

# Letter

April 13, 1966

To the Editor:

In his very interesting article "Judicial Procedures for a Change-of-Name in the United States," (September 1965), Robert Rennick quotes the following sentence from a decision by Justice Joseph T. Ryan:

"Thus may the petitioner know that he bears a traditionally old and honored name [COHEN], and this court will not aid him in his desire to forswear his original identity by assuming another and totally different one [KAGAN] . . ."

Prof. Rennick goes on to comment, "These words seem kind enough but the underlying implication is that no Jew should be allowed to assume such a fine old Irish name as Kagan, or rather 'Keegan' – from which Kagan is derived."

I'm afraid that both Judge Ryan and Prof. Rennick have erred. The name Kagan is not "totally different" from Cohen. Kagan is another form of Kahan, which is a respelling of Cohen\* just as Kohn and Kahn are respellings of Cohn. From Kahan to Kagan is a short step – a Russian step.

Since the Russian language is without an *h* sound, Russians usually substitute *g*'s for *h*'s. (Cf. Gerbert Goover, Adolf Gitler, Gherman in "Pique Dame," and such parallel names as Geller–Heller, Gertz–Hertz, Gershberg–Hirschberg, Gelfand–Helfand, etc.) So thus via Russian Kahan became Kagan. (Cf. Lazar Kaganovitch, a former Jewish top official of the U.S.S.R.)

My Brooklyn telephone book (1965) lists 68 Kagans, three of whom are rabbis. Fine old Irish name, indeed!

Sincerely,

Maxwell Nurnberg

[Ed.: Professor Rennick will reply in a later issue.]

---

\* Albert Douzat in his *Dictionnaire étymologique de famille et prénoms de France* (Larousse, 1951) at the name Cohen refers you to the entry under Cahen and lists the following variations: Cahin, Cain, Caen, Cahn, Cohen, Cohn, Kaan, Kahn: nom de fam. israélite, représentant une anc. caste sacerdotale.