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What's In A Name?

My birth certificate claims, I am David Francis Tufenkian but I entered school as David Armand Francis. There's a reason. My father was born Francis Armand Tufenkian and raised in Fresno. Many Armenians came from Turkey to escape years of discrimination and eventually -the massacre of 1915.

Born in this country, Dad did not escape discrimination. He applied for a job in the Post Office after graduating from Fresno State College. He got a high score on the Civil Service Test. He didn't get called for an interview. He went to the Post Office to inquire. The man said, "Francis, with a name like Tufenkian, you're not going to get a job in this town!"

Names are tags, handles, and predictors. For Dad, his Armenian name him brought rejection. He left Fresno.

In San Francisco he sold rugs for his uncle Miron Babassinian, who owned the rug department in the City of Paris Department store. He sang in the San Francisco Opera chorus. He stopped

using Tufenkian and assumed the name, Armand Francis.

Encouraging customers to return, he said, “Just ask for Francis”

(pause) an easy handle to grasp.

I grew up as David Francis in Huntington Park. Getting a hair cut, at age nine, the barber asked,

“What is your nationality?”

He guessed, “Are you Italian?”

“No.”

“Spanish?”

“No.”

“What then?” I didn't have an answer.

When I got home I asked my mother, “What should I say?”

She said, “Tell them you are American.”

She was revealing our unstated rule:

“Look American.

Act American.

You are American.” (Pause)

“Armenian is not important!”

When I applied for college I needed a birth certificate. Mom got it and handed it to me. When I saw it, I was shocked! My surname was Tufenkian!

I complained, "Why wasn't I told?"

She said, "You knew it."

"No I didn't. I thought my name was David Francis," I said spitefully. I had lived seventeen years with a phony name.

Did I want to be Tufenkian?

No way! It was too heavy. My friends couldn't pronounce it.

No one could spell it.

Years later, Sue and I bought our first house. It was near Lewis and Clark College. As we started to furnish it, I imagined we need rugs.

My father's friend, Henry, owned a rug import business in San Francisco. I went in and picked out several rugs. He shipped them.

Suddenly, the room changed. As we sat talking with friends, the art on the floor grounded us and connected us.

I must have talked about it at work because Carol, an office

mate, said, “Why don’t you go into business?” That sounded like a big stretch. I started with a simple step, filing for a business name.

A. Tufenkian & Sons was an easy choice. It was credible, as I soon discovered. At the Post Office I bought stamps using my first

business check. I asked, “Would you like some identification?”

He said, “No, I recognize your name.”

The power of a name, it was all he needed.

My business plan was to sell rugs through design-oriented furniture stores on the West Coast. This took me from Anchorage, to San Jose. I shipped or brought in the rugs, set up a rug department, and trained the sales staff. The sale was on!

As I met customers, I introduced myself as, David Francis Tufenkian-connecting to my Armenian heritage and my role as owner.

Sue and I talked about changing our names. Jeff was in college and Jenny in high school. We wanted them to freely choose for themselves. We decided to go ahead.

Conveniently, our next-door neighbor was a Circuit Court

Judge. She held court on our front lawn. Our friends sat on Kelims. Sue and I briefly our feelings about this name change. Several women shared their experiences of name change.

I said I expected some emotional effects as we took back my family name. Tufenkian means “son-of-a-gun” some of my ancestors were gunsmiths or warriors, or had significant gun collections. This name implies power. It may communicate a threat: Watch out! I am a son-of-a-gun!

My grandfather Abraham saw me only once. I was several days old. He held my hands and predicted, “He will be tall.” I take his words to mean strong.

As I reflect on my twenty-two years in business, I see how this name propelled me.

It was as if Grandpa had said, “David you have the name. You have the power. Use it carefully. Aim it well. Use it for compassion and justice.

I intend to live up to this commission!