On the other side: An electrician shines shoes in Tijuana

by John Fanestil in the July 23, 2014 issue

© YUSUF BATURAY BATIR

Several times each month I walk across the border into Tijuana at the San Ysidro port of entry, the busiest land border crossing in the world, just south of San Diego. I have grown so accustomed to declining requests for my patronage that *Hoy no, gracias* (“Not today, thanks”) has come to feel to me almost like a pleasantry, a kind of all-purpose salutation.

But one day a man, whose name I never learned, was persistent and persuasive and addressed me confidently in barely accented English as he offered to shine my shoes.

“You can pay me whatever you want,” he said. When I balked, he insisted, “I’ll make them shine like a mirror, man.” He closed the deal with: “I know what I’m doing, I promise.”

And so I assented, and he got down on his knees and pulled his kit from over his shoulder. He set out a few small tins, filling each with a precise amount of liquid from small squeeze-top bottles, and set out some small strips of rag and one blue-gray chamois. He tucked my shoe laces under the tongue of my shoe, rolled up the leg of my pants, and got to work.

“You from Tijuana?” I asked, honoring his obvious preference that we speak in English.

“Yeah, well, I am for now,” he answered, “but I am also from the other side” (*el otro lado* is how Mexicans near the border commonly refer to the United States). “That’s where my wife is, and my kids. I got a grandkid, too. They are all citizens.”

“You got family with you here in Tijuana?”

“Yeah, my mom lives here, and I got a couple of brothers here, too.”

“You been able to see your kids and stuff since you been here?”

“Yeah, they come down from the other side and see me ’cause I can’t cross. I’m waiting one more year. They gave me like ten years before I can go back. I got an application in with a lawyer. One more year.”

Beginning in the early 2000s, the U.S. federal government made a determined effort to criminalize reentry, resulting in a ten-year ban on applying for readmission to the United States for Mexicans who had crossed the border illegally, no matter their family configuration. This policy has undermined what for generations of Mexican workers had been an orderly process of moving back and forth between the two countries to follow the ups and downs of what is (and always has been) a binational labor market.

“Is one of your kids going to be able to immigrate you?”

“Probably, when I get to the other side.”

In border vernacular, “to immigrate” someone is to sponsor them to become a U.S. citizen, which is something—depending on a host of circumstances—that a U.S. citizen can do for an immediate relative (a child for a parent, for instance, as I had put it in my question). But the man shining my shoes was not thinking about citizenship, at least not yet. What mattered most to him was the ability to return to his prior life, the life of a Mexican national working in the United States.

“See, I went to the U.S. when I was 14 years old, and I got my Social Security number. Back then they didn’t ask you for nothing. You just give them your name and your address and you got the Social Security [card] by mail. So I got it back then, in ’76.”

“My father, may he rest in peace, my nephew, and me . . . all three of us, we all three applied, and we all three got it. My father worked in LAX, Los Angeles

International Airport, for 30 years. He got a pension from LAX, and my mother's got the pension now. So he worked in the U.S. for most of his life, a lot of years."

I wondered why the man shining my shoes had not applied for permanent residency in 1986, when the U.S. Congress passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act. IRCA had offered legal status to some 2 million U.S. immigrants who had no criminal record and who could prove they had maintained continuous residence in the United States since 1982. Maybe he had gone back to Mexico during those four short years, disqualifying him from taking advantage of the reform. Or maybe he had committed a crime as a young man. I decided not to ask and turned to a less personal line of inquiry.

"Do you find your business picking up at all back here in Tijuana?"

"Well, not really. This is all I do. I should be doing . . . well, I'm a certified electrician in the U.S. I went to college.

"I went to college for 18 months, I got all my diplomas and everything. So I'm just hanging out here, shining shoes. To get by. You know, to get money to eat.

"So I'm just gonna be patient. I got one more year, then I go over there and start working. 'Cause I already put in 14 years working in the U.S., so you know, I need to, I'm not done. I'm 51. So I got another 15 years to work, 15 or 16, something like that."

Later I reconstructed the timeline of the life of the man who had shined my shoes. Born in 1962 in Mexico, he went to the United States with his father and nephew in 1976. There he married and raised a family, before being deported to Mexico in 2005, nine years ago. All told he lived in the States for about 29 years, although this may not have been an uninterrupted residency. By his accounting he had spent four years in high school, two in college and 14 working as an electrician—that made 20 years, and left nine of the 29 years between his arrival and deportation unaccounted for.

But all this calculating came afterward. In the moment I was utterly entranced by the disciplined work of this man shining my shoes.

The United States has deported between 3 and 4 million people over the past decade, and the majority of these, like the man who shined my shoes, are Mexican

workers with extended family on both sides of the international boundary. Each deportation has undermined a family, and deportees have faced an agonizing decision—to seek to reenter the United States illegally or to reconcile themselves to a dramatic reduction in their earning power. One friend tells me that for a 50-hour week working for the public utility in Tijuana he can make $115, an amount he had been accustomed to making in a good afternoon working as a carpenter in San Diego. Another friend now runs a call center in Tijuana for about one-sixth of the income he earned while managing a grocery store in California.

After two decades along the border, I have come to place my hope not in Congress but in the people of the borderlands themselves, whose capacity to withstand hardship inspires in me a continual awe. It dawned on me that the man shining my shoes was also washing the feet of his wife and children left behind in the United States. For many years he had supported them by working as an electrician, and if he could no longer do that, at least he would work to pay his own way so that they did not have to support him. So for nine years he had been kneeling before strangers like me, exercising patience, discipline, and determination, “just hanging out here, shining shoes.” There was no tone of despair in his voice, but there was a note of resignation.

“All right,” he said, as he finished my second shoe, rolled down the leg of my pants, and packed up his kit.

In Spanish there is a salutation that can be both greeting and farewell. When used in the latter sense it carries with it an implied hope and expectation that paths will cross again. “*Saludos*,” I said.