My Danish immigration nightmare

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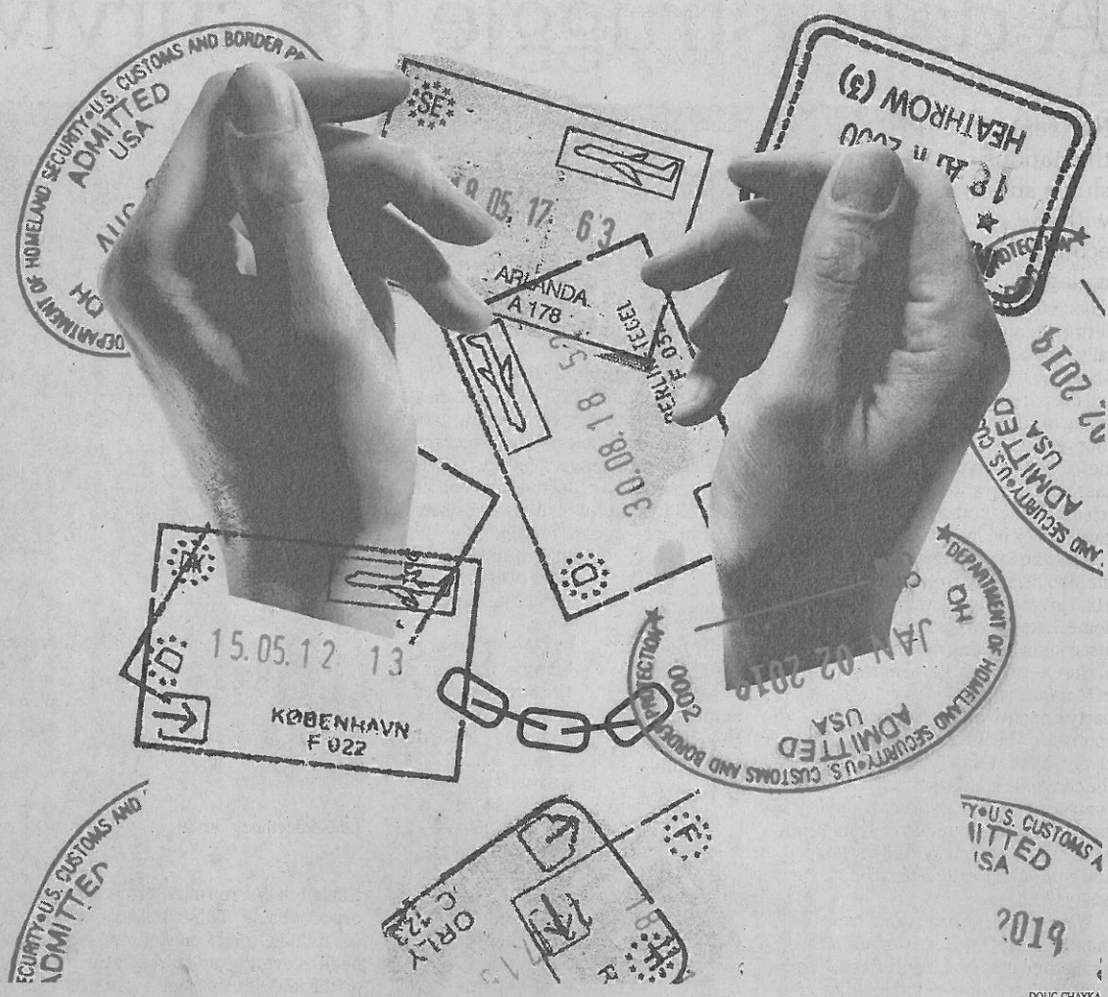

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The call came on a Friday.

When it came, I thought my boss was going to congratulate me for winning a research prize just announced that morning. Instead, she told me I would be contacted shortly by the Danish police; the university had just learned I was facing criminal charges for violating my work and residence permit.

My crime: giving lectures on my academic research to the Danish Parliament and to government agencies, at their request. That year, 2017, I had given five such lectures, a task normally considered an obligation, and an honor for a professor like me. Yet each had been declared a crime because I was an immigrant from a non-European Union country.

And that is how, weeks after being promoted to full professor and having a book on the Danish best-seller list, I ended up cowering in the middle of my kitchen with my 7-year-old son, hoping that the two police officers pounding on the door of our Copenhagen apartment would not see us. I was terrified they would take me away to prison and send him to foster care.

A month before, I'd been on top of the world and ready to apply for permanent residence in Denmark, the country that had been my home for nearly eight years. There was so much I loved about the Danes, and still do; their system of research support and early childhood education for my son allowed me to do the innovative research on tax havens that led to the book and the findings I'd been invited to share with Parliament. Then suddenly, all because I had the wrong passport, I was at risk of losing my career and my life savings in a court fight.

For me, the story had a happy ending, but not so much for Denmark. When the account of my prosecution was plastered across the front pages of European newspapers, Denmark not only embarrassed itself internationally but also sabotaged its own economy and undermined its own longstanding development efforts.

Nearly everyone, from the prime minister who warned in an op-ed about overzealous immigration policy to government officials who tweeted about my case to the Danish police officer who read the charges against me over the phone, expressed regret about the absurdity of the prosecution. It was a debacle, both politically and economically, and that is the lesson of my story: Anti-immigrant, ethnonationalist policies are acts of self-destruction, not self-preservation. And nowhere is this more true than in countries like Denmark and the United States, which compete in the world economy based on brainpower and innovation.

Long before the Trump administration, the populist Danish People's Party formed a bloc in Parliament in the early 2000s and influenced a shift in the laws of a country formerly known for its warm welcome to outsiders.

The party didn't want to just eliminate immigration; it sought to return Denmark to an imaginary past of racial and ethnic "purity." As the party platform states: "Denmark is not an immigrant country and never has been. Thus we will not accept transformation to a multiethnic society."

This is more or less what Mr. Trump's immigration adviser, Stephen Miller, wants for the United States, which is why it is important for Americans to understand where such policies lead.

I had become a full professor and a best-selling author. Weeks later, Denmark charged me with violating my work and residence permit.

Performative xenophobia was so popular politically that one immigration minister put a counter on the ministry's website to show the public that her regime had tightened the laws restricting foreigners over 100 times in her four-year tenure. Changing the immigration rules an average of more than twice a month for four years meant that nobody could keep up. Even the Danish universities and the minister of education apparently didn't know about the law forbidding professors from outside the European Union to give guest lectures.

It didn't matter, because this legal strategy had just one purpose: to create pretexts for deporting non-Europeans, or to make them feel unwelcome enough that they would leave Denmark.

It worked like a charm, though at a huge cost, both to the targeted foreigners and to the country rejecting them. For example, the Danish state spent thousands of kroner (a krone is worth about 15 cents) prosecuting the respected Colombian economist Jimmy Martínez-Correa, a professor at the Copenhagen Business School, on the same charges leveled against me; he was acquitted 18 months later. Rachel Bullen, an Australian oboist prosecuted for the crime of playing guest sets with Danish orchestras, was not so lucky: She was convicted and left Denmark with her career in tatters; with a criminal record, she found it hard to get work even in her native country.

I don't know what became of the other non-Europeans (about a dozen) who were charged at the same time as I was; some contacted me privately, saying they were so fearful of the xenophobia whipped up in the Danish public sphere that they dare not speak to the media.

As the story of my case spread, Danish government officials tried to do damage control, taking to mass media and Twitter to say that Denmark would never want to discourage immigrants from sharing their skills and knowledge. But it was already too late: Denmark started to lose things it cared about.

Most notable, it may have contributed to the loss of the jobs and prestige that would have come with the relocation to Copenhagen of the European Medicines Agency, a European Union office that tested pharmaceuticals. The Danish government had spent months and millions of kroner wooing the agency, which had decided to move from London to the Continent after the Brexit decision. But the publicity surrounding the charges I faced may have spooked the agency's multinational staff members.

For me, the nightmare ended after eight months; Denmark changed its laws so that the charges against me were dropped. I was more fortunate than Ms. Bullen in escaping the lifetime stigma of criminal conviction; but like her, I returned to my native country determined to warn of what we stand to lose in continuing down the path set by ultranationalist policymakers.

I saw that the hatred of others is contagious and inevitably spreads to the people a country most needs to survive, whether they be farm laborers or physicians. This ultimately comes into conflict with the country's economy and its aspirations.

The humanitarian disaster of the Trump administration's treatment of

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migrants has already been documented in gut-wrenching detail. Less recognized, however, is the destruction such policies wreak on the society, economy and long-term development of countries that attempt to rid themselves of immigrants.

The kind of xenophobia that afflicted Denmark appeared last month, during impeachment hearings, in commentary questioning the loyalty of public servants like Lt. Col. Alexander Vindman and Fiona Hill because they are immigrants. Their contributions — including a willingness to risk death in the name of duty — don't matter to their critics, who saw and heard only one thing: not one of us.

On top of the staggering moral failure this represents — alongside the Muslim travel ban and the horrors of caged Central American children — this is just unfathomably self-defeating. Immigrants helped Americans win World War II and put Americans on the moon; immigrants built the global tech dominance of the Silicon Valley and enabled the United States to win more Nobel Prizes than any other country.

They literally made America great. Don't let anyone destroy that legacy for a poisoned dream of purity.

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