

My Story

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My story starts with a blue and red passport and is a story in progress.

Nationality: United States of America

Wow! That is what it says in my passport so it must be true. But is this really me? I have another passport that says: Nationality: Deutsch. That is also me! So, what am I?

Since July 30th, 2019, I am a citizen of the United States of America. Before, I was a German citizen living in America with a green card. I am an immigrant. My identity has changed. What happened to the person who was just a “legal alien”? Am I American or am I German? I am afraid I am neither. I am definitely not American even though my blue passport says that I am. But I don't think I am German anymore either even though I fought to hold on to that red passport.

What makes one German or American? Is it just the passport? Is it one's experience, the food they eat, their history? Or, is it one's socialization, ideals, and value system? Is it a combination of all of it?

My family is German – full stop. But I, Pia, am a citizen of a different country. How weird is that? As far as I know, I am the first in my extended family to take on another citizenship. In fact, I am the first, as far as I know, to marry someone who is not German.

I came to the US for the first time in 1982 as an exchange student to the University of Arizona in Tucson. I remember that I had always wanted to live in a different, English speaking, country. My parents supported me in my decision to study abroad not thinking that their youngest child would one day move there.

I met my husband, returned to Germany, moved back to the US, and returned to Germany to finish my Masters. My husband joined me there in 1985. We got married, had our son, and decided to return to the US, temporarily, for Kurt to get his graduate degree. Still did not want to move back for good. We kept that back door open.

After 5 years in the US, our daughter was born. My parents finally suggested to give up the storage unit in Germany and make the move that had started in 1989 final. I spoke German with our children for many years. I visited Germany with our children annually. There, they were the American cousins. Here, they were the kids with a German mother.

My German background has always been an important part of me. Growing up and travelling through Europe in my teens and early twenties, I was not proud of my German heritage. The atrocities of World War II were still too close. Patriotism was something we were taught to avoid like the plague. All these years later, I still have problems with overt displays of patriotism of any kind.

I started my citizenship application right after Trump was elected. I had to have permission from the German government to keep my German citizenship. I am not ready to give it up. I started the citizenship process because I did not feel safe anymore in a country that I had called home for close to 30 years. Things have changed since the election and I felt I had to protect myself. I filled out the

paperwork and last summer took the oath. My family in Germany did not quite understand why. My friends and acquaintances here were wondering why I would want to be a citizen of a country that just elected a president like Donald Trump. From that perspective, he promotes very controversial policies within the US and around the world. They, however, didn't have to fear the threat of deportation for minor infractions. Imagine coming "home" to be denied entry because he doesn't like green cards today.

30 years after we moved to the US, I studied 100 questions about American history, geography, and politics, signed on the dotted line, recited the pledge of allegiance, and swore to uphold the constitution. Dang! I remember well the very strange emotional mix of pride, solemnness, and utter disbelief at what I was doing there waiving my little flag around. Am I now American? I certainly did not feel the same way that so many of my fellow candidates talked about during the ceremony. I felt more like a fraud.

The oath and acceptance of a new citizenship is reshaping my identity. To understand what was happening to me, I began to research my families', my hometown's, and Germany's own history.

I am a member of the post-war generation in Germany. Its and my personal history are intertwined and makes me who I am today. After reading some literature, I realized how my parents' war experiences have helped shape me. Much research has been done in the past 15-20 years about this post-war generation. Certain idiosyncrasies common in us were born out of those experiences. I wanted to find out for myself how they influenced me to act, think, feel the way I do. There is so much still to learn. I am running out of time because my mother will be 94 this year and there is only precious little time left to hear her story firsthand. Last fall, I decided to ask her questions and steeled myself for her answers. I expected answers I was not ready to hear. It's been a good start but not nearly enough. My hope is to continue our conversation this Spring but the planned visit is postponed until fall.

I don't think I would have started on this journey without accepting my new citizenship. Thank You, blue passport for sending me on it. My identity is reshaping but I am excited about the process and curious about the outcome. I know I am not alone. Many of my immigrant friends have similar experiences. We are sitting between two chairs and now need to figure out a way to create a comfortable bench to connect the two.

