

“Passport to Freedom”, World Government of World Citizens: Garry Davis vs. National Borders

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Theme: [History](#)

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(Note: A memorial service for Garry Davis will be held at Burlington City Arts in Burlington, Vermont on January 5, 2014 at 3 p.m.)

In September 1948, when delegates to the young United Nations met at the grand Palais de Chailot in Paris, a twenty-something American wearing the flak jacket of a bomber pilot pitched a tent on the Palais steps. Guards descended and angrily ordered him to leave, but he politely declined.

I'm no longer in France, the man explained, eyes twinkling. I'm standing on "international territory."



As a crowd gathered, so did the world press. With days the name of this pilot-turned-peacenik, Garry Davis, was known around the world. Newsreels captured a mounting drama that featured curious crowds, inspired celebrities and perplexed authorities.

When a reporter asked Davis what he was about, he replied, “I’m a world citizen.” With that simple assertion a global movement was born.

Garry Davis, who died on July 24, 2013 just shy of 92 years old, was part rebel, part performer and completely original, a world-class Don Quixote who for more than half a century jousted at the biggest windmill of all – nationalism. It was a wild ride that took him around the world, in and out of 34 jails, and across countless frontiers.

After renouncing his US citizenship as an anti-war protest, camping out in Paris, and crashing a UN session to deliver a speech, Davis launched his first major organizing project, a registry for world citizens. More than a million people responded to the call. Forced out of France, he next went on tour, stateless and without documents. This time thousands of people turned out to meet him and local governments passed supportive resolutions. Yet,

over the next few years he was also repeatedly thrown in jail and deported.

In 1953, for example, while he was appearing as an actor in a London stage production of *Stalag 17*, the show closed unexpectedly when the Queen died, and Davis found himself without a visa. A kindly magistrate gave him an idea: build a home on public property. But he was arrested anyway and taken to Brixton prison.

Officials there laughed at first when Davis wrote to the new Queen. But they had to eat some crow when she responded with a thank you note. She would not step in, Her Majesty explained, but she did appreciate his situation.

Three years later, wearing a homemade uniform and carrying a “World Passport” he had printed himself, Davis traveled to India. Necessity was helping him to become adept at intimidating low-level bureaucrats and exploiting the local media. His discussions with border officials were often hilarious, exposing the arbitrary rules and artificial boundaries of nations. But once inside country, he shifted focus to study with a Buddhist guru. The break also helped clarify his mission and prepare him for the next phase of the journey.

At this point, for Davis, world government already existed. After all, he had announced its formation in a 1953 declaration. Before a small audience in Ellsworth, Maine, he had called it the World Government of World Citizens, and explained that its legitimacy was based on three laws – one God, one world, and one humankind. And although he was only one person, all humans were potential world citizens. They just needed to “claim their rights and assume their responsibilities.” Yet Davis also understood that many more people would have to reach the same awareness before things began to change.

In the early years, the tactics Davis used sometimes put not only his freedom but his life at risk. A year after his stay in India, for instance, Davis was almost shot before he could show his passport in Germany. It happened in Berlin after he left his bicycle near a barbed wire fence that separated East from West. Crawling under the wire in a pre-dawn mist, he was caught by several gun-toting police, arrested, interrogated, and ultimately put on a train to West Germany.

As the scenery passed he could not help but remember another view of the same countryside — from the cockpit on his bomber during the war – and also what the experience had taught him. “We are born as citizens of the world,” he realized. “But we are also born into a divided world, a world of separate entities called nations. We may regard each other as friends, and yet we are separated by wide, artificial boundaries.”

Garry Davis spent the rest of his life trying to change that. One of his main strategies was to develop and issue documents, including the extraordinary World Passport. Recognized on a case-by-case basis by more than 100 countries – and officially by a handful – the passport has evolved into a convincing document in seven languages, issued to at least a million people over the years. Davis often argued that the right to travel, outlined in the passport, was grounded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Just as important as the fundamental right involved, however, was knowing how to use tools like the passport and other identity documents. As explained in *Passport to Freedom*, a book we co-authored in 1991, many nations have accepted World Passports and other documents issued by the World Service Authority, the non-profit organization Davis founded. But step one in effectively using them is to know what you are talking about. “The official, as part of

the machine, knows little more than his narrow function and the regulations on which it is based. When you ask questions, you shift the burden of responsibility.”

Other steps include remaining cool, going to the top of the chain of command as soon as possible, always assuming you are right, keeping track on your paperwork, choosing the right words, looking good, and remaining firm. It’s basic but solid advice for anyone who has to deal with arbitrary authority. That said, over the years Davis refined the approach into a long-running piece of political performance art that he repeatedly took around the world.

In April 1984, for example, he arrived at Tokyo’s Narita Airport. At this point Davis was already in his 60s and could look like an elder statesman if he wished. Determined as ever, he was nevertheless detained after a mind-boggling exchange and told he could not enter the country. The next night, however, when the authorities attempted to put him on a return flight, he protested so effectively that the captain threw him off the plane.

A day later he escaped from detention and went downtown for public interviews at a daily newspaper.

When he was caught, the Japanese put Davis in detention, then on a plane for Seattle. There he was told that he would be placed on trial for entering the US illegally. He was now classified as an “excludable alien,” the officials claimed. It was beginning to look like he was trapped in a Kafka-like tale.

Two weeks after setting out for Japan, Davis stood before a US immigration judge. Both governments were refusing to admit him. ‘Quite a dilemma,” mused Judge Jones. But before he could decide how to handle the convoluted case, a telex arrived from Washington, DC. The news was almost inconceivable: Davis’ entire file had somehow been “lost.”

As a result the Seattle case was closed and the world citizen was free to go.



Five years later Davis was back in Japan. This time he opened an office in Tokyo and helped many undocumented workers and Chinese students who were fleeing repression. For them the World Passport and other documents meant proof of identity, access to a job, or a way to get from one place to another.

During this extended visit, Davis met the Japanese Prime Minister and had a private, personal talk with Andrei Sakharov. The Cold War was winding down then, and the Soviet Union would soon dissolve. Like Davis, Sakharov had reached the conclusion that it was time to move beyond nationalism and create a democratic world government.

After more than a year of looking the other way, however, Japanese Immigration eventually decided to pounce and had Davis arrested in July 1990. He was jailed for several weeks and questioned each day by the same immigration official who had handled his original case

more than five years earlier. Gradually, Davis managed to convince this man his claim to world citizenship made sense. The Japanese deported him anyway.

When Davis landed in Los Angeles in August 1990, he fully expected to be arrested again. This time he was handed a letter instead. It announced that the Secretary of State had unilaterally decided to classify him as a "parolee in the public interest" and let him go.

During this period Davis moved to Vermont, a safe haven that remained his home for the rest of his life. However, he never stopped fighting for his vision for a world without borders. In July 2013, just a week before he died, Davis was still finding ways to spread the word. At this point NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden was trapped in a Moscow airport after his US passport was revoked. For Davis the response was obvious: the World Service Authority would issue him one.

The World Passport did not reach Snowden, but Davis made his point one last time. "All we're doing is conforming to the idea that human rights must be protected by law," he told reporters. "The world passport opens the door. Anyone can get it; everyone is a human being, everyone has a right to travel."

Greg Guma knew Garry Davis for more than 20 years, co-authoring and editing two of his books, [Passport to Freedom: A Guide for World Citizens](#) and [Dear World: A Global Odyssey](#). A memorial service for Davis will be held at Burlington City Arts in Burlington, Vermont on January 5, 2014 at 3 p.m.

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