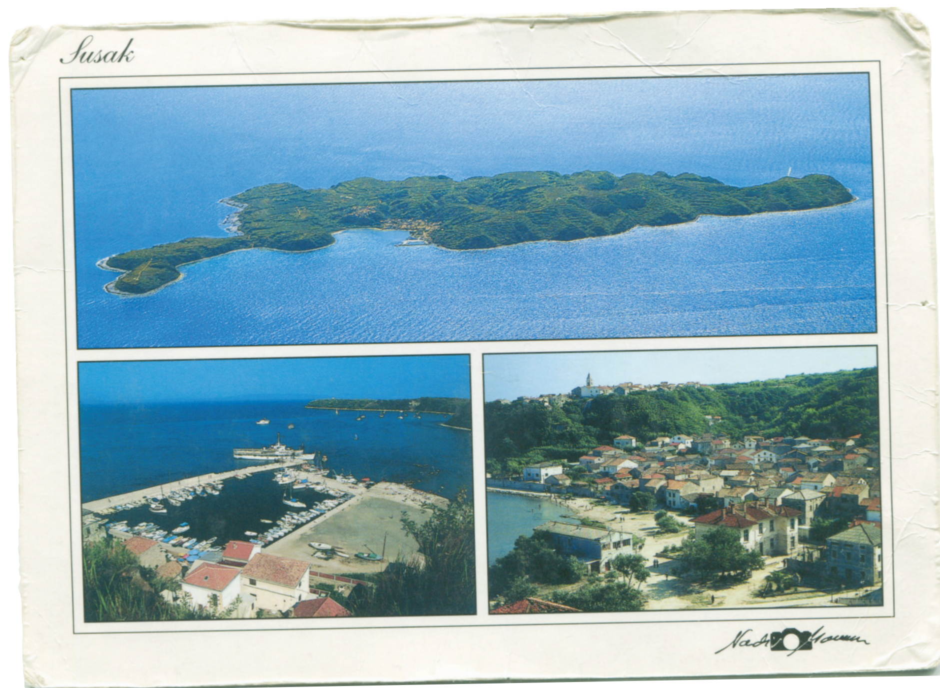
Today We Are Blessed
So Why Not Be Happy?

Recollections of Peter Volaric

A chapbook from the "Vanishing Hoboken" series of the Hoboken Oral History Project



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The Hoboken Oral History Project

A Project of the Hoboken Historical Museum
and the Friends of the Hoboken Public Library

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

*[How will we manage every day?]
It depends. Are you willing to say,
"Tomorrow's not going to be there," or
"Tomorrow will come and it will be better"?
If you say, "Tomorrow will be a better day,"
then you'll experience that day.
It's all about saying tomorrow will come
and it will be better. You get that energy,
and you really can experience that day.
Like we did, from the island to here.
That's how we did it.*

—Peter Volaric
February 19, 2016

Antonia and Peter Volaric visiting Susak, Croatia, 2006.

Peter and Antonia Volaric's three children visit with a friend in Medjugorie, ca. 1990s. From left to right: *Valerie, Josephine, and Peter.*

Introduction

For nearly forty years, Peter Volaric has worked six days a week, painting the exteriors and the interiors of Hoboken homes. Born in 1950 on Susak, a small island on the northern Adriatic coast of Croatia, he arrived in Hoboken with his parents and three siblings in 1963, joining the city's substantial Yugoslavian community. Beginning just after World War II, and continuing through the 1960s, more than half of Susak's population settled in Hoboken, where jobs were plentiful, and more personal freedom and comfort was possible.

On the island, they had worked as fishermen, farmers, and vintners, and resided in homes with dirt floors and no plumbing or electricity. Their way of life was rugged. But they were resilient people, Peter said, and they approached their lives with equanimity and good cheer.

Throughout his interview, Peter told stories that demonstrated the attributes of Susak people. At one point he recalled "the mattresses used to be filled with grass, when people [on the island] were poor. And when you go to sleep, a piece will stab you." But, he added, "It's all good, you know—so long as it's not raining! You feel good; you're inside the house. That's what a lot of young kids are missing. They don't have a mattress where it pinches you at night." And then he laughed—as he did often during the interview. (His interviewers laughed just as often—as did his wife, Antonia, who accompanied him to the interview.)

Antonia is also from Susak, and like Peter, she first left the island for a refugee camp in Latina, Italy, to wait for the papers that would allow entry into the United States. But she did not meet Peter in Susak or Italy: they met on the streets of Hoboken. The story of their meeting is one of several Peter told that point to his gratitude for a life made in two, disparate places. "We grew up on the island, on a dirt floor," he said later in the interview. "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. We go once a year, every year. We go there, to Susak."

And then they return—and Peter goes to work in Hoboken. And this, too, makes him happy: "I think that's one of the best things—when you see people, especially in Hoboken—you're working every day—when you see people, and they tell you, 'I just recommended you to my friend,'" he said. "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."

Peter Volaric was interviewed in a conference room at the Shipyard complex on Hudson Street, Hoboken, on February 19 and March 11, 2016, by Holly Metz and Robert Foster. Copies of the transcripts from which this chapbook was derived have been deposited in the archives of the Hoboken Historical Museum and in the Historical Collection of the Hoboken Public Library.

The lower section of Susak, Croatia, ca. 2000.

A Small Island Called Susak

[I was born on] May 26, 1950, in Yugoslavia, on a small island called Susak. It's maybe twice the size of Hoboken, and before people started leaving, there were about 1,800 people living there.

[The island has been home to many people, under different governments.] I have pictures from 1900, [when] Austria was in charge of certain parts of Croatia. Later on it came under Italian rule. My mother learned how to speak Italian. Then, after World War II, it became [part of] Yugoslavia, [which was divided into several republics, including Croatia. After the breakup of Yugoslavia, Susak remained part of Croatia.] You change the flag, just like that. But the people remain the same.

[What was life like there?] Well, you had people living from the grapes and fishing. [The weather is good for grapes.] There could come times that it could be a little windy, but there's hardly any snow. If you get it, it's maybe half an inch. Then the next day it's gone.

So they would make the wine, and then you would sell it, [or] trade it for wood for the winter. And the fish—you'd sell them. My father worked in a fish [canning] factory [on Susak]. My mother worked on a farm, for other people. You know, different people have more land. We didn't have no land, so my mother worked for other people. [And when there wasn't work on the farm], she did other jobs, like help clean house.

[*Looks at a photograph of women carrying barrels filled with grapes from the September harvest.*] This is in 1960. Too bad I don't have [a photo of] the men [working, too]. These are wood barrels, but [the men] had a leather bag, and they carried the grapes like this, on your shoulder. [*He demonstrates carrying a bag.*] You pack it up with the grapes and you bring it to the winery, and you sell it there. After that, you get tired, there's always these little walls, where you stop and you take a break. The women, they just kept going. You

Susak women carrying grapes they've harvested, ca. 1960.

get paid for the day. So you start and you keep [going]. Each trip is over thirty minutes. Thirty, forty minutes before you reach where you drop this off, and now you gotta go walk again. And fill it up and do it again. In ninety-degree temperature. Yeah, you don't know how to be weak! [*Laughs*.] You just didn't have a gym. And a big La-Z-Boy chair. [*Laughs*.]

But that was something, to live on the island, I tell you. And to walk, and you could pick grapes wherever you wanted, to eat them. A friend of mine told me that they had over twenty different types of grapes on the island.

But now there is only ten-percent of the island that has grapes. Everything is just [abandoned]. There's nobody there. Right now there are only like 120 people living there—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. [We came to the United States] in 1963—my parents, Joseph and Mattea, [and my three siblings]. I'm the oldest, [then there's my brother] John, [my sister] Darinka, and my youngest brother, Joseph.

[Most of the people who left Susak came to the United States, to Hoboken.] It's like every nationality follows each other. Because you feel they will help you find a job. If you move to a town you don't know, how are you going to get a job? So you come here, [and] over here you have all these buildings [with apartments for rent]. You find a [place to] rent right away, and they help you find a job within two days. You go to work. Sewing. That was the only job they could have. (My mother, Mattea, and my aunts, Anna and Liberat, did that.) Everybody worked. Even I worked in a [garment] factory. Because Hoboken was the place where the next day you'd get a job. That's the reason why we came here. To work.

Everybody Had A Nickname

[When I meet someone here from Croatia, I always know whether or not they're from Susak, because] Susak people only have a few last names. Picinich. Morin. Tarabokia. Matachich. Scrivanich. [Not Volaric. My mother was from Susak, but my father was from another island.] My father came to Susak after the war [and] met my mother there. So that's why my last name is different from all these other guys. I'm lucky—because everybody [else] on the island had [to have] a nickname. Everybody had a nickname. You have twenty families [with the last name] Picinich—so you have to give a nickname. [But Volaric,] we didn't need no nickname.

[How did they come up with a person's nickname?] If one day you did something stupid, then that was your nickname. [Or you could wear something, or say something, and get a nickname from that.]

Summers On the Island of Krk: "I Learned To Have A Good Heart"

[When we were living on Susak], my parents used to work a lot in the summer, so they would send me, the oldest, out to another island, [where my paternal grandparents, Maria and Peter, lived]. That island is called Krk. It's a big island, with many villages. My parents would send me there for three months.

[My siblings were too young to go.] I was nine. For me, it was fun. I'm going on a big boat, to a big city—Rijeka. You take a boat from Island Susak—six hours. They go slow [and] stop at different islands. My cousin would be waiting for me. Then we'd go to another boat, a steamer. Another six hours, [to Krk]. So it's twelve hours. But it's fun. My grandfather would wait for me with a donkey, and it's almost a half hour up in the hills, to Risika. That was the name of their village.

They used to have pigs and chickens, and they had a donkey. We didn't have that on the island [Susak]. But my grandmother, since I was the first grandchild—I don't know—there was something the way she was.... My mother was too busy to give me time, with the other three kids. [My grandmother] 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. 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.*] Not that my mother and my father didn't love me. They loved me even more, but different. Different.

I think I learned to have a good heart, from my grandmother.

Grandmother Maria and grandfather Peter, dancing at home, Risika, ca. 1983.

View of Risika, showing the road, now paved, on which Peter's grandfather traveled with his donkey, to retrieve Peter from the dock. Date unknown.

Starting the Journey: A Year in a Refugee Camp

[In 1962, we left Croatia to start a new life.] But from the island, we [first] went to Italy for one year, before we could come to this country. We went to a town called Latina, near Rome. This is a [refugee] camp. I think it was sponsored by the United States. They'd keep you there until you got your paperwork, [because] 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. And they give you free lunch and dinner. But it was exciting, because it's Italy, you know? [When we were] on the island, we used to get three hours of night electric. The house we lived in [there had] no running water, no toilet, [and] dirt floors. So when we went to Italy, I was very excited, because I'd see cars.

And the town had these bumper cars, [too]. I used to go to work—I got a job, painting for somebody for four months when I was thirteen years old [and] I did dishwashing, too—[so] I had my own money to go on a bumper car and listen to this beautiful Italian music. You have so much to see and to do. Because [when] you live on the island, you look at the boats. Italy was exciting.

[Did I go to school in Italy?] I went maybe two months. I couldn't speak Italian. [And that was okay with my parents] because they figured, he can work. He can [help the family and] have money for the bumper cars.

OPPOSITE TOP: *Peter Volaric and his siblings in Italy, ca. 1962.*
From left to right: *John, Joseph, Darinka, and Peter.*

Flying Into A New World

[And then we got our papers.] 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. A cousin picked us up with a convertible Cadillac. [*Laughs.*] We said, "Wow! Why did we wait so long to come here?"

I think we got here June or July. We were in Hoboken a couple of months when a bad thing happened. 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. And then to watch on TV, the funeral. The most touching was when you see his kid salute the father. Even I get teary-eyed, now. Who would have thought? Four months later, rock n' roll comes, and everybody sings and dances—[because] in '64, in February, the Beatles come.

How Far We Traveled

[We moved into my grandmother's apartment], I think it was 918 Willow, for a short time—with my mother's mother, Maria. [*Looks at photograph of her.*] This [photo was taken in] the United States—we're here. She never changed her uniform. She remains in [traditional widow's] black till she died. A lot of story in that face, you can read from it. I can see, there's so much she's saying—like how far we traveled. And what we have to see and live through.

So the picture is not—she's not happy—but she's been through a lot, raising her kids. Her husband died. [She] was left with three daughters and a son, with no husband. He was like thirty-five when he died. And they lived in a house with a dirt floor. No water, no electric, no toilet. Four kids. [To earn some money on the island], she used to wash clothes for people—to get a couple of dollars.

But very positive, positive. Always positive. [And she was glad to be here, too.] You had a washing machine, you had the toilet, you had running water. You've got a grocery store a half a block [away]. You can speak what you want to say. You have your own independence.

Maria, Peter's maternal grandmother, in the U.S, undated.

Above The Blue Point

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. 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.... But we figured, we're above the restaurant. We're not gonna make noise. *They're* making noise. They're keeping *us* up. So everybody was a winner. [*Laughs.*]

My father worked, at the beginning, as a dishwasher, downstairs. [He started working right away.] You'd better move quick! [*Laughs.*] Well, we came here, we were excited to work, to have your own place.

[And then my father found work on the docks.] 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 in.

Top half of a postcard of the Blue Point Lounge, 8th Street and Willow Avenue, Hoboken, ca. 1955. Courtesy of the Hoboken Historical Museum.

A Place For Tomatoes and Sunday Stew

Then we went to [a basement apartment on] Willow Avenue. I think it was because my father loved to have a garden, so he could plant tomatoes and stuff like that. [There was even a fig tree in the backyard. He didn't plant it, but he took care of it.] Because that was his hobby.

After that, we bought a house, in '68, at 324 Park Avenue. [In the 60s] there had to be three or four hundred [Croatians in Hoboken], and within two years everybody bought a house. That's all it used to take them. We'd all stick together. We'd put the money in the piggy bank.

Peter's father, Joseph Volaric, in front of their home, 324 Park Avenue, Hoboken, ca. 1970s. Photograph by John F. Conn. Courtesy of the photographer.

[Did we have traditional foods that we ate at home?] Sundays Croatian people—still, today—we eat beef stew on Sunday. [It cooks on the stove a long time.] Three hours. And you have macaroni. That's your Sunday meal. 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 of bit this, a little of that. But Sundays, that's the meal.

[Were there markets in Hoboken that carried traditional foods?] 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, [and] Hoboken had a lot of fish stores. Now it's all gone. What a shame. But back then, we were lucky.

Peter's mother, Mattea Volaric, in front of their home, 324 Park Avenue, Hoboken, 2016. Photograph by Robert Foster.

Peter Volaric in the backyard of 1002 Willow Avenue, Hoboken, 1976. He is standing in front of the shed where his father stored his gardening supplies.

Learning the Language

At home, you'd always speak your language, and we spoke Croatian. [But when I got here, at thirteen, and was ready] to go to Brandt School, I was a little nervous. Because I don't speak English [and] the teachers didn't know how to speak Croatian. If you speak Spanish, they knew [it], because there [were] more people [who spoke Spanish in Hoboken]. So you try your best. Your friends, who were here before you, they will help you out and tell you.

[And I didn't need to translate for my parents.] My father was pretty good. He could speak English. He used to watch *Sesame Street*—the ABCs. He learned so much from that show. It was unbelievable. My father had, I would think, [schooling] to eighth grade [when he was in Croatia]. My mother [had] very little, because her father died. Her mother, with four kids left.... On the island, you have to go to work.

Carrying Groceries and Delivering Newspapers

After two months in this country, somebody said [to me], "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.

After that, I said, "Well, I think maybe I should deliver newspapers." So after a few months, I had [a route for the] *Hudson Dispatch*. You'd get up at 5:30 in the morning, and you'd bring the paper. 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. Every place was a bar. I loved the detail work in the bars—the detail of the [carved] wood.

[My route] was on Hudson Street, too. At that time, you'd bring the paper five floors up. You don't leave them [outside].

So I've got the paper [route for] the *Hudson Dispatch*, and then I find out there's another paper, the *Jersey Journal*. So after school I do that. 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. [Not my brothers, because they had their own routes.]

For the next three years, two and a half years, I was delivering three newspapers. And 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 think, the paper. After like two weeks, I didn't need the book; I remembered how many newspapers each building gets. [I walked my route, delivering papers as I went.] In Hoboken, everything is within walking distance. [Sure, I'm carrying all the newspapers,] but you're thirteen! You're strong! You had the bag. I think it was 100 papers.

Peter Volaric on 11th Street, Hoboken, ready to deliver newspapers, ca. 1964.

Working in Factories

Then, at sixteen, like most of my friends, I quit school. We didn't speak the language good. So once you see your friend go to work.... And I was already working.

At sixteen, I think my first job was at a waste [cardboard] factory. Recycling. At Eleventh and Clinton. [What a smell!] 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. I hope you continue to overcome the smell. [*Laughs*.] You'll be my honey forever!" And it worked. [*Looks at his wife, Antonia, and they both laugh*.] Look! She's here, after forty-five years.

From [the recycling place] I went to work at a coat factory, Liberty Fashions—half a block away, on Clinton. It was $1.25 an hour. The women would sew, and I'd make sure they had the coats ready [for them, to sew pieces and add buttons. There were about twenty women sewing]. So when you'd see that they'd finished, you'd bring more work to them. [There were two of us doing that job.] They called us "floor boys." [*Laughs*.]

Two brothers owned the factory. [They were Italian.] One was Dominick and the other brother was Frank. I remember their first names, [because] my boss was Frank, and the other guy was Dominick.

I worked [there] like a year and a half. One summer my father took us to Europe—in '68, after five years in this country—because he wanted to go see his parents. That was nice. We went for three months. When I came back, I lost my job. They said, "There's some other guy from the island doing your work." Okay. No problem. I think [my parents] didn't lose their jobs, but I know I lost mine.

[And so I got other jobs.] I remember one in North Bergen. They used to make, I think, pasta, [and] they wanted me to go into this big mixer. You had to clean the blades. I didn't want to become baloney. So I quit. 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 those blades. What if somebody just plugs it in by accident? I'll be a meatball. [*Laughs*.]

Then I went to Carlstadt. I went to work in Pilot Woodwork. They used to make cabinets for offices. That was fun, because you learned different stuff. My job was to put Formica on the plywood. You have to [use] round sticks, then you take them out slowly, so there's no bubbles later. Each job you get educated. [After this one,] if you have a house, you know how to do a few things.

With One Car, We Go

In 1968, I bought my first car, a Galaxy 500. I could fit 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. We worked [all week], comes the weekend, [we wanted to go out]. Sometimes we'd go ice-skating—or roller-skating on Route 17. And that's where my Galaxy got smashed [after] I picked up a girl there. That's a story.

It's 1968. [Kids in Hoboken] go roller-skating in Paramus, on Route 17. 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. [Will I give her a ride home? And her friends?] "Sure, sure. No problem. I give you a ride home." So I pulled my car in to the front of the building. I open the door for her, to get in. I go on my side, and a kid comes out of the parking lot, my door is like twelve inches too close—not even—and he smashes my door.

Oh! What do I do now? I don't know. Where am I? Paramus. How am I going to get home? The cops came. [The girls] called their parents to come pick them up. We didn't talk about that. [For] them, it's okay.

But now I'm in trouble. What am I gonna tell my father about my car? I say [to the cop], "I don't know how to get home." It's 11:30-12:00. And he tells the same guy who 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, [who smashed my car], gave me a ride to Hoboken.

For the next three weeks I'm telling my father the car is at the dealer because something is bad [and the car needs work]. I wanted to cut my head off, that I smashed the car! After a while I had to tell him, because they couldn't get a brand-new door. It took two months to get one. So they fixed it over here on Seventh and Garden; I think it was Steve's Auto-Body then.

[What else did we do for fun?] We had a Croatian bar on Third and Park, 301 Park. It's still there. We'd hang out there, play a little pool. From there, we'd go to the movies. Or we'd go horseback riding, down Route 46, I think it was, 46 West. It used to take almost an hour to get there. And Central Park, on the boats, on Sundays. Sunday comes—you work six days, so Sundays we'd go out. Always three or four people. With one car, we go.

It was beautiful growing up. Hoboken is nice. We all used

Peter Volaric waiting in New York City for the bus to Jones Beach, 1970. Peter and his friends would travel by train to Manhattan and then catch a bus to the Long Island beach.

to meet down by the drugstore, Willow Pharmacy, Ninth Street and Willow Avenue. It's still there. You'd go call your girlfriend inside the booth, where your parents don't hear you. [We had a phone at home], but you've got to go over there, [to the drug store, for privacy]. There used to be like five of us waiting for the little phone booth.

Pocket mirror advertising Willow Pharmacy, 904 Willow Avenue, Hoboken, ca. 1960. Courtesy of the Hoboken Historical Museum.

Becoming A Painter

After that job [at Pilot Woodwork], I was dating this Croatian girl from Long Island. She said, "Why don't you become a painter? The job is better." She had a friend, and they put me in the union, in 1972, when I went to the Big Apple.

[How did I get into the union?] They helped me out. They let you paint closets, [smaller jobs] like that. My first job was up at Kennedy Airport. We'd work in a hangar. Then, they gave me another hangar where I was painting pipes—water pipes, fire pipes—[for] like a month. That was exciting, because I would go outside, eat lunch, and you'd see the planes—and they'd bring cargo boxes. The warehouse I was painting—you had these warehouses full of boxes. [There were shipments from all over the world]—birds, shoes. And I'd see these big planes.

I worked at Kennedy Airport like three months, and in that building I worked alone. The boss would say, "This pipe, this pipe." After I finished up all the pipes, 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. DC #9. That was a good salary, and not too much work.

While I was in the union, I would come home—I was, let me see, twenty-three years old, living at home—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 [I see] my neighbor across the street—he was a little older—[struggling to paint his railing]. 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'd get [a job to paint] a fence here and there, fire escapes. You need two jobs. You stay healthy that way.

[Did I thank the Croatian girl who gave me the lead to the union job?] 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.

Meeting Antonia

A friend of ours had this place where [young people from Susak would go] on Sundays, for a couple of hours, so you could meet a person from your island. [It was] on Fifth and Adams [Streets], a private club. They had a little band each Sunday [playing music from Croatia] and we'd go there. The mothers would come with their daughters, make sure you'd know [they were watching]. 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 [about] somebody." The mothers would sit on one side, and the girls would sit on the other side. [Yes, keeping an eye on them.] They really did some good, I guess. [*Laughs.*]

[On the island, the tradition was to marry at fourteen or fifteen. And] back then, most people got married—the girls—by seventeen. Here, in Hoboken. But no more, now. That was the tradition [then].

[I didn't meet Antonia in the club, though! I was in my car, on Willow Avenue, and I saw her on the street.] This was after work. She's walking with her friends. I'd keep going around the block [to see her]. One time I went to get my brother's car, and she couldn't figure out who this guy was, a second time—but I fooled her! I came around in a different car. [*Laughs.*]

[She was fifteen, and] I was twenty-two. So it was not easy to convince her parents. 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.

[When we were ready to get married, Antonia was] going to be seventeen in like a month. Her father had us go to City Hall [with him], to sign up, [because we needed his permission. He] went to City Hall and signed, and we got married in St. Ann's Church. That's where her parents were going. Usually,

Antonia and Peter Volaric in Croatia, at the dock, ca. 1970s. Peter recalled that the pants he wore were red, white, and blue—the colors of both the Croatian and US flags. "People say, when they see me dressed like that, 'You're my cousin in Croatia,'" he said, then added with a laugh, "I guess I knew I was going to be a painter. I always loved color. But look at them pants! Why she threw them away—I should wear that today."

you get married where your wife's people go to church. A lot [of Croatian people] went to St. Ann's, but also Our Lady of Grace and St. Francis—because we're Roman Catholic.

But the funny part—we got married, [and] the honeymoon [was going to be] a week later; I had to paint a house with somebody. So we figure, we'll go to Holiday Inn, a hotel downtown—and they kick us out! They say she's too young. She was shy three weeks from seventeen. So we were searching for a hotel for just one night. Thank God they didn't kick us out of Hawaii [when we went on our honeymoon]!

That was a beautiful honeymoon—I used to watch Elvis Presley in Journal Square, so I said, "I've got to go to Hawaii, for two weeks." [*Laughs.*] But that was a beautiful trip, because we saw Pearl Harbor, we saw the volcano. Everything was beautiful. We had a great time. That's where we saw that singer, Glen Campbell. And Don Ho.

But I left the most interesting part out. The first day we come to Hawaii—I think it was 1:00 or something—"Let's go

Antonia and Peter Volaric on their wedding day, 1974.

swimming right away," you know? Well, we go to the beach, right there [by] 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 into the water, and her ring goes flying! We see the ring [in the water], and the people are helping us. A minute later, the waves come, and no one sees the ring no more. We can't find it. Lucky she didn't leave me then! [*Laughs.*] [I've heard since that it's] good luck, when you lose something in the ocean.

After that, another thing happened [and] 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. [People tried to encourage us to put lotion on.] "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." [But we got really burned.] No ring! No sleeping together! [*Laughs.*] We were screaming at each other, whose fault it is! But we survived. We're still here. Forty-five years. Lifetime memory. You have to laugh. 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.

"What A Beautiful Job You Did"

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. It's amazing. When you contract, you've got to figure lumberyard, plumbing, all the suppliers who are selling. And the houses, you know, were old, but what happened—it's beautiful. I think the lady, one of the first who started the trend —what was her name? Pat Tuohy. She had a bar on First and Bloomfield [and] lived in that house at 624 Bloomfield. People saw that this is a good town, that you can have good schools. There's everything in walking distance. That transportation can't be better. And slowly, things started changing.

In 1980 I quit the union, and I went to do [painting in Hoboken] full-time, starting my own company. [I worked with my Uncle Nick and my brother, Joseph. What was it like working with my brother?] We're different, but different is what's good. He's the baby, I'm the oldest. We're ten years apart. But he's good, and 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.

[*Looks at photograph of 633 Bloomfield Street.*] This was one of my first customers, forty years ago, her house—Mary Carluccio. Different people own it now. But she, she would be the only one, when it snows at night, in the morning, in the front of her house, it felt like the house was in Hawaii—there wasn't a flake in front of the house. Shoveling and sweeping. The only lady in Hoboken, you walk by her house in the morning, and it didn't look like it snowed. [*Laughs.*]

[She was one of my first customers, but soon there were a lot more.] People started fixing, and everybody had work. I supported my family from Hoboken people, and they just gave you—you got energy. These people tell you, "Good job." You can't wait to get up the next day and go paint another

TOP: Left to right: *Joseph Volaric, Peter Volaric, and Uncle Nick Pavlovich, 1991, getting ready to paint 523 Park Avenue, Hoboken. David Plakke Media NYC. Courtesy of the photographer.*

ABOVE LEFT: *Peter Volaric climbing a 40-foot ladder, Ogden Avenue, Jersey City Heights, New Jersey, 1993. Peter remembered this job was in Jersey City "because in Hoboken, we always use a scaffold. Up and down on the ladder, forty feet. You never look down."*

ABOVE RIGHT: *633 Bloomfield Street, Hoboken, where his first customer, Mary Carluccio, lived. This photograph documents a later painting job, for a new owner.*

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—when you see people, and they tell you, "I just recommended you to my friend." 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.

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.

The funny thing is, to look back, almost forty years, [and realize] that I worked in [about] twenty-five percent of Hoboken, from Park Avenue to Castle Point, from Second Street. Below, [and west,] I hardly work. I didn't even know that town existed. [And] still today, what I'm doing: It's twenty-five percent of Hoboken. But now you come back again [and paint for new owners].

Left to right: *Joseph and Peter Volaric, working in Hoboken, ca. 1982.*

A Last Visit With My Grandmother in Krk

We went in the winter, all of us, to Croatia, to see [my grandmother] before she died. Lucky my wife didn't divorce me. People say, "You guys are crazy, going in the winter. It's cold over there." [Because when we went,] 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. But I wanted to go see my grandmother. She touched me. There's something, you know? I wanted to go see her—because she had a cancer. You don't know how long [she has left]. 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 [that]—her sister, also. She lived a few doors away from her. 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

Peter and Antonia's daughter, Valerie, standing in front of the house where Peter spent his summer vacations with his grandmother Maria, Risika, Krk, ca. 1996.

Peter's great-aunt and her son in Croatia, ca. 1993.

this, is where my roots [are]. "I've got bread three days old, I don't need nothing—" So why be upset?

I have a picture of us sitting on these stools, [at my grandmother's house. My grandmother] would sit on the porch —the fig tree, the chickens, the pig outside, and the house. It goes back—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. You can't ask for better.

My grandkids, they are happy and everything. But to me—I don't think I would change anything in the way we live. [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.

I'll be sixty-six in May. [Will I retire?] No, never. [And no gardening for me now, either.] I would love to [grow tomatoes like my father did, but] I don't have time, because I'm always working. You work ten, eleven hours, and you need time [for your garden]. 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 [have it]? 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.

[Mostly, though I work.] Six days—even Sundays, sometimes. When you promise.... People go on vacation, you try to surprise them, give them a little more than what you told them [you'd do], even when they [didn't ask.] 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. [I know some people don't have that.] Not everybody can be lucky to be touched by 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.

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

[How will we manage every day?] It depends. Are you willing to say, "Tomorrow's not going to be there," or "Tomorrow will come and it will be better"? So if you say, "Tomorrow will be a better day," then you'll experience that day. It's all about saying tomorrow will come and it will be better. You get that energy, and you really can experience that day. Like we did, from the island to here. That's how we did it.

Peter and Antonia Volaric's grandchildren wearing Croatian soccer team tee shirts they bought for them in the airport. From left to right: *Dean, Peter, Julia, Julian, Bradley, Alexa, Kayla, Brooke, and Grant.*

The Hoboken Oral History Project

"Vanishing Hoboken," an oral history project, was initiated in 2000 by members of the Hoboken Historical Museum and the Friends of the Hoboken Public Library in response to dramatic physical, social, and economic changes in the city of Hoboken over the preceding twenty years, and to consequent "vanishing" of certain aspects of public life.

For much of the last century, Hoboken was a working-class town, home to many waves of immigrant families, and to families who journeyed from the southern regions of the U.S. and from Puerto Rico—all looking for work. Hoboken, close to ports of entry in New Jersey and New York, offered a working waterfront and many factories, as well as inexpensive housing. Each new wave of arrivals—from Germany, Ireland, Italy, Yugoslavia, Cuba, and Puerto Rico—found work on the waterfront, at the Bethlehem Steel Shipyards, Lipton Tea, Tootsie Roll, Maxwell House, or in numerous, smaller garment factories. Then the docks closed in the 1960s; factory jobs dwindled as Hoboken's industrial base relocated over the 1970s and '80s. Maxwell House, once the largest coffee roasting plant in the world, was the last to leave, in 1992.

In the go-go economy of the 1980s, Hoboken's row houses, just across the river from Manhattan, were targeted by developers to young professionals seeking an easy commute to New York City. Historically home to ever-changing waves of struggling families—who often left when they became prosperous—Hoboken began in the mid-1980s to experience a kind of reverse migration, in which affluent condominium-buyers replaced poor and working class tenants, many of whom had been forced out by fire, through condo-conversion buy-outs, or through rising rents. More recently, building construction has further altered the face of Hoboken, as modern towers are rising up alongside the late-19th century row houses that once spatially defined our densely populated, mile-square city and provided its human scale.

The Hoboken Oral History Project was inaugurated with the goal of capturing, through the recollections of longtime residents, "Vanishing Hoboken"—especially its disappearing identity as a working-class city and its tradition of multi-ethnic living. In 2001, with the support of the New Jersey Historical Commission, a division of the Department of State, the Oral History Project transcribed and edited several oral histories to produce a series of "Vanishing Hoboken" chapbooks. Since 2002, twenty-nine chapbooks—including this one—have been published, with the support of the Historical Commission, the New Jersey Council for the Humanities, a state partner of the National Endowment for the Humanities; and John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Vanishing Hoboken Chapbooks

The editor of this series chose to call these small booklets "chapbooks," a now rarely heard term for a once-common object. And so, a brief explanation is now required: A chapbook, states the most recent edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, is a

> ...small, inexpensive, stitched tract formerly sold by itinerant dealers, or chapman, in Western Europe and in North America. Most chapbooks were 5 x 4 inches in size and were made up of four pages (or multiples of four), illustrated with woodcuts. They contained tales of popular heroes, legends and folklore, jests, reports of notorious crimes, ballads, almanacs, nursery rhymes, school lessons, farces, biblical tales, dream lore, and other popular matter. The texts were mostly rough and anonymous, but they formed the major parts of secular reading and now serve as a guide to the manners and morals of their times.

Chapbooks began to appear in France at the end of the 15th century. Colonial America imported them from England but also produced them locally. These small booklets of mostly secular material continued to be popular until inexpensive magazines began to appear during the early 19th century.

Although some of the chapbooks in the "Vanishing Hoboken" series are considerably longer than their earlier counterparts, others are nearly as brief. They are larger in size, to allow us to use a reader-friendly type size. But all resemble the chapbooks of yesteryear, as they contain the legends, dreams, crime reports, jokes, and folklore of our contemporaries. One day, perhaps, they might even serve as guides to the "manners and morals" of our city, during the 20th and early 21st centuries.

Peter wearing the Susak hat his mother, Mattea, made. They are both holding a doll she costumed in traditional Susak dress, worn for weddings and other celebrations. "It's very colorful and happy," Peter said, referring to both the costumes and the dancing. "There's always a person [with] an accordian on the island. It gives you such a happy sound. Even if you have no legs, you can dance."

A Project of the Friends of the Hoboken Public Library
and the Hoboken Historical Museum