

What's in a Name? . . . for Roses and People . . .

Can They Make a Difference?

The history of my name is complicated. It begins with the history of the family name which was originally **Rikito**, a Ukrainian word for a low-growing bush. It is my understanding that this was the name of my great grandfather. He had been approached by a man who had no children, and who wanted my great-grandfather to change his own name to **his** name which was **Gorodovich**, a name that means urbanite: **Gorad** is a city, like Leningrad or Petrograd. This was my father's name as he grew up, and it remains the name of his siblings. My father joined the revolution in 1917 and fought in Trotsky's army. He developed typhoid, was hospitalized in Odessa, and was befriended by a Jewish medical couple who urged him to remain in the Soviet Union, go to medical school, and become "The new Soviet man."

My father went home and told this plan to his father who said it was not a good plan because "the Bolsheviks are just as antisemitic as the *Tzarists*." He decided to desert the Red Army, and he crossed into Romania and changed his name, from **Gorodovich** to **Goradowski**, so people would think that he was Polish and not Russian. Even though he was not a Zionist, he joined a group that was recruiting young people to go to Palestine, and he came to Palestine in 1921. When he arrived, he changed his name to **Earoni**, which is the Hebrew equivalent of urbanite.

He immigrated to the United States in 1924 and took back the name **Gorodowsky** again. He had a younger brother as well as two sisters. His younger brother's name was David. David had also wanted to join the Red Army, but my father told his father that it was not a good idea, and that it was too dangerous. However, this younger brother was killed by Ukrainian bandits who came to the town looking for my father, the Bolshevik. His brother was wearing his hat, and, therefore, it seemed appropriate that when I was born, I should be named David. I am 18 months younger than my sister Libby.

Before I was born, a spinster couple came to my mother and asked if she would name **her** newborn son after **their** father, whose name was Aaron. My mother agreed because she needed the money, as she hadn't paid the obstetrician for my sister's birth, and they gave her fifty dollars. So that's how I became Arnold David Richards. My father was not too happy with this naming, but he had very little leverage because he was having trouble making a living.

So **Arnold David Gorodowsky** was my name all through elementary school, junior high, and high school, and when I start a college at the university of Chicago in 1951 and 1952.

Then my mother decided to change the name *from Gorodowsky to Richards*, which was the name of my father's painting and decorating company: "Richard Painting and Decorating Company." The explanation was that people were having trouble pronouncing Gorodowsky, let alone spelling it, but I think the real reason was that she was concerned about my getting into medical school, and she feared that I would be rejected because I was Jewish. Gorodowsky was a Jewish name, and Richards was not, so, in the middle of my last year in college at the University of Chicago (which I attended as an undergraduate on a scholarship. It was also my first year of college because I graduated in one year due to having passed some tests), the name was changed, I had to tell everyone that I had a new name—which became my name throughout medical school, and remains my name to this day.

We need to be aware that discrimination for admission to medical school was a problem. In fact, my college dorm roommate's father was the Director of Admissions for Columbia *Medical School*. I did apply to Columbia and Harvard Medical Schools, and was accepted by both, but couldn't afford to go. I was also accepted by the medical school of the University of Chicago medical but I couldn't go there either because I had not received a Medical School Scholarship as I had for my undergrad years.

The roommate's name was Eric Elfman, and he assured me, knowing his father, that I was likely to be rejected from Columbia because I was Jewish. After I graduated from the University of Chicago, I came to New York and took the New York State Scholarship Examination for medical school. I came in seventh and was admitted to Downstate Medical College in Brooklyn Heights, which later moved to Flatbush. I was Arnold David Richards in medical school and I am Arnold David Richards now.

I'm not sure I am pleased with my mother's decision to change my name. I have thought from time to time of going back to my old name, but I think it's too late. All our children are **Richards**, and I don't think they would be happy with Gorodowsky.

The psychological implications of the name change are another matter. I *am* Jewish—very Jewish. My Jewish ethnicity is very much a part of my identity. The problem is that Richards is not a Jewish name. Richards is a WASP name, and I think that everyone who meets me for the first time wonders where the name Richards came from, since they know I am Jewish, and not a WASP, in a way, my name makes me seem like I'm an imposter, or that I'm trying to pass for not being Jewish, which is *what my mother had in mind*. Her aim was for me to go to medical school and become a doctor to fulfill her ambitions. She didn't think about the psychological consequences of changing my name, which she did with her own name in New York. While I was at school in Chicago, I learned by mail about the name change, and was sent a copy of the court order. I think my brother, whose name was **Richard J. Gorodowsky** suffered the most because his name was changed to **Jay Richards**. I think my father had less of a problem with it because he had the Richard Painting and Decorating Company after my brother, and, in fact, his customers called him, "**Mr. Richards.**"

The name change did not affect my sister Libby because she was already married and had a new name. I would like to learn more about how this name is viewed by my children, in any case, and answering the question "What's in a name?" would say a lot.