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Imagine my surprise when I picked up the paper some time ago to learn that Jacob is the most popular boy's name in the U.S. I was born 80 years too soon. When I was a kid, most of the guys I knew were named Bob or Sid or Irv or Al. The Irvs could be Irwin or Ervin or Irving; and the Als could be Alan, or Allen or Albert or Alex or even Alvin! There were also several Milties, Seymours, and Arthurs, and some Biblical names were around: Dave, Sol, Sam, and Joe, but they didn't sound too Jewish. No Jewish kid was named John. Now, wherever you look, there's a Jonathan.

To be honest, for most of my life, I thought being named Jacob was (forgive me) the cross I had to bear. It was the name given to me by my mother. And it was compounded by my last name, Schlitt, given to me by my father. I really thought that was too much. How I envied my friends with such wonderful names as Teddy Blank, and Norman Lowy, and Alex Roth, and Sid Stern. They were Jewish, but their names didn't hit you over the head with it.

So what do your friends call you when your name is Jacob? As a pre-teen, I was Jakie, and that was Jake with me. As a teen-ager, it became Jake, and I didn't mind it since there were lots of cowboys in westerns named Jake. I didn't particularly like being called "Jake the snake" but I was able to live with it. I guess because the name sounded Jewish, one friend took to calling me Jay which I thought was silly, but that was his problem. What surprised me the most was when I worked for the Jewish Labor Committee and met professionals in the Jewish community relations field, they, without exception, called me Jack. I hated it. It seemed to me that they were trying to assimilate or Americanize my name. I found myself constantly correcting them: "My name is not Jack. Call me Jacob, Jake, Yankel or Yaacov, but not Jack."

As a kid, my classmates had a field day with my last name. The kindest pronunciation was "Schlitz" and I was constantly asked if I was related to the beer. Many non-Jews had trouble pronouncing "shl" and the name became "Slit" or "Slits." Of course, clever classmates came up with remarks like "I'll knock the 'I' out of you." The more crude ones simply called me "shit." I chose not to make fun of their names and simply responded "fuck you."

It wasn't until I went to work for the Jewish Labor Committee in 1956, at the age of 29, that my feelings about my last name changed. It happened when I met Jacob Pat, the legendary head of the agency. I had been hired by the JLC's Civil Rights Director Emanuel Muravchik (there's a mouthful) the month before. We were passing each other in the hall when Pat looked at me quizzically and asked me, in Yiddish, if I work here. I answered in Yiddish that I did. He then asked "What's your name?" I answered "Schlitt." He nodded and said: "Schlitt. That is a wonderful name." I asked him why he said that, thinking he was kidding me. He responded by asking me if I knew what Schlitt meant. I told him that I thought it was Yiddish for sled. He shook his head, smiled and explained that it is from the Hebrew "shalit" which means leader. It changed my whole self-image.

MY concern with names obviously extended to the naming of my children. When, in 1955, my wife was pregnant with our first child, we were faced with the challenge of a name. We had agreed that, since Sylvia's parents were alive, the baby would be named after my parents. If it was a boy, no problem; his name would be Lewis, after my father Louis. However, since my mother's name was Celia (Tsirl in Yiddish) we struggled to find the "right" name. It had to begin with a C and it had to sound something like Celia and Tsirl. We agreed on Carol. Being stationed in Augusta at Camp Gordon, Georgia at the time, friends thought it would be great if we named the baby Gordon if it was a boy, or Augusta or Georgia for a girl. Thanks, but no thanks..

Our son was born three years later and we named him Lewis, but I had a problem. My mother had written in her will: "It is my wish that in the event that my son JACOB should marry, that the first daughter of such marriage should be called MALKE and the first son of such marriage should be called DAVID in honor of my parents." Despite her wish, I felt that my first obligation was to name my children after my parents, and I hoped that I would have the opportunity later to fulfill my mother's wishes. Four years after Lewis was born, Sylvia gave birth to our daughter Martha (Malke). That took care of half my obligation to my mother.

Over the years, I became reconciled to the fact that I will not be fulfilling my mother's desire that I name my children after her parents. Then, a few years ago, when I was rummaging through her papers, I came across her birth certificate. It was faded, torn and difficult to read, but I made out her mother's name Malco Golstain and her father's name Jacu Golstain. Aha! My mother's parents were not Malke and David. They were Malke and Jacob, and I was named after her father. So who was David? Of course—my mother's grandfather, who was very important to her.

Time passed. Carol, Lewis and Martha grew up. Sylvia and I separated. I moved to Boston. I met Fran Morrill. We married and had a son. And we named him David. And I was finally able to fulfill my mother's wishes that I have a daughter named Malke and a son named David.

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