

Spelling Doesn't Count: Tips for Tracking Those Ever-Changing Names

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No matter what country your ancestors came from, because of the assortment of languages and pronunciations, you will likely be confronted with a variety of possibilities for your original surnames.

The spelling of surnames is going to vary; it's not unusual.

**No one's name was changed at Ellis Island,
no matter what stories your family has told you!**

1. Immigrants obtained travel documents in Europe.
2. Ship personnel copied the information from those documents onto manifests.
3. No one in the U.S. entered names onto manifests unless errors were detected here.
4. Occasionally, names might have been entered in the language of the ship's purser or captain.
5. Remember that some immigrants traveled on forged documents, with assumed names, or with mothers' maiden names.

When ships landed:

1. Immigration officials read what was on the manifests; they did not enter names.
2. Translators were available for a wide variety of languages.
3. If an error was detected on a manifest, someone might fix it; later on, manifests were used for checking arrivals, and you may find notations for naturalization.

Finding the "Right" Name

Our ancestors did not arrive with "American" names. If they changed any part of their names, they did it to fit in. Many names were not easily spelled or pronounced by Americans, and most immigrants wanted very much to become Americanized quickly.

Many of our ancestors were not literate in their own languages and spelling their names "correctly" was never a priority.

Chain Migration

- Usually, one relative would arrive first, often a male, but not always.
- Once that person had a job and a suitable place to live, he or she worked to save money to buy tickets for family left behind.
- As others came, they worked to bring the rest of the family until everyone was here.

Names in All Languages Changed

- Russian and Hebrew/Yiddish use different alphabets, so names were transcribed multiple times, leading to errors.
- Variations of spelling of the same name were and are common.
- Online translations of names are based on the translator's expertise and legibility of the original handwriting.

Learn European Spelling!

- Familiarize yourself with how letters are pronounced in the language(s) of your ancestors' country(ies).
- Be especially aware of how letters familiar to us with one sound are different in other languages.
- Learn how to pronounce letters with accent marks and letter combinations.
- Learn letters that are easily confused and how they may be pronounced.
- Become familiar with male and female endings for names.

Working Strategies

First and foremost, be flexible! Recognize that there are no “right” spellings and that every immigrant group has exactly the same problems.

- Search for variations of names in all languages.
- Remember that names can shorten or change over generations.
- Learn to recognize literal translations like White for Weis(s) or Taylor for Schneider.
- Try searching on other variables, like occupation, family members, or age.
- Work with maiden names, if possible.
- Search online for ethnic hints or similar names.
- Accept similarities as matches if other data holds true.
- Teach yourself some basic Hebrew, Polish, Russian, whatever.
- Know that first and middle names were often interchanged.
- Know, also, that names changed with the fashion of the times.
- Use the U.S. and state censuses and city directories for spelling variants.
- Use immigration and naturalization documents for names on arrival, which may help you to work backwards.
- Use tombstones, where available, for original Hebrew/Yiddish names.

Some Recommended References/Websites

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