

## Given Names in Strasbourg

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SOME YEARS AGO, when I was beginning the study of French in high school, I recall that our teacher re-named every boy and girl in the class with a translation, wherever possible, into French, of his or her given name. I am sure that this is a common practice in many language classes at the elementary level. It often serves, as it did in our case, as a motivating force in the study of the language, for it seems to give the students a French identity and helps to stimulate them to greater efforts in their contact with the new idiom.

But I believe it also gave us a false notion of the relative popularity of certain names in France, as compared with the same names in the United States.

This fact was brought home to me in 1951, while I was living in one of France's largest cities, Strasbourg. I chanced to observe that the local newspaper, *Les Dernières Nouvelles d'Alsace*, regularly published the complete *État civil*, or record of births, deaths, marriages and divorces of the city. Having recently read Elsdon Smith's *Story of Our Names*, I was attracted particularly by the lists of names given to new-born babies. It was at once apparent to me that there were significant differences between France and the United States in the popularity of given names.

Strasbourg was, at that time, as all of Alsace, emerging from the trying years of the second World War, and the German occupation, and the inhabitants were obviously trying to be very French in spite of their German origin. Anti-German sentiment was still strong, to such a point sometimes that anyone who spoke standard German was coolly received. People whom we met only casually frequently made a point of telling us how severely they had suffered under the occupation. I felt therefore that the names given to babies at that time would surely be typically French, as a reflection of this pro-French, anti-German attitude.

My curiosity aroused, I consequently undertook a tabulation and statistical analysis of the names registered in the birth notices, over a period of several months, from August to October, 1951. The results are found in the accompanying tables. During the period, I recorded a total of 940 births, of which 523 were boys and 417 were girls.

It should be noted in passing that the list of births represented a fairly broad cross-section of the population of the city, for, since the calling of the father was in all cases noted, it was possible to ascertain that all walks of life, from the laboring classes to the merchants to the professions, were amply represented.

For the boys there were 140 different names counted; for the girls, 187. As in the United States, most children receive at least two names at birth. Only 48 boys and 58 girls in my lists were limited to one name. The great majority had two names: 214 boys and 217 girls. A somewhat smaller percentage bore three: 144 boys and 131 girls. And two girls, but no boys, had six names!

But any consideration of the form or popularity of given names in France must take into account several factors which inevitably influence the choice of a name for a child. The two most important of these factors are the Christian tradition in France and certain legal restrictions regarding the registration of names in the *État civil*, while other, yet secondary, influences might be considered as a certain inherent French conservatism and the whims of fashion, coupled with some regional preferences.

France has from the earliest centuries of our era been known as one of the foremost Christian nations, and has proudly borne the title of "eldest daughter of the Church." Predominantly Catholic, yet with strong Protestant elements, the country, in almost every aspect of its life, is thoroughly conscious of its Christian heritage. We may therefore expect the great majority of given names to be Christian names, taken from the several Christian calendars. Jean and Marie, as may be expected, head the lists, and we are not surprised to find such names as André, Patrick, Pierre, François and Michel for the boys, and Christiane, Elisabeth, Geneviève and Marguerite for the girls. The names of many of the saints are very much alive in France today.

Besides the Church, the State also acts to influence given names in France. During the Revolution, when baptismal names became

“given” names, parents called their children by names chosen from natural history (i.e. Siboulette) or from current events (i.e. Café Billard), rather than by names of saints. But a law of the year XI, under Napoleon, put an end to this practice which had often produced rather ludicrous results. Napoleon’s decree declared that given names must be those of well-known persons of ancient history or those found in the various religious calendars. This law may be considered as one of the results of the Concordat of 1801, as it generally represents a return to religious principles. Subsequent regulations have somewhat modified the law, but even today the basis remains much the same. A list of names, published in 1865, is supposed to be consulted before civil authorities admit a name to the *État civil*, but since this list contains certain errors and is incomplete, it is not always respected. Nevertheless, names which do not conform to this list are not supposed to be accepted, and each year the registers of the *État civil* are scanned by the authorities in order to draw up another list — of those names which should not have been recorded. It was only a few years ago that the name Ginette, for instance, was refused by the *État civil* in Paris, in one case of which I have personal knowledge. The parents of the child were able to have the name recorded only because they were able to persuade the authorities that Ginette is, in a sense, an abbreviation of either Regine or Genevieve, patron saint of Paris. Since that time many girls have been named Ginette, although the name has not become highly popular, since in the Parisian mind it has become somehow associated with the midinettes and it is therefore tainted with a certain class feeling. The name Carol, too, has only recently been admitted. It is said it became popular owing to the rise of the film star Martine Carol.

The State today protects the children of France against the ridicule which might result from the fantasies of their parents, and it is almost impossible today to find whimsical names in France. Such a name as Kenesaw Mountain, or its equivalent, or simple initials such as K. T. would be quite unacceptable.

French babies, in addition, must not receive foreign names. That right is reserved for children of foreign parents. For this reason, in the accompanying tables, there are very few “foreign sounding” names. Each occurs but once, and when we check the names of the parents, it is obvious that they are of foreign origin. Thus Domenici,

Gianni, Giannandrea and Silvio are Italian; Georg and Gottfried are German; Ali, Ben and Salem are of Arabic extraction. Strangely enough, Salem's second name is Bernard, and Ben Ali's first name is Norbert. Concessions, no doubt, to a French, and Christian, mother in each case.

Exceptions to the rule on foreign names seem to be those derived from English or Irish. Yet in each case the foreign form appears to be so close to the French name that it seems acceptable. Patrick, as a boy's name, is today more popular than the French Patrice. Francis, which has long been popular in France, follows close on the heels of François. And we also have Jacky, Jackie, Eddy and Betty, which can all be claimed as abbreviations of perfectly acceptable French names. Other names in the list are distinctly "felt" as French names, regardless of their ultimate origin. Even Serge, which came into France via the Slavic languages, has been around long enough to be considered as having acquired citizenship. Marilène, said to be of Scandinavian origin, is claimed as an abbreviation of Marie-Madeleine.

Fashion also plays a rôle. While Alphonse, Armand, Raoul, Virginie and Charlotte may have been very popular some time ago, they have, for some reason, been replaced by other names at the top of the list. Popular fancy is unpredictable and is often influenced by the names of movie stars or contemporary fiction. The prominence of Martine Carol has brought two names into popularity in recent years. Since the days of Molière, Martine, as representative of a type, had not been too popular. The movies have changed that, as they forced the acceptance of Carol. Chantal, a few years ago, was rising in popularity, but the series of jokes about a girl named Marie-Chantal, a silly, overly-rich, snobbish girl without a serious thought in her head, may return this name to a relatively unimportant position. Guillaume is considered countrified in some circles in France, and is no longer popular. In Alsace, this might be attributed to anti-German sentiment as well, for my list did not contain a single case of this name. Likewise Jules, the butt of many jokes and a name which has certain connotations related to unsavory sections of Paris, is not found in my list.

The tables I have made are in two parts. Tables Ia and Ib contain only first names, for boys and girls. Tables IIa and IIb represent a total count of all names, regardless of position. Since French

children tend to have multiple names, I felt that a list of first names only would not present a true picture of total popularity. Marie, for instance, is a popular name for boys, but is never used as a first name. It is almost always a second name, and most frequently combined in Jean-Marie. Similarly Jacques is twentieth in popularity as a first name, but in the total list it has moved up to fifth place, because of its frequent use as a second name in the combination Jean-Jaques. In the girls' list Louise stands toward the bottom as a first name, whereas because of its association in the combination with Marie it occupies a fairly high position as a second name.

In compiling my lists, I observed that certain combinations of names tend to recur, to form a pattern. I therefore tabulated all those combinations which occurred three or more times. The popular patterns are as follows:

For boys — Jean-Marie (21)	For girls — Marie-Louise (12)
Jean-Jacques (19)	Marie-Thérèse (10)
Jean-Claude (18)	Anne-Marie (8)
Jean-Pierre (12)	Brigitte-Marie (6)
Jean-Paul (8)	Marie-France (6)
Jean-Louis (7)	Marie-Claire (5)
Jean-Luc (5)	Martine-Marie (4)
Claude-René (4)	Marie-Elisabeth (4)
Jean-Michel (4)	Marie-Jeanne (4)
Daniel-Georges (3)	Marie-Joséphine (4)
Jean-Charles (3)	Marie-Rose (4)
Jean-Marc (3)	Marie-Madeleine (4)
	Marie-Paule (4)
	Christiane-Renée (3)
	Marie-Anne (3)
	Marie-Antoinette (3)

The reasons for the popularity of some of these combinations are at once apparent, and are usually either historical or religious: Jean-Marie, Jean-Jacques, Jean-Luc, Marie-Madeleine, Marie-Louise, Marie-Thérèse, Marie-France. The last one here seems to be a welding of both religious and patriotic elements

The accompanying tables give us a fairly clear picture of the popularity of given names in an important segment of the French population, at a given point in time. No doubt, another simultaneous study in another French city would have given us a somewhat

different story, for, as we have seen, names are subject to the whims of fashion and of regional influences. But what better means have we of determining those names which are most liked, and, conversely, least esteemed? Tests have been devised to discover, by questions, what names people most prefer, but they have been inconclusive. In the final analysis, would it not seem likely that the names people most like, they give to their children, their most treasured possessions?

Table Ia. Frequency of first names — Boys

There are only ninety names used as first names. The number after each name represents the number of times it was counted as a first name.

Jean	94	Roger	4	Ernest	1
Claude	20	Serge	4	Etienne	1
Alain	19	Dominique	3	Fernand	1
Daniel	17	Philippe	3	Florent	1
André	16	Yves	3	Freddy	1
Bernard	14	Albert	2	Gabriel	1
Patrick	13	Alfred	2	Georges	1
René	12	Denis	2	Gérald	1
Roland	12	Louis	2	Giannandrea	1
Pierre	11	Lucien	2	Gianni	1
Gilbert	10	Patrice	2	Hervé	1
Gérard	10	Sylvain	2	Jackie	1
François	9	Thierry	2	Jacky	1
Michel	9	Adrien	1	Jacquy	1
Francis	8	Aloïse	1	Janny	1
Guy	8	Antoine	1	Jérôme	1
Marc	7	Armand	1	Jeannot	1
Raymond	7	Arnaud	1	José	1
Christian	5	Axel	1	Joseph	1
Jacques	5	Bertrand	1	Julien	1
Marcel	5	Caspar	1	Laurent	1
Maurice	5	Damien	1	Lionnel	1
Paul	5	Danny	1	Lothaire	1
Richard	5	Didier	1	Marcellin	1
Charles	4	Domenici	1	Marius	1
Hubert	4	Eddy	1	Martial	1
Rémi (Rémy)	4	Emile	1	Norbert	1

Olivier	1	Salem	1	Tibert	1
Pascal	1	Sylvio	1	Valentin	1
Roy	1	Thomas	1	Yvan	1

Table II a. Overall frequency – Boys

These are the first 100 names in my tabulation. The figures represent the number of times a name was counted.

Jean	128	Guy	9	Patrice	2
René	46	Fernand	8	Sylvio	2
Claude	41	Eugène	7	Thierry	2
Charles	39	Lucien	7	Victor	2
Jacques	32	Philippe	7	Adrien	1
Pierre	32	Christian	6	Albin	1
Marie	25	Dominique	6	Ali	1
André	24	Luc	6	Armand	1
Bernard	23	Maurice	6	Arnaud	1
Michel	23	Richard	6	Aurel	1
Alain	22	Yves	6	Axel	1
Joseph	21	Hubert	5	Ben	1
Daniel	20	Rémi	5	Benjamin	1
François	20	Alphonse	4	Benoit	1
Georges	20	Serge	4	Bertrand	1
Louis	20	Sylvain	4	Boris	1
Robert	20	Aloïse	3	Camille	1
Roland	20	Auguste	3	Caspar	1
Paul	19	Denis	3	Damien	1
Raymond	18	Edmond	3	Danny	1
Gérard	16	Frédéric	3	Didier	1
Patrick	15	Germain	3	Domenici	1
Gilbert	15	Julien	3	Erwin	1
Albert	14	Leon	3	Firmin	1
Roger	14	Martin	3	France	1
Alfred	13	Eddy	2	Freddy	1
Henri	12	Edouard	2	Georg	1
Marc	12	Etienne	2	Gérald	1
Marcel	12	Florent	2	Giannandrea	1
Antoine	11	Gabriel	2	Gilles	1
Francis	10	Gaston	2	Gottfried	1
Emile	9	Jackie	2	Gustave	1
Ernest	9	José	2	Hervé	1
		Nicolas	2		

Table Ib. Frequency of first names — Girls

These are the 100 most frequent first names. Figures represent the number of times each name was counted.

Marie	43	Yvette	4	Annick	1
Christiane	17	Agnès	3	Anny	1
Michèle	15	Arlette	3	Antonia	1
Danielle	13	Catherine	3	Aude	1
Martine	13	Dominique	3	Aulise	1
Brigitte	12	Hélène	3	Bernadette	1
Astrid(e)	11	Irène	3	Betty	1
Simone	10	Lucienne	3	Carmen	1
Anne	9	Madeleine	3	Caroline	1
Francine	9	Solange	3	Cécile	1
Jeannine	8	Angèle	2	Claire	1
Denise	8	Annette	2	Clarisse	1
Evelyne	8	Annie	2	Fernande	1
Françoise	8	Corinne	2	Florence	1
Chantal	8	Edith	2	Gaby	1
Yolande	8	Fabienne	2	Georgette	1
Monique	7	Huguette	2	Gertrude	1
Béatrice	6	Isabelle	2	Ghislaine	1
Marlène	6	Laurence	2	Gisèle	1
Nicole	6	Louise	2	Gyseline	1
Christine	5	Marianne	2	Hedwige	1
Claudine	5	Marlyse	2	Henriette	1
Doris	5	Marthe	2	Ingeborg	1
Eliane	5	Micheline	2	Janiela	1
Elisabeth	5	Paulette	2	Josée	1
Josiane	5	Raymonde	2	Joselyne	1
Liliane	5	Renée	2	Lilette	1
Sylvie	5	Suzanne	2	Marguerite	1
Gabrielle	4	Sylviane	2	Marilène	1
Geneviève	4	Yvonne	2	Mathilde	1
Ginette	4	Adrienne	1	Méry	1
Mireille	4	Alice	1	Murielle	1
Sonia	4	Alix	1	Nadia	1
		Andrée	1		



Table IIb. Overall frequency — Girls

These are the first 100 most popular names. Figures represent the number of times each name was counted.

Marie	125	Jeanne	8	Odile	4
Christiane	25	Marlène	8	Sonia	4
Anne	23	Catherine	7	Agnès	3
Michèle	21	Claire	7	Annette	3
Martine	18	France	7	Annie	3
Françoise	17	Germaine	7	Arlette	3
Marguerite	16	Liliane	7	Bernadette	3
Brigitte	15	Solange	7	Berthe	3
Denise	15	Yvonne	7	Florence	3
Elisabeth	15	Andrée	6	Huguette	3
Madeleine	15	Claude	6	Isabelle	3
Louise	14	Claudine	6	Jacqueline	3
Simone	14	Doris	6	Jeannette	3
Thérèse	13	Geneviève	6	Laurence	3
Chantal	12	Irène	6	Marcelle	3
Danielle	12	Jeannine	6	Maria	3
Francine	12	Josiane	6	Micheline	3
Marthe	12	Lucienne	6	Adrienne	2
Monique	12	Mireille	6	Anna	2
Renée	11	Raymonde	6	Colette	2
Suzanne	11	Rose	6	Corinne	2
Astrid(e)	10	Sylvie	6	Edith	2
Béatrice	10	Alice	5	Emma	2
Evelyne	10	Antoinette	5	Eugénie	2
Hélène	10	Dominique	5	Fabienne	2
Joséphine	10	Ginette	5	Gisèle	2
Nicole	10	Paule	5	Lina	2
Yvette	10	Paulette	5	Marianne	2
Eliane	9	Angèle	4	Marlise	2
Georgette	9	Cécile	4	Marlyse	2
Yolande	9	Josée	4	Richarde	2
Christine	8	Léonie	4	Sabine	2
Gabrielle	8	Lucie	4	Sylviane	2
		Mathilde	4		