

# Notes on Swiss Personal Names<sup>1</sup>

ALFRED SENN

1. **S**WISS IMMIGRANTS who settle in the various parts of the United States bring with them not only their talents and skills, but also their surnames. Corresponding to the multilingual composition of the Swiss population, these imported surnames may be of German, French, Italian or Romansh origin. In the present paper, only German names will be discussed. In the course of time many of them have been changed in various ways in attempts to bring the English spelling into agreement with the traditional pronunciation. Others have been translated. Many a *Carpenter* derives his name from an ancestor who was called *Zimmermann*. Numerous are the cases where the original Swiss spelling is preserved, but the word itself pronounced in such a way that no Swiss could recognize its original identity without a knowledge of English. As an example we might cite the surname *Zuercher* (found in Wisconsin and Nebraska) the meaning of which is "a man from Zürich." This name is pronounced in Switzerland somewhat like *Tsiurkher* which sounds quite different from the American pronunciation which, transposed into German spelling, would read *Sörtscher*. There are also examples

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. my article "Swiss Names" in *The Swiss Record* (Yearbook of the Swiss-American Historical Society) (Madison, Wis., 1949) 71–82. Selected bibliography: Adolf Bach, *Deutsche Namenkunde*. Part I: *Die deutschen Personennamen*, 2nd ed., Berlin, 1952. August Steiger, *Wie soll das Kind heißen? Über unsere Vornamen* (Volksbücher des Deutschschweizerischen Sprachvereins 7), Basel, 1918. Ferdinand Vetter, *Über Personennamen und Namengebung in Bern und anderswo*, Bern, 1910. Paul Oettli, *Deutschschweizerische Geschlechtsnamen* (Volksbücher des Deutschschweizerischen Sprachvereins 14), Erlenbach-Zürich. Wilh. Tobler-Meyer, *Deutsche Familiennamen nach ihrer Entstehung und Bedeutung mit besonderer Rücksichtnahme auf Zürich und die Ostschweiz*, Zürich, 1894. Gottlieb Studerus, *Die alten deutschen Familiennamen von Freiburg im Üchiland*, (Fribourg University dissertation) 1926. K. Surläuly, *Zur Geschichte der deutschen Personennamen nach Badener Quellen des 13., 14. und 15. Jahrhunderts*, (Zürich University dissertation) 1927. Henri Gobat, *De l'origine des noms de famille dans le Jura bernois*, (Actes de la Société Jurassienne d'Émulation 26) 1921. Paul Aebischer, *Sur l'origine et la formation des noms de famille dans le Canton de Fribourg*, (Fribourg University dissertation) 1923.

of Swiss names which were inadvertently changed by American immigration officials because they did not catch the pronunciation correctly or because the name seemed too long. In the Pennsylvania Dutch area we find the surname *Hoot* in a family which traces its origin back to Switzerland. The original form of this surname may have been *Hutmacher* ('hat-maker') which is attested as having been established in the Bernese communes of Konolfingen and Langnau before 1800. Another Swiss surname which has been partially adapted to American pronunciation is *Hoover* going back to *Huber*, a very popular surname all over Switzerland.<sup>2</sup>

2. Those interested in genealogical studies referring to Switzerland will find Robert Oehler's book *Familiennamenbuch der Schweiz*<sup>3</sup> a very useful tool, a reliable source of information. This is a reference work containing the surnames of all Swiss citizens, in alphabetical order, on the basis of the records of the Swiss Office of Vital Statistics (*Eidgenössisches Amt für Zivilstandswesen*). Each surname is followed by a list of the communes in which the families of that name hold citizenship, and in each case the reader learns when such a family was admitted to citizenship, that is, either before 1800 or during the nineteenth century or after 1900. Thus, we learn that families with the surname *Sprunger* (occurring in Indiana) had been citizens of Sarmentorf (Aargau) and Oberwangen (Thurgau) before 1800 and that some *Sprungers* were admitted to citizenship in Rapperswil (Aargau) and Sursee (Luzern) after 1900. The surname *von Grüningen* (North Dakota) appears only in Saanen (Bern) where it is quite old, that is, attested before 1800. Also from Saanen and likewise attested before 1800 is the *Frautschi* (variant spelling: *Frautschy*) family (Wisconsin), but some members of that family have become citizens of the cities of Basel and Geneva since 1901. Before 1800, the *Rieser* (*Riser*) families (now found in Oregon and Wisconsin) were limited to the cantons of Thurgau (Affeltrangen, Buch bei Üsslingen, Istighofen, Tägerschen, Tobel, Wallnewil, Weinfeldten, Wuppenau, Zezikon), St. Gallen (Ebnat), and Aargau (Herznach),

<sup>2</sup> Herbert C. Hoover, thirty-first president of the United States, traces his family origin back to Oberkulm, a hamlet in the present township of Kulm in the canton of Aargau (before 1798 a part of Bern), Switzerland. See *Prominent Americans of Swiss Origin* (published by the Swiss-American Historical Society in 1932), 1-6.

<sup>3</sup> Robert, Oehler, *Les noms de famille suisses — Familiennamenbuch der Schweiz — I nomi di famiglia svizzeri*, Polygraphischer Verlag A.-G., Zürich, 1940.

but they spread to other communes and even to other cantons during the last one hundred and sixty years. In this arrangement, the year 1800 is of special importance since it marks the approximate end of the old order of Switzerland, the so-called Old Swiss Confederation (*Alta Eidgenossenschaft*), an era in which the population had been much more stable than it was later. This arrangement of the book enables such Americans of Swiss origin whose ancestors arrived in the New World in the eighteenth century (Lancaster, Pa.) or earlier to ascertain their original roots with little difficulty. Thus, the *Oberly* family would have to look under *Oberle* or *Oberli* or *Oberlin*. Unfortunately, surnames now extinct in Switzerland are not listed in this book. As a result, the Pennsylvanian surname *Steckbeck* whose bearers trace their origin back to Switzerland is omitted.

3. Perusal of Oehler's *Familiennamenbuch der Schweiz* shows that *Müller* is the most popular surname in Switzerland. Citizens with this name are registered in 807 communes. Unfortunately, this information is insufficient to establish the percentage of all the *Müllers* with regard to the total population of the country, since there is no indication as to how many individuals or families of that name are registered in each commune. Next in order of popularity are the surnames *Schmid* (500 communes), *Weber* (500), and *Meier* (494). However, if we add to *Meier* the variant spellings *Meyer* (330), *Maier* (119), *Mayer* (96), and *Mejer* (2), we get for this synonymous group a total of 1041 communes. And by adding to *Schmid* its variants *Schmidt* (164), *Schmitt* (43), and *Schmied* (26), the total for that group is 733. All these surnames designated originally a profession or occupation, namely, that of a miller, a smith, a weaver, a (farm) manager. Impressive though their popularity may be, they are not really characteristic of Switzerland, since they occur also in Austria, Germany, and in the German-speaking part of France.

4. In many cases it is difficult to recognize the original professional designation of surnames. Frequently such names occur in their common meaning only in a limited dialectal area and are unintelligible elsewhere. Moreover, many of these names go back to words which today are no longer used as common nouns and survive only as surnames. Thus, *Beck*, occurring in 114 Swiss communes, is the Upper German and Swiss designation of the baker. *Beck*

appears as a professional name in the writings of Gottfried Keller in a number of compounds, e.g., *Pastetenbeck* 'baker of pastry,' *Zuckerbeck* 'candy maker.'<sup>4</sup> We have a similar situation with the name *Baumann* occurring in 260 Swiss communes. It is also of South German origin. In the language of earlier texts, *Baumann* meant as much as *Bauer* (which also occurs as a surname in 106 communes), that is, 'peasant, farmer.' The Swiss surnames *Suter* or *Sutter* (in 281 communes) and *Pfister* (154 communes) are good examples of former professional names which have now disappeared and continue to exist only as surnames. *Suter* (*Sutter*) is to be traced back to Latin *sutor* and meant originally 'shoemaker.'<sup>5</sup> The modern form *Schumacher* occurs as a surname in 104 communes and its standardized (that is, adjusted to the German spelling rules) equivalent *Schuhmacher* in 17. The German word *Schuster*, occurring as a surname in 17 Swiss communes, was originally a redundant compound of *Schuh* 'shoe' and *Suter*. Likewise *Pfister* goes back to a Latin loanword. It designated originally a pastry baker and developed out of Latin *pistor*. The city of St. Gallen still boasts a *Pfistergasse* 'Pfister street' even today. This is a remnant of the time when all the pastry bakers lived in that street.

5. Characteristically German-Swiss are surnames which show phonetic features characteristic of the Alamannic dialect, not adjusted to the standard German spelling rules. Here belong the following:

(a) Alamannic *Achermann* (46 communes) against standardized *Ackermann* (76 communes), Alamannic *Studer* (144 communes) against standardized *Stauder* (2 communes), Alamannic *Schnyder* (73 communes) against standardized *Schneider* (299 communes), Alamannic *Schwyzler* (15 communes), *Schwizler* (8), and *Schwitzer* (3) against standardized *Schweizer* (165 communes), etc.

<sup>4</sup> I am informed that the surname *Beck* occurring in the U.S. may in some cases be traced back to a Scandinavian word for 'stream,' either directly or through England. This explanation would recommend itself when the bearer of the name has no Swiss, Austrian or South German connections.

<sup>5</sup> The American pioneer John Augustus Sutter who in 1841 established *New Helvetia* (Sutter's Fort) was a citizen of Rünenberg (Baselland). His life and work is described (in his own native dialect) in the novel *Der Gänneral Sutter* by the Swiss poet Traugott Meyer, published in 1953 by Verlag Lüdin in Liestal (Baselland). Cf. my discussion of the novel in *The German Quarterly* 33 (1960), 95-96.

(b) The numerous names formed with the Alamannic diminutive suffix *-li* (standard German *-lein*) which, however, frequently appears as *-lin* especially in the canton of Baseland; e.g., *Börtin*, *Bünzli*, *Nägeli* (*Nägelin*), *Niggli*, *Oertly*, *Oetli*, *Schibli*, *Schneebebi*, *Stampfli*, *Stempfli*, *Stehli* (*Stehlin*), *Stierli* (*Stierlin*), *Stöckli* (*Stöcklin*), *Streuli*, *Temperli*, *Vetterli*, *Vögeli* (*Vögelin*), *Wälchli*, *Wehrli* (*Wehrlin*), *Wernli*, *Werndli*, *Zimmerli* (*Zimmerlin*), *Zwingli*.

(c) The numerous names formed with the (originally endearing) suffix *-i* or *-y*, which, especially in the canton of Baseland, may also appear as *-in*, e.g., *Bürgi* (*Bürgin*), *Bürki*, *Burri*, *Erni*, *Fritschi* (*Fritschin*), *Gautschi* (*Gautschin*), *Hauri*, *Lüdi* (*Lüdin*), *Lüthi* (*Lüthin*), *Lüthy*, *Stucki*, *Strübi* (*Strübin*), *Thöni*, *Thöny*, *Trümpi*, *Tschudi* (*Tschudin*), *Tschudy*, *Tschumi*, *Wälti*, *Welti* (*Weltin*), *Wicki*, *Wildi*, *Willi*, *Witschi* (*Witschin*), *Zopfi*, *Zwicky*. This formation has nothing in common with such Italian surnames as *Bianchi*, *Martini*, *Ratti*, *Rossi*, *Rusconi*, *Tonini*, *Turri*, *Zoppi*, which are plural formations and all of which occur also in Switzerland.

(d) The surnames *Marti* and *Marty*, very common in Switzerland, are the Alamannic form of standard German *Martin* which occurs likewise as an old surname in the German-speaking cantons of Aargau, Appenzell, Baseland, Baselstadt, Graubünden, and Thurgau. However, in the French-speaking cantons the very popular surname *Martin* sounds differently and is, of course, of French origin.

6. Some of the surnames listed in Section 5 (c) are easily recognizable as the informal, friendly calling forms of traditional first names, e.g., *Erni* for *Arnold*, *Wälti* and *Welti* for *Walter* (older *Walther*), *Thöni* and *Thöny* for *Anton*, and *Willi* for *Wilhelm*. *Fritschi* is used for *Friedrich*, and *Gautschi* goes back to the Latin first name *Gaudentius*, hardly used any more today. Other former first names have completely fallen into disuse as first names, but may survive as surnames either in their full or short form, e.g., *Bürki* for *Burkhard*, *Lüdi* for *Ludolf*, *Lüthi* and *Lüthy* for *Leuthold*. The forms ending in *-tschi* or *-tschy* occurred originally only in certain parts of Switzerland. Here belong, e.g., *Bärttschi* and *Berttschi* from *Berchtold* or *Albert*, *Dietschi* and *Dietschy* from *Diethelm* or *Dietrich*, *Rüetschi* from *Rudolf* (older *Ruodolf*), *Ültschi* from *Ulrich*. While the names in *-li* are for the major part diminutive forms of original nicknames, some of them are of the same semantic type

as those ending in plain *-i*, e.g., *Niggli* from *Niklaus*, *Oertly* from *Ortlieb*, *Oetli* (beside *Otti*) from *Ott* or *Otto*, and *Wernli* and *Wernkli* from *Werner* (older *Wernher*). *Regli*, common in the Catholic canton of Uri, may be derived from the feminine first name *Regula*, the name of a Swiss saint.

A large portion of German-Swiss surnames are regular masculine first names; e.g., *Adam*, *Aeberhardt*, *Albert*, *Albrecht*, *Anton*, *Arnold*, *Augustin*, *Berchtold*, *Diethelm*, *Dietrich*, *Eberhard*, *Ernst*, *Felix*, *Franz*, *Karli*, *Kaspar*, *Klaus*, *Mathis*, *Niklaus*, *Nikles*, *Ott*, *Otto*, *Reinhard*, *Richard*, *Rudolf*, *Ulrich*, *Werner*. Feminine first names in the function of surnames are extremely rare in the German-speaking part of Switzerland. The surname *Anna* is attested in the commune of Steinen — in the Catholic canton of Schwyz — as old, dating back before 1800. The surname *Berta* appears first only in the Italian-speaking regions of the country.<sup>6</sup>

7. The Swiss first names or Christian names differ essentially from their English or American counterparts by the fact that only a specific limited number of Swiss names can be used as given names, while in English any designation, even a surname, may be used as a Christian name. How rigid this system of Christian names is in Switzerland is illustrated by the fact that officers of vital statistics have prepared and published a list of names admissible for use as Christian names. According to a newspaper article published in the Swiss daily *Der Bund* of October 11, 1948, a certain tendency to break away from this rigid tradition had spread after World War II in the wake of a new "internationalistic" movement. However, the officers of vital statistics took steps to check this fad. In the Anglo-Saxon world, on the other hand, it frequently happens that one and the same name may be used for either sex, e.g., *Evelyn*, *Gordon*, *Lloyd*, *Marion*, and *Merle*. In Switzerland, as in all other continental European countries, a strict distinction is made between the masculine and the feminine names.<sup>7</sup>

8. Today each German-Swiss has normally only one Christian name and no middle name, e.g., *Gottfried Keller*. However, examples with two Christian names are not lacking, such as *Conrad Ferdinand*

<sup>6</sup> *Margreth*, attested as old in Churwalden, Obervaz, and Parpan (Graubünden), is of Romansh origin.

<sup>7</sup> But see *Maria* in Section 11 below.

*Meyer*. The Swiss Nobel Prize winner in literature, Carl Spitteler, used a single first name although on his birth (April 24, 1845) he had been given three baptismal names, namely, *Carl Georg Friedrich*. When a middle name is used, it is frequently contracted with the first name into a single name of compound character with the main stress on the first component, e.g., *Péterhans* or *Háns peter* for *Peter* and *Johann* or *Johann* and *Peter* respectively, *Hánsjakob* (*Hánsjoggi*, *Hánsjoggel*) for *Johann* and *Jakob*, *Hánsjörg* for *Johann* and *Jörg* (*Georg*), *Hánsrüedi* for *Johann* and *Rüedi* (*Rudolf*).

9. A study of the records of Swiss history shows that very interesting changes in the customs connected with name-giving have taken place in the course of the centuries. From church records of endowments for anniversary masses for the dead (*Innerschweizerische Jahrbücher*)<sup>8</sup> we know that men from the central cantons of Switzerland who died in the battles of Morgarten (1315), Laupen (1339), Sempach (1386), Bellinzona (1422), in the so-called Old Zürich War (1443), St. Jakob an der Birs (1444), in the Burgundian Wars (1474–77), before Novarra (1513), before Marignano (1515), before Milan (1522), and near Rapperswil (1656), all had only a single first name or Christian name, e.g., *Hans Zwyer*, *Cuonrat Löry*, *Werni Ob dem Weg*, *Peter Lützly*. In contrast to this simplicity which was carried out rigorously and without exception, a new style prevailed in the eighteenth century. Already in the casualty lists of the battle of Negroponte (1688, in the service of Venice) and in the Second War of Villmergen (1712) we find a strongly increasing tendency to use two Christian names, e.g., *Carl Emanuel Besler*, *Johann Melchior Strawmeyer*, *Franz Josep Gisch*, and *Hans Caspar Wipflin*. Around 1800 it was almost a rule for the people of Central Switzerland to have two Christian names. This change in the name system started in the second half of the seventeenth century, since the men with two names who died in 1688 were born about twenty years earlier. Under no circumstances can this double-name system be considered exclusively as a Swiss peculiarity. It occurred in other countries, too.

<sup>8</sup> P. Rudolf Henggeler O.S.B., *Das Schlachtenjahrzeit der Eidgenossen nach den innerschweizerischen Jahrbüchern* (Quellen zur Schweizergeschichte. Neue Folge II, 3), Basel, 1940.

10. Historical studies<sup>9</sup> have shown that at certain times in history certain first names are especially preferred. Among the few Biblical names which had been popular in German-speaking families before the Reformation, the name *Johannes* or *Johann* holds an undisputed first place. This name is one of the very first names of Christian origin used in baptism in German countries. For many centuries *Johannes* or its shortened calling form *Hans* was the most popular and most widely used first name. It appears in innumerable transformations, abbreviations, and compositions. Of the 230 men from the canton of Uri who died on the battlefield of Marignano (1515), 59 were called *Hans* by name, while one each is listed as *Johans* and *Jany*. The form *Jany* mentioned here appears otherwise regularly as *Jenni* or *Jenny*. Also the form *Hensly* (diminutive form of *Hans*) appears often. In cases where both father and son have the name *Hans*, the son is listed as *Jung Hans* ("Hans Junior"). A number of prominent Swiss of the fifteenth century were called *Hans*, e.g., *Hans Waldmann* of Zürich and his sharp-tongued opponent, *Frischhans* ("Daring Hans") *Theiling* of Luzern. For a time the name *Hans* was so widely used that it changed into a nickname with a slightly contemptuous or critical connotation as can be recognized from the expression *Großhans* (in the sense of "braggart") or the verb *hänseln* (that is, to call somebody "Hans," to deride him). Beginning with the twelfth century many derivations of the name *Johannes* became surnames. Here is a list of such Swiss surnames which are still in use today and had been used already in the Old Swiss Confederation, that is, before 1800, in the cantons mentioned in parentheses: *Häner* (Baselland), *Häni*, *Hänni*, *Hähni*, *Häne* (Aargau, Bern, St. Gallen, Solothurn, Thurgau, Fryburg, Graubünden), *Hännny* (Graubünden), *Hänseler*, *Henseler* (Bern, Luzern, Zürich, Aargau, St. Gallen, Thurgau), *Hensi* (Schaffhausen), *Hänsenberger* (St. Gallen), *Hänsler* (Zürich), *Häny* (Aargau), *Hans* (Fryburg), *Hanselmann* (cf. *Hanselima* in a nursery rhyme; St. Gallen, Thurgau), *Hanseman* (Graubünden), *Hanser* (Schaffhausen), *Hanslin* (Thurgau), *Henne* (St. Gallen), *Henni* (Baselland), *Henny* (Graubünden), *Jenni* (Aargau, Bern, Baselland, Fryburg, Glarus, Graubünden, Luzern), *Jänni* (Bern), *Jenny* (Bern, Baselland, Fryburg, Glarus, Graubünden), *Jann* (Graubünden, Nidwalden, St.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Alfred Bähnisch, *Die deutschen Personennamen*, 3rd ed., B. G. Teubner, Leipzig-Berlin, 1920.



Gallen), etc. Many of these names have been brought to the United States by Swiss immigrants. In addition to these characteristically Swiss derivations from the name *Johannes*, there is now in Switzerland a number of derivative formations brought in by immigrants from Germany, for instance, *Hansen*.

11. Another favorite name in the German language area is *Karl*. About forty years ago probably one-tenth of the entire German adult male population had that name. This was certainly true of southern Germany and the eastern part of Switzerland. This is all the more surprising in view of the fact that around the year 1400 this name was almost completely unknown. The city of Breslau (present-day Wrocław) in Silesia shows in its records before 1400 a complete absence of this name. In Rottweil, which was an associate member of the Old Swiss Confederation until 1798, but since 1802 has been part of Württemberg, there was not a single *Karl* until some time after 1500. In Esslingen (in Württemberg) there had been no *Karl* until 1420 and in Ulm (Württemberg) there had been none before 1314. In the casualty records of Central Switzerland mentioned in Section 9 above, the name *Karl* (in the form *Carli*) appears for the first time in the years 1688, but immediately thereafter occurs frequently. In the record referring to the Second War of Villmergen (1712), we find among the dead several with this name, but mostly combined with a second Christian name. Likewise the names *Joseph* and *Maria*, which today enjoy great popularity, do not occur before the year 1500. They do not become really popular before the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Surprisingly, the first occurrence of the name *Maria* in Switzerland is in the function of a surname. In the battle of Novarra (1513) a man from Uri, *Hans Maria* by name, was among the dead and another man from Uri, listed as *Thöni Maria*, fell in the battle of Marignano (1515). This man, *Thöni Maria*, came from Livinen and was perhaps not a Swiss-German but an Italian-speaking Ticinese. *Maria* as a surname disappeared later completely. Oehler's *Familiennamenbuch der Schweiz* has no such entry for any part of Switzerland. The name *Joseph* occurs for the first time in the casualty list of Negroponte (1688) but is there already quite frequent. In the year 1712 it is already widely used in Central Switzerland. The Catholic population of Central Switzerland uses for men the name *Maria* in combination

with other names. Two men from Uri called *Franz Maria* and thirteen called *Joseph Maria* fell in the fighting against the French in the years 1798–1800.

12. It is evident from the material culled from historical Swiss records that a change of style took place during the second half of the seventeenth century: namely, the introduction of *Joseph, Karl, Maria* as Christian names for men in combination with the use of two Christian names instead of a single one as before. It would be interesting to discover the source of this new style.

University of Pennsylvania

\* \* \*

#### TO THE EDITOR

Mr. R. S. Boumphry, who has served in the Falkland Islands and who is now at the University of Durham, has made a study of the place-names in the Falkland Islands, and he has sent me some pertinent information on two items in my article on the "Falklands," *Names*, Dec., 1961.

Mr. Boumphry suggests that the confusion over Lucius Cary and Anthony Cary, the Second and the Fifth Viscount of Falkland, and the status of the latter could be clarified in Burke's *Peerage* and *The Complete Peerage* by G. E. C. The latter points out that Anthony was First Lord of the Admiralty in 1693. He was therefore a contemporary of Captain John Strong, which makes it all the more credible that Strong named Falkland Sound for the Fifth Viscount of Falkland.

In reference to the naming of Fort St. Louis, Mr. Boumphry points out that M. Louis de Bougainville was a knight in the French Order of St. Louis, "making it more probable that he named the settlement after the French Order," and "probably also with some reference to his own and his king's name."

I am very grateful to Mr. Boumphry for the additional information and the clarification of these points.

John Rydjord