# The History, Adoption, and Regulation of Jewish Surnames in the Russian Empire

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## Introduction

Between 1880 and 1924, over two million Ashkenazi (Eastern European) Jews immigrated to America from the Russian Empire, where repeated pogroms made life untenable. They came from Jewish diaspora communities in the Russian Pale of Settlement (the territory where Jews were permitted to live in the Russian Empire, encompassing modern Poland, Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova), the vast majority of them entering America through the Port of New York, at Ellis Island.

Many of these Jewish immigrants had strange, foreign-sounding surnames, very different from the surnames of their American-born children and grandchildren. How did these immigrants originally obtain their Russian or Eastern European surnames? Where did they get them from, and how long did they have them? When, where, and why were they changed?

The purpose of this presentation is to explain the various laws and mandates pertaining to Jewish surnames in the Russian Empire, so that those who are interested in Jewish genealogy will better understand the complexities of Jewish surname adoption and use. The first part of the presentation presents a concise history and overview of these laws and mandates. The second part examines the effect that these laws and mandates had on the adoption and use of surnames by Jews living in the Pale of Settlement, through the examination of original Russian censuses and other genealogical documents.

## Background

There has always been a certain mystique associated with Jewish surnames. Part of this mystique is due to the fact that many Ashkenazi Jews, whose ancestors immigrated to America, do not know how or where their surname originated, or even what they mean. They may be vaguely aware that their American surname was changed from a different ancestral surname in the old country, but the origin and history of their ancestral surname remains a mystery for most.

This lack of knowledge regarding their ancestral surnames has led to many stories and legends among Jewish families about how their ancestors' surnames were shortened or changed as they passed through Ellis Island, although the facts do not bear this out. Immigrant inspectors took the surnames directly as they were recorded in the ships' manifests, and never altered them unless persuaded that a mistake had been made in spelling or rendering the name.

However, Jewish immigrants frequently changed or "Americanized" their own surnames, often during the period between immigration and naturalization, the thinking being that in America, it was more advantageous to have an American-sounding surname.

There are similar misperceptions regarding the adoption and use of Jewish surnames in the Russian Empire. Jewish families often have oral histories which involve a grandfather or great-grandfather being adopted by another family, and his surname being changed to avoid conscription into the Russian army. In reality, however, adoption was not an option for most Jews living in the Pale of Settlement, and a series of czarist edicts, laws, and regulations made changing surnames very difficult for Jews in the Russian Empire throughout most of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

The history of the adoption, regulation, and use of Jewish surnames in the Russian Empire is quite complex. There were a myriad number of ways by which Jewish surnames were created, assigned, or adopted, while tight restrictions were placed on changing or altering surnames. One principal mandate was that members of different households had to adopt unique surnames. In response to these mandates, Jews adopted surnames based upon the places they were from, the occupation they had, their nickname, their spouses' surname, their parents' given name, the decisions of the *Kahal* (local Jewish community councils), or the whims of the local Russian authorities.

As a result of these Russian laws and mandates, many non-related Jewish individuals acquired the same surname, while many related people acquired different surnames. This situation has created many challenges for genealogists who try to trace the ancestry or locate descendants of a particular Jewish lineage, many of whom have different surnames, as well as for interpreting the different results of DNA tests for Jewish descendants, who are often assumed to be related because they share a common surname.

**Summary**

Until the emancipation of the Jews in the late 18th century, most Jews in Europe used the traditional system of patronymic names. This was particularly true in the Russian Empire, where Ashkenazi Jews living in the small towns and villages of the Pale of Settlement, had little use for hereditary surnames. Most people in these small towns knew each other, and patronymics or nicknames were used instead of surnames.

All of this changed with the Czar's edicts of 1804 and 1835. These edicts required every Jew to forever retain, without alteration, a known inherited or legally adopted surname. Although instances of illegal surname changes undoubtedly did occur, especially among those who tried to avoid military conscription in the Russian army, these instances were, in all likelihood, the exception rather than the rule, as it was up to the local Jewish community leadership to determine which young men would serve in the military.

An important aspect of these edicts and the ensuing regulations that often goes overlooked, was the emphasis on adopting unique surnames for the occupants of each separate household. This was done largely for taxation and military conscription purposes. The direct result of these edicts was the adoption of different surnames by members of the same family, if they happened to live in different residences, resulting in the creation of numerous subdivided family units of interrelated people having different surnames.

Although administratively expedient, the inevitable consequence of this production of new surnames on such a grand scale, was the loss of familial contacts and connections across the generations. This has obvious and important implications for the practice of Jewish genealogy.

There is a widely held belief among many that because Jews were largely free to choose their own surnames, that most did so. However, a high frequency of specific naming patterns in various regions of the Russian Empire makes this unlikely, and strongly implies the active participation of Jewish community leaders, as well as local Russian authorities, in the surnaming process.

There is another widely held belief that many Jewish children were adopted by neighbors and relatives, and their surnames changed, in order to avoid conscription into the Russian military. However, for most of the 19th century, Jews were forbidden from adopting children, and even after Russian civil adoption laws were liberalized somewhat during the early 20th century, legal adoption and the transfer of paternal surname was permitted only in rare circumstances.

Due to these strict Russian civil child adoption laws and policies, when Jewish parents with children remarried in the Russian Empire, they generally became step-parents rather than legally adoptive parents. Russian censuses from widely different towns, as well as from different periods throughout the 19th century appear to bear this out, as the children of second marriages nearly always retained their original surnames on the censuses.

As a result of the 1804, 1835, and 1844 edicts; the 1850 law**s** prohibiting Jewish surname changes; the May Laws of 1882, and the additional edicts and regulations issued during the 19th century, once surnames were adopted by Jews in the Russian Empire, they remained relatively stable. This history of Russian civil laws and policies led Beider to conclude that: “Most Jews who lived in the Russian Empire at the beginning of the 20th century carried the same surnames that their direct ancestors had adopted one hundred years earlier.”

At the same time, however, the frequent adoption of different surnames by individual members of the same family during the early part of the 19th century resulted in the creation of numerous family units of related people having different surnames. In addition to the “Americanization” of Jewish surnames, this may explain, in part, why so many closely-related Ashkenazi Jews with Russian ancestries have completely different surnames. This has greatly complicated their efforts to trace their ancestries, or to locate common ancestors with individuals with whom they may be a genetic match.

Both of these seemingly contradictory characteristics – the legally mandated creation of numerous separate, yet interrelated families, each having their own unique Jewish surname, and the relative stability of these surnames over most of the 19th and early 20th centuries in the Russian Empire – have combined to create a complex tapestry of Russian-derived Ashkenazic Jewish surnames, which has important implications for the practice of Jewish genealogy as we know it today.

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