‘Adolfine’ and ‘Hitlerike’

A linguist plumbs the nuances of Nazi-era names

By HEIDI LANDECKER

NAMES SAY A LOT about not only who we are but who we hope to be. In January, at the American Name Society’s annual meeting, in Portland, Ore., people who study names presented research reflecting that. A talk called “Velvet Elvis at the Mary Mart” examined the burgeoning names in the marijuana industry, like Bong Appetit, for a new cannabis cooking show on Vice Media. “How the Internet Has Changed Baby Naming” explained how prospective parents choose names they think unusual, and how those names may, surprisingly, boom so much in popularity that the most common baby names can now be predicted. Think of all the Owens and Madelyns you know.

Iman M. Nick, an American sociolinguist at the University of Cologne, studies Nazi-era names. She has analyzed the names of children in the Lebensborn homes, elite programs set up to educate the blond, blue-eyed youngsters designated to carry on the Aryan “master” race. The names of those children (some were kidnapped from occupied countries) were changed from, for example, Aloiszy to Alfred. That research, commissioned as a book by Rowman & Littlefield, also examines, among other topics, the “hiding names” Jews used to obscure their identities from the Gestapo.

In Portland, Nick talked about her study of present-day German attitudes toward names in use during the Third Reich. She asked German respondents to rate the degree of importance the Nazi period had for the names they might select for their children. Then she asked them whether they would name their daughters a variety of Aryan- and Jewish-sounding names; the respondents could answer “yes,” “no,” or “maybe” to each name. Her talk in Portland focused on four of them: Adolfine, Hitlerike (“-ike,” pronounced “ee-keh,” is a feminine ending in German), Yehudit, and Sulamith.

About Adolfine and Hitlerike, Nick explained: “After Hitler came to power, people were afraid. Names could be a stigma. There was a movement away from anything associated with Judaism, and that included names.” Some people chose the Führer’s name in the hope that “Adolf” and the feminine counterparts would be as safe as you could get. But Hitler soon put a stop to the namesaking. “There is only one Adolf Hitler,” he is said to have decreed. After the war, many of the eponymous Adolfs changed their names. Today families in which “Adolf” is a tradition may want to honor an older relative, but most will choose a nickname, like “Adi,” Nick says. The occasional Naziphile might choose those names, but Adolf and the surname Hitler, whose spelling was changed to “Hittler” and the like, dropped from favor even in the most right-wing circles.

Nick, a 47-year-old scholar with a buoyant smile, embarked on her study because of something that happened several years ago when she was visiting her German mother-in-law, who lived in a home for elderly people with dementia. Because of the older woman’s illness, Nick explained in Portland, it was easiest to talk with her about general, familiar topics. Nick asked her Schwesternmutter her favorite names, and she was pleased when the older woman picked Günter, the name of her son, the linguist’s husband. When the elderly woman asked Nick for her favorite names, she obliged: “Oh, I like names like Sarah, Hannah.”

“Those are Jewish names,” sneered another resident, sitting nearby. The disdain in the woman’s voice startled both Nick and her mother-in-law, and was remarkable since this woman, in the later stages of Alzheimer’s, ordinarily spoke little. Despite the woman’s advanced age and illness, Nick wrote to me after the conference, “she still had access to such raw hatred, all these years later.”

After the visit, Nick thought about how Sarah and Hannah had become popular names in Germany. She decided to test whether there was a generational difference in the reactions Germans had toward Nazi-era names, both those perceived as Jewish and those that sound Aryan. She studied two age groups: 45 and younger, and 46 and older. As she expected, neither the Nazi-resonant names nor the names perceived as Jewish were acceptable to the older respondents, except for a few who said “maybe” for Yehudit. Some of the younger subjects said they would or might name their daughters Sulamith and Yehudit—11.6 and 7.9 percent, respectively. To most of the younger respondents, all the names were too foreign: “I think Arabic- and Turkish-sounding names are much more unpopular than names from the Nazi period,” one subject wrote. “Sulamith and Yehudit are too exotic, difficult to pronounce, and sound Arabic.”

But to Nick’s surprise, a small percentage of the younger group said they would consider Adolfine or Hitlerike: Slightly more than 2 percent said “yes” or “maybe” to naming their daughters Hitlerike, and 0.7 percent said “maybe” for Adolfine. “Really?” she said, incredulously, to the conference audience. “They’d consider naming their children that?” Yes, their responses had shown her that a few of them would. It’s worth noting that Nick’s subjects were well-educated and knew what the names represented. None were likely to have been neo-Nazis—this study was done before the rise of anti-immigrant groups like Pegida, which has been staging marches across Germany since the fall. (The German acronym translates roughly as Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the West.) Some subjects may have been joking when they checked the boxes, but even if they “had done so in jest,” Nick told me, it is “extremely disturbing to think that anyone would find it humorous to consider naming their daughter after a person who led one of the greatest acts of genocide in human history.”

Of course, some Germans are still conflicted about the Nazi period. My German cousin, now in his 60s, once told me he hated the first Star Wars movie because all the bad guys had German accents and looked like Nazis. (His father’s cousin, my dad, was arrested in Frankfurt on Kristallnacht and sent to Buchenwald, but Germans as bad guys in a movie? That’s insensitive.) It is easy to see how my cousin’s generation, and his children, might feel a need to move on from the Nazi image. I asked at the conference whether naming your kid Hitlerike could have something to do with that.

Nick chose not to speculate on the reasons for her subjects’ choices,
but later she shared a comment from one respondent: “In my generation many people care about names of the Nazi period, but I think it will change in the future. There will be a time when Adolf is as normal as any other name because the contemporary witnesses all die.”

Nick is president of the American Name Society and chairs the ethnic-diversity committee of the Linguistic Society of America. She’s also president and co-founder of the Germanic Society for Forensic Linguistics, which is devoted to the linguistic analysis of forensic data; she specializes in suicide notes.

For her Ph.D., from the University of Freiburg in 2005, Nick examined the racial terminology historically used by the Census Bureau to classify U.S. residents of African ancestry: “mulatto” for a person half African-American and half white; “quadroon” for someone who was a quarter African-American, “octofoon” for an eighth African-American, and other such labels. Her focus was the “historical meaning of such racial terms both as used by the U.S. government and by the general public,” she explained via email. The shifts in that vocabulary present a “chilling and nevertheless invaluable and dynamic picture of national ethnoracial consciousness,” she continued, noting that the leaders of the Third Reich also used such racial classifiers (half Jewish, a quarter Jewish, etc.) for carrying out their policies.

In Germany, to become a professor requires postdoctoral study in an area different from one’s Ph.D. dissertation, eventually qualifying for “habilitation,” which gains a scholar the title “Professor” along with “Doctor.” For her habilitation, at the University of Cologne, Nick studied language acquisition and identity among adults with bilingual bicultural parentage. Along with having strong teaching and research records, candidates must speak on a topic chosen by the university’s habilitation faculty. Often, Nick says, only those professors come to such talks, which can be highly specialized.

Nick’s habilitation lecture was on the names of runaway slaves in America. She compared the surnames of slaves listed in advertisements in colonial newspapers with those of their masters, finding that slaves kept the last names of their former masters far less frequently than is commonly believed. “Every seat in the auditorium was taken,” Nick recalls, and professors stood aligned at the back of the room. “The drilling lasted an hour. It was great! Like the Nerd Olympics.”

She speculates that the overflow crowd may have been a result of a controversy over whether she would speak German or English, which would have been acceptable given her topic. A vocal contingent at Cologne thought a candidate for the highest degree offered by a German university should speak German.

However, Andreas Rohde, her habilitation supervisor, says people came because her topic was intriguing and because Nick “is an extremely popular teacher/lecturer at the University of Cologne.” Whatever the reason for her outsize audience, after her talk, in Germany, in 2011, she was awarded the habilitation.

Born in New York City, Nick earned undergraduate degrees in German languages and literature and in psychology at the University of Maryland. (“How are the Terps doing this year?” she asked early in our correspondence.) She went to Germany in 1991, in an exchange with Saarland University, during a time of rising neo-Nazi sentiment. She was attacked, more than once, in the street. Her housemates asked her to avoid the windows so people wouldn’t know a black person lived there. She says the fact that she, a black woman and a foreigner, could get degrees from a German university and have an academic profession is thanks to others who fought for those things. “It is my turn to pave the way for the next generation,” who will take it further. “You have to continue to see the big picture,” she says.

Nick sees nothing unusual about being interested in names; most people are. She credits her late mother, Venita Lamour, with giving her the name Iman Makeba (for the South African singer and activist Miriam Makeba) to honor her roots, and for making her proud of her history. Her survey of Germans’ attitudes toward Nazi-era names shows why we need to educate people “about the historical importance of names and naming,” she says.

The linguist ended her lecture in Portland with a photograph of a demonstration against Muslims this past fall in Cologne. Her last slide was a photo of a Stolperstein (literally, “stumbling block”), one of the brass-covered cobblestones that the artist Gunter Demnig engraves with the names of Jews deported from their homes. The cobblestones mark where the deportees lived, and the artwork is controversial. Some critics say the stones in the ground remind them of how the Nazis used Jewish gravestones for cobblestones. A few cities, including Munich, have tried to ban them.

But Demnig has been laying the Stolpersteine in cities across Europe since 1997, and there are more than 48,000 now. The one Nick showed bears the name Sulamith Starke, born 1924, deported to Auschwitz in 1943, where she died. The scholar who studies names dedicated the talk to her.

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