

“What’s in a name?”

Shakespeare asked this in *Romeo and Juliet*. He believed his audience would find there’s nothing to a name. A name is simply a sign of a much bigger property—be it a location, a work of art or a human being.



Naming (and more importantly, renaming) has been on my mind quite a bit recently, owing to my daughter’s birth. She has a name now, but it took my girlfriend and me a month of negotiations and peace talks to arrive at one agreeable to both of us. The documents read: Mila Penelope Wilson.

The girlfriend laid claim to Mila—Slavic for “grace.” This name is beautiful in sentiment and sound. It encapsulates a trait I would love my daughter to carry throughout her life. Yet, I confess I was vehemently opposed to it. I have known only one Mila in my life; you know her too. She is a B-rate film star, an ex-cover girl. She married well, and she married French. That is the one association I have with this name.

Penelope was my choosing. This is not one of the score of names allowed to Slovenian girls. Still, I picked it for its classical allusion to fidelity. The Penelope of the *Odyssey* waited over twenty years for her husband, whose name (in English) was either Ulysses or Odysseus, depending on whom you’re reading.

Wilson is my last name. Since we aren’t married, even this was up for debate.

I say that her documents read Mila Penelope Wilson, because we never call her this. When she is getting her diaper changed, she is Lil Driska. When she is sleeping, she is Milicnik. When she pulls herself up, she’s Mocna. And, when she’s screaming, she is simply Mila!

When we were getting her application processed by the Slovenian passport agency, my girlfriend’s mother and brother implored us to change her name to Mila Wilson Plahuta. This was unacceptable; mutually, it was none of their business. Personally, I found it to be extremely Slovenian chauvinistic. Our daughter is the product of a plurality of cultures, and her name should reflect these. My girlfriend’s brother countered that the name we gave her would make her a stranger in Slovenia.

I always want to credit Slovenians with the insight the location of Slovenia would imply to Americans. Poised at the hinge of Italy, Austria, Hungary and Croatia, Slovenia possesses an array of dialects, drawn from its proximity to other languages. This impresses me as a scholar of words, and endears me as a traveler. It also seems to make many Slovenians strangers within their own borders.

It’s one thing to be small. It is another matter to think small. I grew up in Texas, a state internationally associated with small-mindedness. I have distinct memories of an early 90s uproar caused when one of Dallas’s streets—formerly Oakland Avenue—was renamed in honor of Malcolm X.

I now live in Izola, or Isola...depending on which language you speak. Here, signs give you the choice. The difference between these two words is so slight it hardly warrants a moment’s thought to me, much less different spellings. Yet, I recognize the courtesy.

And so, I was surprised when I opened a page of *Žurnal* (Journal, transliterated into Slovene) and saw a headline that read, “Vandali nad italijanske napise.” If you don’t know what that means, there was a photo of the bilingual “Now Entering” sign for Koper with Capodistria (Koper’s Italian name) spray-painted over in red and tagged with “SLO.” This juvenile act of linguistic nationalism was apparently reactionary, as Italian hooligans earlier torched a Slovenian day-care center in Trst. (Which Italians call Trieste.)

Arson is a crime; vandalism is just silly. And, the word gives life to a civilization that no longer exists. A bygone culture gets more credit than Slovenia’s neighbors currently give them. As proof, Haiderists voted the Austrian town of Bleiburg should be read only as “Bleiburg” on their signs.

A column is hardly the place to explore this. Or why Slovenians call Istanbul “Carigrad,” or why Englishmen call Mumbai “Bombay,” or why Spanish Caribbeans call New York “Nueva York.” Still, I wonder how Texans would fare against international scrutiny, if they decided to rename San Antonio “Saint Anthony.”

This is Slovenia, and Austria, and Italy...just names, small pieces of a bigger property. I suppose each are happy to be in the EU, but the vandalism at “Capodistria” and elsewhere speaks to something much darker in the gray areas of dotted borders.

On a lighter note, I’m renaming this column—formerly “Pagat Ultimo.” The goal of most parents is to grow with their children. I intend to do so, and rename this column “Growing up Slovenican.” ■