



## Founded on Family

Throughout *Properties'* conversation with Michael Petrasek on his upbringing and American International Construction's evolution, he inevitably traces back to his parents. Their struggles and perseverance, and the will to succeed exhibited by his father, John (above), permeate the business. A look at John's journey to America and the founding of AIC makes clear why his legacy endures and drives the company, and his son Michael, forward.

John Petrasek decided to leave Yugoslavia in 1941, soon after Germany invaded his homeland early in World War II. Leadership choices in Yugoslavia at that time were unappetizing – Marshal Tito, a Communist hardliner, or Adolf Hitler and his right-wing nationalist philosophy. John would join resistance movements and travel throughout Europe, often ending up in the thick of confrontations between the German and Russian armies. He and his comrades are credited with rescuing downed U.S. pilots and shepherding them to safety in Italy. Along the way, John learned several European languages, parlaying these skills into a role as interpreter for the U.S. Army in Austria.

As an interpreter, John learned firsthand of the suffering brought by the Communist conquest across Eastern Europe. "I recognized early in life that I could not live under such a system [as Communism]," he told a reporter for a 1969 newspaper article. "That is why I was so determined to find a way to get to America."

John's efforts to reach American shores succeeded in 1951. He brought with him an Austrian girl, Margaret, whom he had met six weeks before leaving. The following year she would become his wife.

Though an experienced construction engineer, John at first could only find menial work in the United States, initially as a dishwasher in Chicago. He came to Cleveland to visit a friend and took jobs as a Fuller Brush man and bakery deliveryman. But again, his persistence and drive paid off as he eventually found work with a construction firm.

By the early '60s, after eight years in employ at the firm, John decided to strike out on his own, forming Building Services, a construction firm headquartered in Lakewood. Displaying the determination that led him through World War II Europe and to a new life in the United States, John would build that business and ultimately form AIC. —LK