

The Counter Where Names Go To Die

by Gita M. Smith

Inside Ellis Island 1912, arriving immigrants are being processed. At one counter stands a middle aged man whose job it is to give people their new American identities. He changes their foreign-sounding names to more American-sounding ones. Paderewski becomes Drew; Ystremskaya becomes Strong; Wjohowicz becomes Howard.

The immigrants -- so malleable -- will do anything to become Americans. They suffer this indignity, which is far less onerous than many they have suffered in the past, for the sake of getting the papers needed to begin their new lives.

This man does his job efficiently and rotely. It doesn't occur to him that people have a right to their names as part of a long blood line stretching back thousands of years. To him they are just sounds — problematic in some cases — just strung together in chains that can be unlinked and made shorter. It is of no concern to him that these names have substantial meanings in other languages.

They may be place names, signifying battlegrounds or vinyards or lakes wherein the bones of generations now lie. These names may mean “son of so-and so,” signifying precious relationships and lines of succession no less important than those of Tudors or Hapsburgs: *Shlomo Ben Levi* — Solomon son of Levi. *Ibrahim Bin Saud* — Abraham from the house of Saud. Genetic history is seated in these names and yet, with a few pen scratches in a registry, he erases those connections forever.

He doesn't hear the music in “Delaprovatti,” or the rhythmic susurrantion in “Sipsizimani.”

One day a woman, one of several translators at Ellis Island, asks him why he has changed a passenger's name from Checchowicz to something else.

“The name was too long,” he says. “Ten letters.”

She replies, "But you didn't change O'Shaughnessy, and it has 12 letters."

She waits for an answer but he doesn't have one. Finally, "How does it hurt to shorten a name?" he asks. "You can dock a dog's tail, but he is still a Rottweiler."

She turns away and doesn't speak to him again.

Sometimes, when he is in the great City of New York, going about his usual life at a Chinese shirt laundry, for example, or the fish market, he sees the hostile looks of the immigrants around him. He has been bumped in lines and glared at from vegetable stalls, and he is not sure why.

He doesn't recognize the faces, but they recognize him. He is the man at the counter where they lost their names. He is the man who stands on the spot where names go to die.

