As An Example Of Dual Citizenship

My purpose is to discuss my practice in having two passports, two citizenships. I do not want to attempt formulating a theory. I am not involved in the current Lithuanian discussion of this question; I could argue against or for the principle of dual citizenship. In this paper I just want to concentrate on my own experience and practice.

I have two citizenships, two passports, by birth. My parents were Swiss citizens when I was born in the United States. My parents met and married in Kaunas, and my two older sisters were born here, but as far as I know I have no right to a Lithuanian passport. My mother, who was born in Raudondvaris, not far from here, had given up her Lithuanian citizenship, and although I am a foreign member of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences, Lithuanian authorities have refused to give me a residence permit. But that is another story.

In my youth, I understood that an American cannot have two passports and that the Swiss do not recognize a renunciation of their citizenship. This caused me no problems. When I was a child, my father spoke of taking me to Europe when I was twelve years old, but then 1944 was not a good year for being a tourist on the European continent. I traveled to Europe for the first time in 1957, after I had finished my graduate studies. At that time I practiced only my American citizenship.

In the 1950s American views on dual citizenship began to change. Speaking in a most unscholarly fashion, I would identify two major factors in the American change: the establishment of the state of Israel and the marriage of the movie star Grace Kelly to Prince Rainier of Monaco. American Jews showed a strong interest in obtaining Israeli citizenship, but they did not want to give up their American citizenship. Grace Kelly's father, a noted Philadelphia businessman and a powerful political figure, did not want his daughter to lose her citizenship just because she became the wife of the last Divine Right Monarch in Europe. Scholars may come up with other arguments and factors determining the change in the American laws on this question, but these two factors contributed heavily to the change in the public mood and the law.

For me, dual citizenship was not a great issue until I began to travel regularly to Europe.
There was an occasion in Switzerland when it served me well. In 1970 I had a grant to write a book about Russian émigrés in Switzerland, and I took my family to Zurich. The Swiss consulate in Chicago had told me there would be no problem in obtaining a residence permit in Switzerland, but in Zurich I was told that I would probably not be allowed to stay. When the officer in charge received me, I immediately began to talk about my Swiss heritage. He began to doubt that I even needed a permit, but he then decided it was simpler to give me the permit I was requesting. Our session ended with his searching his papers to explain the authority of the Fremdenpolizei to me. (This was relevant for my research.)

I am, to be sure, Auslandsschweizer, that is, a Swiss living abroad. Were I to try to make a career in Switzerland, I might well find this a handicap. My father was convinced that it was a handicap for him. He was actually born in Alsace, then a part of Germany but now a part of France. Although our family was registered in Baselland in the 14th century, he felt a certain discrimination as an Auslandsschweizer even though he used only his Swiss passport. All other things being equal, the Swiss officials in charge of filling a post probably favored the native born candidate. This was a major factor in his eventual decision to emigrate to the United States.

In the kaleidoscope of citizenship laws, my mother ran into the same sort of trouble while living in Kaunas in the 1920s. A native of this region, she lost her citizenship when she married my father. My father was teaching at the University of Lithuania; in fact he took over Kazys Būga’s classes after Būga’s death. But he refused to give up his Swiss citizenship – he specifically spoke to me about his decision not to follow the example of his old friend Joseph Ehret, Juozas Eretas. As a result, my mother, who now lived with a Swiss passport in Kaunas, just a few kilometers from her birth place in Raudondvaris, annually had to request permission to remain in Lithuania. My parents left Lithuania in 1930–1931, both looking for a new start in the United States. Eretas, I might point out, left Lithuania in 1941 under the program that was repatriating Germans then living in Lithuania.

My father took American citizenship in 1936; this was probably the first moment he could. My mother did not act immediately, but during the war she underwent naturalization, as we call it, and became a United States citizen in order to avoid any problems that might arise from having been born in Lithuania which was now headed for Soviet domination.

I emphasize the use of the words citizen and citizenship. I have always regarded myself as first of all a citizen of the United States of America, but also a citizen of Switzerland. This has nothing to do with national heritage. At a Santara-Šviesa meeting, I was challenged – I had said I was not Lithuanian but rather Swiss or American. My critic declared that neither Swiss nor Americans have a distinct national identity, and so what was I in fact? I responded that if the population of heaven is organized according to nationality, as Šatrijos Ragana once suggested, then there is no place there for me. I do not exist.

I once read in Kultūros barai a writer’s thought that he could imagine the confusion that must exist in the mind of a child who has parents of different nationalities. My reaction to this was negative. I cannot say that I ever had any distinct problem arising from my parent’s different national backgrounds. My parents spoke to us children in Lithuanian; my sisters and I answered in English. My father made great efforts to make us aware of our Swiss heritage. My mother introduced me, through the Lithuanian language, to Russian culture. A significant part of my brain is occupied by German and Russian folk songs, not Lithuanian. By the standards of nationalist ideologists, I perhaps should not exist, but I think I have profited by this mixture of national heritage.
Today I travel with two passports. I enter and leave the United States with my American passport. In Europe I show my Swiss passport. My Swiss passport is better received here in Lithuania – and also in Latvia where I have to travel regularly – than my American passport. Switzerland is not formally a member of the European Union, but we Swiss have treaty rights within the EU that are about equal to those of EU members. In this Brave New Globalized World, both Swiss and Lithuanians have this same higher identity as citizens of the European Union. I have to refrain from discussing this particular thought any further; my purpose here is just to discuss my practical thoughts about living with two passports.

In conclusion, I want to express one more thought about forcing a person to renounce one citizenship in favor of another. It might be argued that I have exploited my dual citizenship for personal benefit. I have, but is that bad? I do not think so. Depriving a person of citizenship can have a much more destructive effect. My mother deeply resented the fact that the Lithuanian government took away her citizenship. This contributed to her readiness to emigrate. How many Lithuanians today would think the same way?

Alfred Erich Senn

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