

Edward Alfred Zlotkowski, aka Buddy

I've always had issues with my names. Take my surname, "Zlotkowski." The fact I even have this name is a wonder. As anyone whose ancestors immigrated through Ellis Island in the early 20th century knows, the folks staffing immigration at that time weren't exactly fastidious about names. If a name gave them too much trouble, they simply changed it. So I just as easily could have been born a "Baby Whatcowski" instead of a "Baby Zlotkowski." In fact, at one point, my father himself considered changing our name to "Zlot" – he thought "Zlot" sounded more like English. Maybe, maybe not, though It's certainly true, Americans tend to panic when they see "Zlotkowski." I've been called "Zakatowski," "Zlotski," "Zakuski," "Salotki," "Kiebasi" (just kidding about that last one). But, I've also come up with a little trick to give people a hand: *first comes "zlot." It rhymes with "got" or "not" or "pot" but you stick a "z" in front – "zlot." Then comes "cow" – as in mooooo. Then the sport, swoosh, "ski" – Zlot-kow-ski. Easy, no?* Unfortunately, even this little trick isn't foolproof. – I once was introduced as "Mr. Zlotmooski."

Okay, okay, you say, so you've had a hard time with your surname, but "Edward?" What's so difficult about that? Nothing, I confess, nothing, that is, except for the maddening American need to use nicknames. You can't be "William" – you have to be "Will" or "Bill" or "Billy." You can be "Elizabeth" – you have to be "Liz," "Lizzy," or "Beth." So, of course, I could never be "Edward." I had to be "Ed" or "Ted" or "Eddie." But I didn't want to be "Ed" or "Ted" or "Eddie." "Ed" was not only my father's name. It was also the name of a talking horse my friends watched on TV. "Ted" was my uncle's name, and "Eddie," the name of a slimy family friend. So what did my father come up with? "Buddy" – a name so thoroughly American it's familiar to cops and panhandlers as well as family dogs. Who could possibly object to "Buddy"? Well, maybe me. "Buddy" seemed just a tad out of synch with "Edward Alfred," the names my mother chose for my birth certificate. "Alfred...Alfred" – I hear you asking. Why "Alfred?" "Easy," my mother would explain without even a pinch of humor, "If he has to have a name that begins with Z, he should also have a name that begins with A."

So there you have it: "Edward Alfred Zlotkowski, aka Buddy" – a name with the integrity of a Donald Trump tweet. Still, for all the "Ed Zlotski's" I've had to answer to over the years, I can still count on most gas station attendants to get right at least one part: "Hey, Buddy, cash or credit?"