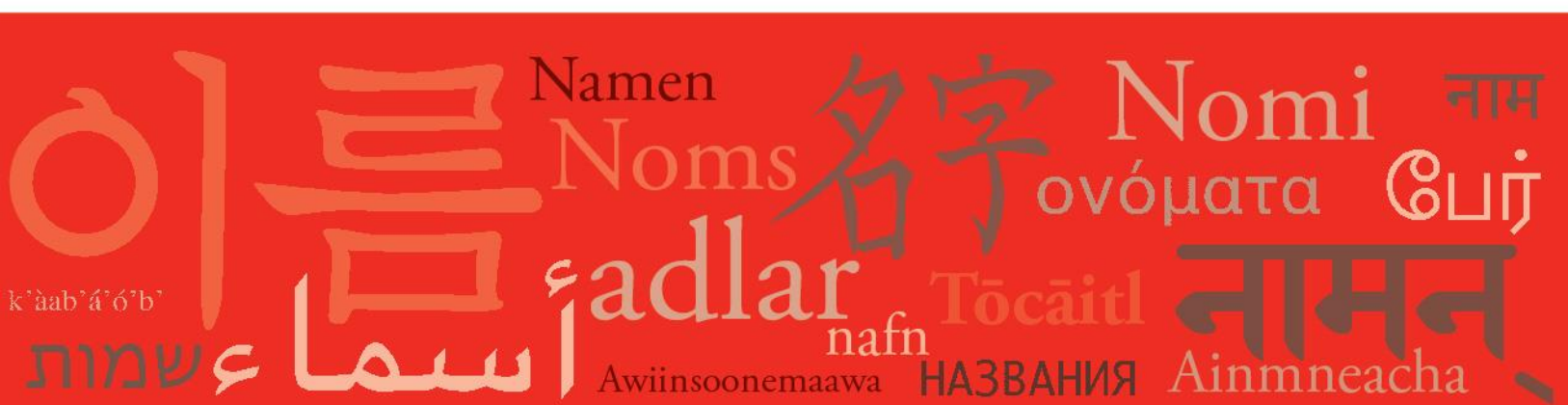


Names | A Journal of Onomastics



Book Review

A Rosenberg by Any Other Name: A History of Jewish Name Changing in America. By KIRSTEN FERAGLICH. New York: New York University Press. 2018. Pp. v + 245. \$28.00. ISBN: 978-1-4798-6720-2.

“What’s in a name?” asks Juliet, of Shakespeare fame, and then continues, “That which we call a rose/By any other name would smell as sweet.” Juliet, unlike Kirsten Fermaglich, author of *A Rosenberg by Any Other Name: A History of Jewish Name Changing in America*, believes names, whether Montague or Capulet, should not be an obstacle to love. Fermaglich, on the other hand, traces the twentieth-century curve of name changing in New York City’s Jewish population and convincingly argues that Jewish Americans changed their names precisely because Jewish surnames were an obstacle. For them, a Jewish name impeded social and economic mobility and inhibited equal access to education. The experience of anti-Semitism and prejudice in the “white” world (a term the author uses to distinguish “otherness”) gave them a significant enough reason to change their Jewish-sounding surnames. The anti-Semitism occurred in the marginal interactions between individual Jews and Gentiles but also in the broad social and economic culture of the United States. As the second generation of Jews born to immigrant parents sought access to Gentile institutions, neighborhoods, professions, and businesses, they encountered barriers based on their Jewish-sounding surnames. While a “good name” usually refers to one’s character and integrity, Jewish name-changers believed changing their name to a “good,” less Jewish-sounding name, and thus obscuring their identity, would be more acceptable to the Gentile world and offer them better and greater access to the American dream of middle-class life.

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ISSN: 0027-7738 (print) 1756-2279 (web)

Vol. 69, Issue 1, Winter 2021

DOI 10.5195/names.2021.2246



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The book is divided into three chronological sections. The first two sections explore name changing after each of the World Wars. The last section discusses the decline of name changing after the 1960s until the end of the century. This periodization enables Fermaglich to identify the era of immigration, the process of Americanization and assimilation, and, in the post-modern period, the reassertion and rediscovery of identity and cultural roots. Fifty pages of extensively documented footnotes and an index bring the page total to 245. Fermaglich's primary research in the Name Change Petitions Collection of the New York City Civil Court provides both statistical data and anecdotal examples. Additional, and unusual, sources (multiple archive collections, newspapers, interviews, case law, films, and popular fiction) expand and amplify the central arguments. The six chapters, two in each section, incorporate illustrative figures including charts, name lists, posters, graphics, admission forms, and residential housing maps which enhance the narrative.

Although Jews made up one quarter of New York City's population, they were disproportionately represented among name changers. Over the course of the twentieth century an average of 100 Jewish name changers per year increased to 200–300 in the interwar years and peaked at 800 per year in the 1940s. Thereafter, the numbers dwindled through the 1980s and 1990s. Fermaglich makes clear that the majority of New York City's Jews did not change their names, but among those individuals and families who did, she uncovers personal and public, official and unofficial reasons for doing so. Applicants claimed their names were a handicap, either too foreign-sounding or too difficult to spell, limited access to desired employment (for both men and women), restricted advancement in the military, or excluded applicants from institutions of higher learning (spearheaded by Columbia University). And, at a time when Germans changed their names during World War I to escape discrimination, Jews with German sounding names felt they were in double jeopardy. In a blatant move to ferret out "Jewishness," employment agencies, businesses, and schools added questions regarding an applicant's mother's maiden name and membership in churches, clubs and organizations. Another common screening device was to ask whether the applicant had ever been known by another name.

This book underscores yet again the contradictions between the rhetoric and the reality of life in the United States. The pervasive anti-Semitism documented by the author in the public and private spheres is a history relevant to both Jewish and Gentile scholars. But one need only recall the controversy over electing John Fitzgerald Kennedy, an Irish Catholic, to the presidency or the forced institutionalization of Native American children with its erasure of Native names and culture to be reminded of an underlying intolerance of those of a different color, religion, or ethnicity. Fear and hatred of the "other" complicates the ongoing immigration debate which fosters xenophobic reaction to Hispanic, Middle Eastern, and Russian names. While this nuanced account of the American Jewish struggle for acceptance and respect echoes our own discordant era, it also reveals how denial of equal access to education, employment, and housing for those seeking entry to the middle class can be uncovered and overcome.

After World War II, the return of GI's to civilian life prompted more name changing. Jewish soldiers, like so many others, wanted access to better educations and better jobs. This provoked a debate within the Jewish community. Orthodox leaders claimed name changers would weaken their ties to Judaism and become secular. Others accused name changers of self-hatred and derided them for trying to "pass" as Gentiles. Despite these charges, as the author notes, most name changers continued to maintain their cultural, familial, and religious ties.

Although the heart of the book examines the interplay among success, anti-Semitism, and name changing, the author does not dwell on either the Jewish names or the assumed names. To be sure, there is a list of distinctive Jewish names from a 1942 study, in which we see common Jewish surnames such as Goldberg, Levy, and Cohen. But the examples of assumed names can be found within the text only as part of anecdotal and supportive evidence. While it is commonly known that higher profile Jewish movie stars, producers and authors changed their names, Fermaglich's work highlights ordinary name changers such as William Levine (Lawrence), Harold and Florence Katzenson (Kenson), Leonard Bloom (Broom), Estelle Walovshy (Elaine Wales), and Laura Ginsberg (Gale).

In the final section, Fermaglich argues that the same bureaucracies that limited lives and shaped identity served to exclude Jews and made Jewishness unacceptable. As a result, Jewish activists compiled data, pursued a strategy of legal activism, and organized public support for civil rights. Jewish groups joined with other activist organizations including the Japanese American Citizen League (JACL), the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC). These and similar efforts put civil rights at the forefront of the political and social agenda of the 1960s and beyond.

In the post-modern period, there is a movement among the descendants of Jewish name changers (and many other hyphenated-Americans) to return to their roots and reclaim lost identities. As the author notes, escaping from a badge of inferiority is often at the core of assuming a new identity. It is ironic that the name changers and those who now participate fully and freely in American society may have forgotten the struggles that brought them to where they are.

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