

THE HOBOKEN HISTORICAL MUSEUM
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEWEE: PETER VOLARIC [also present:
ANTONIA VOLARIC]

INTERVIEWERS: HOLLY METZ, ROBERT FOSTER

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Track #1

HM: Please tell me your name.

PV: Peter Volaric.

HM: And where and when you were born.

PV: May 26, 1950, Yugoslavia.

HM: And where in Yugoslavia?

PV: On a small island called Susak.

HM: When did you come here?

PV: In 1963, with my parents.

HM: So you were thirteen.

PV: Thirteen.

HM: Okay. And did you speak English?

PV: No.

HM: Now why did your parents come to Hoboken?

PV: Well, everybody started to come here. One by one, they started leaving. Then my parents decided they also wanted to go, to find a better future for the children.

HM: How many children did they have?

PV: There are three brothers and a sister.

HM: Three brothers, that includes you.

PV: Right. I'm the oldest.

HM: Okay. So the names of the three brothers?

Peter --

PV: Peter; John; Darinka.

HM: Darinka is the sister.

PV: And my youngest brother, Josep.

HM: What did your parents do in Yugoslavia?

PV: Well, my mother worked on a farm, and my father worked in a fish factory.

HM: And the farm was your family farm?

PV: No. She worked for other people.

HM: Within the family, is that what people traditionally did?

PV: Yes. You know, different people have more land. We didn't have no land, so my mother worked for other people.

HM: And when there wasn't a grape harvest, did your mother do other work?

PV: She did other jobs, like help clean house.

HM: Tell me about the town where you lived until you were thirteen.

PV: Well, it's an island maybe twice the size of Hoboken.

HM: And how many people were there, about?

PV: Before people started leaving, there were about 1,800 people living on the island. So you have two sections -- lower section and an upper section, where people lived. Right now there are only like 120 people living there.

HM: How long has this island been occupied?
How many generations do you think lived there? Or, your
people? How many generations of your people?

PV: It has to be a couple hundred years, I
would think. I have pictures from 1900. At one time, in
1900, Austria was in charge of certain parts of Croatia. On
this island, there was a section where a guy from Austria
built homes for his family. They used to come during the
summer, on vacation.

HM: And people lived on the island.

PV: Yes. They maintained living there.

HM: So they lived there all year around, and
he came just --

PV: Right. He built the section for his
family, for the resort. There are brick walls left.

HM: So what was life like? People were
farmers and -- ?

PV: Well, people just lived on winery -- grapes -- on the whole island there was only grapes. Then you had a big percentage of fruit trees, like. I forget the name of the fruit, but there was some type of fruit. So you had people living from the grapes and fishing.

HM: And they're trading with others?

PV: They would make the wine, and you trade with other people, and the fish -- you'd sell them.

HM: But only within the island?

PV: No, they would go --

HM: -- to the mainland.

PV: Right. People would make wine, and then you would sell it, and trade it for wood for the winter, or different stuff.

HM: It looks like it's very green. But is it windy?

PV: Well, yes. There could come times that it could be a little windy. But there's hardly any snow here. No snow. If you get it, maybe a half inch. Then the next day it's gone.

HM: So very temperate, more like the Mediterranean climate.

PV: Right. A friend of mine told me that they had over twenty different types of grapes on the island.

HM: So they were heritage -- they were passed down.

PV: But now there is only ten-percent of the island that has grapes. Everything is just --

HM: -- abandoned.

PV: Right. There's nobody there.

HM: So people spoke Croatian.

PV: Croatian.

HM: Was there ever a time on this island when there were several different --

PV: Later on it came under Italian rule. My mother learned how to speak Italian. A lot of these islands, they belonged under Italian rule. Then, after World War II, then it became Yugoslavia again.

HM: So you didn't learn Italian.

PV: No. But from this island we went to Italy for one year, before we could come to this country. That's when I spoke I would say sixty-percent Italian. I even worked in Italy when I was thirteen.

HM: It was probably useful when you came here, too.

PV: I got a job -- I was painting for somebody for four months when I was thirteen years old, in Italy.

HM: So you've been painting a very long time.

PV: I painted for somebody. I did dishwashing. That's it.

HM: Because you were the oldest, you contributed.

PV: That's right.

HM: What's the age difference. There's you in 1950. You don't have to tell me the years, but what's the age difference between you?

PV: We were all born within ten years, from '50 to '60.

HM: So Josep is --

PV: -- fifty-nine.

HM: And Darinka?

PV: Fifty-five, fifty-six. She was born in 1955.

HM: And then John.

PV: John is fifty-two. Within nine years.

HM: That's plenty. That's plenty of kids.

PV: She got through.

HM: Your parents -- how old were they when they came here, about?

PV: Let's see. My mother is ninety now. She just finished ninety, three weeks ago. So 1963 to now -- what is that? Fifty-three years? So she had to be like thirty-five.

HM: And your father, was he a little older, or about the same age.

PV: Two years older. He was born in 1924; my mother was born in 1926.

HM: Your father's name?

PV: Joseph.

HM: Also. And your mother?

PV: Mattea.

HM: So you were old enough when you came here to have stories of your own, and impressions of what it was like to come to Hoboken.

PV: Yes. Well, first you left the island, where we lived at that time -- we used to get three hours of night electric. At the house we lived there was no running water, no toilet, dirt floors. So when we went to Italy, I was very excited because I'd see cars.

HM: And where in Italy was this?

PV: We went to a town called Latina, near Rome. This is a camp. I think it was sponsored by the United States. They'd keep you there until you got your paperwork. Your family has to sponsor you to come here. So you stay in

this camp. They give you one room for a family. One room. Everybody gives you free lunch and dinner.

HM: So the camp seemed more luxurious than where you lived before.

AV: I was there, too.

PV: But it was exciting, because it's Italy, you know? I went to work. Then the town had these bumper cars. I used to go to work, I had my own money to go on a bumper car and listen to this beautiful Italian music.

HM: Was it the freedom that made it so beautiful?

PV: Well, no, I guess you have so much to see and to do. Because you live on the island. You look at the boats, and fishing. But it was exciting.

HM: Did you go to school in the camp, as well? Or not so much?

PV: I went maybe two months. I couldn't speak Italian.

HM: And that was okay with your parents.

PV: Yes. Because they figured, he can work. He can have money to go for the bumper cars.

HM: And when did your parents stop school? Maybe they stopped school very young, too.

PV: My father had, I would think, to eighth grade. But my mother, very little.

HM: And was that because she was a girl? Or was that common?

PV: Well, on the island, you have to go to work.

Because their father died. Her mother, with four kids left --

HM: Everybody has to pitch in.

Now you said your family had to sponsor you.
So you had family here?

PV: Right.

HM: And where were they?

PV: In Hoboken. We all came from the island,
all the thousand of us came to Hoboken.

HM: Why Hoboken? Because there were jobs?

PV: It's like every nationality follows each
other. Because you feel they will help you find a job.
Because if you move to a town you don't know, how are you
going to get a job? So you come here -- over here you have
all these buildings for rentals. You find a rent right away,
and they help you find a job within two days. You go to
work.

HM: I just wonder about the very first one;
what those people were thinking when they came here. Is this
a good place to settle? What made them decide -- ?

AV: My mother used to tell me -- because we did the same thing. Sewing -- and that was the only job they could have. Everybody worked. Even I worked in a factory.

PV: Yes, because Hoboken was the place where the next day you'd get a job. That's the reason why we came here. To work.

HM: And also, when you came, you traveled by ship.

PV: No, no. We came by plane. Pan Am. Seventeen hours. That was exciting! Here you are, living on the island, and now you're flying! I think you had to make two stops to gas up, to come to Kennedy Airport. Then my friend picked us up -- a cousin picked us up with a convertible Cadillac. [Laughter]

HM: Very impressive.

PV: We said, "Wow! Why did we wait so long to come here?"

HM: Do you remember what color it was?

PV: No. I don't remember.

HM: Was it warm? Did you keep the top up?

PV: I think we got here June-July weekend. We came in Hoboken a couple of months when a bad thing happened; when Kennedy got killed, in November, '63. So as a kid, you just came here. To hear that -- you didn't know too much, but you'd still understand that somebody -- somebody like that could get shot -- he just told us to go home. Then to watch on TV the funeral. And the most touching was when you see his kid salute the father. Even I get teary-eyed, now.

HM: Everybody remembers where they were when that happened.

PV: Who would have thought? Four months later, rock n' roll comes, and everybody sings and dances. In '64, in February, the Beatles come --

HM: -- and changes everything again.

So you come here, the cousin picks you up --

PV: -- and we lived on Willow Avenue.

HM: Where on Willow Avenue?

PB: I think it was 918 Willow, for a short time, with my grandmother.

HM: And your grandmother came --

PV: -- before us. So she helped us --

HM: Your maternal or paternal grandmother?
Your father or your mother's mother.

PV: My mother's mother.

HM: And her name? Is she in any photographs?

PV: No. Her name was Maria.

HM: And she also sewed in the factory?

PV: No, she was a little older. She went to watch an older person. How do you call that?

HM: Home aid.

PV: Home aid. But her daughters went to work.

HM: And which one? Or did they work in different ones? Do you remember?

PV: Yes. My grandmother has three daughters: My mother, Mattea; another sister's name is Anna; and another sister's name is Liberat. Her husband just died a week ago.

HM: And they were all here?

PV: Yes. We all lived at 918 Willow for a few weeks, and then we found an apartment on Eighth and Willow, above a restaurant we used to call Blue Point. We could hear music without going to the movies! We could hear the dance. My father worked, at the beginning, as a dishwasher, downstairs.

HM: But it's so fast, what you're describing; settling in pretty fast.

PV: Well, you'd better move quick. Well, no, we came here, we were excited to work, to have your own place. So within a few weeks we found an apartment over the Blue Point. That's the Applied houses now, on Eighth and Willow. That building is Applied houses. So we lived right above the restaurant. We had good neighbors. They had this cute dog, we used to play with the dog. Nice people next door.

HM: Were they from the island, too?

PV: No, they were from this country, American people, but nice. There were a few other Croatian families in the building. They helped you. They said, "Look, you have an apartment here." But sometimes it wasn't easy, because when the landlord hears you have four kids --

HM: That's always been the case.

PV: Things don't change. But we figured, we're above the restaurant; we're not gonna make noise. They're making noise.

HM: They'll keep you up.

PV: They're keeping us up. So everybody was a winner. [Laughter] Then we went to Willow. We lived in the basement.

HM: And why? Was it bigger?

PV: Maybe because of the noise of the restaurant. Or they just liked the other apartment. I think it was because the other apartment was in the basement; my father loved to have a garden, so he could plant tomatoes and stuff like that. Right. That's why we moved.

HM: Did you have a fig tree?

PV: There was one, I think, in the back yard, but he didn't plant it.

HM: Did he take care of it?

PV: Yes. Because that was his hobby.

HM: My father, too.

PV: After that we bought a house, in '68, at
324 Park Avenue.

HM: That may be the photograph we have of
your father.

PV: Yes. That's the picture, right.

HM: So you're thirteen, and you go to a
Hoboken school.

PV: When I'm thirteen I go to Brandt School.

HM: What was that like? Because you don't
speak English.

PV: Right. So I was a little nervous. Because
you don't speak English. What it is back then -- the
teachers didn't know how to speak Croatian. If you speak

Spanish, they knew, because there was more people. But Croatian -- so you try your best. But your friends who were here before you, they will help you out and tell you. But after two months in this country, somebody said, "Oh, you can go to the supermarket and carry the bags for the ladies." They gave you twenty cents. I thought, "Oh, that's not bad, twenty cents." But then I found out what I've got to carry -- I remember carrying four bags, and every few steps I stopped. I used to take a break, and the lady's walking. So then I got the carriage, and I would go to Ninth and Willow, where you have the Rite Aid now. That was the A&P or something. I forget the name.

After that, I said, "Well, I think maybe I should deliver newspapers. Maybe I'm more interested." So after a few months, I had *Hudson Dispatch*. You'd get up at 5:30 in the morning, and you'd bring the paper.

HM: Everybody got the paper, then.

PV: This was my route here, Hudson Street. At that time, you'd bring the paper five floors up. You don't leave them. Then I got the paper -- the *Hudson Dispatch* -- and then I find out there's another paper you can make money, the *Jersey Journal*. So after school I do that.

HM: You did both?

PV: Yeah. Then I find out there's another paper you can make money -- the *Sunday News* -- so now my parents would help me put all these papers together. So for the next three years, two and a half years, I was delivering three newspapers. So that's how I learned --

HM: Just you, or also with your -- ?

PV: Well, my other brothers, they did it too, on their own. They had their own routes. So that's how I learned English -- because I had to deal with people. I had to remember who owed money. It was thirty-five cents, I thin, the paper. So after like two weeks, I didn't need the book; I remembered how many newspapers each building gets.

HM: Did you ride a bike? How did you get around?

PV: No, no. Walked. In Hoboken, everything is within walking distance.

HM: Yes, but you're carrying newspapers.

PV: Yes, but you're thirteen! You're strong!

HM: So you're carrying sacks full?

PV: Yeah, yeah. The sacks -- you had the bag. I think it was 100 papers -- whatever. The office was on Eighth, between Bloomfield and Garden. *Hudson Dispatch* was there, and the *Jersey Journal* was on Sixth and Washington. And the *Sunday News* -- I think they used to drop the papers in your house, and then you put it together. One time I helped a guy deliver milk, bottled milk, too. I did that.

HM: Do you remember who that was?

PV: I forgot his name. He had a truck, and he used to bring the milk to the doors. Then, at sixteen, like most of my friends, we quit school. We didn't speak the language good. So once you see your friend go to work --

HM: You're already working.

PV: Yes, I was already working. But at sixteen then, I think my first job was -- on Clinton Street they had a waste factory.

HM: Like recycling?

PV: Yeah. Eleventh and Clinton.

HM: So they're crushing bottles and cans?

PV: No, cardboard. At Eleventh and Clinton.

HM: That's a really distinctive smell.

PV: Oh, yeah. You could really go see your girlfriend, and smell like that! [Laughs] "Wow, I like this smell today. I hope you continue to like this smell today. I hope you continue to overcome the smell." [Laughter] You'll be my honey forever! And it worked. And look! She's here, after forty-five years.

HM: Well, newspapers -- you sort of bag them or whatever. But carrying that --

PV: From there I went to work at a coat factory, Liberty Fashions, same thing -- half a block away, on Clinton. It was \$1.25 an hour.

HM: And what did you do there?

PV: Well, the women would sew, and I'd make sure they had the coats ready. You'd bring the coats so they could sew --

HM: -- so they could add things.

PV: Right. So when you'd see that they'd finished, you'd bring more work to them.

Track #2

HM: Did they have a name for that job?

PV: They were sewers.

HM: They were sewers. But what did they call you?

PV: Floor boys. [Laughs] I was a floor boy.

HM: And how many floor boys were there?

PV: Two. One was in charge of one department, and the other guy was in charge of the other section. That was Liberty Fashion.

RF: Owned by an Italian family.

PV: Yes.

RF: Do you remember the name?

PV: One was Dominick and the other brother was Frank. But I don't remember -- but I remember the name, my boss was Frank and the other guy was Dominick. Because the two brothers owned the factory.

HM: And about how many people do you think were working on the floor?

PV: There were two floor boys, me and --

HM: Right. But sewers. How many sewers do you think? How big a factory?

PV: Maybe twenty. From there, one summer my father took us to Europe, in '68, after five years in this country. Because he wanted to go see his parents. So that was nice. We went for three months. When I came back, I lost my job. I came back, and they said no. "There's some other guy from the island doing your work." Okay. No problem.

HM: And your parents were able to leave their jobs behind, too? Or did they also lose their jobs?

PV: I'm not sure. I think they didn't lose their jobs, but I know I lost mine. Then I remember one time I went to work at construction, by Newark Airport. That was kind of tough. I don't know what happened.

HM: How old were you around then? That after you came back from the island?

PV: I was probably nineteen. In the coat factory, I worked like a year and a half.

RF: Was that building several floors?

PV: No, one level. One level. Now it's a building, now. I remember one time I got this job in North Bergen. They used to make, I think, pasta or something. They wanted to go to this big mixer, and you had to clean the blades. I quit. I didn't want to become baloney. I quit that job quickly. I said, "Oh, no." I was inside this big can, stainless steel, and you've got to clean the thing. I don't mind cleaning it, but I was afraid of these blades. What if somebody just plugs it in by accident? I'll be a meatball.

[Laughter]

Then I did a few other -- I went to Carlstadt.

HM: And how did you get to these places? Did you have a car?

PV: Yes. In 1968 I bought my first car, a Galaxy 500. I could a lot of friends inside! Eight people! I could go to Journal Square, to the movies. It was brand new. Brand new, for \$3,000.

HM: And at that point, were you [Antonia and Peter] together?

PV: No.

HM: Going back to Carlstadt -- what happened in Carlstadt?

PV: I went to work in the Pilot Woodwork, like the pilot on the stove.

HM: And what did they make? Cabinets?

PV: They used to make cabinets for offices and stuff like that.

HM: And what was that like?

PV: That was also fun, because you learned different stuff, so each job you get educated, you see things, and it's good, as you get older. If you have a house, you know how to do a few things.

HM: So what did you learn how to do there?

PV: My job was to put Formica on the plywood. You have to put the round sticks. Then you take them out slowly, so there's no bubbles later.

HM: So you learned patience, too.

PV: Right. Patience.

HM: And that whole thing of when they say "measure twice, cut once" --

PV: Right. Right. So I think after that job, then I was dating this Croatian girl from Long Island. She said, "Why don't you become a painter? The job is better." So she had a friend, and they put me in the union, in 1972, when I went to the Big Apple, and I was really excited. Now you're looking at the island here.

HM: That's when you joined the union?

PV: In 1972.

HM: And how were you able to do that? Don't you have to be an apprentice for a while?

PV: Well, they helped me out. They helped me out. They let you paint closets. Stuff like that. My first job was up at Kennedy Airport. I would drive every day from Hoboken to Kennedy Airport. We'd work in the hangar. Then, after the hangar, they gave me another hangar where I was painting pipes, for the water pipes, fire pipes, like a month. That was exciting, because I would go outside, eat lunch, and you'd see the planes -- and bring cargo boxes. So the warehouse I was painting -- you had these warehouses full of boxes, "birds," shoes. I was really excited. Instead of contractor, I see these big planes. I was excited.

HM: And you see world trade. You see what comes through.

PV: Yeah. So then I work at Kennedy Airport like three months, and that building I work alone. The boss would say, "This pipe, this pipe." After I finished up all the pipes, then I went to Manhattan, and worked office buildings.

HM: And the people you worked with -- were they also Croatian? Or were they from all over?

PV: They were Croatian.

HM: And the common language was, I guess, English?

PV: We all had to speak English. By then I spoke English, in '72. I could sing.

HM: You could swear in English.

PV: I knew how to curse. Then from that job at Kennedy Airport I went to Manhattan. That was very exciting. Now we're working in the offices -- the Pan Am building, the Twin Towers. I worked on Wall Street. Private houses, on Central Park West. That's union. That's union. Yeah, DC #9.

HM: And making a good salary.

PV: That was a good salary, and not too much work.

HM: So did you thank the Croatian girl who gave you the tip?

PV: Yeah, I thank her for that, and I thank her that she dumped me, so I would find the right one. That was the last piece that was missing in my life, and it came on Willow Avenue, 721 Willow.

HM: Now you have to tell me.

PV: In the meantime, while I was in the union, I would come home and I was, let me see, twenty-three years old, living at home. So I'd come home and say, "What am I going to do now?" Should I go drink and get in trouble, but I've got to figure this out. It's too many hours. Then my friend's job, my neighbor across the street -- he was a little older. I said, "You should not be painting. You're going to hurt your back. Can I paint your fence?" And that's how it started. Then sometimes, after the union, I get a fence here and there.

HM: Again with the two jobs.

PV: Yeah. You need two jobs. You stay healthy that way.

Then from New York I come home to Hoboken, and start painting fire escapes here and there. Then in 1980 I gave up the union. That's history now. Now we work in Hoboken seven days a week.

HM: I have a lot of questions about what you've seen in Hoboken concerning people's houses, can you feel the changes. I want to go back a little bit. When your parents came here, did they have social groups or civic groups that they joined?

PV: No. A friend of ours had this place where we'd meet on Sundays, so you'd meet a person from your island.

HM: Where was this place?

PV: It was Fifth and Adam.

HM: Was it formal?

PV: They had a little band each Sunday and we'd go there. The mothers would come with their daughters, make sure you'd know [they were watching].

HM: And music from --

PV: -- Croatia.

HM: Were they local people, who played in the band?

PV: People from the island -- the same people who played at our wedding.

HM: I'd like to hear that music.

PV: We can bring a CD. You can show me how to dance. In forty years, my wife can't teach me how to dance. But she figured one thing that you're doing bad, that's not bad. As long as you do everything else okay, the dancing -- we can let go of the dancing part.

RF: [Unclear]

PV: You come to this country, your parents are worried for you. It's normal. They figure, "You guys stick together. This is the place you go on Sunday. And hopefully somebody will like you, you'll learn somebody." But the mothers would sit on one side, like this, and the girls would sit on the other side. We guys would say --

HM: Keeping an eye on them.

PV: Right. Yes. They really did some good, I guess. [Laughter]

RF: What did you call this place?

HM: It was like a club?

PV: It was a private club. It was open Sundays, for a couple of hours. And that's where everybody got married. That's where I met -- well, I met her on the street [with seeing her from the car] [laughter] and I'd keep going around the block, and she got in the car. One time I went to get my brother's car, and she couldn't figure out what this guy was, a second time -- but I fooled her. I came in a different car. [Laughter]

HM: So is this after church?

PV: No, this was like after work. I'd come home. She's walking with her friends. I was twenty-two. So it was not easy to convince her parents.

HM: So what was that like?

PV: How many rooms did you paint?

HM: Well, we had to get married -- she lived at 906 Willow, and I painted the whole place before they moved in there. I painted the doors two colors, and I went out of my way. But her parents were the sweetest people on the planet. It's just that back then most people got married, the girls, by seventeen.

HM: On the island, or here, too?

PV: From here, from Hoboken. For some reason, I guess I was just the thing. But no more, now.

HM: That was the tradition, maybe.

PV: That was the tradition.

AV: To marry at fourteen or fifteen.

HM: And have a family and --

PV: Her father had us go to City Hall, to sign up.

AV: My oldest one got married when she was twenty-eight. She went to school, and got a job and did all that before. So now it's not --

PV: So her father went to City Hall and signed, and we got married in St. Ann's Church. But the funny part -- we got married on -- the honeymoon, a week later, I had to paint a house with somebody. So to figure out -- we go to Holiday Inn, a hotel downtown -- they kick us out. They say she's too young. So we were searching for a hotel for just one night.

AV: When we got married.

PV: She was going to be 17 in like a month. Yeah, she was shy three weeks from seventeen. So thank god they didn't kick us out of Hawaii. But we used to have so much fun in Hawaii, because we would sit with people my parents' age. Because back then Hawaii was popular with people who were forty-five, on their anniversary. So we had such bliss, sitting with these people at night. That was one of the beautiful honeymoons -- I used to watch Elvis Presley in Journal Square, so I said, "I've got to go to Hawaii, for two weeks." But that was a beautiful trip because we saw Pearl Harbor, we saw the cemetery, we saw the volcano.

The funny thing is--. I love chicken. So back in Hawaii, they have sweet chicken. I said, "Why is the chicken sweet?" "Oh, they put pineapple juice on top." I kind of forced myself. But it was beautiful, Hawaii, Maui.

HM: So you're saying except for the chicken.

PV: Everything was beautiful. Only the chicken was so sweet!

AV: I have a good recipe for it.

PV: We had a great time, because that's where we saw that singer. I just had his name.

AV: Glen Campbell.

PV: Glen Campbell! And Don Ho.

HM: And Don Ho. Of course.

PV: And the tradition -- people from Hawaii had the dress. I bought a little skirt for her. [Laughter] And I took her picture.

HM: A grass skirt.

PV: A grass skirt. I left the most interesting part out. I guess guys do that. You always think -- we always think we're smart. The first day we come to Hawaii -- I think it was 1:00 or something -- "Let's go swimming right away," you know? Well, we go to the beach, right there is the hotel, the Hilton Hotel. We get to the beach, and we got like two feet in the water, and I do a crazy thing -- I push her in the water, and her ring goes flying in the water. We see the ring, and the people are

helping us. A minute later, no one sees the ring no more. Lucky she didn't leave me then! [Laughter] But good luck, when you lose something in the ocean. But -- after that, another thing happened. We couldn't sleep together for four days -- we got burned! We thought we were so smart. We go to the beach at 1:30, no lotion, nothing, and she has a little lighter skin.

AV: Oh, yes. That was painful.

PV: So for four days --

AV: They went to make sure we put lotion on.

PV: No, no, we're from Jersey! We're from Hoboken! We don't need no lotion! Here, you guys from Hawaii need lotion. Not people from Hoboken. What, are you kidding? People from Hoboken don't need lotion. Come on. If I can smell, why do I need lotion?

HM: And the skin is peeling off on your sheets.

PV: Yes!

HM: And no ring!

PV: No ring! No sleeping together! [Laughter]
We were screaming at each other, whose fault it is! But we
survived. We're still here. Forty-five years. Lifetime
memory. Lifetime memory.

HM: It's like a series of follies. You have
to laugh.

PV: You have to. Laughter is more interesting
than tears, so why would you want to cry? This is life.
You've got to experience what comes to you, and you deal
with it.

AV: And you learn from it. We never burned
again. [Laughter]

PV: Well, not as much.

HM: What year were you married?

PV: May 11, 1974. So I have to get my gift, soon.

But that was so funny. You see the ring. You see it right there. And the waves come, and the people tried to help us. We can't find it. But I still have mine -- the original. She changed a few times.

AV: I always loved gold, in any jewelry.

PV: A year later, we had our first baby.

HM: Before you go there -- when you were in your family home, before you got married --

PV: Three-twenty-four Park Avenue.

HM: -- we're speaking Croatian in the home?

PV: Yes. Because my parents, they couldn't speak that good English. And at home, you'd always speak your language.

HM: And were you a translator for them?

PV: No, my father was pretty good. He used to watch *Sesame Street*. He learned so much from that show. It was unbelievable, the stuff. My father could speak English. He used to watch *Sesame Street* -- the ABCs --

HM: That was really smart.

PV: That's what I learned. Then we got married, and we lived at 810 Washington Street.

RF: You were talking about getting married in St. Ann's. Was that the church that most Yugoslavians would go to?

PV: No, that's where her parents were going. It was where your mother goes. My mother went to St. Mary's. Usually, you get married where your wife's people go to church.

AV: A lot them got married at St. Ann's. St. Ann's. St. Mary's and St. Francis. Those are the churches - Croatian people went to.

RF: And your background is Croatian also.

PV: The same. She came from the island.

AV: Both my parents [came from there.]

RF: So it seems like Croatians would go to
any church.

PV: The Roman Catholic, because we are
Catholic religion.

RF: The church would be Italian --

PV: Right. Roman.

RF: And when you said St. Mary's, you meant
Our Lady of Grace.

PV: Right. Yes. I don't know why I called it
that. Because we lived half a block from there, so why go to
St. Francis, if the church is there. We lived closer to that
church so they went there. Because they lived on Willow, so
for them it was straight down --

HM: And did you eat traditional foods and have traditional celebrations?

PV: Sundays Croatian people -- still, today, we eat stew on Sunday.

HM: And what is in the stew?

PV: Whatever she finds and puts in. So far, we're still alive. [Laughter] I don't know what she told you there. The only thing that happen -- I lost my hair with the stew! I lost my hair with the stew, but that's okay. [Laughter] So the stew -- you've got the beef.

HM: Is it long-cooking? Do you leave it on the stove a long time?

PV: Three hours.

AV: Two and a half to three hours. Yeah.

PV: That's your Sunday meal, and you have macaroni. In Croatia we call it goulash. That's like a Hungarian thing. And then during the week, you don't have

much time so you do chicken, a little bit this, a little of that. But Sundays, that's the meal.

HM: And weren't there markets that just served things that people might want from Croatia?

PV: No, no. You just had the supermarket. But back then, you had a lot of fish. Croatian people love fish, because we come from the island. So Hoboken had a lot of fish stores. Now it's all gone. What a shame.

HM: You want it fresh.

PV: But back then, we were lucky. Because in Hoboken you had so many fish stores, and you had live chickens you could buy.

HM: So the fish stores -- when fish is prepared traditionally, or the way you would eat it on the island --

PV: For example, like octopus -- that's delicious. You cook it with potatoes and stuff like that, or porgies you bake. Squid. You'd make a stew out of.

HM: Do you have to smash it with a mallet.

PV: No, you step on it. [Laughter]

HM: I remember, in Italy --

PV: What is that, the octopus?

HM: Yes. To make it --

PV: Well, you cook it a couple of hours.

HM: They would bang it. I couldn't believe
it.

PV: Well, you get your frustration out. Maybe
that was the reason. [Laughs] You're going to beat the
octopus instead of somebody you know -- maybe a neighbor.

AV: I know how I do it today. I will bake it,
bake it for about an hour, and then I put it in the water
and let it cook, to become nice and tender.

HM: And add sauce on it?

PV: No, I'm a plain person. I like everything plain.

HM: Well, then you taste it. Sauce just covers it up.

PV: For some reason, I'm not into all these spices. Somehow it doesn't go to my taste.

So I got used to the four dishes that she makes -- four, five, six.

AV: It's just that he's picky.

PV: Well, like, she makes stuff that -- she makes lasagna.

HM: Sounds good to me. Do you grow tomatoes?

PV: No, I don't have time because I'm always working. I would love to do it. [cross talk] You work ten, eleven hours, and you need time, because if you're going to

plant it -- it's like buying a dog. If you've got no time to walk it, then why go do something --

HM: It takes a lot of water.

PV: But it's a relaxing thing. I would love to do it. It's just that now we have nine grandchildren, and if you've got time, you've got to go watch them. So, you know, nine grandchildren.

Track #3

HM: So when you were growing up, it sounds like -- both of you -- you worked. But did you play games with your friends?

PV: No, no. We just worked. We just worked. I mean, comes the weekend, sometimes we'd go ice-skating. Roller-skating.

HM: And where was that? Where did you ice-skate and roller-skate?

PV: There was [Route] seventeen, where my Galaxy got scratched. I picked up a girl there. I'd go roller-skating with my beautiful gal. That's a story.

HM: Tell me.

PV: So 1968 we go roller-skating in Paramus, on Route seventeen. The building is still there. I think it's a pet store.

AV: It is.

PV: So here I am, eighteen. There's no fear. What's the big deal? The music is blasting? The lights are dim. Everybody's happy. So I meet this girl, I give you a ride home, your friends. "Sure, sure. No problem. I give you a ride home." So I pulled my car in the front of the building, I open the door for her, to get in. Her friend -- on a shoulder. I go on my side, and the kid comes out of the parking lot, my door is like twelve inches too close, not even, and he smashes my door. Oh! What I do now? I don't know. Where am I? Paramus. How am I going to get home? The cops came, and all this stuff. I tell the police, "How am I going to get to Hoboken?"

HM: What did the girls do?

PV: They called the parents to come pick us up. We didn't talk about that. So they called the parents. So then, it's okay. Now I'm in trouble. What am I gonna tell my father about my car? Then the cop comes and all this stuff. I say, "I don't know how to get home. It's 11:30-12:00." He tells the same guy that crashed into me to take me home! [Laughs] So we had a conversation. It's not his fault. Things happen. I was very happy nobody got hurt. Everybody's okay. So the same kid gave me a ride to Hoboken. So the next three weeks I'm telling my father the car is in the dealer, because something is bad. I wanted to cut my head off, that I smashed the car. Then after a while I had to tell him, because they couldn't get a brand-new door. It took two months to get a brand-new door. Back then, they fixed it over here on Seventh and Garden. I think it was Steve's Auto-Body.

HM: So this young man who drove you back -- he paid for the damage?

PV: Yes, his insurance. I think my insurance paid, because I had liability coverage, full coverage. It was a brand-new car. My insurance gave me the check, and believe it or not, I'm still with the same people. In two more years, it will be fifty years with the same people. I don't like to change.

HM: Well, if it's working, why change?

PV: Right. But people look for five dollars. If I like somebody, I stay. I don't like to go here and there. Yes, so I'm with the same people. Two more years will be fifty years. I painted this house. [points to photo]

HM: So you roller-skated. What else?

PV: That's what we did as young teenagers in the United States. We'd go to movies; we'd to roller-skate; we'd go horseback-riding, down the 46, I think it was, 46 West. It used to take almost an hour to get this -- Central Park, on the boats, on Sundays. Sunday comes -- you work six days, so Sundays we'd go down to the square, like I said.

HM: As a group?

PV: Oh, yes. Always three or four people.
With one car, we go. It was beautiful growing up. Hoboken is nice.

Well, we all used to meet down by the drugstore. It's still there. You'd go call your girlfriend inside the booth, where your parents don't hear you.

HM: At Tucker's?

PV: Yeah.

RF: Not Willow Pharmacy?. Ninth and Willow.

PV: Ninth and Willow.

HM: Oh, right. They took that great sign down.

RF: It's right on the corner. It's got the old display.

HM: Did you not have a phone at home?

PV: Yes, but your mother don't want to talk to the girl. No. You've got to go over there. The guy and the gal --

RF: Before cell phones.

PV: There used to be like five or us waiting for the little phone booth. Why do they take all the good stuff out?

HM: They didn't have a soda fountain there, did they

PV: No, just the phone inside the drugstore.

HM: Very good. There's always a way.

PV: There's always a way. Then we had a Croatian bar on Third and Park. It's still there. Yeah, 301. We'd hang out there, play a little pool. From there, we'd go to the movies.

RF: It was one of the few bars that hasn't changed.

PV: They closed it down. It's been closed for two months, because her father died. Because I know them. Every time they needed painting, I worked for them. Now the mother is in a nursing home. There, the only one in Hoboken that had two buildings on Garden Street empty for forty years -- one they just sold a year ago.

HM: I remember that. Yes.

PV: That was boarded up -- 708, I think it is.

HM: For years, and years, and years.

PV: Finally, they sold it to a contractor, and made it into a one-family. And they still own another one two doors from there.

RF: But why empty for so many years?

PV: You can't get these people's buying that easy. So many people try, but you can't get the people buying. I know some of my friends would buy it. "No. My mother said no," and she's in a nursing home. Or maybe she's home now.

HM: Was that the family home?

PV: No, no. They live out of town. But they used to live on top of the bar. And, believe it or not, that apartment is still rented, thirty years, above the bar.

HM: They just don't want to deal with it.

PV: I know. Because I worked for them. I know. But they have one apartment that's been empty for twenty-five years. And the garage on Third and Park, right near the shelter, they could rent it but they don't want to deal with the problems it made.

HM: Maybe they feel it's a bigger headache than it's worth.

PV: Yeah. A lot of headaches. [Laughter]

But if you don't like to admit when you're wrong, you would not be working in Hoboken all these days. Because I tell people, the funny thing is, even for me, it's so hard, sometimes, to look back, almost forty years, that I work in almost 25% of Hoboken, from Park Avenue to Castle Point, from Second Street, and never below, I hardly work. I didn't even know that town existed. So this was, still today, what I'm still doing.

HM: So from Park Avenue to Castle Point, and then is it just this section?

PV: Yes. It's 25% of Hoboken. Maybe 40%. But now you come back again.

HM: Can you tell me about the changes? Well, first let's talk about your tools. What do you use?

PV: Well, painters, you don't need much tools. You buy the scaffold and the ropes. That's like \$3,000 or whatever. Maybe more. Because when you paint the buildings outside. Let's take a little fun now. Too much stress.

RF: Can you get the ladder?

HM: Oh, great.

PV: And you get this. This is 633 Bloomfield.

HM: So once you buy it, you have it.

PV: It's yours, right. The ladders you buy.

HM: But you don't just do exteriors.

PV: I do both. Wallpaper, plaster, paint, you know. A lot of fancy wallpaper. Now I've got to do a vestibule.

HM: And you have to know how to take it off, too.

PV: That's easy! Like to start a fight with your wife! That's easy. But how to get out! [Laughter] A lot of flowers! You don't cook for a week. You've got to pay the price. [Laughter] Yeah. So you need the truck. You need

ladders. So you buy brushes, you need. Brushes are expensive. Rollers. Tape.

HM: Is there a special kind?

PV: Well, you need to buy a good brush, like \$15.00, because for water paint you use nylon; for oil -- I think I'm the only painter who still uses oil primer in Hoboken. They don't even sell it at City Paint, unless I tell them to get it for me.

HM: And why do you still use it?

PV: Well, on the new wood, the oil base is the best, and when you put in wallpaper, you need to put in the oil primer. Then you put sizing. That's the right way I learned. I'm not going to cut corners for \$5.00. For me, money is not important. For me, it's important that I can walk and say hello to you. That's what life is about. Not \$5.00. Tomorrow we eat, today we eat, tomorrow we might not eat. So what's \$5.00 more? I was never into --

HM: -- grabbing.

PV: I've got my business, my wealth, right here. That's the world, right here -- my kids and my grandkids.

HM: You have pride in what you do.

PV: We grew up on the island, on a dirty floor. Now we're here, you have a car, your wife has a car. You have a roof over your head. You can go on vacation to the island once a year, that we do it. We go once a year, every year. We go there.

This is the guy, this picture -- this one has to be in the book. Because my uncle just passed away. This guy. His funeral was Tuesday. So this picture - Plakke. He came over to my house for dinner. And my kids --

HM: So this is who ?

PV: -- my uncle. That's me. That's my brother Joe. Josep. We worked together for thirty years or more.

HM: I didn't know that. We didn't get to that point.

PV: So that's very sentimental -- especially that he passed away just recently.

HM: And his name is?

PV: Nick. The other one --

HM: We'll need his permission.

PV: From who?

HM: From the photographer.

PV: Oh, he has to give you permission, to put that in? Oh. How do you get in touch with him?

HM: I don't know. We'll see.

PV: Right. All you have to get permission?

HM: Yes.

PV: Well, if you can get in touch, I'm sure he would say yes.

HM: I would imagine so.

PV: No, no. I know.

HM: I'll send him to you!

PV: You do that. Remember, he used to play music, teach music. Do you know him?

HM: If we can find him.

PV: Believe it or not, his wife still owns the house, because they got divorced. She's in Europe. She lives in Europe. They owned the house -- 523 Park Avenue.

HM: We'll figure it out. We're good at that.

PV: I can call his wife to find out.

HM: We'll find a way.

So now we need to talk about going into Hoboken houses from -- well, even before 1980. Before you retired, you were doing fire escapes.

PV: In 1980 I quit the union, and I went to do this full-time, starting my own company.

HM: With your brother.

PV: Right. Right.

HM: So tell me about the changes you've seen in Hoboken -- inside people's houses. Or outside people's houses.

PV: I think in the late '70s -- that's when people realized that Hoboken is such a nice place to live, so close to New York, when people started buying, and fixing up, and putting so many people to work. They put so many people to work, still, today.

HM: Contractors.

PV: It's amazing. When you contract, you've got to figure lumber yard, plumbing, all the suppliers who are selling. Put so many people to work. And the houses, well, you know, were old, but what happened now -- it's beautiful. I think the lady, the huge -- one of the few who started -- what was her name? Pat Tuohy. I think she was one of the few first --

RF: Fourteenth Street.

PV: -- who started the trend. She had a bar on First and Bloomfield. Then she lived in that house at 624 Bloomfield. It has a carriage in the back, and a barn in the back. I knew the guy who lived there. So people saw that this is a good town, that you can have good schools. There's everything in walking distance. That transportation can be better. And slowly, things started changing. People started fixing, and everybody had work. I supported my family from Hoboken people, and they just gave you -- you got energy, and these people tell you, "Good job." Like you can't wait to get up the next day and go paint another room, and another room. I think that's one of the best things -- when you see people. Especially in Hoboken -- you're working every day, so when you see people, and they tell you, "I

just recommended you to my friend --" There's so much you learn from the customers. After all, I have no education, so a lot of things -- I don't think I know much anyway, but I think most of the stuff I did learn --

HM: So what did you learn? You mean about the town?

PV: To be a better person? To respect more. But the most I think I learned, to have a good heart, from my grandmother, back in Croatia, where I used to go to my other island, where my parents used to work a lot in the summer. So my mother would send me out, the oldest, to another island.

HM: Not the one you showed me.

PV: That island is called Krk. That's the biggest island. That's a big island, but it has so many villages. Like forty towns.

HM: So more opportunities for work.

PV: So my parents would send me there for three months. But my grandmother, since I was the first grandchild -- I don't know -- there was something the way she was -- like she implanted in me -- I mean, when she was ready to die, lucky my wife didn't divorce me. We went in the winter, all of us, to Croatia, to see her before she died. People say, "Are you crazy?" I say, "It's my grandmother." So she touched me. There's something, you know?

Then I remember watching my grandfather cut the wood in the front of the house. He had that "raspberry" thing, that saw. And then it was different, because you go to this island, that people speak a little different dialect. So I go there and I learn that language. Then I go back to my island, and all the kids are making fun out of me. You call a fork different; you call a spoon different. So I go here, and I get laughed at. Then I go back to the island I lived, and I got laughed at. I guess it makes you a stronger person.

HM: Right. But in three months, you learned some different words.

PV: Right. And you meet different friends.

HM: And you have to speak differently to the different friends.

PV: It's like in this country. I'm sure if you go Midwest, to the small villages, the dialect is different from Hoboken, probably.

HM: And there are words that people use that mean different things.

PV: The island we grew up -- a lot of words would just change. They were Italian, but they added a few Croatian words. So they were basically fifty-percent Croatian, and fifty-percent Italian. But that, I think, is where it all started -- with my grandmother, in 1958-'59. She used to talk to me, hold me on her lap. They used to have pigs, and they had a donkey. We didn't have that on the island we had. There they had donkeys, pigs, chickens. And back then, when you killed a pig, you let the prosciutto dry in the winter, for like a month. So I was spoiled. Back when I was nine years old, I would only take the "red," and her sons would eat the white. [Laughter] So I got the best.

HM: You were the special one.

PV: I got the treat. So that, to me, seems like it just happened yesterday.

HM: When you brought it up before, you said that that formed you in some way. So what is it? How does it manifest itself in your life now, or since?

PV: My mother was too busy to give me time, with the other three kids. She had more time, because her children were all adults. So she had this special time for me, special hours, where she would talk to me and stuff. Like today, if the parents have five kids, you can only give so much time to a child. You've got to go to work. You've got to go here. You've got to go here. But she had three months to sing in my ear. [Laughs]

HM: So do you think that made you calm?

PV: Yes! Oh, yes. Not that my mother and my father didn't love me. They loved me even more, but different. Different. So to me, I think, that is why she

sent me to my grandmother, because she made me stay calm.

[Laughs]

HM: It's beautiful that you recognized it.

PV: It's true, like I said. They'd say, "You guys are crazy, going in the winter. It's cold over there." And we lived in the house with my aunt. It was only two or three rooms. We'd all stick together. We'd have like ten blankets at night; there's no heat in the house.

HM: When you visited.

PV: Yeah. But I wanted to go see my grandmother. I wanted to go see her.

HM: You only had one chance.

PV: Yeah. Because she had a cancer. You don't know how long. Because these people -- they don't go to the doctor. You lived until you were eighty-five, and boom. And most people over there live like -- her sister, also. Her sister -- I have a picture at home of her -- back ten years. She lived a few doors away from her. So I'd go visit her.

I'd say, "I'm going to the store. Do you want me to get you something?" She says, "What do I need? I've got bread that's three days old. What else do I need?" But between that work and this, is where my roots come. Once she says, "I've got bread three days old, I don't need nothing --" You remember?

AV: And no running water in her house.

PV: In '85 she got skin cancer.

AV: She never went to the doctor.

PV: I have a picture of us sitting on these stools. She would sit on the porch -- the fig tree, the chickens, and the pig outside, and the house. It goes back - - they have the homes -- the pig is there. You throw him food. The chickens.

So I think right there is all the wealth, just the way I grew up -- by seeing that and this. So this is very lucky, because I think people would do anything to have this kind of life, to experience living on the dirt floor, and then come to this opportunity.

AV: [Unclear]

PV: You can't ask for better.

Track #4

PV: My grandkids, they are happy and everything. But to me -- I don't think I would change anything in the way we live. There's something -- where you can go play with your friends. I remember on that island, where I used to go -- this kid was so smart. There was a little pond where the cows would drink water. So he knew how to take a motor from the clock and make a little boat. I was so amazed. And his grandfather was a tailor. So after he cuts the shreds, he cut the stuff and made a little car for the wheels.

HM: Made a toy.

PV: He was my friend.

AV: [Unclear] -- these are the things that we appreciate. Our kids never once --

PV: It's not their fault. They were born at a different time.

AV: It's amazing how we appreciate so much more than the kids born now.

PV: I'm glad I was born in that century. Me, I don't think I would ever want to be born after that. I was lucky.

RF: You kind of started off by saying that when you go into these homes to do the painting -- that you learned a lot from them. But then you kind of switched to the core of your grandmother. I'm just wondering -- people you paint homes for -- is it partly that you feel respect? That they respect you? They see something in your, at the core?

PV: They appreciate -- I go out of my way to do the job right. I don't cut no corners. I tell them how long the job should take. I don't go there and say it's two weeks, and later it's four. I tell them, "This is five weeks' work." Then, the relationship we have, it becomes a good relationship, when we see each other on the street.

I'll never forget -- one guy I worked -- he lives here in Hoboken, a young guy. I showed him the picture of Croatia, and one day he called me, and he said, "You know, I'm on your island, in front of your house." I said, "Don't tell me this! I'm here on your block, painting, and you are --" So I gave him the address of my friend, who rents the house. But only, today, it's amazing how people can be in touch with each other, with the computers. He found the friend in England, because he recognized the name. He's English. He recognized the name. He's married to a Croatian lady. They have two houses on the island, and he rented the house from them. Wow. So he had such -- he took his kids over there.

HM: And it was from you. He heard about it from you, and he became interested.

PV: Right.

HM: There's an exchange in that.

PV: So when I work, and these people recommend me, it's a big reward for me. They recommend. We had a good relationship. They always say, "What a beautiful

job you did." That's more than -- you can't be more happier than that.

HM: I don't know how much of it involves construction, but I remember talking to friends who worked in old buildings in Manhattan, with a little bit more construction and painting. And behind walls, they would find interesting things. Have you been in that -- ?

PV: No. Never found -- I'm still looking for it! [Laughter] I'm looking for it. No, no. Then, if you find it, you have to stop working! Then I would be rusty, and I don't want to get rusty.

HM: You'd spend all your time counting.

PV: Then your hands get blisters. So no, I never found nothing.

HM: In our house, we had horsehair behind --

PV: Horsehair you will find in the plaster. See, putting it together -- next time I come see you, you might not recognize me. They might be different colors,

these horses we used to ride on 46th. Plaster has the horse, it's called the brownstone, the plaster doesn't have the horse. See, the structure back then -- they mixed it with the horsehair.

HM: Like a binder.

PV: And then you put lime on top. But the final finish, all these houses with lime. Then you have the wood strips. So that's the reason the wood strips -- eventually the ceiling cracks, because of vibrations, the years. But, at the same time, it's a lot of work.

So what I did -- when the ceiling has a lot of cracks, they came up with the fiberglass, 36" -- you build a whole ceiling with the fiberglass, and you skim coat four coats. It don't crack, and it holds the ceiling together.

HM: That's where the leaks come into play.

PV: Right. So I'm serious. I did like that. But we broke holes where people have leaks. We have to patch it up. No money. Just a lot of dust. Out of this, you come home.

HM: Sorry. I shouldn't have -- you're cutting holes. I'm kidding.

PV: Two more months, I get my social security checks, so I don't need no money.

HM: Will you retire?

PV: No, never.

HM: I don't see you wanting to do that.

PV: I'll be sixty-six in May.

HM: So working with your brother -- was that really good? Or not so good? Because you're too close?

PV: No, it's good. We are different, but different is what's good. He's the baby, I'm the oldest. We're ten years apart. But no, he's good, and we learn from each other. We learn from each other. You learn from everybody, even if it's not your brother. There's no such

thing -- you can't say you're not going to learn from somebody.

HM: And you hire other people, too?

PV: My uncle, and if I need somebody, I hire. But now I'm trying to do a little less.

RF: Five days.

PV: No, no, no, six days. Even Sundays sometimes. No, when you promise, like where we're working -- people go on vacation, you try to surprise them, give them a little more than what you told them, even when they don't want that to be done. But I go out of my way to be around, in Hoboken. That's always what I aim for. If I tell you, "Maybe I do one room while you're away," I try to do the other one. I get that from my grandmother.

HM: A generous heart. That's come back to you. I know people don't believe it -- because those are people who don't practice that.

PV: Or maybe they never got touched by that person. Not everybody can be lucky to be touched with the right person. I'm sure. Every good person would love to have that in them. I think we all have it; it depends on how much you use it. Me, I was very lucky. I think for my own self -- I speak for myself -- I was lucky to be going there during the few years, my school break. And just to see the donkey, the pigs, and the chickens. And then you meet different friends, a different culture, a little bit, from one island to another. I'd go swimming three months, with different people. You can't go wrong with that.

HM: And your parents did it as, "Now you're on school break, and you should get to know her?"

PV: Well, they did it so she could have more time with the other kids, because they were little. Because I was nine, so my other brothers were six, five, and two. Like Josep was only two when we left the island. So she had to take care of the other three, because they were little. But for me, it was fun. I'm going on a big boat, to a big city. Then from there you take the other boat, which was a steamer -- you know, with the charcoal. So you go from the big city, maybe it was -- [cross talk] -- for example, you

go to this city here. My cousin took this picture in '72. Look at my uniform! You can tell I was a painter. [Cross talk]

RF: Was this in the '60s?

PV: That's in the '70s, '72. Look at them pants! Why she threw them away -- I should wear that today.

So you go to this city -- it's called Arieka. From there you take another boat that had the charcoal thing. So you take the boat you used to take from island, Susak, to Arieka, six hours. They go slow. You stop different islands. From there, my cousin would be waiting for me. We'd go to another boat, another six hours. So it's twelve hours. But it's fun. Then my grandfather would wait for me with a donkey, and it's almost a half hour up in the hills, with a donkey. I'm the eldest grandchild, the first. So, on the steamboat, you know -- he'd come wait for me. Then in the morning, you've got to go like 3:00, get up, take the donkey on the boat, and my aunt would go to the big city from there. Somebody else would wait for me, and take me to the other boat. Because 3:00, that boat used to leave and get to Arieka by 12:00, 11:00. The other boat would leave, too, and get to the other island at 8:00 at night. So

it used to be rock and roll, more than this crew ship.

[Laughs]

HM: Smaller ships and older ships.

RF: Do you have any idea, at the height, how many Yugoslavian families were here in Hoboken?

PV: Well, I would say we are Croatians -- because Yugoslavia is five states. But we are considered Croatians.

RF: Croatians. I'm sorry.

PV: No, no, no. It doesn't matter. [Cross talk] When I was born, it was Yugoslavia. It was five states.

AV: [Inaudible]

PV: But there had to be three or four hundred.

RF: In the '70s? Sixties?

PV: In the '60s. And within two years everybody bought a house. That's all it used to take them.

RF: You're a workaholic.

AV: They saved money.

PV: We'd all stick together. We'd put the money in the piggy bank.

RF: Sometimes you hear the term "Yugo." Is that considered derogatory?

PV: No! There's no need to be upset, nothing.

RF: But would some people be upset?

PV: No, no. Maybe, but not me.

RF: No, I know you.

HM: What's amazing about the history of that island -- who's in control keeps changing. If you go through

the history of the island, like you said -- Austro-Hungarian, Italian --

PV: But the people remain the same.

HM: Exactly.

PV: You change the flag, just like that. As long as your belly's full. I hate to say it, but what are you going to do?

HM: It's kind of like the people are always there. A different flag, you have a different name, but you live your life, so --

PV: Slowly they change, and came back to Yugoslav. I'm not good at history, much. That's one thing. I was too young.

RF: Some people might confuse Italians with people from Croatia?

PV: No.

RF: I could be totally wrong, but I think of older women dressed in black, walking around Hoboken.

PV: But these women were Croatian. Everybody you saw in Hoboken from this island, all the people you see in black were from the island we came from.

RF: Okay. And then there was this understanding that a lot of the women would run rooming houses?

PV: What does that mean?

RF: A building where they just rented out the room, to a working person. Like around Bloomfield, between First and Fifth Streets, there are simple row houses. I could be wrong.

PV: Back then there were single guys, and they would rent to single guys until their wives' family came in. Because there were some guys who came without a wife. Then they sponsored the family there. But I don't remember, because we came complete families.

RF: Do you remember Jerry Forman, who lived on Bloomfield, between like First and Third? He used to run a lunch program out of the building.

PV: That I don't remember.

RF: He used to say that this was all owned by "Yugos," and they would own three buildings, and rent it out.

PV: There might have been one or two buildings on Hudson Street, where the buildings were rooming houses, from people from the ships that used to come.

HM: That's what I was thinking.

PV: So it could have been that a Yugo guy owned it. It could have been the German guy owned it. That's where I messed up when we wanted to buy a house at 418 Hudson Street. Today, I drive every day --

It was a rooming house. We'd just got married, and I said, "This is the perfect building. It has the garage for my truck in the back. The people live in the basement." Before you know, we go upstairs, and the guy says, "It's a

rooming house." "What is a rooming house?" "Well, you've got one guy live here, one guy live --" I said, "How am I going to leave my wife, seventeen-year-old, with these guys?"

[Laughter] I didn't know you could just slowly tell them -- once they leave, you make it into an apartment.

But I just kick myself. It's not the money value; it's that I didn't know about the rooming house.

HM: You didn't know what it was.

PV: Because when I was thirteen, I used to deliver papers on River Street, where every building was a bar, from Newark Street up to the park. That was also interesting, in the morning you delivered newspapers. Every place was a bar. Now, the buildings --

HM: You said that was interesting. Did you see things?

PV: I loved the detail work in the bars. I would see architect's work. When you go to Rome and Venice, you see this fancy stuff. For some reason -- the detail of the wood. The bars were always carved. The saloons always have --

HM: Well, like the Elysian?

RF: The Elysian Bar & Grill. Again, the older women we'd see dressed in black --

PV: They were Croatian. Yeah. But slowly, they changed that. Because when their husband's died -- back in the island, the women dressed in black --

RF: They were in mourning.

PV: First of all, they killed them. Then they'd wear black. [Laughter]

[cross talk]

PV: [They were staying within the culture.] It feels safe. My kids -- we tried to see if they can get -- give them an idea you want to marry a Croatian girl, but they want to go their own way. I say, no problem.

AV: Now it's different.

PV: But now they have no more. But they still, even today -- the parents are still fixing them up. Still, today -- or they meet at a wedding.

AV: That's very rare. Very, very rare.

PV: "My son is single, your daughter is single. Maybe they could go to a movie." [But], you do not force somebody. You do not force somebody to marry.

HM: But it worked for you.

PV: I forced. [Laughter] I kind of pushed myself.

RF: Hey, she was willing to be seen next to you. [points to photo of PV and AV.]

PV: My gosh! My cousin took that picture, black-and-white. When I see that picture -- I have about twenty pictures like that at home. We see him when we go to Croatia. He was a good photographer.

HM: It's a nice, crisp photo.

PV: And this is the bold type thing, here. We used to take it, you know --

HM: I'm curious as to whether Croatian men came and worked on the dock.

PV: Oh, sure. My father was a longshoreman [for a while]. It's like me -- you start dishwashing. Then you talk to your neighbor. "What do you do?" "Oh, I work here." Then you talk to your other friends. So my father worked as a longshoreman, here on First Street, when the ships came.

HM: A friend, her family was from Yugoslavia-- Skoblar. Do you know the name? Her father -- they were from that island.

PV: But not from Susak.

AV: [Unclear]

PV: Susak only has six last names.

HM: Maybe not. Maybe not.

PV: Susak people have six last names. Once
you say the last name --

HM: -- then you know.

PV: It's not from Susak.

HM: Skoblar.

PV: That's a different island.

AV: This is Susak. So they come here maybe
six, seven --

HM: Wow. What are the six names?

PV: You've got Picinich.

HM: Ah! Picinich. We know a Picinich.

PV: Morin. Tarabokia. Matachich.

HM: What did you say after Tarabokia?

AV: Matachich. And that's it. Maybe one more.

PV: Tarabokia. Scrivanich.

AV: Scrivanich. Yes, Scrivanich.

RF: A lot of Morins and Picinichs.

PV: I was lucky, because my father -- so they knew who I was, because my father, he came to the island after the war. He still have to go like another few months, and he met my mother there. So that's why my last name is different from all these other guys. So I'm special all the way around! So everybody knew who I am, because everybody on the island had a nickname. Everybody had a nickname. Because you have twenty family Picinich.

AV: I was a Picinich. My maiden name was
Picinich.

PV: So you have to give a nickname.

AV: His mother was from the Island Susak, and
his father was from a different island --

PV: So we didn't need no nickname.

HM: So are the nicknames based on attributes?
What are the nicknames from?

PV: If one day you did something stupid, then
that was your nickname.

AV: That's how we will name someone.

PV: Somebody would do something --

AV: -- or wear something, or do something, or
say --

HM: -- and you can never get away from it.

PV: [looking at photo] People say, when they see me dressed like that, "You're my cousin in Croatia." I guess I knew I was going to be a painter: I love colors. I always loved color.

HM: It's part of your daring. "Hey, I'll try it out."

AV: Red, white, and blue.

RF: White and blue?

AV: That's the Croatian flag.

PV: And American flag.

HM: Appropriate, wherever.

PV: I learned this summer -- we go to the island, and a guy is wearing this shirt, and it says, "Susak," but he says, "What are the three letters in the middle?" I say I don't know. The three letters are U.S.A.

HM: S-U.S.A.-K. Susak. Oh, how funny.

PV: And I never knew that all these years,
with all the postcards.

AV: It was so funny, when he was wearing the
shirt...

HM: It stood out.

PV: So the three letters -- U.S.A. So we were
meant to come to the U.S.A.

Track #5

PV: Maybe because what happened, back then
people were working on the boats. They used to maybe come in
to New York and remain here, and then from there -- maybe
that's how it started, 130 years ago. Because on the island
there was not enough work for everybody. So a lot of men
went to work on the boats that you always see -- cargo
ships.

HM: Like merchant marines.

PV: Right.

HM: And traveling, being away from home a long time, too.

PV: So I guess maybe that's how it started.

HM: It's always the first one. But who knows who that first one was.

PV: My fear is like when I go here, I go -- like one year I did such a funny thing. She says, "Nah, you're gonna relax." I said, "You gonna relax. Okay." So I did crazy things, because, like you said, the clothes -- I like to do -- so it was 1:00 in the afternoon, a quarter to 1:00 -- I said, "You know, I always wanted to walk the whole island." So it's ninety-five degrees, but I'm strong. I work, I'm from New Jersey.

RF: Remember Hawaii!

PV: So I take a chance. I went to walk the entire island -- four hours and something. And I didn't have a drop of water with me, only a hat.

HM: It's great that you had a hat.

PV: But then, another thing I know -- I would walk the whole thing, go there, take a dip, take a dip in the water, to cool off. But then, the mistake was I used to take a little sip of water, and that was the mistake, because salt is no good, because you get thirsty. So when I came to this part here [pointing on map] in and out, I keep walking.

So when I came here, and laid down on the beach, I had a pain here for six, seven hours. But I survived. But this is where I used to walk, like these rocks. See, like that? So I walked the whole island.

If I had had water, I would've did it in three. [laughs]

RF: Was that island ever in danger of storms?

PV: Sometimes you have a wind that comes and damaged the pier a little bit, but so far --

AV: [Unclear]

PV: That's my school, over here.

RF: Is that palm trees?

PV: They didn't have that. This is like twenty years --

AV: This is a new thing.

PV: When I was a kid, we planted these trees here. These trees we planted. This one here. This, no. This is no -- but this they made into a firehouse. They have a little car here, just one car for the island, in case they have to go. But this school is still original, when I went.

HM: But there are so few people there now.

PV: Well, you know what it is -- one class does everything. And I think they have a computer, and they

teach them. Because now this has electricity and running water.

HM: What's the main occupation there now? Do people still do the grapes?

PV: There are only a few families now. Most people are retired. There are only a few young people.

AV: Well, see, when the kids are ready to go high school, they go to a different --

PV: They work in the city. There's nothing here to do, because the fish factory is closed.

AV: People took over that farm, the grapes farm.

PV: They leased the section. They leased over here. Over here, this group from Italy, right here by the cemetery. They leased this one section. Then, a few other people -- they just sold a little bit here. Everything is empty now. The whole island is empty. Now I forget what we were talking about.

Yeah, but some guys -- now -- oh, yeah.

There's like twelve families, younger than me. So one guy's a builder, the other guy's a carpenter, so they maintain -- people, they need work on these homes. Most of these people have summer homes; they don't even live there. They're from a different part of Yugoslavia, or Croatia, or people from Austria, buying homes. Because you can buy a house for \$80,000.

AV: It's cheaper than where they're living.
They like it.

PV: Well, it's peaceful. There's no cars,
see.

AV: There's no cars. You walk everywhere.

PV: No police, no firemen.

HM: But you really get away.

PV: And they've got good restaurants, ice
cream.

HM: Sounds nice to me.

So I think we should stop. Right?

RF: I think so. So soon. He still wants to go a few more rounds. I can tell.

I do have to ask -- do you blue tape?

PV: Well, sure -- because if you're not painting the base wood, you have to put the tape, because blue tape, it doesn't remove the paint. Only on the baseboard, and if you're doing the baseboard, then you put it on the floor, so you don't damage the floor. You can't be worried about \$5.00, again. It's all about quality, not the money.

RF: So is it Benjamin Moore or Sherwin Williams?

PV: Ninety-five percent is Benjamin Moore. But if the architect says -- if he wants Sherwin Williams, then I go get -- but 95% is Benjamin Moore.

RF: I'm going to turn this off.

PV: And we can curse, now!

Track #6

PV: [About the photo, which shows the grandchildren wearing T-shirts from Croatia.] And we were so lucky, because usually we don't buy nothing. There's nothing, really, in Croatia. So we went in on the airport, and I saw these outfits. I said, "You know, why don't we buy them an outfit, for a few bucks."

RF: I was going to ask you.

PV: That's a Croatian soccer team. And the lady was so helpful at the airport. She found everybody's size.

AV: She was so helpful. I couldn't believe it.

RF: Well, it was the sale of the week! I was going to ask -- are there any other early shots of you in Hoboken, when you were with your Galaxy, or -- ?

PV: I think I have, with two girls sitting on it. But these two girls -- I don't know if they want to be on the picture.

RF: That's okay.

HM: We don't even have to identify. We can just say, "And two friends."

PV: Yes, with that Galaxy, I have that picture at home. Remember that lady that lived on Eighth and Blue Point. You saw that picture.

AV: Yeah, I saw that picture.

PV: And it's right here, facing New York.

RF: It would be good to have a couple pictures of the '60s and '70s in Hoboken, if you had.

AV: We're going to look.

Track #7

PV: She said, "I've got bread for three days. What else do I want?" So why be upset. That's why I tell people that I take a job. Okay. Today you make \$5.00, today you make \$3.00. You can't go on a job and say -- because I know sometimes people do that. They have a number they've got to do each day. I'm never like that. Each person has a right to do what they want, but I can't work like that. I need my energy to come home and fight with her. [Laughs]

RF: All that fun at the end of the day.
[laughter]

AV: We are "done for the day." All right.

HM: I can't take anymore laughing. I've reached my quota for the day. I'll fall apart.

PV: The other guys, they were a little bit on the funny side.

HM: Sometimes. It depends on the person.

RF: We won't say the funniest; one of the funniest.

PV: But I like to stay happy. I like to think positive.

RF: That comes across.

HM: I don't think I started to cry. So I think you might have made me laugh more than anyone else.

PV: I like to stay positive. Because, you know, today, we are blessed, so why not be happy?

AV: It was a good day.

HM: It was lovely.

TAPE ENDS.