

Pa's Life As an Immigrant¹

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When I was a teenager in Cleveland people would sometimes come up to me and ask, "Are you Louis Ryavec's son?" When I answered in the affirmative, I was told in a very definite voice something like, "He's a treasure. Take good care of him!"

Pa was a short man, and never weighed over 120 pounds during the almost forty years I knew him. I have wondered if the Celtic strain was strong in him. He liked to tell stories, usually while standing, the better for gesturing and body language. I find that I too like to tell stories standing up. His Sunday best was a dark suit, a sober tie, and high-top black shoes. I thought his clothes had been born a long time before I came along, in 1936. If he was working he wore blue denim overalls.

He was a hard worker, as were all the men who had immigrated from Eastern Europe. He would take vacations in order to work, usually on the house. "If you have a house you have work," he would say. He was quite outspoken. I've often thought that if he had remained in Europe he would either have wound up one of the top men in the country or dead—executed for standing up to authority. He felt he had definite rights and that they should be exercised. I often recount his exchange with the head priest at the church across the street at the start of WW II. "Germany will win this war," the half German and half Irish said. "No," my father answered. "America will win. I've traveled all over it. It's strong." He told me more than once never to be afraid to speak out. (So I became a loudmouth, always disturbing my fellow students in elementary school and eventually going into teaching, reluctantly, due to the low pay, because I love to sound off on one thing or another.) He also told me to trust people. "If you are hungry, ask people for help; don't steal. Someone will help you." He ungrudgingly helped all four of his surviving children go to college, and beyond in three cases, and willingly, never complaining about the expense and the social "distance" thereby created. Though he did mention his sadness at his sons' marriages to non-Catholics because the couples would be buried in different cemeteries.

¹ I have drawn on my daughter Karen's essay "Louis Ryavec," based on interviews with my father, dated October 26, 1978 (8 pages).

Slovenia

My father, born in 1888, came to the United States in 1909 from a small, even tiny, part of Europe—Slovenia, on the southern side of the Alps and independent since 1991, but part of Austria for 700 years as three marches (marken) or military border areas. (During the twentieth century, parts of Slovenia belonged several countries: Austria, Italy, Germany, the royal Yugoslavia as well as the communist one. Indeed, from a Slovenian point of view, parts of Slovenia are still inside Austria and Italy.) For most of his life he thought he had been born on 17 March, St. Patrick's Day. But when he needed to prove it for Social Security purposes, he contacted the Catholic Church in his part of Slovenia and found he had been born on 28 February. He told me his parents had confused his birth date with that of one of their other thirteen children. Carrying on the "tradition," he usually called me "Albert," the name of my older brother closest to me in age.

I learned early in my visits to Slovenia, starting in 1974, never to drop in on more than one relative in one day. So much alcohol would be poured for the visiting relative that he would be in no shape to visit anyone else that day. Even visits to universities might involve at least the ceremonial drink of brandy-and in the morning. I still remember an appointment with a dean who poured us brandy and then took us on a short tour of the university. When we returned the man's office was suffused with a delicious odor by sunlight hitting the brandy.

There is something very special about Slovenia, though I cannot, even after much thought on the subject, state what it is in any brief, clear-cut and objective way that would delineate Slovenia from other small countries or ethnic areas. The Slovenians have done very well in their relationship with Western Europe, having been admitted to the EU and NATO prior to some other, larger, states in the area. They have a well-functioning democracy. Even during the communist period Slovenia was a haven for people who did not fit into the more authoritarian or rigid parts of that distinctive communist-run country, never a part of the Soviet "bloc." They were first in many socio-economic indicators among the several countries of east-central Europe for decades. *The New York Times* once called the Slovenians "the Scots of Yugoslavia"—that is, the people who made the system work. A German businessman whom I once met in the USSR said of the Slovenians, "a clever people" and then asked, "Do you know what we [the Germans] call them?" No, I answered with great interest. "The Jews of Yugoslavia," he replied with a grin, having noted that he was often there on business. (Interestingly, the Slovenians were one of those peoples whom the Nazis considered potential Germans, once they were purged of their intellectuals and nationalists. It wouldn't have worked.)

Their concentration in a relatively small, hilly and mountainous area has aided in giving them a national consciousness. In the past, they often coped with success by becoming Germans or, earlier, Venetians (Italians). But this no longer takes place. Most are, or were, Catholic, though they were affected by the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation. The Bible was translated into Slovenian during the same century, the sixteenth, that Luther put it into German. (The Russians got the Bible in their language only in the nineteenth century.) During the communist period (1945–91) Slovenia was one of the few places that produced an “excess” of priests (more than were needed domestically.) In 1973, at my father’s funeral in Cleveland, Ohio I met a priest from Slovenia who had been trained in Russian for missionary work in Russia once the country opened up. (A Slovenian would be less objectionable to Russians than a Pole would be.)

It is likely that being surrounded by several talented peoples: the Austrians, the Italians, the Hungarians, and the Croatians, contributes in some ways to the Slovenians’ successes. Now, in 2014, it will be interesting to see how much time it will take for them to emerge out of the current European economic malaise. In all probability, they will find a way.

Pa’s Life in Slovenia

My father, named Aloysius there but using the name Louis here, was one of thirteen children born to a peasant family in Trnovo *pri* (or “near”) Nova Gorica, a Slovenian city abutting the Italian city of Gorizia. Trnovo is a village uphill from Gorizia and the Italian border at about 800 meters elevation, in an area that saw much fighting during WW I. (In 1974 I listened to a man who had been there, tell us, in my father’s dialect, about the situation; “It was winter with snow up to here,” he said, gesturing to his neck.) Hemingway was there, too (see his novel *A Farewell to Arms*), and thought the Slovenians were Italians speaking in dialect. My mother’s house in an adjacent village was destroyed by Italian shelling in the first war, and was not re-built, but my father’s stone house, burned out by German troops in the Second World War, has been restored, and much improved in recent decades. A woman relative who had been living there during the war told me the only warning from German troops was “Raus!” (“Out!”) She had to live in the woods in winter with her baby. “It was bad,” (*hudo*), she said. (The Germans were trying to deal with the common problem for armies abroad, eliminating places that were supplying indigenous forces.)

Trnovo is very near the forest (*gozd*). At the edge of this forest and not far from Trnovo is the tiny village of Rijavci, from which term my surname was derived. (The surname Rijavec must

come from the Slovenian words for “brown” or “rust:” “rjav” and “rja.” The “i” after the “R” was, a specialist on Slavic languages told me, inserted into the name by Italian priests to make the it easier for them to pronounce.)

I stayed in the house overnight in the summer of 1974, when the property was still in the family. In the late nineteenth century for the first time in history, perhaps due to Austrian public health measures, most of the children lived—and thereby created a land shortage and political dissatisfaction. To earn money for land, my father and two of his older brothers came to the U.S. in 1909. The day Pa came off the boat he was working in a factory in Brooklyn. My mother, Rosalia Plesnicar from Slovenia, also came to Brooklyn, in 1912, to work as a maid for a German-American family for two years. Her first English words were “yellow turnip,” words she memorized when sent to the store on her own to buy turnips. Pa went to see the factory when he was in his eighties and visiting my brother, an attorney in Brooklyn. It was still there.

Stories from Europe

Another family once tried to kill my paternal grandfather, who was alone in a brawl at a bar or inn. But they failed. “He was tough,” (“On je bil trd.” or “He was hard.”), my father said with an appreciative laugh when telling that story.

My grandfather could not read well. This itself led to a reduction of the class position of the family. He had been a builder. One day he was shown plans of a house someone wanted built and agreed to build it for a certain price. He thought the plans were for a single-story house. But he was wrong. It was to be a two-story. Still, he had to build it, and for the cost of a one-story. This ran him out of the construction business. But the family retained their own house, a three-story stone structure, and some land and farm animals. (In 2000, when I visited a farm in Tibet I felt very much at home. The arrangement was the same as in Slovenia. The people lived upstairs in stone houses and the animals downstairs.) But the Tibetans had running water; a nearby mountain stream. They also had a tough mastiff, which they put on the roof during the day. My family in Slovenia got drinking water from rainwater in cisterns hewn out of solid rock. Luckily, the rock in the mountainous area where they lived was limestone, which produces good-tasting water. (Limestone has been used to de-acidify streams and ponds in the U.S.).

My father and his father went on trips for one reason or another, walking to other villages and were sometimes unable to make it back home by sundown and so slept in the woods with leaves as a blanket. Once my father woke up because something was sleeping on him. When

he felt it was a snake he instinctively threw it into the woods—and hoped it wouldn't come back. During these walks through the woods father and son would sometimes come across poachers in black face carrying the Kaiser's deer. Nobody said anything to anybody as they passed each other by. There was fear that the poachers might do them in.

Pa started working for the family at age five, and attended school only when the family could spare him. Still, he wound up with a serviceable knowledge of at least four languages: English, German, Slovenian and some other Slavic language. It isn't clear to me which one. He told me that his older brother Andy, the communist of the family, could speak seven languages. (It was arguing with Andy that was my introduction to political discourse.) One of Pa's early jobs on the farm in Slovenia was to hold the reins and control the movement of the horse pulling the hay cart as hay was cut, with scythes, for the cows. (The scythes had rather short blades to minimize their hitting the uneven ground. During my first visit to Trnovo, in 1974, I was asked to scythe, but the request was withdrawn when it was learned I had never done such work. No one wanted their scythe ruined.) These Slovenians were doing "alpine-type agriculture," raising fodder for cows in order to get milk and cheese.

I always thought this early start in the world of work, common to immigrants from Eastern Europe, set an important pattern for Pa for later life. He was devoted to work, and worked well, and communicated the standard that a job could be done perfectly. (I think this was very important for encouraging good academic and scholarly work on my part. I was gratified, many years later, when a former national security adviser to the President of the United States said of one of my books, "You were very careful" in that book.) I remember Pa's insisting that I paint without leaving brush marks, hard to do with the paints of the 1940s. Indeed, he would make his own house paint. I can still see him sitting in the garage stirring for hours to make the mix of now illegal white lead and linseed oil come to the right consistency. Ironically, that garage never held a car of ours. My father never wanted a car. He didn't believe in them. Still, he and his two brothers lengthened the garage after cars got longer. (Once, when I was a teenager, he offered me a car. But I couldn't accept. I felt I had no right to take a car from a man who didn't have one.)

Potatoes were a crucially important staple, as they were in Ireland and elsewhere. It was potatoes, originally from South America, which allowed the population of Europe to increase greatly, and possible excessively. Slovenia's rocky and mountainous terrain was not at all ideal for growing potatoes. So peasants dug up the ground to a depth of more than a meter and then strained it back in, making tall cairns of the rocks. Removing all rocks was of fundamental importance. Even in northern Ohio

where we lived, where there are few rocks, I was taught to remove any rock I found in the garden, no matter how small it was. This is more “gardening” than farming. (Slovenians have been called “urban peasants.” I still have to have a vegetable garden every year in order to feel I am a decent human being. My father once said of a certain family member, “He’s a good man, but there are rocks in his soil.” I remember from my childhood that one common meal was mashed potatoes with buttermilk and big chunks of bacon. I rather liked it.

One way of making extra cash for the family in Slovenia was going down rope ladders into certain caves and bringing up blocks of ice on one’s back. The ice was then covered with leaves and sent in wagons to breweries in Milan, maybe via train the final distance. Probably there was no artificial way of making ice at the time.

Work is almost a defining characteristic of Slovenians. (The Slovenian newspaper paper of the League of Communists was entitled *Delo* or Work.) One Slovene myth is that of the peasant Martin Krpan, who, in one of his Paul-Bunyan-type exploits, carries an ox to safety across a stream in winter. (I have a Slovenian children’s book with such a picture on the cover.) The ox had to live for the family to survive.

Moving Out

In 1909 three of the brothers decided to go to America to earn money for the purchase of their own farmland in Slovenia. This was something thousands of others in Eastern Europe had been doing since the 1880s. (Yes, many people came to America to escape persecution, but I think most came for economic reasons, planning to return to Europe with cash.) The brothers left at night without telling anyone. My father said more than once that the hardest part was not telling his mother. One brother had already served in the military and could legally leave, another was deserting from the Austrian army, and my father was about due for his compulsory military service. He said that it was obvious that there was going to be a war. Every summer the hills and mountains were filled with troops on maneuver. (The Cold War brought similar military moves in the area.) When I flew into Warsaw in 1974 and saw the airport ringed with a very large force I thought of his words. And I did so again in the late 1980s while driving at night in Austria back towards Slovenia. A squad of armed troops was walking south along the highway, without any reflective gear. During the Yugoslav period Yugoslav troops bedded down each night within a few meters of the border with Italy. Romania regularly conducted military maneuvers directed at the U.S.S.R.) The brothers traveled first to Italy and then to Basel in Switzerland. In Italy they ran into a German Army recruiter who tried to talk them into joining up. But, although they listened to the man’s spiel, they continued on. There was no need then for passports or visas. Europe’s

borders were open. The only bureaucratic hitch was the need to pay a tax on any tobacco in one's possession when crossing a border. When they got to France they wrote home. (France was not an ally of Austria and would not detain them.) They left Europe on the French ship Chicago out of Le Havre and were at sea for twenty-eight days. Seasickness was a problem for them, but apparently they could keep onions down. They arrived in New York on 27 April 1909. Pa was twenty-one.

Arrival and Early Days

His first American job started the day he arrived. He worked on the docks in Brooklyn, unloading cargo of heavy timbers, including twelve by twelves twenty feet long. He left after a few months because his shoulders were always bleeding. After New York, Pa was a coal miner in West Virginia. Here he showed his intelligence and spirit. Twice the mine shaft collapsed after he had come out. About this he said, "God gave me two warnings." One day, with the workers outside the mine after charges had been set, the foreman asked him to "go down and see why the dynamite didn't go off." This was a test. Upon hearing that Pa threw down his shovel and walked off the job. "You couldn't get ahead there," he said, given the prices in the factory store. I'm very glad he left West Virginia; a place that still has a "dead-end" quality for many, particularly now that there's less and less need for coal.

This work was followed by a few years in the West, where he was paid twenty percent more than in the East: \$2.50 per day vs.\$2.00. He worked in a gold mine somewhere and then mined copper in Billings, Montana, where he worked over an operating crusher machine using a breaker bar to loosen up the ore in the machine, one more dangerous job in a long life of such jobs. One night he came out of the mine to see Halley's Comet doing its thing in the sky, dating this job to 1910. He left the copper mine after a few months because the fumes were terrible and headed out to the west coast. Traveling was done by hitching rides on freight trains. One time he and his brother tried riding in a refrigerator car but had to give it up due to the cold.

Now we come to his three-year stay in the Northwest, mostly in Oregon, near Eugene and Marcola, though he did some work in Tacoma, Washington too, where he helped build a reservoir. I may have seen it during my two-year stay in the area while in the Navy there (1957-59). The logging period may well have been the happiest one in his life. Pa said that he never ate better. The Chinese cook baked several pies a day. But there was one clear rule: "Rollout or roll up;" that is, illness didn't allow avoiding work. Pa became a head faller, the man who decided how the trees were to be cut down. He would cut them down so

one group would fall parallel to each other and then the second group would be felled to fall at right angles to the first group. All this with hand tools. The chain saw did not yet exist. The trees, such as Douglas firs, were virgin growth and huge, as big around as normal-sized rooms. (We have photographs. In one, Pa and one of his brothers are cutting off the top of a tree from a springboard high above the ground-and without a safety net, probably an unheard-of luxury at the time.) Skin cuts were covered with tree sap and left to heal. (In our basement was a bottle with old sap in it, brought from Oregon years before. The sap would move, ever so slowly, when the bottle was turned over.) For bug bites they would cover their skin with kerosene. The only machinery may have been a small narrow gauge train on temporary tracks that were moved from place to place that took out the logs, probably to a main railroad line. Pa once went "western," and bought a revolver. But, after a brief time, he threw it into a river. He would often say, about weapons, "All the guns should be thrown into the ocean." He was a pacifist and one who spoke out and gave his views in no uncertain terms.

One time he took the option of being paid in gold, but only once. The gold was so heavy it almost tore out his pockets. He made enough money to buy eighty acres of virgin timber in Oregon, near Roseburg, if I remember correctly. He kept this property until deep into the Depression, when a priest to whom he spoke about the burden said, "Don't put good money after bad." He followed the advice, but he often expressed resentment at it, his anti-clericalism showing. He knew he could have made some real money out of that land during WW II.

The forests seem to have been teeming with immigrant workers. They readily fell into friendships. Once he lent money to a Hungarian guy he had only just met. He still remembered the man would literally pour pepper into *his* soup until it was black. Months later, after deciding that the money was gone for good, he ran into the man, who said he had been looking for him and produced the repayment.

Pa seems to have roamed about the entire Northwest by train, but often without paying for a ticket. He would get into a boxcar or ride on top of a freight car, often getting sooted up in tunnels. He never rode under the cars and quickly learned not to ride in refrigerator cars-too cold. There was risk involved in this mode of travel, of course, and not only from the normal dangers of hitching rides on fast-moving vehicles. He said that the railroad dicks, if they caught you, might well kill you. It was common, he told a disbelieving friend of mine who was from an upper-class background and just could not believe how things were. Once Pa was leaving a railroad yard after a trip and realized he was being followed by two men who must have been detectives. He decided to make them break off. He stopped under a streetlight, put *his* hand into his pocket as if he had a gun. The two men

stopped dead, looked at him, spat out a few words of contempt and headed back to the yard.

To Cleveland. Marriage and the Railroad

Years before my father had met the woman who was to become my mother. She lived in a nearby village, Voglarji, not far to the north of Trnovo. In 1974 I drove there in a little rented BMW and felt I was driving up a dry stream bed and had to stop and wait for a horse-drawn hay wagon that had burst out of the woods to cross my path, with the driver, an old man, cursing me and cars in the same dialect my father would have used. The place's elevation seems to be about 845-850 meters and during World War One was so close to the front it was shelled by the Italian Army and her house was destroyed.

In about 1914, my father in Oregon found out that my mother, Rosalia Plesnicar, was now living in Cleveland, Ohio. Pa was able to obtain her address and wrote to her. A correspondence ensued which resulted in an agreement to marry. To me, this suggests the two had known each other rather well in the "old country." My father then headed back east, and took the long way 'round, via southern California and New Orleans. This is when he was impressed by the power and wealth of the United States.

All I know about the wedding day, in August 1914, is that it snowed heavily. My mother said it was a blizzard. They must have been married in St. Mary's church, the Slovenian church in the Collinwood area in eastern Cleveland. The married couple made a very impressive photograph, with my father seated with my mother standing beside him, both looking very serious. They went to buy a building lot after the ceremony.

They lived at first in a room in the house of another Slovene family and then were able to build a large two-family brick house on Holmes Avenue in St. Mary's parish in Collinwood. But they decided to sell the house. According to my daughter's discussions with my father during the 1970s, he was determined not to live in a non-English-speaking neighborhood; he wanted to live in a neighborhood where mainly English was spoken. (At that time about fifteen percent of the U.S. population was foreign-born, mainly from Europe. My wife's mother, as a girl in Cincinnati, Ohio, attended a public school, which was bi-lingual in the English and German languages.) Pa realized that the schools would be better in an "English" neighborhood and thought that if his children grew up in a Slavic area they would feel they had to remain there. He was probably correct.

When they put the house up for sale, some Italian neighbors came to them and asked that they not sell to Calabrianos or Sicilianos (southern

Italians). In around 1922 they moved north about a mile to a small house in Shore Acres, an “English” neighborhood on the shore of Lake Erie, where I was born in 1936, the last of five children and the first to be born in a hospital. The move put us into a more mainstream existence with better “life chances” but with the loss of fluency in Slovenian for the children. It also put us into a different parish, St Jerome’s, whose rector was half Irish and half German. My mother once told me that the Irish were a big help to us. They “had been through it before,” she said. We found that it cost more money to live there because the neighborhood had a beach on the lake plus a pier and some buildings there as well as a tennis court nearby. These were supported by an obligatory assessment (supported by the courts) on every household. My father worked it off with manual labor in the evenings every year. But by my time we were able to pay it.

And it was there that the family changed its name—twice: first to Reavetz and then, legally, to Ryavec. Rijavec was impossible for Americans to pronounce. And that’s how our surname became one that made some people think we were from Iceland. We were the only Slavic family in the neighborhood for decades.

Cleveland at the time offered plenty of work. It has long been a city with a diversity of industries and several railroads passing through. (John D. Rockefeller played these railroads against each other to get the best price for the shipment of his oil). It also contained a number of Slavic and other ethnic groups, with the Slovenians on the east side in two main areas. One of my father’s first jobs there was for GE. He did sandblasting inside big tanks and without any protective clothing during twelve-hour workdays. He then found work on a railroad, the New York Central, as a car repairer. This was an outdoor job year-round, and could be dangerous. Pa survived various serious accidents and many minor ones. I remember two: the air hammer which had been badly locked and kicked back and hit him in the jaw and the time he was pinned down under a railroad engine which had fallen off jack. Luckily, since he was between the tracks he was only partially crushed. My mother got a telephone call about that one and we rushed to the hospital. For some weeks thereafter he was putting a big bandage on his stomach before going to work. Wood slivers deep in his hands were common. The box cars were wooden back then (the 1940s). His skin was so tough I had to use a straight razor to get to some of the slivers. Only then could I finally use a needle to get them out. One accident he joked about was the time, while taking an old boxcar apart prior to rebuilding it, he had driven a spike through his hand and then, with a return stroke of the hammer pulled out the spike. His fellow workers poured schnaps (whiskey) through the hole and bandaged it up; then Pa went right back to work. More than once he said, “If I had known how hard it was going to be I would not have come [to America–KR].” But this statement covered a multitude of problems.

Most of the workers were Slavic immigrants of various ethnic groups. In learning how to communicate intelligibly with each other on the job they "re-invented" proto-Slavic, the language spoken by the Slavs prior to the year 800. I once asked a visiting Czech academic, a linguist, if this was true. He answered in the affirmative. (How close was this renewed language to Old Church Slavonic, the language still used in Orthodox Church services?)

A few stories from the early Cleveland period: My mother used to deliver my father's lunch to him in the railroad yard. To do this she had to climb over parked trains while wearing long skirts. During WW I my father appeared before a draft board and was exempted from the draft on the grounds of his having children. During the 1918 flu epidemic, which killed more people than did WW I, my mother was stricken and my father tended to her. He was determined not to fall ill, or all would be lost. So he got a bottle or two of whiskey and drank some every few hours while he kept replacing hot bricks wrapped in cloths at my mother's feet and head. It worked. They survived.

An interesting thing happened sometime after the war. My father met a man who had known his younger brother who had died in the failed attempt of a Slovene ex-general in the Austrian army to create a Slovene state. While talking to him a feeling came over my father that this man had killed his brother. That must have been difficult to deal with. Another tragedy of this early period was the death of the only girl in our family, Gabriella, who died of diphtheria despite the all-night help of a doctor who tried to keep her airway clear but failed. (There was no inoculation for diphtheria then). My mother never really recovered from this loss of her only daughter. She talked about it now and then, saying "You have to talk about things that hurt you." Despite this tragedy, she had long-term support from the several women who came to America with her. Most or all of them were from her village. In 1936 she gave birth to me, when she was forty-five. Her old friends had told her, "It's impossible. "But it happened. (My father was then about forty-eight.) Her old village friends helped her a lot then. In this sense she had never left her village. Indeed, an anthropologist has called the Slovenians of Cleveland "urban villagers." I can relate to that. Every spring I had to dig up the garden by hand (and learned to cope with blisters and eventually, to avoid them by using gloves). The garden was about seventy by forty feet, at the back of the lot. One of my uncles, Andy, a brother of my father (who had served in the Austrian cavalry), built his house at the back of his lot, with the garden and fruit trees at the front. Thus, he created a little bit of Slovenia in the American Midwest. He and his wife were older than my parents and had adapted less to the U.S. Their little house was filled with the smell of boiled milk. They must have known this would kill the germs, but they must not have trusted pasteurized milk from the stores. Andy was the first person with whom I had political arguments. He was the family

“communist,” though he never joined the party. (So, the FBI had no file on us then. I know; I obtained my 26-page FBI file. It took two years to get). My father was the “socialist” (until FDR appeared), and Pete, who owned an apartment house, was the “capitalist” Andy always took me seriously and never showed anger in the face of my “Americanist” ravings. He always wore a cap, even indoors. I wondered why.

Eventually I saw him without a cap on. He was bald; the only one of the three brothers in the U.S. without hair on his head. This political variation among the three brothers was not unusual among immigrants then. A Greek-American book salesman told me that his three uncles were similarly divided politically.

The 1930s brought a time of privation, the Great Depression (the sixth depression in American history.) But my father kept his job. He was never out of work. (Even after he retired people offered him jobs.) It was also a time of big, ugly labor disputes and strikes, some of which affected the family. At that time the Ohio National Guard routinely shot strikers. (A unit from a particular place, Marysville, down on the Ohio River, where the people were very anti-union, was run up and down the state to confront strikers. One could join the Guard at age fifteen. The rifles of the Guard were always “locked and loaded” when on duty (as we were to see at Kent State in the early 1970s).

One strike against the railroad where my father worked, the New York Central (as it was then called), caused him and one of his brothers, who also had worked there, not to speak to each other for ten years. At some point in the strike the railroad announced that all would be forgiven and everyone would be taken back if the workers showed up for work on a certain date. The workers split on this offer. My father, who had four children, decided to go back to work. His brother Pete, having only one child, and many other workers decided to continue the strike. So they lost their jobs and had to start over on another railroad, the “Pennsy,” without any seniority. The railroad got “its own” back. My father, to keep his job, had to buy a share of NYC stock—at \$100; about \$2,000 in today’s money. It lost most of its value and was worth very little in the 1950s.

A big, “showy” strike took place at Fisher Body, a big maker of car^hbodies for GM in a huge, sprawling plant on East 140th Street some two miles from my house in about 1937. This was a “Polish-style” strike; the workers took over the plant and locked out the management and the National Guard. My mother’s younger brother, Angel Plesnicar, a man with an interesting and original turn of mind (he once tried to teach a crow to talk), welded shut the plant doors from inside. The workers’ kids, including his son Don, brought food to the strikers by going in under and through holes in the fence. This strike was successful, I believe. Angel continued to work there, as did a cousin of

mine, Frank Wolf. Angel and his wife ran a convenience store across from the plant for some years. My mother and I used to visit them there. Here's where he again exhibited originality. He got rid of the rats in the store by catching one alive, painting it green, and releasing it. The trick worked. The rats departed for other climes.

The 1930s also saw the momentarily scary drama of my parents' need to get a new mortgage in order to keep the house. After being turned away at various banks, a bank worker at one bank agreed to give them a mortgage. He was soon fired, but my parents were loyal to him in his new business, selling insurance. They bought their house insurance from him for the rest of their lives. And he prospered. His house was in Gates Mills, a high-end suburb of Cleveland, a place visited years later by "W."

We had a telephone then, but only because my father was on the railroad's wrecking crew, which could be called out at any time, day or night. He would regale me with stories of the wrecks, some of which were truly memorable, with cars standing up straight and animals running about after escaping from the cars. Once he came home with a live rooster. Someone else had acquired a pig. I did not know about the rooster and awakened to its early morning call, thinking, little kid that I was, that there was a ghost in the basement. The rooster didn't last long. I was drafted into holding it while it was killed for dinner. I'll always remember the smell of it being thrust into hot water for the plucking.

The start of WW II has stayed with me. The Pearl Harbor attack occurred when I was four years old, almost five. I remember being in the living room while my father and two of my three adult brothers talked-in a serious quiet way while standing. (The eldest was already on active duty, having been called up in 1940 as member of the naval reserves.) I knew something important was up; the thick Sunday paper was on a footstool, with a big, bold black headline. Though I could not yet read I knew that a big headline was special. (Years later, while in my second year in the Navy, I served under the man who as a young naval officer at the Navy Department, had taken the notification of the attack to the White House. Since it was classified, he had to take it himself. No car was available so he took it on a bicycle.)

Sometime during the war Pa told me, very seriously, with a reflective expression, that for the first time in his life, he had earned ten dollars in one day. This munificent sum (equal to about \$80.00 today) was earned on the basis of piece-work, real measurable work, not pay by the hour. He would take all the overtime he could get, but there was a bit of a catch in getting the overtime. His foreman was Irish and, after their work was done, they would walk home together. The foreman lived around the corner from us. The walk was never direct, however. The foreman

couldn't pass a bar, called a saloon, at that time. He would say, "Louie, let's step in here for a while." My father had to do it-in order to keep getting the overtime work. He said to me once, reflectively, "You know, if you own a saloon and you have eight or so regular Irish customers you can probably stay in business." That doesn't mean Slovenians don't drink or make wine.

At some point in the war Pa noticed lend-lease aid for the Soviet Union coming through the yard. One time a whole trainload of locomotives came in and stopped. He was curious and found that the locomotives' wheels were about a hand's length further apart than ours-due to the broad gauge of the Russian tracks.

In 1947, at about age sixty, due to his painful arthritis, he retired from the railroad on a disability pension and moved to the Mojave Desert in California where his eldest son was then living. My mother and I stayed in Cleveland. It was in California in the spring of 1949 that a letter, probably the first in years, came from relatives in his village, now in Yugoslavia. An extremely important political change had occurred-Stalin had thrown the Yugoslav communists out of the "bloc" (the Cominform), probably thinking that they would not survive on their own. Soon it was permissible to communicate with one's relatives in the capitalist world. The letter from the village asked for assistance. As an answer, my father and brother put together a large, long box full of gardening tools as well as vegetable seeds. Yugoslavia eventually received a great deal of material assistance, including weaponry, from the United States government. (Years later a relative of mine in Yugoslavia, an auto worker, asked me why the American tanks were polished and smoothed up on the outside. Russian tanks' sides were uneven and rough. "Why," he asked, "A tank is for war. I don't remember how I answered that cultural question, one of many such I had to handle in my forty years of teaching about Russia.)

One good thing about the desert for Pa were the hot springs. My brother would take him to one or another of these hot springs, where he would stay for a week or so. He particularly liked a place called Hobo Hot Springs, both for the muscle-soothing hot water and the conversations. The hot tub had not yet been invented, I think. In the spring of 1949 he got a light job at the famous Ahwanee Hotel in Yosemite National Park. He would keep the sidewalks clear of snow and did other light work there. One Christmas he sent my mother and me a redwood box containing presents for us. Included was a checked green checked woodsman's jacket that a couple neighborhood kids said they wished was theirs.

He returned to Cleveland in 1950 or so, riding "hard" (as the Russians would put it) all the three-four days' train trip. He never paid for a berth or compartment in his life. He decided to make some wine, something

he had done years earlier. He had a wine press in the basement and two or more fifty-gallon barrels. Doing this work probably took away some fascination I might have acquired for alcohol. This was work, starting with getting the 30-plus boxes of grapes off the truck and into the basement. It was interesting to see him do all the things that were necessary, such as taking apart the barrels, cleaning them and putting them back together. He had a cooper's hammer for this work. I have it still. He made the barrels and the press tighten up their seams by using cornmeal and water. I remember he and I together turning the jack that pressed the grapes for every last drop of their juice. We pushed so hard that we bent the steel bar working the jack.

Pa bought Muscatel grapes partly because they had a high sugar content which would yield a high level of alcohol. The bung had to be left out of the barrel opening during the fermentation so the barrel did not explode. One of my uncles didn't know this rule and wound up with a very sticky wine-soaked kitchen. We operated in the basement. I remember that the new wine would be moved from one barrel to another during a full moon. He bottled some of this wine, which turned into a very good sherry or, sometimes, because no preservative was used, into vinegar. As he got older, he would burn off the alcohol before he drank it, particularly in winter.

He worked various jobs during the 1950s, and thereby earned two additional pensions: social security and a State of Ohio pension. He got a job on the state highway department after getting a note from a Democratic Party activist which said "This is Louis Ryavec; he's a good man. See what you can do for him." These jobs provided the money for getting me through college, Miami of Ohio, from which I graduated in 1957, and then commissioned in the Navy. I always remember that, in Cleveland, during the big snow of the early 1950s, when no vehicles save fire engines and National Guard tanks were on the roads for a week, he worked on a highway crew for four or more days, sleeping in trucks at night. On the morning he was able to get home I passed him on my way to high school. He was walking, with difficulty, as if on autopilot and neither of us said anything as we passed each other. A conversation at such a time would have been a waste of his precious remaining energy. Pretty good for a guy in his sixties.

Sometime in the late 1960s or early 1970s he returned to California and my brother's home in Santa Monica. My mother, partially paralyzed after a stroke, was with him. A few years after she died he passed away in Santa Monica hospital on 21 March 1973, aged eighty-five years, from, according to the death certificate, an "acute cerebral vascular accident" arising from "generalized arteriosclerosis and arteriosclerotic heart disease." I was told by someone in the family that he had been helping my brother re-

roof the house. Others deny this. He knew he was about to die. Accordingly, three days before he died he asked to be taken to the hospital. This foreknowledge of death and bringing on of death is not unknown among Slavic peasants. See a story by the Russian writer Turgenev and "Death Waits for Uncle Janez," a story by the Slovene-American writer Louis Adamic.

The funeral service mass took place at Saint Mary's Church in Cleveland. It was a truly memorable and a highly moving service in which many "songs of his youth" were sung by the choir. A great send-off for a great man. I am reminded of the lines by the Irish poet Seamus Heaney:

By God, the old man could
 handle a spade.
Just like his old man.

.....

But I've no spade to follow...
Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it.

University of Massachusetts