

# 3 The citizen

Der Bürger  
Le citoyen

ON A WINDY day in August 2007, I was standing in my living room admiring the city landscape of Brussels. My apartment, on *Avenue Gabriel Emile Lebon*, was on the 11th floor and had spacious windows, perfectly made for such contemplation. Below me a large wasteland of a building site was spreading out, adorned by four oversized building cranes, with their jigs dancing an intricate dance, turning around in an ever-changing pattern. Above it all, clouds were chasing clouds on a sky back-lit by a sinking sun. I hastened to take a picture with my View Camera, to preserve this dramatic view. This camera sat permanently on a tripod close to the window, so I could quickly react to changes in scenery.

But my attention was elsewhere. Out of the blue, I started to think about life after my active career abroad. After all, mandatory retirement lay only two years ahead. Hitherto, I had been too busy to contemplate this fact. What should I do with my time after retiring and becoming idle? Should I attempt a second career, as consultant maybe, advising about issues I had learned during my working life? Or should I make a clean break and embark on new activities, previously suppressed due to scant free time and the need to make a living?

With the glorious window view in mind, which I had captured on film just minutes before and could still admire in reality, it suddenly came to me that photography would be an occupation worthy of a pensioner. There and then, I took the decision to make that my new career. Of course, the details remained to be hammered out over the following years, but the main direction of my remaining life was set on that very day.

Then came the next question: where should I take residence in the future? I was very tempted to just remain where I was, with the views from my window so fresh in memory, and being satisfied living there. Still, the issue seemed worthy of more introspection and was not settled as quickly as the question of what to do with my life after retirement. Over the following months I continued to ponder this question without arriving at a definitive conclusion.

Finally I tried to address that agenda in a more orderly way. Why not start by looking at all the places I had lived in over the years? Wouldn't it clear my mind to see the pattern? Said and done! The list turned out as follows:

*Neudau 9 years; Graz 8 years; Vienna 2 years;  
Berkeley 1.5 years; Geneva 4 years; Brussels 10 years;  
Stockholm 30 years*

With this list came indeed clarity. Where I earlier had Brussels, Vienna and Stockholm in the closer choice set, I realized that almost half of my life had been spent in Stockholm. This was where my friends and acquaintances from my early studies and working life were living. This was where the child and grandchild of my late wife were living, whom I still considered family. Even if my brothers and their children resided hundreds of miles to the south, in the Austrian countryside, I could not envisage moving back there; I had become too much of a city dweller during my life abroad. So, Stockholm it was to be!

Once having made the decision, I also realized why it had taken me so long. This choice was far more fundamental than the resolution to become a photographer. It concerned the basic issue of where a migrant has his roots. It is clear that your place of birth and first formative years will forever be closest to your heart. But what about the country it is situated in? What about other places, where you have lived, in some instances more years than at your birth place? Should I consider myself Austrian; or rather Swedish?

I do not have a definitive answer to those questions. But actions speak louder than thoughts in some circumstances. Why had I sought work in international organizations and much preferred to work in those, as well as at the university in Stockholm, rather than in the national agencies in which I also had been engaged? Most probably because those working places had a "stateless" flair, with employees stemming from several countries, and many of them finding themselves in the same situation as me: migrants without well defined roots. Working in those places helped me avoid determining where I was rooted myself.

But I wonder, is it such a bad thing to avoid being bonded very strongly to a specific place or country? After fifteen years of work abroad, afar from Sweden, I eventually arrived at the conclusion that there is little benefit in seeking your roots in a specific location. As a human being, I will always be grateful to my parents, who raised me, and the two countries, Austria and Sweden, who provided my education. But, after having moved around so much during my life, I am, at my mature age, inclined to seek the roots of my existence in myself; wherever I tread, I will have my roots within me, ready to implant them once again in any place in which I happen to wind up in and stay.

But, happy as I am about this view, it still does not resolve an issue others may have with this position. For time eternal, loose-rooted migrants without affiliation to a tribe (as of old) or nation (nowadays) have always been considered by their fellow humans to be vagrants, outsiders, or even entities less than human. Membership in a tribe, with all the rights and obligations that entails, is thus essential in manifesting one's identity in the eyes of the beholder.

Fortunately, I have only to look at my passport to find the solution. Its colour is red and the first row of text on its front says *Europeiska Unionen*. Now, the EU is an interesting concept. It is a bit like the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation of which it was said that:

*...it could most closely be characterized as an irregular body much like a mythical beast, if classified according to the rules of political science (Pufendorf).*

The EU comprises a geographical region of almost 4.5 million square kilometres with more than 500 million inhabitants. More importantly, it is not a state or nation and is lacking the patriotic idiosyncrasy that inhabitants in such entities love to embrace. Rather, it represents the utopia of a community embracing the humanist ideals of freedom, democracy and peace. This is good enough for me. Even if I would prefer to be a member of a global tribe of humans, this is not possible and may never be possible, or even desirable.

At least I am free to roam in Europe, put down roots wherever I please in its realm, and still be respected as a member of the tribe. For that reason I am proud and satisfied to state that I am a *Citizen of Europe*.