

Shape-Up on Bedford

By Philip Berroll

Around 7:30 a.m., the men gather in the chilling December air at the corner of South 5th Street and Bedford Avenue, next to the Williamsburg Bridge overpass, as they do every morning. There are about 30 of them, ranging in age from twentysomething to early fifties. Some stand alone; others cluster in small groups, chatting, making jokes. But everyone keeps an eye on the street, watching the cars, vans, and pickup trucks that pass by -- and waiting for the occasional vehicle that slows down.

The men are part of a sad tradition in American labor -- the shape-up crew. For generations, the unemployed have clustered on particular street corners in American cities, hoping to get a day-labor job for a couple of hours or even better, several days. Because most of them do not possess a special craft or skill, they are of little interest to unions or conventional employment agencies, and so are left to their own devices.

At the height of the Depression, most shape-up crews were made up of native-born Americans. Today, the crews are almost entirely composed of immigrants, legal and otherwise. Mexican-dominated crews have long been common to Southern California. Here in Greenpoint, two of the men waiting by the bridge are African-American and several are Latino, but most have emigrated from Poland or the former Soviet Union.

Zygmunt "Zygi" Lemond, a stocky, friendly man of 43, came from Poland -- he is vague about the exact year, but it was some time after the fall of the country's Communist regime in 1989. Drawn to Greenpoint by its large Polish community, Zygi has lived for almost a year in a homeless shelter on Bedford and Atlantic Avenues, about half a mile south.

Wearing a patterned jacket, hightop sneakers and a painter's cap, he is dressed a bit more colorfully than the others. (Even more bizarre is a younger man who looks like a college student, wearing a backpack, a Walkman -- and rollerblades.) Zygi's background is also unconventional. Trained as a musician, he left Poland when he realized that work would be harder to come by in a capitalist society -- "How many dance bands do you need?" he asks rhetorically.

But Zygi felt that the American music business, while equally competitive, offered more opportunity. And he does on occasion play bass guitar with a band, working New Jersey towns such as Linden, Garfield, or Passaic, which have large Polish neighborhoods. He plays both nightclubs and social events -- weddings, christenings, baby showers.

But it's not enough to make a living. So every morning, he is out on the corner, looking for construction or warehouse jobs or "painting, sometimes." The pay isn't great, but it's better than minimum-wage -- at least \$6 an hour, and as much as \$10 for more strenuous construction or demolition work.

The real problem is the length and frequency of the jobs. When asked if he gets much work, Zygi makes a face and says only, "It's not regular." Some of his jobs have been as short as two to three hours, but none have been longer than two days. "Yesterday," he says, "I worked nine hours, in a warehouse." He usually stays on the corner until noon before giving up for the day.

At one point, a station wagon pulls up, with two men in the front seat. Everyone clusters around, gesticulating, talking in two or three languages, as those with better English translate for their friends. Zygi joins in for a few minutes, then walks away. Eventually, no one else decides to get in the car, and the men drive off.

Zygi explains that the men offered to pay \$6 an hour for extensive wiring and carpentry work on a building that they were renovating -- but were honest enough to mention that the building was unheated. "For a job like that," he says, "it's got to be at least \$10."

Not everyone can afford to be so choosy. Down the block, on the other side of the overpass, another group of East Europeans have staked out their own patch of turf. One of them, Sasha, a Ukrainian immigrant who has been in the U.S. for three months, says with a laugh that he does "everything." Another in the group, Tibor, who comes from Bulgaria, lists his skills as "welder, electrician... and I put down tiles." They are less easily discouraged than Zygi -- they usually stay on the street until 2 or 3 p.m.

At his end of the block, Zygi sniffs that there are "too many Russians out here" -- some days, in fact, they outnumber the Poles. Is he voicing ancient resentments, given the history of relations between

Russia and Poland? More likely, it's a matter of numbers. The more men on the block competing for jobs, the less chance any of them has of getting one.

Occasionally, Zygi says, the competition gets ugly. When an employer announces two openings and four (or more) men are gathered around his car, push can literally come to shove. But the disputes are generally forgotten, or at least set aside, by the following day. The men have to face each other every morning, and holding grudges is a waste of energy.

From time to time, two uniformed policemen in a squad car circle the block, keeping an eye on the group. But the men are careful to stay on their best behavior. Until several months ago, the group had been gathering a few blocks away, at the intersection of Wallabout Street and Kent Avenue; they were chased away by the police, after local residents complained that some of the men were drinking in public and throwing bottles and other garbage on the street. Zygi confirms the charges, although he personally claims innocence.

Now another car pulls over. Before Zygi takes three steps in his direction, the Latino driver picks the first three men who approach, and drives away. Zygi shrugs, takes a cigarette from a Marlboro pack, and lights up.

Most of the employers, Zygi says, are Latinos or Orthodox or Hasidic Jews. The latter, he says, are sometimes a problem because they prefer to pay him in cash, off the books, in order to avoid paying social security taxes. He would rather get a check. "If you're paid cash," he says, "it could be as low as \$3 an hour. A check, if it's six, you still keep \$3.75 after taxes and Social Security."

Zygi is familiar with the current American political debate about welfare and unemployment. He has heard the claims that there are plenty of available jobs for any able-bodied worker who is willing to look hard enough. (In New York, Gov. George Pataki recently announced plans to cut state welfare rolls by 25 percent.)

But Zygi prefers not to take sides in this argument; he will only speak of his own feelings and experience. Welfare, he says, is not for him, but he does not judge anyone who takes that route.

What Zygi really wants is the chance to leave the corner for good. He says he knows of "some people in the summer who go to upstate New York. They get regular factory jobs and they don't come back." And Zygi himself has an application in at a factory on Java Street, a few blocks north. For now, though, he remains under the bridge, waiting for another car to pull up to the curb.

"Every day," he says, "it's the same situation."

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