

## Portuguese and Spanish can be heard much more frequently now

On America's east coast, too, the Latinos have become the majority in many places. *Lisa Nienhaus* asked around in Elizabeth (New Jersey)

When Christian Bollwage went to primary school in Elizabeth, he had two children in his grades with Spanish last names. At that time, in the early sixties, Elizabeth was a place that was home primarily to people who spoke English and had European roots. They had German, Polish, Eastern European or Italian ancestry, and in addition, there were many Jewish inhabitants. The city in New Jersey, half an hour's drive from Manhattan, founded by the British in 1664, was a city with a white majority. Christian Bollwage himself has German and Irish forbears.

Today, 50 years later, Bollwage is the mayor of Elizabeth, happily ensconced in his handsome office, behind him the American flag to his left, the blue city flag to his right, and family photos between them. A side table holds about 20 framed photos, all showing him with former President Bill Clinton. Bollwage is a solidly-built man who enjoys conversing with people, plays golf, but doesn't know any foreign languages. All so stereotypically American, Western, white. But the city has changed since Bollwage was a child.

Today, Spanish is spoken in most stores, in every office, including City Hall, in the tax office. In the schools lessons are taught in Spanish and English, and you can choose to study English as a foreign language. There are streets on which you can't order lunch if you don't know Spanish, because there is no menu in English.

The 2010 census made it official: In Elizabeth, with its 130,000 inhabitants, one population group has taken over the majority – the one Americans call “Hispanics” or “Latinos”. This refers to people who are mostly white, but include some colored, but have one thing in common: Their mother tongue is Spanish or Portuguese. In most cases, they or their forbears come from South- or Central America, less often from Portugal or Spain.

Almost 60 percent of Elizabeth's inhabitants are members of this group, and probably even more, since there are many illegal immigrants who can't be precisely counted.

Here in Elizabeth it is possible to see observe already now what the United States as a whole is headed for in 2044, according to projections by the Census Bureau. Whites (not including “Hispanics”) will have lost their majority in the country by then, and will be a majority-minority, as the Americans call it. By 2060 Hispanics will make up just about one third of the population. Already they have surpassed African Americans, at 17.4 percent of the population, while blacks are at 13.2 percent. And their share is growing from year to year: They have more children than Anglo-Americans, but in addition, more of them are flowing into the country, some legally, some illegally.

What is happening in Elizabeth could up to now be observed only in the South of the country, in California, Texas or Florida. Miami, in Florida, has 70 percent Hispanics, El Paso, in Texas, even 77 percent. But meanwhile the Spanish-speaking population has been pushing northward as well, into the classically Anglo-American territory. For example, to Elizabeth.

[photo caption:]

Latinos dominate a street scene in Elizabeth.

They have been coming to Elizabeth for so long that here one can see exactly what happens when they take over a city. It is a slow process. For example, the top dogs are still just as white and male as elsewhere in the country. The major, as noted, has Irish-German forbears. Gordon Haas, the president of the Chamber of Commerce, wears a yarmulke. He is the son of German Jews who came to New York in the thirties, fleeing the National Socialists.

But just one level below that, the ancestry takes a turn to South- and Central America. Colombians, Puerto Ricans, Peruvians, Mexicans, Cubans. For some time now, “Hispanics” have no longer been only people who mow lawns cheaply and off the books. There are illegals here, too. There are certain street corners where you can pick them up if you have a job that needs to be done. The police rarely interfere.

But there are also people like Fernando Fernandez, a Cuban businessman. With 15 employees, he buys and sells houses in Elizabeth. He is a broker, and being Cuban helps. “Sixty percent of my customers speak Spanish,” he says. For years Fernandez hated it when people asked him where he came from. “I don’t ask you where you come from,” he used to say. But now that he has earned a place for himself in Elizabeth society, he is glad to talk about it.

At the age of nine Fernandez fled Cuba with his parents. First to Mexico, then to Florida. There was no work there. So the parents moved north. In the sixties, Elizabeth was a city with many jobs. There was industry, for example the Singer sewing machine factory. The large port and the train station also guaranteed that immigrants of all kinds would find their way to the town, which was always open to newcomers. And Elizabeth was small. Although New York is nearby, there are no high-rise buildings here, but rather single family wooden houses in many colors, that look to a German visitor like vacation homes, and have large gardens. Fernandez, who grew up in a small town in Cuba, felt good here.

Fernando Fernandez’s story is one of many immigrant stories here. His parents had to take any job to survive. They cleaned toilets and sewed leather goods. Later his father opened a small shop, then a small variety store. Fernando went to college and worked alongside him. Today he has his own small company, is married to a woman who came to America from Colombia, and has a son who also works in the family business, while studying in college. He drives a good car, lives in a good neighborhood.

And still, he enjoys going to Morris Avenue. The street, once dominated by Jewish stores, is now firmly in South- and Central

American hands. “Here is a Colombian bakery. There is a very good Cuban restaurant. This one here is the first Colombian who ever opened a restaurant here, the Grandpa of the street,” Fernandez relates. All the while he is exchanging a few words in Spanish with each of the store owners.

“This is Little Colombia,” says the mayor about Morris Avenue. He is proud of it. “The Colombians have brought this street back to life.” Indeed: There are so many restaurants and snack bars, one next to the other, that one wonders whether the inhabitants of Elizabeth cook at home at all – and if so, how so many businesses can survive. One of the secrets of that survival is revealed by Fernandez in passing: Many illegal immigrants who have just arrived work here. They earn little and often speak only broken English.

It is harder today to get a visa than it was when Fernandez came to Elizabeth. But at the same time, there were other obstacles then. There were no classes taught in Spanish in school, for example. Fernandez thinks that’s better. “Children learn it in three months,” he says. It’s a mistake to teach in Spanish, they have to learn English.” And at offices no one spoke Spanish then. “My mother used to take me along to translate.”

Today the city’s life is dominated by Spanish. If you walk along the main shopping street, Broad Street, you see all skin colors and hear, above all, Spanish. Language schools advertise English courses in Spanish, and target illegal immigrants. “Study with legal status or change your status with us,” says the sign. T-Mobile advertises in Spanish billboards offering free calls to Mexico, a travel agency advertises cheap flights to Cuba. Even the local firefighters seek recruits in bilingual ads.

Why so many Spanish-speaking migrants end up in Elizabeth is something no one in the city seems able to explain. When Fernando Fernandez discusses it with the Chamber of Commerce president, Gordon Haas, the story that comes out is more or less the following: It all started with the Cubans. At the end of the fifties, large numbers of them fled the socialist revolution in their homeland. They were followed by other Spanish-speaking immigrants. Recently, many Colombians have

come, but there are also Mexicans and Peruvians. In the eighties many Portuguese came, and more recently also Brazilians.

The power of the individual groups is determined by the order of their arrival, along with their sheer numbers. The Cubans came a long time ago, and there used to be many of them. Lately there are fewer, as they move away. But they own many buildings in Elizabeth, along with the Jewish inhabitants who had come to the city even earlier.

Aside from that, they have influence. In the park in front of City Hall the Cubans have been allowed to erect their own monument. In addition to the commemoration of George Washington's brief visit to Elizabeth, the park also contains a bust of José Martí, a Cuban national hero. Aside from that, Martin Luther King and a general from Uruguay have also found a place. Only the Washington monument was erected by the city itself. Private initiatives are responsible for the other memorials. But they had to be approved by the City Council.

The park shows: Old power structures are surprisingly enduring. In Elizabeth, too, the white Americans are still on top. But the hierarchy breaks down as soon as the new inhabitants have been around for a while and form a second, a third generation. This majority will eventually push its way to the top.

Mayor Bollwage, in office for 23 years, speaks no Spanish. He's not yet worried that next year, when elections are held again, a candidate with a Central- or South American background will overtake him. But he also knows: More and more Hispanics are registering to vote. And Bollwage can't exclude that in another 20 years they will be the ones choosing the mayor.