

In Limbo

Elena Remigi

Elena read several entries from In Limbo: Brexit testimonies from EU citizens in the UK at the Gathering in Nottingham. This is her own contribution to that landmark collection, now in its second, expanded edition with Byline Books, which marks clearly many new and unwanted borders in our lives.

I do not remember when my love for Britain began. My mother used to call me ‘my English daughter’, and joked that on the day that I was born, during the students’ protests of May 1968 in Milan, there was an English woman giving birth who shared the same hospital bedroom, so they must have exchanged the two babies.

I suspect I have always been an anglophile. I adored British and Anglo-Saxon literature in general and, during my childhood, spent entire afternoons sitting in an old dusty armchair in my basement facing the garden, immersed in Stevenson, Defoe, Carroll and, as time went on, Hardy, Austen, Orwell, and many more. At school, English was my favourite subject, partly because it provided a respite from the rigour of all other subjects. Compared to Latin and Greek, English was easy, fresh, modern.

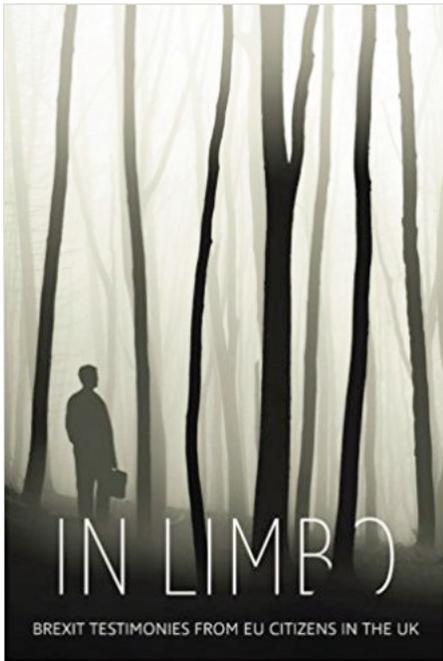
In my eyes, Britain was a country steeped in history but also open, multicultural, and certainly not as suffocating as the city where I was doing my *liceo*, Pavia. I often dreamt of being able to go and live there one day.

Many years later, when my husband was offered the opportunity to move to Britain for work, I was overjoyed, though I loved my life and work in Ireland. So we moved. Eleven years afterwards, I was completely at home in the UK. I thought a few times of getting a British passport, but kept postponing. After all, there was no need for one.

The Referendum did not come as a complete surprise, because the signs were painfully all there, but it was a big blow none the less. After the result, the lack of

clarity from the government on our status as EU residents, the choice to use us as ‘bargaining capital’, spurred me to take a British passport. I studied and passed my Life in the UK test, filled my application, added all the requested documentation, only to realise at the end that they wanted a Permanent Residence number for European Economic Area citizens. I had never heard of PR or the EEA. As far as I was concerned, I was an EU citizen and was permanently living in an EU country. I owned a house, we paid taxes, and never had any need for extra documents. The new regulations, however, required us to have Permanent Residence to apply for a passport. Unlike most wives of British citizens, my husband could at least be my sponsor. He spent hours filling the much dreaded 85-page application. Not only is the form long compared to the European average of two pages, but requires a myriad of documents. Although our son is at university, we had to provide proof of his child benefit, all my husband’s salary variations, five years of flights in and out of the UK, and many more documents and bills. Fortunately, he had no gaps in his work and had kept all the documents. After four months, we finally received our three PR cards.

Very relieved, my husband and son started taking the exams requested for citizenship, the language test and the Life in the UK one. We made the



decision to spend £1500 per person including everything to obtain our passports. Compared to the average one in the EU, which is only a few hundred euros, this was a huge sum to pay, not affordable to everyone, but we did not want to take any risk. If for any reason my husband lost his job or became ill, we could be in trouble. We were already worried enough about his pension, matured in three EU countries, now that Britain was leaving the EU.

With all the documents ready, I booked an appointment with the National Checking Service. It was expensive, but it would have allowed me to keep my Italian

passport rather than sending it to the Home Office. Before going, I checked and rechecked my documents and was certain to have ticked all the boxes. During the Referendum, the amount of xenophobia displayed had left me drained and worried, so I was a little tense when I arrived there, but the last thing I thought was to be told to return home as I could not provide proof of having lived in the UK for five years. Having Permanent Residence, owning a house, paying my utility bills, having listed all my flights in and out of the country for five years, having a passport saying that I resided here, and much more was deemed insufficient. There was no proof of my existence in the UK as I was a stay-at-home parent – a Kafkaesque situation which left me humiliated. I was therefore asked to provide everything I could to demonstrate that I lived here. Not an easy task, given that I had moved house three times in the past five years. I spent the following five days frantically gathering testimonies from my neighbour, the priest, friends, and two old teachers of my son; I provided all my bank statements (luckily they were in my name) for the past five years; and had to go from one surgery to the other to ask doctors, dentists and opticians to write letters stating that I had used their services. I also gave the Home Office all my medical exams.

When I returned to the National Checking Service (had to pay again) there was a German lady before me who left in tears saying, ‘This would never happen in Germany, France or even Italy’. I knew the feeling. I wish I could have reached her to tell her that I completely understood.

This time my application was accepted. It is now up to the Home Office to decide my fate.

After this experience, and months of hostility towards EU citizens from the press and politicians, something has broken inside. The bond, the affection I had for this country is still somehow there, but the wound inflicted is still raw. More than feeling betrayed, I am in mourning for a country I admired for its liberal principles and now at risk of losing them.



Suresh Grover – ‘We need to tell the story of what is going on.’



Andreas Bieler closes the Citizens' Gathering