

From the Russian Mailbag

Letters from the curious about U.S. immigration policy

by Don Barnett

Many if not all foreign-language newspapers published in the United States carry a "Dear Abbey-like" column advising readers about immigration and welfare. *Novoe Russkoe Slovo*, the leading Russian-language newspaper, is a good example of this. With a readership of about 1 million worldwide it is in the same league as the leading English-language newspapers.

Imagine the *Los Angeles Times* carrying a column exhorting readers to become citizens by proclaiming:

[America] has provided pensions and free medical care to elderly individuals who have not worked a day in the U.S.; many live in practically free housing. It's a great honor to become a citizen of such a great and humane country. And now every legal immigrant living here 5 years or more (3 years for spouses of U.S. citizens) can become a citizen even if a disability prevents him from learning English.

This is a direct translation from Russian of one of many advice columns offered by immigration lawyers and organizations sponsoring immigrants and refugees. They field such questions as that of the hopeful Red Army veteran from Brooklyn who asked about applying for U.S. veterans' benefits ("after all we fought together against the same enemy").

Then there was the reader from St. Petersburg, Russia, who suggested the solution to the housing shortage in her city was to resettle more individuals from public housing in Russia to public housing in America.

The advice columns serve as advertisements

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for lawyers promising to get results in obtaining

public assistance and winning appeals for refugee status or asylum. A recent column discussed the appeal of a Christian evangelical whose bid for refugee status was denied because she could not identify basic tenets of the religion she claimed to be part of. She won her appeal after the lawyer-columnist brought in a psychologist to testify that anxiety about the interview interfered with her ability to recite facts well known to her. What's interesting here is that no attempt was made to show persecution: it was enough to simply suggest that the individual *could* be a member of the rather vaguely defined Christian evangelical community.

Below are translated excerpts of typical questions and answers taken from *Novoe Russkoe Slovo* columns which ran in issues published in March and April of 1998.

Ask the Experts

D.T. from Pittsburgh asks, "Can you explain in detail who is eligible for a partial or full waiver of the citizenship exam?"

The advisor explains residency and age requirements allowing one to take the exam with a translator or to take a special simplified exam in one's native language. The 25 questions of the simplified exam are listed. (Where's the capital of the U.S.? Who is the U.S. president? Etc.) Paradoxically, the longer the residency the lower the requirements for elderly applicants. For individuals able to show physical or mental disability the citizenship test is waived altogether. A free packet of information is offered to those who wish to prove disability.

Asset Hiding Goes Global

A.D. from Baltimore writes: "I arrived as a refugee from St. Petersburg in 1993. I am 66 years old and since 1991 have been eligible for my pension from Russia. In 1994 I began receiving disability SSI. I recently learned I have a right to my Russian pension [in U.S. dollars] which has been accumulating since 1993. Can I receive money from

Russia and still keep my U.S. benefits?"

"Tough" new commitment required of non-refugees... still worth the wait

M.I. from Massachusetts writes: "I arrived in the U.S. as a refugee in 1996. I am working. I want to marry a man from Byellorussia. He has bronchial asthma which he got from his job. How and when should we get married? ...Most important, if we got married and he came to America will he get free medical coverage?"

N.C. from New York writes: "My sister and her husband, both age 65, received *parole* status. What benefits can they count on when they arrive?"

The advisor writes that as of recent changes Medicaid will probably be available to *parolees*, but not SSI (the federal cash assistance program for the elderly or disabled). He warns, "Persons arriving as *parolees*, regardless of age, should be prepared to live here for 5 years without free social programs."

Even Pravda frets about language policy in the Western Hemisphere

(Translated from *KommSomolskaya Pravda* by Don Barnett)

"In Mexico you can be fired for saying 'goodbye'" by Evgenii Umerenko

Mexicans are a strange people. They refuse to speak any language other than Spanish. They share a common border with America and over 100 billion dollars of annual trade, but you will never see the word "shop," "market" or "parking" in Mexico. Even brokers, dealers, and, strangest of all, promoters are called by their Spanish names.

Mexican federal law mandates that radio and TV shows use the national language. Only in special situations and with the express permission of the Interior Ministry can a foreign language be used during a broadcast. And then only when accompanied by a Spanish translation.

The same law prohibits profaning national heroes, inciting racial hostility and broadcasting programs which "harm the national language." "Harming the national language" includes usage of non-standard lexicon and foreign words when not absolutely necessary. Now, even saying "goodbye" on radio or television is forbidden by law....

An ethical dilemma easily resolved

B.K. of New York writes: "In January 1997 I was hospitalized for three days. I was visited by a doctor 4 times for a total of 15 minutes. From that time I have been getting bills for fantastic amounts. According to them I owe more than \$126,000. I have not paid a cent as I have nothing to pay with. Lately the bills have come with stronger and stronger warnings and now they are threatening a lawsuit. What should I do?"

The advisor answers: "The hospital will, naturally, try to get its money from you, but if you have nothing with which to pay they will eventually have to leave you alone."

Good mechanics wanted

P.S. writes that she wants to be reunited with her 41-year-old son who lives in Ukraine. She wonders if he can receive a work visa as a tractor driver.

The advisor answers: "Obtaining a work visa is realistic, but not as a tractor driver — perhaps as a specialist with an in-depth knowledge of automobiles. You will need a sponsor which you can only find by going out and looking — that is, try to find a business willing to act as a sponsor for your son."

What happened to five-year deeming for non-refugees?

"My husband and I arrived as legal immigrants in 1995. We do not have refugee status. In 1996, when we turned 65 years of age, we began getting SSI/Medicaid. In April of 1997 my husband found work and so we can no longer get public support." She goes on to ask if they can resume SSI if her husband loses his job.

This couple started receiving SSI/Medicaid a year after arrival even though, as non-refugees, their relative/sponsor's income should have been "deemed" available to them. The advisor assures them not to worry because in the worst case they can become citizens in the year 2000 and the problem will go away.

Next time ask the experts, not the INS (or: ignorance is bliss)

Poor Rep. Pombo (R-CA); had he taken his questions to the experts in the pages of *Novoe Russkoe Slovo* he would have gotten accurate information and useful advice. Instead, he directed his queries about immigration to, of all places, the

Immigration and Naturalization Service.

A constituent of Rep. Colombo's had noticed that the public housing in his hometown of Rancho Cordova, California was filling up with former Soviets and asked the Congressman about the U.S. refugee program. Rep. Pombo promptly sent a letter to the INS asking about the program and got back an answer from the acting Director of Congressional Relations who writes:

When refugees are admitted to this country there is a resettlement fund which is issued per individual by our government, through the offices of refugee resettlement, a part of the Department of Health and Human Services. The amount that is issued ranges from \$5,000 to \$7,000 that may be obtained by the refugee within the first 18 months of their entry. Once the refugee has received this assistance and permanent residence has been acquired, they must work to sustain themselves as any other person in this country. Our government does not grant special treatment to any specific group of immigrants.

Is it possible that the INS Director of Congressional Relations thinks that each refugee uses \$5,000 to \$7,000 in services and that no special treatment is afforded them? Is it true that summing the annual budget of the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) with those parts of

the INS and State Department budget dedicated to refugee re-settlement and then dividing that sum by the number of refugee arrivals for a given year yields a result of approximately \$7,000 per refugee? This mythical \$7,000 figure floats around in the media and in Congressional testimony, but it is surprising to see the INS promoting it, especially implying that it is a fixed cash amount that is doled out over the first year and a half of residency.

Absent from this number is the cost of welfare dependency beyond the first months. (An ORR official told me that \$7,000 is not even one tenth of the true average per refugee cost.) According to an ORR study over half of those refugees who arrived in a recent 5-year period are dependent on cash assistance, two-thirds receive food stamps, etc. Elderly usage of welfare/Medicaid runs nearly 100 percent and is a lifetime entitlement, unlike some welfare programs which are subject to time limits.

All of this is made possible because our government does indeed grant "special treatment" to specific groups of immigrants. Unlike other immigrants, refugees receive interest-free and apparently uncollectible loans for airfare and are allowed access, upon arrival, to all welfare programs on the same basis as citizens.

Perhaps the sociologists and organization theorists will give us a name for the state of affairs that exists when the people using a system know so much more about it than the people who are running it.

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