'I'm ashamed to be a Brexit voter – it never occurred to me that my holidays would be affected'

By Silvia Marchetti
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A gardener from Hertfordshire with a £43,000 farm in Umbria says he is hoping to leave England for good

A 50-year-old British man with Italian roots says he is "ashamed" to come out as a Brexit voter, and feels foolish "for having believed in the utopia of sovereignty" fed to him by politicians.

He is now trying to recover his lost Sicilian ancestry in order to get an Italian passport and ditch the UK for good, but is aware that it will be tough.

Thomas (not his real name), a gardener from Hertfordshire, bought a cosy farm near the Umbrian town of Foligno for €50,000 (£43,000) 10 years ago, hoping to enjoy it in the holidays whenever he wanted.

He used to come and go, but under post-Brexit travel rules, he can only stay for a period of 90 in any 180 days.

"I could kill myself for being so stupid, my pro-Brexit vote contributed to the mayhem the UK is now in. It never occurred me to that my holidays in Italy could be affected … and I'm even half Italian," he tells i.

"All the blah-blah from many pro-Brexit politicians and commentators made me believe that the UK, in its millenary history, had survived and turned into an 'economic giant' thanks to its isolation and independence, hailed as its greatest powers – as if we could thrive only by getting rid of Europe."

By the time he realised it was just "poetry and rhetoric", he says, it was too late and now Thomas faces the hard consequences of his vote.

When he visits Umbria and Sicily, he follows the trail of his ancestry to dig out key documents that could help him kickstart his Italian citizenship application.

Thomas has embarked on a crusade to recover his Sicilian roots. His father was born in Syracuse in Sicily and migrated as a child to Hertford with his parents. But 30 years later, when he married a British woman, he renounced his Italian citizenship and became British, which made it easier to find a job. When Thomas was born, his parents registered him as a British citizen.

"I have asked two Sicilian lawyers to help me claim back my broken Italian ancestry," says Thomas. "Once I have found the necessary documents in Syracuse, I then need to re-register in Hertford as an Italian born in the UK. It's a huge hassle."

The lawyers are collecting key documents on Thomas's ancestors, following a paper trail across Sicily to dig out from register offices the birth certificates of his father, grandfather, grandmother, all the way back to his great grandparents, to tie them to Thomas.

"Luckily, these lawyers are locals and know several places where I can get access to all this information," says Thomas.

"The more my ancestry line dates back, higher are the chances of claiming my roots. In the past, there were no register offices in deep Sicily. Parishes, monasteries and convents is where many old birth certificates can still be found. I've toured a few."

Thomas, who is nearing retirement, would like to relocate to Foligno, in central Umbria, in the future but is aware it might take him years to have an Italian passport.

"My lawyers have managed to find my grandpa's birth certificate but strangely my father's hasn't popped out yet. Completing the paper trail might take me another year and then, I am told by Italian-Brit friends, four more years to get my Italian passport."

Thomas regrets having been so blind to the impact that Brexit would have on his travels, but what really makes him angry is that he overlooked his Italian roots.

"I should have claimed my Italian passport when I was a teenager," he says. "Now I wouldn't be in such a mess."