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The Name Changers

I suppose we all know Bradleys who used to be Berkowitzes or Coopers who were once Cohens. When I was a youngster at City College in the early fifties, one of our teachers was known to have gone through this transformation, and in student talk the man I shall call Professor Bradley was invariably referred to as Bradley-né-Berkowitz. Though fairly well known and respected his name change completely overshadowed all his other characteristics for us and to this day, when I see his Anglo-Saxon name in old textbooks I take a malicious pleasure in unmasking him to myself.

We did not try to analyze the reasons for our distaste in those days, but it must have had something to do with the hypocrisy suggested by the man's action. Then as now, liberal American academia, certainly in the humanities and social sciences, implicitly but resolutely was preaching to both Jew and non-Jew: don't

be prejudiced against other races and ethnic groups; don't be anti-Semitic; anti-Semitism, like all prejudice, is dishonorable and irrational; don't give in to it; and whatever your background, be yourself, be authentic. Such are the professed rules as I think we all understood them then and still understand them now, and changing one's name from Berkowitz to Bradley, while a professor at a liberal American college, means preaching one thing and practising another.

I grew up as a child in Nazi Germany and well remember the glee of the Nazi press in pointing to, or sometimes inventing, original Jewish names of public figures who preferred to be known by non-Jewish names. I remember in particular that this was done for Soviet leaders of Jewish origin (although non-Jews, like Stalin, had also changed their names). The Nazis ritualistically used a formula: first the allegedly assumed name, then a hyphen, then the putatively original Jewish name. It was never Litvinov alone but always Litvinov-Finkelstein; never just Trotsky but always Trotsky-Bronstein.

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The message was obvious: it is unspeakably evil and shameful to be a Jew; Jews constantly try to hoodwink unsuspecting Gentiles; National Socialists unmask abomination when they reveal the Jew who lurks behind a fraudulently-assumed Christian name. This relentless Nazi propaganda thoroughly intimidated me and left me with the impression that Itzigs and Finkelsteins are odious, lecherous, cowardly, vile. Even now it takes an effort to overcome a primitive loathing which insinuates itself at the mention of those Jewish names that the Nazis had singled out for special vituperation.

The Communists, with their much more hidden and much less violent anti-Semitism, have at times had recourse to the same stratagem. After a General Krivitsky of the Soviet secret service defected to the West in 1937, the Communist *New Masses* (May 9, 1939) thought it relevant to exclaim "General Krivitsky, you are Shmelka Ginsberg." So here we have the ugly Jew, hiding behind a good Slavic name, betraying the proletariat. A former Communist fellow-traveller of my acquaintance remembers this incident as his first inkling of the anti-Semitic nature of Stalinism. Had he known the contents of a (then still unpublished) essay of Trotsky's, *Thermidor and Anti-Semitism*, he would have realized that the Left Opposition had long complained of Stalin's anti-Semitic use of "Bronstein" for Trotsky, "Radomyslsky" for Zinoviev, "Rozenfeld" for Kamenev.

It would seem then that there is something in common between the anti-Semitic agitators and the Jewish college boys who make fun of Professor Bradley; both have the name changer as a target. But as soon as the similarity is mentioned, the gulf that separates them also becomes obvious.

The anti-Semite promotes the doctrine that it is shameful to be a Jew, but Jews who recoil from name changers do so precisely because it is the changers who, by their apparently cowardly action, give credence to this doctrine.

The sense of Jewishness-as-shame is so strikingly strong among some name changers that I must cite two cases to illustrate it. As with "Professor Bradley," I am changing some of the incidental detail to prevent identification of living individuals.

Professor Edward R. Howard and his work have been familiar to me since my undergraduate days, and his prestige is such that he is considered the dominant figure in his particular field of academia.

I had never thought of him as either Jew or non-Jew. He had achieved with me what I now understand so many name-changers want to achieve: a state of being, so to speak, *parve*. (Cf. Anonymous, "I Changed My Name," *Atlantic Monthly*, February 1948). It is only lately, in discussing my interest in Jewish name changes with friends and acquaintances, that Howard's name kept cropping up. Everyone thought that he had heard from someone else, on good authority, that Howard isn't really Howard at all. I felt quite shocked by these rumors. I had always thought of Howard as an honest journeyman of the academic craft, a status which I had assumed implies a degree of probity in one's personal life. Running away from a Jewish label did not fit with my picture of him. I decided to investigate the rumors.

Library research revealed that Howard's parents had been poor, that they had come from Europe, that his father had a European accent, and that his parents had been Jewish, but the parents' names were

always missing. This is quite remarkable for an entry in *Who's Who* where parents' names are otherwise given routinely.

Each university where Howard had studied reported his current name, Howard, as the one under which the degree was granted, but the relevant yearbook of his undergraduate institution inexplicably lacked his picture and made no mention of his name.

I then wrote to Professor Howard in person. Though past retirement age, he still maintains an office and an academic title at a prestigious university. I explained my interest in the phenomenon of Jewish name changers and in the rumors to the effect that he may be one of them. I asked for any comments he might care to make. Only a very few days after mailing my letter, I had Professor Howard's brief but courteously-worded reply: no, these rumors are not interesting at all, no, he would not like to comment.

I now know that Edward R. Howard was born what I shall call Isidore Moses Feldstein. His high school records have him as Edward M. Felstone, and at the age of nineteen, after testifying that bearing his name constitutes a hardship for him, he obtained a court order under which he legally became Edward Richard Howard. At the time of his birth his parents were of course Feldstein, and the father's occupation was indeed a modest one, just as the biographies have always claimed. But Feldstein-père, though his name can be found if one is very persistent and lucky, will probably never feature in a *Who's Who* entry of his illustrious son.

The next true story I have to tell is about a man perhaps less eminent but certainly more famous than Howard. I shall call him Montgomery because his current name is far from neutral; it is

decidedly Anglo-Saxon. Montgomery who until the age of 25 was called Moskovits, and I were boyhood acquaintances. He has since become one of the best-known writers of his time. His work is famous for its prominent moralism; he tells his contemporaries how to think righteously, and his contemporaries, with some exceptions of course, follow what he has to say. He is publicly known as a Jew, and in fact being Jewish is part of his trade, but his father's name is kept secret.

In *Who's Who* Montgomery has listed his father's last name simply as "M". The uninitiated reader must assume that "M" stands for Montgomery. This device of lying through telling a technical truth, called by the Romans *dolus*, is widely practised by those name changers who are prominent enough to make *Who's Who* and who have retained their original last-name initial.

Together with at least two other authors who have changed their names, Montgomery has discussed the phenomenon of Jewish name changing in his writings. Like the other two, he never tells his readers that he is one of the people whom he describes. Montgomery is constantly covering up, constantly hiding; most of all he hides his father and his mother, and this seems to be true of name changers in general.

Since Montgomery (unlike Howard) freely identifies himself as a Jew, one might ask why he bothers to keep up the charade of an Anglo-Saxon name. Erving Goffman (in *Stigma*) has observed that a Jewish name, like some horrifying physical defect, can place its bearer into positions of humiliation and suffering. This was certainly true in Nazi Germany and is true to some extent in certain situations today. I had to travel to Vienna some

years ago and it seemed to me there that the hotel clerk took my name to be a badge of shame. With experiences of this kind, either in person or vicarious, there is certainly a motive to keep one's Jewishness to oneself. Some such sentiment seems to lie behind the famous advice from Judah Leib Gordon: "Be a Jew in your home and a man in the street." It would seem that a non-Jewish name can eliminate some minor slights and snubs, and this might be an advantage to people who are very sensitive to such incidents.

But it is not only very prominent people, famous enough to figure in works of reference, who change their names. Judith Kramer and Seymour Leventman, in their 1961 study of a small Jewish community entitled "Children of the Gilded Ghetto," found that twenty-eight percent of the higher-class Jews in their sample, but none of those in the lower class, had taken Anglo-Saxon names. I have looked at the 3,400 Jewish families in Vancouver who identify themselves as Jews in the 1982-1984 *Vancouver Jewish Community Telephone Directory*. According to my classification, thirteen percent of their names are Anglo-Saxon, ten percent are neutral, and seventy-seven percent are apparently unchanged Jewish. Of the approximately eight hundred officers of national Jewish organizations in the United States and Canada, about five per cent have Anglo-Saxon names; of the approximately five hundred officials of local Jewish federations, about sixteen per cent have such clearly non-Jewish last names. (These estimates are based on name lists in the 1983 *American Jewish Year Book*). None of these figures is very precise, but they do give an indication of the extent to which North American Jews

have lost one of their important Jewish attributes.

New names may be thought of as a) Jewish anglicizations, b) neutral, or c) Anglo-Saxon.

a) The Jewish anglicizations (Greenberg from Gurenberg, Goodfriend from Gutfreund, Goodman from Gutman, etc.) do not hide Jewish identity. I have taken little interest in this type.

b) A typical way of obtaining a neutral name is a foreshortening or other alteration to the original: Libin from Libinsky, Chud from Chudnowsky, Hammer from Hammerstein. The motivation here would seem to lie in a desire to be inconspicuous, rather than to pass as an Anglo-Saxon American.

c) When we come to clearly Anglo-Saxon names — Clark, Parker, Newhouse, Evans, Warner, and Penna are among those on one of list of Jewish American names — the motivation is clearly more complex.

Name changers, as distinct from the names themselves, may also be categorised.

1) *Popular entertainers*: The current *World Almanac* tells us that Woody Allen was born Allen Konigsberg, that Lauren Bacall was Betty Joan Perske, Jack Benny was Benjamin Kubelsky, and George Burns was Nathan Birnbaum. But there are non-Jewish entries as well: Tony Bennett was Anthony Benedetto, Maria Callas was Maria Kalogeropoulos, and Marlene Dietrich was apparently Maria von Losch. No-one in this long list of "original names of selected entertainers" voluntarily assumed the name of Israel, Levy, or even Cohen. It would appear that the motivations of professional entertainers for choosing stage names are quite different from those of other name

changers. In the cases cited, no very strenuous attempt seems to have been made to hide the original family names.

2) *Loyal Jews*: Most of the name changers proclaim themselves as "loyal Jews." This was true of the twenty-five people interviewed by J. Alvin Kugelmass some thirty years ago ("Name-Changing —and What It Gets You," *Commentary*, August 1952) as it is, no doubt, of those with Anglo-Saxon names who identify themselves in Jewish directories. I know a Conservative Cantor Hanson and an Orthodox Rabbi Turner; a Ronald Jones is president of a Conservative synagogue. Kugelmass also reports that "Without exception, all twenty-five said that they had been fools [to change their names]. . . Never in my experience as a newspaperman have twenty-five persons, questioned by phone on any subject, shown such agreement."

3) *The indifferent*: Perhaps nobody is quite indifferent about his own Jewishness, but one would assume that there are those among the name changers to whom this word would most nearly apply. Perhaps the anonymous *Atlantic Monthly* writer whom I have cited falls into this category.

d) *Passers*: Trying to "pass" for something one isn't can become a tricky condition to diagnose. One might argue, and perhaps he himself will argue, that the label "Edward R. Howard" is a truer statement of fact — a higher level of honesty — than would be "Isidore Moses Feldstein." Professor Howard, is after all, a man of universalist ethics. And if he fudges a bit about his name, his ethnicity, his religion (some think him Quaker, some Unitarian, some take him for a member of Ethical Culture) is he trying to pass for something that he is not? That is how I

would put matters, but it is not how he sees it.

In addition to the ambiguous and ambivalent "passing", there are also persons who have taken on the Christian faith with some seriousness. But in my very limited personal acquaintance of serious converts, each has retained his Jewish family name.

At this point it is important to remember that not all who try to pass have changed their names. The Quakers, the Unitarians, Ethical Culture, in its own way the Communist Party and the groups of the New Left, all these may properly be thought of as loci of passing. But the Jews whom one finds in such groups are sometimes Epstein and Ginsburg and Blau. One would expect that there is a better-than-chance correlation between name changing and attempting to pass, but this proposition is as yet unresearched.

What are our Jewish surnames to us? In the case of Cohen and Levi they signal continuity with an ancient tradition, but neither Bernstein nor Goldstein nor Wittgenstein has any inherently Jewish significance. And all family names, Jewish or not, are of relatively recent origin in history. Indeed, there are the familiar anecdotes of how hostile or ignorant government officials, both in Europe and in the New World, have decreed family names to particular Jews capriciously. "How did you, such a good Jew, happen to be called Kelly?" "Oh well, when my grandfather arrived at Ellis Island, the clerk . . ." This may explain what happened on Ellis Island, but what prevented the former Cohen, or his son, from effecting the appropriate correction later in the Bronx?

While most Jewish surnames today have no inherent Jewish significance, they do serve as indicators of Jewish identity, and as such, though by no means infallible, they are probably the best available (Cf. "The Identifiability of Jews," by L. D. Savitz and R. T. Tomasson, *American Journal of Sociology*, March 1959). Whatever the origin of "Finkelstein" may have been, the bearer of this name today tells the world that he is Jewish. Changing or tampering with such an indicator is bound to have personal and social consequences.

First, there is the question of anti-Semitism. One view has it that anti-Semites are thwarted by name-changing. It may well be that the name changer gains some advantage in academic and business pursuit, but the evidence is not completely clear. It would seem that whatever benefit there may be in name changing, it can only accrue to the name changer as an individual; there are no grounds for expecting any significant social benefit.

When Broom, Beem, and Harris studied name changers in California (*American Sociological Review*, 1955, pp. 33-39), they found that while Jews made up only six per cent of the total population, they constituted almost half of the legal name changers. And when it becomes known, as somehow it always does, that a Jew is hiding his Jewishness, mightn't this fact tend to confirm suspicions that Jewishness is indeed something to be ashamed of?

Next, there is the question of the effect of name changing on the future of the Jewish group in America.

What makes a person Jewish? One element, surely, is the fact that other people regard him as Jewish. If he changes his

name and finds that fewer people think of him as a Jew, he may well regard himself as less Jewish, or regard himself as Jewish less often. And if his children are less readily identified as Jews, might that not make it easier for them to follow the already very strong tendency to marry non-Jews? This is only a conjecture on my part. But in view of the considerable concern over the threat of inter-marriage to Jewish survival, the fact that so little attention has been paid to the potential threat posed by name changers is surprising. Congregations who have Anglo-Saxon-named rabbis and cantors and presidents obviously see nothing incongruous in such appointments; but surely there is a question here of the example that is set in respect to Jewish self-identification.

What, finally, are the advantages and disadvantages of name changing? In short, the various advantages we have considered, and possibly others, all seem to relate to relatively superficial human relationships. A business man may attract more customers; one may get a better job; there will be fewer petty discourtesies. Some of these advantages are real enough, but, when seen in contrast to the disadvantages, they are all superficial.

The basic disadvantage is the conspiracy of deception in which a name changer is caught. The prominent people we have observed must cover up in *Who's Who* (though some who are listed do give their parents' names in full). People less prominent have other occasions when parents and relatives must somehow be accounted for. Some, again, are quite forthright about their past. When Ronald Jones, the synagogue president, saw fit to mention his father from the pulpit, the little speech became quite complicated: "I cannot describe to you how much I owe to my

father, whose name is Moses Jaffe . . . " Though the audience was let into the secret here, there was a consciousness of a cover-up being practised on others. Almost all name changers find themselves, at one time or another, lying about their parents. And can a person who lies about his parents be trusted in other matters?

Ronald Jones happens to be a retail merchant, and the customers who daily enter the store with the big "Jones" sign neither know nor seem to care whether they are served by Jones or Jaffe. There may indeed be some among them who would not knowingly do business with a Jew but who buy at Jones's. These are the people whose trade Ronald Jones has gained by changing his name, but in return he has had to endure the covert derision and loss of respect from people who have known him and his family for

years.

We American Jews at the present stage of our history live in a fairly tolerant environment. Whatever anti-Semitism threatens us is relatively mild. Why do some change their names to minimize public identification as Jews, and others do not? Could it be that some people are very anxious about outward appearances and casual human contact? Willy Loman, who wanted to be "well liked," would have been a name changer. Others are willing to tolerate relatively minor indignities in order to safeguard a more long-term and a more basic sense of identity. These latter, I suggest, will continue to bear the names of their fathers.

(In Midrashic literature the fact that during their long captivity in Egypt, the children of Israel did not change their names is often cited as one of the reasons for their redemption. Ed.)