

Hitlers and Others who Changed their Names and a Few who Did Not

ROBERT M. RENNICK

BEFORE ADOLF HITLER BECAME CHANCELLOR of Germany in 1933, there were some 22 families named *Hitler* or *Hittler* listed in the New York telephone directories. By the end of the war there were none. While some of these name-bearers might have left the city in that time, examination of contemporary court records and news releases suggests that many more had deliberately changed their names. This paper is an account of several of these cases and an examination of the procedures by which the changes were secured.

As we have suggested, *Hit(t)ler* was not an uncommon name before the Second World War. Quite a few Galician-Jewish families had borne the name, in either of its spellings, since at least the middle of the nineteenth century. It is more than likely that most of the *Hit(t)lers* in this country had come from Galicia and were Jewish. French newspapers during the nineteen-thirties reported that there were also many Jews in Rumania and Czechoslovakia with the *Hitler* appellation, or variants of it (*Heidler*, *Heitler*, *Hiedler*, *Hettler*, etc.), although it is more likely that Czech (as well as German and Austrian) *Hitlers* were not Jewish but had derived their name from the Czech *Hidlar* or *Hidlarček*.

According to Franz Jetzinger, in his definitive account of the Führer's youth,¹ there is some evidence that families with variants of this name had settled in Lower Austria (where Adolf's grandparents lived) around 1430. From that time, the spelling of the name had undergone certain changes: to *Hydler* (1435), *Hytler* (1457), *Hidler* (1540), *Hietler* (1568), *Hütler* (1571), *Huttler* (1581), *Huettler* (1585), *Huetler* (1609), *Hiedler* (1627), *Hiettler* (1640), *Hüedler* (1681), *Hitler* (1702), *Hütler* (1751), and *Hittler* (1755). In

¹ Franz Jetzinger, *Hitler's Youth* (tr. Lawrence Wilson), London, 1958, pp. 16 to 34, especially p. 32.

Adolf's immediate family line (c. 1850) the name was spelled *Hiedler*. Although Jetzinger cannot verify it, he believes very strongly that the Hitler family was of Czech descent.²

In any event, Adolf shared his name with many other families, including Jewish ones, which fact, we are told, never ceased to infuriate him.³ Some of the families, as we shall see, succeeded in divesting themselves of the family name and thus of any association with him.

One of the first such changers in this country was a *Morris Hittler* of Brooklyn, New York, the 23 year old son of *Max Hittler*, an Austrian-born furrier, and his wife Yeti (or Yetta). When, in November of 1934, he applied to the Kings County Court of Justice Peter B. Smith to become *Hilton*, he claimed that, as a Jew, his name had subjected him to scorn, ridicule, and embarrassment, and he feared it would continue to do so. Moreover, his fiancée, Miss Medea Whitman, had advised him that she could never wed a "Hitler" or even a "Hittler" though she would willingly consider a "Hilton." The judge, in granting Morris' change, acknowledged that "Hittler" was not a fitting name for a Jew. The petitioner's father and uncle, also a furrier, filed separate petitions. The father had earlier removed his name from the telephone directory to avoid the numerous unpleasant calls and tiresome jokes, and especially to escape the epithet "Adolf" frequently hurled at him.⁴

² *Ibid.*, p. 32. Wardviertel, where grandmother Schicklgruber lived, was the contested frontier of Bohemia and Austria. Spital, where his father was raised, had been settled mainly by Czechs. After the Hussitic wars, many Czechs had fled to Austria, though over the centuries they were to become completely assimilated. Moreover, alluding to the strong possibility that his father was not the natural son of grandmother Schicklgruber and her husband, Jetzinger suggests that Adolf was only one-fourth *Hitler*, through his *maternal* grandmother. In fact, Adolf's father, Alois, had borne the name Schicklgruber until he was 40 years of age; then he adopted the *Hitler* name which had also been that of his mother's husband who apparently had never taken the trouble to adopt him formally. The change occurred long after the death of both of his parents and about 13 years before Adolf's birth in 1889 (*Ibid.*, p. 27). August Kubizek (in his *The Young Hitler I Knew*, Boston, 1954, p. 40) recalls Adolf's once having shared the sentiment with him that the most agreeable event he could think of was his father's change of name. To Adolf, the name *Schicklgruber* "seemed . . . so uncouth, so boorish, apart from being so clumsy and unpractical. . . but 'Hitler' sounded nice and was easy to remember."

³ *Jetzinger, op. cit.*, pp. 23-4.

⁴ File no. 59653, November 4, 1934, Special Term Court, Part II, Supreme Court of the State of New York, County of Kings.

In February of the following year, another Brooklyn furrier, *Benny Hittler*, also petitioned a local court to be allowed to assume the name *Hilton*. This 38 year old, Polish-born American citizen expressed his feelings in the most unequivocal terms in his petition. Of the Jewish faith, he could not countenance the oppression being visited upon his co-religionists by the German tyrant and his political machine. Since his accession to power, he pointed out, Hitler had engaged in such "oppression and persecution of the Jews and . . . all others in opposition to his political, racial, and religious tenets, as was not believed possible in this day and age, and in such an heretofore enlightened and apparently civilized country as the one he now rules. It is too well known to be disputed that the acts and beliefs of . . . Adolf Hitler have been and are so foreign and contrary to the knowledge, learning, and political institutions of modern civilized countries . . . that the name of *Hitler* . . . is mentioned only with disdain, scorn, and hatred." Though Benny's family had proudly borne the name "Hittler" for many generations, it had suddenly become an encumbrance and embarrassment to them.⁵

Another "Hittler"-changer was *Leon*, a 50 year old Bronx tailor of women's dresses. He, too, selected *Hilton* for himself and his entire family. In the dress business for many years, Leon had worked his way up to a position of competence and respect until, with the Führer's assumption of power, both his career and his personal affairs took a downward turn. Even though his name had more or less always subjected him to the kidding of fellow employees, pressures to change it accelerated after 1933. Because of his name, he had to undergo countless experiences like the one he told the court about when applying for his change: The phone rang at five o'clock on a bitterly cold winter's morning and he crawled out of bed to answer it. "'Hello,' said the voice on the other end, 'are you Hitler?' 'Yes, yes, who's this?' 'If you're Hitler, go to . . .!'"⁶ For two years, Leon's family had used "Hilton" in its daily affairs and had even placed the new name in the slot on the apartment house mailbox; yet invariably the "Hilton" name would be scratched out, and the old "Hittler" would appear beneath it. People never forget.

⁵ File no. 59749, February 4, 1935, Special Term Court, Part II, Supreme Court of the State of New York, County of Kings.

⁶ *The New York Times*, January 17, 1936, p. 21:8.

Once, when two little boys were playing in the hallway of the apartment building, a stranger asked where the *Hiltons* lived. "Oh," they answered. "You mean *Hittler*. He's on the first floor." What really hurt the family, though, were the numerous postal cards addressed to "Adolf Hitler" in care of their place of residence.

Leon's sons and their families had fared no better.⁷ As a salesman for a wholesale tobacco firm, Harry's sales had declined significantly. David, in his petition to the Bronx County Supreme Court in 1936 to formalize his prior common law change, expressed the concern that introducing himself by his "right name" might tend to increase the normal sales resistance of his prospective electric appliance customers. Brother Raphael was a building clerk for Chappell and Company, the music publishers, and his signature appeared on bills mailed to all parts of the world. When the firm began receiving letters from people asking if he was related to Adolf (it was odd how nobody ever noticed the difference in spelling), he too was advised to change.

Jacob L. Hittler, a Brooklyn college student in the early days of the Second World War, also received a court's permission to formalize the *Hilton* name which he and his entire family (including father Max, a machine operator; mother Bertha; Paul, a shipping clerk; Jonas, a salesman; and Sidney, a bookkeeper) had assumed earlier.⁸

Also permitted to change his family name, but to *Hiller*, was a Bronx butcher, another *Jacob Hittler*. He would have changed earlier, he told the court, but in spite of the social and business disabilities of the "Hittler" name, he wished to avoid the publicity. Finally things got so "bad" that⁹

Even a name like *Heitler* was no guarantee of security from association with the Nazi leader.¹⁰ In his petition for a judicial change presented to the New York city court of Justice Frank A. Carlin, *Seymour Heitler* (also known as *Hilton*) pointed out that, in spite of the fact that this name was pronounced with the characteristic German long "i" sound, it was invariably subject to the short "i"

⁷ *The New York Post*, February 29, 1936.

⁸ File no. 62483, January 8, 1942, Special Term Court, Part II, Supreme Court of the State of New York, County of Kings.

⁹ *The New York Times*, October 26, 1944, p. 7:6.

¹⁰ It might be interesting to point out that there were also 27 *Heitlers* and *Heidlers* listed in the several New York telephone directories in 1933 and only 12 by the end of the war.

pronunciation, thus being indistinguishable from "Hitler."¹¹ *Leo Heitler*, a deputy United States marshal in Hudson County, New Jersey was also permitted to become *Hilton*, by the grace of the Common Pleas Court of his county.¹²

Neither were the veterans of the Second World War exempt from the pressures to change such a name. Major *Paul Hitler*, a New York City native and 30 year veteran of the U.S. Army, had also long been embarrassed by the frequency with which he had to disavow kinship to the Führer. One of his most humiliating experiences came when, as commanding officer of the Military Police in Paris, his picture was printed in the French newspapers with sarcastic remarks noting the similarity of his name with the German dictator's. He was permitted by a New York City court to adopt the name Harrison in its stead.¹³

Europeans bearing the Führer's name had more than their share of unhappy experiences because of it. According to the Jewish people's paper *Zurich*, after Hitler's rise to power, many Polish Jews with that name petitioned the Polish government for permission to change it, such permission being nearly always granted.¹⁴ As a case in point, 24 year old *Alzyk Hitler*, a Jewish merchant of Wyszogrod, succeeded in obtaining a Warsaw court's approval for a change-of-name to *Hiller*. His fiancée had also refused to share a name with the anti-Semitic dictator. Alzyk's father and younger brother too desired a name-change. The latter had often complained that life was unbearable since Hitler's assumption to power; his peers would greet him derisively with shouts of "Heil Hitler!" and he was severely handicapped at school.¹⁵

In March, 1936, a Rumanian rabbinical candidate, *Israel Hitler*, was informed that, although he had passed his examinations, his chances of receiving his degree would be immeasurably increased by a change-of-name.¹⁶

¹¹ Petition no. 557-44, October 26, 1944, City Court, New York City.

¹² *The New York Times*, December 2, 1944, p. 15:1.

¹³ Petition no. 18869-45, September 27, 1945, New York County Supreme Court of Justice Ferdinand Pecora.

¹⁴ From a *Jewish Telegraphic Agency* release, datelined Paris, January 30, 1940.

¹⁵ *The New York Times*, June 8, 1933, p. 7:2.

¹⁶ According to a news release to the Jewish press, from Radautz, Rumania, March 3, 1936.

Another Jewish "Hitler" was a Latvian resident of Nazi occupied Poland whose request to return to his native land was denied when the Gestapo reasoned that public knowledge of the existence of a Jewish "*Adolf Hitler*" (that was actually his name) would be extremely embarrassing. However, on appeal to the higher German authorities in Warsaw, on the ground that he had never relinquished his Latvian citizenship, his visa was later granted.¹⁷

It is also known that a Polish Jew named *Adolf Hitler* had been refused a visa to enter Germany only a few months before the occupation of Poland.¹⁸

As surprising as it must seem, however, not everybody with the name "Hitler" was willing to relinquish it. Some were quite adamant in their refusal to give it up, at least for a time. *Paul Hitler*, as a master sergeant in an M.P. unit in Trenton, New Jersey in the spring of 1942, is alleged to have rejected the advice of his commanding officer to change his name, stating defiantly that "it is my name and I have a perfect right to it. But Adolf hasn't. His name is Schicklgruber."¹⁹

There is little doubt that the name *Hitler*, with its variant spellings, was borne by non-Jews both in Europe and America. However, this writer has come across only one *genuine* Gentile *Hitler* in this country, and he was a nephew of the German dictator.²⁰ *William Patrick Hitler*, born in Liverpool of an Irish mother and

¹⁷ From a *Jewish Telegraphic Agency* release, Paris, January 30, 1940.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ From a *Jewish Telegraphic Agency* release, March 17, 1942.

It was not Schicklgruber, as we have already pointed out (v. Jetzinger, *op. cit.*). According to Rudolf Olden, (*Hitler*, New York, 1936, p. 9ff.) Hitler did not know of his father's name-change until just before he became chancellor. A Viennese journalist published it in his newspaper, along with the suggestion that the masses should say "Heil Schicklgruber" rather than "Heil Hitler." Some writers have been speculating ever since as to what Hitler's "political career" would have been like if his father's name had not been changed. Would "Schicklgruber" have been as successful as "Hitler"? William L. Shirer found it difficult to imagine "the frenzied German masses acclaiming a Schicklgruber with their thunderous 'Heils.'" (*The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, Greenwich, Connecticut, 1962, pp. 23-4.) A similar sense of incredulity was registered by a writer in the *New Statesman and Nation* (Vol. 18, November 18, 1939, pp. 706-07). Olden, however, suggests that Hitler's name would not have made any difference.

²⁰ *The New York Times*, June 30, 1941, p. 5:8; October 10, 1942, p. 2:3; March 7, 1944, p. 8:2; April 21, 1944, p. 4:4; February 6, 1946, p. 25:7.

Adolf's half-brother, Alois, arrived in the U.S. in 1939 to engage in a lecture tour during which he denounced his uncle as a "menace to the world." He registered as an alien in 1940 and shortly thereafter was rejected by the United States Army for military duty on the grounds that he had a living relative who had served in a foreign military organization, namely his uncle Adolf who had been a corporal in the German Army in the First World War. In June, 1941, anxious to do as much as he could for the Allied war effort, he joined the British forces in Canada and three years later began a hitch in the U.S. Navy. A brief item in *The New York Times* in March, 1944²¹ mentioned his having been transferred from the Sampson (New York) Naval Training Station to another stateside base in the company of none other than Seaman *Charles W. Fuhrer* and *W. W. Messerschmidt*. On February 6, 1946, he was honorably discharged from the Navy as a Seaman First Class and settled in New York.

There may, however, have been at least one spurious Gentile *Hitler* in the United States in the last few decades. In what may have been nothing more than an incident of the assumption of the dictator's name, the *United Press* reported²² that an *Adolph Hitler* received an induction call in early March of 1942 from a Detroit draft board but he could not be located. It seemed that 40 year old Adolph, who had listed his place of birth as Moscow, Michigan, had signed up for the draft the preceding month, listing his occupation as "unemployed" and his address as the Howard Street Mission, Detroit. Nothing more was heard about him. However, in early June of that year, an *Adolph Hitler* was arrested by Michigan State Police and charged with spying on the Army Ferry Command base at Wayne County Airport.²³

Contrary to all reason and in the tradition of the wildest fancy, there have been, to the writer's knowledge, at least two cases of non-German parents actually seeking to name their children after the Führer – neither of them succeeding in doing so – and one case of a man who had successfully petitioned a court to use "Hitler" as a part of his middle name. In 1943 Joseph Mittel of Astoria, New York named his son *Adolf Hitler*. An outraged public, however,

²¹ March 7, 1944, p. 8:2.

²² *The New York Times*, March 6, 1942, p. 11:3.

²³ *Ibid.*, June 3, 1942, p. 42:3.

forced him to reconsider and he called the child *Theodore Roosevelt* instead.²⁴ The second *Hitler*-namer was a French peasant in the Côrtes du Nord who was threatened with prosecution by the authorities after he had named his son for the German dictator. French statutes provided that given names be derived from the Calendar of the Saints or chosen from the Old Testament in the case of Jews. The peasant compromised on *Hilaire*.²⁵

An incident of name-changing which involved the inclusion of "Hitler" in the adopted name occurred in a Pittsburgh court as recently as April, 1967. Retired coal miner, *Joseph Rastorazkozicz*, 77, of Blairford, Pennsylvania, formally became *Joseph Petrovich Hitler Rastohan Mtr*. According to his attorney, Silvestri Silvestri, the *Hitler* name does not refer to the German dictator but to a German prince who had married into the Russian nobility, though when this occurred was not mentioned. In like manner, the *Petrovich* was said to allude to Peter the Great; *Rastohan* was a kinsman of the petitioner who occupied an important public post under Emperor Franz Joseph, and *Mtr* is Russian for a family which has undergone great sorrow.²⁶

Two final words on the *Hitlers*, one a man and one a horse: *Max Hitler*, a 44 year old Austrian-Jewish tailor, was arrested in New York on June 22, 1934 and charged with bookmaking. When he was to have appeared before the Special Sessions court of Justices Flood, Caldwell, and Hackenberg, his attorney moved for a post-

²⁴ *Ibid.*, February 10, 1943, p. 27:2-3.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, June 14, 1936, p. 28:2. Back in 1932, the Austrian Federal Chancellor's Department was given control over Christian names permissible for children. According to an official directive on the matter, "it has always been forbidden for children to be called by names which offend against public morality or good order. It is true that there is no actual law confining the choice of name which it is permissible to give to children to those which are recognized as in daily use. Yet it cannot on any account be permitted that existing surnames should be given to children as Christian names, for the Christian name is given as a distinction within the family, while the surname serves to distinguish one family or tribe from another. . . ." The decree ordered that all birth registrars forbid parents the use of such names as implied therein but that protestations can be made to the several provincial governments. The underlying motive of the decree was to prevent the adoption by Austrian parents of names referring to Adolf Hitler and his Nazi Party, for such names, according to the Clerical Party news organ, *Reichspost*, were in very bad taste. (*The New York Times*, August 14, 1932, II, p. 4:7.)

²⁶ *The New York Times*, April 9, 1967, p. 50:5.

ponement because, as he put it, "Hitler was observing the Jewish holidays." The court obligingly adjourned his case until the second of October. On that date, however, he was tried and acquitted by a new panel of justices for lack of sufficient evidence.²⁷ A horse on a Filipino government-owned stock farm before the war bore the name *Hitler*. Under protest of the German consul, his keepers were compelled to change his name to *Hedjaz*.²⁸

This article has attempted to show that a name is more than the letters it is composed of; that while it may no longer be denotative of something, it certainly will have a connotation that may often be quite unpleasant. Though there is nothing inherently sinister about the name *Hitler*, the affairs of one of its bearers have succeeded in making the name, at least for much of the world's population, synonymous with villainy in the twentieth century.

De Pauw University

²⁷ *Ibid.*, September 11, 1934, p. 11:4.

²⁸ *Associated Press* news release from Manila, July 20, 1938.

NOTICE

The editor regretfully announces the death of Professor Erwin G. Gudde, to whose memory this issue of *Names* is dedicated. An obituary will appear in the December issue.