

KIRKUS REVIEWS

THE LANGUAGE OF THIEVES

My Family's Obsession With a Secret Code the Nazis Tried To Eliminate

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An American professor discovers that his grandfather was a Nazi as well as a scholar with an interesting specialty.

Born in Nuremberg and now a professor of English at Harvard, Puchner made his discovery 30 years ago while studying at the Widener Library. Recalling that his German grandfather had been an archivist specializing in the history of names, he searched the card catalog for his papers and found a trove, including a 1934 article, "Family Names as Racial Markers," which discussed Jewish names throughout history. Originally based on the Bible, they soon reflected non-Hebrew sources. Arriving in Germany in the Middle Ages, Jews often adopted German names, usually related to a location. Few chose Nuremberg, which forbade their settlement, but Frankfurter became a common Jewish name. A crucial change came after the 18th century, when nations granted Jews equal rights—"the worst mistake in history," according to Puchner's grandfather. En masse, Jews adopted German names, but since German Christians often chose biblical names, it became difficult to tell them apart. The author's grandfather believed that because Jews sought to blend in to further their nefarious plans, the Reich should consult experts like himself to distinguish Jewish-sounding German names from German-sounding Jewish names. As a scholar in love with words and language, Puchner gives these priority, so his attention wanders, but the digressions are never less than intriguing. He cannot resist exploring the secret languages used by vagrants and criminals. From childhood, he was fascinated by Rotwelsch, a popular argot throughout Europe dating from the Middle Ages that contained terms from Hebrew, Yiddish, Latin, and Romani. It was regularly denounced by establishment figures, from Martin Luther to Puchner's grandfather. The author also devotes long sections to Rotwelsch's history, social role, and vocabulary.

A compelling mixture of memoir and philology.