

U.S. must accept, aid incoming multitudes

The Atlanta Journal and Constitution

March 15, 1991, Friday

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Section: EDITORIAL; SECTION A; PAGE 19

Length: 558 words

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Body

I try never to forget how frightening my grandparents **must** have looked to many Americans when they arrived in this country early in the century.

Frank and Eva Grzywacz (yes, that surname somehow became Geewax) were Polish, penniless, illiterate and unskilled.

My mother's Hungarian parents also were in sorry shape, except that my maternal grandfather had a trade. He already was a barber when he settled in this country at age 16.

To native citizens, my grandparents **must** have seemed like an ignorant bunch of riffraff who barged in bringing their lice and strange customs. How would such peasants ever fit in here?

This is an extremely important question today. How did it happen that those four poor people reared 11 law-abiding, hard-working children who in turn produced 22 grandchildren, all of whom either learned a trade or were graduated from college?

The answer to that question is the key to our collective prosperity as this nation again absorbs an enormous wave of newcomers. The Census Bureau has just released statistics showing fantastic increases in immigration.

A surge of Hispanic and Asian residents is changing the complexion of the nation. In recent years, more than four out of five legal immigrants have had non-European backgrounds.

In some Sun Belt states with large immigrant populations, minorities will outnumber people of European heritage before the decade is out. That will be true nationwide by 2050.

Will these huge numbers of immigrants participate in the economy as my grandparents did, or become permanent members of a disaffected underclass?

Absorbing foreigners is an economic imperative because natives aren't having enough babies to expand the work force. Immigrants are our font of labor and entrepreneurship.

But today's immigrants are facing tougher challenges than my grandparents did. At the turn of the century, uneducated newcomers could find work with companies that needed only strong backs. Frank Grzywacz worked in a steel mill for years without ever learning English.

Today's immigrants will find fewer such jobs. With employment declining in basic industries, such as textiles, steel, tires, autos and mining, there aren't many good jobs for unskilled workers, foreign or native.

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Employers now want workers who can communicate with customers. Even blue-collar jobs require workers to operate sophisticated machines. My younger brother is a tool-and-die maker whose workplace more closely resembles a high-tech laboratory than a greasy machine shop.

Industrial giants no longer can be counted on to soak up uneducated masses and turn them into taxpayers. The government will have to do more to help people entering the work force get the language skills and job training they'll need to participate in a 21st-century economy.

The miracle of America is that so many poor people have been able to become productive citizens here within a generation. Today's immigrants, trying to enter a more complex market, will need new skills to do that.

Rather than allowing ourselves to be frightened by foreigners, we natives **must** train our eyes to see in them our democracy's future. If we fail to **accept** and **aid** them, we will have failed our own ancestors who believed in the promise of America.

Ms. Geewax is a Constitution editorial writer.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: IMMIGRATION (91%); GRANDPARENTS (90%); LABOR FORCE (87%); GRANDCHILDREN (78%); CITIZENSHIP (77%); IMMIGRATION LAW (74%); ENTREPRENEURSHIP (72%); MINORITY GROUPS (72%)

Company: SUN BELT RENTALS (55%); SUN BELT RENTALS (55%); US CENSUS BUREAU (55%); US CENSUS BUREAU (55%)

Organization: US CENSUS BUREAU (55%); US CENSUS BUREAU (55%)

Industry: MACHINE TOOLS (64%); IRON & STEEL MILLS (61%); TEXTILES (61%)

Geographic: **UNITED STATES** (92%)

Load-Date: February 10, 1992