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DeBoer, Klaus-Pomp, Evie Oral History Interview: Class Projects

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Oral History Project

Interviewees: Klaus DeBoer and Evie Pomp

Interviewer: Rachel Boersma

December 13, 1999

RB: What brought you to America?

KDB: Parents immigrating. In '56, our father decided he wanted to come to the U.S.

RB: Okay. How did you get here?

EP: By ship. The Seven Seas, right, was the name of it.

KDB: Yup, its easy so far!

RB: Did anyone support you in your immigration?

KDB: At that time you needed to have a sponsor. So, in the event that you could not financially support yourself, there would be an American sponsor to jump in, so we had an American sponsor who did not financially help us, but, was there for the sole purpose in the event we needed financial help. And then he would help us.

RB: Okay. What differences did you first notice upon your arrival?

KDB: They spoke different.

RB: Different accents?

EP: Umm, yeah, there was lots of snow. I remember that cause we came in January and I don't think we ever had that much snow in the Netherlands, did we?

KDB: No, I mean everything was different. The language, the customs, the towns, the people, umm, everything was different from where you came from, you know.

RB: And you came straight to Holland?

KDB: We came straight to Holland, yeah.

RB: Okay. How old were you when you immigrated?

EP: I was five and a half.

KDB: And I was fourteen

RB: Were you excited to come or were you scared or nervous, sad, what were your emotions? You were little.

EP: I don't remember so well, I think I was excited, although our mother was very sad, and I think I felt a lot of that, so, I remember a lot of tears also.

KDB: Yeah and I think I was excited because it was like an adventure, going to a new country you knew nothing about. I was like a sense of adventure, so yeah I was excited about it.

RB: What did you expect America to be like?

KDB: I had no expectations because I knew nothing about it.

EP: Same here

RB: Yup, you were little. Did you find employment soon...or your parents

KDB: We were in school.

RB: You were in school.

KDB: My father found employment right away. He was a baker, but he went to work for a furniture factory when we first came here and later on he became a baker again.

RB: Okay. Um...Could you make friends easily?

EP: Yeah, that wasn't too difficult. Um...at school, and there were other immigrant families whose children I played with.

KDB: Well, it was not so easy because you were different and you felt different, you didn't

feel like you were part of the crowd, you didn't speak the language all that well, you didn't know the customs. You didn't know anything really about how teenagers acted here so it really was not that easy to find friends right away.

RB: Was Holland a welcoming community to you?

KDB: No! I don't think Holland was a welcoming community at all. There was a lot of pressure to assimilate...immediately and no deference was given to the fact that you were different, maybe from another country, so there was a lot of pressure to become as quickly as you can...an American. And even though this is a community of Dutch decent, most of the people that were here were maybe a second or third generation Dutch. And there's a huge difference between first generation Dutch people that come from Holland and the people that have already lived here for maybe one or two generations. So, I didn't find it myself a necessarily welcoming community, no.

RB: Interesting. And you were so little.

EP: It was just so different for me being five years old.

KDB: For her it was entirely different.

EP: Sure, I went straight into kindergarten...it was fun!

KDB: See I came at time when I was fourteen and then you're a teenager. And teenagers even today, they wanna be like everybody else. You didn't want to stand out, you don't want to be different, so you try to hide the fact that you're different. You know you want to be like everybody else but yet you know that you are different. So teenage years are tough years to immigrate.

RB: Yeah, did you feel especially discriminated against because of the accents?

KDB: No, I didn't feel discriminated against but, sometimes ah, the word Dutch was used kind of as a swear word, you know, they would call you Dutchman but it would be used in kind of a derogatory way, you know. But it wasn't really any, it was not an atmosphere where you could kind of hang on to some of the traditions that you came from. There was just a lot of pressure to become, as quickly as possible, like everybody else. Even our parents didn't want to stand out. They also tried as quickly as possible to assimilate. We didn't keep the language up in the house and that would all be different today. You know, we try to speak English as quickly as possible. And now looking back it would have been nice if our parents had continued to speak Dutch at home so then Evelyn would speak Dutch

EP: Yes, for myself and my younger brother.

KDB: Yes, but there was just so much pressure at that time just to assimilate. You know to be like everybody else.

RB: So you know the language still and you don't so much?

KDB: Yes.

EP: I can speak it but its difficult for me. I can understand it better but it's hard for me to speak it and I cannot read it very well at all whereas he can read Dutch books.

RB: Would you ever return to the Netherlands if you could, or are you well settled?

EP: Yeah not to live but its a fun place to visit.

KDB: Well I mean I could. I go to Holland every year for several weeks. And I doubt that I will ever live there again, but I could in the future make it when I am retired decide to go there for a couple months and rent a place and live there for a while.

RB: Do you have family there still?

EP: Umhmm

KDB: Yeah, yup.

RB: What was life like in the Netherlands. Can you remember? You probably can more.

KDB: We lived in a real small town. Three thousand people, where everybody knew everybody. We lived above the bakery...my father's shop and it was very close community, a place where everybody knew each other and it was just a fantastic place as a kid to grow up. At that time you didn't know traveling so most of my fourteen years was spent, I would say in a radius of maybe sixty miles of that town. And one time I made a school trip to Amsterdam. It was a very small world. You know, there was no television, radio or anything. But it was a nice community to grow up in.

RB: Did your family like it here when they came?

EP: My mother had a very hard time. She was just very, very homesick. It took her probably a couple years at least um... I don't know, did dad like it? I think he was disappointed. I think he had hoped to become a farmer when we came here and that didn't pan out. So then working in a factory was not too nice. He did not like that. I remember he'd be shaking at night from sanding furniture and that. But then I think things got a lot better when they bought another bakery. I think that was better for my mother. She got involved in that.

KDB: Yeah, so our mother had a very hard time naturally. She worked at home so she didn't go out and meet that many people, didn't know the language, didn't know the customs, never had driven a car, so her adjustment was the biggest of all really. But one time

she was serious about moving back. But then gradually things got better and became more involved in the Dutch community. Especially once dad bought the bakery.

Things were more back to normal.

RB: Was life busier here or more stressful or was it about average with the Netherlands?

EP: We had a very busy household in the Netherlands with the bakery being right there.

And my mother worked in the bakery although she had a, like a maid, doing a lot of the housework and taking care of us kids. But, it was busy here too, when dad started the bakery again...working seventy hours a week...six days a week.

KDB: Yeah the only pressure was the pressure of adjusting to a new country. To new customs, language. Church is very dominant here...much more dominant than it was in the old country. Ahh, much more conservative so I could do things in the Netherlands, you know I could go to movies and stuff like that and then you come here and you can't do it, that's a little example, so it was much more conservative community than the country where we came from. And that would not affect Evelyn but me and my [older] sister maybe we were used to the more liberal part.

RB: Yeah, are there any Dutch traditions that you have kept that are different than here or...

KDB: The traditions, St. Nicholas on December 5th is a big day in Holland and we've lost that, gone away with that. Not so much, ah, some Dutch traditions, you know, like getting together Sunday for coffee, like after church or something, that's a Dutch tradition. Ah, eating Dutch meals, you know, things that you ate as a youth, things like that, they stick with you.

EP: A lot of the foods, our mom still makes all the Dutch foods.

KDB: The traditions kind of go don't they?

EP: Yeah, I think when we first came here we tried to keep up the Sinter Klaas thing and gave gifts then and I remember getting a package from the Netherlands from our grandpa for Sinter Klaas. But, after a while we got more and more away from that. Although, I really have tried to pass on the story to my kids and on Sinter Klaas Day they each get a chocolate letter, so you know at least they remember some of it.

RB: Well, is there anything else you would like to add. I am at the end of my questions.

KDB: You didn't ask the one's about Vietnam!

RB: Well, if you want to tell me about Vietnam!...

KDB: No the only thing I would say is today there is much more sensitivity for immigrants than there was then. If I look at the Latin community here for example, I think they much more keep up the language, they keep up the traditions. I think the Dutch are very good at assimilating all over the world really, they assimilate very very quickly. But I don't think in the Fifties that too much thought was given to where the person came from you know, if, well, they change your name right away. And in a way, if they change your name, that's in a way robbing you of your identity, because if you have a certain name, that's who you are and then they give you a different name, and then you're somebody else. That wouldn't affect Evelyn, but that would affect, I think, when you come at an older age. And I think today, people are more sensitive about differences. I think they're more aware of differences. Ah, then they were in the Fifties. The Fifties were very much like, be like everybody else, there's not much diversity, you know, it wasn't even celebrated. You know, be like everybody else...a different era.

RB: Cause, just for the record, what was your name when you first came...to just get it on tape?

EP: In Dutch it was Eeke and then they changed it to Evelyn.

KDB: And mine was Klaas and then became Clarence. And I remember going to the high school principal with my dad and he[the principal] thought I should have an English name. And, you know, what does my dad know? You know, you come to another country so you feel, well, you have to do what they do. So then my name was Clarence and then I found out shortly after that that that was not a real cool name. So then I made Clare out of it, so then whenever somebody calls me Clare that's somebody that I went to high school with forty years ago.

KDB: And then when I went to Massachusetts, then I thought, well I want my own name back.

So then I had to go back to court because I had become naturalized in the meantime.

KDB: To get my old name back.

RB: Neat. Well, I think that is it. Thank you very much!