Introduction

Sean Ferguson, Winona Ryder, and Other Jewish Names

A Jewish immigrant entered America at Ellis Island. The procedures were confusing to him; he was overwhelmed by the commotion. When one of the officials asked him, “What is your name?” he replied, “Shayn fergessen” (in Yiddish, “I've already forgotten.”) The official then recorded his name as Sean Ferguson.

—*A Treasury of American-Jewish Folklore* (1996)

Winona Ryder drinks Manischewitz wine
Then spins a dreidel with Ralph Lauren and Calvin Klein
—Adam Sandler, “The Chanukah Song, Part Two” (1999)

When I have told people I was writing a book about Jewish name changing, they have always wanted to tell me a story or joke. (It has frequently been the Sean Ferguson joke in the epigraph.) They have sometimes asked me about the name changes of Jewish celebrities, such as Winona Ryder. Although they have never sung Adam Sandler’s “Chanukah Song” to me, I have sometimes felt as though his novelty piece, filled with references to the unexpected and hidden Jews in popular culture, was playing softly in the background. Some people have asked why I decided to write about name changing, and I have always responded with yet another joke: “With a name like Kirsten Fermaglich, how could I not write about name changing?”

There is no shortage of humor related to this topic, but, as is always the case, serious meaning lies just below the surface. Images of lonely, confused immigrants such as Sean Ferguson losing their authentic selves or of glamorous celebrities such as Ralph Lauren shedding their past suggest that name changing was an individual experience, one that re-
flected isolation and disconnection from the Jewish community. Because our culture associates name changing with humor and celebrity, some people may think that the practice was a superficial or insignificant part of American Jewish life. Even my own personal joke about name changing hints at our cultural expectations. With a given name easily mistaken for others and a long, unusual surname that no one can spell, of course I should want to change my name without a second thought or a word to my family. What else is there to say?

In fact, there is a great deal. As I began researching name changing in the United States, I found thousands of name-change petitions housed at the New York City Civil Court, offering compelling personal details and sometimes heartrending stories from men, women, and children who sought to abandon their names and find new ones. In 1929, Eli Simonowitz was promoted to assistant manager at his workplace. His employer required him to display a wooden plaque with his name on it—and "requested [Simonowitz] adopt the shorter name of "Simmons."" In 1946, Hedwig Steinberg, a refugee from Hitler's Germany, petitioned to change her son Ronald Philip's last name to Stanton, testifying that he wanted to "remove as much as possible all associations with of thoughts of the German regime from his mind and also to give up the surname which is of German origin and association." And in 1957, Charles Moskowitz petitioned to change his 16-year-old son Ira Steven's surname to Miller, saying that "both teachers and fellow students" had "ridiculed petitioner's son for having such a name, stating that the name is un-American." These untold stories and others were buried in the New York City Civil Court records.

I also found, to my surprise, that no historian had yet explored this subject—for any ethnic group—seriously or in depth. I have come to believe that the casual jokes and the glamorous images we circulate about name changing have discouraged us from truly understanding a practice that has been fundamental to many Americans' understandings of themselves, their families, their communities, and their identities. As the first historical book about name changing in the United States, A Rosenberg by Any Other Name recasts our standard images and questions popular assumptions in order to restore these people's experiences to our understanding of American life.

My research makes clear that, for large numbers of Jews, name changing was neither an isolated nor an individual act. Far from being merely a punch line, name changing was an important and widely-practiced phenomenon among New York Jews in the 20th century. Between 1917 and 1967, thousands of American-born New York Jews submitted name-change petitions as families in order to combat antisemitism, find jobs, and receive an education. In fact, Jewish names are represented in the New York City Civil Court name-change petitions far out of proportion to their numbers in the city, suggesting that legal name changing was a Jewish behavior during this era.

The New York Jews who changed their names represented a minority of the New York Jewish community, but they had a powerful impact on American Jewish communal life. For one thing, their neighbors, friends, and relatives in the city, and indeed all over the country, had to confront the practice and its implications: should they too change their own names? Would a new, less ethnic name improve their lives? Did changing their names mean that they were deserting their religion or their family? For the most part, fears of abandonment were unfounded. Name changers did not typically convert out of the religion, leave the Jewish community, or abandon their families, yet these fears shaped Jews' interactions with one another throughout the 20th century.

American Jewish communal leaders, like other members of the community, struggled with name changing. Name changers complicated the efforts of Jewish agencies to count Jews and provide them services, and some leaders were indeed convinced that name changers betrayed their community. Yet the urgency of defending Jews against antisemitism in the middle of the 20th century led important organizations to include name changers as integral parts of the American Jewish community.

American Jewish culture too was profoundly shaped by name changing, as writers, filmmakers, comedians, and social scientists all incorporated name changing into their work, considering the practice alternately as a symbol of Jewish social inclusion, Jewish marginality, or even American corruption and decadence. As New York witnessed a local phenomenon of Jewish name changing, Jews and non-Jews throughout the country confronted images of isolated, ambivalent, or even antisemitic name changers in such popular films as The Jazz Singer (1927), Gentleman's Agreement (1947), and My Favorite Year (1982).

Far from serving simply as a humorous punch line, then, or a prerogative of the Hollywood elite, name changing and our cultural discus-
sions of the practice offer a window into American Jewish economic, social, cultural, and political life throughout the 20th century. Historical debates about immigration, antisemitism and race, class mobility, gender and family, the boundaries of the Jewish community, and the power of government all look different when name changing becomes a part of the conversation.

First, let us consider how name changing changes our thinking about immigration. It is surprising how underexplored the history of name changing is in the United States, particularly given its central place in our imagination of the immigrant experience. When it is mentioned at all, name changing is typically taken for granted, used as a simple shorthand for immigrants' assimilation into American social and cultural life. These brief mentions are inadequate for a few reasons.

For one, scholars have long rejected simple portraits of immigrant assimilation into American life. Historians no longer believe that immigrants were simply uprooted from their past, shedding all elements of the Old World to become absorbed into a new American culture. Nor do they still believe that there is a natural cycle of immigration, in which individuals automatically progress through stages of forgetting their past and "becoming American." For decades, most scholars of immigration and ethnicity have pointed out instead the complex and uneven ways that first- and second-generation Americans integrated into mainstream culture. Immigrants and their children constructed new ethnic identities, with elements of both the Old and New World blended together, as part of an elaborate network of ethnic families, neighborhoods, and institutions.

Rather than a step on the way to forgetting the past, name changing was a part of Jews' ethnic networks, strategies, and values. Jews did not typically change their names to "John Smith" or "Margaret Washington." They selected new names with the same initials as their former names, they frequently amputated their Jewish names to recognizable roots, such as "Rose," "Berk," and "Lebow," and they typically eschewed names that "sounded" too Christian or that had specific Christian or American connotations, such as "John" or "Christopher," "Washington" or "Jefferson." Perhaps most strikingly, Jews changed their names as families, while living in Jewish neighborhoods and supported by Jewish institutions. For many New York Jews, name changing was a part of their ethnic identity and community, not an escape from it.

Additionally, large numbers of name changers were not immigrants at all. Roughly three-quarters of all individuals who changed their name in the City Court in Manhattan in 1945 were actually second-generation Americans who had been born in the United States, attended public schools, and spoke English as their native language with accents that, more often than not, reflected Brooklyn, not Poland. Name changing for these individuals was not a means of "becoming American"; they were, by virtually every measure, already American.

This is not to say that immigrants did not change their names. Indeed, countless numbers of immigrants did change their names as they traveled to the United States and established new lives. After the passage of the 1906 Naturalization Act, petitions to naturalize gave immigrants a space to record a new name, and recent research suggests that many Jewish immigrants, along with immigrants of many other backgrounds, took advantage of this option. Moreover, memoirs and novels from the turn of the century make clear that unofficially taking on a new American name was a typical and accepted part of immigrants' experience in the New World. "With our despised immigrant clothing we shed also our impossible Hebrew names," Mary Antin wrote, describing a "committee of our friends, several years ahead of us in American experience" who "concocted American names for us?" It is likely that thousands of Jewish immigrants changed their names using these formal and informal methods.

Even so, it is striking that the New York City Civil Court has so few petitions from immigrants and so many from immigrants' children and grandchildren. Why would fairly comfortable American-born Jews living in New York—the city with the largest, most established Jewish population in the Western Hemisphere—choose to change their names in such large numbers?

One simple answer to this question is that they sought to avoid antisemitism. Jewish-sounding names could expose them to ridicule and discrimination. But antisemitism is not a simple phenomenon.

Throughout the years, American Jewish historians have done much to outline and explore the contours of antisemitism in the United States, especially in the twentieth century. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, hotels and resorts restricted Jews from registering as guests. Elite Americans began excluding Jews from their social clubs and working to
halt the immigration of Jews and other “undesirables.” In the 1920s, universities and colleges instituted quotas on Jewish students and refused to hire Jewish faculty. Employers posted “help wanted” ads that specified “Christians only,” and homeowners signed covenants promising not to sell their homes to Jews. In public forums on radio and in the press, prominent individuals such as Henry Ford and Father Charles Coughlin attacked Jews for the threat they posed to the country—as both capitalists and communists. In the 1930s, pro-Nazi groups openly spouted hatred against Jews, distributing literature throughout the nation and sometimes targeting Jewish individuals for violent attacks. Angry rhetoric charged Jews with bringing the country into World War II and profiting from it. Antisemitism declined after the war, but perceptions of Jews as clannish or possessing control of certain industries still remained a part of many Americans’ worldview.

This narrative emerges from a host of important works by American Jewish historians. But these historians have rarely addressed in depth the private nature of the American antisemitism they describe. In comparison to Europe’s murderous state antisemitism and the brutal racism directed at nonwhites by the US government, American antisemitism has been mostly exercised by private citizens and companies that have operated quietly, through rumor, innuendo, and informal policy, rather than government violence or decree. How has the unofficial, private, insidious nature of American antisemitism affected American Jews?

For one thing, private and unofficial limitations significantly affected Jews’ status in American social and economic life. Although Jews were neither officially identified nor segregated by American state policy, private institutions—especially universities, employment agencies, and professional boards—developed unofficial but powerful mechanisms to identify and segregate Jews in social and economic life. The most important of these mechanisms was the modern application form, which asked extensive questions about nationality and ancestry in an effort to identify and thereby exclude Jews.

Both names and name changing played a crucial role on application forms. Large numbers of New Yorkers who petitioned to change their names were certain that their Jewish names, listed at the top of their application forms, had been a liability for them with employers and admissions officials: “[Golding] is foreign sounding, cumbersome, difficult to remember and easily confused with other names,” Pauline Golding explained in 1937 in her petition to change her name to Pauline Bennett Gould, continuing, “Petitioner’s foreign-sounding name has hindered her in her work, in obtaining employment, and in her social life. . . . Your petitioner’s present name has consequently resulted in great loss to her both in business and socially.”

In response to name changing such as Gould’s, employers and universities also used application forms to ask applicants questions about their family names in order to determine their ancestry: What was their father’s surname? What was their mother’s maiden name? Had they or anyone else in their family changed their names? In a society where Jews’ racial status was uncertain, these subtle bureaucratic questions marked Jews as different and undesirable. To be sure, antisemites did not think Jews’ racial status was in doubt: they believed they could identify Jews by their dark hair or hook noses. But most Jews in the United States were descended from European ancestors, with a skin color and eye shape that matched most white Americans; their physical appearance was frequently indistinguishable from other white Americans, making questions about religion, ethnicity, and names all the more insidious for their successful efforts to identify Jewish applicants’ identity. And unlike today’s voluntary affirmative-action questions on employment applications, applicants were required to answer these questions and thus either identify themselves as Jewish or lie about their identity. By making these questions standard on application forms, bureaucrats actually helped to construct Jews’ inferior status in American social and economic life—either intentionally or unintentionally.

Then, too, bureaucracy shaped Jews’ perceptions of themselves and their capacity to resist discrimination. What did it mean for Jews to live in a world that was quietly, politely, and privately laced with questions designed to mark them as different? How could they be sure they were facing discrimination? How did they understand rejections from schools, employers, and social organizations? How did shadowy, unacknowledged limitations shape their daily lives? And how did these limitations shape their identities as Jews?

The insidious nature of American antisemitism may have limited ordinary Jews’ understanding of themselves as victims, as well as their capacity to protest openly. Pauline Golding’s petition did not state that she
had been the victim of prejudice or antisemitism, and Golding was not alone. Of the thousands of petitions found in the New York City Civil Court, virtually none mentioned antisemitism. They may have been uncertain of what they were facing—they had no proof of discrimination—or they may have been embarrassed by and ashamed of rejections that could be interpreted as personal and individual, rather than racially motivated. The unofficial nature of American antisemitism encouraged many Jews to resist discrimination by using bureaucratic name-change petitions to reshape their personal identity, rather than civil rights activism to change an unfair society. Name changing thus offers us a window into the corrosive nature of American antisemitism.

Name changing also shows us how deeply intertwined race has been with Jewish economic and social mobility in the United States. Employers and universities tried to weed out Jews precisely because they believed there were too many of them in workplaces and on campuses. As Jews achieved economic success, moving into the middle class faster than other white immigrant groups did in the early 20th century, their efforts at social mobility were severely scrutinized. And it is this interplay between Jewish success, antisemitic restriction, and Jewish name changing that needs to be considered. Historians have typically focused on Jews’ economic success in the United States without much consideration of the obstacles that stood in their way. But the petitions found in New York City Civil Court testify to the significant obstacles Jews faced when they sought middle-class jobs. Dora Sarietzky, a secretary, described her frustratingly long search for work before a name change with a phrase that was repeated in petition after petition: “My name proved to be a handicap.” Petitions also detail the effectiveness of name changing as a strategy. “Immediately [after changing his name to Edmund Cronin] petitioner did obtain a position,” the engineer Melvin Applebaum reported. Jews often felt that their success in the middle class required them to tailor their names to present a more acceptable outward appearance on the job.

Name-change petitions also require us to consider the importance of women and children in stories of Jews’ economic success. The most recent, complicated, and nuanced portraits of Jewish economic life in America have mostly been stories of men. But Jews, far more than any other group in New York City then or since, developed a pattern of family name changing, in which husbands and wives changed their names together, parents changed their names with their sons and daughters, and adult brothers brought their wives and children together to change names on one petition. By the middle of the 20th century, the vast majority of Jewish name-change petitions were filed by family members working together to help one another find jobs or get an education. Sometimes it was children who pushed their mothers and fathers to change their name, as they faced hostility at school or feared that they would not be admitted to college. “For me, a change to Nuland meant that I would never have to get up on the first day of class each semester and announce to a pimply multitude that I was Sherwin Nudelman,” remembered Sherwin Nuland in 2003. At other times, it was women—either alone or with family members—who instigated the name change. Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz’s mother remembered that she threatened to call her first child Forsythia Kantrowitz until her husband changed their surname in 1942. The intense stigma that Jewish women faced as they sought to become secretaries or saleswomen led surprisingly large numbers of single Jewish women, such as Pauline Golding, to change their names—even when they knew they might change them again upon marriage. Of course, in some ways, this may not be as surprising as we imagine: changing last names was a normal practice for women, who were always required to reshape their identities upon marriage. Nonetheless, women and children played a crucial and often forgotten role in confronting antisemitism and shaping Jewish economic success. Name changing helps us remember how important they were in this process.

Indeed, name changing may have actually shaped Jews’ middle-class status itself. Although only a small percentage of Jews in New York City changed their names legally, name changing was concentrated in mostly Jewish neighborhoods where residents earned a solid income, such as Washington Heights and the Upper West Side, and possessed white-collar professions and careers: doctors and dentists, secretaries and business people, writers and musicians. Scholars suggest that class is a complicated category, something we should see as being constructed, rather than taken for granted or assumed. If that is the case, then name changing (and the cultural pressure that surrounded it) can be seen as one way that Jews made themselves into members of the middle class.
Name changing can also be seen as one way that Jews made themselves “white” in American social life. Although Jews of European descent have always been understood legally as white citizens in the United States, as antisemitism rose in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, their racial identity became uncertain. A number of historians have charted the ways that Jews ultimately came to be defined as white through both economic mobility and cultural integration. Eric Goldstein’s work, in particular, has rightly noted the complications of this journey and the pain that it caused for many American Jews.

These historians’ discussions of whiteness, however, do not address one of the central elements that sociologists and theorists have identified in white identity: invisibility, the ability of white people to travel through life unmarked and unseen as a race. Another related hallmark of whiteness for many theorists is ethnic options: individuals’ ability to select when and where they identify their ethnic origins.

Name changing adds these important dimensions of whiteness into our consideration of American Jews’ lives. Name changers sought to shed the markers that identified them as Jewish to the outside world, hoping to fall under the radar screen of antisemites in the workforce and education system. Yet name changers typically continued to identify themselves as Jews in both private and public settings—when they chose to do so. Invisibility—and the ethnic options it provided—were crucial to Jews’ successful redefinition as white people in the United States at the end of the 20th century.

Ironically, civil rights organizations in the middle of the 20th century similarly sought to erase Jewish racial markers—which included questions about names and name changing—in order to eliminate antisemites’ power to label and exclude Jews. Unintentionally, then, Jewish civil rights lawyers’ strategies mirrored the work of name changers and helped to construct Jewish identity as a white identity. While historians who study Jews and civil rights have tended to take for granted that Jews are white, our focus on name changing illustrates that the civil rights movement actually allowed Jews to redefine themselves racially.

The cultural pressure for Jews to change names was intense in mid-20th-century New York City. Many reported being encouraged or pressured to change their names by employers, friends, or family members eager for advancement or success: “Dismay was my first reaction,” the writer Elias Tobenkin reported in 1930, after a well-known editor offered him a meaty assignment on the condition that he change his name. Fred L. Israel, a graduate student at Columbia University in the mid-1950s, remembered that the prominent historian Richard Morris took him aside and encouraged him to change his name: “so I could reach my full potential as a historian.”26 The belief that new names were essential for economic and professional advancement permeated Jewish neighborhoods and workspaces.

Yet Israel and Tobenkin ultimately chose not to change their names, reflecting countervailing pressures within the Jewish community. Many reported disdain and anger for those who changed their names: “that’s not the act of a self-respecting man,” Nathaniel Zalowitz argued in the Jewish Daily Forward. A good number of Jews during this era actually identified themselves as Jewish solely because they were unwilling to escape their background, as they believed name changers did. In 1944, for example, the critic Clement Greenberg described his parents having little connection to Judaism, other than “an insistence upon specifying themselves as Jews—i.e. to change one’s name because it is too Jewish is shameful.” Many Jews believed that name changers had essentially betrayed their people. The phenomenon of name changing triggered communal battles among New York Jews, encouraging some to find more neutral names as an economic strategy, while others kept their Jewish names as proof of their identity.

The belief that name changers abandoned the Jewish community played into the larger fears of American Jewish leaders. As the Holocaust ravaged the European Jewish community, many American Jewish leaders worried that their own society, where Jews were conditionally accepted but dogged by quiet hatred, led Jews to hate themselves. By the end of World War II, Jewish leaders had designated “self-hatred” as the chief scourge of the American Jewish community, and they devoted energy and resources to shoring up children’s Jewish identities. For these leaders, one of the central indicators of self-hatred was name changing, an act they felt marked Jews’ abandonment of the Jewish community.

Historians have not looked closely, however, at the actual experiences of name changers to see whether these fears were realized. Did Jews such as Ronald Philip Steinberg or Eugene Martin Greenberg abandon the Jewish community when they changed their surnames to Stanton and
Grant in the 1940s. Did they seek to escape their Jewish backgrounds and families? Their life trajectories do not seem to suggest any kind of abandonment. As the founder and CEO of the agrochemical corporation Transammon, one of the largest privately owned companies in the country, the philanthropist Ronald P. Stanton gave large sums of money to his synagogue, Shearith Israel, and to Yeshiva University. In 2006, he pledged $100 million to Yeshiva, after having turned down a scholarship to study there to become a rabbi when he was young: “I believe in giving to the arts, education, health care and also my synagogue, religious things,” Stanton told a Forbes reporter in 2011. Similarly, as the founder and president of a major real estate investment and development firm, Eugene M. Grant became a major philanthropist and donor for Jewish causes, including UJA/Federation, the Jewish Museum, the Westchester Holocaust Commission, the National Cabinet of the State of Israel Bonds, the American Israel Chamber of Commerce, the American Jewish Committee, and Big Tent Judaism. Neither of these men seemed to have left the Jewish community at all.

What about other name changers, who were less wealthy or prominent? A closer look at the petitions and the experiences of other ordinary name changers in the years after World War II suggests that Stanton’s and Green’s continued engagement in the Jewish community was more typical than we might imagine and that the story of name changing is far more complicated than charges of “self-hatred” suggest. Jews such as Beverly Winston, who had changed her name from Weinstein, explained that their former names had interfered with their daily lives, but they never intended to abandon their families, religion, or community: “I never pretend that I’m not Jewish nor have I ever had the desire to do so,” Winston told one writer. A journalist in 1948 interviewed 25 randomly selected name changers and found that all of them continued to identify as Jews. And the Bronx resident Reva Blum remembered the Rosborne family in her socialist Jewish neighborhood as the most religiously observant Jews in the community, despite their name change from Rosenberg. The continuing Jewish identification of people with names such as Merrick Garland or Larry King make it clear, even in our own era, that caricatures of name changers who “escaped” or “passed” or were “self-hating” do not illustrate the complexity of real people’s lives and decisions.

Indeed, a close look at Jewish name changing offers us a richer portrait of the American Jewish community and of the United States as a whole. Rather than a traditional historical examination of Jews inside the organized Jewish world—members of synagogues or communal institutions—focusing on name changing allows us to look at the complicated and changing meaning of Jewishness for Jews who may not have affiliated with any Jewish organizations at all. Indeed, this book examines Jews who actually chose to erase one of the markers that outwardly identified them as members of the community. Name changing allows us to reconsider the very boundaries of the American Jewish community—and by extension, the boundaries of ethnic identity in the United States more broadly. The men and women in this book reshaped what it meant to be Jewish in the United States by forcing Americans—both Jews and non-Jews—to reconsider their assumptions about Jewishness.

That reshaping of identity was not merely an individual or communal act—it was an act intimately bound up with the state. Mid-20th-century Jewish name changing was a public phenomenon closely intertwined with local, state, and federal governments. Because we are accustomed to seeing our names as the most private and individual elements of our selves, or perhaps as reflections of our immediate or extended families, we tend to think less about the crucial roles that names play in our official identities. But the history of names, and of name changing, is closely tied to the government.

For many groups in the United States, names and name changing have been intimately linked with state control. In the 1890s, Native Americans were compelled to abandon their traditional names and take on consistent family names that would ensure the inheritance of newly allotted parcels of land, as part of a broader effort to assimilate Native Americans into Anglo-American society and to extinguish Native culture. By 1909, almost all Chinese Americans were required to carry identification cards with them, thereby allowing the federal government to police their names and identities. And women’s right to retain their birth surnames after marriage, although permitted in Anglo-American common law, was abrogated consistently by judges throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, requiring married women who wished to vote, inherit property, or get a business or driver’s license to use their husband’s surname.
Jews throughout world history have faced similar state demands. Political dictates have required Jews to change their names (both surnames and given names) throughout the world, in settings as varied as Spain and Portugal in the 14th and 15th centuries to Germany in the 19th century to Israel in the 20th. At times, the threat of physical violence was a factor. Many Spanish and Portuguese Jews, for example, took on Christian names when they were forced to convert during the Inquisition. At other times, governments used less physical, but no less successful, means of coercion to require Jews to change their names. In eastern and central Europe in the 19th century, adopting new surnames became a part of life for Ashkenazic Jews. With the rise of Emancipation, a political movement whose goal was to incorporate Jews as citizens of new European nation-states, states began to require Jews to take on stable, unchanging surnames so the state might tax them and require them to serve in the military. Jews frequently viewed those names as nuisances or dangers and sometimes sought to subvert or change them in order to preserve control over their own lives. And then, in 1938, the Nazi regime required all Jews to take on the biblical names “Israel” and “Sara” as a means of isolating, humiliating, and ultimately destroying them. In all of these cases, the state’s interest in Jewish names was a means of control—unsurprising given Jews’ position as marginalized outsiders throughout much of the world.

In Israel in the 20th century, too, although Jews were no longer marginalized outsiders, the government still attempted to assert control over Jewish names. During the War of Independence in 1947, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) released a pamphlet titled “Choose a Hebrew Name for Yourself,” encouraging new immigrants to Hebraize their names. After the establishment of the state, Israeli policy strongly encouraged political leaders and party officials to change their names. In 1955, President David Ben-Gurion issued a memorandum insisting that military personnel representing the IDF abroad change their European names to Hebrew ones. Although individuals defied Ben-Gurion’s pronouncement without penalty, there is no question that the Israeli state actively encouraged and even at times required name changing as a means of shaping its citizens’ Jewish identities.

Strikingly, however, in the United States, Jewish names were barely regulated at all. To be sure, American popular culture and folklore is dominated by images of Ellis Island officials foisting unwanted American names on Jewish and other immigrants, such as Sean Ferguson. Most genealogists and immigration historians, however, argue that this Ellis Island name changing did not take place. Ellis Island officials were explicitly prohibited from changing immigrants’ names, and there is very little documentary evidence of official Ellis Island name changing.

Government surveillance of the identities of European Americans in the early 20th century was far more lax than that of Chinese Americans or Native Americans. The Anglo-American legal tradition has mostly understood names to be personal property and thus generally free from state intervention. Most state laws in the United States—including New York State law—do not even require that individuals change their names formally at all; so long as you use a name consistently for a period of time, it is considered to be your name, so long as you are not trying to defraud anyone. Jews, as well as other European immigrants, were able to take advantage of these broad freedoms. Rather than having their names changed for them (or even policed) by state officials, immigrants from Russia, Italy, and Romania typically chose new names voluntarily, easily, and unofficially, without a second thought.

By the middle of the 20th century, however, as a growing government bureaucracy began to track individuals who needed to pay taxes, serve in the military, or receive welfare benefits, names came to take on much more social, political, and economic significance even for European-descended, native-born Americans. Ordinary individuals increasingly found it necessary or desirable to change their names officially in order to receive benefits and avoid penalties. The phenomenon of New York City Jewish name changing took place right at this moment, as the federal government and the welfare state expanded their reach into ordinary Americans’ lives during the Depression, World War II, and the Cold War.

Scholars have traditionally described the United States as a “weak” state, comparing it to European governments whose laws and policies regularly intervened in their citizens’ personal lives. But the phenomenon of thousands of New York City Jews going to City Court to change their names in the middle of the 20th century does not suggest a weak government: why would Jews in Manhattan have bothered going to court to make their names official at all if the state were truly weak? It was a combination
of the private, unofficial antisemitism that Jews faced and the growing federal demand for citizens to be easily identified through one consistent name that pushed Jewish New Yorkers to take advantage of their easy access to name-change petitions at a local city court. Name changing shows us how decentralized the US government is, how interconnected it is with private interests, and how it has increasingly become powerful by subtly encouraging voluntary action from its citizens. The federal government did not demand anyone change his or her name, but private, unofficial antisemitism led Jews to use tools of the state—name-change petitions in the local New York City court—to reshape their identities officially, frequently for federal purposes, such as joining the military.30

The story of A Rosenberg by Any Other Name is, in some ways, a distinctive New York story. That is, in part, because it is a Jewish story. By 1945, almost two million of the city's residents were Jewish, more than a quarter of the city's population, making them the largest ethnic group in the city and giving New York the largest Jewish population in the United States. As the principal port where Jewish immigrants from Russia and eastern Europe first entered the United States at the end of the 19th century, it also became the predominant city in which they settled, married, and raised their children in the first half of the 20th century. Jewish contractors, architects, and workers built neighborhoods with synagogues, schools, and restaurants that catered to Jewish families' needs and tastes.31 In Manhattan, it was neighborhoods such as these where name changing clustered, with new names showing up on storefronts, on apartment building mailboxes, and on school attendance sheets. Name changing was a part of the fabric of Jewish neighborhood life in New York City in the 20th century. And indeed, as Jews left the city for the suburbs in the 1960s and 1970s, the number of name-change petitions in New York City began to decline sharply. New York City had the largest Jewish population in the country throughout the 20th century, and its name changes were closely connected to that Jewish population.

This story is also a New York story because it is a story of the white-collar middle class. By the middle of the 20th century, the city had begun to move slowly and unevenly from a manufacturing to a service economy, with finance, real estate, and insurance, as well as the cultural and entertainment industries, gradually making up more and more of the city's labor force. And although this trend was a national one, these industries became increasingly important, especially for women, in the economic landscape of New York, as the emerging financial capital and the predominant cultural center of the country. It was those white-collar "service" jobs that propelled the New York economy as the century advanced; it was those jobs (along with the professions and retail trades) that Jews sought in large numbers, and it was those employers that were most sensitive to Jewish names.32

Finally, A Rosenberg by Any Other Name is a New York story because it is, in part, a story of progressive political activism. As the home of the headquarters of major communal defense agencies—the American Jewish Committee, the American Jewish Congress, the National Jewish Welfare Board, and, by 1946, the B'nai B'rith Anti-Defamation League—New York was the center of Jewish political activism in the middle of the 20th century. Moreover, beginning in the 1930s, the city's Jews became strong supporters of the Democratic Party and developed a liberal political style that played an important role in the fight for civil rights legislation in the 1940s and 1950s. This political and communal structure, along with a large Jewish voting population, enabled the first civil rights bill in the country to be passed into law in New York in 1945, prohibiting employers from asking job applicants about their race, religion, or ancestry.33 As we will see, both the language of the law itself and its administration grappled specifically and consistently with the concerns of name changers—a result of the Jewish name-changing phenomenon of New York City in midcentury.

There is evidence, however, that Jews elsewhere in the country changed their names in ways similar to New York Jews. In California, for example, sociologists found disproportionate numbers of upwardly mobile Jews seeking new names in the Los Angeles County Superior Court files after World War II: Jews were only 6 percent of the Los Angeles population, but they represented 46 percent of the name-change petitions from 1946 to 1947.34 A study of Jews in Minneapolis in the 1950s found that 28 percent of the wealthier, higher-status Jews in the city had changed their surnames.35 And oral histories and correspondence from cities as diverse as New Haven, Chicago, Houston, San Francisco, Washington, D.C., Baltimore, Detroit, and Toronto suggest that Jews throughout North America responded to economic and social discrimination in the middle of the 20th century by changing their names: "My three
brothers never were crazy about the name Cohn. . . . One has changed
his name to Cole as he said there was prejudice before people even met
him,” reported Mrs. R. Brown, a Jewish woman from St. Louis in 1939.56

And even if Jewish name changing did not reach the extraordinary
numbers everywhere in the nation that it did in New York City, the
popularity of name changing as a theme in mainstream fiction, film,
journalism, and humor affected both Jews and non-Jews throughout the
country. Readers from Louisiana to Colorado to New Jersey were deeply
touched by essays about Jewish name changing featured in Reader’s Di-
gest, even if they were offended by name changing as a strategy: “I am a
strong believer that you are what you are and nothing can change you,
not even changing your name,” declared Mrs. Hubert H. Lowe, a Jewish
woman from Corinth, Mississippi.57

Similarly, people all over the country reacted powerfully to Laura
Z. Hobson’s novel Gentleman’s Agreement, which featured a Jewish
name changer as a prominent character. First serialized in the popu-
lar magazine Cosmopolitan, then turned into a best-selling book, and
then finally made into an Academy Award–winning film, Gentleman’s
Agreement inspired both rage and excitement from readers and viewers
from Iowa City to Buffalo, Wyoming to Hollywood. Some correspon-
dents specifically lambasted the name changing they had witnessed in
their own communities, while others commented more specifically on
Jewish names and antisemitism. “When a Jew becomes successful . . . he
is condemned by all non-Jews,” objected Michael J. Collier, a non-Jew
from Grand Rapids, Michigan. “It doesn’t arise because of success, but
because the Jew is ‘slippery,’ ‘sneaky,’ has a Jewish name, or some other
damned fool reason.”58 Cultural works that highlighted Jewish names
and name changing touched ordinary Americans—both Jews and non-
Jews—who witnessed both antisemitism and name changing in their
own communities all over the country.

Artists from all over the country portrayed name changing (or oppo-
tion to name changing) as a part of their communities. In the middle
of the 20th century, chroniclers of Jewish life, such as Meyer Levin in
Chicago and Budd Schulberg in Los Angeles, incorporated Jewish name
changing as a matter-of-fact part of their worlds, while southern authors
such as Burke Davis and Jack Ansell made Jewish name changing a cen-
tral dark secret in their fictional, and sometimes semifictional, accounts
of southern life.59 By the 1970s and 1980s, the filmmaker Barry Levinson
from Baltimore, the Atlanta playwright Alfred Uhry, and the author Al-
legria Goodman from Honolulu all used name changing as a signal of
Jewish inauthenticity. “None of those people tried to change their names
or pass themselves off as something they weren’t,” Uhry said, testifying
to the Jewish identities of the characters in his play Last Night at Bal-
yhoo.60 Jewish name changing occurred throughout the country, and it
had wide-ranging cultural impact on both Jews and non-Jews all over
the United States. Although the story of A Rosenberg by Any Other Name
is primarily a story of Jews in New York, it has profound implications for
American Jewish history and American history more broadly.

The research for this book has taken me to many places: from the
archives of Jewish communal organizations and New York State agen-
ties to published fiction, film, comedy, social science, and journalism, to
legal cases that have stretched from lower courts to the Supreme Court,
to conversations with people whose families changed their names. The
most important venue for my research, however, has been the Civil
Court of New York City, which currently houses thousands of name-
change petitions from the 19th and 20th centuries.61 I systematically
reviewed these petitions, examining the petitions submitted every five
years (1912, 1917, 1922, etc.), and gathering one in ten petitions from each
year from 1887 through 2012; this methodology ensured that I looked
at thousands of petitions throughout the course of the research. I also
gathered additional petitions that I thought were interesting or that il-
ustrated larger trends I saw in the files: I did not include those addi-
tional petitions in any of the statistical analysis in this book.62

These petitions offer fascinating details into individuals’ family lives,
but of course, they have limitations. As legal documents, their language
is frequently formulaic and somewhat stilted. Sometimes petitioners
are referred to in the first person and sometimes in the third person.
It is unclear how much control petitioners had over the language and
how much was constructed by lawyers. The documents include state-
ments listing petitioners’ ages, residential addresses, occupations, and
nationalities, allowing me to amass a good amount of quantitative data
from the petitions, such as gender, age, residential address, occupation,
and nationality, but qualitative analysis required me to read between
the lines, to consider the petitions’ silences, as well as their vocal claims.
One important example of this silence is that the documents did not ask for or record individuals' ethnic or religious background. Moreover, because these petitions were city documents, they were available to all New York City residents, of all ethnic backgrounds. How, then, can I be sure that Jews were actually disproportionate in the records?

If the surname was a distinctive Jewish name (see chapter 2: Goldberg, for example) or if both given and surnames were names common to Jews (Louis Schwartz, for example), I counted a petitioner and his or her family as Jewish. If only one name was common to Jews (Gerhard Schwartz, for example), I cautiously used a host of different clues, including birthplaces, residential addresses, and occupations, in order to make educated guesses about the ethnic identities of my petitioners. When in doubt, I did not count individuals as Jews. In the end, I believe this methodology had much greater potential to undercount, rather than overcount, Jews.

Perhaps the most important markers of Jewish identity in my research were petitioners' names. As is clear from my foregoing description, I used Jewish names—both given names and surnames—as indicators of Jewishness. But of course, the notion of "Jewish names" is a highly problematic one. Jews have lived in non-Jewish cultures for so long that they have borrowed (or have been required to take) both surnames and given names from their host cultures, and their hosts, in turn, have taken on Jewish-sounding names, particularly biblical ones. Intermarriage, conversion, and patterns of secular belief, moreover, have further ensured that "Jewish names" do not inherently identify Jews. Nonetheless, that does not mean that it is not worthwhile to consider "Jewish names" as indicators of identity.

Historically, names have been important features of Jewish difference in both Europe and the United States throughout the modern era. This was particularly true for Ashkenazi Jews, who originated from central and eastern Europe and formed the vast majority of American Jews in the 20th century. Sephardic Jews, who hail from the Middle East and Spanish-speaking world, represent a minority of Jewish Americans, and their names have typically not marked them as Jews in the United States.

As described earlier, Ashkenazi Jews took on their surnames later than did most other Europeans and under far more restrictive circumstances. The fact that Jewish surnames were taken on belatedly, and frequently under compulsion, ensured that many Jews' names would be distinct from traditional Christian names, even if Jews' new surnames had no basis in traditional Jewish religion or culture at all. Sometimes Jews' names suggested specific religious meaning (as in Cohen, a member of the priestly caste), but other times, Jews created new German names, which typically combined two words together to make names such as "Gold mountain" (Goldberg). Jews did take on other types of names, and many of those names could be held by either Jewish or non-Jewish individuals (for example, the German name Kaufman). Frequently, however, states forbade (or strongly discouraged) Jews from taking on surnames commonly held by Christians, and encouraged (indeed sometimes required) Jews to take on names that would identify them as Jews. After Emancipation, then, certain surnames became recognized as Jewish names, forming a basis for Jewish communal recognition as well as antisemitic labeling and humiliation in much of Europe, as well as in the United States.

Given names were a slightly different matter, but they too could convey a Jewish identity to both Jews and non-Jews. Jewish parents have traditionally given a male child a biblical name, as well as a secular name (kimmi) for him to use in non-Jewish state and society; girls were not included in religious services and thus typically did not receive sacred names. Sacred biblical names were used for religious services, but they could also be used outside of Jewish society; the secular and sacred names, moreover, were frequently linguistically linked and used together. Biblical names such as Abraham thus became linked with Jewish identity among both Jews and antisemitic non-Jews in Europe and in the United States. "Abie" became a catchphrase of antisemites, just as surely as "Goldberg." In the United States, moreover, Jewish immigrants who had arrived during the years of mass migration, 1880–1920, developed a distinctive subculture of naming that created new Jewish first names in the United States. Searching for the most American names they could find for their children, Jewish immigrant parents selected English surnames such as Irving and Stanley for their children's first names. Over time, both in Jewish and in non-Jewish communities, these names became associated with Jews in the United States.

As Jews became less distinctive in their dress, economic activity, and lifestyle in the 19th and 20th centuries, Jewish names became impor-
tant badges of difference throughout much of Europe and in the United States. Indeed, European governments, troubled by the ease with which Jews could be confused with non-Jews in a post-Emancipation world, passed laws that limited or prevented Jewish name changes in an effort to preserve Jewish difference.\(^6\) As noted earlier, however, the United States passed no such restrictive name laws for Jews. Although some name changing could and did occur in Europe, the United States offered American Jews extraordinary opportunities to change the names that marked them as Jewish.\(^7\)

Whether or not individuals who bore Jewish-sounding names were Jewish, names with historical connections to the Jewish community became avenues for Jews to bond with one another and for antisemites at the same time to discriminate. As antisemitism swelled in the United States in the first half of the 20th century, “Jewish names” had tangible meaning for many individuals attempting to get an education, find work, join the military, or avoid social ostracism. Ultimately, rather than viewing names as inherently Jewish, it is important that we understand names as historically Jewish: at important moments in history, both Jews and non-Jews shared the belief that certain names were Jewish, and both groups used those names as stand-ins for Jewish identity.\(^8\) By understanding Jewish names as historical entities, we can understand better the antisemitism that shaped American Jews’ lives in the first half of the 20th century, as well as Jews’ efforts to respond to that hatred.

There is still a place for name-change jokes in my life. Posted above my desk is a 2009 cartoon from the *New Yorker* that makes me smile every day (although it gives me no desire to change my name). In the cartoon, a teacher stands at the front of a classroom with her attendance sheet and asks, “Will Kristen, Kirsten, and Kiersten please choose new names?”\(^9\) Although I love it, the joke also gives me pause. The artist, William Haefeli, illustrates that our names (and my name in particular!) are shaped by family, fashion, and culture, as well as the bureaucratic needs of civil servants, and he highlights (even as he satirizes) our culture’s assumptions about names as superficial and easily changeable. In the pages that follow, I hope to highlight what has been fascinating and fun—but also what is serious and deeply meaningful—about name changing in the United States.

**PART I**

The Rise of Jewish Name Changing in New York City after World War I