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If You're Thinking of Living In/Brighton Beach; Magnet for Immigrants, Moving Upscale

By NANCY BETH JACKSON

NEIL SIMON grew up in the Bronx, but it is Brighton Beach that he brought to the stage and screen when he recalled his 1930's boyhood in "Brighton Beach Memoirs." The first act opens in "a wooden frame house, not too far from the beach. It is a lower-middle-income area inhabited mostly by Jews, Irish and Germans."

Today's gawky Eugene Jerome, once played by Matthew Broderick in his first Broadway role, might be a second-generation Russian-American with Mexicans, not Murphys, living across the street. If Eugene wanted to sneak a smoke behind the Brighton Beach Baths, he would find instead a gated community with penthouses selling for $1 million on the 15-acre tract. And those little beach bungalows of yesteryear with the square footage of a junior one-bedroom now sell for upward of $250,000, if they have not been replaced by a new condo.

"Brighton Beach is one of the most exciting places in New York; it's a combination of something foreign and something very local," said Aviva Zeltzer-Zubida, a Russian-born doctoral candidate in sociology at the City University of New York. She does not live in Brighton Beach but cannot stay away from the food shops and night life in what has long been called Little Odessa, after the Ukrainian city on the Black Sea.

Yet summer mornings on the boardwalk of Brighton Beach, tucked between raucous Coney Island and affluent Manhattan Beach, are much as they were in the 19th century when New Yorkers traveled out from the city by steamboat, train and trolley to savor the sea breezes. The elevated tracks of the Q line and the bustle in shops along Brighton Beach Avenue are only a few blocks away, but the ocean stretches forever from the broad sandy beach. Freighters head east on the horizon as a few sailboats bob closer to shore. You could be on Miami Beach, not a $1.50 subway ride from Manhattan.

Brighton Beach, named after the English seaside resort, began to develop as a summer vacation spot shortly after the Civil War when William A. Engeman recognized its salubrious possibilities. Catering to middle-class families, he built a pier, a hotel and a bathhouse, adding a racetrack in 1879 after the completion of Ocean Parkway. The nation's first bike path was built along the parkway in 1894. A beachside amusement park with a carousel and giant roller coaster added to
the attractions.

The Brighton Beach Baths replaced the amusement park in 1907. Members played mah-jongg or tennis and enjoyed concerts. From its earliest years, Brighton Beach offered top entertainment with John Philip Sousa's band, the first Yiddish vaudeville theater and Victor Herbert in the early years and Milton Berle, Lionel Hampton and Herman's Hermits later on. Today, Russian night spots like the National and the Oceana Theater stage extravagant Las Vegas-style shows. Instead of Yiddish actors, the neighborhood now has the Brighton Beach Ballet Theater and School of Russian Ballet.

Brighton Beach became a year-round community with the conversion of beach bungalows. In the 1920’s and 1930’s more than 30 six-story apartment buildings were built on streets south of Brighton Beach Boulevard. The elevator buildings with doormen, Art Deco entrances and salt water in the bathtubs attracted what one Brighton Beach historian called "the crème de la crème" of immigrants, escaping the tenements of the city.

The Jerome family of Mr. Simon's imagination lived in a single-family house on a narrow lot north of Brighton Beach Boulevard. When moviemakers filmed the movie in 1986, they found it easy to recreate the 1930’s neighborhood on Brighton Fourth Street (numbered streets are all preceded by "Brighton"). The architecture had not changed much, even if residents might have felt more at home in "Moscow on the Hudson," the 1984 Robin Williams comedy that included scenes in the National.

In the late 1970's, Brighton Beach had all but succumbed to urban blight. Apartment buildings were bullet-scarred and graffiti-covered. McDonald's pulled down its Golden Arches. Younger residents fled to the suburbs, leaving behind one of the oldest populations in the country. The Brighton Beach Baths remained, but not the grandeur.

THEN a community outcry organized by a young widow who could not afford to move away and a change in the Soviet immigration policy saved the neighborhood.

In 1977, the widow, Pat Singer, rallied her neighbors. They staged a demonstration at Brighton Beach and Coney Island Avenues, where the traffic lights allow pedestrians to cross in all directions at once. For four hours, about 500 demonstrators, many in wheelchairs and walkers or aided by canes protested the deterioration of the neighborhood and its services. Out of the protest grew the Brighton Neighborhood Association, which Ms. Singer directs today.

About the time Brighton Beach residents citizens decided to take back their neighborhood, the Russians began moving in. The Soviet Union began to allow refuseniks, many of them Jews, to emigrate.

In Mr. Simon's play, Eugene Jerome worried that "at any minute there could be a knock at the door with 37 relatives from Poland, showing up looking for a place to live." Beginning in the late 1970's, the knock on the door came from Russian relatives and friends, who found Brighton Beach a good
launching pad for life in America.

The neighborhood soon had the largest Russian-speaking population in the city and perhaps in the nation. Russian remains the first language on Brighton Beach Boulevard. An English-speaker entering a food shop -- even the bustling N&I International Food with its immense assortment of pickles -- would do well to bring an interpreter if only to read the signage and packaging.

"I'm called the Mother of Brighton Beach, but I'm a bad mother because I can't communicate with my children," laughed Ms. Singer, whose mother immigrated from Odessa, but spoke Yiddish. "I can say, 'Thank you' and 'Wait one minute.'"

To communicate with other residents, Ms. Singer would need to speak more than Russian. The neighborhood is home to Pakistani, Afghan, Indian, Hispanic, Asian and longtime Jewish residents as well as Russians. Brighton Beach no longer has a kosher meat market, but several shops advertise their meats are halal. The synagogues that long have dotted the neighborhood have been joined by an Islamic center on Neptune Avenue. The library has Russian books in one corner, Chinese magazines on the shelf, a Jewish interest section as well as cassettes for learning English and foreign-language videos.

As a portal for immigrants, Brighton Beach is always adding another ingredient, but the dish is more a textured beef stroganoff than pureed melting pot. "Everyone lives in close proximity with a lot of interaction but little mixing," Ms. Zeltzer-Zubida observed.

Many second-generation immigrants head to the suburbs when their children approach school age, but neighborhood schools reflect a rich diversity. Abraham Lincoln High School, whose former students include Arthur Miller, Joseph Heller, Neil Sedaka, Neil Diamond, Elizabeth Holtzman and Harvey Keitel, has students from 40 different countries and offers instruction in Russian and a special science and math program.

About 10 to 25 percent of the students in grade schools in the neighborhood are recent immigrants, mostly from Mexico, Pakistan, Russia and Ukraine, but standardized test scores are generally high. At P.S. 100, 2951 West Third Street, 72 percent of the students met the standard in reading and 60 percent in math in annual tests administered by the city and state. At P.S. 225 at 1075 Ocean View Avenue, those meeting the standards totaled 66 and 67 percent, respectively. P.S. 253 at 601 Ocean View Avenue, which enrolls students from 42 countries speaking 33 languages, scored considerably lower: 32 percent in English and 36 percent in math.

The new Oceana condominium development on the boardwalk also has a polyglot of residents, drawn by the beach and the proximity to Kennedy Airport, 13 miles away. The gated community, which will ultimately have 850 apartments in 15 buildings of 5 to 12 stories, had its genesis more than a generation ago when the family of a Russian-born Brooklyn contractor named Isaac Muss took a gamble on Brighton Beach. In 1980, his grandson Stephen Muss, by then a prominent Miami Beach developer, bought the Brighton Beach Baths, which his family had been leasing, and began planning a high-rise complex.
In 1999, Stephen's cousin Joshua Muss, based in Queens, bought the property and shifted the design to shorter buildings. Using architects who had designed Fisher Island in Miami, the Musses have completed five buildings, where occupancy is more than 96 percent. A sixth will be finished in November and the seventh projected for spring 2003. Two-bedroom condos range from the mid-$300,000's to $600,000, three-bedrooms from $490,000 to $750,000 and penthouses of three or four bedrooms start in the high $600,000's and can exceed $1 million. Private parking near the entrance of each building cost $40,000; underground valet parking for 1,200 cars will be available for a monthly fee.

Sergy Guberman, a former ballet dancer turned real estate entrepreneur, moved his family to Staten Island for more space and newer construction, but he is betting that people like him will return in Brighton Beach if better housing is available. He recently razed six cottages on Brighton Fourth Street just south of Neptune Avenue to build an eight-story condo with landscaping, parking, and fancy kitchen appliances. A two-bedroom apartment with a Jacuzzi bath costs $345,000. Even before the building was finished, all but two of the apartments had been bought by Russian-Americans in their 30's, 40's and 50's. ARTHUR KESSLER, Brighton Beach-born and a realtor for nearly 30 years, predicts that replacing out-of-date housing with condominiums will be the trend of the 21st century, particularly since so much of the area is already zoned for multiple dwellings. Angela Friedman, a Russian-born real estate agent at Fillmore Real Estate, said that bungalow prices were soaring because some were being restored for use as beach cottages by Russian-Americans who want to return to Little Odessa at least for the summer.

Renting? Don't ask. "Zero vacancy and I mean zero, zero -- you wait in line," Mr. Kessler said. Many agents, including Mr. Kessler and his wife, Pat, no longer handle rentals. The market is by word of mouth or local newspapers -- in Russian.

Meanwhile, Brighton Beach is becoming more upscale, glitzy with little fancy pockets here and there. Milena, where immigrants from Tashkent, Uzbekistan, have been selling women's fashions for 20 years, now has a monitor showing the latest from the catwalks and a two-story glass facade that would fit right in on Madison Avenue.

Can Banana Republic, Gap and Ann Taylor be far behind? "Just give us time," says Pat Singer.

Photos: Russian signs abound near Brighton Beach Avenue at Brighton 12th Street, top; the Oceana condominium complex; and houses near Corbin Place and Brighton 15th Street.

RUSH-HOUSE COMMUTATION: Q Express, 35 minutes ($1.50 one way). KNISHES IN A TIME WARP: Borscht and blinis are neighborhood staples these days, but the baked knish holds its ground at Mrs. Stahl's, a no-frills storefront that has been serving up the paper-wrapped specialty under the El at Brighton Beach and Coney Island Avenues for 65 years. When Mayor Guiliani lost his 2001 Super Bowl wager to the Baltimore mayor, he paid off in part with two dozen mixed knishes -- potato, cabbage, cheese and mushroom -- from Mrs. Stahl's. Russian immigrants have been slow to develop a taste for knishes, but Les Green, a Brooklyn businessman who bought the shop in 1985 after Mrs. Stahl's death, keeps them coming. A dozen years ago he added a frozen kosher knish wholesale business. Now he also offers next-day-air gift packs as far away as Hawaii, Puerto Rico and Miami Beach and has a Web site in the works. Map of Brooklyn highlights Brighton Beach.