

A Genealogist's View of Czech Family Names-Part 1

By Miroslav Koudelka

For this column, I am pleased to present the first part of an article written by Mr. Miroslav Koudelka, Czech Republic Regional Representative of Czechoslovak Genealogical Society International (CGSI).

“Family names constitute an important part of our heritage. Handed down by generations for centuries, the name symbolizes the family, identifies each of its members and his or her relationship to other members of the kin. It is a phenomenon that is of interest to any person engaged in genealogy.

And yet, family names have not been accompanying our society for the whole history, they are a relatively young aspect of human lives.

People originally had just one name, the one we today call forename (given, first name). For a long time that was a sufficient way to determine a person. And if someone needed to be more precise, they added the father's name. References such as “Simon son of Jonah” are known already from the Bible. With growing population during the Middle Ages, however, the range of given names was becoming less and less satisfactory. At first nobility started using various kinds of epithets (such as Richard the Lionheart, Charles the Great, Procopius the Bald). The attribute used most often was the name of the place the family had originated from – either actually or just by a legend – or where they had the main seat (Rudolph of Habsburg, George of Podibrady).

As for common people, not belonging among nobility, the process of adding a surname started in bigger cities. A large number of people living in a small closed up area, with dozens and hundreds of men named Jan, Martin or Václav and women named Marie, Anna or Kateřina, those were the reasons calling for a more particular way of referring to individuals. And then, step by step, the use of these “additional” names was spreading out into the country, among lower classes as well. In the Czech Lands it was a matter of the 1300's thru 1700's. Originally there were no strict rules to use surnames at that period, people simply followed traditions – and they were different in various areas, as we will see below – or a person may have been called with a personal nickname, completely different from the surname of his or her father.

A breaking point in the process of constitution of family names was an edict issued by Emperor Joseph II on November 1, 1786. It established that surnames were hereditary and unchangeable, every child was supposed to get the names after father and a wife after her husband. Like everything in that period, it took years and in some areas even decades till these rules became commonly used by every clerk or priest – and every common person – in everyday life. Anyway, because the edict bound a person's surnames to the family (rather than the house, the estate or a nickname), we can say that since then we can speak about actual family names.

The number of family names used in a country is certainly not fixed, especially in the recent period it has been growing because of migration. But it is quite interesting that the basic range of family names constituted both in Czech and English was quite similar – around 40,000. It will be interesting, I believe, to take a look at the way surnames in the Czech Lands were created, in other words, what their sources were and what their semantic interpretation can be.

Before we start, let me underline that “can be”. We have a number of surnames in Czech the origin of which is obvious, but on the other hand, in many a case here are more possible explanations of a name's source and its meaning. So, the original meaning of the most frequent Czech family name, Novák

(derived from the adjective *nový/new*) is unambiguous – it referred to a newcomer and had the same meaning as Newman in English. But for example, as for my family name, Koudelka, the source is quite obvious too – the word stem, *koude* means oakum or tow, and *koudelka*, literally translated, is tow yarn. But if the ancestor of mine who first got that surname was a tow yarn maker or dealer, or if, let us say, the grayish light brown color of his hair resembled the color of oakum, that will remain in the mist, I am afraid. And if we go on and take the name Klíma, there even the source is not certain: It may have been derived from the given name Klement, or from the verb *klímat* (to be drowsing, lazy). Besides, in some cases the names may have actually been ironic:

A person known as Šikula (the skillful one) could have been a local jack-of-all-trades, as well as a local fumbler (aka klutz).

Father's Given Name

The first source of surnames has already been foreshadowed above – the father's given name. This way was widely used in other languages too – compare, for example, names like Peterson or Johansen in Nordic languages where the relation between the suffix *-son/-sen* and the meaning “son of Peter” or “son of Johan” is obvious. In the Czech society it had a somewhat different form. Our language – unlike English, let me add – offers a large range of suffixes to make diminutives. And this way of word formation was used very often to create surnames. If there was a need to refer to a son of Jan, he was taken as the small/young Jan and got a surname with one of diminutive suffixes. Most productive were suffixes *-ek, -ec, -eček, -ka, -ík, -íček*. So, the surname with the meaning “the young Jan” could be Janek, Janeček, Janečka, Janík, Janíček, Janka. And surnames derived the same way from other frequent given names are, for example, Martinec, Martínek, Martinka, Martiník, as well as Pavelec, Pavlík, Pavlíček, Pavelka, and the like. A similar sort of surnames of this kind are those that originally had the form of possessives. They adopted the possessive suffix *-ův* or *-ových*, sometimes preserved it (Janův, Janových) but often dropped off the last *-v* and have been preserved as Janů, Martinů, Pavlů, etc.

Multiple Variations of a Common Name

The derivation of surnames from given names could have gone another way, however. Sometimes they used various forms of the same name – as for the varieties of Jan (and their diminutives), it could have been Janda, Jandáček, Jandačka, Jandoušek, Jandák, Jandas, Jandásek, Jandera, Janderka, Jandát, Jandourek, Jandourek, Jandovský, Janák, Janáček, Janačík, Janko, Janouch, Janoušek, Jansa, Janza, Jašek, Jansta, Janata, Janota, Janžura, Jeník, Jeníček, Jeništa, and so on. When speaking about the name Jan, in Latin and German it is Johannes. And there are a large number of Czech family names derived from this foreign form of that given name, particularly from its middle part *-han-*: Hanuš, Hanus, Hanousek, Hanoušek, Haniš, Hansal, Hanýsek, Hanele... This way the number of Czech surnames derived just from the given name Jan goes well beyond a hundred.

Christian Saints

If we take into account the period when surnames were constituted in our country (as mentioned above, approximately 14th to 17th centuries), it is obvious that a vast majority of these surnames were derived from the names of Christian saints – in addition to Jan, Martin and Pavel mentioned above they were biblical names, namely Petr (Petřík, Petráš, Peterka...), Tomáš (Tomášek, Tomek, Tomeček, Tůma...), Jakub (Jakubec, Jakoubek, Jakubů, Jakubčík, Kubeš, Kubíček...), Marek (Marek itself, Mareček, Mareš, Marko...), Lukáš (Lukeš, Lukšík...), Matěj/ Matouš (Matějka, Matějů, Matějovský, Matoušek, Matocha...), Šimon (Šimek, Šimůnek, Šíma...), and then the names of Czech saints Václav (Václavík, Vašíček, Vacek...), Prokop (Prokopec, Prokeš, Průša...) and Vojtěch (Vojta, Vojtek, Vojtíšek...). Fairly

productive was the name of a saint from the 6th century, Benedikt: Beneš, Benda, Bendl, Beneda, Benák, Baňačka, Beniak, Benko, Benšik, Bína, and the like.

Anno 1803.

1	1	1	Josef	Barbara	Johann
			Zabrnj	Holubin.	Magd.
1	1	1	Frans	Sedlarzin	Frans
			Wenzel	Holub.	Kowaczkin
1	1	1	Johann	Sung	Frans
			Wenzel	Zatopkyn.	Josef
1	1	1	Josef	Barbara	Johann
			Wenzel	Kowaczkin	Magd.

Examples of combined ancient Czech-German spelling of family names. Notice the feminine forms (with the German suffix -in/-yn added to purely Czech names) Holubin, Sedlaržin, Kowaczkin, Zatopkyn, etc. - column with the white background. (Provincial Archive in Opava, Collection of Vital Registers, Roman-Catholic Parish Office in Kozlovice)

Out of all Czech family names, those derived from given names make the biggest group. Linguists dealing with this phenomenon write that up to one third of Czech surnames were constituted that way.

Professions/Position

An important characteristic of a person was his profession or the position in the local society. That was why this feature often became the source of a person's surname too. And it was a very productive source too, the social characteristic must have played a role more important in the past than today: In the general index to the 1654 "Berní rula" (Tax Roll) – which can be taken, among other, as the oldest survey of surnames in Bohemia– we can learn that seven out of ten most frequent surnames were derived from professional/social statuses. Most frequent was Kovář (blacksmith), second was Krejčí (tailor), fifth was Švec (shoemaker), sixth was Svoboda (free man, i.e. not a serf), seventh was Kolář (wheeler), eighth was Tkadlec (weaver) and tenth was Dvořák (free owner of a larger farm, or a man working at a bigger estate or even at a noble's court). And let me add that in eleventh position was Rychtář (village Justice of the Peace). The role of professions as a source of family names must have been decreasing over time, because today just the names Svoboda and Dvořák remain among the top ten.

A subdivision of surnames based on professions is made by those referring to tools used by particular craftsmen or their typical products. These would be names such as Jehlička (needle – a tailor), Sekyra (axe – carpenter), Bič (whip – a coachman), Žemlička (bun – baker), Pivec (derived from pivo = beer – barkeeper), and so on."

March 2010 Vol. 22, No. 2, Page 1; Copyright 2010 CGSI, reproduction granted by permission of CGSI.

Mluvíte Český? Do You Speak Czech?

Pavučina – ('PAH-vu-chee-na') - spiderweb

Jak se jmenuješ? ('YAK SAY YE-men-u-yesh') - What's your name? (informal singular)

Jak se jmenujete? ('YAK SAY YE-men-u-ye-tah') - What's your name? (formal or familiar plural)

Jmenuji se... (YE-men-u-yi SAY'...) - My name is...

As a rule, you should always stress the first syllable of a Czech word!

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Děkuji! Tony Kadlec