

# When You See Life from Wrong Side of the Fence

I shoved my passport through the chain-link fence and shouted, “Permesso di soggiorno, permesso di soggiorno.”

My two sons and I had arrived in Italy on the previous Friday morning to begin our sojourn as missionaries; Debbie, my wife, would arrive in a few weeks.

After leaving my two boys at the hotel, I went to the local police station (“questura”) in Padua with Carmine, our Italian Baptist colleague.

The instructions that came with my visa said to go there to get the forms to apply for a “permesso di soggiorno,” a card that would permit us to become long-term residents in Italy.

The people at the “questura” sent us to another government office. The people at the second office sent us to yet a third office. The third office sent us back to the “questura.”

It was now 4 p.m., and Carmine said we should quit for the day. I was to return on my own to the “questura” on Monday morning and go down the side street to the gate in the fence behind the building; they opened at 8:30 a.m.

On Monday morning, I got my sons breakfast and left them in the room. I took three buses to get to the “questura.”

I arrived at 7:45 a.m. and found several hundred people milling about in the narrow street in the already rising heat.

At 9:30 a.m., a police officer came out of the building and walked toward the gate. The crowd started shouting and waving official-looking letters. I had no such letter.

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July 31, 2018 Jim Kelsey**

I asked the man next to me what the letters were.

He replied, "French ... No else."

I pushed my way to the gate and shoved my passport through it showing my visa, all the time shouting, "Permesso di soggiorno."

Finally, the officer looked at it and replied, "Uffcio postale ... la stazione" - the post office near the train station. I made my way there and got the forms.

I thought I was on my way. It would be, however, six months and multiple visits back to the "questura" before we got any documents.

Most U.S. citizens pay an agent to get documents for them; it's fast and easy but a bit costly. We did not have the money for that.

We were, however, better off than most of the people in the street that morning. We came from a country where we could get the documents we needed - birth certificates, passports, marriage license and so on - without paying large amounts of money.

That morning, for me, was a taste of what it is like to be on the other side of the fence without any privilege.

I was just one of hundreds of people that day who needed some consideration. I was one of hundreds of people that day who were not entirely welcomed in the city and were seen as a burden and inconvenience.

Yes, in Italy, an American seeking residence is just another immigrant that, in the end, may be more trouble than he is worth. Tourists they want; residents, not so much.

I was born a white middle-class male to a family who owned their own home in a liberal democracy.

Others were born in the U.S. with more privilege than me, but I started out in a

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pretty good position nonetheless.

I had never been on the other side of the fence. It was healthy for me to look through a locked gate from the wrong side, without any privilege or claim. I am a better person for it.

*Editor's note: A [version](#) of this article first appeared on Kelsey's [blog](#), "I'm Just Saying," and is used with permission.*