

A Roll of the Dice

A Paper Read to the Chicago Literary Club
April 6, 2015

By
Steve Tomashefsky

© 2015 by C. Steven Tomashefsky

Years ago, I asked my grandfather what our name means. He said he didn't know. Our real family name was Tomashefsky, he told me, but when his older brother Sam came to America, a man at Ellis Island put "Ichachuc" on a form, and that became his name. When my grandfather came over six years later, he had to use the name Ichachuc because his brother was his sponsor. I didn't know he had a brother.

"What happened to him," I asked. "Is he still alive?"

"He went away," my grandfather said. "Sammy. I haven't seen him in fifty years. I wouldn't know how to find him now."

"Where did he go?"

"I'm not sure. Somewhere south, I think."

"Did he run away from home?"

"Something like that. He got into trouble with the wrong people."

"How did he get into trouble?" I asked.

"They never really told me. He was some kind of gambler, I think. I heard he changed his name again."

Ichachuc is not a name people can ignore. No one can spell it. Teachers couldn't pronounce it. The first day of school was always

a trial. The teacher would take attendance, reading the roll of students in alphabetical order. Karen Ianelli was always just ahead of me. It was a fifty-fifty crap shoot whether the teacher would say “ee-anelli” or “eye-anelli.” Once it was “eye-anell-eye.” She never corrected the teacher’s pronunciation, though if the teacher got it wrong, the rest of the class would often titter, and once Billy Wilson called out, “It’s ee-anelli, Teach,” which caused the whole class to explode with laughter.

Then, of course, the teacher would come to me. As the years rolled on, I came first to dread, and then to resent, the moment. “Steven” The teacher’s voice usually trailed off into silence. After a moment’s consideration, the teacher would inevitably say, “You’ll have to help me with that. How do you pronounce your name?” You’d think there would have been a class in teacher’s college on how to deal with students’ names that were difficult to pronounce. Would it have been very hard to obtain the class roster before the first day of school? If some names looked difficult, would it have been too much trouble for the second-grade teacher to ask the first-grade teacher how the name was to be pronounced? Or perhaps there could have been a discrete phone call to the parents.

Only my fourth-grade teacher, Mrs. Boyacevic, who must have gone through similar trials in her youth, got it right the first time without having to ask. (By the same token, our former governor, Rod Blagojevich, was not good at very much. But during his second inauguration ceremony, when he appeared on a podium with his fellow constitutional officers – all of whom were no doubt smarter and better educated – he was the only one to pronounce the name of the newly elected Treasurer, Alexi Giannoulias, correctly.)

“You’ll have to help me with that,” the teacher would say.

“It’s Ichachuc,” I would reply, always thinking I should have said something cleverer. Sometimes, someone would ask “How do you pronounce that?” and I would be tempted to reply “The right way,” or “Just the way it’s spelled.” But the few times I did, no one thought it was funny.

* * *

I don’t recall the first time someone asked me, “Ichachuc. What kind of name is that?” It’s the sort of question that immediately creates anxiety. Why do they want to know? Why do they care? In fact, the first time someone asked the question, I wasn’t even sure what it meant. A last name? A long name? A

hard name to fit on the short lines of certain application forms? A name teachers found difficult to pronounce? So when I replied, “What do you mean?” the answer came back: “What nationality is it?” Once I caught on, I liked to say “It’s Swabian.” I wasn’t sure myself where Swabia actually was – somewhere in Germany, I’m sure – but no one ever asked. I concluded, perhaps unfairly, that the people who wanted to know the nationality were only interested in finding out if it was a nationality they had reason to dislike. Since no one seemed to care about the Swabians, they just let it go.

When I was in the fifth grade, my home-room teacher, Mr. Corrigan, said to me one day a few weeks into the semester, “Ichachuc. What kind of name is that?”

I first pretended I didn’t understand. “What do you mean?”

“The nationality,” he said. “What nationality is that?”

Truth be told, my parents and grandparents never really spoke of having any previous nationality. We had no nationality. We were Jewish. Jews came from all over. They spoke of “The Old Country,” but no one seemed to know or care what country The Old Country was.

“I don’t know,” I told Mr. Corrigan.

“Well, were you born in America?” he asked.

“Yes.” And perhaps too quickly I added, “And so were my parents.”

“What about your father’s father? Where was he born? My grandfather was born in Bandon, County Cork, Ireland. What about yours?”

“I don’t know,” I said again. We had no familial nostalgia for some town or city ruled by the Czar and regularly raided by the Cossacks. I had heard no stories about Ichachucs in Europe who owned farms, were in business, or taught school.

“Well, you should find out,” Mr. Corrigan said. “It’s important to know where you came from.”

“Why?” I asked. “Aren’t we all here now?”

“Sure,” he said. “But you can’t really know who you are unless you know where you’re from.”

His logic made perfect sense to my ten-year-old mind. How indeed could you know who you are unless you know where you’re from? Clearly, I didn’t know who I was. That evening, when my father came home from work, I asked him “What kind of name is Ichachuc?”

“What do you mean?” he said.

“I mean, where are we from? What nationality are we?”

He pursed his lips and hesitated, seemingly not quite sure what to say, as though I had asked him where babies come from.

“Well, Grandpa was born in what is now Poland, but at the time it was Russian or Ukrainian territory,” he said at last.

“So is Ichachuc a Polish name?”

“I don’t really know,” my father said. “Possibly. But it’s not our real family name anyway. As Grandpa says, when his brother Sam got to Ellis Island, they gave him the name Ichachuc,” my father said.

“Why did they do that?” I asked.

“I don’t know why it was changed,” he said. “They just did things that way. Our real name was Tomashefsky or something like that.”

The slight vagueness of “or something like that” gave me a chill. “So why didn’t you change it back?”

“It was too much trouble, really. What difference does it make?”

“Then how do we know who we are?” I asked, using Mr. Corrigan’s unimpeachable logic.

“Well,” he said, “to quote that great philosopher Popeye the Sailor, ‘I yam what I yam.’ You are what you are. That’s my opinion.”

* * *

Names can have an almost magical significance. In his book *Totem and Taboo*, Sigmund Freud observed that

According to the conception of primitive men a name is an essential part of a personality; if therefore you know the name of a person or a spirit you have acquired a certain power over its bearer. . . . For primitive men, as for savages of to-day and even for our children, a name is not indifferent and conventional as it seems to us, but is something important and essential. A man’s name is one of the main constituents of his person and perhaps a part of his psyche.

The power to name someone creates a certain power over them. For example, President George W. Bush was famous for the nicknames he gave to his staff, many of which had a belittling tone, though of course no one could complain. He called his attorney general, Alberto Gonzales, “Fredo,” after the idiot brother in “The

Godfather.” Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld was “Rummy.” Senior Adviser Karl Rove was, famously, “Turd Blossom.”

In school, some kids liked to call me “Chuck” to get my goat. Of course, there’s nothing wrong with the name Chuck. But it isn’t my name. Children know they don’t have to call you anything nasty to get your goat, as long as it’s their name for you and not your name for yourself. In other words, they’re asserting control over who you are.

In literature, of course, authors use their power to name their characters as a way of telling us something about them. James Joyce gave us Stephen Dedalus, a singularly un-Irish name, which stands for the Greek artificer. In E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India*, we have Adela Quested, a young woman on an addled quest; Ronny Heaslop, a repulsive runny he-slop of a man; Dr. Aziz, who likes things as is; and Mrs. Moore, who misses more. As Justin Kaplan and Anne Bernays point out in their book *The Language of Names*, Henry James’ *The Golden Bowl* offers up the remarkably named Fanny Assingham, whose name has three parts, each of which indicates the hind quarters.

Finally, there is Dickens, who had as fertile an imagination for inventing names as any writer going. His names usually mean nothing in any literal sense, yet they tell us everything essential about the characters. Scrooge, Gradgrind, Pumblechook, Bounderby, Buzfuz, Grimwig, Fezziwig, Murdstone, Micawber, Smallweed – he kept a notebook in which he jotted names as they occurred to him for possible use later. Sometimes they took a little work. Kaplan and Bernays tell us that Dickens tried out Chuzzletoe, Chuzzlebog, and Chuzzlewig before settling on Martin Chuzzlewit.

Some people have taken control of themselves by choosing their own names. Amiri Baraka, Elijah Muhammad, Louis Farrakhan, and Malcolm X, among many others, all shed names they identified with their historical oppressors. Others changed their names to avoid association with a disfavored nationality – during World War I, author Ford Hermann Hueffer became Ford Madox Ford, painter Albert Rothenstein became Albert Rutherston, and diplomat Louis Battenberg became Louis Mountbatten. There is a persistent rumor – probably false – that the conductor Leopold

Stokowski, who was born in London, was actually named Stokes and adopted Stokowski to have more gravitas on the podium.

Even politicians, in whose careers honesty is supposed to play a somewhat greater role, have changed their names to win more votes. Here in Illinois, judicial candidates especially have favored Irish-sounding names. James G. Smith ran for judge and lost. He changed his name to James Fitzgerald Smith and won when he ran again. A lawyer named Frederick Scott Rhine lost in the 2002 judicial primary, so he changed his name to Patrick Michael O'Brien and ran again in 2005. But in 2007, the Illinois legislature passed a bill requiring all ballots listing candidates with changed names to include a line with the old name and the words "formerly known as." No faux Irishmen for us!

To be sure, not everyone in the public eye has yielded to the pressure to adopt a simpler or more "normal" name. As Frank Lackner pointed out in his 2010 paper "Haec Nomine," it used to be common Hollywood practice for actors with strange or difficult names to adopt "better" ones: Rock Hudson, Cary Grant, John Wayne, Judy Garland, and so on. Today, though, we have younger actors like Jake and Maggie Gyllenhaal, Chiwetel Ejiofor, Zach

Galifianakis, Adele Exarchopoulos, Stephen Tobolowsky, and Wayne Digrante, who all go by their birth names without stunting their careers.

People often adopt pseudonyms for their postings on the Internet. Often those pseudonyms express some aspiration on the writer's part, tweaking the writer's self-image by focusing on what the writer likes or does. For example, "BBQHound" or "SweetScientist" or "Trainman." Using pseudonyms allows people to control how they're identified by others. But some commentators argue that the use of on-line pseudonyms emboldens bullies, and bigots to post statements they wouldn't dare make if their true identities were apparent, leading to the ultimate demise of a civil society – assuming it's not already dead. Others, like Judith Donath, a fellow at Harvard's Berkman Center for Internet and Society, argue that using on-line pseudonyms can promote open discourse by protecting posters from harassment, spam, and other invasions of privacy. No doubt that's what former congressman Anthony Weiner had in mind when he posted on line as "Carlos Danger."

* * *

My uncle Bob, a lawyer, changed his name to Ingalls. He urged my father, who was an engineer, to do the same. “No client wants to hire someone whose name he can’t pronounce,” Uncle Bob liked to say. “Why should we care about this name anyway? It was never really ours.”

But my father never went along. “Your grandfather went through life with the name Ichachuc,” he told me. “He never let it get in his way. He provided a home for us. He put food on our table. He sent Bob and me to college, though he had no education himself. The name ‘Ichachuc’ is on his death certificate, though I admit it was misspelled. But I’m not going to mess with the name now.”

I occasionally thought about changing my name back to Tomashefsky, as it was before. Once I went to the courthouse and listened to a morning session in which person after person went before a judge with a petition to change his or her name. The judge asked every one of them, “You’re not doing this to escape paying your debts, are you?” The whole process seemed a bit sordid.

Nowadays, there is a profession of name counseling. A woman in Chapel Hill, North Carolina named Kelly Utt-Grubb advises

clients on choosing or changing their last names. According to a recent newspaper article about her work,

After struggling for years with which name to use after her marriage, Cincinnati Psychiatrist Dr. Tammy Huber-Wilkins hired Utt-Grubb to help her decide. "Even as a Psychiatrist, I had not considered the depth of meaning and associations I had regarding my name," said Huber-Wilkins.

* * *

Long after my grandfather died, I learned that his older brother Sam was one of the "Morgan Jews," a group of immigrants processed from 1905 to 1907 at Ellis Island by a United States immigration official named Ted Morgan, whose names were all changed to nonsense syllables. My college roommate, Jack Bradford, sent me an article he had read in *The New Republic* called "A Roll of the Dice," which, he said in a cover note, mentioned my name. The author had discovered that this man Morgan kept a set of lettered dice and threw them to make up a name whenever a Jewish immigrant stepped up to his desk for questioning. Initially, each Morgan Jew had a nine-lettered name, so there must have been nine dice. Eventually, Morgan must have lost one of the dice, because the later group of Morgan Jews had names with only eight

letters. We were evidently in that later group. The whole process stopped suddenly on July 12, 1907, when, according to government documents, Morgan's employment at Ellis Island was terminated for "lack of productivity."

The author was unable to determine why Morgan had decided to change everyone's name with his aleatory system. He successfully traced one of Morgan's descendants to Red Bank, New Jersey, but the descendant, a great-great grandson, knew nothing of his ancestor's scheme, nor did he have the dice. The author asked one of the Morgan Jews what he was thinking when Morgan had rolled the dice. "I thought he was deciding whether I should be let into this country," the man said. "So when he rolled the dice, he looked up at me and said 'Welcome to the United States, Mr. Uftampil,' and he shook my hand. I just moved away as fast as I could so he shouldn't change his mind and send me back."

Another Morgan Jew told him, "My name in the old country was Goldwasser – 'gold water.' What does that mean? What is gold water anyway? Urine? It was a stupid name. Is Pijulotaf any stupider?"

Though he could not find Morgan's dice, the author realized it might be possible to recreate them based on the frequency with which certain letters appeared in the Morgan Jews' names. For example, if a letter showed up twice in a name, it could be assumed that it appeared on at least two dice. In my case, for example, there must have been at least three dice having one side with a "c." And if certain letters appeared more frequently than others, it could be assumed that either they appeared on more than one die, or that they appeared more than once on the same die. The author consulted the famed New York University statistician Rainer Clohessy to determine whether a regression analysis could establish what the dice were, but the statistician told him the sample size was too small. As he explained, the number of possible combinations of nine dice is 6^9 , or 10,077,696. The author wrote that, for just a moment, he had wished that Morgan had not been terminated and that he had created a much larger pool of names for analysis.

Nevertheless, Clohessy did offer some interesting observations. For example, he noted that many of the names appeared to alternate vowels and consonants into discrete syllables. If Morgan

threw all nine dice at once, that result was unlikely to occur very often. But if Morgan threw the dice one at a time, alternating “consonant” dice with “vowel” dice, the alternation could be explained. He supported that hypothesis by observing that, after the ninth die was lost and the names changed to eight letters, there was a significant decline in syllabification, suggesting that the lost die had consisted entirely or mostly of vowels.

The article’s byline was Andrew Falls. Through some friends in publishing, I was able to track him down to an address in Washington. I left a message on his voice mail saying that I was related to a Morgan Jew, and I asked if I could meet him to discuss what he had uncovered.

He returned my call several days later. “Hello, this is Drew Falls,” he said. I understand you are a Morgan Jew. But you didn’t tell me your name.”

“It’s Ichachuc,” I said.

“With a *k* or a *c* at the end?”

“A *c*.”

He agreed to meet me at a Starbucks near DuPont Circle. When I asked what he looked like or what he would be wearing, so I

could recognize him, all he said was, “I look like a *New Republic* writer.”

When I got to the Starbucks at the appointed time, I scanned the room and saw him sipping an espresso. He had sandy blonde hair and was wearing a dark blue crewneck sweater, from which the collar of a light blue oxford-cloth shirt barely emerged. Over that, he wore a mixed brown Harris Tweed jacket. He looked, in other words, like every preppie I had known in college.

“You found me!” he said when I approached his table. He stood up and held out his hand. “Drew Falls. Nice to meet you.”

“Thanks for agreeing to meet me,” I replied. And then something struck me. “But just a minute,” I said. “Your name isn’t really Drew Falls, is it?”

“You caught on,” he said. “It always surprises me how few people do. Sure, it’s a *nom de plume*.” He made a show of pronouncing the words in the French way.

“Why do you use one?” I asked.

“Originally,” he said, “I thought it would be appropriate to show some solidarity with Morgan’s victims by throwing some dice and coming up with a name for myself. I bought nine ordinary dice

and spray-painted them white, and then I wrote random letters on each face with a magic marker. On my first throw, they came up with something like Hempihall, if I remember correctly. I thought that wasn't quite weird enough, though, so I threw again. I don't remember what that one was, but it also didn't satisfy me. As I was about to throw the third time, it occurred to me that I was giving myself choices that Morgan's victims didn't have, and in doing that I wasn't really honoring them in any way. I had read about a rapper named Biggie Smalls, and for fun I started thinking of similarly oxymoronic names, like Shorty Tall, Curly Strait, Stocky Slim, Putin Kahl, Bryden Groome. Then Drew Falls just popped into my head, and it seemed perfect for the article. But my editor said he didn't like using nicknames, so he changed it to Andrew, which of course ruined the effect. He was clueless."

"How was this Morgan able to accomplish his scheme," I asked. "Wouldn't the other inspectors have seen him?"

"That assumes they would have cared," Drew Falls said. "But one of the Morgan Jews I spoke to mentioned being taken to a small room, where the dice were thrown."

I didn't recall seeing that detail in Drew Falls' article and said so.

"Well, I couldn't be sure of that part," he told me. "The man was very old and frail. I didn't want to mention it if I wasn't confident in his memory."

I pointed out that the article didn't say how he had come on to the subject of the Morgan Jews in the first place. "Oh," he said, "That's easy." He told me he had been doing a profile of Ethan Btajervod, who originated the Btajervod Theorem. "I remember asking him, 'Did you ever consider calling it something besides the "Btajervod Theorem"?' Something that might be easier to pronounce?' 'You don't name your own theorems,' he replied. 'The scholarly community decides what to call them. I just published the paper.' 'Well, where did your name come from, anyway?' I asked him. 'I've never heard anything like it before.' 'Ellis Island,' he said, nodding. As though that explained everything. So then I started digging into the records."

* * *

It is indeed a common story among immigrants who came through Ellis Island in the late 19th and early 20th centuries – which

is the vast majority of immigrants to this country – that the immigration officers had changed their names. My great uncle’s change from Tomashefsky to Ichachuc was dramatic, but many names were simply shortened or Anglicized, presumably because the immigration officer didn’t hear the name correctly or couldn’t spell it in the old world way. Some immigrants attributed the changes to the officer’s benevolent desire to be helpful in giving them an “American” name. In some cases, members of the same family who arrived at different times got different names. My mother’s father was admitted as Tanenbaum, but his younger brother, who arrived three years later, became Tenenbaum, maybe because the officer didn’t hear him correctly. There is an old joke about a nervous man who had a memory lapse when the immigration officer asked his name. “*Schoin vergessen,*” the man said, which in Yiddish means “I just forgot.” He was admitted to the United States as Sean Ferguson.

Ellis Island is one of several small islands in New York harbor, originally a low-lying mudbank of about three acres used by the Lenni Lenape tribe for oystering. In 1630, the Dutch West India Company purchased it and for a time it was known as Little Oyster

Island – Big Oyster Island being what is now known as Liberty Island. In 1765, a pirate named Anderson was hanged there, and then the place became popular for hangings. So for a time it was known as Gibbet Island.

Around 1774, the island was acquired by Samuel Ellis, a local merchant and farmer who had emigrated from Wales. After his death in 1794, the island was purchased by the federal government for use as a fort.

Aerial photos of Ellis Island today show a very unnatural squared-off shape, with three arms, something like the capital letter “E.” Starting in 1890, the original natural three-acre site was enlarged with landfill, some of which came from tunneling the New York subway system. The present island is 27.5 acres.

Ellis Island opened as an immigration point in 1892. Its original structures were made of wood, and in 1897, they burned down. In December 1900, the first of a new set of brick and stone structures was opened. At its peak, Ellis Island employed a staff of 552, including doctors, nurses, clerical personnel, and immigration inspectors. In the great hall, there were 21 cordoned lines, each

staffed by an inspector, whose decision determined whether a new arrival could enter the country or not.

Immigrants were classified according to their “nationality.” By far the largest nationality, according to the way in which the U.S. Government classified them, was “Southern Italians.” Between 1899 and 1931, 3,310,015 Southern Italians entered this country. Behind them were 1,911,253 “Hebrews” (so classified regardless of where they were from); 1,644,107 Germans; 1,508,653 Polish; 1,313,716 English; 1,065,624 Scandinavians; 1,053,500 Irish; and smaller numbers from many other places.

The peak year for Ellis Island was 1907, when it processed 1,004,756 immigrants. According to Philip Cowen, an immigration inspector at Ellis Island from 1905 to 1927, in 1907 Ellis Island officials processed an average of 5,000 people per day, occasionally as many as 5,800. The maximum number of inspectors was 21, so each inspector would have processed about 250 immigrants per day, which would not leave much time to question and document each one.

Many writers paint a relatively benign picture of how Ellis Island functioned. But Barry Moreno, author of the *Encyclopedia of*

Ellis Island, notes that, in the early 20th century, “Corruption was rampant at Ellis Island.” The corruption mainly involved imposing charges on immigrants for services that should have been free, as well as outright theft of immigrants’ money and property. Among officials of that sort, there seems no reason to expect care in the recording of immigrants’ names.

The story of name changes at Ellis Island dies hard. The immigration authorities deny it ever happened. Starting in 1893, American law required shipping companies carrying immigrants to compile a ship’s manifest containing certain information about each passenger, such as name, age, place of origin, destination, marital status, etc. The manifests were then to be used by the immigration officers in processing the new arrivals. Whatever was written on the manifest at the port of embarkation became official upon arrival in the U.S. But, as David Brownstone, Irene Franck, and Douglass Brownstone observed in their 1979 book *Island of Hope, Island of Tears*,

the work done by the shipping companies was often rushed and careless. . . . In the early years, some manifests filed were simply false

Thus, the government's official story is not to deny that names were changed, but to blame the ships' manifests for the changes and to hold the immigration officers free of any responsibility. The immigrant, it is assumed, would have had no way of knowing whether his name was changed by the shipping company on the manifest or by the immigration officer at Ellis Island. Upon arrival, however, an immigrant could try to convince the inspector that the manifest was mistaken; if the inspector was convinced, he would cross out the name as written on the manifest and write the correct name above it.

All those records have been preserved and can be viewed online at the National Archives or the Ellis Island history center site. Without much difficulty, I was able to find my uncle's records, showing he had arrived on the *Smolensk* from the port of Libau in Latvia on May 5, 1905. The name "Tomashefsky" on the manifest has been crossed out and, above it is written "Ichachuc."

* * *

In 2003, I came across a movie called "Shattered Glass." With an introduction saying it was based on true events, the film was the story of a young reporter named Stephen Glass, who was on the

staff of *The New Republic* and had written many gripping articles on such topics as drunken revels at a convention of young conservatives; on an organization called the Union of Concerned Santas and Easter Bunnies, which promotes fair working conditions for mall-based Santa Clauses and combats the negative stereotype that they are all drunks and pedophiles; and on a bratty teen-aged hacker named Ian Restil who had been paid tens of thousands of dollars by the software firm Jukt Micronics not to hack its computer system. Glass was widely regarded as a new journalistic superstar who managed to find amazing stories the other staff writers could never get.

You may remember the events. It turned out that Glass was no investigative reporter. The things he described with great precision and vibrant detail never happened; the vivid and racy conversations he quoted never took place. When his editor at *The New Republic* started having doubts and began asking for corroboration, Glass manufactured evidence. He arranged for his brother and others to impersonate people he had quoted in his articles. He created counterfeit interview notes or claimed his notes had been stolen. He produced trinkets he said he had picked up at

the young conservatives' convention. He even designed and posted a fake corporate web site for Jukt Micronics in an effort to convince his editor that it really existed.

Though it took a surprisingly long time for the editor to accept that the magazine had been duped by the fabrications, Glass was eventually fired, and *The New Republic* published a statement saying it believed that 27 of the 31 articles Glass had written for the magazine contained – as the magazine put it – “at least some fabricated material.”

The movie's credits said that the script was based on an article in *Vanity Fair* by H.G. “Buzz” Bissinger, who had written that wonderful book about high school football in Texas called *Friday Night Lights*. I looked up the article, which began with a head shot of Stephen Glass. He wore a blue oxford-cloth shirt, a repp tie, and round steel-framed glasses. Of course, he was Drew Falls. The article ended with a list of Glass' 27 *New Republic* Articles that contained “at least some fabricated material.” “A Roll of the Dice” was not among them. But I wondered if the magazine had gone to the trouble of fact-checking everything Glass had written or

whether it had just stopped at 27 articles, figuring that was *mea culpa* enough.

The possibility that Glass had fabricated the story of Ted Morgan seemed outrageous. I wrote to *The New Republic* and asked whether they had concluded that “A Roll of the Dice” was all genuine. In response I received a form letter stating that the magazine had “long ago concluded all involvement with Stephen Glass and will not be making any further disclosures.”

I called Rainer Clohessy at NYU to find out if he could confirm anything “Drew Falls” had written. Clohessy had retired from teaching and held office hours infrequently. When I finally reached him by phone, he was wary of my questions. He said he vaguely remembered a young journalist who had come to see him with a set of lettered dice, but he could recall nothing of their discussion. He told me he had already given that information years ago to someone who had said he was the journalist’s boss.

I then tried to reach Ethan Btajervod, but there was no such name, and nothing about any Btajervod Theorem, in Google. Perhaps I had heard the name wrong or was spelling it incorrectly. I had no idea what discipline the theorem was supposed to involve –

mathematics, physics, philosophy, genetics? Several university people I know were unable to help me, so the trail ran cold.

* * *

In his great work *The American Language*, published in 1919, H.L. Mencken devoted an entire chapter to name-changing in America. Mencken ascribed many name changes to “the sheer inability of Americans to pronounce certain Continental consonants, and their disinclination to remember the Continental vowel sounds,” particularly German *umlauts* – the *ö* sound of “Goethe,” the *ü* sound of “Mueller,” and the *ä* sound of “Kraemer.” Mencken concludes, “[i]f a foreigner clings to the original spelling of his name he must usually expect to hear it mispronounced.” Until at some point, tiring of the endless correcting, the immigrant changes the spelling of his name to match its “correct” American pronunciation.

The American inability or unwillingness to pronounce certain sounds is profound. Tadeusz Kościuszko was a Polish nobleman who volunteered on the American side of the Revolutionary War and was largely responsible for designing the fortifications at West Point. The bridge in New York City between Brooklyn and Queens is

named in his honor and is called by locals the “KOSS-kee-OSS-ko” Bridge. A county in northeast Indiana is named in his honor and is called by the locals “kozz-AH-sko.” A town in Mississippi, where Oprah Winfrey once lived, was named in his honor and is called by locals “Ka-ZHESS-ko.”

Sometimes the spelling of a name has nothing to do with its pronunciation. I can envision the editorial board at the *New York Times* freaking out, after Chairman Mao died, at the idea of a headline reading “Dung Chosen to Lead China.” Obviously another spelling was needed. “Dang,” “Ding,” and “Dong” each had its problems. “D-E-N-G” was the obvious answer. It could be pronounced “Dung,” but the *Times* could avoid putting “D-U-N-G” on its front page. If he were an American, he would have gone through life saying “My name is spelled Deng but pronounced Dung,” like the upper-class twit on Monty Python saying “My name is spelled Raymond Luxury-Yacht but pronounced Throat-Warbler-Mangrove.”

* * *

Last September, I received an e-mail from itchy73@gmail.com with the subject “Family Tree.” I didn’t recognize the address, but my spam filter let it through. Though I normally avoid opening e-mails from people I don’t know, the combination of the name and the subject line overcame my fear of viruses and my mistrust of hucksters. The e-mail read:

“Hello Mr. Ichachuc. You don’t know me, but I think we are related. My name is Jordan Ichachuc. I am 44 years old, and I live in Apalachicola, Florida. I have recently been doing some genealogical research on our family. Through that I have learned that my great-grandfather, who was born Sam Ichachuc, had a brother named Aaron Ichachuc, who I believe was your grandfather. Our branch of the family has lived in Florida since Grandpa Sam moved here around 1914. I only met him once or twice before he died, but my father told me Grandpa Sam was a magician in the old country. When he came here, the other immigrants couldn’t afford to pay much for that kind of entertainment. He couldn’t speak English, so the locals couldn’t understand his patter anyway. So he gave that up and went to work in a shoe store. My father

remembers him doing sleight-of-hand tricks at home, and when he hid the *afikoman* on Passover, no one ever found it.

“After Grandpa Sam moved here, he changed his last name to Gambel. That was my father’s name, and that’s how I was born. But when I found out that our real family name was Ichachuc, I decided to change it back.

“I have been able to construct a family tree as far as I know it, which is attached to this e-mail.

“If you are ever in the Florida panhandle, I would really like to meet you and get some information about your side of the family. They say our oysters down here are pretty good. I would like to ask you a favor, though. According to Google, you live in Chicago near the Newberry Library, which is supposed to be a great place for doing genealogical research. Maybe you have heard of it – you know, it’s where the girl worked in the movie ‘The Time Traveler’s Wife.’ If you are willing to help me by looking a few things up there, I would be very grateful. My goal is to create a complete chart of all our living relatives and their ancestors. Also, if there are any names you can fill in on the spreadsheet, that would be a big help.

“Sincerely, Jordan Ichachuc.”

After reading the e-mail, I felt indescribably sad. This Jordan Ichachuc had built a whole fantasy for him or herself thinking there actually is a family called Ichachuc, with a history going back enough generations to fill a file at the Newberry Library. I used to think I knew how we got the name, though now the whole story seems burdened with doubt. On the other hand, I admired Jordan Ichachuc for taking hold of his or her identity by changing from the artificial “Gambel” back to the name he or she *believed* to represent the family’s true history, strange as that name was. I wondered whether I would feel differently about myself if I were to change my name back to “Tomashefsky.”

In any event, I had no reason, other than sheer meanness, to burst Jordan Ichachuc’s bubble. So I wrote back and told him or her that I have one brother and two first cousins on my father’s side, though because Uncle Bob had become an Ingalls, their name isn’t Ichachuc. I also mentioned that I know the Newberry Library very well and would be happy to look for whatever information he or she wanted me to find – knowing, of course, that I would find nothing.

About two weeks later I received a small box with Jordan Ichachuc's return address. Inside was a typed letter. It started with an apology. "I wasn't completely candid with you in my last note," he or she wrote, "but I wanted to get to know you a bit better before telling the whole story. Though I am truly trying to compile a list of all our relatives, my reason for starting on this project was that my father recently died, and I'm the executor of his estate. In his will my father left bequests to certain relatives. Though he didn't know you by name, he left a bequest to the descendants of Aaron Ichachuc, his grandfather's younger brother, whom he had never met. Since I am in contact with you, I am sending you the bequest. If you have relatives who might be entitled to share in it, please let them know. I believe there is a letter enclosed with the bequest, which I assure you I haven't read. But if there's something of interest to the family history in it, I hope you will consider sharing it with me. Sincerely, Jordan Ichachuc."

Underneath Jordan Ichachuc's letter was a bulky envelope. I thought it odd that Jordan would have sent the bequest in cash, and of course my mind immediately started spinning fantasies of

how I would spend the money – if I decided, that is, not to share it with my brother and cousins. How would they ever know?

I opened the envelope with some difficulty. When I finally pried the seal apart, I found no money inside. Instead, there was a roll of bubble wrap covering a small object. I unrolled the bubble wrap and held out my hand to catch its contents. A blue and red cube dropped into my fingers. The edges were worn down to expose the underlying wood. There was a letter on each face: A-O-N-I-Y-R.

Underneath the little cube were two deeply folded pieces of paper that had darkened and become brittle with age. I opened them up and found they were covered in a shaky scrawl written in blue-black ink with a fountain pen. The first page seemed to pick up in the middle of a sentence, as though previous pages might be missing.

“I saw ‘Apalachicola’ on a map,” the paper said, “and I thought, if people who live there can pronounce that name, they would not think Ichachuc is so unusual. So I started down there, stopping in small towns along the way to sell socks and gloves from my pack. One day a man approached me at the train station where I had arranged my socks and gloves on a bench. He offered to sell

me a package of socks like the ones I was selling, but for 5 cents cheaper than I had been paying. I asked him where he was able to get socks so cheap. 'Does Macy's tell Gimbels?' he said. 'What does that mean?' I asked him. He explained that Macy's and Gimbels were the two biggest department stores in New York and that they competed for every customer. I decided I liked the name Gimbel. But I was worried that if I took it this great big store in New York would prosecute me. I thought of changing it to Gumbel, or Gombel or Gembel or Gambel. Gambel seemed to fit. So when I got to Apalachicola, I introduced myself as Sam Gambel. I built a push cart. I rented a storefront. I called it Gambel's, but everyone in town called it the Jew Store. I never really changed my name. I just told everybody I was Sam Gambel, and no one ever asked me for proof. People seemed to like me. My English got pretty good, and –"

The page ended there. The next page seemed to pick up at a different place.

". . . which is why in the old country," the letter continued, "they called me the *kischef-macher*, the magician. I could find a dove in an empty top hat, twist a nose rag into a rabbit, shoot a live

butterfly from a shotgun. These are not difficult if the animals are well trained. My specialty was the hidden ball. Many *kischef-machers* could put a small steel ball under one of three cups, move them around, and you could never guess which cup the ball was under. But I used only two cups. So you had a 50-50 chance of getting it right. But no one ever did. Whichever cup they picked, the ball was under the other one. I had great hands. They were so soft and flexible. I was double-jointed in every finger. I got a manicure at the barber shop three times a week. I rubbed them down with cold cream every morning and night. When I came to Ellis Island, I said I was a bread baker, because everyone eats bread, and I thought there must always be a need for more bakers. But the man at the desk asked to see my hands, and when I held them out, he said to me in bad Yiddish, '*Du bist nisht a becker. Dein hente sind zu weisch*' – 'You're no baker. Your hands are too soft.' '*Du bist a Shpieler*' – 'You're a gambler.' I thought he would send me back to the boat, because no country wants more gamblers. I tried to speak, but nothing came out. He held up his hand to stop me. '*Ish bin oich a Shpieler*' – 'I am also a gambler.' '*Komm mit mir*' – 'Come with me.' He led me to a small room with

only one window. There was very little light. From a box on a table he produced nine shot glasses. The glass was dark brown. He picked up the first one, put his palm over the rim, and shook it. I could hear a clinking noise inside. Waving his arm like I used to do after twisting a nose rag into a rabbit, he emptied the shot glass on his desk. A small blue cube rolled out and came to rest a foot or so away. The side that was on top had the red letter 'I.' Then he – ”

The writing stopped there.

I picked up the little blue cube. “Ichachuc” has only eight letters. Grandpa Sam the magician had palmed the ninth die.