

Reflexive essay

**What's in a Name? Maşa—Maşi—Maşenca—
Maşencuţa—Doina—Doiniţa—Bucur—
Deckard—Maria—Măriuca**

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What's in a Name? Maşa—Maşi—Maşenca— Maşencuţa—Doina—Doiniţa—Bucur— Deckard—Maria—Măriuca

Maria Bucur

In this essay, I reflect on how the names by which I have been called have been shaped by, and in turn have shaped, my life. As a child of a Russian mother and a Romanian father, and later a migrant to the United States, the names I have been called and used to identify myself have placed me both inside and outside the cultural norms around me. My reflections focus on both the accommodation of and resistance to such norms.

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I have changed names during my life more often than most people. My birth certificate identifies me as Maria Bucur. I was given my first name in memory of my maternal grandmother from Russia, who passed away when my mother was 15. I never met her and never felt close to that legacy, for there were not any images or stories about her at home. She was a void I was filling, without knowing exactly what that meant. Later in life, I also learned that I was supposed to be a boy (somehow, my parents were sure I would come out that way), and I know my name was supposed to be Serghei (or Serioja in the diminutive).¹ I never heard reference to Sergiu, the Romanian version of Serghei, as an option for that male version of me. One way or another, I was going to be born with a name that might make sense in my native Romanian but was imagined in its Russian format. It is possible that Maria was an afterthought: when I came out with female parts, rather than as my parents' first preference.

My parents have never used my first name to call me or to talk about me with anyone. From the beginning, I was simply Maşa. Or Maşi. Or Maşenca. Or Maşencuţa, Romanianized versions of the Russian diminutive. With a Russian mom and a Romanian dad, who chose to speak to each other mostly in Russian while living in Romania, this was probably a pragmatic choice: taking an adult name and turning it into a cute diminutive, as Maşa is a term of endearment in Russian, used with most girls named Maria. In Romania, as well as Russia, kids are generally not called by their full birth name, but some diminutive version of it. My brother, Alexandru in his birth certificate, has always been Saşa, though he at least was born in Russia and lived there the first three years of his life. But I was born in Bucharest/Bucureşti I and grew up among all Romanian speakers, save for my parents, both of whom worked full time while I was an infant, so they were not around most of my waking hours.

My paternal grandmother and my aunt Florica, who had largely raised me until I started school, called me Mași as well; after all, that is the name to which I answered. I am not sure why they never took to the Romanian diminutive: Măriuca. But they also made sure I was baptized with an unmistakably untranslatable Romanian girl name: Doina. They were born deep in Transylvania and grew up among Hungarian speakers, at a time when Romanianization was replacing Magyarization. Though no longer an ethno-linguistic minority, they still held on to the anxiety of losing their 'authentic' identity through the linguistic manipulation of names. Before 1918, many Romanian names had been Magyarized, such as from Ioan to Janos, or from Lupu to Farkas. The name 'Doina' could not be manipulated in the same way. Of course, at the time of my birth (1968), Magyarization was not a real possibility. The opposite was happening to Hungarian speakers born in Romanian-controlled Transylvania.

Taking the step to baptize a child with a different name than her Christian birth one was not uncommon, but it was certainly also a form of defying the atheist state in which we lived, and many urban dwellers did not go through this ritual. But not my paternal grandmother. She was a fearful believer and wanted to make sure I would not end up in hell, an unbaptized heathen. She took me to Oradea, the city of her childhood, as a toddler; there, I was brought to the Orthodox Cathedral to be baptized. My cousin Doina was my godmother, and I was given that name. My earliest memory is the feeling of drowning in the water in which I was dunk and the shiny objects that surrounded me when I finally came up for air, screaming at the top of my lungs.

Family members from Transylvania began to call me Doinița (the diminutive for Doina). Once I started school, my teachers decided I would be Doina. As a result, I was called Doina or Doinița by everybody at school. I cannot recall how exactly this came to be, but it had something to do with the Russian connotations of Mașa. I grew up in a Russophobe society. In the Romanian imaginary of the 1970s, in which I was raised, Russia was an evil imperial power that forced Romania into communism. The Russians were the 'big brother' who had occupied Romania in 1944, never returned Romania's gold after World War I, and were preventing Romania from being the fully European country it deserved to be. The Russians were the bad guys in every game we played in the backyard. Though my dad had to learn Russian in school in the 1950s, by the mid 1970s, when I started to go to school, the pendulum had swung very far in the other direction, towards a barely veiled anti-Russian attitude on the part of educators and cultural producers. We still loved Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's music and Nikita Mikhalkov's movies. But not your average Russian and not the Russians as a people.

Romanians tended not to trust Russians, and I was announcing my Russian heritage every time I introduced myself: 'Hello, my name is Mașa.' After I did that at school, my teacher, looking into the catalogue that listed all the pupils in my class, noticed my middle name, Doina. I think she said something like 'But you have such a beautiful name, Doina! I will call you

Doina.' This 'but' placed me in the category of outsider-insider. If I insisted on being called Maşa, I would place myself outside the circle of trust and 'authentic' Romanianness articulated throughout the nationalist curriculum in elementary school. I would invite questions like 'Where are you from?' and would have to justify my place in the classroom not as a hard-working kid, but as an interloper with questionable loyalties. As a seven-year-old, I was not up for the challenge. So, Doina and then Doiniţa stuck. I spent the next ten years with two names and two personas: at school, Doiniţa, a clean, unproblematic Romanian name and presumably identity; at home, Maşi, with the parents who communicated in Russian and with family friends who knew me as just that, a 'mutt kid.' Birthday parties with children from school were always challenging, my parents referring to me as Maşi, the confused guests unsure of who that was while addressing me as Doiniţa.

When we moved to the United States in 1985, I dropped Doina. Because it was a baptismal name, it was not in my passport. And the diphthong... Well, try to pronounce this name in any English-speaking way of pronouncing this juxtaposition of letters! I went back to Masha. This time, even though I arrived from a communist country during the Cold War, the association between this name and my Russian background seemed less ominous and more exotic. My name was rare in the neighborhoods where I spent my first few years in the States: Bridgeport and Monroe, Connecticut. There was (and still is) the occasional 'Oh, like in *The Brady Bunch*!' (Marcia Brady was a character on this U.S. sitcom popular from the late 1960s into the 1980s; 'Marcia, Marcia, Marcia!' was her sister Jan's famous exasperated line). But often, people took stock of the pronunciation ('No r!') and relished in repeating my name several times. I did become a target of anti-Russian attitudes as well, but nothing worse than the anti-Romanian ones I still occasionally encounter. In high school, I was told more than once to 'go back to my country,' something that many a migrant has heard over their lives in the United States. I was already used to such insults. I had heard them in my childhood. Still, it hurt as much in America as it had back in Romania. But my skin had thickened, and my response was to become an educator, rather than remain an outsider.

My last names, Bucur and Deckard, have their own stories of separation, acculturation, and integration. Bucur is both a noun and a verb. The myth of Bucharest's name ('Bucur-eşti' means 'you are Bucur') is connected to the shepherd Bucur who settled there. How someone transhumant by the nature of their work becomes the originator of a city is a mystery to me. Whatever the origins of Romania's capital, the proper name at its root is very common among both given names and surnames in Romania. There are many 'Maria Bucurs' in the country, as a quick Google search can show.

In my case, however, it is also a very new family name. My paternal grandfather was born Alexandru Ştefan but took the name Alexandru Bucur when he moved from his little village to Bucureşti. He was fleeing and wanted to start his life with a clean slate. On my paternal grandmother's side, the family was 'Fitero,' an indication of Italian links a few generations back. She

also left her village and family name behind in the late 1930s, when she moved to București, and eventually married Alexandru.

In the transition from Romania to the United States, however, the spelling of my last name has been a constant reminder of my alterity. Maria can be from many places. And Bucur... Well, how do you even say that? When pronouncing it correctly to someone unfamiliar with phonetic spelling, I often see my name written down as Booker, Bucar, Boocour, or some other incorrect version. In dealing with this form of misrecognition, lazy imagination, or linguistic provincialism, whatever we want to call it, I have moved from frustration to humor. The 'Where are you from?' still hits me as a form of integrative speech, where difference and alterity are seen to be produced by sources outside of the cultural 'core.' Everyone is from somewhere, but not everyone is asked that question just about every time they introduce themselves. I now sometimes just say that I am from the forest, which is where I live and where I have spent most time in the past half century.

Like many women around the world, I had to contemplate the question of my surname again when I got married. I had become an unapologetic feminist by then as well as a published author. I saw no reason for my name to change on the cover of any future book, just because I had changed my marital status. But I also loved my future mother- and father-in-law as family, and I thought that taking on their last name would be a way to express my feelings for my new kin. I decided to hyphenate my name, becoming Maria Bucur-Deckard in legal documents. While there are thousands if not more Maria Bucurs, and while there may be quite a few Maria Deckards, I am quite sure that I am still the only Maria Bucur-Deckard on this planet.

Being in a category of one confers some privileges: I can be easily found on social media, for instance. But the hyphen, that darn hyphen, has been a different story. At some point, you eventually find out that many services, institutions, and companies do not consider hyphens as an actual symbol, so your name might become Bucurdeckard. Try pronouncing that without tripping over your tongue! Flying with a passport that has a hyphenated name presents extra hurdles, since some security systems are apparently unable to comprehend the hyphen. Some people give up and just call me Maria Deckard, especially in the United States, trying to avoid the pesky 'Bucur.' I have given up cataloguing all the ways in which my full legal name has been perceived or processed, in the case of on-line forms, as a problem that cannot be solved or has to be simplified, rather than as a straightforward name.

After we moved to the United States, Masha became and still is the name I think of when I am asked to introduce myself in most unofficial social settings. When I met my future, U.S.-born, husband, I introduced myself as Masha, and he thought that was my birth name, rather than a version of Maria. After we had moved in together, I once caught him answering the phone and stating that 'nobody by the name of Maria lives here.' I had to produce my driver's license for him to think I was not pulling his leg. When I go to a party and meet new people, I am still Masha.

But once I started publishing, people came to know me by my given name. At conferences and in official correspondence I became Maria. When I got hired as a university professor, colleagues started addressing me by my given name, and I came to see Maria as part of my professional persona, even more than the title 'Dr.' preceding it. Early in my time at Indiana University, a senior distinguished historian, who viewed himself as a kind mentor, observed that 'Masha is such a peasant name, you shouldn't use it!' I do not believe that he thought of himself as patronizing in making this statement. But I never forgot those words and never felt comfortable calling him out. Thirty years later, I still hesitate to let colleagues know that I go by Masha among friends—until I feel like we are moving from work mates to friends. It is not that I am afraid of being thought of as 'peasant.' In fact, I have remained affectively close to my peasant roots (both of my Romanian grandparents grew up in the countryside, and I used to spend summers in their native villages). But I did not want my name devalued, thought of as essentially part of some kind of lesser category of people. Equally importantly, I did not think that such people deserved to be my friends and thus could call me Masha.

Context is just purely local sometimes. 'Deckard' is one of the most common last names in the city where I ended up living for over 30 years: Bloomington, Indiana. That I ended up working in the city in which my husband was born is a pure coincidence. That I took his last name as part of my hyphenated homage to my in-laws was fortuitous, since I got married before I knew I would live in Bloomington. But that name has given me some 'street credit' in my adopted hometown. People sometimes ask what branch of the Deckards I am part of. There is a Deckard cemetery close to Bloomington. One colleague in the history department told me early on that I was part of 'local royalty.' Bill had a sense of humor, so I took this as a joke, but it is true that this last name somehow softened the perception of me as 'other' on the part of teachers and other parents the first time I met them when I took my kids to school or other organized events.

I arrived at the name 'Măriuca' relatively late in life. I had been in the United States for almost fifteen years, and, around the turn of the twenty-first century, life brought to me my soul sister, Mihaela. When we first met, she did not know me as anything other than my official, professional name. She had no clue about my complicated Russian background, my middle name, or any version of what others called me. When we first met, I went with the standard 'My name is Maria Bucur.' She said that the name 'Maria' fit me, and for the first time I felt like that name was mine, not a mask I was putting on ('And now I will be playing professor!'). And as we came to know each other better, she started to call me by the endearing 'Măriuca.' She still does, and it always makes me feel like I am a duckling sitting close to her mama, enveloped by a fluffy nest of care and love. In my mind, it smells of pine trees and wildflowers when I hear that version of my name. Măriuca takes me back home, back to my childhood, even though nobody called me that back then.

Who has power over naming and rendering names meaningful? How does this affect our experience in the world?

Growing up during the Cold War inside a communist country run like a police state generated for those living in that environment a relationship of duplicity between the intimate and the public. What we said at home was not what we would necessarily repeat in public, to protect ourselves from misperception and punishment (Kligman, 1998). Trust in state institutions was not part of our experience. Naming was a way in which my parents and paternal grandmother chose to articulate forms of protection for me: *Doina* in public, *Maşa* at home. Institutions like the church, the school, and the city hall, where names were recorded and then articulated by government employees (be they doctors, teachers, or priests), had power over the public perception and ordering of individuals into categories of citizens, to be aligned with the nationalist flavor of the day.

But we were not powerless as individuals. While Czesław Miłosz's (1953) 'ketman' describes this duplicity between public and intimate speak as a form of compliance, I know that for me it was both survival and oppositional self-making. Even as I put on *Doina* as an armor that could protect me from xenophobia, I also tested those around me. I never let myself be defined by those exclusionary perceptions. I questioned nationalism and its affective grip on the minds and hearts of my teachers and other authority figures. I developed a critical mind, not a captive one. Looking back, I do not resent that experience, and I do not resent that name. They are part of my journey of becoming a human. By the same token, the nationalism that flows in Romanian public discourse today is one of the reasons I would not want to live again in that country. I can put up with it a few months out of the year, but only because I know I can find refuge from it somewhere else. Sadly, it is a refuge that, these days, I need to curate more and more in my adopted country.

My father's fateful choice to escape from Romania and come to the United States as a political refugee has shaped a lot of my context as an adult. As a well-educated white woman, I have had to go through fewer hoops than many other migrants to America. But as someone who came from a communist country during the Cold War, I faced specific legal and cultural obstacles made evident every time I introduced myself. Keeping Romanian citizenship while living abroad before 1989 meant a complete lack of protection from the Romanian state and diminished protection from the United States. Gaining U.S. citizenship was entangled with showing that we were not communist agents and deserved to be integrated in this country. The suspicion that I lacked loyalty for my host country preceded any kind of proof I could show; in some cases, this continued long after I had become a U.S. citizen. Even as I dropped my accent to blend in, even as I stopped using *Masha* in professional settings, even as I married and had children. For years, I carried my U.S. passport with me everywhere. My husband used to make fun of me. But in the last year he has started to understand me more. I

think migrants understand this kind of anxiety more intimately: it never quite goes away.

Since I had not let structures and public nationalist discourse define me in Romania, I would not let them define me in the United States either. I became a historian because I wanted to voice the perspective of vulnerability and marginalization in analyses of the past and our becoming. I became a university professor, so I could challenge those discourses and the U.S. perspective on the Cold War for future generations of young people growing up in this country.

Still, the only measurable power I have had over others' names has been in naming my two children. Music was our paramount framework for thinking about cultural connotations and tradition when we started dreaming of their names: the tradition of song-writing in the U.S. context and the tradition of music-making in my own family (my husband is a jazz drummer, and I play the violin and bass). I toyed for a minute with the idea of having a Sergey, blending an ironic fulfillment of my parents' desires for me as a boy with my own love for Sergey Eisenstein's films (I wanted to be a filmmaker for a while). Danny, my husband, and I settled on Dylan for our first child and Elvin for our second. There were other musical names on the short list; but with Bob Dylan playing in our town on the day my firstborn was supposed to come out into the world, naming him Dylan felt like fate. And with the passing of giant jazz drummer Elvin Jones just months prior to my second boy's birth, we wanted to honor his spirit through our little one. Today both boys are musicians. And they both have a bit of my Romanian past in them. Dylan's middle name is Daniel, his father's name and a name that my Romanian grandmother could be sure to pronounce without difficulty. Elvin is also Codru ('forest' in Romanian)—the boy from the forest where we spend most of our waking hours and where he was made.

In my 58 years on this planet, I have come to believe that small measures of breaking with some traditions and creating others in our daily practice is the most we can control in the world. How others see us, name us, misrepresent and label us is both meaningful and up for negotiation. How we see ourselves cannot be just a function of social norms and political processes. And whether our personal self remains somewhat submerged in the interstices of our intimate existence, or whether it manages to be seen by others, this cannot be the true measure of our lived experience. Because each of us owns our personal story. When I look in the mirror, I do not call myself by any name. I just see myself.

1. Throughout the text I spell the names the way they are spelled in the country in which I was living at that time—Romania and subsequently the United States.

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