

ETYMOLOGY OF THE BREAKSTONE/BREGSTEIN FAMILY NAME

Though family members, over the years, have suggested that the original family name was Breakstone or Bregstone,¹ Polish, Russian, and Yiddish documents indicate that the family name was originally pronounced as "Breg-shtain."² The name, Bregshtain, is found, almost exclusively, in Lithuania.³ All bearers of that name, there, appear to originate from one single locale: in and around the shtetl of Panemune, (today, Aukstoji Panemune).

While the Bregshtain name remained relatively unchanged in Lithuania⁴, various permutations occurred after family immigration to Sweden and America took place, to produce, among others: Brackstone, Breakstone, Brekstone, Breckstein, Bregstein, and Bregstone.⁵ (Those bearing family names such as Brookstone, Bruckstein, Braxton, Brickstein, Brickstone, Brigstein, and, for the most part, Brackstone, are not family members.)⁶ Though the Brackstone name was used by some family members, and the Breakstone name used widely, not all who bear those two names are family members.⁷

In Yiddish, Polish, and Russian, "breg" means bank or border and "shtain" means stone. Several theories have been advanced to link family history with this compound name. One theory is that "breg" may be a specifically chosen topographical name since Panemune, from which family members came, was situated on the bank (breg) of the Niemon river that was also the border (breg) with Russia.⁸ Another theory suggests that "breg" or "brech" is a shortened form of the first name, Berechyahu.⁹ Family members have suggested that "shtain" may be linked to a stone quarry located in the area next to Panemune, called, Patamulshelis, where some family members lived on a farm¹⁰ or that "shtain" might be linked to a stone factory owned by the family, which was located

midway between the family farm and Panemune.¹¹ Yet another theory is that the family name is a purely phonetical transition from the compound name, Bergstein, to Bregstein.¹²

The most plausible explanation is that "Bregstain" is an artificial compound surname taken when Jews were required to assume family names.¹³ "Breg" may have reflected a specific topographical location while "shtain" was simply a commonly used ending.¹⁴

¹ Bernard Horwich, in his book, My First Eighty Years, gave the original family name as Bregstone but it was probably in deference to Judge Philip Bregstone of Chicago that he did so. The judge, however, in his family history, gave Bregstein as the original family name. (His 5/31/1887 boat arrival records, (S.S. Suevia) record his name as Peretz Bregstein.) Jessie Bregstein, stated in her family memoir that the original name was Brechstein (pronounced "Brechshtain") while the 1930 family newsletter, "Breakstone World" gives the original family name as Breakstone. (See Horwich, Bernard, My First Eighty Years, Argus Books, Chicago, 1939; Breakstone World, Vol. 1, No.1, (Jan., 1930) and Vol. 1, No. 3, (July, 1930); and Jessie Bregstein Trattner's unpublished ms., The Bregstein Story, 1980.)

² The earliest known document containing the family name is dated 1829. Written in Polish, it gives the family name as "Bregshiteyn". (See 1829 Panemune Death Registry, "Hirsha Bregshiteyn"; and Gmina Zydowska: Suwalki, Suwalki, 1864, act 47, "Bregsztein, Judel Chaimovich", which contains the Polish signature of Yehuda Reuven Breakstone, signed as "Bregschtein"). An 1830 document gives the family name in Yiddish, as Bregshiteyn. (See 1830 Death Registry Book of Panemune Jewish Community, "Shlioma Bregshiteyn"). The 1852-54 Income and Expense Report of the Jewish Community of Ponieimon-Frentzele (CWW 1835, AGAD, Warsaw, Poland) has the Polish and Yiddish name of Chaim Bregsziteyn. The 1878 Birth Registry Book for the Kaunas Jewish community, contains the family name, in Russian, as Bregstein. (See 1878 Kovno Jewish Community Birth Record, "Judis"). There has been found, however, one exception to the above: an 1872 document, in Russian, which gives the family name as "Br_ksh_n". (See Gmina Zydowska Matrikula, Suwalki, Suwalki, {Jewish Parish Register of Marriages}, 1872, #58, "Br_ksh_n, Lei_Tumr" {Brekshtein, Leah Tamar}).

³ The tombstones of Lipot Bregstein and Jakab Bregstein (both died before 1947) are found in the Jewish cemetery of Nagykanizsa, Hungary. Brigsztajns who lived in Tomaszow, Krasnobrod and Wielogora, Poland, may have originally born the family name of Bergsztajn. Though the name, Bregsztajn, appears in records of the district

Lipno (Plock Guberniya) and in Warsaw records, these seem to be family members who emigrated from Panemune.

⁴ A 1923 Yiddish tax record for the Jewish Community of Panemune, spells the family name as "Bregstain". (See document 35658, file #824, "Panemune", Archives Record Group Two, Lithuanian Communities Collection, YIVO; and 1938 Kaunas phone book listing: "Bregsteinas, Moisiejus").

⁵ (See Husforhorslangd Malmo Caroli, {Household Examination Roll of the Parish of Malmo}, Sweden, 1870: "Bucksten, Julius" and 1873: "Breckstein, Jude".) U.S. immigration, naturalization and census documents for Nathan's son, Berman, lists him as Bregstone (1892), Bregstein (1893), Brakstone (1900), Breakstone (1920) and Breckstone (1930). His brother, Lipa, is recorded as Pregstein by the Koenigsberg Relief Committee, Brockstein in the Hamburg emigration lists, and then in America as Brackstine (1880), Bregstein (1900), and Breikstein (1910). (See Szajkowski, Zosa, "The First Organized Emigration from Eastern Europe to the U.S.: 1869-1870", YIVO Bleter, YIVO, #40, 1956, P. 224; Silverman, Marlene, "Emigration Through Hamburg During the Great Famine", Landsmen, Vol. 5, Nos. 2-3, Fall-Winter, 1994-1995, pp. 22, 24.) It is not clear whether Dov Bragstein (d.1971), buried in Petach Tikvah, Israel, was a family member.

⁶ Brookstone was originally, Bruckstein, from Kolo, Poland, near Warsaw. (Letter from Helen Joseph-Ellias to Jeffrey A. Marx.) Bearers of the Brackstone name in Canada came originally from England. (Interview with William Brackstone, Toronto; 1871 United Kingdom Census has 15 Breakstones, all born in England.) Brackstone (Breckstone, Braxton) was a common Scottish name. Several Breakstone families found in England, claim Scottish roots. (The 1900 New York, NY census, for example, lists a Helen Breakstone who was born in Scotland in 1869 and who immigrated in 1893.) Bruckstein is a form of Baruchstein. Some Brikstein family members came from Hordodenska, Ukraine. Brigstein came from Briggs of Chippewa Falls Wisconsin, who moved to New York City, converted to Judaism, and changed his name to sound more Jewish. (Email from Nancy Brigstein Romero to Jeffrey A. Marx).

⁷ By 1892, Jacob Petzuran, who was an employee of Isaac Brekstone (later, Breakstone), changed his name to Brekstone. By 1907 (six years after the start of Breakstone Dairy), Jacob and his brothers were using Breakstone as their family name. (See 1892 New York City Directory, "Jacob Brekstone"; 1907 New York City Directory, "Jacob Breakstone").

⁸ In 1935, Minnie Josephson related a trip she took to Panemune. There, guided by her host, Chaim Hirsch Bregstein, she stood on the riverbank at what he said was the spot of the original family home. (See "Breakstone World", vol.8, No.2, Jan. 1935).

⁹ (On "Berechayu", see Guggenheimer, Heinrich W. and Eva H., Jewish Family Names and Their Origins, Ktav, 1992.) In Suwalki Gubernia, however, most surnames were

taken from place names, not from names of fathers. (See "Jewish Surnames in the Kingdom of Poland", Avotaynu, Vol. X, Number 2, Summer, 1994, p. 15).

¹⁰ Grace Mendelsohn, in a 1987 interview, stated that the family name reflected that Patamulshelis, the family farm, bordered a quarry. (Grace's mother, Helen, lived in Panemune until age sixteen and told her stories of growing up there). Recent visits to Patamulshelis, however, have found no trace of a quarry being there, nor did long-time inhabitants know of one. Philo Bregstein stated in a 2004 interview, that etchings of "Napoleon's Hill", from histories of the 1812 Russian Campaign, seem to show that the side of the hill was quarried. It is more likely that the family quarry stories are a confusion with the stone factory. (See below).

¹¹ It was located in Rokai, just outside of Panemune and was bought by Herschl Zorach Bregstein in 1883. (1998 Ruth Lowenstein Wetter interview). It should be noted that this purchase was well after the family name was in use.

¹² Alexander Bieder, (in letters to Jeffrey A. Marx, 1/1995 and 2/1995), stated that the only other Polish Jewish name beginning with "breg" is Bregman which was probably derived from Bergman. (Since that time, the family name, Bregovski, has been found in Panemune 1820s vital records and the family names, Breger and Breginski, in 1850 Kaunas vital records.) It may be that, similarly, the Bregstein name was derived from the more common name, Bergstein, which appears in towns in Siedlce, Lublin and Lomza guberniyas. (See also, Bieder, A Dictionary of Jewish Surnames from the Russian Empire, Chapter 4).

¹³ Though the earliest surname decree, The General Jewish Legislation for New East Prussia, (April 17, 1797), stated that Jews had to adopt family names, this regulation was not carried out due to the death of Friedreich Wilhelm II, King of Prussia, that same year. It was not until March 27, 1821, when a resolution of the Governor General of the Kingdom of Poland decreed that surnames had to be assumed and declared to the Polish authorities, that Polish Jews began taking family names. (See Beider, Alexander, A Dictionary of Jewish Surnames from the Russian Empire, Avotaynu, Inc., Teaneck, 1993, pp. 51, 53; Beider, Alexander, "Jewish Surnames in the Kingdom of Poland", Avotaynu, Vol. X, Number 2, Summer, 1994, pp. 15, 17.)

¹⁴ While "breg" may have been a randomly chosen topographical name, it seems also possible, given Panemune's location – literally on the breg/border not only of the Neimon River but of the Russian Empire - that "breg" was chosen as a deliberate reflection of the family's location. "Shtein" was, clearly, a randomly chosen ending. Bieder states that ten percent of the Jews in Suwalki Guberniya, were utilizing the ending "shtain". This is reflected in its usage in Panemune. In the 1820s, Panemune had over a dozen different family names ending in "shtein". (See Jeffrey A. Marx, "Jewish Families and Individuals in Panemune 1800-1941" at : http://www.shtetlinks.jewishgen.org/Aukstoji_Panemune/