

8 Entering the World of Work

As soon as school ended in June of 1942, I started to look for a summer job. I had graduated from Junior High School 52, I had been accepted to Stuyvesant High School, I was 14 and a half years old. I was ready for work.

The depression was over. My mother was working again in a garment shop, and it was time that I began to make some money. So how do I find a job? Occasionally, when shopkeepers want boys to make deliveries or sweep their stores, they put "Boy Wanted" signs in their windows. So for the first week of July, I walked through the neighborhood looking for those signs. I didn't see any. I told friends and relatives that I was looking for a job and if they knew of one, to please let me know. Toward the end of July, my friend Sol sent me a postcard (we didn't have a phone) telling me that he saw a "boy wanted" sign in a florist shop on Westchester Avenue. I went there but the job had been filled.

At the same time, I scoured the help wanted ads in the Bronx Home News, our local paper. I limited my job search to the immediate neighborhood because I did not want to expend time and carfare going too far afield. Copying down the names and addresses of potential employers, I would map out a route and walk from one to the other, getting rejected by one and all. Most of the time, I was too young. "Sorry, you have to be 16". "Sorry, we want someone who will work year-round, not just for the summer." "Sorry, you don't look strong enough." "Sorry, you have to have a bicycle." "Sorry, the job was taken."

Job hunting was an adventure, and I discovered parts of the Bronx which I didn't know existed. I walked all through the Hunts Point area as far as Crotona Park. I worked my way up and down Westchester Avenue and Prospect Avenue and 149th Street, and Southern Blvd.

On one occasion, I found myself on St. Anns Avenue near St. Mary's park in what turned out to be a tough Irish neighborhood. I was strolling along, minding my own business looking for an address of a store in the area, when, from across the street, someone hollered, "Hey Jew boy!" I was surprised, wondering how they knew I was Jewish. A group of boys, about my age and older, were sitting on a stoop, hanging out. Then: "Christ killer!" Wow. In all my 14 1/2 years, I had never had such an experience. In fact, growing up in the East Bronx, I was confused when they talked of the Jews as a minority. Not where I lived! I acted as if I didn't hear anything (As we say in Yiddish "nisht visindik") quickened my pace, and got the hell out of there. I changed my mind about looking for that job, and headed home, not wanting to walk through there every day.

I don't want to give the impression that I spent the entire summer of 1942 looking for work. There were many days that I spent just being with my friends, going to Orchard Beach or Bronx Park or Pelham Bay Park or Crotona Park,, reading, playing ball, or listening to the radio. On a couple of occasions, I walked to Yankee Stadium to see a ball game, but getting a job was uppermost in my mind.

My mother recognized how important it was for me to get a job, and tried to help me find one. It was now August and there wasn't much time left. A very special friend of my mother's was Mrs. Nerenstein. She had come from Vaslui, the same town in Romania as my mother's. They were "landsleit." In fact, when my mother arrived in New York, she stayed with Mrs. Nerenstein on Allen Street, on the lower east side. Mrs. Nerenstein had a daughter who had recently married. And that first Sunday in August, Mrs. Nerenstein's daughter Lillie, and her son-in-law, were paying her a visit. And I believe my mother arranged for us to visit Mrs. Nerenstein to meet her new son-in-law.

Mrs. Nerenstein's son-in-law was very big, very strong and he had the hardest, toughest, most calloused hands I have ever seen. He worked as a blocker in a millinery factory. (I looked up the word "block" in the dictionary, and it had 28 different definitions including "3. a mold or form on which an item is shaped: a hat block.") His job was to take the unshaped felt bodies that would eventually become a woman's hat, and put it on a round wooden block and stretch it and shape it until it becomes the finished hat. And he would do it by slapping, hitting, pushing and pulling the felt bodies with his hands. The palms of his hands were tougher than leather. Yet he was one of the gentlest men I ever met. He worked in a millinery factory on 38th Street off Fifth Avenue.

During the course of the visit, I screwed up my courage and asked him if his boss needed a delivery boy, I told him I had been looking for a job the whole summer without success, and I was desperate. He commiserated with me, said he understood, and took out a pencil and paper and wrote down the name and address of his factory, and the name of the owner. He told me to come there the following morning and that he would speak to the owner. I was overjoyed; words could not describe the happiness and gratitude I felt. I had never come this close to the possibility of a job. It was my first lesson in "It is not what you know, but who you know" but I did not realize it.

That Sunday night I could hardly sleep. I was up at daybreak, had a quick breakfast, took the subway to 42nd Street and Lexington Avenue, and practically ran to 38th Street and Fifth Avenue, passing the 42nd Street Library, Lord and Taylor, and lots of buildings that contained hundred of millinery factories. I found the address, took the elevator to what was to be my place of employment for the next three weeks, met the boss, answered a few questions, filled out a paper, was shown around the factory, was told that my salary would be \$8 a week, and was introduced to someone who was to tell me what to do.

I had never been so excited. Not only am I now a full time worker, I am working in a downtown factory and will take the subway every day along with the hundred of thousands of other working New Yorkers. My factory consisted of three or four blockers in the outer room with a long table next to a small office, and an inner large room with about 15 or 20 women who finished the hats. They worked at smaller tables and they decorated the finished felt hats with feathers using rubber cement.

My job was to take the finished hats, wrap them carefully in tissue paper, place each one carefully in a cardboard box, place the boxes one on top of the other, tie them together,

and deliver them to the retail stores that ordered them. I was shown how to do each step, and then demonstrated that I learned how to do it. I worked at the long table between the blockers and the small office which contained the boss and his secretary. I felt very important.

I quickly got the hang of opening the boxes and packing and stacking the hats, but the real challenge was delivering them. The boxes were of light weight cardboard and were about a foot in height. I would tie two piles of four boxes each and carry them with both arms extended, walking sideways. The streets of midtown Manhattan were always crowded and I had to maneuver my way through the crowds, making sure nothing happened to the hats. Though the hat boxes were not heavy, carrying them like that was murder on my arms. But I always made my deliveries and hurried back to the shop to pack more hats and to make still another delivery. That first Friday, I received my pay envelope with eight dollars. I felt great!

I worked there for two more weeks. The second week, I felt like an old timer. I began to know my way around, cleaned up the outer room near the blockers, ran a few errands, and my arms didn't hurt as much. I was sad when my third and last week ended, though I was excited about starting high school. Everyone in the shop said goodbye, wished me well in high school, and in my pay envelope there was an extra dollar.