

A Name is a Name

Text written by Louise (Regehr) Wiens, Leamington, Ontario, February 2014

"Well Herr Sawatsky," my mother hesitantly began. "It was war time, you see, and my husband wanted to name our daughter after his mother. But since he had been torn from his family at such a young age he really wasn't sure what her real name was. He had some vague recollection of her being called 'Lisa.' So now, here we are." Wearing her trademark dark suit two-piece suit and black pumps, she sat upright in the plush leather chair clutching her purse as the lawyer took another puff of his cigarette and blew it into the already smoky and stuffy air in his office. Although he himself was also of Russian German background, I wondered if he even had a clue of what she was talking about.

I was a young graduate nurse applying for an out-of-province nursing license for the province of Alberta when I ran into some red tape. Although I had documentation of my birth in Germany, as well as immigration records, none of them matched my school records. At home they called me "Lieschen." Some papers said "Liesa," some said "Liesel" and of course all my school records said "Louise." No middle name. "I should have paid closer attention," my mother continued, shaking her head, "but we had other things to worry about at the time. I didn't even take her to school that first day in Canada. I sent her with my sister because she spoke more English. I think I went to work. And the principal registered her as 'Louise'." "Well that's very interesting," the lawyer responded. "We can certainly fix it, no problem. I will file the papers at the city courthouse and then attend the hearing to legally change it. So now's your chance. Pick any name you want," he laughed. "What? Do you really think that I'm going to change it to something like 'Ashley,' which is really popular right now?" I laughed. And my mother laughed too. So several weeks and \$500 later, it was a done deal.

My father has always been known as Viktor, with a "K," although for years he has told me that his name was actually David. "Just another figment of his imagination," I would muse to myself. We always celebrated his birthday in the beginning of the summer, although at some point during my childhood it switched suddenly to August 20. We all just went with the flow.

My seventeen-year-old daughter again laments, "I really liked those names and I would have been the only one in the entire school with that name. Erika with a 'K.' Or Emma. I like them both." "Well, it really doesn't matter anymore now, does it?" I chastise her. "I liked Emma too, but one of Oma's sisters who died in the war was called Emma and I thought she might cry just thinking about it. Or we thought we might name you Julianna, after your other Oma in Germany. But dad already has a cousin named Julianna Wiens. Anyways, Adam chose your name. You know he was seven when you were born and he chose to name you Rachel. And that was just fine with us. And it's a great name, isn't it?" I add. "And your middle name is Elisabeth. With an 'S.'"

Recently, while admitting a patient, a co-worker calls out to me, "Hey, can you decipher this signature?" she questions me with a puzzled look on her face. The signature is messy but I know immediately what it says. "Why that says Erika," I smile knowingly, with a "K". Looking up at me she furrows her brow. "That's a 'K'?"

It is shortly after midnight when the patient in 221-3 calls again. "I am so sorry to bother you again, Louise," she apologizes. "Hey, don't worry about it. After all, we have the same name, right? Elizabeth. Although, I know you spell yours with a Z and not an S." We both chuckle.

The nursing home calls with an upcoming dental appointment for my father. "Yes, that's Viktor, with a 'K'," I again remind them.

My expectant niece Ashley calls on the phone as any day now she will deliver a baby boy, to be named "Alessio." Married into a close knit Italian family, they had chosen the name carefully months prior. "The baby is coming soon," I remind my parents. "A boy. Alessio." With furrowed brow my dad examines my face. "What did you say the name was?" he responds, deep in thought.

I look at the computer files of the EWZ War Records, a database which includes the names of hundreds of thousands of names of Russian Germans. EWZ translated stands for "Central Immigration Process Control" [We Russian Germans said it stood for "*Ewige Wandernde Zigeuner*" (Eternally Wandering Gypsies.)] From 1941-1944 the Germans kept detailed records of their forcibly relocated deportees, including those in the Odessa region, where my father was born, and where Mennonites had settled for several centuries.

There was the hard evidence in black and white. My grandparents are both listed, along with their 4 children, including my father, listed as David Regehr, born June 20, 1929, not on August 20 after all. My Oma is listed as "Elisabeth," with an "S."

"What's your German name again?" the young nurse quizzes me, giggling. "C'mon you guys. Seriously," I shoot back. "Don't you have anything else to think about?"