

# WHIMSICAL GERMAN SURNAMES

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All European languages, probably, have some family names that are a bit comical in effect. Some examples:

French: LESUEUR sweat, BOILEAU drink water  
Hungarian: CUKOR sugar, LISZT flour  
Czech: KRUTA turkey  
Ukrainian: GROMYKO noisy  
Russian: TOLSTOY fat  
Dutch: DE GIER vulture  
English: GOLIGHTLY, CAKEBREAD, PIGG, HOGG, BUGG, SHAKESPEARE, WAGSTAFF  
Italian: BEVILACQUA drink water, MANGIAPANE eat bread, MANGIAVACCA eat cow, MAZZAPICA kill magpie, QUATTROCCHI four eyes

Most family names were derived from patronymics, place names, occupational names, and sobriquets or nicknames. Appellations of the last type are often complimentary: GOODFELLOW, BIEDERMAN (upright man) - but these are no fun. Very often they were applied in jest, at the expense of someone who was thought to look or act like some animal, or had a strange habit, such as avoiding alcoholic drink, or had a favorite expression (German BEYGOTT, HERRGOTT, WISSGOTT). The humor may be directed at downright antisocial behavior; the original targets of the last two English names above might have been guys of an irascible, threatening nature, but they might also have been exhibitionists, a notion that I favor: the islanders who later gave us the limerick were quite capable of this sort of humor. As the reader will already have noted, a good many famous persons were not immune from inheriting these whimsical names.

It is German speakers who seem to have had the greatest penchant for adopting these comical, not always complimentary family names. Practically the whole dictionary appears. Among attitudinally neutral names, there are all the seasons of the year, and every day of the week except maybe Tuesday; Sunday is the most popular, with Friday a strong second ("Dank sei Gott, 's ist Freitag!"). The list that follows was compiled without putting much effort into it. If your name has a seriously pejorative meaning, please don't take it too seriously - quite a few of these names are considered to have been corrupted over the years from the original form to a word that has an altogether different meaning in modern German. Alas, this is the case with my favorite German surname, KATZENELLENBOGEN cat's elbow, which is derived from a place name that was originally the Celtic tribal name Chattimelibochi of unknown meaning.

My sources have been German and American telephone directories,

newspapers and other ephemera, and the publications of various onomasticians. Most of what appears to be scholarship in the present article was cribbed from Patrick Hanks and Flavia Hodges's marvelous *A Dictionary of Surnames* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

AHL eel	PILZ mushroom
ANGSTWURM fright worm	QUADFLIEG nasty fly
BAUCH belly	REHFUSS deerfoot
BEYGOTT by God	ROSWAENGE rosy cheek
BLEIBIMHAUS stay at home	ROTHFUSS red foot
BUTTERBRODT bread and butter	RUSSWORM soot worm (a blacksmith)
DONNERSTAG Thursday	SAFT juice
DREYFUS three foot	SALPETER saltpeter
EIDAM son-in-law	SALZ salt
FEIGE fig (cowardly)	SAMMET velvet
FEYERABEND quitting time	SAMSTAG Saturday
FICKER fucker	SCHADE what a pity
FINGERHUT thimble	SCHADEL skull
FLECK spot	SCHAAF, SCHAF, SCHAFF sheep
FLIEGE housefly	SCHALK rascal
FREITAG Friday	SCHARFSPITZ sharp point
FROESCHLE froggie	SCHAUFFEL shovel
FRUHAUF up early	SCHAUM foam
FRUHLING spring	SCHEMEL footstool
GNADE mercy	SCHERTZ joke
GOTT God	SCHEU shyness
GOTTSCHALK God's rascal	SCHIMMELPFENNIG moldy penny (miser)
GROSSKOPF big head	SCHMALTZ lard
HANDSCHUH glove	SCHOCK shock
HERBST autumn	SCHOLL clod
HERRGOTT Lord God	SCHON beautiful
HUFNAGEL horseshoe nail	SCHRECK fright
HUNDERTWASSER hundred waters	SCHWAMM sponge, fungus
IGEL hedgehog	SCHWEINFEST pig festival
KAFER beetle	SEEHASE sea hare (the lumpfish)
KASEBIER cheese beer	SENF mustard
KATZENELLENBOGEN cat's elbows	SOMMER summer
KERAUS clean out	SONNABEND Saturday
KNOBLAUCH garlic	SONNTAG Sunday
KRATZER scratcher	TAUSENTTEUFEL thousand devils
KREBS crab	TEUFEL devil
KUCKUCK cuckoo	TRINKAUS drink up
KUSSMAUL kiss mouth	TRUMP trump, Jew's harp
LANGHALS long neck	UNGEHEUER monster
LIEBESKIND love child	UNREIN unclean
LUSTGARTEN pleasure garden	WALFISCH whale
MAUS mouse	WEICHBRODT soft bread
MITTWOCH Wednesday	WINTER winter
MONTAG Monday	WISSGOTT God knows
MORGENSCHWEISS morning sweat	ZICKEFOOSE goat foot
NACKTGEBOREN born naked	ZIPFEL tip, point
PFLUGHAUPT plow head	ZITTERBARTH tremble beard