



*Author at the grave of his bricklayer father, whose death at 36 in a building collapse greatly affected his son's life and inspired his novel, "Christ in Concrete."*

## ***"My people, my place"***

Jammed into a mile-square area, Hoboken, New Jersey, is a grimy industrial town with colorful Old World overtones of sight and sound and smell. Its 51,000 residents are mostly of Italian ancestry. And like Italians everywhere, they have a passionate love of home and their traditional way of life. Pietro di Donato — who left his old neighborhood as a 14-year-old bricklayer — expressed all this with such tremendous poignancy in a novel, "Christ in Concrete," that it became a 1939 best seller. Fame, however, brought di Donato only disillusionment; and after many turbulent years, he recently came back to Hoboken, West Hoboken and the surrounding areas to visit the scenes of his childhood and seek solace in the companionship of his beloved *paesani*. This is the story of what he found on his sentimental journey.

*Text by Pietro di Donato    Photographs by Eve Arnold*



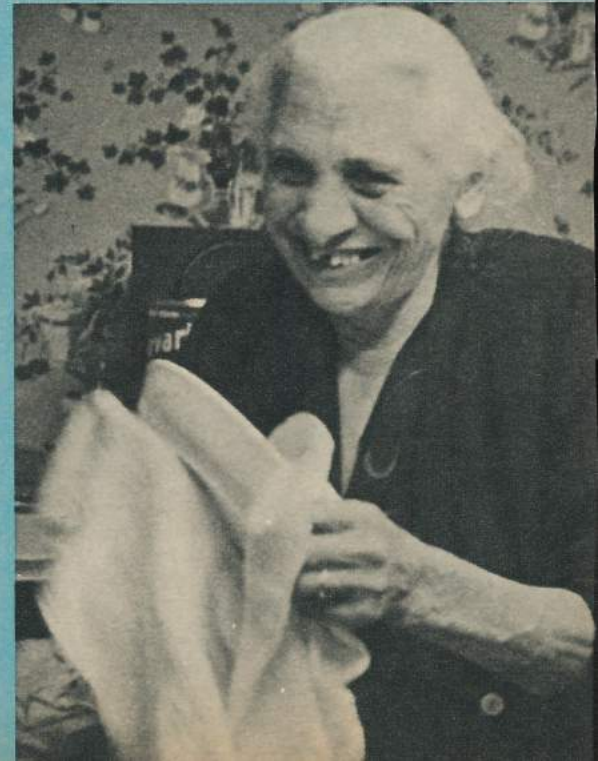


### ***Our hurly-burly on the Hudson***

Looking down from the Jersey Palisades, Hoboken is a level of squat, rookery roofs with parapets, kiosks, and wind-bent chimneys. Beyond is the hurly-burly waterfront and the Hudson River, on whose far shore looms the monumental majesty of New York. From dawn to dusk vehicles stream in from the Holland Tunnel, trains snake and hiss, trailer-trucks roar and multirouted buses crisscross, carrying workers to factories that perfume the air with coffee, candy, mayonnaise, soap, soot and smells beyond smelling. After school, the kids play furiously under the very noses of huge ships. At night the taverns serve pizza pie and mussels for zestful eating, and resound with endless rock 'n' roll and laughter and leather-lunged squabbling.

### ***We become as children...***

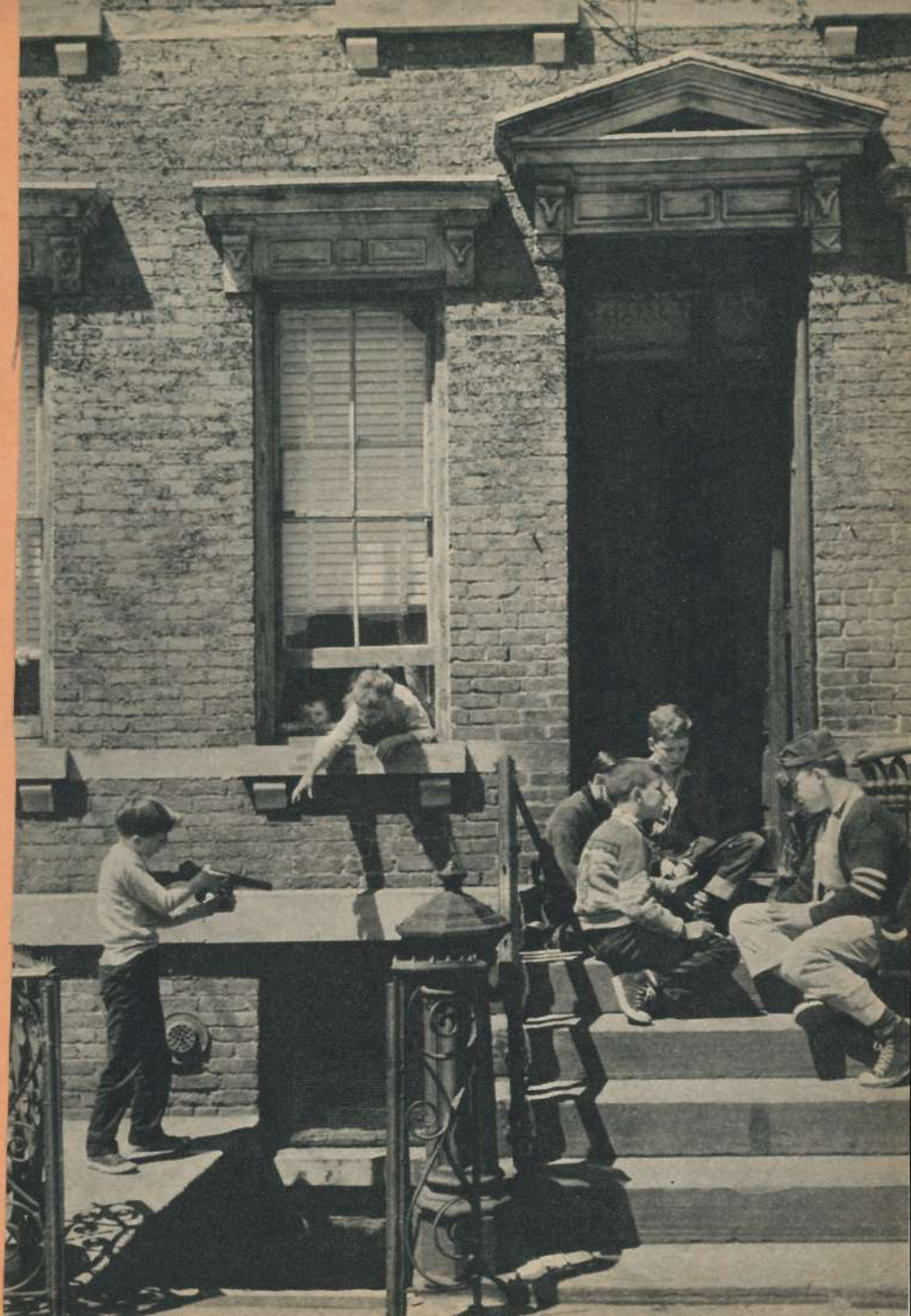
The seventh day speaks of release from bondage to job and daily cares. It tells of later rising, of leisurely dressing, of the tradition of worship at morning Mass, and, soon after, the extended garrulous eating. Then it is for the men to smoke strong cigars and idle away the hours with stories of their youth in Italy and the early immigrant days, or sit to cards and flagon, or play *boccie* ball, which is among the most ancient of turf bowling games. The *boccie* court will be outdoors beneath trees behind the bar that is only for men, and the men will drink wine between throws and vie and posture and boast and bellow. Meanwhile, the wives and daughters and matriarchs will combine chores, gossip and laughter in the kitchen, their undisputed domain.





### ***The lore of masonry***

With the other kids, I played cards, catstick, marbles, cowboys and Indians, and wrestled and had fist fights in sand lots and cellarways. The twin lions under the cornice saw me often; and they waited the long years for me to come back a humble man. I bow to the lore of fanciful masonry, my bricklaying father's once-exalted craft—the manly texture of durable wall, the good bond, the wedged brick of arch, the fretted terra cotta entablature—an ornamentation that soon will be no more with demolishing hammer. Therefore does the keystone satyr, moodily staring down from on high, keep whispering to me, “Recall thee, O sinless urgent hours, O fond dreamings distant?”



### ***Keepers of the hearth...***

The longshoreman's day of toil is ended. Men and ships shall do and rest. Ships in their berths and men at home. The ravioli is bellied with herbs and fresh cheese and anxious for pot and stove and table. A man is affectionate and regales his woman. The unmarried children lightly tarry with friends and will come home not early. But the married son, the daughter-in-law and grandson will arrive on time to relish home cooking. These are the keepers of the hearth that shelter the future. Father and mother are as church to home, center and source of life.



### ***A heritage of faith and toil...***

Toil and belief are more than habit and necessity. They fulfill and inspire. Love of certain trades has been handed down through families for centuries, with father and son fashioning Madonna and altar as did generations before them. Religious statuary is the sculptured shadow of inner grace — the Divine stanced in stone, precious metals, wood and plaster; the symbol whose image is reflected in the spirit, and whose eloquence succeeds when words fail. My people brought the love of the beautiful to America, and they came mostly as artisans.

### ***Life given and returned...***

The priest has just intoned the requiem and blessed the dead. There is sighing and weeping in the chapel. Women clasp their hands in mourning and behold for the last time the peace of the patriarch who has gone to God. At the children's mass are the little living flowers in the garden of worship, with the sun illumining their faces as they receive renewal of the gift of life. We are among the living to seed, to hoe, to tend, to gather and share. Yet always we must be prepared to depart with the mystical night. For the gift is given to be relished and returned.

