

Channel Tunnel's Risks Defied For a Dream of Life in Britain

The New York Times

March 15, 2001 Thursday, Late Edition - Final

Copyright 2001 The New York Times Company

Section: Section A; Column 1; Foreign Desk; Pg. 1

Length: 1381 words

Byline: By SUZANNE DALEY

Dateline: SANGATTE, France, March 8

Body

In four languages, the signs on the walls in the Red Cross shelter warn of the hazards of trying to sneak into England through the **Channel** Tunnel: electrocution **risk**, squashing **risk**, very high-speed train, mortal danger.

But even the people who have posted the lists don't expect them to do much good.

The hundreds of illegal immigrants housed in the shelter, a cavernous, hangar-like former factory in the middle of potato fields have a common goal: getting through the tunnel that is just down the road from here. Some are seeking asylum but many just hope to find work once in **Britain**, while others will use it as a stopping point until they can reach the United States or Canada.

Night after night they try. One young Afghan says he has tried 41 times in the past two and a half months. He might try again tonight, he says, his eagerness clear. "The smugglers will tell us this afternoon whether we go again tonight."

In the last year, tunnel authorities have spent millions trying to stem a clandestine flow of immigrants who have managed to enter Europe and are now trying to stowaway on the vehicles that are boarded on trains going through the tunnel. The 22-acre complex of concrete lanes and train tracks that converge at the mouth of the tunnel has become a fortress with barbed wire, electric fencing, floodlights, infrared sensors and police officers patrolling with dogs.

But still the immigrants try, made more reckless and inventive by the new barriers.

Nowadays they jump onto the tops of moving trucks from bridges. They hang around gas stations hoping to hide in vehicles heading for the tunnel. Some jump in front of freight trains, to slow them down so that others will be able to climb aboard.

Just last week, nine Romanian immigrants including a 3-year-old girl, were found hidden in the undercarriage of a high-speed passenger train that had arrived in London. In near freezing temperatures, they had been traveling at speeds of 180 miles an hour. Passengers heard them banging for help.

For many, these **risks** are worth taking because tens of thousands are believed to have made it through the tunnel, while only one death has been reported. Earlier this month, an Iraqi man was found dead after he apparently got caught between a platform and the undercarriage of a train.

In the last few months, security officials have found 150 to 200 illegal immigrants a night trying to get across. "You can see the whole thing start around 8 or 9 p.m.," said Francois Borel, the director of communications for Eurotunnel, a privately financed British-French group that operates the tunnel.

Channel Tunnel's Risks Defied For a Dream of Life in Britain

"They start coming out of the Red Cross shelter in groups of 20 or 30 making their way over here," Mr. Borel said, "ready to take their chances. It is taking more and more of our resources and, of course, it is extremely dangerous for them."

Some local officials have called for the dismantling of the Red Cross shelter that opened just 18 months ago because they think it draws the illegal immigrants and provides them a base from which to make repeated efforts to enter the tunnel. But others say that the immigrants were squatting all over town, long before the shelter opened. Red Cross officials point out that their role is to provide aid to those in need -- not to police the comings and goings of the immigrants or their activities.

The immigrants' numbers began to mount when war broke out in Kosovo, but other conflicts have fueled the flow. The shelter has also housed Russians, Ukrainians and Czechs. These days, most immigrants in the shelter are Kurds, Iranians and Afghans.

Some have paid \$25,000 to \$40,000 to get this far, and will pay smugglers another \$300 to \$500 to get across the English Channel, if they have it.

Those who do not pay often face the wrath of gangs that control this market. Shelter officials said that a recent group of Afghans who tried to enter the tunnel complex on their own were turned away at knife point by smugglers. Fifteen people were injured in a melee at the shelter last week when one agent for the gangs tried to extort a fee from a young Afghan who refused to pay.

But many of the immigrants are well educated and have been doctors, engineers or are relatives of successful businessmen in their own countries. They simply pay the fees, putting themselves in the hands of the smugglers.

The young Afghan, who in khaki pants and a Polartech sweater could pass for a university student anywhere in the world, says he has been told to jump off bridges and has done so. He has also tried to sneak into the backs of trucks. For all of his efforts, he said, he has been beaten up by the police, beaten up by a truck driver and once, he badly gashed his hand on barbed wire.

"I will keep trying because I have no way back," he said. "I have to keep trying."

The young man said he hopes to be able to study in England, though he has nothing particular in mind. He and a dozen other young Afghans share one of the prefabricated cabins the Red Cross has set up inside the building, once a staging area while the tunnel was being built. They all talk of avoiding the military service in their homeland, which has grown from two years to five. "Either you fight or you are killed," he said. "conditions are very bad."

Like the others he bunks with, he has only two sets of clothes. He wears both when he goes to the tunnel. But their cabin is spotless and everyone appears upbeat. This is not true in all the cabins. Some reek of stale sweat and despair.

The lives and movement of these immigrants from one European country to another is a touchy subject among the 15 members of the European Union.

Several times, Britain has made its displeasure known with France's willingness to let illegal immigrants move around the country unsupervised. When a boatload of 900 Kurds arrived in Frejus last month, France was heavily criticized for giving the new arrivals eight passes that allowed them to travel where they wanted.

Britain quickly told France to deal with the Kurds themselves, saying they would be deported to France if found in England.

France responded that the Kurds would be invited to apply for asylum in France. But eight days later, more than 200 were missing. Germany caught more than two dozen of them trying to get across the border and quickly returned them to France. Swiss border police turned back another nine. No one knows if any passed through Sangatte, but it is clearly possible.

Channel Tunnel's Risks Defied For a Dream of Life in Britain

Britain is now the most popular destination for immigrants in Europe. In 2000, the country received the largest number of asylum applications, 97,900 or 22 percent of the total number of applications lodged in Europe. Germany was second with 78,800 or 17 percent.

Experts say immigrants are drawn to **Britain** for many reasons, including cultural and historical ties. In addition, most are aware that **Britain** is the only country in the European Union that does not demand that its citizens carry identification papers at all times, making it that much easier to move around and work illegally.

But many note as well that the immigrants often get poor information about where they are going. At the shelter in Sangatte, several immigrants said they were choosing England because they would get free housing and an allowance when they arrived, which is far from true.

"There is what we call the CNN factor at work," said Jean Pierre Garson, an immigration expert with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. " And you have the fact that a lot of people are selling them **dreams**, they are just victims of false **dreams**."

On a chilly, rainy day there is little to do at the shelter, where noise echoes harshly on the concrete floor. Mothers bathe their children in the sinks as men shave nearby. But the most activity is around the pay phones, just outside the front door. Everyone waits for word from the smugglers.

Since the shelter opened, more than 26,000 men, women and children have passed through the Red Cross shelter.

Michael Derr, the director, says he has no doubt that almost all of them are in **Britain** now, with most having passed through the tunnel while some used boats or ferries to cross. A family of four was not back in the cabin they had occupied. "It could be that they made it," said another of the shelter's residents.

<http://www.nytimes.com>

Graphic

Photo: Cots piled with belongings at a shelter in Sangatte, France. The number of immigrants headed for **Britain** began to grow with the war in Kosovo; these days most shelter residents are Kurds, Iranians and Afghans. (Fabien Calvacchia for The New York Times)(pg. A12) Map of France highlighting Sangatte: In a Red Cross shelter in Sangatte, immigrants wait for their chance. (pg. A12)

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: IMMIGRATION (89%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (89%); EMERGENCY SHELTERS (89%); DOGS (78%); DEATH & DYING (77%); LAW ENFORCEMENT (76%); SMUGGLING (76%); WEATHER (60%)

Organization: RED CROSS

Channel Tunnel's Risks Defied For a Dream of Life in Britain

Industry: HIGH SPEED TRAINS (90%); BRIDGES & TUNNELS (90%); TRAINS (89%); LONG DISTANCE PASSENGER RAIL (77%); ELECTRONIC SENSORS & DETECTORS (72%); THERMAL SENSORS (64%)

Person: DALEY, SUZANNE

Geographic: LONDON, ENGLAND (58%); CANADA (79%); UNITED STATES (79%); UNITED KINGDOM (78%); ENGLAND (73%); GREAT **BRITAIN**; SANGATTE (FRANCE); KOSOVO (SERBIA); SERBIA; IRAN; AFGHANISTAN; IRAQ

Load-Date: March 15, 2001

End of Document