

INTRODUCTION

‘How is Max doing at school?’ I asked.

Max’ parents exchanged a knowing glance.

It was fall 1999 and we were having dinner at their house in Brussels. Claus Sorensen, Max’ father, is Danish. His wife, Maria Assimakopoulou, comes from Greece. They’ve met each other in Brussels; he worked at the Danish embassy at the European Union at the time, she worked at the Greek embassy. Later they both started working for the European Commission. Max was born in Brussels in september 1990.

Max went to the European school. Rumour had it that it was not as strict as the French lycée or most Belgian schools. So when Sorensen en Assimakopoulou exchanged their knowing look, I half assumed Max had been caught smoking pot.

But Sorensen said: ‘Max just switched schools. He’s going to the international school now. Language became such a problem at the European school that in the end he didn’t want to go there anymore.’

‘Language problems?’ I asked. I had just moved to Brussels a month earlier. All I knew was that the European school was set up specially for the children of European officials, so they could be taught in their own language.

‘That was precisely the problem,’ Assimakopoulou said.

She speaks Greek with Max. Her whole family lives in Greece. They often go there on holidays. Assimakopoulou admits to feeling very Greek. She’s very close with her siblings in Athens and after twenty years in Brussels she still misses the clear skies and the good life under the sun. A few years ago Sorensen and Assimakopoulou bought a house on the island of Naxos. This makes it easier for Max to connect to his Greek family during the holidays. Sorensen speaks Danish with Max. ‘I think it’s important that Max knows where his parents come from,’ says Sorensen. ‘And that our backgrounds are part of him.’ But he and his wife speak English together: they speak each other’s languages rather poorly. This explains their use of English when the three of them are together.

When Max first went to the European school they were handed a document on which they had to fill in Max’ ‘first language’ and ‘second language’. ‘First language’ is the dominant language for a child at this school. After a while one subject is introduced in a second language, and slowly more subjects follow. In the end a third language is introduced. The idea behind all this is that you slowly immerse children in other European languages without weaning them from their mother tongue. This also enables children who eventually go back to their own country to stay tuned to the national curriculum.

To Sorensen and Assimakopoulou it was clear that English should be Max’ first language. Choosing between Greek and Danish would be for him like choosing between his parents. And besides, what was the added value of a Greek or Danish education to a boy who grew up in such an international setting? But the school didn’t agree. ‘First language’, they said, was supposed to be equivalent of ‘mother tongue’. Moreover English classes had to be reserved for real little Brits, who were flocking into Brussels in ever greater numbers. The school wanted Max to choose Danish as a first language and English as a second.

Danish or Danes, however, left Max stone cold. Already back then he associated Denmark with cold winds, punctuality and a lack of abundance in every field. His heart went out to Greece, where people can walk barefoot most of the year and children never go to bed early. Most kids in this class had two Danish parents. Among them Max felt like an outsider, just like when he travelled with his parents to Denmark or Greece. Then people would make jokes he didn’t get or discuss tv programs he hadn’t seen. Once he’d taken a Brussels friend to Greece, who spoke only French and English. This was the first time ever Max had thought: he’s the outsider, not me (it had felt rather good).

The more miserable Max felt, the more complicated the discussions of his parents became. It was clear that they had to come up with a solution – but which solution?

‘Suddenly you realize,’ Sorensen said, ‘that you have to give your child a clear identity. Half Danish and half Greek will not do. Maria and I don’t care what we are. Our identities and backgrounds are clear. I feel less close to my country than Maria, maybe because I partly grew up in Switzerland. But my roots are still Danish. Max’ situation is different. He’s a little bit from here and a little bit from there, but he doesn’t belong in either country. Belgium doesn’t mean anything to him. All our friends and his friends come from all over Europe. That doesn’t give him anything to hold onto. And this is very much what he needs: something to hold onto.’

They understood they couldn’t choose an identity for Max that didn’t exist. So they chose a language instead. They sent him to the international school in Brussels, where only one language is spoken: English. That’s where he was now, among kids from all over the world. Most of his new friends had hybrid identities, just like him. Most of them had some kind of accent, too. There were always others who didn’t get the jokes, either. Here everyone was an outcast, not just him.

From the first day Max liked this school. He visibly brightened up and quickly got good marks again. At home he spent less time in his room. He had long had the traits of a typical only child (his step sister, who is much older, lives in London): somewhat punyish, solitary and polite because there are always adults around. Now he became more outgoing and spontaneous. He looked healthier and more sure of himself. He remained the outsider, wherever he was, but it didn’t bother him anymore.

‘Because of what Max went through,’ Sorensen said, ‘I realize that we might always stay in Brussels. It’s better for him, sure. But also for us. I think next time I’m going to register myself as a voter for the local Belgian elections, for example. Someone told me that Europeans are eligible for the first time. This means I can vote for a European. Heck, why not get involved?’

‘Claus!’ said his wife jokingly. ‘You’re reading the *Financial Times*, *Le Monde*, the *International Herald Tribune* and some Danish papers. You don’t even *know* the names of Belgian political parties. You have no idea who the candidates are, let alone what they stand for. Why don’t you buy a Belgian paper first?’

‘Come on honey,’ Sorensen replied, ‘I do buy *Le Soir* from time to time.’

Assimakopoulou burst out laughing. ‘Sure, but only on Wednesdays, because of the weekly movie schedule!’

To me this was quite a memorable evening. It was the first time I understood that Europeans in Brussels are a class apart. These Europeans had ended up in Brussels more or less by accident: if the main European institutions (such as the European Parliament, the European Commission and the European Council – see glossary p. 295) had been established in another European city, they would most probably not have lived in Brussels now. These Europeans are hardly integrated into Belgian society. They have their own things to tend to, their own codes, their own conversation topics. Already back in 1999 the newspapers were full of stories about European politics – exactly the business that many of these Europeans were involved with, day in, day out. But I had never read anything about their existence and their lives, let alone about their dilemmas concerning identity.

Because of Max’ story I started to wonder which identity my own children would end up with. In those days I had only one child, now there are three. They have their roots in three European countries: the Netherlands, Belgium and Portugal. They’re fluent in Dutch and French, and speak quite a bit of Spanish, Portuguese and English. What would be their homeland, a nest in the geographical and cultural sense? *Would* there be a homeland at all?

And if not, would this matter much? Were we, the parents of these hybrids – and the culprits of this confusion fortold – supposed to steer them in a certain direction, for example by choosing certain schools, buying a house somewhere or declaring any of the multiple languages at home ‘dominant’?

I started asking other Europeans about these issues. And soon enough I understood that many Europeans in the city were struggling with them in one way or another. For whoever decides for his children, decides for himself as well. Are we going to stay in Brussels or go back to where we came from? How Dutch or Spanish or British can I still be after so many years in Brussels? Where do we go on holidays?

There are approximately 150.000 Europeans in Brussels. They come from all over Europe. Many of them are professionally dealing with European politics on a daily basis – the integration project that was started after the devastation of two world wars (1914-1918 and 1940-1945), in order to prevent yet another war from breaking out. The idea was that the more European countries would cooperate economically, the harder it would be for them to take up arms against one another – as had happened so often in the past. What started in 1951 with the European Community for Coal and Steel (by merging the German and French heavy industries that were so vital for warfare) has by now gradually developed into a big internal market of 27 countries. But not all Europeans in Brussels are working for the European Commission or the parliament. Many have also found work with law firms, lobby organizations, ngos or the growing amount of companies that have come to Brussels in the slipstream of the European institutions.

The Europeans in the city are expatriates in name only. Expats never get the chance to root, since they hardly ever stay longer in one country than three or four years. Many Europeans in Brussels, however, are sort of re-rooting. They often came many years ago and have never left. They’ve bought houses (like Max’ parents), renew their opera subscriptions every year and spend most or all of their money in Belgium. Dozens of real estate offices, book shops, language institutes and travel agencies are set up specially for them. Magazines such as *The European Voice* and *The Bulletin*, targeting Europeans, are thriving. In Brussels it is as easy to book horse-riding classes in Italian as it is to see Swedish movies on any given day of the week. Although most Europeans have some Belgian friends, they spend a lot of time together. They play tennis together, start book clubs and drive to Charleroi airport on Friday evening to catch a cheap Ryanair flight to another European city for the weekend. Many don’t even notice any more how often they switch languages at the dinner table. Neither do their children (the little ones are often fluent, though).

Some are very sceptical about more European integration, others firmly believe in the European ideal. Some of them remain close to their countries of origin. Others feel that they have drifted away. There is also a growing group of people, including kids like Max, who don’t know what or where their country of origin is. This dilemma unites them, in a way. For it is a dilemma: who are you, if you don’t have a clear national identity any more? Are you, then, a European?

A European identity for all Europeans has never really taken hold. European integration is quite far advanced but mostly in a geographical and economical sense. A member of the European parliament once called the European Union (EU) ‘a museum piece of good economic intentions’. There are no internal border controls any more. Most Europeans in the ‘old’ EU pay with one currency: the euro. But politically and culturally Europe hardly exists. The fiasco with the European Constitution in 2005 – that was firmly rejected in French and Dutch referendums – shows us what’s wrong with Europe: ordinary citizens don’t identify with this political project. Their own national governments perceive a strong Europe as a

threat and are reluctant you yield more powers from their capitals to Brussels. This is why Europe is of little relevance to many citizens.

Issues that most people deeply care about and tend to have strong opinions on – such as the quality of our children’s schools, employment, street safety or the war in Iraq – are not at all decided upon on the European level. These issues have firmly remained in the competence of national governments, who all make sure that this is going to stay that way. They let Brussels have a say in agricultural and trade policy, the composition of plastics in toys or the way butchers should slaughter a cow. All these issues are important, too, affecting consumers’ health for instance – but they’re definitely *not* issues that citizens tend to have sleepless nights about. They are technical and utterly un-emotional. This is one of the reasons Europeans hardly ever question their national identity. The country where live, where your whole family lives, the country that issues your passport, the country where you vote – that’s where you belong. It has always been this way.

The only ones who do feel European to a certain extent, are the growing group of people working in Brussels. They went there to ‘work for Europe’ (in the old days), to promote their careers (the younger generation), to follow a sweetheart or whatever other reasons one can have for such a move (there are so many). Some of them were there already: second generation. Many of them feel European by default: being far away from home for years, and getting used to and even charmed by dealing with the totally multicultural Brussels environment often makes it difficult to stay tuned to the political, social and moral codes in their countries of origin. They end up not feeling at home there anymore.

This book is about all those people. They are people, funnily enough, who don’t appear in statistics at all. No one writes about them. Although absurdist Belgium seems to have one of the highest rates of sociologists in Europe, they prefer to study another group of Europeans with identity problems: migrants from Turkey, Algeria, Pakistan or Morocco. *My* Europeans, by contrast, are predominantly white, well educated and mostly solidly middle class. Some *Bruxellois* blame them collectively for demolishing charmingly old *maisons de maître* in order to make place for ugly European offices of concrete and glass. Other Belgians are scandalized by the high salaries the Europeans are supposedly earning, or their snobbish attitudes. But apart from this the Europeans don’t seem to antagonize anyone much. Socially, politically and economically they don’t cause any alarm. Hence this total silence.

Still these people embody – often unconsciously and sometimes even unwillingly – the exact ideals that Europe’s founding fathers had in mind after World War II: a melting pot of cultures and backgrounds, based upon common political rules that would effectively prohibit the old belligerent nation states to take up arms against one another ever again. As such, I think they really deserve to be studied. They represent part of modern, post-war European history..

This is one of the reasons the Europeans have fascinated me right from the start of my five-year stay in Brussels. I soon started writing about them, their lives and ideas: because they’re so connected to the political stories I was covering I could in fact use them to highlight or illustrate Europe’s successes or failures. My aim was to give Brussels a ‘face’ by writing about the people behind the politics, as a sort of antidote against the daily barrage of incomprehensible headlines (‘The European Parliament Has Decided...’, ‘The Commission proposes...’). At the end of my tenure in Brussels, when I was about to move to Geneva, I decided to write a book about them.

My timing was not very practical; in order to do the interviews for this book I had to shuttle often between Brussels and Geneva. But my absence from Brussels had advantages too. It gave me some distance from my subject, which is indispensable for a journalist.

Moreover, living in Geneva helped me define the group I was writing about more precisely. For Geneva is a very international city, too. The United Nations has its European headquarters in Geneva, and still there are foreign banks on the corner of almost every street. The world's oil trade, dominated nowadays by Russians, is conducted from Geneva. Finally, Switzerland's particular tax laws attract rich foreigners and scores of holding companies from all over the world as never before. Most foreigners in Geneva, though, clearly fall into the 'expatriates' category. For them the city is a station, a place where they temporarily reside. This influences their behaviour: knowing they will have to leave again in a few years' time, many people tend to be more superficial in their contacts with others. They invest less in each other and in the city. All this has been studied and written about many times: the existing literature on expats, which I will explore later on, is huge. Europeans in Brussels couldn't, generally speaking, be more different. Other than employees of the UN or big multinationals, they work for a company – Europe – that is mostly confined to one place: Brussels. Their future is there. And so they invest in it, financially and socially.

Another difference is that Geneva is truly international and diverse: there are many Chinese, Africans, Arabs, and Indians for instance. Brussels is 'just' European, and hence much more homogeneous. The European sub-culture feels more coherent.

Just after I left Brussels in 2004 citizens' discontent with Europe – the so-called eurosclerosis, or euroscepticism, which had long been looming - erupted. The prime ministers and presidents of the 15 EU member states had decided to enlarge the EU with ten new members. Most Europeans didn't like it one bit. They hadn't even gotten used to the euro yet, which had been introduced a few years earlier and which in their view was to blame for recent price hikes in many countries. National parliaments had been publicly debating EU enlargement since the Berlin Wall came down in 1989. But, just like earlier with the euro, nobody followed those debates. So the politicians went ahead and negotiated technical details and time tables with the ten new countries. Only months before their accession many citizens started moaning about it. But by then it was too late. So everything went ahead as planned.

Many people were afraid to lose their jobs to cheap workers from Poland or Hungary who, 'for sure', would migrate to Western Europe by the millions in search of a better life. They were scared of criminals coming, too. So they blamed Brussels.

Government leaders, as always afraid to lose the next elections, left it at that. They even encouraged the people by starting to blame Brussels, too. They could have explained why they thought enlargement was a good idea. They could have told the people that in fact these kinds of important decisions are never taken by bureaucrats in Brussels, but by national governments – in other words, by themselves. And only by unanimity, even. But they didn't mention that, wisely. And that's how Europe suddenly became *passé*. Even Europe's biggest supporters like the Dutch and the French changed their minds collectively. A year later the Constitution was voted down; so far nobody has been able to revive it. Everything that goes wrong somewhere in Europe these days is blamed on Brussels: rising unemployment, illegal immigration, and even the bankruptcy of companies.

Wherever they travel, Europeans in Brussels often feel this mistrust personally. Sometimes they are directly being accused of being profiteers, of squandering taxpayers' monies, of living with their heads in the clouds. But is this so? How can they be judged if we have no idea of who they are? So perhaps now is a good moment to finally get to know these 'eurocrats' in faraway Brussels a little bit better who are put on the rack so ruthlessly. Who are they, how do they live, what do they think, what makes them tick? Why did they go to Brussels – because of a vague ideal 'to make the world a better place', because of career opportunities, or simply because of love or a thirst for some adventure? I was curious if the current political crisis is influencing the way they work. I wanted them to sketch the history of

modern Europe in terms of their own personal stories. I wanted them to explain what eurosclerosis is all about and if it has an impact on their identities. How does it feel not just to belong to a privileged group but also to a beleaguered group all of a sudden? Does that make them more European, or less?

Identity and European integration *are* connected. The EU is all about states working together, but for the founding fathers economic cooperation was never a goal in itself. In their view it was only an instrument to bring people in Europe closer together. They wanted all Europeans to listen to each other more carefully and be more understanding and tolerant. They could keep their own culture and national identity. But if they would *also* feel a little European, in addition, peace would maybe this time last a little longer than between previous wars. So the founders of the European Union saw a European identity as an antidote against ultranationalist feelings that had plunged the continent into wars for centuries.

Some Europeans are putting this idea into practice in Brussels, the capital of Europe. They work together, they live together, they get married there. How much closer, how much more ‘understanding’ can one get? In these turbulent days for Europe the political relevance of this European subculture in Brussel only increases. It is high time someone studies it. The degree of their Europeanness tells us something about the future of European integration. If a European identity doesn’t exist here, of all places, where else can it?

Chapter 1 is about myself and my family. I haven’t chosen this subject for personal reasons but they certainly did play a role. I will use concrete examples from my own family life to explain why. I will also describe my entry into a complicated political life in Brussels that I didn’t understand anything about at first.

In chapter 2 I will try to define what ‘European identity’ is and describe my – sometimes hilarious – quest for facts and figures about the European population in Brussels. In chapters 3 till 30 I will let the Europeans speak for themselves, one by one. After these long interviews follow a conclusion, a glossary of ‘Euro-speak’ and a literature list.

Last but not least: so far European identity has only been studied theoretically, *in abstracto*. To my knowledge nobody’s done it yet in the way I’m doing it – by describing a group of people of flesh and blood, and by letting them talk. It’s oral history, not science. The errors are entirely mine. But the people are real.