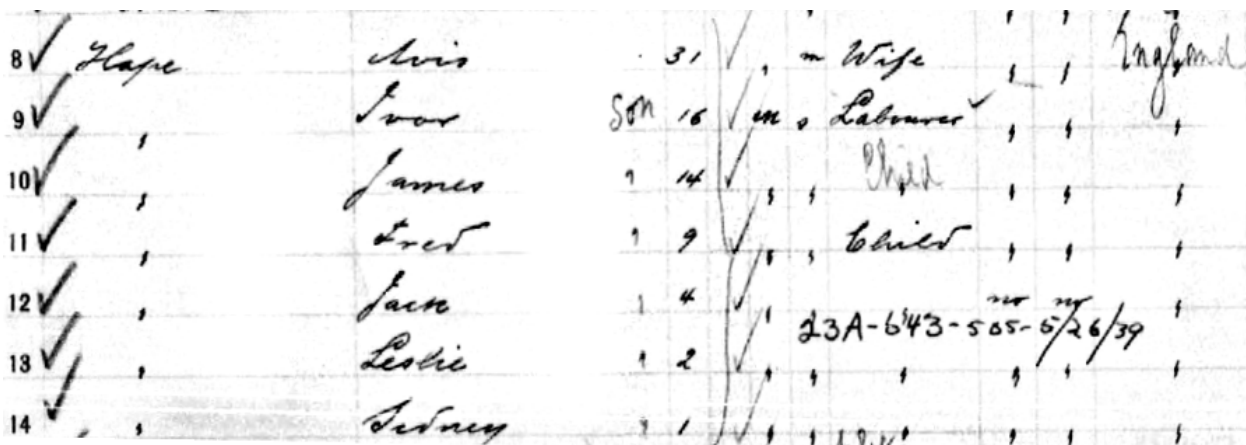


The Name Game

Genealogy offers plenty of opportunities to practice flexibility – especially when it comes to surnames. Many people are convinced that they have the only true version of their name, one that has existed just as it is forever. As the online rep for an ethnic society, I was often called upon to help folks who were hoping to find their old world cousins so they could meet them during the trip they had coming up. Time and time again, I would pick up the family's trail in records – let's say a census record showing the immigrant couple and their 12 kids (usually spaced with impressive regularity every two years). The family would be in the correct location and everyone would have the right first names and ages, but the person requesting the help would respond that this wasn't their family because the last name was spelled differently.

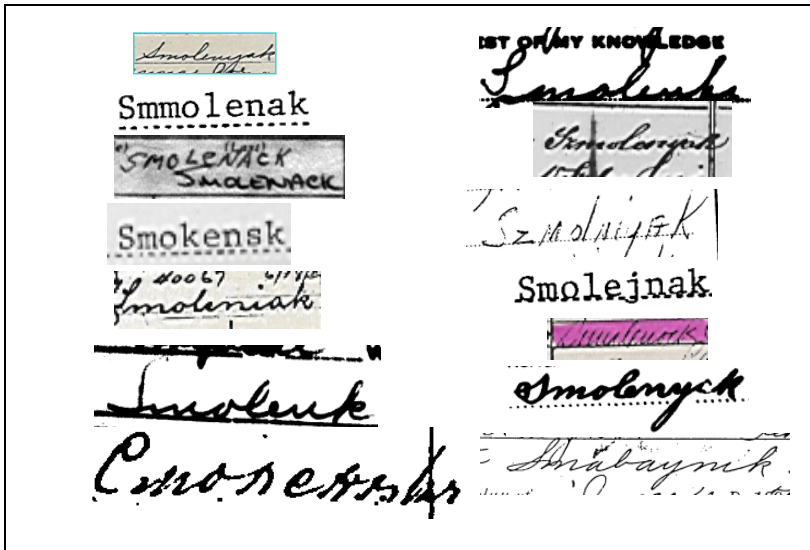
If you limit yourself to searching only records that match your exact and current spelling, you will undoubtedly miss some of your family. This might seem fairly obvious for complicated and multi-syllabic surnames that invite misspelling, but this can happen even with the most simple of names. When Bob Hope, born Leslie Townes Hope, was to be honored at Ellis Island some years ago, there was a minor snag. He couldn't be found in the passenger arrival records even though it was well known he had come here in 1908. A little digging revealed that he was there, transcribed in the searchable database as Leslie Hape. If you look at the original record, the transcriber did an accurate job. It could easily be read as Hape. But that was all it took to keep this future national treasure hidden from view.



| | | | | | |
|----|--------|---------|----|----------|---------------------|
| 8 | ✓ Hape | Mrs | 31 | Wife | England |
| 9 | ✓ | son | 16 | Labourer | |
| 10 | ✓ | James | 14 | Child | |
| 11 | ✓ | Fred | 9 | Child | |
| 12 | ✓ | Jack | 4 | | |
| 13 | ✓ | Leslie | 2 | | 23A-643-505-6/26/39 |
| 14 | ✓ | Sweeney | 1 | | |

Future comedian, Bob Hope, arrives at Ellis Island as Leslie "Hape" in 1908 with his mother and siblings.

Now imagine that your name is Motyczka or Menecola. Can you see where others could get creative with it? Or even family members could opt for different spellings? My husband had uncles who spelled their name as Smolenak and Smolenyak, and they're American-born brothers raised in the same household. If you'd like to amuse yourself, you might even want to start a collection of all the variations of your name you find over time. My collection is quite extensive, so I've included just a sampling.



Be prepared to be flexible about how your name is spelled. Here's a selection of the collection of Smolenyak spellings I've found in assorted documents.

Incidentally, this flexibility should also be employed when dealing with first names and old country towns of origin. John in America might have been Johann, Janos, Jean or countless other variations originally, and if your family hails from Abbeyfeale, Ireland, you'll do yourself a favor to be open to Abbeyfeall, Abbeyfeele, Abbyfeale, Abbeyfiale, Abbyfoale – you get the idea.

The above is excerpted and adapted from [Who Do You Think You Are](#), companion book to the television series of the same name, by [Megan Smolenyak](#)