

Seniors in United States and Europe are targets of scammers who say, 'You've won, send money'

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Tuesday, July 6th 2010, 4:00 AM

In a tiny English seaside town, [Ada Joseph](#) lives alone with big dreams of becoming a millionaire.

The retiree seldom has visitors, but every day dozens of letters land on her doormat in [Bridlington](#) with amazing news: She's won a huge jackpot. She just has to send back a small amount of cash.

She does not know where the letters come from, but Joseph has sent in hundreds of pounds, convinced she is about to reap a windfall.

"I have three children. I wanted to give them a million each," the elderly widow Joseph said from her wheelchair. "That's the only reason I'm doing it. I just wanted them to be happy and secure and be able to do what they want."

In reality, Joseph may be a victim of an elaborate international scam, [New York Postal Inspector Tom Boyle](#) says.

And [New York](#) is at its center.

The scheme stretches from [Europe](#) to the [United States](#) and taps into the savings of vulnerable elderly people by duping them into thinking they have won a multimillion-dollar sweepstakes.

Sweepstakes scams are one of the most common types of mail fraud - costing \$150 million a year in America, probers say.

The letters mislead recipients into thinking they have won millions and can claim their prize by sending back a "processing fee," usually \$20 to \$30, inspectors say.

The catch: the small print says the company is a research organization that provides information on "cash awards and prizes."

That information rarely comes, inspectors say.

From [England](#) to midtown

Joseph had no clue about any of this when she mailed off a check for 20 pounds (\$30) earlier this year to "A.O.G." at a post office box at the [James A. Farley Post Office](#) in [Manhattan](#).

She was convinced she had won \$5 million.

The payment was delivered to box 3151, and for five mornings over two weeks the Daily News watched as a worker picked up a box full of letters while a driver waited outside.

Postal inspectors say this box gets 25 to 50 letters daily.

If each one contains a check of similar value to Joseph's, the masterminds behind this cold-hearted ruse are walking away with up to \$1,500 a day.

And that's just one box. From the Farley post office, the pair typically made at least five more stops at post office boxes around the city, each time leaving with another bundle of letters, presumably containing dozens more checks.

When approached by The News, one of the women seen collecting mail denied any knowledge of the contents. Authorities say the people who ferry the mail around are usually unaware of the role they play in the complex operation

"We just picked up the mail," [Claudia Baena](#) told The News. "We never opened them. I have no idea what's inside."

The stash was eventually unloaded at an office in [Long Island City](#), Queens, where the buzzer lists the company as PSS and Associates. The state had no record of a company with that name at that location.

The car they use to pick up the mail is registered to [Marcus Pradel](#), who lives with his family in upscale [Boca Raton, Fla.](#)

He is listed as the registered agent or manager of at least 16 companies on the [Florida Department of State](#) Web site, including [Mail Tree Inc.](#), Spin Mail, Postal Chemistry, and the [European Bureau of Prize Draw Registry](#).

"I really feel bad about the way you refer to it," Pradel said when reached at his home. "Those letter mailings ... those are newsletter offerings, not postal scams," he said, before refusing to answer more questions.

In 2006, UK authorities flagged the European Bureau of Prize Draw Registry as a possible sweepstakes scam.

Florida postal inspectors were investigating Pradel a few years ago, suspecting he was part of a large, well-organized group of sweepstakes operators.

The probe was put on hold after his companies appeared to suddenly shut down.

"They tried to disappear," said one Florida postal inspector, who believes the scheme may have worked in up to eight countries. "It looks like they've moved from down here to New York."

Kibosh on boxes

Postal authorities are closing a number of Manhattan postal boxes after The News exposed them as being part of the potential scam.

Still, it's hard to make progress against the enormous problem. Since each check is for such a small amount, people rarely complain when they realize they've been duped.

No complaints against Pradel or his companies have been made to the [Federal Trade Commission](#) or the [Better Business Bureau](#).

The Florida attorney general's office has one complaint against Pradel: [Robert Tilly](#) discovered his father, who suffers from dementia, had written \$74,000 worth of checks to two companies, one of which was Pradel's Mail Tree.

"Every month he was writing up to three checkbooks of checks," said Tilly, whose father lives in a Florida retirement community. "They target these elderly people and it's so easy to do because my father's mind doesn't work right anymore."

"He would get 30 to 40 letters a day. ... They sell the names [to each other]. There are scores of people doing this."

U.S. investigators say they are hampered not only by the shortage of victims who come forward but because they are mostly in Europe, beyond their jurisdiction.

U.K. authorities say they have trouble bringing prosecutions because the companies operate from the United States, beyond **their** jurisdiction.

The tangled legalities are why this type of sweepstakes scam is so successful, officials say.

The News sent its own check from a British bank account to "A.O.G." at the James A. Farley post office box.

It was eventually sent to [Thomas Exchange UK Ltd.](#), a foreign exchange company in [London](#). The News could not track the check further than that.

The exchange company said it had no knowledge of the scam, and believed it was cashing checks from a catalogue company selling cheap trinkets.

Sources said the firm receives hundreds of checks each day - in dollars, euros and pounds - and the handwriting on nearly every check is frail and shaky, clearly written by someone elderly.

[Scotland Yard](#) has referred Joseph's case to Operation Sterling, part of the fraud prevention and disruption team.

Meanwhile, the checks continue to roll in every day, and people like Joseph hold out hope one day they really will hit the jackpot.

"When you're by yourself, the days are long," she said. "It gives you something to look forward to. I could be lucky, you know. I'm not going to give up hope."