

What's in a Name?

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As we approach July 4th our nation's day of independence, it is a time to reflect on what it means to be an American, and even what it means to be an American who lives in Eastern North Carolina. This was recently brought squarely to my attention as I attended a group who without malice, clearly stated they weren't sure about hiring a subcontractor who had the last name Yankov. It was just a "little to foreign". I have been explaining my last name for about thirty years, but mostly I just help people pronounce it. "Yan – like you are yawning, and kov – just as it's spelled."

So, perhaps it's time I have more to say about this. Yankov was my husband's name. His father was from Bulgaria. In Bulgaria, the old traditions rotate last names to the middle and then as the first name of future generations. If you had a boy child and your name was Doyno Yankov, then your son would be (a brother's name, in this case Jordan), Doynov Yankov. Jordan's sons would have the middle name Jordanov or Jordanka if female. It gets complicated and I wonder how often this is followed as the stability of last names has become the norm. Anyway, my father-in-law was born in Bulgaria and after WW2 when the Communists came to rule over Bulgaria he joined the Agrarian Party, an anti-communist resistance from the rural areas. He fled with a price on his head.

Mr. Yankov eventually arrived in West Germany and met Anna Luckert who had also escaped through the barbed wire of Eastern Germany before the wall was built. They neither spoke each other's language, but they did speak "the language of love.". They married and had their first son in West Germany. They immigrated to Erie, Pennsylvania when he was about two and later this son was naturalized along with his father as a young teen. The family settled down in Chicago and like many immigrants worked in factories. They built their own house on the rubble of a small city lot who's house had previously burned and was offered at a price they could afford. They never used loans. They put their first son through Loyola University and when he finished his bachelor degree he joined the United States Marine Corps as an officer and pilot. He married, had two children, and eventually gave the ultimate sacrifice to his adopted country, dying at the young age of 35 in a helicopter accident. He was my husband.

So, I could tell you that my whole mother's side of the family came from Chowan County and Perquimans' County. That my mother traced her ancestry back to England through the little Quaker Church that still exists in Hertford, North Carolina. I am very proud of this. The family names will be familiar: Byrum, White, Wright and more. Are those names less foreign? They come with their own dignity and passage of time present in Eastern North Carolina for many hundred's of years.

So, just how American is my name? I could have changed it many times since. I have never chosen to do so.

Maggie Yankov