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NOTES OF A RETIRING FEMINIST

BY DORIS E. FLEISCHMAN {BERNAYS}

IN 1925 ship-news photographers clicked their shutters at the newsworthy sailing of the first American married woman to travel abroad under her own name. Newspapers next day actually ran the story and pictures of this event. Before that the Lucy Stone League had tried for four years to get the State Department to validate the legal fact that women are not compelled by law to assume their husband's name. The struggle had stirred up negative sentiment among the heads of the conservative Department. Neither friends nor influence had secured for any Lucy Stoner the right to sign her own name under her own face. I won the right by the device of understatement.

"Oh, no," said the shocked clerk at the New York Passport Bureau, looking at the maiden-name entry, "you have to use your *married* name."

"But I have no married name, I have only my name," I protested with dignity.

"Write to the Secretary of State," said the clerk, sneering genteelly.

"Certainly. Shall I have a statement typed?"

"No," he waved his hand, "write it on your application blank."

The message to "Mr. Secretary" scratched with a pen that might have been borrowed from a rural post office, read something like this: "Will you kindly have issued to me a passport under my own name. There is no law compelling a woman to use any but her own name, and I have never done so. Since it is apparent that the purpose of a passport is to establish identity, I assume you will not wish me to travel under a false name." That did it. In a few weeks the historic passport was launched, and in a few weeks more it was forgotten until the writing of this true confession of a way of life in the romantic 1920s.

We were fervid idealists in those days, fighting usually for means rather than for ends. We feminists wanted our own personalities, wanted to throw off the ascendancy of the male. What did we do about that? Not what you'd think. We grasped for a symbol — a name — instead of developing personalities of our own. We wore our Miss as a cosmetic, to conceal the underlying Mrs. No one was fooled by

DORIS E. FLEISCHMAN (BERNAYS) has been the wife and business partner of the eminent public relations counsel for the past 26 years. The formidable confusions concerning her name are, we believe, dealt with more than adequately in this article.

the paint. We bore children, baked cakes, said "yes, please" to our husbands, and tried to be good wives. We flirted, we smiled, we concealed pain, like other women, whether or not we walked big in the business and professional world. Feminists in general were — and are — feminine at home. Our individualities, as Sartre might say, were what we made them in whatever orbit we swung around.

My husband had been a fine encourager of the Lucy Stone League before he had suspected that his wife would one day forego his name. The League was founded in 1921, by Ruth Hale, almost as an unpremeditated act of passion. She told me how the idea originated in her mind. "I had no thought of keeping my own name beforehand," she said, "but when Heywood Broun and I were married, a friend rushed up to me as we left the altar, and said, 'Congratulations, Mrs. Broun.' I was furious, looked at her, and said, 'I'm not Mrs. Broun. I'm Ruth Hale.' I was so upset I rushed home and had hysterics." Ruth Hale's frenzy should have warned me then that I was no proper Lucy Stoner, because I had no emotional involvement in what I believed was a good principle.

Edward Bernays' marriage to me started off more calmly than Heywood's and Ruth's. We had gone quietly to City Hall, hoping to escape all attention. We must, however, have had some slight emotion, because I found myself sitting on my hat in the waiting room, and watched my husband forcing twenty dollar bills

into every palm within fingers' reach. Mr. McGargle performed the marriage ceremony with blushing cheeks when he learned there was no wedding ring. (A ring was taboo since we believed it was a symbol of wife-ownership.) "You can kiss her if you want to," he said, shyly, and the formalities properly concluded, we assumed that all outside interest in our union had ended.

Despite the bold and boisterous rebelliousness of the age, we thought marriage a private matter, and we believed deeply that any public notice of it was vulgar and even obscene.

II

Our marriage was to be secret. I cannot remember how the secret was to have been kept. Our families were proper, moral and conservative, and would surely have known that we had stopped living under their cozy roofs. Had we thought we could pretend not to be inhabiting a joint abode? We certainly had no intention of pretending to live in sin. It seems quite mysterious to me now. I can only surmise that we thought a principle, an ideal, somehow had dimensions that were as obvious to others as to us, and needed no explanation.

Directly we reached the Waldorf-Astoria where we were to honeymoon, all desire for secrecy blew away, like a mist in a sunny breeze. My husband grasped the telephone and called hundreds of his most intimate friends to tell them about our secret marriage.

The public was embarrassingly in-

terested in our personal venture. It became front-page news in a few hours. Out-of-town papers carried full banner headlines clear across the top of the page. We might have been a new war, instead of a new private alliance. It seems a little difficult today to remember why there was so much excitement about an obscure woman's decision to leave a name untaken.

There was less excitement but also less official poise when our first daughter was born in the fashionable obstetrics of Miss Lippincott, on Madison Avenue. The latter accepted woodenly the news that I was "Miss" and my husband "Mr." However, she wept when she presented the birth certificate and whispered: "Do I have to put in 'illegitimate'?"

Looking backward I am inclined to think that I entered too lightly this nominal obstacle race that has lasted 26 years with few stretches of clear running. The fine prize was that my own personality would be securely attached to my name. What has actually happened is that Mrs. stands to the right of me, and Miss stands to the left. Me is a ghost ego nowhere in the middle.

The truth may be surprising, but it is not bitter. Not that name-disassociation has not had its pleasant and amusing compensations. For instance, my husband who is supernormally generous and a congenital ego-builder, takes enormous pride in the pseudo-independence of his wife. Then, too, many women at the edge of intel-

lectual curiosity admire me for keeping up the appearance of independence. However, taking it on balance, as the economists say, the bargain was not good.

You might think that there is a professional advantage in using my own name, but actually, this is not so. After a long career, my name has no good-will value whatsoever, in spite of my husband's generous and gallant fight to apportion all credit to me as his partner. He is known to have a Mrs. Therefore, when I appear at a conference as Miss, I have status neither as his partner nor his wife. His name is so well known that it would be professionally valuable for me to use it. I'm presented as Miss to people who have heard only of Mrs., and vice versa. People have a way of saying, "What name do you write under?" emphasizing the pity of dividing a little fame two ways.

Strangers are often disconcerted. One day my husband hugged me — for some good reason, no doubt — during a discussion in his office, when Captain J., a most conservative official, walked in and blushed. My husband casually introduced me as Miss Fleischman without further identification. The Captain looked around the room in horror, possibly wondering where the casting couch was.

In casual social contacts, I am afraid that I have been a nuisance to my friends, an embarrassment to my family (with the exception of my husband), and a hazard to hostesses, who clearly ought not to be burdened with

an extra name to bandy about. Even ordinary introductions are difficult to a mind wrapped up in problems of olives and beer. "Please," whispered a dear little woman, balancing a tray of used glasses in one hand and a tray of pink-covered crackers in the other, "I'm so embarrassed. I'm really very embarrassed. I don't know how to introduce you. Some people tell me you want to be Miss, and some say you insist on Mrs." She mastered the system very efficiently. Another hostess was less poised. She said, "This is Mrs. Bernays, but she's really Miss Fleischman; I mean she's Miss, but she's really Mrs." as if she meant, "This is Jenny Jones, but she's really Billie the Rat."

Most people start well by calling me Miss, but quickly lapse into Mrs. The usual introduction is: "This is Miss Fleischman, Mrs. Bernays." A pretty little interior decorator wailed, "I can't ever remember which you want to be called, it's terrible."

"Just call me Doris," I answered kindly, "that'll fix it."

"Oh, I will. Thank you ever so much, *Mrs.* . . ."

A woman whom I hadn't seen for many years said, "Why how do you do? Oh, I'm so sorry, I don't know what to call you. Are you Miss or Mrs.?"

I answered, "Oh, I'm always Miss. But everyone here knows me as Mrs. You can call me Miss."

"Really?" she said, and vanished in a steam of clam chowder.

My daughters looked at me ac-

cusingly. "You just tried to confuse her, didn't you?"

"Yes," I admitted. There was no excuse for laughing, but we did.

III

Sometimes young people come to have a look at my placid, kindly face. Because I am so conventional-looking, the people who seem interesting and unconventional ignore me when I am miss-called Mrs., as just another Hokinson. Two women once discussed me as candidly as if I were deaf as well as different. One said, "I can't see why she has to use her own name." The other supported her. "No, she doesn't look so wonderful." People have, on the whole, been strangely reticent about discussing my name. Only one or two have asked why any woman should keep her name, and few have expressed even the mildest disapproval — or approval — for that matter. They have been more bashful than Kinsey researchers asking about sex.

Strangers have kept their reactions under so polite a cover that one must conclude that they believe some sex irregularity is involved or that they regard the abnormality much as they would a physical defect. At any event, it had better not be mentioned. Recently I have tried to drag the subject into the open. When my latest host asked how to introduce me, I said: "Alternate it. To every other one, say Miss, and to the others, say Mrs." The effect was startling. "Why? Why?" they asked. After I had ex-

plained, a charming woman of rigid antecedents said briefly, "Baloney," but would not particularize.

Occasionally, use of my own name has given me a sense of separate individuality. Once at a cocktail party, a beautiful woman attached herself to my husband and after a few minutes of intense pre-symbolic conversation looked indignantly at me as if to say "I saw him first — why don't you scream?" I did, of course, to my husband's delight, since he didn't want to be saddled with a Mrs. at that point. And one evening at a public dinner, a fascinating Economics Professor urged, "Let's get out of here and have some fun. You don't have to wait for that so-and-so who brought you."

There have, however, been a few moments of revenge. One sunny day I ran into an old school friend whose name had been so difficult that I failed to remember it. He asked coyly, "And have you changed your name?"

I answered sweetly, "No, I haven't, have you?" To my embarrassment, he stuttered, "Well, as a matter of fact, I have!"

The only really unpleasant experience I had concerned another Lucy Stoner. A tense situation was staged impromptu by my brother. An intermittent feminist, he was the only member of my family who approved my Miss. He was brilliant, but given to intellectual slapstick. One evening on Fifth Avenue, we saw Doris Stevens, a pioneer Lucy Stoner, approaching. He whispered, "Did you hear

that Doris has decided to use Dudley's name?" I was staggered for an instant, but greeted her with poise and some superiority, "Hello, Mrs. Malone." She answered in harsh passion. "What do you mean? You're the last person I'd expect to call me Mrs. You don't call *yourself* Mrs., do you?" She swept into the Sherry Netherlands leaving me beside my brother who was bent over and choking with laughter.

By and large, using my own name has been like swimming upstream through molasses. My children, my parents, my friends have consistently refused to Miss me. Every telephone call I make presents a hazard, because the other end of the wire invariably shrieks, "*Who?*" There are always hidden complications in phone messages left for me. Did the caller ask for Miss or Mrs.? Usually no one knows. I must dial the number and say, "Did anyone ask for Miss? Well, then, for Mrs.?" Too time-consuming. In writing invitations, I must delicately bring my husband's name into the note in order to identify myself. When I accept an invitation I have the same subtle assignment. At a party I am assailed by "Oh, do you know him? Oh, you're his wife? What? — you're his partner? What? — you're Miss? You're Mrs.?" The hell with it. Let me get you some tea." On the way home with friends-of-the-moment, a complacent lady looked at me suspiciously, stretched her arms and heigh-hoed: "The greatest gift my husband ever gave me was his name."

My children are of the same mind. As my daughter said, "If I were married, I'd be proud to take my husband's name. I'd want everyone to know I was married." My other daughter wanted to know, "How does Daddy introduce you — as Miss, his wife?"

"No, he just says, 'This is Miss.'"

"And he doesn't say you're his wife or anything?"

"No."

"How perfectly foul." In a nutshell.

"I always introduce you as 'My Mother, Mrs.' I'd feel foolish saying 'My Mother, Miss.'" Incontrovertible.

There are other drawbacks to parenthood as a Miss. Through their young lives, there has been a constant struggle to protect the children from untoward results of their parents' ideals. Every note to teacher presents a problem, since teacher should not be misled into thinking that dual names indicate a broken home. Divorces are so common that progressive educators adopt watchful attitudes towards children of split marriages. Cards, contracts, excuses for lateness all must be signed Miss with a coquettish parenthetical Mrs. for identification. The same awkwardness applies to our relationship with the various doctors and dentists who take care of them.

Doctors' offices are doubly painful to a woman with two identities. Nurses on the whole are conservative, and although they start filing me as Miss, I creep gradually into a Mrs. folder. I keep getting shifted from F

to B, losing symptoms and acquiring ailments on the way.

Even more complicated are the mechanics of housewifery under this two-name system. They are exhausting, and on the whole humiliating. Early in the game, I tried listing charge accounts — at food and department stores — under my own name. However, through the clever footwork of credit bureaus, the existence of a Mr. was uncovered. Thereafter, we were plagued with double bills, one for Miss and the other for Mrs. Endless correspondence was needed to clear up the puzzle. We decided to appease the retail credit system by using Mrs. for all charge accounts. Another snag: My checking account is under Miss, and therefore, bills to Mrs. were paid by checks in my own name. Apparently no department store is capable of crediting a Mrs. account with a Miss check. So we have found it necessary to have Mr. pay the bills for the steak and dresses bought by Miss. Because of my independent name, I cannot pay my own bills. I might as well be a normal little wife.

Only one dealer has been a comfort to my ego in all these troubled years. The newsstand dealer always greets my husband, "Hello, Mr. Fleischman." My husband honestly enjoys it.

IV

While life at home has presented the greatest hazards to Lucy Stonerism, travel is not altogether smooth, either. Registering in a hotel in the United

States leads to battles, withdrawals or confusion. Reactionary room clerks are not always easy to indoctrinate when rooms are scarce. We have developed various subterfuges. For instance, my husband once tried to solve the difficulty by registering "Mr. Bernays and wife (Miss Fleischman)." We were billed for three persons in one room that time, and made to feel decidedly immoral besides.

Morality seemed often to be drawn into the use of separate names, especially in Europe. I can remember a leering conductor on a train from Vienna to Prague, who wished us all happiness when he left us alone in one compartment with two passports. Using my own name was a good deal of fun in France in the early twenties. There was a puzzled *homme du monde* in Paris, who couldn't understand why any married woman should want to pass herself off as single. He assured me that men are far more interested in married than in maiden ladies. Why should I sacrifice the opportunities that awaited me as Mrs., but would be denied me as Miss?

Charmion Wiegand, the artist, recently applied for a passport in her own name. The clerk said she would have to use her husband's name. Her husband, novelist Joseph Freeman, cited my 1925 passport as precedent. The clerk raised his brows, and said, "Well, okay then, it's your lookout."

Joe, Charmion and I subsequently discussed the entire question of names and marriage customs. Joe believes it is philosophically and anthropolog-

ically unsound for a woman to keep her maiden name.

"In a matriarchy," he said, "children take the names of their mothers. What happens if a woman keeps her own name? She is keeping her father's name. Her children keep their father's name. Keeping the father's name doesn't establish a new system of nomenclature. It doesn't certainly, establish a new status for women. Possibly the woman who keeps her father's name prefers to be father's daughter, rather than husband's wife."

"Oh, Joe," said Charmion, in charming dismay, "I had no idea I'd hurt your feelings. If I'd known, I'd have taken your name."

Joe said, a bit grandly, "Not at all. I have no feeling about it at all. But Miss Wiegand will have more difficulty in traveling than Mrs. Freeman would." He was correct.

A Lucy Stoner is mistaken in thinking that keeping her father's name is more significant than taking her husband's name. We were guilty of belief in magic. We thought a name itself had power to confer a separate identity. It is the actions of women and the attitudes of men towards them that determine a woman's status.

Perhaps that is why the number of Lucy Stoners has not grown perceptibly since the founding of the League. Ruth Hale, Jane Grant, Michael Strange, Janet Flanner, Zona Gale, Susan Glaspell, Fannie Hurst, Freda Kirchwey, Anita Loos, Neysa McMein — these were the founders of what failed to become established as a

custom. Certainly the present young generation evidences little interest in an idea that seemed momentous in the wild 1920s.

Two bright teen-age girls discussed the question gravely and I think, definitively. "If my husband didn't let me use his name, I'd think he didn't love me. I'd bop him and leave him." They couldn't see the sense in the Lucy Stoner idea at all. It wasn't exciting, or adventuresome, they thought. It was just silly. Of course, if you were an actress or a singer or a dancer or movie star — but even actresses use their married names now, in private life, don't they? Well, some of them do anyway. Or if your husband was a dope and you were famous — or if you just needed to have something to fight about all the time —

I have been convinced by the logic of the anti-Lucy Stoners. I have forgotten the mystic satisfaction of maintaining the maiden name in spite of countless discomforts.

But I am up against a pragmatic dilemma. I want to abandon the struggle against the married name. I'd like to be Mrs. Edward L. Ber-

nays. I'm proud of him and of his name. But can I change it now without loss of face? Will a change of name now imply cowardice? Certainly my own generation of romantic feminists will resent my desertion after a quarter of a century of honest experimentation. Can I retract without being accused of seeking notoriety?

General Sarnoff asked me: "What has it done for you, keeping your name?"

"Nothing," I answered. "It's been nothing but a bother and a nuisance."

"Well then, why do you keep on?"

"Habit, pride, timidity," I explained.

The General shrugged a shoulder.

"You're right, of course," I conceded.

Miss will now endeavor to turn herself into Mrs. She will secure a new passport, a new checkbook, a new letterhead. Some of her professional acquaintances and a few of her friends will deplore the defection. But basically, since a word at best can reflect only a truth, there will be no change in the inner life or external motions of an ex-miss.

