

Historical Collections, Bridgeport Public Library
Oral History Project: "Bridgeport Working: Voices from the Twentieth Century"
Mr. Peter Us (PU) interviewed by John Soltis (I), 1999.

I Mr. Us, could you tell us when and where you were born?

PU I was born in Slovenia, Nablama, 1934.

I 1934, okay can you tell us a little bit about what it was like in Slovenia where you were born. You know the time you spent there?

PU This is where you got me, I was just a child, (chuckle), no, seven years old when we left the originally.

I Where did your family go from there?

PU From there we went to Austria. We lived there from 1942 until 1952.

I 'Til you came to the United States?

PU We lived in Austria through the war time.

I How large a family did you have?

PU We had fifteen children.

I (chuckle) which one were you, in the pecking order?

PU I was right in the center.

I Right in the center, okay. So your family moved from Slovenia and spent the war years in Austria?

PU In Austria, that is correct.

I Then what brought your family to the United States? And why Bridgeport in particular?

PU Why Bridgeport? I can't answer that you that. A Priest intercept us in New York. Originally we were gonna go to the farming land, somewheres in Ohio. I don't know exactly where, but it all changed. Father Farkas, I ain't forgot his name, he had dull jobs waiting for us, bought a house here.

I Oh, so it was the Priest who had a job here for you?

PU Yes. A job was waiting for me, yes, the Norwood of English you know, yeah.

I How old were you when you came to the United States?

PU Seventeen.

I Seventeen. So whereabouts in Bridgeport did you come to?

PU 47 Ash Street.

I What part of town is that in?

PU West End.

I West End.

PU Right off State Street Extension.

I You went right to work when you came?

PU I went right to work, the younger bunch went to school.

I But you went right to work. How much education had you had at that point?

PU I had seven years of grammar school.

I In Austria, primarily?

PU Right, yeah.

I Where was your first job in this area?

PU In Fairfield.

I Where was that at?

PU What was it called, trying to remember what was it called.

I Was it a furniture company?

PU I worked for the furniture company, couple of years maybe and they closed up. After that I went to work for Fairfield Lumber.

I How long were you at Fairfield Lumber?

PU Seven, Nine, seven years.

I This was what during the 50's?

PU 50's and...

I Early 60's?

PU 60's yeah.

I What did, well first off how did you get that job in Fairfield Lumber?

PU I was asked I believe, you know. When the furniture company closed up they gave me a choice to stay. The yard belonged to the, that was all one company.

I Oh, okay, so it's part of the same thing?

PU Yeah. So I said I'll stay here, then I end up working out in the yard.

I What had you done in the furniture company?

PU We built furniture.

I So you like copied it?...

PU Oh, specifically, well, things were a little different here like when they put you in assembly line you did parts, yeah. When I started out, I was an apprentice before I came here.

I A carpenter's apprentice?

PU No, furniture.

I Furniture, okay, furniture maker.

PU Right, but things are a little different here, it's all in production line, you didn't create anymore, you had stock in the job.

I So it was like mass production?

PU Right, yeah.

I What was your job specifically?

PU If I can remember. We pushed it on and someone else did something else.

I So you worked on an assembly line where you did one specific thing, over and over.

PU Yeah, you put the pieces together and all that, yeah.

I About how many people worked there?

PU Oh (chuckle).

I You know just a guess, it was about hundreds or is it....?

PU Maybe two hundred.

I Oh, that large, so it was a fairly large operation.

PU Yeah, it was, yeah, yeah.

I And so then the furniture part closed down.

PU Yeah.

I And they moved you over to the lumber yard?

PU In the lumber yard.

I What does one do in the lumber yard?

PU What does one do? You can, trucks come in and you load them, make up orders and get 'em set up for shipping.

I Now was this just lumber or.....?

PU Everything, from the house supply, sheetrock.

I Really.

PU Cement, yeah. They had fabrication department.

I About how many people were still working there?

PU Maybe a hundred.

I What was the relationship between the management, the workers? I mean was it a good place to work or was it.....?

PU Oh, yes! It was a good place to work, very good. Pays were small (chuckle).

I About what was an average wage there, let's say back in the 50's?

PU Maybe 75 cents an hour.

I 75 cents an hour.

PU But I'm not really sure, you know.

I Yeah, okay, about 75 cents. Did you generally work a forty hour week?

PU Forty hours, oh yeah.

I Was there overtime sometimes?

PU Always.

I Always.

PU Worked every Saturday, yeah.

I Was there a union or anything then?

PU No, no.

I Basically, it was a good place to work?

PU Good place to work, they treat you well (chuckle).

I Did you have like sick benefits?

PU Oh, yes. Sure.

I Insurance?

PU Insurance, you had all that.

I How about sick days?

PU No, no. We got vacations.

I Got vacations?

PU Yeah.

I Okay and you say you were there for about seven years?

PU Seven years.

I And at this whole time were you living on Ash Street still, with the family?

PU Yeah, yep, I live there for sixteen years, 'til I got married (chuckle).

- I** And where did you go after, well first of all why did you leave the furniture, not the furniture store, the lumber yard?
- PU** Well, that was seeking for more money, better pay, better jobs and I went into the steel business, ironworks.
- I** Where was that?
- PU** Same street where I lived, it was a company there called Leake-Nelson.
- I** Leake-Nelson?
- PU** Yep, erection company, fabricating steel.
- I** Yeah, tell us about that.
- PU** And then I became a welder.
- I** At the steel place?
- PU** Yeah.
- I** How long were you there?
- PU** Twenty one years.
- I** Okay, let's talk about that a little bit. Tell us about....
- PU** Let's see, I started there about 1950, no, 1960 I believe.
- I** How big a shop was it?
- PU** That was a small shop, about fifty people.
- I** About fifty?
- PU** Yeah, yeah.
- I** What did you do there when you first started?
- PU** First started was grinding small jobs, then until I learned to weld.
- I** I'll show my ignorance here, what did you weld, what did you make there?
- PU** Oh! We fabricate steel, for like a school buildings, banks, we had big jobs.
- I** What was it like a contract thing?
- PU** Yeah, yeah.
- I** But would you work there in the shop or would you go out....?
- PU** No, no, we didn't go outside we worked in the shop, we fabricated and then painted and send it out. Gotta have special crews for erecting steel.
- I** You had a whole separate operation that would go out?
- PU** Right, right.

I You say there were about fifty or so people there?

PU Um hmm, yeah.

I What was the pay like then?

PU Well, pay was about \$3 an hour then.

I \$3 an hour, that was good money.

PU Oh, yeah, very good.

I Was there a union there?

PU Yes, yeah, yes.

I What union was that do you recall?

PU 830, no then it was 532 Local.

I Was that the iron workers union?

PU Yeah, right.

I Did you stay as a welder, is that the position you stayed at for twenty years you were there?

PU No, well I did different things, not just a welder. Wherever I was needed, operate machines, punch machines.

I What does a punch machine do?

PU Machine punches a hole into "I" beams, about that thick.

I About two, three inches thick?

PU Yep, no, no, about two and half inches. Man would set up holes for you, give you a center punch. You align it up with the machine, all you have to do is press the paddle and.....

I Oh like a foot pedal?

PU Yep and down comes the punch, baboom.

I And the holes is that like where the rivets or something would go through?

PU No, for the bolts.

I Bolts.

PU So it ties up the whole building together.

I Oh, okay, again you would fabricate these parts?

PU Fabricate, that's correct.

I Then they would go out?

PU Yeah.

I What was the labor situation right there, I mean did, you said there was a union there. Were there any strikes or anything while you were there?

PU Oh, yes, we had strikes, we had rough times (laughter).

I Oh, tell us about that.

PU The longest we had was about a month.

I When was that?

PU 1970's.

I Let's go back a little further first, what was the first labor problem you recall there? Or if there were other strikes.

PU There was never, most of the times there were wage problems, not conditions, more holidays, better working conditions, safety.

I Safety was an issue there?

PU Oh! Safety you can go way back to strikes on safety.

I What were some of the safety problems?

PU When equipments don't work right, they break down, they'd refuse to repair them, I'd refuse to operate.

I So the company management would be asking you, at times, to operate what you thought was unsafe equipment?

PU Exactly right. You'd be threatened of "you don't work now, there's the door."

I But because there was a union they couldn't throw you out?

PU Most of the time they back you off, most cases.

I Tell us about that 1970 strike, when you were out for a month?

PU Well, the company just wouldn't give in. Membership wasn't that strong, maybe three hundred, four hundred members.

I There were that many people working there by then?

PU No, in the whole state of Connecticut.

I Oh, okay, so it was all the iron workers went out?

PU When we go out on strike, they all go out at the same time, yeah.

I So it wasn't just your Local?

PU No, no, statewide. They called it national. Things would get rough sometimes, they'd be cuttin' up tires and (chuckle).

I No, they wouldn't do that. (laughter)

PU Oh yes they would. I used to tell it about old timers, they had a rougher time than

- when we came in, long before I came.
- I** How do you mean?
PU I mean shooting. Shootings yeah. Shooting, wars, smoke wars, you know.
- I** Here in the Bridgeport area?
PU Labor. In the Bridgeport area. Between the labor and the management and they had seven days a week, ten hours a day, no holidays.
- I** Really.
PU Yeah.
- I** When was this like back in the 40's?
PU About, 40's maybe.
- I** 30's
PU Yeah, this was an old company that I worked for. It's, even back in 1900 and these men, they were hard working men. They had skills, skills today you don't see this anymore.
- I** Really.
PU No. Skills are gone, gone caputs, you know.
- I** But they were still there when you started work?
PU Oh, yes. Yeah, no, some but not all, just the young fellas beginning and learning.
- I** So these are the guys that broke you in, on the job?
PU Right, yeah. You know you learn from the best.
- I** You were there through the 70's, that was the, when was that big strike again? In about the 70's?
PU Like '72, around there.
- I** Was it fairly...?
PU That's the longest period that we had. Any other times were shorter, shorter.
- I** What happened when you came back after the strike?
PU Well, you get your three-year contract and you go back to work, and things go back to normal.
- I** Were you satisfied with the contract?
PU Most of the times we were satisfied, we got a lot bigger raises than you get now. Not three percent.
- I** What was the average settlement?

PU You get a dollar a year, a dollar and a quarter a year.

I Okay and what were you making that, about that, I mean what percentage would that be about?

PU I think...

I I think you said you started there at three dollars an hour...

PU Yeah, that's the, that's early in the 60's. Oh and we..., they went by contract. Either two year or three year the longest.

I Okay, but you're saying that the raises, like a dollar a year that would be ten, fifteen percent something like that? A lot more than the three percent raises.

PU Yes, plus you get your other things in benefits.

I By that time you said the old timers there, they were working seventy hour weeks or whatever.

PU That's right and whatever.

I No holidays or anything, did you have holidays by then?

PU Oh yeah, yup. We got holidays, sick benefits, no not sick benefits, there was enough holidays.

I Well, what would happen to someone if they were, if they got hurt lets say, and couldn't go to work for a week or just got sick? They'd just have to go without pay or was there some sort of a fund?

PU If he got sick, (laughs) that's a good question. No, you'd need the doctor's approval I guess you know, sometimes, most times you lucked out you had enough time in you put in towards vacation. I never really, for myself, I never really got that sick.

I Okay, but if it did happen you could take it out of your vacation time?

PU Yes, yeah.

I So there was some money coming in?

PU Oh sure, sure. You get some Union benefits.

I So the Union would have like a fund?

PU Yeah, never end up behind the eight ball.

I So then there were ways to get by?

PU Oh, yes. Yeah.

I How long were you there now?

PU Total of twenty-five years.

I Okay, so that brings us what, to the early 80s?

PU Yeah.

I Okay, tell us, is that plant still in existence?

PU No, that closed up also.

I Okay, is that why you left? 'Cause it closed or did you go....?

PU Well, I had no choice.

I Yeah, see, but you were there right? 'til the end?

PU Yeah.

I Okay, tell us about what happened?

PU Well, the younger generation take over. Computers start coming in, business got slower, just no work (chuckle).

I And what, were there layoffs, eventually?

PU Layoffs yes and all of a sudden you get a letter saying we don't need ya no more. That's it.

I So is that why you eventually had to leave?

PU Yeah, making you forced to retire.

I Was there any severance pay or anything?

PU No, this is where I got...cheated. Well, I guess I didn't put up enough fight to get your severance pay. Put up enough fuss, the Union wouldn't back you up.

I Was it some people got it and some didn't or...?

PU No one got it.

I No one got it?

PU Yeah.

I Was it in the contract and the company reneged?

PU No, no, not in the contract, no.

I And how many people eventually, well at the end there, how many people were left?

PU About 30 people.

I So they just shut down?

PU Shut down, closed up, that's it. Closed the door. So many other shops in Bridgeport they closed up.

I How old were you then, about?

PU 80's....let's see...4, no.

I 40s, 50s?

PU No, oh no.

I Okay again Mr. Us, you are how old then? Late 40s, early 50s?

PU Right, yeah.

I So you're still a relatively young man?

PU Yes.

I You still relatively a young man (laugh)

PU Yeah, hard to believe that. (laughs)

I Where did you go from then? You're 50 years old and out of work.?

PU I was collecting for a while, but then I got another job.

I Where was that?

PU Peerless Illuminating Foundry.

I Where were they?

PU They were in Bridgeport.

I Whereabouts?

PU Andover Street, off Fairfield Avenue.

I Andover Street?

PU Andover Street, you where metal goods.

I Yeah, how did you get that job?

PU Through a friend of mine, I guess you know and I didn't like that job at all.

I How long were you there?

PU About three years, three and a half.

I What did you do there?

PU There was packing and inspecting. Inspecting the pieces, parts.

I What did they make there?

PU Let's see, makes just, a lot of government work. Storm Ruger, a trigger gun.

I Oh triggers for guns?

PU Triggers, I used to inspect them. If they had holes in them we have to reject them.

I How big a shop was this?

PU Totally, that use to have over 400 people.

I Really?

PU Yeah.

I Was there a Union there?

PU No. No, that place I wouldn't have wanted it.

I How did the, let's say the pay and benefits compare to the place had you just left?

PU A big difference, take a cut in pay. When you first sign up they would start you off with seven dollars an hour.

I This was in the mid 80's or early 80's?

PU No, this was almost towards, 90's.

I Seven dollars an hour?

PU Yeah. If I was still in business, should be making around twenty dollars an hour by now. If I was still in my old job

I Your old job?

PU Yeah, but not this, no.

I How about sick days, holidays?

PU No, nothing like that. You got, ya know, you got your holidays.

I How about vacations?

PU Yeah, when the time came. You have to get in a year seniority before you get a week.

I A week?

PU Yeah.

I And seven dollars an hour?

PU And seven dollars an hour. So for forty hours about 280 a week, that's after taxes are taken out.

I And that happen to be 400 people working?

PU Yeah, yeah.

I Are they still in business?

PU They're still in business, yeah. That's why they're still in business, low paying jobs. This is what Mr. Clinton has got for the public. I mean it's something negative, but it's true.

I So you were there for how long? Three years?

PU Three years, three and a half years.

I What, you just decide it wasn't worth staying?

PU I had enough, that's when I decided to retire. After 62 I decided to retire. I signed up for Social Security, so now I'm on Social Security.

I And they're still working there for seven dollars and hour. Okay, that's the working history, could you go back just for a little while now to Bridgeport. Let's say in the 50's when your family came here. Tell us a little bit about you neighborhood on Ash Street?

PU `It was a beautiful neighborhood! Bridgeport was a wonderful place to live. We went to school in the neighborhood, nice schools.

I What would you do for entertainment, let's say on a weekend?

PU That was no problem either. You had movies all over the place, bowling. Those days we were, we liked to bowl, hang out in the clubs, social clubs.

I And these were all here in Bridgeport?

PU Yep. You had Italian clubs, you had German clubs, Slovaks (chuckle).

I Oh, so you just use to go to each other's clubs, basically?

PU Yeah, some you have to belong to. They couldn't serve you drinks, state doesn't allow that. What they don't know...you could go walk in with someone that is a member there.

I What was the, let's say ethnic makeup of your neighborhood or racial makeup? And who was living there then?

PU I don't know, I didn't sense any ethnic problems in those days.

I Yeah, but I mean who was living there?

PU Mostly the....

I The Slovaks, Italians?

PU Oh, there were, Italians in one section, Slovaks in another, Pollacks in another section.

I In the places you worked, what was the makeup of the work force? Let's say in the lumber yard?

PU Oh, mostly Irish, yeah.

I We'll go through it, and then in the steel works or the iron works?

PU They had mixed, they had Spanish, Puerto Ricans, Blacks, not too many Blacks. Mostly whites.

I How about this last place?

PU This was all Spanish.

I So primarily Spanish speaking people?

PU Yeah, yeah. I thought I was gonna learn some Spanish (chuckle). I just wanted to get out of there so bad, I could taste it. That was one job I hated with passion.

I Sure, seven dollars an hour?

PU I can't see myself tack down to the job, feel like a prisoner.

I Well, I think that's about it, unless, is there anything you would like to add that I haven't ask you or, just something you'd like to say for posterity?

PU As far as social life, I haven't seen any problems in those days. We had church picnics, dances, no problems with places to go.

I There was a lot going on.

PU A lot going on, more than you have now. Now kids, they don't know what to do with themselves. This is where you meet a girl, at the church dances.

I Oh! That's what I didn't ask you, where did you meet your wife?

PU Well, through my, at the church dance actually and she's related to my other brother's wife. Actually, she's a niece to my other brother Gus. It gets confusing (laughter).

I Okay, Mr. Us, thank you for your time and again thank you.