

Submission No. 77

Date Received

On a backpacking trip to Europe in 2005 I took a one-way flight to London and was detained on arrival at the airport, on suspicion of intending to work illegally in the UK. After being held overnight I was put on a plane back to Berlin the next day. Brief and relatively benign as the experience was, it gave me a taste of the mental torture of immigration detention and convinced me that the practice is a truly inhumane and indefensible one.

I was smiling as I stepped forward to the counter at London's Stanstead airport. After four months traveling through France, Spain and Germany I was looking forward to being able to speak the language. I had a sense of reassuring familiarity as I listened to English accents around me. Thirty years before, my brother and I had gone to school in London. I remembered a handful of things from that time – free healthcare, hot school dinners, squirrels in the park, a friend named Honour Pinner.

The smile slowly froze on my face as the woman at the counter ignored my greeting, flipping through my passport in silence. When she looked at me her eyes moved up and down my face with the detached efficiency of an interrogator.

"What is the purpose of your visit to the United Kingdom?" she asked.

"Ah...tourism?" I said, shrugging.

When I arrived in Paris they'd been so casual they didn't even stamp my passport.

"How long are you planning to stay here?"

"I'm not sure."

"And where will you go next?"

"Probably Ireland."

And then the questions flowed thick and fast.

"Where are you staying in London?"

"How are you financing your trip?"

"Show me how much money you've got."

I had 40 euros in my wallet and put the notes on the counter. I told her I had a few thousand dollars in bank accounts and credit cards and would withdraw pounds from a cash machine. She was taking a lot of notes, but I didn't think she was writing down what I said.

"How much money have you spent since you left Australia?"

"What's the date on your return ticket?"

"What have you been doing in Europe?"

"And what are you planning to do in London?"

The barrage of questions was making me nervous but I was also getting angry. I was under suspicion because I only had €40 in my purse and wasn't travelling to a schedule. Maybe I'd go to Ireland, maybe I'd go to Morocco, maybe I'd fall in love and move to Finland. What business of hers was it how much money I'd spent in Europe or whether I looked up a friend or checked into the Savoy?

She went away then and conferred with someone in the elevated control office between the immigration counters.

"We're going to make some investigations about you later on when we're not so busy," she said when she came back, handing me a piece of paper saying I was being detained in order to be "further examined".

I sat down in the chairs she indicated beside a young woman who had been in front of me in the queue. She was Bulgarian, traveling on a French passport, and had been at a Buddhist convention in Berlin. She said she always got singled out by immigration when she traveled. "But an Australian!"

We waited while subsequent flights arrived and the passengers were processed. We were joined by a Chilean woman who didn't speak a word of English; a young Canadian; a very formally dressed Chinese woman and a serious Pakistani student.

RECEIVED
28 JUL 2008
BY: MIG

As time dragged on, the fury I'd been filled with gave way to anxiety. We hadn't picked up our bags. It was eleven o'clock at night. How long would we be there? What would happen next?

After an hour or so they moved us into a waiting room policed by security guards, who photographed us and took our mobile phones. The room had a TV, a drink machine and some plastic chairs. A sign on the wall said we were under surveillance.

Two young Russian girls were sleeping on each other's shoulders; a Japanese man in a suit and tie sat very upright. I noticed a couple of cheap sleeping bags lying around on the chairs and it dawned on me then that there was no certainty of a bus into town that night and a hostel bunk where I could finally lie down.

I had slipped sideways into an uncertain world, where inconvenience was irrelevant and time ceased to belong to you, where your right to information and your right of expression was constrained within a bureaucratic process you didn't understand. At least I could understand what they did tell me, unlike some of the others in the room, who needed interpreters but had no access to them at that time of night.

The security guards were cheerful, offering us snacks and telling us to help ourselves to drinks from the machine ("It's all free!"). They chatted and watched competition billiards and motor-racing on TV and complained about it being a busy night.

And we waited, staring blankly around the institutional setting, trying to think through the questions they had asked, the arguments they would make. Every now and then an immigration official appeared and took someone into one of the interview rooms for questioning.

I wasn't sure what rights we had. How long could they hold us for? Would we be searched? Could they lock us up somewhere else? I cycled through fear, frustration, panic, fury. And lapsed back into numb waiting.

The Bulgarian Buddhist who'd been through it all before, advised that it was karma, there was nothing we could do, and stretched out her legs and fell asleep. The Japanese man, who looked like he'd been sitting stiffly there for hours, finally cleared old chip packets from the chairs and lay down under a sleeping bag. I asked for and was allowed to get a book out of my shoulder bag but it was hard to concentrate and I felt uncomfortable under the cameras, wondering whether judgements might be made on the basis of our behaviour.

I had arrived in the UK at 10:30pm. At 4:00am I knew I was being deported back to Germany and by 6:30am I was on a plane.

A white Australian, citizen of a commonwealth country and English-speaking, I was never in danger of having anything really bad happen to me. And I was only held for eight hours. It was long enough though to get a taste of the anxiety, powerlessness and demoralization of immigration detention. After four hours I felt like smashing windows and realized it would take extraordinary strength of character to survive longer-term detention intact.

It is an unsurprising consequence of immigration detention and the processes around it that people die and go crazy and hurt themselves all the time. Back at my friend's house in Paris I read up on European immigration and found out that in the previous 15 months six people had died in immigration detention in the UK, five of them by hanging and one from injuries sustained after throwing himself off a landing. One of these men died in a prison – the UK, like Australia, uses prisons to accommodate the overflow of people from other immigrant holding centers.

The surprising thing is that criminalising people for trying to cross borders has come to be seen as normal. Millions of people are moving around the post-September 11 world, displaced by wars, political realities and economic policies which have often been driven by the affluent western countries. Every year thousands of people die trying to reach Europe, America or Australia. In the month before my experience 11 people had been shot dead in Morocco whilst trying to breach the double razorwire fence borders of Spanish territory. And hundreds of thousands each year are

stopped and detained. In Europe alone there are more than 200 detention centers. In 2005 11 people died in a fire in one of them, in Holland.

In the age of terrorism, public and political discourse in the developed countries is blurring the fear of bombs and violent conspiracy with a fear of immigration, the notion of physical security blurring with that of economic security, to justify a climate of control.

In this new climate, nationality, ethnic origin, language, religion or lack of money can be enough to cast a shadow of suspicion, against which a person has to establish their credentials as 'legitimate'.

It will be a sad thing if, in the rush to respond to threats to our security, we lose our civil liberties as well as our respect for the lives and rights of foreigners, and all that's left to protect is economic privilege and security itself.

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