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Garry Davis dies at 91; World Citizen No. 1 and advocate for peace

Garry Davis, who renounced his U.S. citizenship in 1948, founded the World Government of World Citizens.

By Steve Chawkins

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When a Cold War-era acquaintance of Garry Davis' complained that U.S. passport restrictions kept him from visiting Iron Curtain countries, Davis did just what you would expect of World Citizen No. 1. advertisement

He took a rubber stamp to the young man's passport and slapped it with an official-sounding pronouncement: "The above restriction is hereby removed." Six months later, the traveler triumphantly returned from Bulgaria.

Davis, who registered himself and more than 950,000 others as "world citizens," was an activist who took his cause a lot further than rubber stamps. He founded the [World Government of World Citizens](#), an organization that issues its own "world passports," visas, birth certificates and other documents in an effort to rise above national borders and the conflicts they breed.

Sometimes the documents work and sometimes they don't — Davis was jailed at least 32 times — but his broader aim was to draw attention to what he saw as the violent lunacy of nationalism.

Davis renounced his U.S. citizenship in 1948. Sixty-five years later, as he was taken by ambulance from his home in Burlington, Vt., to a hospice in nearby Williston, he tried to talk the driver into becoming a fellow world citizen. Davis even gave him a copy of the U.N.'s [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), a document he held dear and always kept at hand.

Davis, a provocateur for peace who drew followers as respected as Albert Einstein and Albert Schweitzer while roaming the world with papers of his own making, died July 24 at age 91. He had cancer, family members said.

"Everything he did was dead-on serious and at the same time a spoof on the system," said Arthur Kanegis, a San Diego filmmaker who has a documentary about Davis in production. "He used to say: 'The World Passport is a joke — but so are all the other passports. Theirs are a joke on us and ours is a joke on the system.'"

Like much humor, it had grim roots.

Born July 27, 1921 in Bar Harbor, Maine, Sol Gareth Davis was the son of pianist Hilda Emery and orchestra leader Meyer Davis, whose many dance bands were a fixture at cotillions and other society functions for decades.

With a booming voice and theatrical manner, Davis headed for Broadway after studying drama at the Carnegie Institute of Technology. In 1942, he subbed for an ailing Danny Kaye in a musical called "Let's Face It!"

However, he lost interest in show business when his older brother Bud was killed in action on a U.S. destroyer off Italy during World War II.

"I prayed for a chance to exact revenge," he recalled in his 1961 autobiography, "My Country is the World: The Adventures of a World Citizen."

But after a stint as an Army aviator, he came to regret the bombing runs he made over Germany.

"Ever since my first mission over Brandenburg, I had felt pangs of conscience," he wrote. "How many men, women and children had I murdered?"

The question so tormented him that he showed up at the American Embassy in Paris on May 25, 1948, to give up his U.S. citizenship and establish himself as a citizen of the world.

"If I could show that it was possible for me to survive in the world without papers, cross frontiers without a passport and conduct myself as a free human being without benefit of any national credentials, I would be striking a blow at the very heart of nationalism itself," he wrote.

Davis was hardly the first to rail against nationalism, but he was one of the most masterful at getting publicity. In Paris, he camped out for days on the steps of the Palais Chaillot, home of the fledgling United Nations. His message resounded in a Europe still weary from war and beset with refugees. Eleanor Roosevelt lauded him in her newspaper column. He spoke at a rally and drew cheers from 20,000 Parisians.

For years, publicity surged as he engaged in global street theater.

While trying to enter Germany from France, German guards on a bridge wouldn't let him into the country without papers and French guards wouldn't let him back in. Aided by enthusiastic supporters, he camped out in place for weeks.

"Mr. Davis has stowed away on ships, sneaked across borders, shuttled back and forth on trains between one country and another, and has been forced to fly countless air hours in different directions because no country would let him off a plane," wrote columnist Art Buchwald in 1957.

When police in Iran told him to leave the country, he sought refuge at Egypt's embassy. After exasperated officials there kicked him out, he was grudgingly taken back by Iran and finally placed — involuntarily — on a plane to Saudi Arabia, which refused to admit him.

For someone in official limbo, he lived well — often off the kindness of strangers — and had some fun at the expense of bureaucrats. During his lengthy contretemps with Egyptian officials in Tehran, he intimidated a guard with a theatrical flourish.

"I held up my left hand before him like a traffic cop while I reached into my pocket with my right," he wrote. "Out came my World Guard badge, newly gold-plated and flashing like a thousand Mogul swords. He shrank back."

In 1957, he choreographed his arrest for shoplifting lingerie at a Parisian department store, later explaining that he aimed to expose the craziness of a system that would both boot him out and require him to stick around for trial. He left anyhow, sailing for Italy at night in a one-man rubber raft.

Davis wore down officials rhetorically.

"He was an actor," said his friend, Vermont peace activist Robin Lloyd. "He had a way of sweet-talking when that was needed, of being evasive when that was needed, and of arguing vociferously that this is mandated by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and your government has agreed to it."

Before he died, Davis saw to it that a "world passport" was sent to Edward Snowden, the National Security Agency fugitive who is being held at the Moscow airport. Whether he received it is unknown, said David M. Gallup, president of the World Service Authority, the administrative arm of World Government of World Citizens. A three-year world passport costs \$45 but fees may be waived for refugees.

While officially stateless, Davis lived for years in France and, since the early 1990s, in Burlington, Vt.

He is survived by daughters Kristina Starr Davis and Athena Davis; sons Troy Davis and Kim Davis; a sister, Ginia Davis Wexler; a brother, Emery Davis; and a granddaughter.

He ran for numerous offices, including mayor of Washington, D.C., and global posts of his own devising. In 1988, he ran for U.S. president on the World Citizen Party ticket.

"Contrary to most people in the world who want to make world peace and who say that love is the answer, he realized the answer is political," said his son Troy, a university lecturer in Strasbourg, France. "It's not just love your neighbor. You have to change the system."

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