

Mutilation: the Fate of Eastern European Names in America

by William F. Hoffman

Ever since I wrote *Polish Surnames: Origins & Meanings*, I have received a steady flow of letters and e-mail notes asking about Eastern European names (not just Polish!), either of persons (first names and surnames) or places. I can divide these questions into two basic categories: 1) the name is reasonably correct as given, and the challenge is to find out something about it; and 2) the name has been mangled somewhere along the way, and before it's possible to learn anything about it, the original form has to be determined. The first category is a piece of cake compared to the second; if I have a reasonably correct form to work with, I either have something on the name or I don't. A few minutes of searching through my books is usually enough to tell me which is true.

But if the name is mangled so badly I can't even tell what it was originally, there's no way to proceed. I have to respond by saying, "Sorry, I can't help you. Do some research, and get back to me when you have a more reliable form of the name." I've learned the hard way that this is the way to go. There have been occasions when someone has submitted a bizarre-looking name, say, *Nrawpulkowski*, and I spent hours trying to come up with some brilliant explanation of what it might mean, only to hear back, "Gee, sorry, the day after I wrote you I found out it was really *Nowakowski*. Silly me!"

Actually, It Is a Miracle Any Names Are Right!

When you think about how easily a name can get mangled, it's a wonder more names haven't been. I'd estimate at least half the names I see are recognizable — they're either correctly spelled, or the inaccuracy is easily spotted and compensated for, such as *Krakofsky* for *Krakowski*. That's a pretty good percentage, all things considered, when you consider what typically happens when Americans try to deal with Eastern European names. Remember back to when American newscasters first began reporting stories about Solidarity and trying to pronounce the name "Lech Wałęsa," and you begin to appreciate just how easily confusion over names can develop. I still recall with horror one fellow in Great Bend, Kansas who called him "Leech Walleesuh."

Then think about the dimensions of the problem of names. We're talking about words spoken by millions of people, most of them illiterate, living all over eastern Europe (and, later, America), speaking a dozen or more languages, over the course of centuries. There's a lot of room there for misunderstanding, misspelling, and just plain missing!

Humans are prone to error, and errors with names could get started many different ways, not all of which are susceptible to Sherlock Holmes-style deduction. Sometimes guys just goofed! Maybe a slightly deaf priest misheard *Dębicki* as *Dębiński* and wrote that down. Or maybe a clerk filling out papers for *Wierzyński* was thinking about his jerk brother-in-law *Pierzyński* and absent-mindedly wrote the wrong name down. These things happened, and no amount of brilliance is going to enable you to deduce them after the fact. In such cases you can only hope to do your research so well that you discover the mistake, and document that it is, in fact, a mistake.

Often, however, there is rhyme and reason to name mangling, and with a bit of help we can hope to make sense of it. My experience suggests that **the main cause of name distortion is the imprecision inherent in trying to represent spoken sounds in writing**. If everyone spoke the same language, and spoke it the same way, and spelled it the same way, we'd have no problem. But that desirable state of affairs does not exist on the planet Earth, and we might as well face it.

Some people seem to think a committee of professors sat down one day and assigned everybody and everything names that made perfect sense and were correctly spelled, and those names have obviously remained unchanged to this day.

Uh, sorry, but no. Names developed on the run, usually as a kind of verbal shorthand that was accurate under the circumstances at the time — but those circumstances may have changed enormously since

then. Five centuries ago Polish *Dąbrowa*, “oak grove,” may have been the perfect name for a settlement near a stand of oaks; the name may persist today, even if those oaks were cut down hundreds of years ago. And a family named *Dąbrowski*, “[one] from the oak grove,” may never have seen oak outside a furniture store, yet that would have no effect on their surname!

You might compare a place name or surname to a snapshot: when the picture was taken, it was accurate — but there’s no guarantee it still is. Remember what I said about the dimensions of the name problem: millions of illiterate people, half a continent, dozens of languages, hundreds of years. Why should we expect it to be simple?

I should explain that in this article I focus mainly on Polish names, because those are the ones I know the most about and have the most material on. But the study of that subject has forced me to learn much about names that originated in other Eastern European languages, because many “Polish” names actually come from other languages. In fact, it’s impossible to discuss any one culture or language of Eastern Europe as if it existed in a vacuum. Belarusian, Czech, German, Hungarian, Lithuanian, Polish, Romanian, Russian, Slovakian, Ukrainian, Yiddish — they all influenced each other, and were influenced by each other, to greater or lesser degrees. But I cannot produce a coherent article if I try to cover a dozen languages. So I will use Polish names as my point of departure, and give specific examples, when possible, that illustrate pertinent points in regard to names from other languages.

There are basically three situations in which Polish names can be distorted:

- 1) Polish names in Poland
- 2) “semi-Polish” names in Poland
- 3) Polish names outside Poland

Each has its own circumstances, and familiarity with them may help you recognize them.

Polish Names in Poland

It may seem absurd to say that Poles wouldn’t spell their own names correctly, but there is some truth to this. For one thing, a look at old records shows that for a long time Polish was written with spelling heavily influenced by Latin phonetics, and that influence lingered on. A record from 1193 spells *Sędziwój* as *Sandivojeus*; *Szymanowski* appears in 1404 as *Schymanowsky*; yet anyone who knows anything about Polish will tell you it has no letter *v*, and the ending *-ski* should never be spelled *-sky*!

The point is that the rules of orthography have not always been followed too carefully. The clerks or scribes or priests who wrote down those records weren’t idiots; but they were working in a time when spellings weren’t quite so standardized as they are now. In fact, it has only been in this century, when a certain “literacy threshold” was reached in the West, that the “correct” spellings of many proper names have come to be standard. Records more than 50-75 years old are often full of spellings that are not “correct” according to the rules — and that’s as true in English as it is in Polish.

Also, Polish is not spoken the same way by everybody. There are dialects of any language, regional tendencies, not unlike that in American English that causes Ted Kennedy to call Fidel Castro the “leaduh of Cuber” — and they can affect spelling. In many areas the suffixes *-owski* and *-ewski*, correctly pronounced “off-skee” and “eff-skee,” come out sounding like “oss-kee” and “ess-kee”; the *w*, which in that position is pronounced like *f*, is dropped entirely. So *Dąbrowski* can come out sounding like *Dąbroski*, and may very well be spelled that way. There is also a tendency in some regions to change *cz* (which normally sounds like “ch” in “church”) into *c*, which sounds like “ts” in “cats”; *sz* (“sh”) into plain *s*; *ż* (“zh”) into plain *z*; and *dź* (like English “j” in “jail”) into *dz* (like “ds” in English “lads”). If your ancestors came from areas where people speak that way, their names may appear in records as *Sumowski* instead of *Szumowski*, *Zak* instead of *Żak*, etc.

There are other such tendencies that can affect spelling. For instance, in some regions near Łomża there’s a tendency to replace the vowels *y* or *i* with *e*: names such as *Rogiński*, *Kryszczyński* and *Ptaszyński* can become *Rogieński*, *Kryszczeński*, or *Ptaszeński*. Polish dialects do not have enormous effects on the spelling of names, but the ones just mentioned show up fairly often.

But enough of dialects. What about standard, mainstream Polish?

“It’s spelled just like it sounds.” Ask a Pole how to spell a Polish name, and he’ll probably say this. It’s true, once you master how Polish sounds are spoken and written, Polish is more phonetic and consistent than English. And yet if you take a close look at Polish spelling and pronunciation, you find it’s a little more confusing than most Poles even realize.

Vowels

- a** like “ah” in English “father”; fairly stable, and yet in some names alternates with **o**, e. g., *Nawracki* vs. *Nawrocki*, *Nawarol* and *Noworol*; also the nasal vowel **ą** has sometimes been represented in writing with **an**, even if it’s not “correct,” e. g., *Sądecki* vs. *Sandecki*
- ą** typically pronounced like “on” in French *bon*, and therefore spelled phonetically as *on*, e. g., *Sondecki* vs. *Sądecki*, or, before *-b* or *-p*, as *om*, e. g., *Dombrowski* vs. *Dąbrowski*; often alternates with **ę**, e. g., *Dąbski* vs. *Dębski* (it’s not “correct,” but it happens)
- e** typically pronounced like “e” in English “led”; often confused with *-y* or *-i*, as seen above; also the nasal vowel **ę** is often spelled phonetically as **en** or **em**, see **ę**
- ę** typically pronounced somewhat (but not exactly) like *en* in “men,” and therefore spelled phonetically as *en*, e. g. *Renka* vs. *Ręka*, or, before *-b* or *-p*, as *em*, e. g. *Dembski* vs. *Dębski*; often alternates with **ą** (q. v.)
- I** pronounced much like the *i* in “machine,” also indicates softening of a preceding consonant; in practice it can easily alternate with *-y*, *-j*, and *-e*, especially in older records
- o** pronounced much like *o* in “bore,” but not quite so long; under certain circumstances **o** can become **ó** and vice versa, e. g., *Ostrów* is a place name, “in Ostrów” is *w Ostrowie*
- ó** pronounced just like Polish **u**, and therefore sometimes the two are used interchangeably, even if that’s not “correct,” e. g., *Góra* vs. *Gura*, *Jakób* vs. *Jakub*
- u** pronounced much like *oo* in English “too,” but not quite so long; see **ó**
- y** in modern Polish used only as a vowel, with a short sound much like *i* in English “ship”; theoretically the sounds of **i** and **y** should never be confused, but in fact they often are

Consonants

- b** pronounced much like *b* in English, but without aspiration; at the end of words, or of syllables followed by devoiced consonants, sounds more like *p* and thus can be spelled that way, e. g., *Rąb* vs. *Rąp* or *Romp*, *Dąbkowski* vs. *Dompkowski*
- c** if not modified by the letter following it, is pronounced like *ts* in “cats”; often Anglicized or Germanized as *z* or *tz*, e. g., *Stec* vs. *Stetz*
- ć** pronounced much like *ch* in English “cheek”; when followed by a vowel, spelled **ci** (q. v.)
- ch** pronounced like the guttural *ch* in German “Bach,” but usually a bit less guttural; the same sound can be spelled simply **h**, e. g., *Chojnacki* vs. *Hojnacki*
- ci** pronounced somewhat like *chee* in English “cheek”; theoretically **ć/ci** and **cz** are distinct sounds and should not be confused, but in practice they sometimes are
- cz** pronounced much like the *ch* in English “chunky”
- d** pronounced much like *d* in English but without aspiration; at the end of words, or of syllables followed by devoiced consonants, sounds more like *t* and thus can be spelled that way, e. g., *Rudkowski* vs. *Rutkowski*
- dz** pronounced like *ds* in English “ads”; in certain circumstances devoices to the sound of Polish **c** (q. v.) and thus may be spelled that way: *Zawadzki* vs. *Zawacki*
- dź** pronounced somewhat like the *j* in English “jeep” but softer than the English sound
- dż** pronounced much like the *j* in English “job,” or the *dg* in “bridge”
- f** pronounced much like English *f*, but see also **w**
- g** pronounced much like the *g* in English “goose,” never as in “geometry”; at the end of words, or of syllables followed by devoiced consonants, sounds more like *k* and thus can be spelled that way, e. g., *Róg* vs. *Rók* or *Ruk*, *Bug* vs. *Buk*
- h** see **ch**

- j* pronounced like *y* in English “yes”; in older records sometimes confused with *I* and *y k*
pronounced like English *k*, but see also *g*
- l* pronounced much like the *l* in English “litter”; occasionally can be confused with *l*, especially if non-Poles have had anything to do with it
- ł* pronounced much like the *w* in English “way,” but often confused with *l*, especially due to non-Polish influence
- m* pronounced much like the English *m*, but see *q* and *ę*
- n* pronounced much like the English *n*, but see *q* and *ę*
- p* pronounced much like *p* in English “pit,” but with no aspiration; see also *b*
- r* pronounced with a trill, as in Spanish or Russian, not like the English *r*; compare *rz*
- rz* pronounced the same as *ż*, *q*. v.; Polish has a predilection for this sound, and often has *rz* where other Slavic languages have simple *r*, e. g., Russian *Rimsky*, Polish *Rzymski* (Roman)
- s* pronounced much like *s* in English “saw”*
- ś* pronounced much like *sh* in English “she,” but softer, with the tongue arching higher in the mouth; if followed by a vowel, spelled *si* *
- si* pronounced much like *she* in English “she,” but, again, softer, a bit softer and more hissing*
- sz* pronounced much like *sh* in English “shake,” but with a “chunkier” sound, heavier than *ś* or *si*; in theory *sz* and *ś/si* should never be confused, but in practice they sometimes are*
- t* pronounced much like English *t* as in “take,” but without aspiration and with the tongue behind the front teeth; but see also *d*
- w* pronounced much like *v* as in English “verb,” but at the end of words, or of syllables followed by devoiced consonants, sounds more like *f* and thus can be spelled that way, or even omitted, e. g., *Janowski* vs. *Janofsky* vs. *Janoski* or *Janosky*
- z* pronounced much like *z* in English “zone”*
- ź* pronounced much like the *s* in English “pleasure” but softer, with the tongue higher in the mouth; spelled *zi* when followed by a vowel*
- ż* pronounced much like the *s* in English “pleasure” but with the tongue lower in the mouth, giving it a “harder” sound*
- zi* pronounced somewhat like *shee* in English “sheep,” but with more of a *zh* sound*

***Note:** all the sibilants (*s*, *ś*, *si*, *sz*, *z*, *ź*, *ż*, and *rz*) are particularly susceptible to variation and confusion, and can easily be Germanized or Anglicized as *s*, *sch*, *sh*, *z*, *zh*, etc.

Let us look at a sample name and see how its spelling can vary because of the observations made above. Thus consider the surname which is usually spelled **Ledóchowski**:

- ó* → *u*: *Leduchowski*
- ó* → *o*: *Ledochowski*
- ch* → *h*: *Leduhowski* or *Ledóhowski*
- ł* → *l*: *Łeduchowski* or *Łeduhowski* or *Łedóhowski* or *Łedóchowski*
- w* → *f*: *Leduchofski* or *Ledóhofski* or *Leduhofski* or *Ledóhofski*
- dropped: *Leduchoski* or *Ledóchoski* or *Leduhoski* or *Ledóhoski* *ski* →
- sky*: *Ledóchowsky* or *Leduchowsky*

Factor in German influence and *Leduchoske* is also a possibility.

Of these variations, most are pretty rare; *Ledochowski*, *Ledóchowski* and *Leduchowski* are the only ones I’ve actually seen. But the point is that you could conceivably run into any of these spellings in various records. Why? Because they are all reasonably accurate orthographic representations of how the name can be pronounced, and **the spelling of names is often phonetic**. This is a case where some familiarity with Polish phonetics can help you recognize any of the 20 possible spellings given above, and deal with them as variant spellings of one name, rather than 20 different names. That can prove very helpful in research!

Note that I just filled two pages discussing nothing but Polish spelling and phonetics, and quite

superficially, at that! Rest assured, a similar discussion of the spelling and phonetics of any of the other languages of Eastern Europe would take at least as much space, if not more. Can you see why learning a little about the alphabet and pronunciation of a given language can be an enormous help? You don't have to master the language — just learn enough to pronounce names out loud. Time spent learning how to do this can pay big dividends in terms of practical research. Much of the mystery of name spelling, and spelling variations, will clear up once your eyes, ears, and mouth team up to turn those jumbles of letters into sounds!

“Semi-Polish” names in Poland

People are often startled and confused when I tell them a lot of Polish names aren't Polish, linguistically speaking — they actually originated as German, Czech, Slovak, Hungarian, Romanian, Ukrainian, Belarusian, or Lithuanian names. Such names generally were brought into Poland in their “original” forms. (Actually use of that term is begging the question; these other languages are as prone to spelling variation as Polish, so they may have had several spellings — but let's not focus on that, lest we complicate this subject past all comprehension). As time went on, non-native names tended to succumb gradually to the almost invisible pressure of the surrounding linguistic environment, and began to be spelled according to Polish phonetic values. It's not so much the pronunciation that changed — changes in pronunciation are usually subtle, and accumulate very slowly over time — but rather the way they were spelled. (Of course, here again, Polish is not unique in this respect; members of virtually any ethnic group you mention bear names ultimately of foreign origin!).

Thus the sound **Germans** write as *sch* is normally written *sz* by Poles, and the sound Germans spell with *tz* or *z* is written *c* by Poles. So German settlers in Poland might have started out as **Schwartz**, but after a while they might end up spelling their name **Szwarc**. In fact we often see transitional spellings that suggest how the process of Polonization was coming along: *Schwartz* is pure German, *Szwartz* is starting to get Polish around the edges, and *Szwarc* is pure Polish.

German names are relatively easy for American researchers to deal with, because they are more familiar to us, sources on German are comparatively easier to come by, and they are written in the Roman alphabet. Certain German letter combinations tend to match up consistently with Polish counterparts, especially the following:

Germ. <i>au</i> = Pol. <i>ów, owo</i>	Germ. <i>em, en</i> = Pol. <i>ę</i>	Germ. <i>off</i> = Pol. <i>ów, owo</i>
Germ. <i>om, on</i> = Pol. <i>ą</i>	Germ. <i>r</i> = Pol. <i>r</i> or <i>rz</i>	Germ. <i>s</i> often = Pol. <i>sz, z</i> or <i>ż</i>
Germ. <i>sch</i> = Pol. <i>sz, rz, ś, ź</i>	Germ. <i>sch</i> = Pol. <i>si</i> or <i>szy</i>	Germ. <i>ti</i> = Pol. <i>ci</i> or <i>ty</i>
Germ. <i>tsch</i> = Pol. <i>cz</i> or <i>ci</i>	Germ. <i>tz</i> or <i>z</i> = Pol. <i>c</i>	

Czech and **Slovak** names are not a huge problem, because they, too, are written in the Roman alphabet, and you might say they have fewer letters and sounds than Polish that confuse English-speakers. Once you recognize the following tendencies, you begin to have some confidence that Czech and Slovak names are at least as comprehensible as Polish names. Here is a list of some of the Czech and Slovak characters representing sounds that can produce confusion, with an indication of how these sounds might typically be rendered phonetically in English, German and Polish:

Czech/Slovak	English	German	Polish
<i>c</i>	<i>ts</i>	<i>tz, z</i>	<i>c</i>
<i>č</i>	<i>ch</i>	<i>tsch</i>	<i>cz</i>
<i>d'</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>dź, dzi</i>
<i>ň</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>ń, ni</i>
<i>ř</i> [Czech only]	<i>r</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>rz</i>
<i>š</i>	<i>sh</i>	<i>sch</i>	<i>sz</i>
<i>t'</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>ci</i>
<i>ž</i>	<i>zh</i>	<i>sch</i>	<i>ż</i>

Hungarian names intimidate Americans — and in truth a language that can turn *Władysław* or *Ladislaus* into *László*, *Stephan* into *István*, and *Elizabeth* into *Erzsébet*, should be approached with healthy respect! Here are a few consonants and consonant clusters that are especially likely to affect Americanized spellings, with approximate equivalents in English, German, Polish, and Russian:

Hungarian	English	German	Polish	Russian
<i>c</i>	<i>ts</i>	<i>tz, z</i>	<i>c</i>	<i>ц</i>
<i>cs</i>	<i>ch</i>	<i>tsch</i>	<i>cz</i>	<i>ч</i>
<i>j</i>	<i>y</i>	<i>j</i>	<i>j</i>	— *
<i>s</i>	<i>sh</i>	<i>sch</i>	<i>sz</i>	<i>ш</i>
<i>sz</i>	<i>s</i>	<i>s</i>	<i>s</i>	<i>с</i>
<i>zs</i>	<i>zh</i>	<i>sch</i>	<i>ż</i>	<i>ж</i>

**In Russian the consonantal y sound can be represented in different ways, too complex to be summarized briefly here.*

Lithuanian names typically cause researchers considerable trouble, in part because they are so unfamiliar to most Americans. Lithuanian is normally written in the Roman alphabet, modified with special letters much like those seen in Czech and Polish — *ą, č, ę, ě, į, š, ū, ū,* and *ž* — so when they are written in Lithuanian, we catch a break and see them spelled in a comparatively familiar alphabet. Lithuanian names can generally be recognized by their preference for the endings *–as, –is, –us,* and *–ys,* especially in suffixes such as native Lithuanian *–aitis, –enas, –onis, –ulis, –unas, –ynas,* and in Lithuanized versions of Polish or eastern Slavic suffixes, e. g., *–inskas (–iński), –auskas (–owski or –ewski), –ickas (– icki), –evičius* and *–ovičius* (forms of Polish *–ewicz/–owicz*).

Unfortunately, we don't often see these names written in Lithuanian. For the last few centuries Lithuanian names have usually been rendered in either a Polish or Russian linguistic environment. When appearing in Polish-language documents, Lithuanian names are generally Polonized — which includes dropping the *–as* and *–is* and *–us* suffixes that characterize them, and turning *č* → *cz*, *š* → *sz*, *ż* → *ż* — and that makes them harder to recognize. Then, when the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was partitioned, Lithuania was seized by the Russian Empire; so after 1867 it was affected by decrees mandating the use of Russian in all documents. When dealing with records, therefore, we often have to cope either with Lithuanian names modified due to Polonization, or — even more ghastly — Lithuanian phonetics filtered through Cyrillic orthography. This is not for the faint-hearted! And the bottom line is, it makes them hard to recognize and deal with if you have no extensive prior knowledge of Lithuanian.

Here is a list of the Lithuanian letters most likely to confuse people who don't speak the language, and thus particularly likely to be misspelled or misheard; the closest equivalents are given in English, German, Polish, and Russian:

Lithuanian	English	German	Polish	Russian
<i>c</i>	<i>ts</i>	<i>tz, z</i>	<i>c</i>	<i>ц</i>
<i>č</i>	<i>ch</i>	<i>tsch</i>	<i>cz</i>	<i>ч</i>
<i>ch</i>	<i>ch, kh</i>	<i>ch</i>	<i>ch, h</i>	<i>х</i>
<i>j</i>	<i>y</i>	<i>j</i>	<i>j</i>	— *
<i>š</i>	<i>sh</i>	<i>sch</i>	<i>sz</i>	<i>ш</i>
<i>ž</i>	<i>zh</i>	<i>sch</i>	<i>ż</i>	<i>ж</i>

**In Russian the consonantal y sound can be represented in different ways, too complex to be summarized briefly here.*

Names of the Poles' Eastern Slavic neighbors — the **Belarusians, Russians, and Ukrainians** — present their own problems. They are often similar in form to Polish names, and often come from similar

roots, so that there may be nothing about them that distinguishes them reliably from native Polish names. Then, too, they usually started out being written in the Cyrillic alphabet, so you have to deal with the complications involved with transliterating sounds in very different writing systems. Thus the suffix Poles use as *-czuk*, meaning “son of,” is spelled that way only by Poles. Russians and Ukrainians spell it *-чук*, whereas English-speakers would render it phonetically as *-chuk*.

Or to put it another way: consider the name ending we see in Polish as *-owicz* or *-ewicz*, in Russian and Ukrainian as *-ович* or *-евич* (rendered *-ovich/-ovych* or *-evich/-evych* in our alphabet), in Czech as *-ovič* or *-evič*, in Serbian as *-ović* or *-ević* (e. g., Slobodan Milošević). Despite the apparent differences, these are all variations of the same basic ending, pronounced almost exactly the same and all meaning the same thing, “son of.” The spellings vary so much due to historical factors that affected how these peoples write sounds when they hear them. (Incidentally, this same ending was adapted by Lithuanians into *-avičius* and *-evićius*, and was often Anglicized as *-avage*!)

So when you see a name such as *Iwanczuk*, the spelling (*w* rather than *v*, *cz* rather *ch*) suggests it is Polish. How are you to know this is an Eastern Slavic name, originally spelled *Иванчук* (Russian) or *Іванчук* (Ukrainian), but rendered in our alphabet in the Polish fashion for one reason or another? If you knew something about Slavic names, *Iwan* is a clue — that form is used only by Eastern Slavs; Poles would use *Jan*. Unfortunately, few of us have the time for detailed study of Slavic names.

And by and large, there is no easy way to tell eastern Slavic names from Polish names without devoting a lot of time to studying them. The tell-tale variations in spelling or form that may tip scholars off are too subtle and inconsistent to be summarized briefly for non-linguists. However, a few general statements can be made about certain suffixes:

- iv* (Polish spelling *-iw*): this suffix is typically a rendering of Ukrainian *-ів* (*-iv*), used the way Russians use *-ов* (*-ov*)
- nyj*: this suffix is typical of Ukrainian names, rendering the suffix *-нуї* in the Roman alphabet but by Polish phonetic values (in English we tend to spell it *-nyi* or simply *-ny*)
- ow/-ew*: Polish surnames seldom end in this suffix, but it is the Polish spelling for the standard ending for Russian surnames, *-ов*, *-ев* — which we would normally spell *-ov/-ev*
- skyj*: this suffix is typical of Ukrainian names, rendering the suffix *-скуї* in the Roman alphabet but by Polish phonetic values; standard English phonetic renderings are *-skyi* or just *-sky*

Polish Names Outside Poland

The preceding paragraphs show that even before your Eastern European ancestors left home, there were plenty of factors that could affect the spelling of their names and the names of the places where they lived. Still, there’s no doubt the worst of the confusion began once they began heading west. The misunderstandings that occurred “back home” were nothing compared to what happened when they had to deal with Western Europeans and Americans! The resultant confusion bedevils researchers; if all they have is the post-emigration name, they may have no way of reconstructing its original form except through research — it has been changed beyond recognition.

A word of caution, however, is in order here. We constantly hear “Oh, my name was changed by the immigration officials at Ellis Island.” Undoubtedly there were cases where officials got a name wrong and the error stuck; but experts say there’s good reason to doubt all that many names were changed by immigration officials. The changes that names unquestionably underwent were more often made before the immigrant boarded ship, or especially after he had entered the country and begun to settle down. (See the article beginning on page 15 for more on this subject).

You see, comparatively few immigrants just “showed up” at ports of entry. The majority came by ship — it was easier than swimming from Europe. All right, did those ships just pull up at the dock, dump their passengers, and sail off? No, they supplied the immigration officials with lists of paid passengers. The officials had those lists to refer to as they processed the new arrivals. And it’s a pretty good bet — bureaucrats being the way they are — those officials went by those lists: you were in trouble if your name wasn’t on them; if your name was on them, that was your name, no if’s, and’s, or but’s.

Where did the lists come from? Probably from the shipping line's list of paid passengers. Those passengers had purchased tickets, boarded the ship in Europe, and proved their identity with papers — if not to the shipping line's agents, then surely to the police of the port town, with whom they were expected to register as transients. Where did those papers come from? Ultimately, from the immigrant's old home. The partitioning governments kept close track of their subjects — so they couldn't weasel out of military service or paying taxes — and traveling without the proper papers was not exactly encouraged. (Of course, some people emigrated illegally or with forged papers anyway.)

In other words, legal immigrants left behind a paper trail that led from Ellis Island back to the local district office with jurisdiction over the immigrant's village. The trail began with travel papers issued by bureaucrats who required identification — birth or baptismal certificates, for instance — before they'd lift a pen. The form of the immigrant's name that appeared on those papers would follow him, with relatively few changes, up to the moment the American official at Ellis Island said "Next!"

It was once the immigrant got into the U. S. or Canada, and began to settle in, that changing his name might start to seem like a good idea. "Native" Americans (i. e., those whose ancestors had immigrated some years before) tended to treat the new arrivals rather badly. Even tolerant Americans were reluctant to hire people whose names were too foreign, if only because they couldn't pronounce them. And there's always that invisible but relentless pressure I mentioned earlier, the pressure of the linguistic environment. Just as Poles couldn't help but influence Germans to go from *Schwartz* to *Szwarc*, Americans couldn't help but pressure Poles to go from *Sandomierski* to *Sands*. There isn't necessarily any ill will or intolerance involved; it might be as simple as a Szczodrowski saying "I'm sick of hearing what these Americans do to my name, from now on I'm Scott." Or it might be Szczodrowski's boss saying "I can't pronounce your name. If you wanna get paid, from now on you are Scott." There's ample evidence both phenomena occurred all the time.

A true story illustrates the issue rather well. A lady (who gave me permission to repeat this) told me her father's original name was *Kryvosyka* (a Ukrainian name). She told me he hated it, and when he was a boy he constantly got into fights because of it. She asked why, and I explained the name sounds like it comes from *криво*, *krivo*, "crooked," and *сикати*, *sykaty*, "to squirt, emit a stream of liquid." You can imagine what the local boys turned that into! (I suspect it originally came from *kryvos*, "cripple," and meant "son of the cripple," but was later reinterpreted in this humiliating way). Any-way, when Mr. Kyvosyka came to this country he thought, "Finally I can be rid of this awful name," and he changed it to a name he'd heard, one that seemed safe, *Krause* — a German name meaning "curly-haired." How could he know within a few years World War I would break out, a wave of anti-German feeling would sweep America, and he'd be beaten up by guys who thought he was a dirty Hun?

In any case, many names were changed. Many, on the other hand, underwent little or no change. Why? It's hard to say for sure. But I wonder if you've ever noticed: people from Eastern Europe can be just a teensy bit stubborn! For every Kryvosyka who jumped at the chance to change his name to Krause, there'd be a Szczelągiewicz who'd say "To hell with these Americans if they don't like my name. I'm not changing it!"

In cases where the name did change, we can discern three basic categories:

- 1) the change is to an equivalent name, one as close as possible
- 2) the change is to a name that's only slightly similar
- 3) the change is to a totally different name

The first category is illustrated by changes such as *Piotrowski* to *Peters*. The original name comes from *Piotr*, the Polish version of "Peter," so the change was not quite so drastic; a Piotrowski who sent by *Peters* in this country would not feel totally cut off from his origins, would not have abandoned his ancestral name. In cases like this, a bit of research or familiarity with Polish names can help you a great deal; if you know *Wawrzyniec* is the Polish form of "Lawrence," you won't be lost when the former name is suddenly replaced by the latter in the records.

An example falling into the second category has already been mentioned: *Sandomierski* to *Sands*. But often the change was more drastic, such as *Kryvosyka* to *Krause*; here all the two names have in common is that initial *Kr-* sound. We see Poles named *Mieczysław* become *Mitchell* or *Michael*, or *Wiesław* might

become *Wesley* or *Wells* or *Wilson*. Often we see a vague similarity between the names; perhaps the first letter is the same, and at least one letter in the middle or at the end. After all, a Pole who'd answered to his Polish name all his life might want his new name to resemble the old one at least slightly, if only to make it easier to answer to. A new name with a couple of sounds in common with the old one was a bit easier to get used to. I really think that factor entered into the choice of new names. Here familiarity with Polish names doesn't help as much as with category one, but can help at least a little by highlighting the similarities between the old and new names.

The third category, of course, is totally unpredictable. It might be as simple as an immigrant on his way home from work, lamenting the troubles his unpronounceable name is causing him, and seeing a newspaper headline on how Ty Cobb had a timely hit that won a game. "Cobb! That's a good name — short, easy to pronounce. Why not?" The choice of a new name could depend on just such a whim, just such an unpredictable concatenation of circumstances.

Also, many immigrants needed to turn their back on their old lives; a totally different name helped them do it. Maybe they couldn't stand the homesickness without the psychological trick of saying "I've burned my bridges, there's no going back." And unquestionably some feared that if they kept a name even remotely resembling their old one, the secret police of the Czar or the Kaiser or Franz Josef might find them and haul them back to serve in their respective armies. Don't laugh! I've heard enough to know many immigrants feared precisely that; maybe they were paranoid, maybe they weren't. Their experience with authorities back in the old country had not exactly encouraged them to be frank and trusting. They weren't about to take chances by making themselves easier to track.

So an immigrant might have several reasons to take a new name — and compassion on his genealogically-minded descendants would not figure prominently in his decision!

As for **place names**, most of what I've said about personal names applied to them as well. They weren't usually changed intentionally, but remember: most immigrants were illiterate, and probably didn't have a clue what *powiat* or *Kreis* or *uyezd* they had lived in. If, somewhere along the line an official made a mistake copying this information on a form, they couldn't correct him. Remember, too, some wanted to cover their tracks; there were immigrants who were fleeing military duty, or debt, or criminal charges. The harder their place of origin was to determine, the less danger they'd get deported back there. They had no real incentive to be overly accurate in providing information about themselves.

Between American and western European ignorance of the geography of eastern Europe, most immigrants' illiteracy and sketchy information on the administrative details of where they had lived, the problems both had pronouncing and spelling eastern European names comprehensibly, and some immigrants' desire not to be too terribly forthcoming about where they came from, it's no wonder these place names often underwent hopeless distortion.

For the definitive works on Polish names, their equivalents in other languages, and their popularity, meaning and etymology, the following texts by the author of this article can be obtained from the Polish Genealogical Society of America bookstore. Click on the title to reach the information and order page for each book.

[*Polish Surnames: Origins and Meanings, 3rd edition, 2 volumes*](#)

[*First Names of the Polish Commonwealth Origins and Meanings*](#)
