

NAME TAGS #11: 13 Ways of Looking at Liena

written by Guest Contributor | July 23, 2018



[Photo by Liena Vayzman, *Untitled Self Portrait (Eye to Eye)*, 2018.]

By Liena Vayzman

1. Anagram of Alien
2. Rhymes with Siena or Vienna. Take your choice: the sun-saturated South or the grey bracing East.
3. Unpronounceable correctly in English because my given name Елена (Yelena/Elena) and its shortened form Лена (Lena/Liena) are originally written in the Cyrillic alphabet. Cyrillic? You know, the script of Russian, derived from Greek? I didn't know that.
4. Lena is a river in Russia. Recall that Vladimir Lenin, the Communist leader, named himself after this river to proclaim his love of the Motherland. The ending *-in* means "of", denoting possession, masculine case. Belonging to Lena.
5. I added the I to the transliteration. "The I was added by me" would be the passive version of this sentence, and less grammatically correct. I learned this in Chicago Public Schools. The *I* makes it unique, now that *I* is in me.
6. My first name Yelena was Americanized to Helen on the day that I got my US citizenship. I was 14 and my mom was 37. We went downtown to the Chicago Federal Building, proud and happy. We traded in our green resident alien cards for citizenship certificates. I wrote Helen, what my teachers had been calling me for several grades, and it's still on my passport. Like Helen of Troy, true to the Greek roots of Yelena. Helen worked well with teachers and our Greek-American / Serbo-Croatian / Jewish / Asian neighborhood in Chicago. She kept Alla. I dissuaded her from changing it to Alexis after Joan Collins' character in *Dynasty*, the popular TV show at the time, 1985. Alla is pronounced the same in English as in Russian, I reasoned. I wanted at least something to stay the same.

7. My Yugoslav-American stepdad Jack always called me Helen. I didn't insist that he pronounce Liena, even years after I changed my first name back from the aunt-like Helen to Lena and then Liena in college. I'd moved on, reinventing myself, and keeping the invention as my own.

8. Living in Paris in my 20s learning French for my dissertation research on Surrealist photographer Claude Cahun, who also changed her name, I stenciled LienaLienaLiena scrolling along a construction site wall. It read AlienAlienAlien... When I signed anything or showed my passport: *What kind of name is that?* They meant my Jewish last name, foreign sounding to xenophobic French ears. French antisemitism warrants a third of a chapter in my dissertation.

9. Yelena Dorianovna Vayzman is my full given name. To delve into patronymics – mine translates as belonging to my father Dorian, which I would rather not. I refer readers to *The Brothers Karamazov* or any other Russian novel I haven't read. Russian formal first names are familiarized in conversation and among friends and family. Mikhail becomes Misha. Alexander or Alexandra both yield the androgynous Sasha (appropriated by Americans as a popular baby name and ending up in the White House as a president's daughter). Yelena becomes Lena. Familiar first names are further softened and caressed with sweet additions of adoration: Lienusha, Lienochka, my favorite word to hear my grandmother say.

10. Burnt Liena: my first band.

11. I've met one Siena and multiple Sierras in my USA life. Siena's parents like Italy. Sierra's parents hike California. The other Sierra is a minivan.

12th letter of my adopted alphabet.

13. Press your tongue to the roof of your mouth and smile the first syllable of Liena. Say the L softly. Not hard L as in Love but soft L as in Lyubov, любовь, (love).

Editor's note: This essay is part of a series called Name Tags, about issues related to names and naming. You can find the original Call for Submissions [here](#).

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