

# PASSPORT TO ENCLAVIA: Travels in Search of a European Identity

by Vitali Vitaliev

## SAMPLE CHAPTER:

### Introduction: The Road to Enclavia

#### ELY PLACE

“If you don’t remember anything else I say, remember this: every single fundamental problem of the independent world is rooted in an imperfect sense of identity.”

Bill Clinton

There is a place in London where I often go for solace at moments of sadness and indecision. Passing through the ornate iron gates separating Ely Place, a quiet little cul-de-sac off Holborn Circus, from the hustle and bustle of the City, is like entering a mysterious fourth dimension, the name of which is “dislocation”.

Very few people know that the straight tree-less lane, the former residence of the Bishops of Ely, is not geographically a part of London. It is a little corner of Cambridgeshire, still enjoying freedom from entry by the London Police, except by the invitation of the Commissioners of Ely Place—its own elected governing body. (The results of the latest elections, dated and certified by “J. Franks, Esq., Clerk to the Commissioners”, are duly displayed on the noticeboard of the magnificent St. Etheldreda Chapel—the oldest Roman Catholic church in Britain—halfway up the street.)

One of London’s best-kept secrets, Ely Place is a living anachronism from medieval times when the influential Bishops were determined to remain in their Cambridgeshire diocese even while on ministerial missions in the capital. In the local pub, one can view a stack of recent letters addressed to “Ye Olde Mitre Tavern, Ely Place, Holborn Circus, Cambridgeshire”.

Why does this stranded street, situated simultaneously in London and outside it, agree with me so well? Why does it evoke in me the peculiar feeling of being elsewhere—a sensation both calming and disturbing? Is it due to the fact that as a Ukrainian-born Russian, with Australian and British passports, I am a thoroughly “dislocated” person myself?

Or is it also because “ee-ly” means “or” in Russian—an ideal association for a place that is neither here nor there, or either here *or* there, if you wish?

Perhaps, part of its attraction lies in the fact that Ely Place, this little chunk of Cambridgeshire in the centre of London, is a model of a full-scale geopolitical *enclave*, of which there are still a handful left on the map of Europe.

According to a widely accepted scholarly definition, “enclaves” are parts of one country totally surrounded and landlocked by the territory of another. This excludes self-governing mini-states, surrounded by foreign territory—San Marino, Andorra, Vatican City, etc.—or isolated parts of a country that are accessible by sea and hence have a direct link to their

motherland: Alaska, Kaliningrad (Russia) and the disputed Spanish towns of Ceuta and Melilla on the Mediterranean coast of Morocco, which are often incorrectly referred to as enclaves.

To me the most fascinating quality of the remaining Western European enclaves is that each of them combines characteristics of two or more separate European nations, making them an ideal natural laboratory for isolating—as in chemical experiments—a common substance (trait) that makes them tick.

Of the two hundred and fifty-five proper enclaves currently existing in the world, almost ninety percent are located in the small corner of Asia between India and Bangladesh. I dug this figure out from an extremely rare book *The Exclave Problem of Western Europe*, penned by Honore M. Catudal, Jr. and published in 1979 by the University of Alabama Press in the USA—so far the only printed work on the West European enclaves in the English language.

“The possession of an uninterrupted territory is one of the principal requisites for the smooth functioning of a political entity,” wrote the honourable Honore M. Catudal in the Introduction to his engaging monograph. “Enclaves, though, disturb this tranquillity by creating numerous administrative problems for both home and host states, increasing the variety of social groups and physical environments, adding to the difficulties of travel and communication and, more important, lengthening the political and economic boundaries to be guarded.” In other—less scholastic—words, one might characterise enclaves as peculiar geopolitical troublemakers and mavericks—which may be one of the main reasons for my enduring passion for them.

Most of the remaining West European enclaves appeared in the Middle Ages—after the treaties of Madrid (1526) and Westphalia (1648), the latter ending the Thirty Years War and creating diverse and independent principalities which made the map of Europe resemble a sloppily manufactured patchwork quilt. Others resulted from land ownership disputes, or plain mistakes. With the advent of capitalism, the Napoleonic wars, the creation of the German and Italian states and the Swiss Confederation, most of the enclaves were eventually re-attached to their mother countries or swallowed up by host-states. Verenahof, a small patch of German farmland inside Switzerland, was the last European enclave to lose its status, as recently as in 1964, when it was happily absorbed by the Swiss.

Apart from Vennbahn, a Belgian railway cutting into German territory south of Aachen to form five Belgian “pockets” inside Germany, and several Alpine villages that can only be accessed from neighbouring countries (Samnaun, Jungholz and Kleinwalsertal Valley, the so-called “semi-enclaves”), only four “full-scale” outliers can now be found in Western Europe. They are: Campione d’Italia—an Italian town in Switzerland; Llivia—a Spanish (or rather Catalan) town in the French Pyrenees; Busingen—a German village in Switzerland; and Baarle-Nassau/Baarle-Hertog—a unique Dutch/Belgian municipality comprising twenty-two pieces of Belgium and eight of Holland. Like children of mixed marriages, torn between two different cultures and ways of life, they combine the traits of their mother countries with those of their host states—which makes them wonderfully uncertain, idiosyncratic and ambivalent. By their very nature, they defy chauvinism in all its ugly forms in our epoch of ethnic cleansing, racial prejudice and rampant nationalism.

To locate the enclaves on even the most detailed maps of Europe takes a powerful magnifying glass. But even armed with a microscope, it is easy to overlook such places as Busingen—effectively a German suburb of the Swiss canton centre of Schaffhausen, or Samnaun—formerly a smugglers’ haven and now the “duty-free” Swiss semi-enclave of a village, lost in the Austrian Alps. Often, even residents of neighbouring towns and villages

have no knowledge of the piece of a foreign country on their doorstep.

To make matters worse, it is not uncommon for the authorities of a mother country (a state to which an enclave belongs politically, but not territorially) to claim no responsibility over a “prodigal” bit of their own land. Their counterparts in a host country, by whose territory an enclave is surrounded, are often equally uninterested in the problems of a foreign “intruder”.

One could be forgiven for thinking that these obscure geopolitical anomalies in the heart of Europe—whose status, in my view, should be protected by a special European Parliament Act—do not actually exist.

My undying interest in enclosed spaces (by borders, bars, fences, stone walls, etc.) goes back to my childhood. I spent the first three years of my life in a so-called “closed town” near Moscow, to which my parents, young scientists (Mum was a chemical engineer, Dad a nuclear physicist) and newly-married graduates of Kharkiv University, were dispatched to work at a top-secret Soviet government facility, developing nuclear and hydrogen bombs in the early 1950s. The town of forty thousand people was both unmapped and unnamed (it was referred to as “Military Unit BA/48764”, or something similar). It was enclosed by a tall concrete fence, with barbed wire on top, and no-one could enter or leave without a special pass.

Times were tough. Stalin wanted to develop nuclear weapons by hook or by crook to achieve military parity, and then, ultimately, superiority over the West. My parents had to work for twelve hours a day and there was practically no protection against the excessive radiation. My mother told me how skin peeled off her palms when she was pregnant with me (so I must have got my share of the stuff too). Some of her colleagues literally died before their eyes from overdoses, and my father was particularly affected, since he dealt directly with radioactive substances. He died at the early age of fifty-six of the long-term irradiation effects.

Of course, I don’t remember much from these distant years; I was too young. But strangely enough I did recall some smells, vague impressions and feelings (claustrophobia being one of them) when I visited the town with my mother shortly before my defection from the USSR—in 1989, after thirty-three years of absence.

The devilish “facility” was still there. It was still located in the grounds of the old monastery, only instead of crosses, the factory buildings had faded metallic red stars mounted on their onion domes.

The town was still surrounded by the thick concrete wall with barbed wire. You could only get in through a couple of checkpoints, provided you had an invitation from someone living inside the compound. We were invited by a woman who had worked with my parents many years before.

At the checkpoint, a young military guard, having carefully scrutinised our credentials, gave us a one-day pass into my childhood and my Mum’s youth—equally constrained and repressed. “The place hasn’t changed a bit,” my Mother noted sadly.

Childhood impressions are extremely potent. And could it be that having been literally “encaged” for the first three years of my existence, I have spent the rest of my life trying to escape the constraints of borders and dogmas, but at the same time having a strange (possibly even dark) fascination, or nostalgia, for little pockets of life, separated—in one way or another—from the rest of the world?

Like Billy Liar in Keith Waterhouse’s novel, who invented Ambrosia—a fictitious land, to which he could escape from the gloomy reality of his provincial town in the North of

England—as a youngster in the Soviet Union I used to entertain the idea of having my own mini-state—an “autocratic democracy”, populated and ruled by just one person—myself. In this fluid and moveable “nation”, with no stable borders, I could stop being a permanent outcast—both ethnically and spiritually. Even living in the West, I often try to visualise my imaginary “country” (“Vitalia”?) which would comfortably accommodate all the duplicities and uncertainties of my peripatetic existence—the land where no one would regard me, its only citizen, as a foreigner, which in turn would provide me with some sense of stability and national awareness.

Vitalia’s biggest flaw, however, is that it doesn’t quite correspond to the generally accepted definition of a country as “a territory, distinguished by its people, culture and geography”. Travelling around the globe, I am always on the look-out for a real-life, not fictitious land, where I would experience that obscure (to me) sensation of belonging, and my discovery of the West European enclaves, the places where I felt more at home than anywhere else in the world, made me think that I had found one.

Indeed, the remaining enclaves of Western Europe share the never-ending dichotomy of their people—permanently torn between two (or more) different cultures. They also share “displacement” as a common feature of their geography. But what’s more important, as I have established while visiting them, is that they all have similar achievements and similar problems which determine their shared common mentality—a peculiar ingenuity of the enclaves’ dwellers, shaped by centuries of having to deal with not one but two state bureaucracies at a time. Strewn around Europe—from the Pyrenees to the Austrian Alps—these orphaned and stateless villages and small towns, unwanted by both their mother countries and their host states, have all the credentials to be regarded as a separate entity—the Federation of Disunited European Enclaves (FDEE), or simply Enclavia.

I don’t remember exactly when I first had the idea to visit all remaining West European enclaves and semi-enclaves. Was it while researching my book on the mini-states of Europe, *Little is the Light* in 1993–94, when, for the first time, I heard of the special status of Campione d’Italia—economically Swiss, yet politically and geographically Italian? Or was it during my spells in Australia and in the USA, when, tormented by nostalgia, I sometimes saw myself as a stranded one-person Euro-enclave, torn between my constantly changing whereabouts and my roots? It was then that I first thought of the enclaves not just as a geopolitical reality but as a category of the human soul. No man is an island, according to John Donne. This may be true, but some, like myself, are enclaves.

I thought therefore that travelling to all the enclaves of Western Europe was my best opportunity to pin down an elusive European identity—and perhaps my own as well.

If “true Europeans” are to be found anywhere at all, the enclaves should be the places. Yet, visiting all of them, I saw the extent to which officials in Brussels and Strasbourg stubbornly refused to notice (or even to acknowledge the existence of) the enclaves, where cross-cultural harmony, cross-border co-operation and “European integration” have been happening *naturally* for hundreds of years. The reason for such ostracism is simple: by their very existence, the enclaves perfectly epitomise the “unified Europe” ideal, achieved without any assistance and/or interference from the EU, and therefore constitute a direct challenge to the very existence of arrogant and overpaid Euro-bureaucrats. “They don’t know about us, and they don’t want to know,” was the mantra I heard in every single enclave and semi-enclave on my route. Why? The answer was no less repetitive: “Because—through centuries of living together—we have managed to create our own little EU—without any instructions from Brussels!”

It was the end of 2001, and the continent held its breath awaiting the introduction of its new common currency—the Euro, the most momentous change in modern European history. I thought that early 2002 would therefore be the perfect time for my quest.

Shortly after my research was completed, I was hit by a massive personal crisis that incapacitated me as writer for over five years. Having recovered (I always do), I looked at the copious notes of my Enclavia travels and—ten years since the idea of the Euro was first put forward—I decided there was no need to update them: the book would work best as a retro journey chronicling, among other things, the first days and months of the Euro—a historic period when a European identity (if there is such a thing), European values and Europe itself were undergoing the biggest shake-up since WWII.

But what is identity? *Collins Concise Dictionary* defines it as “the individual characteristics by which a person or thing is recognised”. This means effectively that one has no control over his or her own identity, which—like beauty—is very much “in the eyes of the beholder”, in how others see us rather than in how we see ourselves—a fact so perversely and so cannibalistically substantiated by the Holocaust and, more recently, by “ethnic cleansings” in the former Yugoslavia and in Rwanda, as well as by the September 11 terrorist attacks. One particular detail from media reports about the atrocity haunts me: nearly three thousand people of more than eighty different nationalities were murdered solely for being “American”—in the terrorists’ eyes that is. Brits and Arabs, Germans and Australians—all became Americans at the moment of their violent deaths. This makes one ponder over the true meaning of national, ethnic, cultural and other human identities. Where do they start and where do they finish? And what (or who) exactly is it that determines them?

My own gruesome experience prompts me to agree with Scottish writer A.L. Kennedy, who once wrote in the *Guardian* that “national identity rests on bigotry and self-absorption—and the (preferably televised) humiliation by others”. If so, then the best way to pin down one’s identity is by spending some time in a hostile, not necessarily foreign, environment.

It is important to understand that identity and nationality are two different things, the latter being one of the many components of the former. Identity is permanent and unchangeable, whereas nationality is rather arbitrary and fluid. Unlike identity, which, as we have just established, is largely beyond one’s control, nationality can be gained by naturalisation (like my British citizenship), denied (like the same citizenship in the case of Muhammad Al Fayed), altered, withdrawn or even acquired for a bribe—a fairly common occurrence in the former Soviet Union. Identity is for life, and life is sometimes the price for adhering to it.

So is there such thing as a Pan-European identity?

Anthony Sampson in his book *The New Europeans* noted that “in spite of all the interactions with America, there is still not much difficulty in distinguishing Europeans from Americans. Americans have paradoxically helped to unite Europe in two opposite senses: first, by regarding the . . . continent as a whole; secondly, by showing Europeans that they have at least one thing in common—that they are not American”.

And although I would find it hard to say exactly what “European-ness” involves, I know that I felt profoundly European while living in Australia, where my nostalgia for Europe—not for any particular country, but for Europe as a whole: for its trees and smells, for its low satin skies, for its old stones—became almost obsessive. I also felt European in America, whose loud, hooray-patriotic and often megalomaniac attitudes were a sharp contrast to quieter European ways. And whereas an American President can easily get away with (and

even earn some political capital by) repeatedly calling America “the greatest nation on the face of the earth”, a similar pronouncement from any European head of state is likely to trigger a prompt election.

It is not just Americans who are helping Europeans to unite by regarding our continent “as a whole” (*pace Sampson*) and thus implying that a Greek, a Swede and a Belgian share some common identity, at least in the outsiders’ eyes. It’s true that in the USA I often came across ads and signs where “European” was a euphemism for “quality” or “classy”: “European Leather”, “European Lights”, “European Kitchens”, and even “European Skin-Care” in Newport, Rhode Island. (The latter made me wonder what particular “skin-care” was implied: Italian, French or, maybe, Estonian?) But it was in Australia that I saw the most striking manifestation of this curious inferiority complex (or was it a post-colonial hangover?), when a mediocre and permanently empty Turkish restaurant in the Melbourne suburb of South Caulfield tried to attract customers by installing a huge brightly painted banner above its entrance: “European women in the kitchen!”.

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Contrary to my intentions, it was in Australia that I found myself on “E-Day”—1 January, 2002. In the weeks to come, I would painstakingly sift through Australian newspapers in search of news from Europe, where—for the second time in its troubled history—a single currency had come into circulation. (The first failed attempt was undertaken by Napoleon III, who created the short-lived Latin Monetary Union in 1863.)

“There is no subtler, no surer means of overturning the existing basis of society than to debauch the currency—the process engages all the hidden forces of economic law on the side of destruction.” Who said this? No, not Maggie Thatcher, although she would probably agree. It was written by Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, the great leader and teacher of workers, peasants and executioners, the founder of the Soviet state and an undisputed expert in “overturning the bases” of democratic societies.

For reasons purely emotional, I regretted the passing-away of different European currencies. For years, I used to take pleasure in changing my familiar pounds sterling or Aussie dollars into foreign money first thing on arriving in a new European country. Hunched over a cuppa at the nearest café, I would scrutinise the alien-looking banknotes trying to learn something about the nation’s history and culture which they were supposed to reflect. This little ritual was an integral part of travelling and one of its little delights.

I deplored the demise of deutschemarks, especially of the banknote with the portrait of the brothers Grimm; of colourful and crispy—like freshly-baked baguettes—French francs, which I am told started in 1360 as ransom money to bail out King John II of France from English captivity (“franc” meant “free”); of rumpled and near-worthless Italian lire, smelling of sunshine and olive oil; of Greek drachmas going back to the sixth century BC, when they circulated as silver coins in Athens; of substantive Austrian schillings, on which—only several years earlier—women’s faces were allowed to be printed for the first time by a special government decree. They were all to be replaced with uniform, badly designed and lifeless Euros. Perhaps, it is a life-long passionate stamp collector speaking in me too: postage stamps, these colourful tiny bits of unknown and unreachable foreign lands, provided me with one of the few little windows to a life outside the world’s largest cage of the USSR in which I had been imprisoned for thirty-five years. For the same reason, a couple of my childhood friends collected old foreign banknotes.

On the eve of the E-Day (when the new pan-European currency first went into

circulation), the Belgian Foreign Minister, called the Euro “the first important symbol of the European identity”. Utter nonsense. On the contrary, it felt as if a chunk of that very “identity” had been forcefully taken away.

What will go next, I was wondering? Postage stamps (indeed, who needs separate national stamps when the currency is the same)? Flags? Anthems? Languages? A new cross-national Pan-European Esperanto?

I thought it was not by chance that immediately after the “E-Day”, the EC functionaries—in a sinister thrust towards a European superstate with Brussels as capital—began relentlessly campaigning for the EU president, the EU army, the EU joint police force, the EU arrest warrant, the EU air traffic control, etc. Having grown up in a totalitarian state, I am instinctively frightened of this unstoppable push, for I know only too well that all superpowers are sooner or later bound to show dictatorial traits. Confronted with Brussels’ almighty propaganda machine (450 million dollars of European taxpayers’ money was spent on the Euro campaign alone), the people of Europe had little choice. The feeling of being out of control was similar to the one I had when calling for a taxi in Melbourne and hearing a recorded voice message: “Hello, we already know your name and address.”

In the meantime, Australia was living its normal undisturbed life. January there—like August in Europe—was the start of the “silly season”, and everyone was heading for the beach. Possums, whose own endemically Australian “identity” was—unlike mine—totally above suspicion, were climbing up and down gum trees and running along the wires. Some snippets of Euro news made it into the habitual “silly season” media trash.

Melbourne’s *Herald-Sun* tabloid reported that “eating more than four hundred new Euro notes can make you ill”. The *Melbourne Metro*, a free daily rag, whose “international coverage” was limited to a minuscule “Important but Boring” section, gleefully mentioned an Austrian bank cashier who gave a customer “\$A98,000, instead of \$A7000” by mistake, because he was “confused about the Euro”. The lucky customer had disappeared of course.

I read about the flood of the first fake Euro notes in Germany and in France—some printed from home computers and cut out of magazines; about counterfeiters in Ireland who had left out the “o” on a forged one-Euro (“Eur”?) coin; about the wrath of the Canary Islanders—the territory that was mistakenly left out on the maps of Europe printed on the back of new Euro banknotes; about a peculiar quality of the one-Euro coin that, allegedly, made it always fall face down when dropped and thus rendered it ideal for betting; about the debate in the German media as to what to do with the demised Deutschemarks—burn them (the Greens were opposed to this out of fear of toxic fumes), make bricks out of them or build a monument out of them in Berlin? I also heard my first Euro-joke: Tony Blair, in his pro-Euro crusade, decreeing that from now on the Brits, instead of spending a penny, were officially required to “Euro-inate”. Ha-ha.

On a more disturbing note (I don’t mean a “banknote” in this case!), there were reports of creeping price-rises under the guise of the changeover to the Euro from almost every Euro-zone country. These were particularly distressing for me on the eve of my potentially expensive journey to the West European enclaves.

Shortly before my departure from Melbourne, my (then Amsterdam-based) eldest son came to Australia for a holiday. He brought me a glittery, freshly minted, one-Euro coin—my first glimpse of the new European currency—as a souvenir. Before putting it in my wallet, I tossed it up in the air, and it fell onto the soft sun-soaked asphalt facing down—towards Europe.

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