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The Reason I Kept My Jewish Last Name

It took a trip to Sicily to figure out why I wouldn't be taking my husband's last name.

By [Ali Wunderman](#)

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I've always liked being a Wunderman. My last name is a conversation starter, the source of

almost too many Wonder Woman puns, and keeps me feeling close to my dad. So when it was time to get married, I had a big decision to make about what that would mean for my name, and with it, my identity as a Jewish person.

The concept of women taking their husband's names has always felt antiquated to me, as do basically all social constructs around gender, but as the surname of my husband, Michael Siracusa, suggests, he hails from a Sicilian family — specifically from the coastal town of, you guessed it, Siracusa. Let's face it, Alexandra Siracusa (said with all the proper Italian inflections) flows like Sangiovese from a Roman amphora.

But, it was mostly my attachment to tradition that made me question what I would do when the time came to sign that San Francisco City Hall marriage license. At the wedding, both of my parents would walk me down the aisle (in the Jewish tradition) to an artfully decorated chuppah (in the Jewish tradition), so I had to at least consider the option of taking his name and thus, some of his traditions, too.

Yet doing so would mean shedding the most obviously Jewish thing about me (thanks, Mom, for your half-Scandinavian DNA). My name lets me be part of that magical little moment when two strangers who happen to be Jewish meet and recognize each other as being cut from the same cloth, cementing the game of “Jew Or Not Jew” that — at least in my family — we are constantly playing.

Changing my name would also mean identifying myself by some random town in Italy I'd never been to. It's one thing to become a Smith or Jones or Diggs (please), but something else entirely to have to reply, “Siracusa? Never heard of her!” every time someone asks me about the origins of my very own name. My mom, sympathetic to my position, gifted Michael and I with the early

wedding gift of a trip to Siracusa so I could become acquainted with the ancestral land of the

family I was marrying into, and the root of my potential surname, if that's what I chose.

As we set out to cross the planet together to the land of arancini, Mt. Etna and mafia jokes that are absolutely not funny there, I had a final conversation with my dad about what it even meant to be a Wunderman.

The origin of my family's name is shrouded in mystery, possibly because my Grandpa Marty was a goofball until the day he passed (may his memory be a blessing). "Your grandfather used to say that when his father came to Ellis Island, they were given the choice of Wunderman, Winderman or Wanderman," but my dad doesn't buy this story. He thinks it was made up, inspired by their living situation. "At our apartment in Queens, we were 'the Wundermans in 201' because there was a Winderman across the hall."

I'm inclined to share my dad's suspicions. Wunderman sounds German, although Germans always laugh and ask me if I'm serious when I tell them my name, but apparently my grandfather's father immigrated from Romania. We have no idea what his name could have been before reaching the new world in the early 1900s to inspire those alleged options upon arrival. It's hard to even gauge if the Romania part is true, because when my dad took the Ancestry DNA test, his results were full blown Ashkenazi Jew, no country of origin specified. Even asking other Wundermans how they came to be is tough, as there are fewer than 90 worldwide.

Michael's own last name doesn't come without any hang-ups. His grandparents immigrated to the western U.S. from Sicily while pregnant with his father, just before the Great Depression. Their surname was actually Giansiracusa until it became essential to assimilate into American culture, which at the time was bigoted towards Italians, a sentiment American Jews were familiar with.

I arrived in Sicily determined to become intimately familiar with Siracusa, which fortunately meant eating all the pasta in sight, traipsing about the Greek relics of old, and chumming it up with the incredibly friendly staff at [Charme Hotel Henry's House](#), a boutique at the tip of Ortigia, the historical center of Siracusa. We were heartily welcomed first as guests and then as family

once they realized Michael was returning to his ancestral land, bride in tow.

There was an unforgettable moment when we drove to the nearby town of Ferla to surprise his Aunt Pina, thanks to the guidance of a perfectly coiffed, cigar-smoking neighbor of hers who pointed us in the right direction. It had been 17 years since Pina and Michael last visited, but she still delightedly invited us to drink espresso in her living room where we caught up through a mix of English, Spanish and Italian (including gesticulations).

Back in Siracusa, I was enamored with the ancient stones of the city and the millennia of stories they must harbor. I was already beginning to believe I could be a Siracusa when we stumbled upon Sicily's Jewish secret: Europe's oldest still-functioning mikveh, built as long ago as 535 AD, which had been recently discovered beneath a hotel in Ortigia. We took a tour and learned that Siracusa is home to the first Jewish settlement in Sicily — and one of the first few in all of Italy — arriving well before Christianity, making Siracusa a historically Jewish city.

It went on to be home to the Greeks, the Goths, the Visigoths, the Vandals, the Romans, and of course, modern day Sicilians. But even as the Jewish influence faded away, the mikveh endured, a little reminder that backgrounds and heritage aren't always so straightforward. It was proof that if I wanted to go from Wunderman to Siracusa, I wouldn't necessarily be sacrificing all my Jewishness.

Ultimately, as you can see from my byline, I kept my name. In seeing Michael so easily return into the fold of a city that gave him his name, I realized my name was all I have left of my ancestors. Like many other Ashkenazi families, my own emigrated from the Russian Empire following the pogroms, the ones who ultimately left Europe settling in San Francisco on my mom's side and New York on my dad's. Next to nothing is known about my ancestors prior to their arrival in the United States, including their names. In a way, Wunderman was the only thing they had to pass down to me.

Oppression, forced immigration, and loss of identity might be part of my family's history, but we

have survived despite it all, so it's my honor to hold onto the name that keeps our story alive.



Ali Wunderman

Ali Wunderman (she/they) is a freelance travel journalist, essayist, and novelist with work in The Washington Post, Cosmopolitan, Narratively, Travel + Leisure, and Forbes, among others. Originally from San Francisco, Ali now lives between Montana and Belize with her husband, Michael, and their two dogs, Sophie and Vinny.

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