



NEIGHBORHOOD STORIES

By Bette McDevitt



Mary Petrich leads a tour of the Maxo Vanka murals at St. Nicholas Croatian Catholic Church in Millvale.
Photo by Richard Domencic.

Mary and Maxo

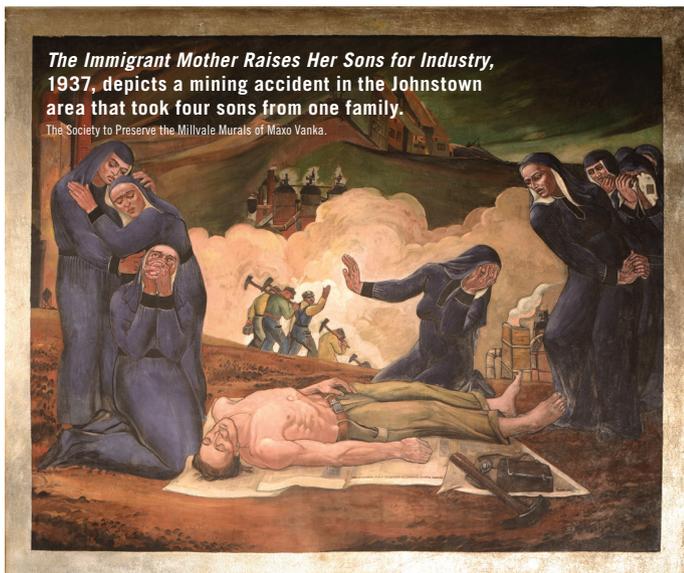
Mary Petrich could describe the Maxo Vanka murals in St. Nicholas Croatian Catholic Church in Millvale, all 25 of them, in detail, even if her eyes were covered. As we sit in her apartment in Lawrenceville, she virtually places us in the church. “On the right side,” she says, with a graceful gesture of her arm, “is the mother weeping for her son killed in the mines. And just across from it,” with a sweep of her arm in the other direction, “is the mother weeping for her son lost to war.” Each of the 25 murals is painted in her mind’s eye.

The murals were created by Maxo Vanka, an artist with a spiritual sense of social justice. He moved from his homeland of Croatia to New York City in 1934, and

Father Zagar, pastor of St. Nicholas, having seen an exhibition of his work, invited him to come to Millvale to “beautify the church and tell the story of this parish, the people.” Vanka went at it.

“My walls have claimed me, every inch of the church must be painted,” Vanka wrote to his family. During two sessions, in 1937 and 1941, he covered the walls and called it his “Gift to America.” There are few people as connected to the murals as Mary Petrich.

Mary, now in her eighth decade, grew up going to the church and nearby school. She recalls, “We lived on Hatfield Street in Lawrenceville and my five siblings and I walked to school every day and to Mass on



The Immigrant Mother Raises Her Sons for Industry, 1937, depicts a mining accident in the Johnstown area that took four sons from one family.
The Society to Preserve the Millvale Murals of Maxo Vanka.



The Croatian Mother Raises Her Son for War, 1937.
The Society to Preserve the Millvale Murals of Maxo Vanka.

Sunday as a family. We saw the progress of the murals every day, while attending mass before school. Vanka came early and worked very late. We weren't supposed to bother him. I was nine years old, and was fascinated by the images."

She remembers, "Father Zagar was a simple man. For him to permit this type of painting was totally amazing. People were used to churches with saints and pious artwork. Vanka portrayed ordinary people experiencing the same things in life that Mary and Jesus experienced. He brought religion to people where they lived, with their feet on the ground."

Describing another mural, Mary continued:

Over the altar, you see Mother Mary as a queen on a throne in the Byzantine fashion, holding the infant Jesus. Her muscular body and her large hands reveal that she is a peasant woman. Her eyes follow you around the room. On one side is the peaceful village in Croatia, and on the other side, the immigrant workers in Millvale. The workers are holding the church in their hands, and that is different from Europe where wealthy benefactors gave money to build the church, and their portraits would hang in the church. But here Vanka shows the workers who built the church, offering it as a gift to Mary. He dignifies the ordinary person. That always impressed me.



Mary, Queen of Croatsians, 1937. The large altar painting portrays Mary in traditional Croatian colors and with large, working hands. Above her is "Mary, Queen of Croatsians, Pray For Us.

The Society to Preserve the Millvale Murals of Maxo Vanka.

It was logical, then, that Mary, after a career as a public health nurse and educator, became one of the first docents to lead people on tours of the murals. "In the year 2000, on our 100th anniversary, Francis Babic, an art historian of Croatian ancestry, came from Cleveland to talk about the murals." Babic made the connections between religion and the shared experience of humanity.

I had always loved the murals—they are biblical, and I know my Bible—but what Frances did was open my eyes to the concept of motherhood as a unifying theme. I realized that I had a story to tell, with three themes at the core: the grieving mother, the contrast between the old and new country, and social injustice, revealed in war and exploitation of the worker. People who came to the tours gave me ideas, so the story grew.

Hurricane Ivan inundated Millvale in 2004, damaging the church and community. "We knew the murals needed cleaning, but the water damage showed up slowly. The water went through the wall, dissolved the plaster, and



The Croatian Family, 1941, depicts a simple meal of soup and bread in the presence of Jesus.

The Society to Preserve the Millvale Murals of Maxo Vanka.

caused an incrustation,” said Mary. “Ivan woke us up to the fact that the murals are a treasure.” Since then, a fund raising campaign (supported by the entire community and, led by The Society to Preserve the Millvale Murals of Maxo Vanka) has allowed for the restoration of 10 of the 25 murals and the design of state-of-the-art LED lighting of the murals.

Mary led tours for 12 years and trained more than 10 docents, many of them members of the church. More than 2,000 people toured the church in 2015. In the beginning, Mary used a flashlight to illuminate the murals, but soon the murals will have museum-quality lighting that can adjust to the needs of the church community. Permanent lighting for eight of the murals will be completed by the end of 2016.

The murals touch visitors in unexpected ways. “I gave a tour to three women from Vietnam,” Mary recalled, “three generations of women, and when they saw the suffering from war in the murals, they sobbed, because they’ve had that experience.” Sobbing sometimes, perhaps a lump in the throat, but many times viewing the murals is a joy. One of the favorites, called *The Croatian Family*, shows a family praying before a simple meal. It is reminiscent of *The Potato Eaters*, by Van Gogh. “When I look at the mural of the family having a meal together,” Mary said, “I think of my mother serving us soup, and I can smell the soup, and the bread!”

For Mary, the murals bring hope. “On the lower walls, you see all the agony people

experience, and you raise your eyes up to upper murals, the heavenly scenes, and there you see hope. To this day, the murals affect me tremendously.”



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