

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

I We're doing the oral history project, our interview with can I have your name?

PU Richard, well my name is Peregrin.

I Peregrin?

PU But everyone calls me Richard. This is an adopted American name.

I Oh.

PU Peregrin is really not a very familiar a name.

I Okay, and your last name?

PU Us.

I Us? Us.

PU Us.

I And where and when were you born Mr. Us?

PU I was born in Slovenia in 1939.

I Slovenia?

PU Slovenia.

I 1939? Okay, and could you tell us a little bit about what it was like where you lived?

PU In Slovenia?

I Yeah.

PU I only learned what it was like in Slovenia several years later. We fled when I was two years old.

I Oh okay.

PU From Slovenia into Austria in 1942.

I And is that where you grew up? In Austria?

PU That's where I stayed in Austria until 1952 before I came here.

I Tell us a little bit about Austria?

PU Beautiful. A beautiful place and I loved it, another home.

I How many in your family?

PU Fifteen.

I Whoa! Is that your mother and your father and the rest of Us?

PU That's the children.

I Oh, just the children?

PU Just the children. My mother and father and a grandmother including when came here.

I Whoa!

PU Sure.

I And what type of work did your parents do?

PU They were farmers. Run their own farm and a ranch in Slovenia. And we were driven off of the farm, the war circumstances and we had to leave and leave everything there now we were refugees.

I In Austria?

PU In Austria. And we stayed there as refugees until we came here.

I Did they find any work at all there?

PU Oh, of course, they found work. My father found work in a lumberyard. That's where he stayed mostly, working in lumberyard. (laughter)

I What then, you say you came to the United States in 1952?

PU In 1952, yes, we came here.

I Could you tell us about the circumstances that brought you here?

PU Well we couldn't stay in a refugee camp forever. We would have to find homes. Coming back home you could not, some stayed in Austria, became citizens of Austria, others left for Germany and so on and so forth. But the doors were open for immigration for United States and there was plenty of work here and it was just, seemed like the best choice.

I Now did you come right to the Bridgeport area?

PU We came right to the Bridgeport area.

I Because of the jobs?

PU Well, yes, it's a long story.

I Well...

PU Well, we actually had sponsors to go to Minnesota.

I Okay.

PU Okay, and this is how we would acquire a farm and work this farm. Since were experienced in farming, but when we came here, Father Fargus from Holy Cross decided that he would rather keep us here and assign us to the Parish.

I And where was the Holy Cross? The Holy Cross Parish was in Bridgeport? The

PU Parish was in Bridgeport, off of Bostwick Avenue.

I Okay.

PU On the West End.

I Yes.

PU Now, much different when it was there, but then the church is gone, but someday they built a new one in Fairfield. On Tahmore Drive.

I So the good Father decided that...?

PU That he would rather keep us here and he finagled everything, took care of everything. Bought us a house in Bridgeport.

I Oh, whereabouts?

PU On Ash Street.

I Ash Street?

PU Yes, its street.

I And this was in the early 50's?

PU It was 1952.

I Is that where you spent the rest of your adolescents?

PU Yes, until I got married. I stayed there for some ten years.

I Tell us a little about the neighborhood on Ash Street.

PU On Ash Street?

I Yeah.

PU Beautiful! There was an Italian Club, right next to a Latino Club. We hung around there all the time. It was just beautiful, all this socializing with the people, other immigrants that were here. Because those were the only ones we knew.

I Okay.

PU But then we finally spread out and everybody went on their own way.

I By other immigrants, do you mean other people from Slovenia?

PU Other people from Slovenia and other people from Europe. Other parts. Certainly, we had something in common. First of all we experienced the same situation and we all came into a strange country, you know. I don't know if came in through the sliding door, but I don't think we did. We didn't come in that way (laughter)

I So you started off for a farm in Minnesota and you wound up on Ash Street, in Bridgeport.

PU Wound up on Ash Street in Bridgeport. And it was beautiful there.

I Where did you go to school?

PU St. Anthony's. I went to St. Anthony's and stayed there until I was old enough to go to work. I started late,.....speaking the language and so I had to pay for the, we had to pitch in and pay for the house. The parents, Father Fargas bought for our parents and we lived in this house and we all chipped in to pay for it.

I So how old were you when you left school?

PU Oh, I was sixteen.

I Sixteen?

PU Yeah, and then I went to night school. I had to go to school after that, but that, I only had to go to school to learn the language, then did my own, then I went my own way and I worked out my own situation what was necessary.

I And you say you had to go to work, to pay for the house?

PU Yes, to pay for the house, yeah. I continued school at night.

I What was your first full time job?

PU I worked at Leake and Nelson.

I What was that?

PU It was a fabricating steel company. Leake and Nelson.

I Leake and Nelson.

PU Leake and Nelson.

I Was that in Bridgeport?

PU That was in Bridgeport, right down the street, on Ash Street.

I Oh!

PU So in the summertime, naturally if you guys are hiring I could do work with that. Bang steel around and paint girders and so forth. It was a construction company. Fabricating what would, how could I put it? High beams and girders and trusses all the things like this. We built schools, churches, supermarkets, whatever.

I What year was this about?

PU That was in 50..., when did I start there? 55

I 55? Do you recall any difficulties there?

PU No, I have only good times.

I How long did you stay there?

PU Well, I stayed on and off, I stayed for a year the first time. Then I quit and went other places and I did some house painting, things like that. I kept working; I was working on restoring paintings in churches.

I Oh, Really!

PU Yes, I was into art and so on and I was working with a man who did this sort of thing. So we got into that.

I After this period, take us through your working career a little bit.

PU Well, I worked for this man 'til I broke my arm.

I Restoring the paintings?

PU Restoring the paintings, but then we had to climb these scaffolds and everything. It was kind of dangerous. But I broke my arm, not on the job, but in the park doing calisthenics on bars. Goof, just flew off of those and landed on my arm, broke my arm and then I didn't want to work on those scaffolding anymore.

I I could understand that. (chuckle).

PU Yeah that's what it was, mainly. Then I went back to work for Leake and Nelson, for a while, then after that I quit there and I went to work for Brink and Cotton. It was all manufacturing kind of stuff like that. Where I stick with a job for a while, make some money then find something else again.

I So you had many jobs?

PU Oh, yes. Several, anything at all that, I wasn't afraid to do manual labor at all.

I Do you recall at any of these places, were there any unions or some?

PU Leake and Nelson was unionized and I had to belong to a union over there. Yes. The other place was called Brink and Cotton, it was manufacturing I forget what they had, I think it was manufacturing "C" clamps. And other things related to it, you know.

I If you wouldn't mind, could you tell, you had many jobs in this period. Let's say from fifty-five through the early 60's or something. What was the average pay like?

PU Oh, let's see. In 1955 the average pay was only about a dollar fifty, a dollar seventy-five and hour. Good pay was two dollars and over. (chuckle). Can you imagine?

I Did you have any benefits at these jobs, you know sick benefits?

PU They had benefits. They were sick days, insurance, anything of any importance, sure. Holiday pay, paid holidays, very much the same as now and even today, I don't remember having too many more paid holidays than I had then. That's the only thing that didn't go up. (laughter). Not many more paid holidays or more vacation time, even, the same as any place.

I I know we're going to wind up at Lacey. But, could you get us there. A little bit at a time?

PU Well, by then I was drafted into the service.

I What year was that?

PU That was in 1960.

I 1960.

PU The German's were Berlin Wall there and it looked liked the United States was going to get into war and naturally the Selected Service.

I Which branch of the service did you go into?

PU The U.S. Army. Yeah. The U.S. Army. I was trained in Fort Dix and then Aberdeen Proving Ground. I was stationed over there and went to school. Army ordnance.

I Okay, what was then name of it again?

PU Aberdeen Proving Ground, that still exists. That's still there and it's still a proving ground. Fort Dix is not being reduced to some minor camp, not a training camp anymore. But then as I said, I was sent to Germany on full alert. This time and then when that quieted down then when the Cuban crisis and then it was a full alert. Yeah, I remember that.

I So you were in the Army during the Cuban Missile Crisis?

PU Yes, oh yeah. And then when I came back home and I went to the Reserves. I was in the Reserves for about a year maybe less. And then again, we were called to go to Vietnam. Now we're going to end up in Vietnam. But Mr. Johnson, President Johnson did no more troops for Vietnam and we just escaped, barely, not to get shipped to Vietnam.

I Were you called up though? Or just...

PU We had orders to go. And then they changed the orders that no more troops should be in Vietnam I guess. There were protests. I was in uniform, not one of the protesters, no. (laughter).

I Must have been an interesting experience.

PU Yeah right. Interesting. Not appreciating the people protesting either, not at all.

I What was the view of, ya know guys like yourself that were in the reserve at that time of the protests?

PU Oh, I had the, my ideas were positive. I felt they had the right to protest and that the war wasn't exactly just but it wasn't all as wrong as that the way they protested either. Any war is wrong, really. But to brand the government as criminals was going a little bit too far. No, you know and demand an apology and all this kind of stuff, that's..., I don't know about that (chuckle), and I couldn't see that. I just couldn't see it. That's all well and good you know if you can stop the war with that, and naturally every war is. I don't know I don't know the politics, I didn't understand the politics, all I knew was stuck in a situation and I have to go along with it.

I How would you describe most of the guys that were in the reserves with you?
Would they be working class type of guys?

PU Working class, students.

I The students also?

PU Oh many, there were students yes.

I And they were generally...

PU A lot of them, yes.

I If not in favor of the war willing to serve?

PU Oh definitely. If not in favor, willing to serve. That's just the same. Yes. No question about it. Most of them were not in favor but not ready to protest and to walk off. They could voice their opinion but they wouldn't go those measures. I mean even to the officers we used to talk and we used to discuss ourselves. And that's why we don't have to disagree what we are fighting for, whatever our government orders us to do. That's what we're here for. We are not here to ask questions. (laughter)

I Okay so you didn't have to go over to Vietnam due to the.....?

PU No. No I was happy about that, I mean I was very relieved. I had enough of two years of constant tension.

I Okay so how did your work career progress from that point, from the late 60s?

PU Okay, then I had ambitions to stay in the army. Where they offer so many benefits. Certainly went to school in the army. You finished high school there.

I Oh okay great!

PU This is where I was able to, they offer daytime schooling why not take advantage of it. And it put me off guard duty and several other duties. (laughter) We should just find a name. They didn't mind and neither did I. (laughter) And then I came out of course it was a young officer who talked me out of staying in the army. He said you'll do better in civilian life. And I don't see any real future in the army, I mean, if you wanna stay as an enlisted man, if you wanna go to school further, then officer, but even an officer. I don't know why? I wouldn't stay in the army. So I just changed my mind and I went back home and then I went to work for Fairfield Tool and Die?

I Fairfield Tool and Die?

PU Fairfield Tool and Die, and they gave me a break to be an apprentice there. For two years I was there.

I Learning the trade?

PU Learning the trade. Yes.

I And you say you stayed there for two years?

PU Two years I stayed there.

I How large a shop was that?

PU Not large then, but successful. And it still is today. I don't work for Fairfield Tool and Die anymore, but unfortunately and naturally, but it's still a successful place. Yeah, still exists.

I Okay, and from there?

PU From there I went to Bridgeport Tool and Die. Bridgeport Tool and Die I worked for twenty years there.

I Ooooh.

PU That's where I stayed after that. I stayed there twenty years.

I Okay tell us about that. Well first tell us what were your duties there?

PU Tool and die maker.

I Okay explain that for folks who may not know.

PU Homemade metal, well you'd have to understand dies, whoever knows anything about dies. I don't know how much I can go into that, but it's basically working with progressive, then we were progressive dies today I think it's a little bit out of style now the progressive dies are now being with this new technology and the different advances that have been made and that it's not worth for too many progressive dies anymore.

I Let's think, what is a progressive die?

PU Okay, a progressive die is when you send in materials that went into the machine, this die then inserted into a press.

I Okay.

PU A huge press. Whatever the size of the die. But these presses were big. You send in material out come a product. We have to build a die, design it and build it to produce this product. When the material goes in, nothing but a piece of sheet metal rolled up in a coil goes in and out the other end comes a product either for any component from anywhere from making spoons to aircraft parts.

I Okay and your job was to make the die?

PU Make the die. Make it, build it and make it work.

I So they would give you the specifications or something?

PU Oh everybody in the engineering department and that's where they make the drawings and figure everything out, if it's gonna work or not and then we get it on the floor, and then we are supposed to build it. And more often enough they don't work when they're first built. (chuckle). Then a lot of changes have to be made, trouble shooting has to be made, take the bugs out, make a few more changes, and then finally we get it to work beautifully and then we produce its parts by the

millions. This is what really built the economy of the world. It's hard to make tools that will make parts cheaply. And that's what die making is.

I And how large a plant was this?

PU Bridgeport was also another, a smaller place even than Fairfield Tool. And also still prosperous and still exists.

I About how many people would you say were there?

PU I would stay about maybe thirty people, maybe forty at the time, at the peak when they employed several, quite a few people.

I And was there a Union there?

PU No, this is not a Union, neither was Fairfield Tool. Not a Union shop, no.

I Okay, how did, I guess treatment by the bosses, the working environment?

PU Working environment? Oh, wonderful, I mean, I never had any problem. I had enjoyed working with everybody. Everybody that I worked with. I never, all the bosses I ever worked with I had full respect, I never had any real problems with anything. I am happy about that. Never had any kind of problem with anybody. I had some great experience to work with these people.

I Without getting too personal, could you tell about the average pay rate there>?

PU The average pay rate, I'd have to go back more, of course time. When I left I was making; I think ten dollars an hour. That was twenty years ago.

I So that would be in the mid, late '70's?

PU Mid '70's, late '70's I was making something like ten or eleven dollars an hour. I'm not exactly sure.

I Benefits, vacation time?

PU Benefits, vacation time, all that.

I In the twenty years you spent there do you recall any strikes or lockouts or labor problems?

PU Labor problems, well we wanted to get a Union. There was in Bridgeport, trying to organize a Union. I was not for it, but if all the rest of the guys would go for a Union I'd go with them, of course. I would have to go with them. But, it didn't succeed and I didn't vote for the Union.

I They did have an election though?

PU We had an election and I saw to the attitude of how the guys were and the attitude of the entire company. Including the owner and I put everything in perspective like that. I didn't feel that the Union would do the best self-interest for everybody at this point. I didn't see anybody being discriminated against or mistreated in anyway at all. I thought everybody was treated fairly. I didn't see any real reason

for the Union other than maybe, fight for more pay. But other benefits were just fine, then, it seemed to me.

I Well, apparently majority of the...

PU And then they did not go for it. No, then they went with the majority, it's simple as that. If the majority went for it then I would have joined the Union.

I Were there any repercussions for that? I mean did people lose their jobs?

PU There were some repercussions and I don't know if anyone was fired directly and I don't think anyone was, but the atmosphere was uncomfortable after that. I guess everybody can understand that, they just felt uncomfortable, they had a hard time communicating after that and so on and so forth. A lot of them quit or soon or later found other jobs and so on.

I Why did you eventually leave Bridgeport Machine?

PU Well, naturally, I wasn't happy either, after a while. When I saw things were not improving but other deteriorating, then I thought it was time for me to leave, but this was twenty years later. This was, and much, many years later after that Union incident or anything else.

I By things deteriorating what can you...?

PU Well, we weren't getting enough work there. The overtime was falling. The overtime we made the money, this is where the money came in. A lot of times you didn't have to work the overtime, but if you was available and when you needed some extra money it was so nice to have it. You could work Saturdays, then there's double, time and half and it's all, you know it adds up.

I Sure.

PU When it's available it's easy enough to work there. But when that was gone, and then there was not coming raises, as often and falling behind with everybody else. We know what everybody in the other tool shops make.

I Oh, okay sure.

PU So, if we're falling behind the other, the others are climbing up, they're getting raises and we were not. At one time, one time Bridgeport Tool was the highest paying company for toolmakers. Then they became the least paying company for toolmakers. Because things didn't go as well as they should have and it didn't work out.

I What was the reason for this, your pay, they just weren't getting enough business or they just didn't want to pay you?

PU Well, probably a mixture of both, either way, they weren't getting enough business for overtime and the reason not for making pay raises, I don't know and that's too bad. Because others were getting pay raises and the company was not. Maybe it was hurting him, not doing as well, so the pay raises don't come in. But then you can't hold anybody back, they can leave.

I Sure.

PU And this is what I did.

I Where did you go?

PU Then I went to Lacey's.

I Tell us about that.

PU I went to Lacey's. I saw an article in the paper, advertising a tool maker and specifically a particular job. A jig lining machines and jig boying machines, these are machines with high precision. It takes a lot of patience to work with these things and they had a job opening for that and so I called up and went for an interview and they hired me. It was just that simple.

I How long did you stay, or are you still at Lacey's?

PU I'm still there now. It's been ten years now.

I Ten years. So, when did you start, when did you leave Bridgeport Machine?

PU Brideport Tool and Die.

I Tool and Die, I'm sorry.

PU Bridgeport Machine is another company.

I Yeah, that's....(laughter).

PU Okay, when did I leave ten years, '88?

I '88, okay.

PU Sure it will be ten years in September. So it's '88, it was '88.

I How big a plant is Lacey now or when you started?

PU Big. It's big.

I How big was it?

PU Oh, it's pretty big. So it has four or five hundred employees, I would believe, something like that.

I And it's located on Barnum Avenue?

PU It's on Barnum Avenue, they just built a new extension. Very modern facilities, yes. Very reformed.

I Tell us a little bit about Lacey, how did you find it as compared to Bridgeport Tool and Die?

PU It was a bigger company. Run more formally, everything has to be much better organized in so many different ways. I guess it would have to be and basically a bigger company.

I Is there a Union there?

PU We have a Union. The tool room has a Union, but the other people I don't know if they have a Union involved. Maybe some of them do, they're all kinds of departments there. The toolmakers, I know the engineers, I'm sure they probably have the Union.

I What Union do you belong to?

PU Oh, I have, let me get this. It's Tool and Die Mold Makers Union, okay; I don't want to say it wrong.

I How many of you are there in the Union at Lacey?

PU Well, that I don't know, what we are in the tool room are some twenty tool makers, but all the tool makers in New Jersey, Connecticut from all these other companies belong to this Union.

I But at Lacey they're about twenty of you?

PU At least, maybe twenty-five. I would have to count them all.

I But again, that's just specific to my trade?

PU Specific to my trade, yes.

I How's the, I don't want to ask you right out how much money you make, but how's the pay there?

PU The pay is good and the benefits are good. Oh yeah. They definitely, even with everyone else or above.

I How about the treatment, the management relationship with the work force?
How's that?

PU Well, I don't have any problems. But some do, there's always someone who has problems, but I have no problems whatsoever with anyone. Not the work force, not the people I work with and naturally not with the foreman or the management.

I Do you recall any strikes or lockouts from the time you've been there?

PU Since I've been here, there haven't been striked, no, but we've had some close moments. When the contract is over, we have to renew the Union. Then, yeah, it gets harried, but we've never striked, not yet, no. I hope not, I hope we don't.

I Lacey is, I'm trying to recall since they've opened there, they've been expanding an awful lot aren't they?

PU Expanding, sure they have, yes. It's a growing company.

I Gee, that's one of the few in Bridgeport right now that's....

PU One of the few in Bridgeport, that's interesting to me. (chuckle).

I Yeah, I'm use to hearing stories about the plant used to have X amount of employees, and now they have nothing.

PU Yeah. Not Lacey, they've gone their way; it's bigger than it was before.

I That's on the work end of it, the other thing I'd like to touch on a little bit. You did grow up here or for a good part of your time in Bridgeport. Back on Ash Street, what did somebody do on a Saturday night or whatever, where did you go for social activities or dances or whatever?

PU Oh, the dances, in the fifties? Oh it was wonderful! We had Ritz Ballroom for one. We had this great big band, like Ray Anthony and Xavier Cougat. You had some of the best names, you had Gene Krupa, Pleasure Beach on Saturday nights, you had all these places to go ballroom dancing. It was wonderful. Then there were movies, movie theaters. Main Street in Bridgeport was beautiful, we had the Loew's Poli over there, the Majestic Theater, there were several theaters there and everybody but everybody was always downtown on Saturday night. To watch either, the movies were wonderful movies that were playing in the '50s. I'll never forget when they first came, Loew's Poli, oh! it was beautiful inside. Crystal, not crystal, I'm not sure but it looked like, it was beautiful with all red carpeting. It look like an Opera House. Then what was playing? Quo Vadis...on a big huge screen.

I Quo Vadis?

PU Quo Vadis, Robert Taylor, never forget that stuff, awesome. It was beautiful. Then we came out they had penny arcade that you can go into, you know we had so much fun. And traveling everyday by bus, fifteen cents or ten cents it was.

I The old CR & L or something?

PU CR & L, yeah. (laughter) Imagine that. Twenty five cents for a movie and we'd sit, sometimes Saturday night was a movie night. There was no television, television in the '50s, there was programs but you can see a movie like that and then today's movies when you go to these square boxes, that very much like watching television at home in the '50s. (laughter).

I Good point!

PU (laughter) But then, I'm not kidding, really weird. You watch it at this movie theater and it's like an Opera House in a huge screen and ushers inside, beautiful.

I Yeah, I can remember some of those movies.

PU I'm sure you do.

I So, are you married now?

PU I'm married.

I Did you meet your wife back then?

PU No, I didn't, well this is my second marriage and I met my wife in 1960 in Bridgeport. She was from Long Island and we got married. After I went into the service we wrote to each other a lot and after I came back from the service we got married. We stayed married and then things didn't go well. I don't know if I want

to go into that. No, it didn't work out to good and it ended up in divorce. And then I married Maryann and she was divorced and she has three daughters and I had two daughters.

I Oh, there you go.

PU And now we have five daughters. (laughter) Was that a smart move, yes, it was two kids. We're still here and we're still happy.

I Okay, I guess that's about it. The last thing is as we spoke about earlier; this is going to be, this tape is going to be in the Bridgeport Public Library forever.

PU Oh, that's interesting.

I Are there any words of wisdom or anything you'd like to say, before we stop? (Tape goes off and then comes back on). Okay, here we go.

PU Enjoy life the best you can everyday of your life!

I Thank you.

PU Thank you.