

## A FAMILY NARRATIVE

Do our names define us?

# A spelling difference--a last name ending with one `n' vs. two--marks an emotional entry point into the tale of a Jewish-American family's search for identity

By Erik Gleibermann

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Anyone searching for my parents in a telephone directory would likely overlook the spelling difference between my mother's and father's surnames.

This seemingly trivial detail, one name ending in a single "n," the other in a double "n," probably looks like a typo to most readers. Yet it marks an emotional entry point into the tale of one Jewish-American family's search for identity.

The family name Gleiberman--with one "n"--appears first at Ellis Island in 1906, written on the entry visa of my grandfather Chatzkel's Russian passport.

Chatzkel Gleiberman was a barely literate man who spoke no English upon his arrival, and he probably never noticed the particular English spelling that some immigration official inscribed on his visa.

He had come to America to escape service in the czar's army, fleeing Pinsk, a predominantly Jewish city in modern-day Belarus. The family story goes that, lacking the proper documents, he bluffed his way across the German border dressed as an aristocrat in suit and tails. When a government official aboard the outgoing train demanded his visa, my grandfather slipped off a white glove, waved it across the official's face, and chastised him for daring to ask someone of his stature for identification. While the stunned official recovered, my grandfather strode away in mock disgust.

The meaning of his name, and whether it was originally spelled with one or two "n's," remains a mystery. The name's origin is Yiddish, the common language of East European Jews that blends medieval German with Hebrew. The similar-sounding German word "glauber" means believer, suggesting a possible spiritual occupation.

My father, Eli, never learned Yiddish while growing up in Brooklyn. He loved the English language and graduated from New York University in 1952 with a degree in English literature. But then he realized his calling as a physician. Lacking the pre-med course requirements for American medical schools, he applied to European schools and earned a place at the University of Lausanne in Switzerland.

Swiss officials, familiar with the more common "nn" spelling used in modern German, added a second "n" when writing my father's name. My father came to prefer this new spelling, believing it to be more elegant and authentically European. Upon returning to the States in 1961, he legally adopted the "nn" spelling.

But in what sense did my father wish to become European? Was he attempting to restore a traditional Jewish detail to his signature? Or was it a gesture of assimilation to Germanicize his identity? Though he was proud of his heritage, when he left New York for Switzerland, a part of my father surely wished to discard the burden of being a Jew. Fifty years later, looking back on his expatriate period in Europe, my father remains unclear about his original motivation.

He had been raised by rigid authoritarian parents and forced to attend Jewish yeshiva instead of public grammar school. For a young boy growing up on the streets of Brooklyn, this spelled bitter social isolation. Perhaps the new German spelling served as a symbolic break from the past.

Did my father share the hope of F. Scott Fitzgerald's literary anti-hero James Gatz, who fled his Midwest background and, shaving the East European edge from his name, converted himself into the Jay Gatsby of Long Island high society?

Or did he vaguely desire to become the aristocrat Chatzkel had embodied for one fateful day? My father, though, never concealed his origins. Maybe he just wanted to embellish a signature.

My mother, Lillian, who married my father just before they moved to Switzerland, reluctantly agreed for the sake of harmony to use the "nn" spelling when they returned to the States. But the boldly Germanic ending haunted her just a decade and a half after the Holocaust, when much of her father's family was killed.

Her father, Philip, had left the city of Grodno, also in modern-day Belarus, and immigrated to New York in 1933. He set up a tool-and-die manufacturing shop in Harlem, married and started a family. He planned to bring over the rest of the family in a few years, when he had become firmly established. By 1937 it was too late. Hitler had consolidated power, and borders tightened. Eventually the Nazis killed the rest of the family still living in Grodno.

My mother never legally changed her name and eventually dropped the second "n" altogether. When I was born in Detroit in 1963, followed by my brother Stefan a year later, the "nn" spelling appeared on both birth certificates, in contrast to my older brother Owen, who was born in Switzerland before my father adopted the new spelling. To counter the Germanic connotation of "nn," my mother named me Erik, using the Scandinavian "k" at the end rather than the "c" more common in German.

And so here we are. Having lived with this "k" and the "nn" for 40 years, and being a non-conformist at heart, I have become proud of my less-than-common spellings. I am also probably freer to enjoy my name than my parents, whose questions about their name reflect a struggle to navigate the cultural path from insulated New York immigrant neighborhoods to the affluent suburbs of the Midwest.

I live a generation removed from the shadow of the Holocaust, an energetic participant in the great alchemical exercise of cultural blending that defines 21st Century America. I choose to interpret the "nn" as a restoration of a probable German-Jewish ancestral identity, one that sees no inherent tension between being German and being a Jew.

My pragmatic brother Owen, a film critic in New York, prefers the single "n." He finds it easier to spell over the phone, rarely has an incorrect byline in a publication, and estimates that over a lifetime of document signing he can save at least one entire fountain pen.

My other brother, Stefan, may be the most easygoing of the three siblings. He says he sees no issue. He knows that, one "n" or two, his identity is secure, equally unmistakable expressions of a rich Jewish heritage. So when the paycheck or the jury summons arrives spelled one way or the other, he lets it be.

I have learned that every person's name contains a family narrative. Three members of my family spell their last name one way, two spell it another. We do not share identical birth certificates, nor precisely congruent experiences of what it means to be a Jew in today's America. We are spread out from New York to Michigan to California. But our name supplies something that transcends these differences: the bond of a common story.

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