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Interview with Robert G. Vanecko

Date: 5 March 2010

Location: UIC Historian's Office, 815 W. Van Buren St., Chicago, IL.

Present: Robert G. Vanecko, Dr. David W. Veenstra, and Jason Marcus Waak

Jason Marcus Waak: It is March 5, 2010. We are sitting with Robert G. Vanecko. Mr. Vanecko, if you could just state again, your name for the record, and your relationship to Richard J. Daley. Then maybe just start off with some of your background, growing up, your education, etc.

Robert G. Vanecko: As you said, I'm Robert G. Vanecko, the grandchild of Richard J. Daley, and the oldest grandchild. I grew up here in Chicago on the northwest side in the Sauganash neighborhood. I went to Queen of All Saints Grammar School, Loyola Academy High School, Yale University, and then to Northwestern Law School.

JMW: What are your earliest memories of your grandfather?

RGV: If I can pick it out, what's the earliest? Most of what I remember is doing things with him as a kid, going to White Sox games, going to Bears games, Blackhawks games, and fishing. He was a fisherman. He really liked going fishing.

JMW: Yes. We've heard a lot of fishing stories (DWV laughs).

RGV: Right. We played baseball up in Grand Beach.

JMW: Did he pitch to you guys?

RGV: Yes. He would pitch the ball to us. We would help him. He did a lot of putzing around the house up there. He had his little workshop. I remember going around and helping him. He had all kinds of bird feeders on the property. So we would help him with filling those up.

JMW: So he was into landscape kind of work? I mean, is that how he de-stressed?

RGV: No. I think it was more just little projects, filling up all of the bird feeders around the house. He had a lot of tools. But I don't know what he really did with them (DWV laughs). He had a very nice workshop. We used a lot of those tools. I don't know if anyone has talked about it. We built a little tree house up there, some of my cousins and I. We had all kinds of hammers, nails, and saws from his workshop. We built a little tree house. It had about this much space (RGV motions with his hands) and about three thousand nails hammered into it. We did stuff like that.

JMW: When did the family buy the property up there?

RGV: I don't know if I know for sure. I think it was in the fifties, I want to say.

JMW: When did it dawn on you that, beyond just your grandfather, that your grandfather who he was, famous, or just high profile?

RGV: You know, I think it was always a dual situation. I remember things better than from what were the first memories. But I always had a sense, right from the beginning, that he was the mayor and all of that, but was also our grandpa. I guess the first thing I remember was when I was really little. We lived down in Florida for a little while. So that's probably my first memory. I remember being down there and him coming down to visit. So I was probably five, six, or something like that. I remember him having to go back to Chicago for some reason. It was really from the beginning that I had that sense.

Dr. David W. Veenstra: He had to go back to Chicago. When you were on vacation in Michigan, did he have work with him. Did he take time to have a study? Was he on the phone? Or was he seeing visitors?

RGV: He had a little office up there. But I don't remember him having visitors up there. The time that we spent with him was more of just the fun stuff (JMW laughs).

DWV: Yes. That impresses me. I've noticed, in these interviews, that he had an uncanny ability to be efficient and also to compartmentalize. I mean, when it was time to play ball, he played ball (DVW laughs). Reading the history of that period, you almost get the sense that he was always working, and always ready to. So those are a lot of the stories that I'm interested in, like playing ball. Did he ever take you to school?

RGV: To school? I don't remember that. I don't think so. But a lot of what I remember, like I said, was going to different sporting events with him. That was a lot of fun. I went to Bears games with him. I remember, at half time, he would go into some backroom somewhere. A couple of times we went up and saw George Halas. He was friends with George Halas. So we would go and see him at half time. That was a lot of fun.

JMW: Do you have any specific memories of wins, losses, or certain plays? Do any of those stick in your mind from the times with your grandfather that you'll never forget?

RGV: You know, the Bears, in those days, were pretty bad (RGV and DWV laugh). Those were the Dick Butkus, Astroturf days. I mean, there were a lot of losses (RGV laughs). Bobby Douglas was the quarterback. But I was a football fan. I loved it. I still love going to the games. With the Blackhawks games, they were better, I do remember. It seemed like they were always playing the Montreal Canadians. The Canadians were the best team in the league in those days. I remember some of those. I think we went to, somewhere in there, some of the playoff games. I don't remember if they ever made it to the Stanley Cup in those years. But I remember it. Those were pretty exciting.

JMW: That you know of, did your grandfather have any favorite players? Did you ever talk to him generically about baseball, football, or hockey?

RGV: I think he was mostly a baseball fan. His favorite was baseball. But I think he liked going to the other things. I think his favorite players were not from the games we were

watching, but from when he was a kid. So they were some of the White Sox that were from further back.

JMW: From you memories, you know how guys sit around the table with food and sports. What Daley family event, like thanksgiving, what holiday did he in particular seem to look forward to? What kind of food did he like? What kind of restaurant did he take you to? When I think of Bridgeport, I think of Ricobene's or something like that (JMW laughs). I'm assuming that you guys spent some time with him that way.

RGV: Christmas was always the big thing. So that's the holiday time that I remember the most. We would have a family party sometime before Christmas. Then everyone would go to their own house for Christmas. I remember the last Christmas before he died. I was into football. And the thing I really wanted was this tackling dummy. He got me that for Christmas when we had that party. I think he might have gotten it from the Bears or somewhere. So I remember that, with that kind of thing. He always had a way of taking an interest in people, making them feel special, and the center of the universe kind of thing. Other people have told me, whose fathers worked for him at one time or another, that he used to call them on Christmas. Everyone was excited.

JMW: Okay. You mean folks from the cabinet?

RGV: Right.

JMW: I'm assuming Donovan and Bedore.

RGV: Right. It was people like that.

DWV: You had the tackling dummy in the house (DWV laughs)?

RGV: Well, when we had our family party, he gave it to me then.

JMW: Then you moved it outdoors for use.

RGV: Right. Yes. That was definitely one of the things.

DWV: Would he cheer at the games?

RGV: Yes (DWV laughs). I think so. As a kid, it was just an exciting experience. We would usually meet them at their house and ride with him in his car to the game. I was just excited to be at the game. I was a Hawks fan and a Bears fan. So I was focused on the game. But I think he was into the games. I think, like I said, he knew baseball the most. He was most of a fan of baseball.

DWV: We see the pictures. They're all still pictures. He's sitting there. I know he was a baseball fan and a sports fan. We wonder, did he, every so often, just holler "Yeah (DWV laughs)?"

RGV: Yes. I think so. It was not overly so. But I think he was into the games.

JMW: Well, I imagine that fifty nine might sum it up, right?

RGV: You mean with the White Sox? Yes.

JMW: He was willing to go to extra measures at times.

RGV: Yes.

JMW: When you would see him, was it at the residence on Lowe? Or would he come up to Sauganash and see you guys?

RGV: I think it was usually in Bridgeport. Then he would come up to our house. Or we'd see him at other aunts' and uncles' houses. If it was my mom's birthday, or if it was

something with our family, he'd come up to our house. Or if we were going to a game, we'd usually go by his house. Then, I think with the holidays and different family things, we'd kind of rotate around to different aunts and uncles. Yes, he was up there. Growing up, we lived in Edgebrook, most of the time. Then we moved to Sauganash, right around the time that he passed away. So yes, he was up there.

JMW: Back to food, with most of his meals, did he eat in? Or did he ever take you guys out? I mean, Harold Washington was known for the beef and sausage combo that killed him (JMW laughs). The stories that we hear are that he would stop and have a combo at least once a day. I'm just wondering if there was a family meal once a day, or for that matter, with you? I mean, like when you think of home, or going to visit your grandfather. Was there an eatery, a meal that your grandmother might cook, or something?

RGV: I don't remember him being a big eater, that he loved this or that. I do remember that he liked buttermilk. I remember that. Some of the things like that are sort of old school that nobody eats or drinks anymore. At breakfast, he'd have a poached egg. I don't remember him being a big eater. We didn't go there often. But in terms of eating out, he used to go to the Tavern Club on Michigan Avenue. We met him a few times there for dinner or lunch. He liked that place.

JMW: We ask these questions because this is the kind of stuff you use for biographical work. You can find enough on policy. But what were his passions? What was he like around the house?

RGV: I'm trying to remember. There were a couple of other steak places near the stock yards that we would go to. But they're all gone now. So I remember that.

DWV: When you would talk, what were the most important values that he would convey?

RGV: I think he was patriotic, sort of a love of the country. That was one thing that came through. I remember him, since I was a little bit older, not all of the time, but a lot of the time, he'd talk to me like an adult. He treated me like an adult. I remember him talking about some of the things going on in the country that he was concerned about. So that was one thing that came through. Then I think it was the value of hard work, and then family, being with your family, and loyalty to your family. Those were the biggest things.

DWV: What was he concerned about?

RGV: Going back to the Tavern Club, one of the memories I have is that he took me to lunch there one time, just the two of us. We just had a nice lunch. He talked to me, again, like an adult. He was talking about how all of the steel mills in Gary were closing down, how the country was losing its manufacturing base, how we were losing all of these jobs, how he was concerned about that, and how that was impacting the country, the city, the economy, peoples' ability to earn a living, and that kind of stuff.

It was just something that stuck with me because it was not what you usually think about doing with your grandpa (JMW laughs). And it wasn't like I had any answers for what to do about it. It stuck with me because he was sort of sharing that experience, or that concern with me. It was the way he brought you into his world, I guess.

DWV: That's fascinating. I don't know if you can answer this. But was he concerned with the loss of jobs? Or was he concerned with the type of jobs? That's because the stock yards were starting to slow down in the seventies. I'm just wondering a little bit.

RGV: You know, I don't know if I really remember for sure. But I think it was the sense that the country used to have a lot of the good, solid, middle class jobs that were going away. And also, it was that the country's strength came from its manufacturing power, that that was deteriorating. And we were losing that.

DWV: You said earlier that people have come and talked to you about your grandfather (DWV laughs). What are some of the things that are said? What are some of the most frequent things that are said? That should be the question.

RGV: You know, he went to a lot of wakes. People remember or say about him that, "He went to my father's, or mother's, or aunt's, or uncle's wake." He always stood in line and always waited it out. So people talk about that. As I said, he would call some of the cabinet members and talk to them and their kids on Christmas. That was always kind of a treat for some of the people that worked for him, like some of the people that he knew like the budgets and the finances of the city inside and out. Abe Marovitz used to talk a lot about when they were together in Springfield. They were state senators together in Springfield. He used to talk a lot about how he first proposed UIC, or the idea of something like UIC in 1939 or something. And it took until the late fifties or early sixties before it was able to all come together. He was, there again, a very diligent kind of legislator when he was down in Springfield. He really learned all of the financial and budgetary aspects of the government. But then, going back to what I said before, a lot of it was mostly people remembering things he did for them, like kindnesses, going to wakes, remembering people's birthdays, and things like that.

DWV: Probably his greatest political skill was his personal attention that he gave to the people of Chicago. I hear that over and over again. And I was struck, just to touch on the background here, by that Christmas story. I was touched when we talked to Ed Bedore. As we were leaving, his wife was emotionally moved when she saw some of the old pictures. She said, "He was really like a father to me." Politically, he was immensely influential. I think often we've gotten the sense, from the reading, I don't want to say strong arm tactics. But I think we've missed a lot of the personal side, and the attention to detail period, that he gave. What I'm asking is this. With what you've heard over the years, was that one of his greatest political strengths?

RGV: Well, I didn't interact with him that way. So I don't know how he operated politically. But I know personally, from listening to some of my aunts and uncles, he had

a way of making every one of them, even though there were seven of them, I don't want to say his favorite, but like they were the center of his world. And he had that same ability, I think, with all of his grandkids. Like the story of going to the Tavern Club and going to those events, he took an interest in you. And he had a way of making you feel, like I said, very important to him. So I'm sure that translated into the political world as well.

DWV: I want to clarify something. In 1939, the date that was used, was he proposing UIC in Springfield?

RGV: Yes. I think he had proposed something in Springfield, which later ended up becoming UIC.

DWV: And it was Abe Marovitz who told you that story?

RGV: I'm pretty sure. Yes.

DWV: Okay. That's actually very helpful because we've heard that in a couple of different places. And I haven't been able to find the records on it yet.

JMW: It kind of bounces between 1936 and 1945.

DWV: That is fairly important, at least to our story about UIC. It's that he was thinking about this already, early in Springfield. I want to make sure I got that correct (DWV laughs).

RGV: Yes. I think that's what he said.

DWV: Did he say anything about UIC? Do you remember anything?

RGV: I don't know if I do. Most of that, like I said, I heard from Abe Marovitz or had learned about it since he passed away, since I've grown up. I just remember seeing a lot of the pictures. But I don't remember talking specifically about it with him.

DWV: Pictures? Do you mean pictures in the newspapers of UIC, and maybe his being there?

RGV: Yes. I mean like some of these kinds of pictures (RGV points to pictures on the wall).

DWV: Were there any pictures in the house of UIC?

RGV: I don't remember. You know, it's hard when I see some of these, if I remember, if I've seen them since, or if I'd seen them back then, before. And then, a lot of the pictures I remember seeing them with buildings. I don't really know what building it was. But I do know that he always felt that that was a really important accomplishment and probably the most important thing that he did. Going back to one of the questions you said before, one of the values that he tried to instill in people was the importance of education. So I see that that ties in with UIC. Growing up like he did, I think he had a particular interest in young people who were sort of working hard to make their way in the world. It was important to get an education and to look out for young people like that who were working hard.

JMW: He apparently talked to you adult to adult (JMW laughs).

RGV: Right.

JMW: Did he ever talk to you about your future, as far as career, going to school, or talk about some stories from his experiences working at the stock yards and going to school?

RGV: When I was that age, I still thought I was going to be a pro baseball player or a pro football player (DWV laughs). So he was just kind of encouraging in your sports activities and that kind of thing. I don't really remember talking about careers or what I was going to do.

DWV: Did you have any special responsibilities as the oldest grandchild?

RGV: Do you mean growing up? Or do you mean now (DWV laughs)?

DWV: Maybe all of the above. Probably growing up is what I was thinking there. Were there any special talks?

RGV: Well, we would do this thing on the Fourth of July in Michigan. He had a flagpole. So we would bring the flag out and raise the flag. Then we would read the Declaration of Independence. I was the oldest. So I would be the one who would have to read it. So that was kind of from being the oldest. I think, like I said before, he made everyone feel really important and special. So I don't think there was a particular role from being the oldest. I just felt lucky because I got to spend the most time with him and get to know him better almost as an adult, versus most of my other cousins, who just didn't have that chance.

DWV: Maybe this is probably you've already said. If we're going to share with the world something about your grandfather, what is the one thing you'd like added to the public record? What would you like people know the most?

RGV: I would say that he really was a great husband, father, and grandfather, to my grandma, my aunts and uncles, and to us. That is what is really the most important to me. I think that he was a great mayor. There's a lot of history and debate about different issues. Certainly, some people have a certain image of him from that and they don't appreciate what he was like personally. He really was a very kind, cheerful, and happy guy. My memories of him were that he was always laughing a lot. He had a very infectious laugh that made you laugh. He would start laughing. And that would make him

laugh more. So I don't think people that know him in the historical and political sense appreciate that.

DWV: We've got a couple of more questions. One of them that we're asking is to what you just said. Is there anything you want to say about his politics? You said there were historical interpretations, etc. If not, that's fine. That wasn't the purpose of the interview.

JMW: Is there anything that you personally would like to right the record on or feel that maybe he's been....?

DWV: That's one of the things that we're studying, his politics. I'm enamored with the information that we're getting here, on the personal side. But politics was part of him, too.

RGV: There's so much to cover there. I think he did a great job of building the city, turning it into a great city, and interacting with the federal government. It was building the city, getting the expressway systems built, getting O'Hare built, getting UIC built, and getting so many of the buildings downtown built. I think he did a great job of turning the city into a world class city. I think he tried to be fair and do what he thought was right. I think that was his motivation. I think he tried to protect the city when the city went through the craziness of the riots during the conventions and all of that. When you look back on it now, it was almost like a September 11th 2001 kind of extreme event. You didn't know what was going on, what was going to happen next, and what was going to be a target. So I think he was reacting to that and trying to protect the city.

DWV: It's very interesting that you say that because that's been my thesis for a little while, especially about Chicago in 1968, the conventions. You need to recognize the background of building this city. He really was a building mayor. And I think he was looking at, "We've done all of this to make Chicago a world class city. We don't want it torn down," or a world stage, none the less.

RGV: Yes. I remember my Uncle Bill saying that I don't think people realize what the environment was like around back then. And I don't know if it was during the riots or during the convention. But he had told some stories about having to go and meet someone at the airport. I forget who it was, some official or whatever. It was to bring them into town. The National Guard was assembled over those overpasses as you'd come riding into the city. You were in a war like environment. You didn't know what was going to happen next. For people who didn't live through that, it's difficult for me, someone my generation or younger. That's because it's just not something you think of happening in the United States.

JMW: You were old enough to remember the stroke.

RGV: Yes.

JMW: What was that like? I'm assuming you were aware that occurred.

RGV: I don't know if I remember specifically that he had a stroke. I just remember that he was sick and then he was recovering. Everyone was concerned. It was a positive outlook and that everything was going to be okay. I remember that he had to change his diet and no more buttermilk (DWV and JMW laugh). There were things I remember as a kid that he couldn't do. He couldn't use salt and things like that. So I remember some of the changes from that. I don't remember the terminology or whatever. But I think there was some new medical procedure that came out of that episode. The doctor that helped him created some new technique or something out of that episode.

JMW: We mentioned the fishing stories. Do you have any fishing stories? Did you go fishing with him?

RGV: Yes. That was definitely a lot of memories. I remember going fishing off of McCormick Place in Chicago and going out from, I forget which harbor that is. But it was from one of the fishing boats that used to be there and just going really early in the

morning. It was like straight off from McCormick Place. I don't remember what we caught exactly. But I think we caught some pretty big fish. It's a great view of the skyline of the city from there. Then a few times in Florida, we'd go fishing. We'd usually go out with guides and my dad or one of my uncles. So he really loved to fish. When we were away in Florida on vacation with him, we would go fishing most of the time. Then, in Michigan, he had a friend who had a place nearby that had a little fishing pond in back. During the summers we would go a lot and go fishing with him there. It was just blue gills and those kinds of things. Yes, he definitely liked fishing.

JMW: Who was it, Ed Bedore? We heard one story. Or I had heard at least one story where your grandfather was so proud of some fish he had caught. Throughout the day, he kept telling everyone about that fish and kept offering them some. I forget where they prepared it, if it was the Democratic headquarters or wherever. But it was like having to create this fish to feed the masses.

RGV: It was a fish this big (RGV motions with his hands).

JMW: Right. He had promised everyone a bite or a piece of it (DWV laughs). Were you in on that one?

DWV: No (DWV laughs).

JMW: Talk about your grandmother. I'm sure everyone always wants to know about your grandfather.

RGV: Right. You know, she was wonderful. She had a great sense of humor. She had a great ability to not take herself too seriously, not to let anyone else take themselves too seriously, and keep everyone in line. She had a lot of good advice. She always told you to work hard and save your money. She would talk about my grandfather and saving money. They grew up during the Depression. So they were very good about that. I think about her sense of humor the most.

JMW: Apparently, she was as sharp as a tack. I mean, just reading through the transcripts when Dr. Remini interviewed her, she could pick out stuff like, "Oh yes, so and so was the fourth president (JMW laughs)."

RGV: She was definitely very sharp. She was one of those baseball fans that remembered all of the players, statistics, names, records, and all of that. So I think that kind of kept her sharp as well.

JMW: What were her hobbies or passions? What would you find her doing? If you came to visit, what would she be in the middle of doing?

RGV: I think that it was mostly all family stuff. I think when she was younger, she played some sports and stuff like that. But I knew her more as the grandma and taking care of the family. She liked to shop. She would go to Marshall Field's. So I remember her and my mom or my aunt going shopping and that kind of stuff.

DWV: This actually is the last one. We've asked about your grandfather and your grandmother. I don't know that we've asked many people about any interactions between the two of them. You said earlier, "How he treated my grandmother." Could you say a couple of words about that, about how he treated your grandmother?

RGV: They were just a great couple. I mean, there was just a great bond. I think they treated each other extremely kind and with just great affection. They just seemed like they were great friends. It was great to witness that.

DWV: Yes. I was kind of curious. Was there joking going on? Maybe the word you gave, affection, sounds about right. It sounds like they were always in love, I guess (DWV laughs).

RGV: Right. I just remember my grandmother having a kind of gleam in her eye. And I think he had the same (DWV laughs). I think they admired each other very much. And

they just seemed to get along great. I think he always treated her very well, kindly, and all of that. And I think she was always understanding of the demands of his job. But she also had a great way of not, not that he acted this way, but not letting people take themselves too seriously. You could kid him, joke around with him, and with anyone. So it wasn't a feeling like, "Oh, he's the mayor." She could get to him.

JMW: This is my last question. We're about to run out of tape. What would be, not to say the best or the worst thing about being Richard J. Daley's grandkid. But what is the best or the worst thing? Like your friends or your classmates, were you an unknown? I guess as a Vanecko, you could slide under the radar a little bit.

RGV: Right. The best was just having a chance to be around him and to have some of those experiences that I had, particularly having the most time with him, and just being around him. I would say the best part was just getting to know him. The other things that were nice was going to a lot of these events that were fun and exciting. The best part, I think was just being around him. The worst part is that to most of the rest of the world, he was a public figure. Some people may have a certain image. So it's hard to take some of the criticism when it's someone you know or related to as a part of your family.

DWV: Thank you very much. We appreciate this.

*****END OF INTERVIEW*****