JEWISH NAMING CONVENTIONS

Until mandated by laws enacted in the late 18th and 19th centuries (the date varies by country), most Jews did not use fixed surnames. Jews with a common given name were often distinguished by a patronym (a kind of "by-name"), meaning that a father's name was used in addition to a given name. For example, Jacob the son of Abram was called Jacob Abram or Jacob ben [son of] Abram. If this was not enough to distinctly identify a person, a nickname was used. Such nicknames described a person in some way, such as a physical characteristic or personality trait, occupation, or place of origin. A Jew named Abram ben [son of] Maimon might also be called Abram the copper merchant or Abram red-beard. These nicknames were not permanent or inherited. They changed from one generation to the next. Fixed surnames often developed from these patronyms and nicknames.

In the middle ages, the custom arose of combining the abbreviation of a title with the initials of a name. This was mostly limited to prominent writers. Examples: RAMBAM (Rabbi Moses ben Maimon) and RASHI (Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac). These were merely descriptive "by-names" and not family surnames. The Jews of the Byzantine Empire, Romaniots, were the first Jews to adopt fixed family names. The Bulgarian Jewish surnames Politi [citizen], Roditi [red grapes], and Kalo [honest, good] are of Greek origin and date from the Byzantine era. After 1492, the area of the Byzantine Empire received great numbers of Sephardic Jews. Because the Sephardic and Byzantine Jewish naming practices influenced each other, it is difficult to differentiate between Sephardic and Byzantine Jewish family names in the Balkan area and Greece.

Sephardic Jews usually named their children in honor of living grandparents. There was a specific order in which this was done. The first son was generally named after the father's father, the second son after the mother's father, the first daughter after the father's mother, the second daughter after the mother's mother. Successive children might be named after living siblings or other relatives of the father and mother.

In the Ashkenazic tradition children were named after deceased rather than living relatives. Usually a child was named after the closest deceased relative for whom no one else in the immediate family was already named. For example, if a mother died in childbirth and the baby was a female, she was almost always named after the mother.

Relatives were not the only source of names. A child born during passover might be named Pesach. One born on the Purim holiday could be named Mordechai or Ester. If it was feared that a child might die in infancy, they might receive the name Chaim or Chaia, which means "life."

Jews often took their given names from the languages of the countries they lived in and kept Hebrew names for "sacred" purposes (Bar Mitzvah, marriage, and blessings associated with reading from the Torah). The spelling of their names varied considerably depending on the spelling rules of the language and culture they lived in.

Ashkenazic Jews often adapted Hebrew given names to fit the country they were living in. In America, for example, the name Avraham (Hebrew) or Avrum (Yiddish) could be anglicized to Allen, Allan, Albert, Alvin, or Arnold; Chaim could become Hyman, Herman, Herbert, or Charles; and Feigla could be Fanny, Faye, Fran, or Victoria.

Sephardic Surnames

Sephardic Jews, those who originated in Spain, first began using hereditary surnames in the 1500s. They were the first to make widespread use of inherited family names. The Arab and Spanish cultures were the two major influences on Sephardic surnames. Spain was under Moorish Muslim rule from the 700s to the 1200s, and Jewish family names developed under the influence of Arab custom.

Arabic family names developed from "by-names," which began to be passed from father to son. These family names were patronyms, occupations, places of origin, and descriptions. Surnames of patronymic origin (most common) often used the Arabic term ibn for "son of." Ibn was placed in front of the father's name, such as Ibn Aknin and Ibn Baruch. Arabs sometimes reversed the patronym, using the term abu for "father of," such as Isaac abu Jacob. Some Jews simply joined his father's name to his own, such as Joseph Abraham (instead of Joseph the son of Abraham).

After the Arabs were driven out of Spain, Jews made their Arabic-sounding names sound more like Spanish. Among Spanish Jews we find the family name Avinbruch (which corresponds to Abu Baruch) and Abeldano (which corresponds to Ibn el-Danan). The Hebrew word for son, ben, was also used; the son of Elisha became Benelisha or Belish. Sometimes Jewish given names were translated into their Spanish form and used as a patronymic surname. For example, Mendel (a common Jewish given name) became Mendez and Acaz became Isaac.

The translation of given names goes even further. Chaim (a Hebrew given name meaning "life") became the Spanish surname Vital or Vidal. When Jacob (Israel) blessed his sons, he compared Benjamin to a wolf. This is lobo in Spanish. The Spanish patronym for Lobo was Lopez, which is a common surname among Sephardic Jews.

Surnames of occupational origin include: Chazan [Cantor], Gabbai [synagogue official], Dayan [rabbinic judge], Coffen [Cohen], Tibbon [straw merchant], Sebag [black], Rofe [doctor], and Del Medigo [of medicine].

Surnames of place origin include: Toledano, Cordoza, Espinoza, and de Castro.

Spain forced all Jews to leave the country in 1492. After their expulsion, the Sephardic Jews continued using family names. Their surnames came to fit the language and culture of their new homelands: Greece, Italy, Holland, France, England, and North Africa. In areas where they were in the majority, they were able to impose their Spanish-Arabic language and naming customs on the existing Jewish community, as they did in the Greece and the Balkan states. Where they were in the minority, as in North Africa, they assimilated the language, culture, and naming customs of the Jewish communities they joined. In time, the term "Sephardic" came to be generally, but inaccurately, applied to all Mediterranean Jews. Hereditary family names became generally accepted throughout this extended Sephardic world in the 1500s.

Ashkenazic Surnames

The Yiddish-speaking Jews of central and eastern Europe are called Ashkenazic. Some Ashkenazic Jews used hereditary surnames as early as the Middle Ages, although the custom was uncommon. The practice was limited to Jews who had business dealings with the gentile (non-Jewish) world. These early Jewish surnames were often the same as Christian family names. Some Germanic Jewish names were derived from the house signs which served instead of house numbers in many German cities during the 16th and 17th centuries. For example, the Rothschild family lived at the red shield. Strauss [ostrich] comes from the house with an ostrich plume sign. Other examples of shield names are Adler [eagle], Taub [dove], and Schiff [ship].

In the 17th and 18th centuries, Ashkenazic Jews moved increasingly into mainstream European life. The adoption of fixed surnames became more and more important, especially those in Western Europe. These names were patronymic or derived from localities (such as Berliner [of Berlin], Frank [France], or Hamburg), occupations (such as Wechsler [money changer], Kaufmann [merchant], or Schneider [tailor]), or characteristics (such as Schwartz [black hair] or Klein [small]).

Most Eastern European Jews were isolated from their gentile neighbors and rarely used surnames. Until the end of the 18th century the use of a family name was left to the discretion of the individual Jew. The bulk of the Ashkenazic Jews in Germany and especially in Eastern Europe still followed the custom of using only a given name and the patronymic (Joseph, son of Isaac).

Sources of Ashkenazic Surnames

Before surnames were required, most Ashkenazic Jews were known by a patronym, so it is not surprising that they simply gave their father's given name when asked or forced to choose a fixed surname. This resulted in such surnames as Mendel, Ruben, Solomon, Meir, Moritz, and Gutmann. Many names have the German ending -sohn or the Slavic -wicz and -vitch, which mean "son of." These yielded names like Mendelssohn [son of Mendel], Abramsohn or Abrams [son of Abram], Berkovitz, or Szmulowicz. Ashkenazic Jews also continued to choose surnames from localities, occupations, and characteristics or physical traits.

In many cases, restrictions were placed on the choice of names. Some governments forbade the adoption of Christian-sounding names or names of famous families. French laws forbade Jews taking names based on localities or to adopt Old Testament names. Hebrew names were generally not allowed. Since Jews considered Hebrew names sacred, a Yiddish, German, or Polish version that often had a symbolic association was generally used. Many used diminutive forms of these names according to dialect. For example, the name Jacob has the variations: Jankel, Yekel, Yakof, Yakobl, Kopel, Kopelman, and Kofman. These variant given names provided a rich source for surnames derived from Hebrew names without actually being Hebrw. The surnames Lieberman, Liebowitz, and Lipmann was derived from the given name Eleazar. Surnames derived from Aaron include Arnstein, Arndt, Ahrens, Ehrens, Ehrenstamm, Ehrlich, and Ohrenstein. For the given name Isaac, the surnames Isaacs, Eisech, Eissig, Eisen, Itzig, Zachmann, Seckel, and Gitzok are derived from it. Surnames were occasionally derived from female names, such as Sirkes (derivative from Sarah). Also, a man with a wife named Perla could have taken the surname Perlmann.

Many Hebrew given names have a symbolic connection with animals. For example, the German word for deer is Hirsch or, in some dialects, Herz or Hart. Hence we find surnames such as Hirsch,

Hirschsohn, Herz, Hirschberg, Hartwig, and Herschel. The Slavic version of deer [hind] is Jellinek and in French is Cerf. Jews also used given names as part of a surname. The lion of Judah [Löwe in German] produced many variations, including Löw, Löb, loeb, Löwenstein, and Leibowitz. The fish symbol gives not only the surnames Fisch [fish] and Fischer [fisher], but also Karpf and Karpel [carp], Heilbutt [halibut], Hecht [pike], and the Slavic version, Ryba [fish]. A lot of other animal names were adopted by Jews, including: Baer and Bermann [bear], Hase [rabbitt], and Fink [finch].

But the most common names were ones that were cleverly disguised. Often the German name chosen had a different meaning to the Jew than it did to the German official who recorded it. For example, the acronym of the Hebrew words kohen ha-tzedek [righteous priest] produced Katz (German for cat), a name acceptable to German officials. This same abbreviation of form is found in Barsch from Ben Rabbi Shimeon [son of rabbi Simon] and Schatz [German for treasure] from shaliah tzibbur [minister of the congregation]. For example, Altschul means "old school" in German but means "synagogue" to the Jew. Also, many Jewish surnames end in -meyer which means "steward" in German but is derived from Meir, which means "light" or "wise" in Hebrew.

Family names were often derived from place-names. Place-names chosen by Ashkenazic Jews may represent a recent place of origin or may go back to some ancestral home (real or supposed) the family was expelled from in the Middle Ages. Thus we find such names as Amsterdam, Lemberger (from Lemberg, L'vov), Halpern (from Heilbronn), Dreyfus (from Trèves), and Shapiro (from Speier). Some names are less specific like Westermann (from the West), Unger (from the Hungarian county of Ung), Schlesinger (from Schlesien [Silesia]), Hess (from Hessen [Bavaria]), and Deutsch (from Germany).

Russia had no restriction on family names derived from place names. Many such surnames are found among Russian Jews. Interestingly, although their surnames are often derived from localities in Russia and Poland, many Russian Jewish surnames are also derived from German and Austrian localities.

Occupations were also a source for family names, including Schneider or Portnoy [tailor], Goldschmidt [goldsmith], Kaufmann [shopkeeper], Weber [weaver], Schreiber [scribe], Rossman [horse dealer], and Schermann [cloth cutter]. Specifically Jewish pursuits are evident in such names as Rabinski [rabbi], Schuler or Schulmann or Szkolnik [sexton, beadle], Singer [cantor], Metzger or Reznick or Schlachter or Schochet [ritual slaughterer], and Klopman [one who knocks on the shutters to wake people for morning worship]. Many surnames reflect priestly or levitical heritage. One of the most common of all Jewish surnames is Kohen [priest] and its variations, Cohen, Kahn, Kogan, and Katz. Surnames showing Levitic or priestly heritage include Levy, Levinsky, Levin, Lewek, Lewenberg, and Segal (an abbreviation for segan leviah [member of the Levites]).

Many Jewish names are based on personal traits, including Bissell [short], Gross [big], Kurz [short], Krummbein [cripple], Rothbart [red-beard], Weiss [white], and Lustig [merry].

Jews often combined elements of languages, such as Hebrew with Yiddish and German or Slavic roots with Yiddish or Slavic endings. Thus, Jewish names are often found with various spellings depending on the languages that influence them. In Russian, for example, the h sound is substituted with g. This factor creates such diverse spellings as:

- Rothstein and Rotstejn
- Glückman and Glikman
- Warschauer and Varsaver

- Aschermann and Ojzerman
- Himmel and Gimmel
- Kohen and Kogan

Many Russian and Polish Jewish names are patronymic (derived from the father's name) including all the names ending with -wicz and -vitch [son of]. The Slavic endings -ov, -off, -ev, -ef, and -kin also indicate "descent from." Many matronymic names (derived from mother's name) are also found among Russian Jews such as Elkins (from Elka), Rifkin from Rivka (Rebecca), and Dvorkes from Dvora (Deborah).

Various government commissions often took bribes from the Jews in return for granting them pleasant-sounding surnames. Beautiful names derived from flowers and gems, such as Blumenthal [flower valley], Finkelstein [sparkling stone, diamond, pyrite], and other such names would come at a high price. Less fancy names, such as Weintraub [winegrape], Steinberg [stone mountain], Adler [eagle], or Eisen [iron], could be obtained at a lower cost. Those who could not or would not pay would sometimes receive ridiculous names, such as Ochsenschwanz [oxtail], Langnass [long nose], Zweifel [doubt], Schmalz [grease], Fresser [glutton], and other similar names.