

## What's Your Name? by Beulah Gross

Much has been written about the origin of Jewish surnames. Chapter 1, pages 1-15 of Alexander Beider's excellent book, *A Dictionary of Jewish Surnames from the Russian Empire*, is particularly informative. It, and other books and articles, tell us how, why and when surnames originated and changed. Among other things, we now know that many surnames indicate what city or town a family once lived in and we may also learn an ancestor's profession. For instance, the Danziger family probably lived in Danzig at some time and the original Papa Shochot was probably a ritual slaughterer.

However, there is another cause for change in Jewish surnames which does not appear to be as well documented. This happened from 1827 onwards when military service was made compulsory for Jews as part of Czarist Conscription Laws.

Under the reigns of Alexander 1 (1801-25) and Nicholas 1 (1825-55) boys were rigorously conscripted into the Russian Army. According to the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, the children of Russian soldiers were housed in barracks, known as cantonments and thus conscripts to the Army became known as 'Cantonists'. They were instructed in military matters, given a basic elementary education and were disciplined by way of starvation and corporal punishment.

From 1827, Jewish boys were included in this conscription with a view to forcing them to become Christians. Kidnappers, known as 'khapers', took Jewish boys, some as young as eight or nine, from their homes and these children were thus lost to their families and Judaism.

But, under Czarist Conscription Laws, a family's eldest son was permitted to remain at home to support aging parents. Jewish families, to protect their younger sons and keep their families intact, took advantage of this by changing the surnames of these sons to that of their mothers, grandmothers or aunts or by adopting out the boys to families which had no sons. Thus brothers had different surnames which remained with them forever more.

As these name changes and adoptions were surreptitious there are no records of how often they occurred. For genealogists there is only family legend to work with so one must always examine and research any tiny reference or chance word as these could open a whole new line of enquiry and discovery.

In my own case, I have been lucky with both maternal and paternal family surnames. My maternal great-grandfather's family name was 'Chaimo'. He kept this name when the Cantonist System was implemented but, to avoid conscription, his two brothers were adopted out to 'Polakow' and 'Ausbruch' families. As the brothers and

their families remained in close contact all their lives and told their children and grandchildren about the name changes, it was relatively easy for me to find details about my maternal ancestors.

Most of the family emigrated to South Africa in the early 1900s and although I'm in Australia I'm in contact with members of the Polakow family there, in Canada and the UK. The last Chaimo, Jack, married his niece, Clara Polakow, but they had no children. They died in England, and it is possible that other Chaimo family members lived and died in England. I've been trying to find out more but so far unsuccessfully.

With my paternal surname history, I have been almost as lucky. The original name was 'Manaschewitz' but only the oldest of eight sons kept this name. Two became 'Herring' and 'Baetz', the latter being my maiden name. Nothing is known about the Herring branch nor the other five brothers and their families.

The Baetz and Manaschewitz families also emigrated to South Africa and were always in fairly close contact. Both families knew the story and if proof of the relationships were needed, my father, Isaac Baetz, and his cousin, David Mann (changed from Manaschewitz) could have been identical twins.

Not everyone can know if their family surnames were changed due to the Cantonist System or know exactly what these names were. However, if you think someone was related but can't pinpoint how, consider the possibility that brothers may have been given maternal family names or adopted out to avoid the harsh Czarist Conscription Laws thus causing surname differences and see if that leads you anywhere.

I am certain that dredging up and researching the family name connections created by the name changes due to families trying to avoid military conscription of their sons and keep the family together is important for Jewish genealogy research.

References: *Junior Judaica*, Vol 2, Page 1  
Letter from Gary Mokotoff, Editor of *Avotaynu*, (October 29, 1992)  
Jewish Genealogy Beginner's Guide, VIII-6  
Letter from Dr Alexander Beider, March 1997.

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