

Seeking French Nationality

A sample case history by Mr & Mrs G 2018

Briefly

Since moving to Charente Maritime in 2010, the local community has made us very welcome. Feeling very much at home in France we decided in November 2015 to seek French nationality. By a few months we had already exceeded the regulation five year minimum period of residence in France. We increased our hours of French tuition because, being over 60 years of age, we knew that our fluency in French would be evaluated during an interview. At that time Brexit seemed a remote possibility.

We initiated the building of our dossiers that November, downloading the relevant forms and guidance from the internet. Laura Morley, Your French Matters, provided excellent, invaluable support, particularly but not exclusively in the speedy translation of an extensive range of certificates and documentation.

While aiming to submit our dossiers in March 2016 we were delayed until June by the late arrival of police certificates from North Cyprus. La Poste confirmed their receipt two days later at our regional 'plate-forme de naturalisation' at Niort. In August 2016, Niort confirmed our dossiers were complete and provided an 'Attestation depot de dossier'. The letter also 'obliged' us to present ourselves separately for interview at the 'plate-forme de naturalisation' at 10.00, 6 March 2017, along with a small collection of easily sourced documents.

Each interview lasted about 40 minutes incorporating questions and conversations mainly about French culture and the responsibilities of French citizens. Subsequently, we jointly received an explanation of the next steps in the processing of our dossiers. While we were informed that there was no reason for us to return to Niort, we did not know whether we had 'passed' or not. Much later, in hindsight, we realise our interviewer had given several clues and had tried to reassure us. We were advised that we would probably receive the outcome of our application in March 2018.

In July 2017, we received two surprise phone calls from an administrator in Nantes seeking clarification about the use of our names, i.e. which of our names were first, middle and family names. He deftly sidestepped questions about the progress of our applications but mentioned that he was engaged in preparing birth certificates.

Early in September 2017 we each received a letter that opened with: ' J'ai le plaisir de vous informer que vous avez aquis la nationalité française depuis le 24/08/17'. It added that we would be invited to a meeting at an undefined Préfecture within six months at which we would receive our French documents. In November Le Sous-Préfet at Jonzac invited us to meet her in early December. During a private meeting we received our certificate of French nationality and other papers. In December we submitted our applications for passports and identity cards at the Hotel de Ville at Pons. Three weeks

later we collected them. All that remains for us now is to apply at our village Mairie for our names to be added to the electoral register.

When we began the process we did not inform anyone of our intentions. However, this quickly became impractical after the Brexit referendum. Many of our French friends and neighbours immediately expressed concern about how Brexit would affect us and were all delighted when we explained what we had already done. When they knew we had been granted French nationality, without exception, they enthusiastically welcomed us, typically with an embrace, a 'Bienvenu', often a glass of wine and in one instance a bouquet of red, white and blue flowers, a beret, and a baguette complemented by a Tricolour.

In more detail

Getting started

Living in Charente Maritime, our 'Plate-forme de naturalisation' is based at the Préfecture des Deux-Sèvres, Niort. (1)

We checked the regulations for demanding nationality using the ' Démarches administrative/ Naturalisations ' section of the Deux-Sèvres website. (2) We based our dossiers for the ' Acquisition de la nationalité française par décret ' on guidance accessed via the same site. (3) All of the required forms can also be downloaded from this site. (Since 2015 the site has been updated and improved and now includes, for example, links to tailored national guidance on building a dossier specific to your needs.)

When we needed further guidance/clarification of existing guidance, we found it difficult to get a response by telephoning (05 49 08 69 41) the designated number at Niort - the number was always busy. On the other hand, we received a very helpful response within 24 hours to emails/emails with letters attached (written in French) sent to 'pref-naturalisations@deux-sevres.gouv.fr'.

Building the dossier

We built separate dossiers. We worked tightly to the published guidance and that offered by Niort in response to our emails. We presented the documents in the order specified in the guidance - as demanded by Niort. Each dossier was fronted by a list of contents in the order presented. The list indicated whether the documents were originals or not. Where each dossier required an original of the same document of which there was only one, such as the 'Acte de propriété' or a utilities bill, we made clear in which dossier the original could be found. In each dossier we included a copy of all the emails/letters sent to Niort along with their responses. Where important, we made reference to these emails/letters in the document list, such as when the documents submitted differed from the official guidance, by agreement with Niort.

Many documents required translation. Laura Morley, who has looked after our tax submissions since we arrived in France, kindly accepted to support us. Laura is recognised by the Tribunal de Grande Instance de Sainte as a translator and interpreter: Niort recognised her expertise and status without question. Laura speedily translated our various certificates, letters and documents and helped overcome problems with our police certificates from North Cyprus.

'Le Formulaire'

The early completion of a draft version of, 'Le Formulaire', document Cerfa 12753*02, (Demande d'Acquisition de la Nationalité Française downloaded from (4)) proved helpful in

identifying gaps in our documentation, such as birth, marriage and police certificates. We were unable to complete 'Le Formulaire' online or on a computer. We therefore printed several copies and had to prepare two hand-written copies for each dossier!

While straightforward to complete, we knew the contents would be scrutinised in detail so we carefully checked for inconsistencies. We found, for example, that my home address given in our marriage certificate was not listed in my list of 'Domiciles', since the former was an address of convenience to enable us to marry in a church. Several police stations where my wife had lived no longer existed. While I worked at several schools, my employer was in fact the local education authority. In each case we provided a brief explanatory note.

Actes D'Etat Civil

For sentimental reasons we did not wish to submit our personal, original copies of birth and other certificates, even though there is an option to have them returned.

The UK government's site (5) for obtaining certificates worked efficiently, including for the unusual - a maritime birth certificate for a British parent born in French territorial waters on a German ship. Similarly for a decree absolute. (6)

Where we did not have the necessary details to obtain certificates, a temporary subscription to 'Ancestry' solved the problem.

Much to our relief, Niort confirmed that the warning: 'IMPORTANT : Certains actes d'état civil doivent être légalisés ou apostillés.' did not apply to birth and other certificates provided by the UK Government.

Casier Judiciaire

During the previous ten years we had lived in the UK for 3 months (and for many years before that), then North Cyprus for 4 years followed by France. Even though our period of UK residency was only 3 months, and France does not recognise The Turkish Republic of North Cyprus as an entity, Niort insisted that police clearance certificates were required for both countries.

The UK system for obtaining police certificates (7) was efficient.

Obtaining a certificate from North Cyprus proved to be very complicated, time consuming, costly and frustrating. When the certificates eventually arrived after 5 months mine was incorrect, giving my nationality as Irish. The wait had already delayed our preparations by several months, so we decided to submit our dossiers including the faulty certificate accompanied by an explanatory note. Niort was flexible and accepted this compromise. I provided a corrected certificate in March 2017.

Titre de sejour

Niort confirmed that, being UK citizens, our passport was sufficient; we did not need a separate Carte de Sejour.

Resources and activite professionnelle

We are retired, which simplified matters. On the other hand, we still needed to make clear the sources and levels of our incomes.

For 'Titres de Pension' we submitted the first few financial pages of the letters stating our state and civil service pension incomes on retirement. For brevity, and to reduce the amount of translation, we did not forward the extensive pages of guidance that formed part of these letters.

Niort agreed to several compromises. Being the owner of her own company, my wife did not have any documents indicating her final salary on retirement. This condition was waived. For our civil service and state pensions, the annual statements of entitlement, along with an annotated copy of a French bank statement showing payments received (in Euros), were accepted instead of the latest monthly 'bordereau de versement'.

Our private pensions were treated in the same way.

Revenue en France ou a l'etranger

In essence we listed our sources of income other than from pensions, made clear their origin, valued the capital and income in Euros at a stated conservative exchanged rate - 1.25 - chosen by us. (Those were the days!) We used the same list, signed and dated, for each of us. This list was accepted. We made sure that this detail was consistent with French tax returns in previous years.

Situation fiscale

As required we provided copies of our 'Avis d'imposition sur le revenu'. (Avis dated 2015, 2014, 2013) We also made clear that we had available copies of the 'Avis' for the previous two years since we knew this information would form a major part of the evaluation of our demand for nationality, including whether we had been 'tax' residents in France for at least five years.

Bordereau de situation fiscale (P237) and Timbre Fiscal

We had no idea what a P237 was! The advice on the website is now much clearer. With some hesitation we visited the 'Centre des finances publiques' at Pons. Having explained the purpose of our request, we were offered constructive advice and informed that our single 'P237' would arrive by post within a week. It did. We purchased the necessary Timbre Fiscal at the same time.

Submitting the dossier

As required, we posted the two dossiers to Niort using La Poste's 'Recommandé avec avis de réception'. Within 48 hours we had written evidence of their receipt at the Prefecture des Deux-Sevres.

About 8 weeks later we were informed by letter that our dossiers were complete. An 'Attestation Depot de Dossier' was provided along with the time, date and venue at Niort of 'l'entretien réglementaire' scheduled for the following March. Our meetings were scheduled 30 minutes apart. The letter also included i. a list of further information required for the day of the meeting and, ii. strongly recommended that we download and familiarise ourselves with the 'charte des droits et devoirs du citoyen français' (8) and the 'livret citoyen'.(9)

The further information demanded was: i. the latest 'Avis d'imposition sur le revenu', (For us, the Avis dated 2016 based on income for 2015) ii. an updated P237, iii. and, for our pensions, the latest versions of the annual statements of entitlement plus a more recent annotated bank statement verifying the monthly receipts.

The interview

While waiting for our interview we spoke to a much younger person who was there for the same reason. Our experiences had been different, probably because we are retired. She

had been surprised to learn that a *Gendarme* had carried out some background enquiries including, for example, visiting her places of employment and training. We were unaware of any such investigation, which, of course, doesn't mean it didn't take place.

In addition to the further information demanded, we took a complete copy of our dossiers to the interview. The former was taken from us at the start of the meeting, the latter was unnecessary.

Before the questioning commenced we were handed a 'Recepisse de depot de dossier' and asked to sign a copy of 'la charte des droits et devoirs du citoyen francais'.

We were interviewed individually by the same person who did her best to put us at ease while remaining professional and impartial. Our major concern proved unfounded: our interviewer spoke well-paced, very clear French. She willingly repeated phrases and waited patiently when we sought the correct responses and/or French. She encouraged us when our minds went blank and made light of our errors. It was clearly evident that she was evaluating our capacity to use the French language, plus our degree of familiarity with and the extent of our integration into everyday life in France. She was not expecting perfection and there was never any sense of her trying to catch us out. Our ability to read or write French was not checked during the interview.

Naturally we compared our interviews in the car on the way home. They had followed similar themes but she had, in the main, asked different questions of each of us. She had explored the consistency of our responses on some topics, such as the number and proportions of French/English friends we have near where we live.

We did not do a lot of preparation for the interview. Apart from increasing the amount of French tuition to help improve our speaking and listening, we made sure we read the 'charte des droits et devoirs du citoyen français' (8) et the 'livret citoyen'. (9) We were very wise to have done so. Questions on the former occupied a significant part of the interview and explored, for example, the relationship between the church and state in France and the detail of the rights and duties of citizens. The themes covered by the 'livret citoyen' provided the focus for most of the rest of the interview. Questions covered, for example, history and French films, authors and singers. The accounts of this type of interview found on the internet offered little useful information and bore little relationship to our experiences.

For about 15 minutes before we left, our interviewer talked to us together. She explained that our dossiers would now be passed on to the prefecture at La Rochelle, then returned to Niort for further analysis and subsequently passed on to Paris. She stated we would not be required to return to Niort. We were advised that the whole process would last until at least March 2018 and we should have no concerns if we hear nothing during that period. Finally, she offered a few gentle suggestions about how we could improve our French and when dual UK/French citizens should use their UK and French passports.

We did not know the outcome of our demand for nationality, nor did our interviewer at this stage. However, in looking back, she was clearly trying to tell us that all was well from her point of view.

On arriving home we found an email waiting for us seeking an urgent copy of our 'avis d'imposition 2012 sur les revenus 2011'. The purpose was made explicit - to verify that we had been 'tax' residents in France for at least 5 years. A copy was immediately emailed to Niort and we received a rapid acknowledgment.

The waiting game

We were lucky; we did not have to wait long.

After the unexpected phone call from Nantes in July about that implied all was well, we learned by letter the outcome of our demand for nationality in September - six months sooner than expected.

In addition to explaining that we should receive a letter from the prefecture of our department within six months, the letter noted that our names were inscribed in a decret no. 033 and published in the Journal Officiel De La République Française on 26 August 2017. (10) We located the 'Naturalisations and reintegrations' section of this journal and found our names hidden among hundreds of others. We were identified separately, my wife under her maiden surname.

In November, the Sous-Préfet at Jonzac invited us to meet her in early December. Having proved our identity with our French driving licenses, our British Passports were politely declined, we were officially welcomed to France and given a collection of documents including:

- A letter from Monsieur Le Président de la République Française (Président Hollande not Président Macron, despite being well after the presidential elections)
- A document for each of us stating that we had acquired French nationality. My wife's certificate was in her maiden name.
- A French birth certificate for each of us
- A single copy of our French marriage certificate
- A 'Livret de famille'

And then....

A few days after receiving our nationality documents we completed our applications for a French Passport and Carte Nationale d'Identité at the closest Mairie that had the necessary finger print and document scanning equipment. A single application covered both documents. (11) The online application form enabled my wife to append her married name to her maiden name: e.g. Brown ep. Peters, Jane Sylvia for both documents. Several original documents, such as birth certificates, were held at the Mairie while our applications were processed.

We collected our original documents, passports and identity cards three weeks later. A speedy, simple process.

We are currently in the process of applying for our names to be added to the electoral register. (12)

References

1. Préfecture des Deux-Sèvres, Direction de la réglementation et des libertés publiques, Plate-forme de naturalisation, 4, rue Du Guesclin à NIORT
2. <http://www.deux-sevres.gouv.fr/Demarches-administratives/Naturalisations>
3. <http://79.accueil-etrangers.gouv.fr/acces-a-la-nationalite-francaise/vous-souhaitez-demander-la-nationalite-francaise-vous-n-etes-pas-marie-e-a-un-e/>
4. https://www.formulaires.modernisation.gouv.fr/gf/cerfa_12753.do
5. <https://www.gov.uk/order-copy-birth-death-marriage-certificate>
6. <https://www.gov.uk/copy-decree-absolute-final-order>
7. https://www.acro.police.uk/police_certificates.aspx
8. <http://www.deux-sevres.gouv.fr/content/download/13613/107170/file/La+charte+des+droits+et+devoirs+du+citoyen+fran%C3%A7ais.pdf>
9. <http://www.deux-sevres.gouv.fr/content/download/13609/107142/file/Livret-du-citoyen.pdf>
10. Journal Officiel - <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/initRechJO.do>
11. Vous pouvez saisir directement sur le [site internet de l'ANTS](#) (Agence Nationale des Titres Sécurisés) une pré-demande dématérialisée qui sera à imprimer une fois remplie et à remettre directement au Service de l'Accueil de la Mairie, sur rendez-vous.
12. Electoral register - <https://www.service-public.fr/particuliers/vosdroits/R16024>