A Writing Life

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Preface II
Acquiring a Name

You, the reader, hold my life in your hands. Even my afterlife, which is what memoir becomes when life reaches a completed whole.

Memory is malleable. Revisiting one’s past can be like recording on an Etch A Sketch, on which events are drawn, then often altered or erased. Since distortions of memory can make us feel better about ourselves, recollections often color, conceal, or concoct the past. There is a little of that here, in my cautious handling of a few names. Invading the privacy of the living or dead may result in some awkwardness, even for the next generation. Aware of possible insensitivity, I have on occasion altered names, or dropped surnames. Survivors or their descendants may see through the thin veil. Otherwise I write about what I believe happened.

I have revisited not only memory, but files going back to my curious birth certificate and my first-grade report card. I was a pack rat. Why I saved so much was not that I expected to be worth remembering but that concretizing my memory seemed, early on, important to me. I cultivated the process. (According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the verb “concretize” is even credited to my writings.) I have saved boxes and files of stuff, and for better or worse trashed much more. Every move or change in life leads to lightening the load of the past. Some of the missing residue from the former century has escaped to recycling and the dustbins.

Putting the past into pages inevitably foreshortens events and other people’s roles in them. Perhaps others, living or dead, would have told many things differently. The past belongs to them also, but here they have lived in my life. Yet no deliberate invention intrudes into these pages. Early on I lived with the recording of immediacy. Talking pictures were in their infancy in 1929 and media revolutions beyond anyone’s imagination still continue. My times encompass too many wars,
in one of which I served, and an earlier one that foreshadowed my future. Nevertheless, I cannot pretend that the world would have been markedly different had I not intruded into it.

My intimacy with the makers and shapers of my time and earlier has largely been indirect, as a biographer and a historian. On paper I have lived closely with Lawrence of Arabia, Queen Victoria, James McNeill Whistler, Benjamin Disraeli, Charlotte de Rothschild, George Washington, Bernard Shaw, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, George Catlett Marshall, and other bold-face names. I have rejoiced at their achievements, felt chagrin at their slips and often wept at their deaths as I described them. In imagination I attended their obsequies.

The names in my life obviously begin with my own, which was partially a blank page. Memoirs often involve lucky breaks, or unlucky ones; chance encounters; self-made opportunities; grotesque mistakes and irresponsible mishaps. My name was one of the above. I entered life without one.

Happily obsolescent as writing strategy is to open with “I was born …”—but my case may be one of the exceptions. My birth certificate had an empty space front and center, as my mother and father had failed to concur on a name for me. When a nurse arrived each morning to my mother’s room at St. Agnes Hospital in Philadelphia—new mothers in 1929 remained a full week, or more—she held out a pad and pen and asked, “Do you have a name for Baby yet?” Luckily for me, my parents hadn’t compromised on one of the grim alternatives they had discussed: Seymour. I had no name. Finally, as discharge loomed, the nurse with the clipboard declared that since state law required filing the birth certificate before I could depart for Percy Street, she was writing, as temporary expedient, “Male Baby.”

In the Pennsylvania state archives for new births, as a lasting mishap, I am still “Male Baby Weintraub.” When I was escorted to Fell Elementary School in South Philadelphia in 1934, I had long been called “Stanley,” but the first public record of that was for kindergarten registration. No legal entity for years after required certified evidence as to who I was. As a working teenager in wartime I received a Social Security number as “Stanley.” I was employed at every level as “Stanley.” Only the Army found a minor problem: I had no middle name. That was rectified by the bureaucratic “NMI”—“no middle initial.”
The crunch finally came when I was thirty-one in 1960. To fly to Dublin and London on research for a book, I needed a passport. To apply for one required legal documentation. Who was I?

I asked my mother to search her papers for an appropriate document. My first grade report card would not do. She turned up a rabbinical certificate of circumcision with my name, and a portrait of the mohel who wielded the scalpel and performed the ritual. The form proved unacceptable in Washington because it did not include the date and place of my birth. My Army DD-214 was also unacceptable. Reluctantly, she dug out her copy of my birth certificate. It read, in fading ink, “Male Baby.” Undeterred, she employed an eraser and scrubbed hard. Then with a ballpoint pen not yet in use in the year of my arrival, and differing in all particulars from the rest of the words written in April 1929, she wrote boldly over the ghostly expurgation, “Stanley.”

I might never go abroad, I worried. I might go to prison for forgery. At best I might have to go to court and request a lawful and time-consuming name change. Still, I posted my application and several weeks later received a passport which entitled me to renewals without ever having to expose the altered document again. I am still “Male Baby” in the files of the Bureau of Vital Statistics in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, but “Stanley” is my ballpoint-pen name. A writer should have a pen name, and I now had one.

The “S”—whether “Seymour” or “Stanley”—harked back to a great-grandfather I never knew, Samson Schechter, the father of my father’s mother, whose life statistics are no longer on record—if they ever were. In 1898 my father, like his father, was born in the village of Hotin, on the outskirts of bustling Czernowitz in Bukovina, then the easternmost “Crownlands” province of the polyglot Austro-Hungarian Empire. Czernowitz (after 1918 in Romania as Cernauti and since 1944 in southwestern Ukraine as Chernivtsi) was one of the vibrant cultural centers for European Jewry in the nineteenth century. (The other two were in the Czarist Pale, in Poland and Lithuania.) Annexed to Joseph II’s Hapsburg domains in 1774, it was legally Viennese German in language. In the decade before the death of the reform-minded emperor, Bukovina fell under his decree for Austria’s first census.

For Jews and many others, traditional surnames, as in much of Eastern Europe, were suffixes of son or daughter added to the name of a
parent in every new generation. Family names under the royal edict required the adoption of a continuing Germanic patronym. Often the choice recognized a father’s name, or the town of origin or residence, or an occupation. Apparently my parental forbear chose Weintraube: a cluster of grapes. The family may have had a vineyard, or produced wine.

There is still a Weintraubenstrasse in Vienna and another in Dresden, but somehow, in time, the final e was sloughed off the patronym. The surname survived and proliferated. Perhaps all Weintraubs are family, however distant. At one point there were several (including me) in Who’s Who in America. Google searches turn up a great many; others live their lives under barely recognizable variations suggesting very different origins.

Dad was four when his parents emigrated to the U.S. in 1902. He recalled nothing of his European years, nor his crossing. In 1918, war caused the dismemberment of the multi-lingual and multi-ethnic Austro-Hungarian empire and the absorption of Bukovina into Romania to the south, which led to my father’s citizenship papers, as he became of age, that referred to him as Romanian, which he never was. His mother Eta always thought of herself as culturally Romanian but she knew few words in the language not involved in cookery.

My mother’s parental family maintained a farm along the River Narew in Russian Poland that evokes to me scenes in the film of Fiddler on the Roof, actually shot in the early 1960s in a region of Croatia nearly forgotten by time. The family was dispossessed by Czarist edict, as were the tillers of the land in fictional Anatevka in the film, and forced into barely sustainable urban life in nearby Bialystok, north of the Narew. Her family in the overcrowded city descended from a long line of coppersmiths—miedziownik in Polish. (We still have centuries-old brass candlesticks.) Nevertheless, to seize opportunity, her brother Joseph was apprenticed to ecclesiastical woodcarvers, a craft he brought with him to America in the early 1900s, where his art adorns the Riverside Church in New York, the Sterling Memorial Library at Yale, and the DuPont Hotel in Wilmington, Delaware. Like young Mottel in Fiddler on the Roof, her eldest brother, Sol, somehow brought across the Atlantic his treadle sewing machine.
When her uncle Abram came to the Ellis Island immigration depot in New York harbor, the customs official, a German émigré, interrogating him could neither spell nor pronounce the tongue-twisting Polish surname he offered. “Let me give you a good American name,” he insisted: “mine.” Thus, my great-uncle entered the New World as Abram Isaac Zimmerman. Her father’s surname was more easily spelled, but its origins are murky. Segal appears to be a medieval acronym for the Hebrew phrase Se Gan Leviyyah, or Levite. Had Abraham Segal been interviewed by the kindly German-American official at Ellis Island who christened “Uncle Zimmerman,” my Zeyde might have been surnamed Brick—Ziegel in German.

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Some of my papers for A Writing Life have been hoarded for eighty-odd years. Did I think as a schoolkid that I would be collecting otherwise fleeting memories for use decades later? If I did, I should have realized that some pages written (mostly hand-printed) with a red pencil would fade into unreadability, even with a strong magnifying glass. Yet they survive, along with others in less faded ordinary pencil. Ink was something one dipped into at school, with a penholder and scratchy nib. For some kids, inkwells were potential terrorist weapons, watched over, often unsuccessfully, by wary teachers from the front desk. I had never heard of, then, nor seen, a fountain pen.

My early pages of cursive writing were, and are, rare. As I came to kindergarten and then first grade able to print at length, my teachers seldom asked me to write more than my signature, except at exercises where, with pen and ink, we were ritually copying Lincoln’s “Gettysburg Address.” That remained a requirement at least into third grade. Some stuff I hoarded over the years has not survived relocations. Happily—or unhappily—much did. The rest is fading memory, some of it perhaps only Fiction 101.