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My Name, My Story

What image comes to your mind when you think of the sea? Do you imagine a vast body of water, spanning far and wide? Do you imagine powerful waves crashing into a rocky bay? Or do you imagine a calm pool of blue, its water rippling back and forth with the salty breeze? My father, a man who loves the sea, imagined all these qualities. Many parents may find it an arduous task naming a child. Upon naming his first-born son, my father’s choice was as clear as a cloudless sky. He chose to name his son after that which he loved most. In Hebrew, the word “sea” translates from English to “Yam” (יָם). My family, originally from Israel, spoke Hebrew at home. My first name, Yam, was chosen by my father after the Hebrew word for sea. While our first names reflect the recent choices of our parents, our last names tell a story that reaches centuries back. Our last names reflect the culture, language, and even occupation that our ancestors had. My name, Yam Chimovits, is the culmination of the choices my ancestors made, and the environment they encountered. Thus, our names are analogous to stories, illustrating an image of our past, both near and far.

My father is a man of the sea. Raised in Tel Aviv, Israel, the sea was never far from his grasp. From an early age, he developed an affinity for the sea, often skipping class to relax on the warm, sandy beach. A competitive rower, my father would train in the sea with his rowing team for hours at a time. His favorite author, Ernest Hemingway, set his novel *Islands in the Stream* in the Caribbean. My father was enchanted by the picturesque imagery of the sea that Hemingway ingeniously illustrated through his writing. Upon turning eighteen, my father was drafted into the Israeli army, choosing to volunteer to Shayetet 13, a special forces unit of the Israeli Navy, analogous to the U.S Navy Seals. After his service, he traveled across continents, experiencing the majesty of seas he had never witnessed. My father loves the sea, so it was only fitting that he chose to name me, his first son, Yam, the Hebrew word for sea. For him, the sea represented both strength and kindness, as it could be stormy and powerful one day, calm and gentle the next. His choice to name me Yam was an extension of his lived experiences in the sea and the meaning those experiences gave him. For me, my first name is an extension of my father’s experiences, a man which I trust, love, honor, and respect more than any other. Yam is more than just a name; it is a story that encapsulates the experiences of the man who raised me and cared for me. For that reason, I wear my name proudly, as I am the product of those experiences.

My last name, Chimovits, tells a much older tale, going as far back as the 18th century. However, to understand the true meaning of my last name, we must travel back to a much more recent date, the early 1960s. Fresh off the boat, my grandparents arrived in Manchester, England in the early 1960s to study at the University of Manchester. Upon settling in Manchester, my grandfather had to report his last name to the immigration officers. Knowing little English at the time, he translated my family’s last name from Hebrew to Chimovits in English. However, this spelling was far from the proper pronunciation of my last name in Hebrew, which is spelled Haimovich (‘חיימוביץ). Not knowing any better, my grandfather left the translation as is. My father, who was born in Manchester in 1964, was given the improperly translated last name on his birth certificate, and the English spelling stuck ever since. The original spelling and pronunciation, Haimovich, still stands in Hebrew, and this is where the true meaning of the name lies. The name Haimovich can be broken down into two separate parts, the first being Haim, and the second being Vich. The name Haim (חַיִּים), means “life” in Hebrew, while Vich is an East Slavic patronymic suffix, translating to “son of”. Thus, the name Haimovich translates in English to “son of Haim”. This is significant, as my family records reveal that my earliest known ancestor, a man named Haim Shuv, lived in Russia in the 18th century. Haim had a son, who was given the last name Haimovich after the first name of his father, as is customary in the East Slavic tradition. It was there that the last name Haimovich was born. My last name holds meaning from the cultures and environments that my ancestors met. On the one hand, Haim represents my Jewish heritage, while Vich represents the Eastern Slavic culture my ancestors encountered. My last name is the story of a people meeting different cultures while holding on to their own, a story which I represent to this day.

In Israeli culture, children are not usually given middle names. Instead, children are often given nicknames by their parents, which are used in a family setting. My parents, originally being from Israel, gave me the nickname “Yamchuk” (pronounced Yam-Chook) at an early age. These add-ons at the end of the first name are often given to children by their parents at an early age, a symbol of affection. While the sound “chook” may be used, different sounds are used by different parents. These nicknames are often adopted naturally by the larger family. Even today, at twenty-three years of age, my grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins refer to me as Yamchuk, symbolizing a strong cultural bond. Although my nickname is not official, it tells yet another story of a culture which I come from and its significance.

Our names are more than just arbitrary letters, they encapsulate the lived experiences of our close and far ancestors. They represent their interests, the choices they made, and the environments they lived in. Our names tell us about our history, the culture our ancestors came from and the language they spoke. Our names are like a story, what’s yours?