

New Life in U.S. No Longer Means New Name

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By [Sam Roberts](#)

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For many 19th- and 20th-century immigrants or their children, it was a rite of passage: Arriving in America, they adopted a new identity.

Charles Steinweg, the German-born piano maker, changed his name to Steinway (in part because English instruments were deemed to be superior). Tom Lee, a Tong leader who would become the unofficial mayor of Chinatown in Manhattan, was originally Wong Ah Ling. Anne Bancroft, who was born in the Bronx, was Anna Maria Louisa Italiano.

The rationale was straightforward: adopting names that sounded more American might help immigrants speed assimilation, avoid detection, deter discrimination or just be better for the businesses they hoped to start in their new homeland.

Today, most experts agree, that traditional immigrant gambit has all but disappeared.

“For the most part, nobody changes to American names any more at all,” said Cheryl R. David, former chairwoman of the New York chapter of the [American Immigration Lawyers Association](#).

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Precise comparative statistics are hard to come by, and experts say there was most likely no one precise moment when the practice fell off. It began to decline within the last few

decades, they say, and the evidence of its rarity, if not formally quantified, can be found in almost any American courthouse.

The New York Times examined the more than 500 applications for name changes in June at the Civil Court in New York, which has a greater foreign-born population than any other city in the United States. Only a half dozen or so of those applications appeared to be obviously intended to Anglicize or abbreviate the surnames that immigrants or their families arrived with from Latin America or Asia. (A few Russians and Eastern Europeans did, but about as many embraced their family's original surnames as adopted new ones.)

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The vast majority of people with clearly ethnic surnames who applied to change them did so as a result of marriage (belatedly adopting a spouse's surname or creating a new hyphenated one) or childbirth (because they were legally identified when they were born only as a male or female child or were adopting a parent's name).

Iyata Ishimabet Maini Valdene Archibald of Brooklyn changed her name to Ishimabet Makini Valdene Bryce. Guo Wi Chan of Forest Hills, Queens, changed his to Ryan Guowei Chan. And after Jing Qiu Wu, the Flushing, Queens, mother of 5-year-old Star Jing Garcia, divorced, she renamed her daughter Star Rain Wu, dropping her husband's surname.

Several dropped Mohammed as a first name, adopting Najmul or Hayat instead. And one older couple changed their last name from Islam to Khan, but they said they were conforming to other younger family members rather than reacting to discrimination.

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Sociologists say the United States is simply a more multicultural country today (think the Kardashian sisters or Renée Zellweger, for instance, who decades ago might have been encouraged to Anglicize their names), and they add that blending in by changing a name is not as effective for Asians and Latin Americans who, arguably, may be more

easily identified by physical characteristics than some Europeans were in the 19th century and early 20th century.

Image



An undated photograph from Ellis Island, where officials sometimes transliterated the surnames of immigrants.

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Associated Press



Also, at least in certain circumstances, affirmative action and similar programs have transformed ethnic identity into a potential asset.

“If you are talking about 1910, the social forces on conformity were much stronger,” said Marian Smith, senior historian of the [United States Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services](#), “whereas now an immigrant arrives with all these legal and identity documents, a driver’s license in their pocket, a passport, with one name on it. To change this is a big deal.”

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Douglas S. Massey, a Princeton University sociologist, suggested that newcomers from overseas and their children no longer felt pressure to change their surnames beginning “during the 1970s and 1980s, as immigration became more a part of American life and the civil rights movement legitimated in-group pride as something to be cultivated.”

You can apply to the State Supreme Court to change your name (for \$210) or to Civil Court (for \$65) as long as you swear that you are not wanted for a crime and are not

doing so to defraud anyone. Immigrants can simply check a box on their applications for naturalization. (The government said that in 2005 fewer than one in six did so, and for every possible reason.)

A century or so ago, some names were simplified by shipping agents as immigrants boarded ships in Europe. Others were transliterated, but rarely changed, by immigration officials at Ellis Island. Many newcomers changed their names legally, from Sapusnick to Phillips (“difficulty in pronouncing name, interferes with their business,” according to a legal notice), Laskowsky to Lake (“former name not American”) and from Katchka to Kalin (Katchka means duck in Yiddish and a particular Mr. Katchka was “subjected to ridicule and annoyance because of this”).

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Most requests appear to have been granted routinely, although as recently as 1967, a Civil Court judge in Brooklyn refused to change Samuel Weinberg’s family name to Lansing “for future business reasons, such that my sons shall not bear any possible stigma.” The judge’s name was Jacob Weinberg.

During World War I, another Brooklyn judge refused the application of a Weitz to become a Weeks.

“There is no good reason why persons of German extraction should be permitted to conceal the fact by adopting through the aid of the court names of American or English origin,” the judge ruled. “It may involve some moral courage to bear German surnames or patronymics in these days, but the discomfort can best be borne by a display of genuine loyalty to this country.”

Nancy Foner, a sociology professor at Hunter College of the City University of New York, said: “Jews and Italians changed their surnames in the past so that people wouldn’t identify them as Jews or Italians, the famous cases of course being movie stars. But if you look, phenotypically, nonwhite — East Asian, for example, or black — changing your last name is not going to make a difference. Betty Joan Perske became Lauren Bacall, and most people didn’t know she was Jewish; whatever name she used, Lena Horne was black.”

Lisa Chang, whose parents came from Korea in 1976, had assumed she would marry a Korean man, but decided to retain her maiden name when she wed a Caucasian instead.

“I felt like I would lose a part of myself and my Korean heritage and like I was cheating on my family’s name,” said Ms. Chang, 28, a troubleshooter for online advertising sites. “No one actually told me I had to change my last name, but I did feel some pressure from my future in-laws.”

Marija Sajkas, 40, a health care advocate who moved from Yugoslavia seven years ago, is adopting her Bosnian husband’s surname, Tomic — partly because it is easier to pronounce. “I am fortunate,” she said, “to have a great husband who also has a pronounceable surname.”

Even these days, finding precisely the right adoptive name — one syllable or not — can be a problem. Not long ago, David M. Glauberman, a Manhattan public relations executive, grew tired of having to spell his name every time he left a telephone message. Instead, he legally changed his name to Grant. The first time he left a message, a secretary asked: “Is that Grand with a ‘d’ or Grant with a ‘t’?”

Sam Roberts’s grandfather arrived in the United States as Samuel Rabinowitz. His family first changed the name to Rubin, then to Roberts.

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