

Supply—Citizenship and Immigration

There are many dozens at least, and maybe hundreds of such cases now hanging fire in the files of the department. I would be very much surprised if that is not so. The minister shakes his head. However, I can inform him of several cases myself where it has been going on for anywhere up to 18 months and it has reached a stage where the next move is up to somebody. All I am seeking information on is whether it would not be possible for the department to make a clear undertaking in the form of either a conditional visa or a letter or some other document in order that the person concerned behind the iron curtain could prove to the satisfaction of the officials of his own country that, so far as Canada is concerned, there is no bar in his way and that all that is required is a passport.

Mr. Pickersgill: If the committee will allow me to do so, I can tell them about a personal circumstance. I have been trying hard to facilitate the entry from the Soviet union of the mother and father of a friend of mine in Newfoundland and in this case I have taken steps that it is not usual to take. I asked our ambassador, at the request of the applicant here in Canada, to mention the case to the foreign office of the Soviet union so that there could be no doubt in anyone's mind in Moscow that we were willing to grant this visa. Nothing whatever has happened. I do not believe that the Soviet authorities are in the slightest doubt about these cases where these applications are made.

I am quite willing to consider a procedure whereby we will have someone in the embassy staff write to these people in Russia and say that if they can produce a travel document their cases will be considered. But we have always been extremely hesitant to do that, because if it happened, by coincidence, that three months after such a letter was written, a person disappeared, as does unhappily very often happen in these countries, and it was then suggested that it was because of correspondence from the Canadian embassy that this was done, you can see what a new line of difficulty would be opened up. That may be less likely to happen than it was some years ago but I am not sure that it might not be more likely to happen now than it would have been six months ago. This is a very difficult problem. I know what kind of case the hon. gentleman is referring to, but I do not believe that the Soviet authorities are in the slightest doubt about what our intentions are. No doubt they say they are.

Mr. Lennard: Even so, how could we do that before they are medically examined?

Mr. Pickersgill: Of course we say that if they can pass the medical examination. That is always a condition.

Mr. Zaplitny: Just one word on that point. I want to assure the hon. member who asked the question that I had the same thing in mind, namely that this would be after the government of Canada had satisfied itself on the medical score. But to go back to the question raised by the minister about having someone on the embassy staff that could correspond or communicate in some way with these prospective immigrants and the risk attached thereto, I am only expressing my own opinion but I think that the risk is not something to be too much afraid of. What has happened in many cases—and I know this from personal experience—is that people who have been living in Canada and who have been attempting for a period of a year or eighteen months to bring a wife, a daughter, a son or a near relative to Canada from the Soviet union, having failed to succeed in that attempt, have sought help elsewhere. I am not laying the blame on anyone; I am not saying that the immigration department is to blame. Because of this lack of facility and machinery having failed to do that, I find that a number of these people are writing letters to the Soviet embassy here in Ottawa asking their assistance in this matter. I certainly would feel much better if a Canadian citizen were to carry on his request through Canadian channels, through our embassy in Moscow, rather than the other way around. Certainly the Soviet embassy in this country is not here for the purpose of looking after the interests of Canadian citizens. In my opinion, that is the wrong place for them to request assistance. However, in their desperation and having reached a deadlock, they feel that here is one more channel they will try. If there is any risk that should be avoided, in my opinion that is the one, namely that of Canadian citizens having to lean upon the Soviet embassy in our own country to do for them or in the hope that they will do for them something, which they feel that the Canadian government cannot do. That is the important idea that I think should be avoided. If we have to choose between the two evils or the two risks, I would say that to have the Canadian representative in our embassy in Moscow communicating with prospective immigrants to Canada would be by far the more desirable situation.

Mr. Pickersgill: As I said before, I shall be very glad to give consideration to instructing our officers to tell applicants in Canada that, if they wish it done—and only if