to change a family name, and to what? What happens when names changes are involuntary, and a new identity is forced rather than chosen? In what cases does that

happen, and who has the power to choose? What is gained and lost in the process of fashioning a new, “American” identity? What are the consequences of this change for self-perception and acculturation? Finally, what are the contemporary implications of this history in a country where race is still such an essential marker of identity?

Decades after many ethnic surnames were anglicized, there seems to be a revived interest in family history and national ancestry today. Services like 23 & Me, MyHeritage, and Ancestry.com allow users to test their DNA against reference populations to determine both the composition and timeline of one’s ancestry. These sites are becoming increasingly popular, with white Americans purchasing most of these services. Is this indicative of a desire to reconnect with a lost part of one’s identity, to find some missing truth about oneself? In a time when race is still a central issue in American culture, it is worth examining the history and composition of whiteness, with all its complicated- and, often challenging- components.

A Note on Race

The academic consensus on race is clear: it is a social construct, with no scientific basis or grounding in biological reality. Definitions of “race” vary. Ian Haney-Lopez, in *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race*, writes that race is the “historically contingent social systems of meaning that attach to elements of morphology and ancestry” (14). Later, Lopez comments that “Race is nothing more than what society and law say it is... racial categories exist *only* as a function of what people believe (103). Similarly, in *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*, Matthew Frye Jacobson comments on the fabrication of race: “Caucasians are made, not born” (4). In truth, there is no empirical or objective basis for the categorization of humans by race. The very fact that Southern and Eastern European achieved “White” status is proof that race is malleable, and can change depending on social, political, and historical contexts. However, the truth that race is socially constructed does not mean it is inconsequential. Race- as defined by self and others- has substantial, material consequences on lived experience. “We tend to think of race as being indisputable, *real*. It frames our notions of kinship and descent and influences our movements in the social world” (Jacobson 1). Clearly, race colors our lives to a large extent, and has indisputable significance in how interact with the world. To acknowledge that race is a human fabrication does not undermine the fact that it is a real phenomenon with tangible consequences. Race may be real only to the extent that we think it is, but

we seem unable and unwilling to give it up. Given these considerations, race and racial categories will be treated as “real” in this thesis.

Landmark Immigration Legislation

In order to trace the journey from ethnic immigrant groups to White citizens, a very basic outline of the landmark legislation on immigration and naturalization is necessary. “In its first words on the subject of citizenship, Congress in 1790 restricted naturalization to ‘free white persons’” (Lopez 1). The actual definition of a “white person” would later be contested in the courts, but at the time in which the law was enacted was generally understood to be persons of Anglo-Saxon origin. From the start, American immigration and naturalization laws placed a premium on whiteness, without elaborating on the content or essence of this identity.

Nearly a century after the country’s first naturalization act, 1870 saw the full extension of citizenship to “Aliens of African nativity and to persons of African descent”. The specificity of this act is noteworthy- it was easier to define and identify a person of African birth or descent than it was to decide who could be considered White (Lopez, 40). All other races were still implicitly barred from naturalization, and indigenous peoples in America were not considered citizens at this time: “After 1870, Blacks as well as Whites could naturalize, but not others” (Lopez, 44). While immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe were still viewed as a White Other culturally, they were generally considered white in the eyes of the law, and had little issue naturalizing as such.

Implied racial exclusion was made more explicit with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882- as the name implies, this act prohibited Chinese naturalization and restricted working visas for immigrant laborers. In *Guarding the Golden Door*, Roger Daniels writes of this act, “Like much of what Congress has done about immigration since then, it was conceived in ignorance, was falsely presented to the public, and had consequences undreamt of by its creators” (3). This act was intended to preserve the White majority in America. 1891 saw the introduction of the Bureau of Immigration, created to enforce immigration laws and “deport unlawful aliens” (Daniels, 29). Despite the specificity of “Chinese” exclusion, all other foreign-born individuals of Asian nativity were excluded from naturalization, including those from Japan, India, Korea, and the Philippines. The wave of anti-Chinese (and broadly anti-Asian) sentiment carried through to the 20th century, with otherwise White Other groups banded together to express opposition to Asian immigration and naturalization. Matthew Jacobson cites the example of the Irish immigrant who “would be a despised Celt in Boston”, yet could at the same time be a “solid member of The Order of Caucasians for the Extermination of the Chinaman in San Francisco”, and accepted as White in that context (5). The process of acquiring whiteness was already in progress for earlier immigrant groups during this period.

The 1924 Johnson-Reed Act, also known as the National Origins Quota Act, introduced hard numerical limits on immigration for the first time in American history. “The general debate on immigration law in 1924 was never a question of whether immigration should be restricted further, but rather, how severely and in what additional ways immigration should be curtailed, and which kinds of immigrants should be allowed

to enter” (Daniels, 50). This law was specifically intended to reduce immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe, while immigration generally was limited to smaller quotas based on the 1890 census. Anti-Italian sentiment was especially rampant at the time, as was anti-Semitism. “The nation was also gripped by xenophobia and a rejection of Europe”, and fears over job-stealing immigrants were pervasive. “The impression at the time was that not only were vast numbers of foreigners flooding the land, but that innumerable hordes of ignorant, penniless Europeans were about to descend upon America” (Daniels, 47). The restrictionist sentiment was strongly felt in the public and was reflected in the legislation of the era.

Finally, the 1965 Hart-Celler Act was a modern re-imagining of the American immigration system. Considering the civil rights movement domestically, the optics of restricting immigration by national origin, and thus race, were not good. “The basic thrust of the 1965 law was to scrap completely the concept of national quotas and origins and to substitute overall hemispheric limits on visas issued” (Daniels, 134). Preferential visa treatment for family reunification was instituted, and migration from the Western Hemisphere was limited for the first time. A new system to process refugee applicants was also adopted. It is difficult to overstate the impact which the 1965 immigration law would have on the demographic and racial makeup of America: “In 1965 the golden door had been pushed open much wider... An entirely different mix of peoples was lining up to come in” (Daniels, 144). Immigration from Europe declined substantially, while white ethnics in America rose in cultural influence and political power.

Ultimately, “the history of racial discrimination in the U.S. immigration law is a long and continuing one” (Lopez, 39). Immigration law largely dictated who could immigrate and naturalize, what context of reception they would find, and what opportunities would be available upon arrival. It is within this history that ethnic groups were made to establish and justify their whiteness, and in which a family name carried serious implications for the lived experiences of the bearer.

Concluding Comments

In *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*, Matthew Frye Jacobson comments on the

“racial odyssey of myriad groups- the Irish, Armenians, Italians, Poles, Syrians, Greeks, Ruthenians, Sicilians, Finns, and a host of others- who came ashore in the United States as ‘free white persons’ under the terms of reigning naturalization laws, yet whose racial credentials were not equivalent to those of the Anglo-Saxon ‘old stock’ who laid proprietary claim to the nation’s founding documents and hence its stewardship” (4).

The odyssey of these groups from racialized Other to unquestionably White was not accidental or simple. While the journey to whiteness for immigrant groups was complex, non-linear, and multi-faceted, the important through-line of naming and identity remains.

The literal whitewashing of ethnic surnames is no small part of this history. It is worth examining the process by which culturally othered immigrant groups became white, while also questioning what this racial odyssey has meant and will continue to mean in the future of an increasingly diverse America.

Chapter 1: Whiteness as defined as non-Whiteness

The cultural and social valuation of whiteness in America is pervasive. Nowhere is this more evident than in the definition and qualification of white identity. As previously mentioned, race is a construct which has no basis in science or objective reality. Due to this constructed nature of race, there is no empirical definition for ‘white’. Nevertheless, the legal and social implications of race are very real. Whiteness, historically, has been defined by what it is not. This binary differentiation between whiteness and non-whiteness has resulted in a hierarchical structuring of society along these lines. The legal consequences of this distinction between white and non-white have historically been significant and continue to have contemporary implications.

From the first legal word on the subject, citizenship was available only to “free white persons” and petitioners for naturalization were required to prove their white identity. Many of these cases were highly contested- who was white, and what did that mean? Did the perception of whiteness rely upon a scientific definition, or was it based in social norms and common understanding? Who had the power to define whiteness? By extension, what does this say about the way in which we value and appraise whiteness, both historically and in a contemporary setting? These questions were asked most explicitly in the courts in which naturalization petitions were heard.

Between 1878 and 1952, the United States Supreme Court decided fifty-one cases determining naturalization based on race (Haney-Lopez, 49). These decisions are inconsistent and conflictual; even under the direction of the same Chief Justice, the word

on naturalization changed from case to case. Petitioners included nationals from Japan, Mexico, the Philippines, India, and Syria. All appealed on the claim that they were in fact white, and as such were eligible for citizenship in the United States. The grave difficulty faced by the Court when determining naturalization was in the fact that no objective definition of White existed- whiteness, like all racial categories, is created and shaped by “a fluid process that turns not only on prejudice, but also on factors ranging from dubious science to national honor” (Haney- Lopez, 63). In writing the definitive word on Whiteness, the Justices indeed had their work cut out for them and often “struggled with the narrow definition of whom to naturalize, and with the categorical question of how to determine racial identity” (5). On some rulings, the Court sided with so-called scientific knowledge, basing their decisions on scholars in the fields of anthropology and sociology. More frequently, the Justices considered the definition of whiteness in terms of common knowledge surrounding race. These two approaches were often conflictual: “changes in immigrant demographics and anthropological thinking combined to create contradictions between science and common knowledge” (7). It is significant that these prerequisite cases primarily concerned individuals from Asia and the Middle East; immigrants from Europe were nearly always considered white in terms of the law, even if cultural acceptance of the whiteness of these groups was more complex.

In reviewing cases for naturalization, the Supreme Court justices had a far easier time deciding who (and what) was non-White on a case-by-case basis rather than establishing a specific definition of whiteness. “Whites are those with no known African or other non-White ancestry [...] Whites exist as a category of people subject to a double

negative: they are those who are not non-White” (Haney-Lopez, 27-28). In this definition, a hierarchical valuation emerges; whiteness is associated with purity, the state of being ‘free’ from non-White markers. Examples and scholarship on the association between whiteness and assumed innocence, virtue, and untaintedness are plenty; the inverse of non-whiteness (and specifically blackness) being associated with darkness, uncleanliness, and evil is equally prevalent. The language surrounding the concepts of whiteness and non-whiteness shape how we view each, and by association, those who carry those identities.

Clearly, the process of defining whiteness by what it lacks has tangible consequences for those on both sides of this imaginary line. The implications of “white-sounding” versus “ethnic-sounding” names are no different. A ‘white’ name is one that has no indicators of ethnic identity, or at least any indicators that the individual bearing the name may be non-white. Elsdon C. Smith, in his *Dictionary of American Family Names*, elaborates: “A true ‘American’ name does not have an accent, a tilde, an umlaut, a circumflex, a cedilla or any of the numerous other signs of marks used in the various languages” from which the individual’s name may have originated. The methods in which ethnic surnames were anglicized will be explored further in later chapters, but the underlying distinction between white and ethnic identity remains. Here again, the hierarchical ordering of American names that align with a mainstream white identity and ethnic names that imply a non-white identity emerges.

Despite being considered white in the eyes of the law, the discrimination faced by recent immigrant groups was largely racialized in nature. Characterizations of dirty Irish,

crime-ridden Italians, and sickly Slavs were commonplace. There was a fear that these immigrant groups from Eastern and Southern Europe were unfit for America and American democracy, and that they would somehow corrupt the character of the country.

Of course, the discrimination faced by Southern and Eastern immigrant groups is in no way comparable to the systemic racism and legal exclusion faced by African-American and Latinx populations in the United States at this time. In fact, it was often these very same “White Other” groups that actively participated in the discrimination and oppression of non-white identities. In areas of employment, housing, and education, the acculturation of ethnic whites hinged on the subjugation of non-white groups. Despite the fact that immigrant groups shared, to some extent, experiences of discrimination and racialized prejudice, the relationship between ethnic and non-white communities was often fraught. As just one example, the ethnic and racial divisions in neighborhoods were a source of tension between immigrant and non-white communities. “At best, the search for decent housing subjected blacks to intimidation. At worst, it brought threatening mobs, bombings, and even murder to their doorsteps” (Cohen, 36). Despite their status as racialized White Others, immigrant groups did not experience the same level of systemic discrimination and oppression experienced by non-white groups. The hierarchical ordering of race that is inherent in its construction worked in the favor of white populations, including White Other immigrant groups.

Chapter 2: New Name, New Identities

Given the implications of whiteness and ethnic otherness, the pattern of naming emerges as a intersection of negotiation between the worlds of white mainstream and ethnic identity. Names, specifically surnames, have long been indicators of ethnicity and national origin. The significance of names as a marker of identity in a post-immigration context allows us a deeper look into these issues. While family names do not show the entire picture, they are indicative of a certain level of acculturation. At a basic level, patterns of naming may indicate either commitment to ethnic group identity or a desire to identify more closely with mainstream culture and an American identity. Gerhards and Hans summarize: “Ethnic groups both segregate themselves by using names unique to their community and acculturate themselves by choosing names typical to the host society” (1103). This navigating of heritage and host cultures can be seen in the choices that immigrant families make to either change or preserve their family name.

This aspect of choice raises the question of how immigrant families may want to be seen in their new communities. “Having a heritage name or an Anglicized name can have implications for ascriptions to group membership. Specifically, someone who chooses an Anglicized name [...] may be assumed to identify more closely with mainstream culture, whereas someone who chooses a heritage name may be assumed to identify with his/her heritage culture” (Tummala-Narra, 157). While this may be a

generalization, the implications of heritage versus American identification have real implications for self-perception and how individuals are recognized by others.

Names are only a small piece of identity; they cannot entirely encapsulate the process of acculturation that immigrant individuals and families experience. However, family names are a point of entry into a mainstream culture and identity that may otherwise be difficult to access. Education, political influence, jobs and income, and other traditional indicators of success in the mainstream culture require high levels of investment in terms of time and money. On the other hand, “names are chosen freely, and their use is, in comparison to other labels of identity, not associated with any material cost [...] Other forms of acculturation and assimilation are generally tied to higher investment costs” (Gerhards & Hans, 1104). A legal name change requires a small fee and a fairly straightforward petition before a judge. This is a relatively simple and low-cost option to take as a means of acculturating to the mainstream in exchange for real benefits.

The changing of names in order to “become” white is limited to white-passing individuals and families. Tummala-Narra writes, “Undoubtedly, immigrants, refugees, and their children, in their choice of names, embark on a negotiation of acculturation often in a mainstream context that seems to simultaneously encourage individual choice and freedom, and an adherence to White, Euro-American norms” (156). While this may be true of immigrants from a variety of origin countries, the adherence to Euro-American norms has specific implications for European immigrants. For Southern and Eastern

European immigrants, whose acceptance as white was already tenuous, this process of acculturation to the host country through name changes was particularly significant.

The benefits of acculturating to the mainstream culture are numerous. The social, cultural, political, and economic power has historically been held by dominant groups; this is still true today. “There is evidence, in fact, that immigrants who take on mainstream names can earn more income compared with immigrants who retain their birth names, which sound foreign to the majority or dominant groups” (Tummala-Narra, 155). This is a concrete example of the benefits of acculturating through name changes to the norms of the dominant culture. Access to increased economic power and financial mobility is often a key feature of “successful” assimilation to the host country. This has played out for immigrant groups who, after this process of acculturation partly through name changes, have adopted a white identity.

In a more intangible sense, family names can carry cultural and social capital beyond the material. Names can be very meaningful; they are a central feature of an individual’s identity. “Names further indicate a sense of pride, a desire for belonging, and new possibilities of hybrid identities” (Tummala-Narra, 159). These benefits, while not material, are significant nonetheless. To be able to take pride in one’s name and to carry it publicly without shame or fear are important psychological assets.

Despite all that is gained in acquiring a name indicative of white identity, there are many things that are lost as well. In the context of voluntary name changes, this surface-level identification with American rather than Southern or Eastern European identity may be desired by the individual. However, the price of acculturation can be

steep. Balancing heritage and host culture can be a challenge, while differences in values and beliefs can become pronounced from generation to generation. To gain the attendant benefits of acculturation, immigrant families and individuals often sacrificed elements of their heritage culture.

Ethnic enclaves in the beginning of the 20th century were centers of social life for recent immigrants. Community newspapers published in the languages of the old countries, while churches and social clubs supported a strong sense of ethnic identity. Leaders in these communities often supported this maintenance of heritage and culture in the new land and became rather fearful when the ethnic identity of the group was threatened. This protection of heritage identity extended to the preservation of ethnic family names as well. “Czech ‘Jaroslavs’ who became ‘Jacks’, Poles who dropped the ‘wicz’ or the ‘ski’, immigrants who packed away the once treasured handicrafts of the old country, all worried ethnic leaders” (Cohen 54). As mass culture rose in the post-war era, ethnic identity became more divergent from the mainstream, white-washed American identity. While there were some families and communities that continued to cling to their heritage culture, the tendency towards mainstream culture was undeniable. Restrictions on immigration quotas also prevented the flow of new immigrants to ethnic communities, further encouraging the acculturation process.

To some extent, the choice to turn away from ethnic identity was not freely made. Expressions of ethnic identity, including language, dress, social groups, and even surnames, became somewhat risky. “The nativism responsible for the new immigrant quota system had also made many people cautious about public displays of ethnicity.

This fear dovetailed with a general retreat from European nationalism” (Cohen 54).

While perhaps privately proud of their origins and ethnic culture, the pressure on recent immigrants and their native-born children to acculturate to mainstream America was significant. This climate of caution against displaying ethnicity may likely have encouraged immigrant individuals and families to downplay their ethnic background in a variety of ways. The anglicizing of an ethnic surname is a very significant way to demonstrate a commitment to American identity. Privately, individuals who changed their names begin to internalize and identify with their American name.

Yet there seems to be a deeper sense of loss as well. Names are tied inextricably to identity and self-perception; it seems that an overnight name change cannot result in an overnight change in how one sees oneself and their relationship with the world.

Leonard Covello, in his novel *The Heart is the Teacher*, speaks to a deeper sense of loss that he and his family personally experienced as they eventually acquiesced to an Americanized spelling of their family name:

"Here was the name-changing routine all over again. How many times had I heard it during the course of my life! Each succeeding wave of immigrants seeking to lose their identity, seeking to lose themselves in a nothingness, a characterless void in which one human being was exactly like the other. I sometimes wonder why a law was not passed for such people so they could all legally assume the name of John Smith the moment they entered the country." (224)

The “characterless void” may be a somewhat harsh assessment of the outcome of family name changes, but Covello’s sentiments point to another, perhaps more sinister, side of acculturation. The author suggests that the whitewashing of ethnic family names resulted in a homogenous population from which all ethnic distinctions are removed. While this ‘characterless void’ is not completely realized, there is an extent to which Covello’s comments ring true. Irish, Italian, German, Czech, Polish, and other European immigrant groups are now broadly considered white. Ethnic distinctions for these communities, especially in second and later-generations, is minimal. While some features of heritage culture may remain, these have generally been abandoned in favor of mainstream American culture.

Ultimately, there is a trade-off to be negotiated in the process of acculturation. Name changes are only a part of this process, yet these changes are meaningful given their importance to individual and family identity. The balance between maintaining heritage culture and acculturating to mainstream culture is one with real implications for immigrant individuals, families, and communities. For White Other groups, acculturation and the adoption of an anglicized name had significant benefits. At the same time, a loss of heritage culture is a high price to pay.

Chapter 3: Voluntary and Involuntary Name Changes

As demonstrated in previous chapters, the implications of family names are significant. In this context, the question of who is changing names, and for what reason, is equally as important. The proactive decision to change one's own name is one thing, while having a new name imposed without one's consent is quite another. What instances of involuntary name changes truly occurred, and by whom were these Americanized family names given? What does the real or imagined history of involuntary name changes say about relative power and privilege of those giving and receiving Anglicized surnames? These are significant questions, especially in light many myths regarding the changing of family names upon arrival to the country.

Family lore of ancestors coming through Ellis Island, or otherwise having their names changed by already established Anglo-Americans, abounds. Scott Baird, in *Anglicizing Ethnic Surnames*, explains:

“Ellis Island- and stories emanating from that federal immigration processing center- has dominated American understanding of early immigration procedure. Most of our cultural Ellis Island stories focus upon surnames, especially upon ways in which surnames become anglicized. We know, however, remarkably little beyond cultural anecdotes” (Baird, 174).

What we do know is this. Inevitably, there was some misunderstanding and miscommunication in the immigration process. At Ellis Island, as well as many other ports of entry to the United States, immigrants arriving to the country had to state their names, a process which “amounted to little more than verification of a cargo manifest” (Baird, 175). Peak migration through Ellis Island occurred before a national registration of any kind, and as a result, there was little legal implication for those misspelled and otherwise changed names upon arrival. Ultimately, the stories of newly arrived immigrants having their names changed on the whims of an immigration official is not fully accurate.

Baird further argues that there is an “over-reliance upon the insights warped by Ellis Island cultural mythology [...] These stories have provided our culture a red herring -- effectively cutting off our understanding of the obvious methods used by second and third generation families to change their surnames” (175-176). Most immigrant families did not have their surnames changed upon arrival to the United States, and rather waited for years, even generations, to adopt an anglicized surname. In the case of the Psenicknak family, it was the adult son of Czech immigrants who decided to change his family’s name to Penick, more than two decades after they had first arrived in the country.

The ways in which ethnic surnames were changed are numerous. Smith and Smith published research in 1974 identifying three main methods of name changing for immigrant surnames. The first procedure is substituting an ethnic surname with an American near-equivalent. This is a method attributed to the immigration clerks of lore, yet there is reason to believe that these near-equivalency changes did indeed take place.

A second method of changing a name is gradual acquiescence of the family to an anglicized name. This change likely occurred in later generations; after years in the new country, it was easier to accept a name that was pronounceable to their American counterparts. This change may include simplifications and shortening of an ethnic surname (Baird, 177). Finally, Smith and Smith identify spelling changes as a means of preserving the original pronunciation as a source of name changes. In this method of name changing, “*Dreier* became *Dryer*, *Meier-Maier* became *Myer*, *Koch* became *Cook*, *Bauer* became *Bower*” (Smith and Smith, 100). The changing of non-English markings to equivalent spellings, such as *ï*, *î*, or *ì* to *i* is another means of anglicizing an ethnic surname. In his analysis, Baird argues that the immigration clerks and officials that are often pointed to as the source of erroneous name changes should not take as much of the blame. Changes in surnames sometimes “just happen”, and informal variations may have been used for years before a name was legally changed. The court documents verifying the name change of the Psenicnak family indicates that they were also known as the Penicnak’s prior to adopting the name Penick. Perhaps this change was part personal choice and part gradual acquiescence. As discussed in the previous chapter, the motivations for name changes are often varied and complex.

In some cases, individuals and families elected to change their names to something else entirely. Rather than finding a near-equivalent or acquiescing to an anglicized spelling of a family name, these people chose a new name that was more meaningful and relevant to their identity as Americans. A new name is a unique opportunity to construct a new identity entirely. In *The Americanization of a Ukrainian*

Boy, Wasył Halich offers an anecdote about his choice to change his name some years after his initial move to the United States:

"Before leaving town, I legally changed my name. The name of Warshavsky was good enough in the Ukraine, but the American people had trouble spelling and pronouncing it. Its meaning was: a man of Warsaw. As far as I ever knew, none of the bearers of this name in my community had had anything to do with Warsaw. Furthermore, as most of Western Ukraine was given to Poland at the close of World War I, and that country had practiced severe persecution of the Ukrainian people, I decided to have nothing to do with a name with such a meaning" (Halich, 59).

This is an example that subverts the Ellis Island narrative that is so prevalent. Why do we continue to cling to this myth of the Ellis Island name-changing story? Perhaps it is because this myth has become so widespread that it has become accepted as truth. If a surname was changed generations ago, on a timeline compatible with the Ellis Island narrative, information and documentation may be lacking to corroborate family stories. Finally, it might be easier to accept the idea of an immigration clerk being the one to change an ethnic name than a family member themselves. This is not to say that involuntary name changes never happened; nevertheless, the popular legend in which new names were inflicted upon immigrants upon their arrival to the United States is not entirely accurate.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the process of anglicizing ethnic surnames is only part of the larger historic trend of European immigrants both embracing and reshaping whiteness in the United States. The journey from ethnic other to fully American in many of these groups is indicative of larger truths about race. As highlighted in the first chapter, whiteness, as with all racial categories, is not grounded in scientific reality. If racial classifications were objective and definite, immigrant groups would not be able to move towards acceptance into the white mainstream through name changes and other means. The manufacture of race- and its subsequent weaponization as a tool for oppression- is an important issue given our contemporary realities and the ways in which race continues to play a critical role in the United States to this day.

Examining the ways in which race is constructed, specifically through naming, is critical to undermining the seeming “reality” and implications of race altogether. In the trend of naming, we can see how identities are negotiated, the ways in which race is malleable and shifting, and the societal consequences of these individual choices. This making and redefining of a race has been far from unproblematic; race in America today is a product of a complicated and shameful history. The contemporary implications of our collective past are expressed most powerfully by Ta-Nehisi Coates in his book, *Between the World and Me*. Coates’ work is focused primarily on the vulnerability and exploitation of the black body in America; this contrasts with white Americans and their commitment to a fantasy of middle-class success. Coates challenges the category of

whiteness, addressing the inevitable exclusion that results from the creation of a modern conception of race. He writes, “the new people were something else before they were white- Catholic, Corsican, Welsh, Mennonite, Jewish- and if all our national hopes have any fulfillment, then they will have to be something else again” (Coates 7). While he doesn’t elaborate on what the possibilities of what this ‘something else’ might be, Coates puts pressure on whiteness as a problematic construct.

While Coates may advocate for adopting new identities, there seems to be a trend towards rediscovering and reclaiming heritage identities. New technologies have allowed us to understand and test DNA in new ways to understand ourselves as never before. Companies such as Ancestry, 23andMe, FamilyTree, and others now offer kits for individuals to test their DNA and access information on genetic health issues and genealogy. These tests have exploded in popularity: 23andMe alone boasts more than 10 million customers, while AncestryDNA claims another 14 million; all totaled, upwards of 25 million people have tested their DNA. Clearly, there is a shared desire to know about oneself and one’s ancestry.

Some of these companies have gone beyond offering raw DNA data to curating information about the art, history, and culture of heritage countries. For example, 23andMe gives customers reports about the traditions and language of the countries that most closely match their DNA profiles. Their website states, “unlike your Ancestry Composition, identity isn’t based on science. Of course, there are many ways you may choose to identify with your ancestry, and this sampling of aesthetics, flavors, and traditions may inspire you.” Ancestry is fixed and objective while identity is fluid and

subjective. This distinction goes to the heart of the issues surrounding migration, name changes, and identity. As immigrant groups have acculturated to the cultural norms and expectations of the United States, the identity of individuals and families in these groups inevitably changed. Names, an important marker of identity, changed as both a component and a result of this shift.

The names that many Americans bear today is a result of this acculturation through name-changing process. Even for those individuals whose ancestors immigrated generations ago, the history of immigration, the process of acculturation, and the implications and associations of family names are significant. This history also informs the way in which this country views and experiences immigration today, especially in the context of changing national demographics. Questions of identity for immigrants and their descendants remain highly relevant. Coates' hopes for a new identity may well be contingent on the ways in which these new immigrants acculturate and construct their own identities in the process.

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