

The high price of a new life

Skilled immigrants soon disillusioned when they can't find employment

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Ran with "IMMIGRATING TO CANADA" which has been appended to the end of this story; Text from graphic "IMMIGRATION TO CANADA & WATERLOO REGION - 2002" added to story

When Dan Zdraila and his family arrived in Canada from Bucharest, Romania, eight months ago, they were eager to start a new life.

"Canada is one of the best countries in the world. It was one of the principal reasons I came here," said the 47-year-old Waterloo man. "We wanted to go from better to the best."

What he didn't realize at the time was the price he'd pay for emigrating. Now Zdraila has set himself a deadline. He plans to return to his homeland with his family by the end of July if he hasn't found a job. By then, the family will have been in Canada a year and he doesn't expect to have much money left.

Zdraila, a certified chemical engineer, said since arriving, he's spent about \$40,000 on daily living expenses, furniture, a car and electronics.

In Bucharest, Zdraila and his business partners owned their own company. Employing 100 workers, the company manufactured hydraulic and cryogenic hoses for the oil industry.

His 44-year-old wife, Florina, worked as an accountant, and his 18-year-old daughter, Bianca, was a high school student.

"We had everything we wanted back home," he said.

But Zdraila dreamed of a living in a more civilized country, a nation with a strong tradition of democracy.

In Romania, democracy is relatively new and the country is still in transition, he said.

Raid Biram's journey to Canada sounds similar. It was his dream, too, to live in a stable, peaceful country. He left Iraq in 1993, and worked as a mechanical engineer in Malaysia for five years, saving money that would allow him to apply for a Canadian visa. He reached Vancouver in 2000.

Like Zdraila, Biram, now 42, had his own business, producing fully automated hatcheries, back in Baghdad.

"But living in the Middle East, even if it's a good job, it's not stable to stay there," he said. "It was my dream to come here to advance myself in my career."

Zdraila also hoped he could climb the ladder in his profession and live a more comfortable life in Canada. But after applying for hundreds of jobs, he's still waiting for work.

These aren't refugees forced to flee from their homeland. They are among the majority of people who come here from other countries, professionals who see Canada as a safe place to raise children and a land of opportunities.

When they arrive at Pearson International Airport in Toronto, they are received by immigration officials and most often a family friend or relative is also waiting for them. With a working knowledge of English, they are able to find living quarters with little assistance, but a few weeks or months later, when they can't find work, they turn to local agencies for help.

Maria Alvarez, director of cross-cultural and community services at the YMCA of Kitchener-Waterloo, said skilled immigrants are quickly disillusioned here. "They thought it was going to be easier. They sold things, their houses and left good jobs. They were established and they had hopes.

"No matter who you talk to, it's for the children," Alvarez continued. "They never knew the price would be so high. They postpone their careers or start all over again."

Alvarez said Canada is ignoring the huge potential of professional immigrants, and thereby doing a disservice to the countries from which they came.

"Their country invested in their education and they need them," Alvarez said. "They are the upper class of their societies."

The YMCA offers a variety of services, including settlement counselling, an employment resource centre and a volunteer host program which matches families with volunteers to help them adjust.

In 2004, 12,000 immigrants and refugees contacted the agency, located in downtown Kitchener.

Alvarez said immigrants either visit the YMCA's cross-cultural office at 276 King St. W., or agency workers encounter them at English as Second Language classes they found on their own.

When they approach the YMCA, directed there by church members, volunteers or friends in the community, it's for practical help, such as enrolling their children in schools, finding work and other basic tasks such as setting up a bank account and testing for a driver's licence.

Most of the immigrants the YMCA sees have post-secondary education from their homeland, with 80 per cent holding a bachelor's degree. They are engineers, teachers and health-care professionals.

In some cases, immigrants connect with the YMCA even before they arrive. Alvarez has received e-mails from immigrants who learned about the agency through the Canadian embassy in their home countries.

Ana Milojevic, who works in the YMCA's newcomer employment centre, directs immigrants to job websites and directories. Together, they establish a job plan for each individual, and clients often return many times for assistance.

"We all have been immigrants. We know what they are feeling," said Milojevic, who came to Canada from the former Yugoslavia 12 years ago.

She often reads frustration in the newcomers' faces. "They come from a prosperous background and they want more opportunities for their children, but they can't provide for their children here as they wish," she said.

Many professional immigrants looking for work also visit the New Canadian Program in Waterloo where they can link up with potential employers. In addition to mock interviews and resume writing, the agency attempts to offer short-term work placements in the immigrants' areas of expertise.

Agencies helping immigrants to the region receive operating grants from the federal, provincial and municipal governments.

Zdraila said he's grateful for their support. "The respect and dignity people show us is impressive," he said.

However, Myrta Rivera, executive director of the Kitchener- Waterloo Multicultural Centre, said lawmakers need to look seriously at changing the system. "The national dream that immigrants come from nothing and are happy to struggle is a cultural myth," she said.

Today's skilled immigrants want to be productive citizens -- and Canada needs them, she said. "We have to change the way people (businesses) hire."

Rich Janzen, research director for the Kitchener-based Centre for Research and Education in Human Services, believes a transition is beginning.

Later this month, an Immigrant Skills Summit looking at this very issue will be held in Kitchener. Janzen said the Kitchener-Waterloo Chamber of Commerce and Communitech Technology Association are acknowledging that skilled immigrants are an untapped resource.

"It's been a long haul . . . but there is a realization that something is wrong," he said.

Zdraila began the paperwork to emigrate to Canada several years ago, travelling to the nearest Canadian embassy in Vienna. He had two interviews and what usually takes a year actually took three years.

In addition to processing and permanent residence fees, Zdraila spent an additional \$4,000 to hire a lawyer to assist his application.

On arrival in Canada, his cousin from Waterloo was waiting for the family at the airport. With his assistance, the Zdrailas found an apartment and settled into their new life in the region.

Bianca, a Grade 12 student at Bluevale Collegiate Institute, found it difficult to make friends in the last year of high school. "People already have their friends and we don't have the same interests," she said.

Bianca, who works part-time at a jewelry store in Conestoga mall in Waterloo, said she's happy to be here, but misses her life in Romania.

"It's a big difference culturally. People are nice, but I'm used to another kind of life."

She has applied to York University and the University of Guelph to study psychology and criminology next fall in the hopes her father finds a job.

Biram, who worked in Vancouver, has not found work here. He has two young daughters and is feeling the financial strain.

His 33-year-old wife, Luma Shanshool, who has a master's degree in chemical engineering from Baghdad, is also unemployed. She is volunteering as a research assistant at the University of Waterloo to get her foot in the door there.

Canadian immigration officials in Singapore cautioned him that it might take a year to find work in Canada, but Biram didn't believe it.

"I thought two or three months maximum, but one year is not even true," he said.

"The situation is much different than what I believed it would be when I got here," he said.

The family left Vancouver and moved to Ontario in February 2004. Despite the disappointments, Biram says he has no regrets about emigrating. "I'm happy to be in Canada. If I had the choice again, I would still come here."

Zdraila remains confident about his skills and education, and still hopes to contribute to the Canadian economy rather than return home.

"English can be learned easily. These qualifications took years," Zdraila said, pointing to his two-page resume.

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IMMIGRATING TO CANADA

Potential immigrants must visit a Canadian embassy in their country or a neighbouring country. Applications are also available on the Internet at www.cic.gc.ca

A personal interview is required.

Skilled workers undergo an assessment based on a point system. Factors measured are education, language ability, work experience, age, arranged employment and adaptability. Applicants must achieve at least 67 points. .

Application fees cost \$550 per adult and \$150 per child, plus a \$975 permanent residence fee for each applicant and his or her partner.

Other required documents include a police clearance and medical examination.

Applicants must also have a certain amount of money when they arrive in Canada to ensure they won't be an immediate burden on the government. For example, an individual must have \$9,897; a family of six must have \$23,015.

IMMIGRATION TO CANADA & WATERLOO REGION - 2002

Economic:

skilled workers and business immigrants 138,506 / 945

Family sponsored 65,277 / 796

Refugees 25,111 / 390

Total 229,091 / 2131

Sources: Citizenship and Immigration Canada / Region of Waterloo Public Health

*Note: There 197 immigrants who come to Canada under other categories.

[Illustration]

Photo: PETER LEE, RECORD STAFF / Dan Zdraila, shown with his wife Florina (left) and daughter Bianca, has applied for hundreds of jobs without success since arriving in Canada eight months ago. He says that if he doesn't find a job by the end of July, he will return to Romania.; Photo: Raid Biram left his native Iraq in 1993 and worked in Malaysia for five years before moving to Vancouver. He arrived in Ontario in 2004.; Photo: Maria Alvarez is the director of cross- cultural and community services at the YMCA in Kitchener.; Graphic: IMMIGRATION TO CANADA & WATERLOO REGION - 2002

Credit: RECORD STAFF

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