

# Stories about passports and visas

By Norbert Hirschhorn

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Consider the case of Edward Snowden who leaked U.S. classified documents to journalists: His U.S. passport was revoked (though he is still a citizen) meaning he has no right to travel anywhere.

The Latin American countries that might take him in cannot because any flight he's on would have to pass through airspace of countries that, under U.S. pressure no doubt, would deny him passage. Until the Russians gave him temporary safe-haven he sat for weeks in no-man's land at Moscow's Sheremetyevo airport. He reminds me of the subject of Edward Everett Hale's 1863 short story, "The Man Without a Country." Lieutenant Philip Nolan, on trial for treason, shouts out, "I wish I may never hear of the United States again!" And so the judge sentences him to spend the rest of his life on U.S. Navy warships, never again permitted to enter his own country.

Passports have been around for many hundreds of years, generally used as identity cards, and to assure safe passage. During the great European and Chinese migrations of the 19th and early 20th centuries to America, hardly anyone had a passport.

(Africans, of course, were captured and brought over as slaves from the 17th century on. American Indians were already here.) This is how Minnesota became populated with Germans, Swedes, Jews, Norwegians, Finns, French, Slavs, Croatians, Bosnians, Italians, Chinese, Laotians, Somalis and other Africans, Arabs, Latinos, Russians and Ukrainians, Asian Indians, Tibetans, Nepalis, Afghans, Greeks, Armenians, Iranians - - have I missed anyone? Minnesota is a vibrant state because of all these immigrants. Only later in the 20th century did passports become instruments of national security -- in some countries, a passport was needed even for internal travel. As a further obstacle to free travel, the visa, an advance permission to enter another country, became standard after World War I. U.S. citizens are lucky in that many countries permit us to enter with no visa or one automatically issued at the airport. In many nations one needs an "exit visa" just to leave.

My parents escaped from Nazi Austria thanks to an exit visa. They were born in Eastern Europe, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. They fled to Vienna in 1914 when intense fighting broke out at the start of World War I. With the Austrians on the losing side and their empire broken up, my parents' official birthplace was then considered to be Poland. They were never granted Austrian citizenship. When the Germans annexed Austria in 1938 and began the cruelties against Jews, my parents needed an exit visa in order to get out, one that had to be signed by a Polish consular officer. The only one willing to do so was in neutral Switzerland -- so my father smuggled himself across the border to get visas for himself, my mother and me. We fled to Italy, but soon after the Mussolini Fascist regime would order the expulsion of all foreign Jews. Once Hitler invaded Poland in 1939, we were now considered stateless. By some good fortune (I still don't know how), we were permitted to enter England with no papers at all. England saved us. Near the end of World War II, relatives in the U.S. vouched for us and we were allowed entry. We became citizens five years later. I am proud of my certificate. America saved us.

My uncles made it out of Austria in 1940 to the French port city of Marseilles. The city had not yet been taken over by the Nazis but was controlled by the Vichy collaborationist regime. My uncles told of people's frantic attempts to get hold of a series of vital documents: a visa, any kind, along with a Marseilles residence permit, a French exit visa, an entry visa to any country that would have them, along with transit visas for countries one had to pass through along the way; and a ticket on a ship to anywhere safe.

Thousands of refugees descended on the city, many with no papers at all, often lacking money. Without papers, you were officially dead. My uncles made it to America. They were lucky: Many seeking asylum were sent to the gas chambers. One uncle joined the U.S. Army; the other made parachutes in a textile factory. Both eventually became millionaires with their own enterprise. I became a physician, declared by President Bill Clinton an "American Health Hero" for my work in international public health.

Almost daily, we hear stories of African and Asian refugees huddled in unseaworthy boats trying to reach safe havens in Europe and Australia; many dying on the way, anonymously. Cubans and Haitians made it across the hundred or so miles to Key West, although many drowned. Illegal immigrants from Latin America who cross our southern desert border with Mexico now serve as day laborers on farms and in factories, paid cheaply, illegally, and without any protection. Many raise families here, contribute to the economy, but live always in fear of arrest and deportation.

Mahmoud Darwish's poem, "Passport," captures their despair:

"They did not recognize me in the shadows/  
That suck away my color... / Stripped of  
my name and identity/  
On soil I nourished with my own hands."

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