

Immigration 'Sweepstakes': Odds Will Favor the Irish;

Program Earmarks 40% of Available Visas

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Body

Sometime next month, the State Department is expected to announce details of an unusual contest -- part lottery, part gold rush -- that will change the lives of tens of thousands of foreigners living illegally in this country.

The prize is more valuable than gold to an illegal immigrant, a "green card" allowing its owner to stay in the United States indefinitely. Winners do not have to be Irish -- but it helps.

Under a provision in the Immigration Act of 1990, **40,000** green cards (they are actually salmon-colored these days) will be handed out each year for the next three years on a first-come, first-serve basis. Applicants must be from one of 34 countries, most of them in Europe, that have had little emigration to the United States in the last 25 years.

A similar program five years ago drew 1.4 million applications for 10,000 visas, and immigration lawyers and federal officials expect millions of applications this time.

But there is a difference this time: In a display of ethnic political clout, **40** percent of the visas -- 16,000 -- must go to Irish applicants, a provision courtesy of powerful lawmakers such as Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.) and former representative Bruce A. Morrison (D-Conn.).

The "Irish Sweepstakes" is what the Irish news media here and in Ireland are calling the process. Irish abroad and thousands of illegal immigrants here are waiting anxiously to learn the special post office box number in Washington and the date applications may be submitted.

One 26-year-old construction worker who came here last year says the reason for the intense interest is simple: The Irish here, like any other group of undocumented workers, are "an underclass," forced, as he has been, to take "the crummiest jobs at the lowest wages."

"I don't think I can go on like this too much longer," said the man, who like others interviewed asked that his name not be used.

The Irish illegals are a part of a huge wave of Irish immigration to this country that rivals the influx at the turn of the century and in the 1950s. In the last decade, about 50,000 have arrived, legally and illegally, according to the Irish government's figures.

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They have come, mostly here and to New York, for the same reason as their forefathers: jobs. Unemployment in Ireland is at a staggering 18 percent and expected by some Irish experts to climb to 20 percent in the next year or so. As a member of the European Community, the Irish can travel to any other member country, and many go to England, but large numbers still come here.

The official estimate is that there are about 5,000 illegal Irish in the Boston area. But Irish immigrant advocacy groups estimate the national total at 120,000, with nearly 30,000 here and more in New York.

Lena Deevy, director of the Irish Immigration Reform Movement office here, acknowledges any number is at best an estimate. "It's an anonymous floating population," she says, "it's like counting the homeless."

And life is getting harder for those here. A 32-year-old waitress in a Boston suburb said it was easy to find work when she came here six years ago, when Massachusetts was in a boom economy.

But the restaurant where she worked closed down as hard times hit this region. Then a second closed down and then a third. The 1987 Immigration Reform Act made it illegal for employers to hire undocumented workers. That closed off opportunities at large companies such as those in the computer industry -- where the construction worker used to be employed, or the insurance industry -- where the waitress used to work.

"You can't apply for a job," she said. "You can't answer a want ad" because of the 1987 law. "It's all word of mouth." Finally she found a job as a housekeeper for the last 18 months that paid over \$ 10 an hour. "They dropped me three weeks ago, said they wouldn't be needing anyone."

Several of the Irish immigrants talked of the social isolation of being undocumented in this country, of the need to keep a low profile at all times. "My social life is limited to the Irish sector," said the waitress. "I can't talk to Americans -- you just have to tell too many lies. You never know who you're talking to."

"It's like living on the edge," Deevy said. "There is a lot of fear" that someone -- an enemy, an employer, a jilted lover or jealous colleague -- "will squeal to the INS [Immigration and Naturalization Service]," even though, in reality, few are ever deported.

The fear of exposure leaves the undocumented vulnerable to crime and exploitation, Deevy and state officials said, even though the city insists it will not turn over crime victims' names to the INS. Several of those interviewed report incidents of Irish men being mugged on Friday nights after cashing their checks in the pub, a center of Irish social life.

But some of the undocumented "are ingenious enough to get around the system," Deevy said.

Among the success stories is a 26-year-old health clinic worker who arrived on a tourist visa two years ago and stayed. She makes \$ 14 to \$ 15 an hour plus overtime at the clinic, she said, and works baby-sitting and other jobs on the side. She owns a new car, and her life, for the most part, is like that of her neighbors in a nearby suburb. One difference: She cashes her paychecks at the pub.

Another who has mastered the system works at a large law firm here. An attorney in Ireland, he has a bank account, driver's license and graduated from law school here. But he can't take the bar exam and practice law in this country until he gets that green card.

For the Irish and the Polish, the next largest group expected to apply, obtaining the green cards is critical.

"It is a matter of life and death for many Polish people," said Eva Wierzynska, an aide in the office of Rep. Dan Rostenkowski (D-Ill.) in Chicago. Many illegal Polish "have nothing to return to" in Poland, she said, and like the Irish, are living in fear of discovery. "I personally know one man who is living in his car because he's afraid to rent an apartment. He says he cannot go back."

The tension over the lottery has sparked ethnic rivalries and wild rumors. One rumor in the Polish community has it that the Irish have fixed the lottery in their favor through manipulation of the U.S. Postal Service.

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There is also intense speculation on ways to beat the system in what a State Department official said will in effect be a "crap shoot."

There is no prohibition or penalty for multiple entries -- although machine-made duplicates will be electronically filtered out -- so officials expect a substantial number of applications per person. Applications received either before or after the week-long application period, expected to be in September, will not be considered.

Since winners are selected on a first-come basis, many applicants are debating whether they should come or send someone to Washington as soon as the post office details are announced and mail as many applications as they can afford at 12:01 a.m. It is not an amnesty program, but immigrants already in the country will have a substantial advantage over those outside, especially since the applications must be accompanied by a letter from an employer promising a job.

Law firms around the country are signing up clients, both corporations and individuals, even though immigrant advocacy groups insist no lawyers are needed.

"It's all a matter of whose letter gets processed first," said Cornelius D. Scully, an official in the Consular Affairs bureau in the State Department.

In the last program, he said, a colleague, doing a favor for a friend's Canadian aunt, sat outside the Brentwood postal service center in the District putting batches of applications in the bins every hour or so. The colleague spent the evening chatting with a Canadian couple who had driven down to do the same thing.

"The couple won," Scully said, "but the aunt didn't."

I'm asked: 'Would [dumping hundreds of applications in person] enhance my chances?' I tell them you have to make up your own mind. I can't answer, I don't know."

But Washington immigration lawyer Michael A. Maggio insists that, while there are no guarantees, "It's a matter of the odds and there are steps you can take to increase your odds," including filing large numbers of applications in Washington. Maggio is charging clients \$ 350 to post 100 applications.

The international firm of Coudert Bros. recently wrote its corporate clients. "We are charging a flat fee of \$ 2,550 (plus \$ 500 for each dependent) for registration in this program," the firm said, with \$ 800 to cover application expenses.

Scully insists, however, "there are no guarantees. There is more mythology for the right formula for winning. People have different formulas. What's the right way and wrong way? I don't know."

Graphic

PHOTO, UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANT SCOURS NEWSPAPER IN THE BLACK ROSE, A BOSTON SOCIAL HUB FOR IRIISH IN THE UNITED STATES ILLEGALLY. CAROL GUZY

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