

Ireland's history with immigrants is fraught with tough experiences

Experiences of migrants depend very much on how they are classified by the host society

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"Nothing seems at times to be so conducive to human misery, as ham-fisted attempts to regulate the admission of refugees." Photograph: Alan Betson

I have spent the past few years writing a book, *Migration and the Making of Ireland*, which explores the experiences of immigrants and emigrants across the last four centuries. There are many common elements to the stories of those who have left Ireland and those who, as Sorcha Pollack puts it in her weekly column, are new to this parish. Most made life-changing journeys under circumstances that were not of their choosing. The experiences of migrants have come to depend very much on how they are classified by the host society. Since 2004 migrants from the Eastern European countries that joined the EU at that time have settled in Ireland without hindrance or political controversy. Others requiring visas from countries such as the Philippines and India work in healthcare and other sectors and have become Irish citizens in large numbers. Tens of thousands from places like China and Brazil came as students, and they have been allowed to work during their stay. By contrast – and unlike in most other EU countries – asylum seekers have been prevented from working. Late last year the Supreme Court ruled that this

absolute ban was unconstitutional. The Burmese Rohingya man whose case led to the ruling, had spent eight years in enforced unemployment before getting refugee status. On January 18th, 2018, just in advance of the deadline to remove the ban, Charlie Flannagan, the Minister of Justice, outlined a response which would allow asylum seekers, whose cases had not been resolved after nine months, to apply for work permits. But only those people who could command a starting salary of €30,000 and afford to pay a fee of at least €500 would be allowed to join the rest of us who have “to get up early in the mornings”. The rest, including those who need the most help and support to integrate into Irish society, are left to languish in limbo as before.

Frustrated

Over the past 20 years, I have spoken to many people who were very frustrated at being not allowed to work who, ultimately, have gone on to become Irish citizens. In 1999 I became friendly with one young African man in Ennis when I lived at the time. We used to chat when we met in the town. Having returned to Ennis after 10 years in London and four years before that in college, I felt like a blow-in myself but could only imagine how marginal he felt. ‘Joseph’ was desperate to continue his interrupted university education or find a job. We occasionally spoke about this on my days off from my university job. One Saturday in March 2000 I read in the local paper that Joseph had been attacked and pushed through a shop window. Although I have since researched the stories of many immigrants I never met Joseph again. I do not know whether or not he managed to resume his education and overcome the barriers faced by many others like him. In addition to racism – latent as well as violent – long periods of compulsory joblessness have been found to be a huge factor in the high rates of unemployment amongst African Irish.

Around the same time, I was part of a team who produced a report for the Irish Refugee Council called Asylum Seekers and the Right to Work in Ireland. During 1999, reports on television showed asylum seekers queuing overnight outside the “one-stop shop” on Mount Street, established to process their claims. A political furore, sparked by Progressive Democrat Junior Minister Liz O’ Donnell’s assertion that the government’s asylum policy was a “shambles”, prompted new restrictions on asylum seekers. But it also resulted in a one-off amnesty that was supported, at the time, not just by the usual human rights groups but by organisations representing employers and business such as ISME and the Small Firms Association, as well as the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. Backing was also forthcoming from the Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed – whose members knew all too well what asylum seekers prevented from working were going through.

In a once-off effort to clear the backlog of unprocessed claims, more than 3,000 asylum seekers were permitted to work. This was at a time when the Celtic Tiger was roaring and when migrant workers were being encouraged by the State and employers to come to Ireland in large numbers. While this amnesty was welcome for many who had long sought a chance to make new lives for themselves, it also brought certain issues to the fore. Working on our report, it was clear from our interviews with this group that many needed help and support in preparing to apply for jobs; some needed English-language training and many had experienced racism. All indications were that the longer asylum seekers were stuck in a state of enforced dependence, the harder it was for them to integrate.

Legal agreement

The aftermath of the second World War saw international legal agreement on definitions of refugees and obligations towards them. The United Nations Convention on the Status of Refugees of 1951 was ratified by Ireland five years later. Before the UN Convention was ratified here, some refugees in Ireland benefited from grace and favour – but many did not. The red carpet extended to the Austrian scientist Erwin Schrödinger showed what could be achieved when there was political will to admit refugees. In April 1938 Eamon de Valera, who was in Geneva as head of the League of Nations, instructed his officials to offer asylum to Schrödinger. The Austrian, who had just been dismissed from his academic post for criticising the Nazis, was a mathematician, and wanted to establish an Institute of Advanced Studies in Ireland. Schrödinger fled Austria with his wife Anny to the Irish embassy in Rome. From there, equipped with documentation from the embassy, he travelled to meet de Valera in Geneva. Indeed, de Valera put the Schrödingers up for three days in his hotel before they left for Ireland. A visa was also provided for Schrödinger's mistress and their daughter. Schrödinger's unconventional household had previously caused difficulties for him at Oxford and Princeton, but, according to his biographer Walter Moore, it posed no problem for de Valera. An excellent novel by Neil Belton, *A Game With Sharpened Knives*, imagines Schrödinger's subsequent life in Dublin.

But just how badly a rights-based system was needed in Ireland can be seen from how the Department of Justice blocked the admission of Jewish refugees before, during and after the Holocaust. Efforts by Irish Jews to rescue co-religionists from the Third Reich were opposed most prominently by Department of Justice civil servant Peter Berry, who authored memos between 1938 and 1953 justifying what he described as a Department of Justice policy of not admitting Jews.

Robert Briscoe, a Jewish member of Fianna Fáil and TD for Dublin, became involved in efforts to help Jews leave Germany and Poland before the war. Berry's role in blocking these and other Jews from coming to Ireland did not become apparent until government files were made public some decades later. As far as the Briscoes were concerned, Berry was a family friend. In 2003, at a talk I gave in a Dublin Synagogue on discrimination against Jewish refugees, Robert Briscoe's son Ben spoke about this. He recalled how Berry had been a frequent visitor to their home for many years and used to play cards with his parents. For decades they had no idea that Berry had made persistent efforts to prevent Jewish refugees from being admitted to Ireland.

Converted barracks

In November 1956 Ireland admitted a group of more than 500 Hungarian refugees who were placed in a converted army barracks at Knocknalisheen outside Limerick city. The Hungarians were very welcome in theory. The presumption that they were Catholics fleeing Communist dictatorship led to an outpouring of sympathy in Church sermons and newspaper articles. But the welcome quickly soured at an administrative level. Although Article 17 of the UN Convention, which Ireland had just ratified, conferred upon the refugees a right to work, considerable efforts were made to prevent the Hungarians seeking employment. They were confined to the camp by the use of quarantine periods. When these elapsed, efforts were made to use the gardaí to illegally restrict their movements. The gardaí, to their credit, refused to turn them back.

Soon after they arrived the Hungarians demanded a role in the administration of the camp. They elected a committee which the Irish Red Cross camp administrators sought to suppress. On January 17th, 1957, the Red Cross wrote to the civil service co-ordinating committee on refugees demanding that 12 "agitators" be removed from the camp. These included Lazlo Pesthy, the elected leader of the Hungarians, a 35-year-old engineer who had been a political prisoner in Siberia for 29 months, before being imprisoned for a time in Hungary. He had escaped, leaving his wife and 3½-year-old son behind.

The camp administrators accused Pesthy of intimidating other refugees and of bringing into his hut "an undesirable woman for the night and refused to have her placed out of bounds". A report from the local Garda superintendent ridiculed the accusations. He pointed out that Mr Pesthy had received overwhelming support from other refugees, having been re-elected as their leader by a massive majority in a secret ballot. The so-called "woman of the night" turned out to be a respectable Limerick woman attempting to recruit refugee musicians to play in a band in the city. She had been turned away from the camp but was eventually allowed to collect the musical instruments she had allowed the

refugees to borrow. Whilst the accusations were not taken seriously by government officials, Pesthy was nevertheless seen as a troublemaker. It was decided that Department of External Affairs officials in London should help him find a job in England “as he had previously indicated some interest in moving there”.

Mothers and children

Behind the scenes, the Red Cross agreed with complaints made by the Hungarians about the unsuitability of the camp for expectant mothers and children. Furthermore, a December 1956 Department of Defence report likened Knocknalisheen to an internment camp. Yet, no changes were proposed. It had already been decided that the Republic of Ireland’s first refugee crisis would be resolved by “onward migrations” to Canada. Before this could happen, on April 29th, 1957, most of the adults in the camp went on hunger strike. They refused food from the authorities and fed their children from a stockpile they had had saved up in advance. The hunger strike was called off following a long-sought visit from senior civil servants to the camp. Subsequently, most of the refugees willingly relocated to Canada. By the beginning of 1959, some 438 of a total of 538 had left the country. History repeated itself when, in January 2007, more than 200 asylum seekers in the re-opened Kanocknalisheen Refugee Centre went on hunger strike for two days. The complaints that sparked the 2007 protest related to diet and the poor quality of the accommodation. These escalated because, according to a letter sent to the Department of Justice, management had “bluntly refused any forum where these complaints could have been discussed and tackled”.

Very few of those who lived in direct provision have published accounts of their experiences under their own names. One exception, Nogugo Mafu, fled Zimbabwe in 2002 with her six-year-old son after her husband, a political activist, was killed. She recalled her time as an asylum seeker in Killarney as “alienating and dehumanising”. The system, as she described it, turned people into “helpless institutionalised zombies”, induced “mental torment” and “a loss of the dignity which comes with being able to make decisions regarding one’s life”.

Nothing seems at times to be so conducive to human misery, as ham-fisted attempts to regulate the admission of refugees; whether by corralling them in camps for years at a time or deliberately impeding efforts they might make under their own steam to integrate into host societies. Refugees unsurprisingly want better lives for themselves and their families – to fulfil the usual range of human ambitions – as well as to be safe. Responses to those designated as refugees sometimes expect them to behave like patients in a

hospital – to be passive and deferential – whilst treating them coercively like inmates in other kinds of institutions.

Turned down

Efforts to distinguish refugees from other categories of migrant tend to presume that they are one, or the other. Asylum seekers are often turned down on grounds that they are economic migrants, whereas the reasons for forced migration often go beyond the narrow criteria acknowledged in assessing their applications. Where exactly specific migrants might be placed along a continuum stretching between migration by choice and forced migration is often contested. Karl Marx used the term “forced migrant” to refer to the masses of Irish who migrated to the United States after the Famine. Hardly any of those Irish leaving in the 1840s and 1850s would meet criteria for admission derived from the UN Convention.

The reasons why many people migrate today who have no easy legal right to travel (other than declaring themselves to be refugees) are no less compelling than the reasons why millions of post-Famine emigrants left Ireland. Freedom of movement, taken for granted by Irish people for centuries, is a prize denied to many millions of desperate people in today’s world. Denying people the right to work, something Irish emigrants have rarely experienced, is an artificially concocted cruelty. The pre-condition recently put in place to undermine the right to work determined by the Supreme Court - securing a salary offer of more than €30,000 – is but the most recent chapter in a longer story of unnecessarily-blighted refugee lives.

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