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# Kleis, Margaret Wolffensperger Oral History Interview: Dutch Immigrants who Emigrated to the United States after WW II

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Interview with  
Margaret Wolffensperger Kleis

Conducted July 15, 1992  
by Donna M. Rottier

1992 Summer Oral History Project  
Post-WWII Dutch Immigrants to Holland, Michigan

DR: Could you please state your full name?

MK: My full name is Margaret. My maiden name was Wolffensperger so I use that for a second name, my middle name, and my last name is Kleis.

DR: Thank you. And your current address?

MK: My current address is 117 East Thirty-eighth Street, Holland, Michigan, 49423.

DR: Your date of birth?

MK: My date of birth is [date removed], 1927.

DR: What date did you emigrate from the Netherlands?

MK: I don't know for sure if it was about the fifteenth or the sixteenth of September, 1947. We sailed from Rotterdam. I know the name of the ship, and I know we arrived eight days late for school because Hope College was starting in those days not way in August like they do know, but they were starting in September. They had started right after Labor Day which probably was about the seventh or so. We came in around the fifteenth, eight or nine days late for school.

DR: What was the reason that you came?

MK: I came as a student. Sometime during the summer or early spring of 1947, at the time of the Centennial of Holland, Michigan, some of the city of Holland officials and Hope College officials had said for the Centennial, it might be interesting if we invite some Dutch students to come and study here. So they allotted some money for scholarships and we were given full scholarships. The way they chose these people (there were actually seventeen of us), in the Dutch newspapers they advertised and wrote something to the effect

of--any high school graduates who would like to attend a Reformed Church college in Holland, Michigan, please write so-and-so or call so-and-so, and the address was given. It was some place in The Hague, which is the seat of the government. At that time I had applied, and that was maybe about June. I hadn't heard anymore. I sent in my application with some references and I thought well, maybe nothing is going to come of it. About August, as I was camping with a YMCA camp in the northern part of the Netherlands, in Friesland, there was a telephone call. We were sailing that day, and as I came in later that day they said there's a telephone call for you. Your parents called. So I called my parents, and they said, there's a letter here from the government and from Hope College inviting you to come as a student to Hope College. But you have to be on the ship in about five or six days. That wasn't a lot of time to get ready. My parents decided I could go. My father paid for my trip, and I had a return ticket because it was going to be for a year. That's how I got started.

DR: What made you decide to apply initially for the program?

MK: I had three or four older sisters and brothers who had been studying at the university. I know that by that time my parents were spending quite a bit of money, and I thought, well, if I can go for a year to the United States and get some education there, maybe after I come back I can maybe support myself, and it would be better. Actually, they did not know anything about that; that was just my idea. Besides, everybody in the United States was always thought to be rich, plentiful, jobs, everything was like the "money

grows on trees" country. I thought, I'd sure like to go and see what's going on there. Being young and healthy and happy, I decided, let's go. That was a fun experience, thinking it was only going to be for a year, and I could always come back. I hadn't quite decided, I had talked at one time about studying dentistry, but when I came here that never materialized.

DR: How did your parents feel about you going to the United States to study?

MK: They had really no objection. Some of my older brothers and sisters had been out of the country, too, for other reasons. They said it would probably be a great opportunity, and they felt that if I wanted it, they would not stand in my way. I think my mother in the back of her mind thought, "I sure hope she's coming back after a year." I think that's the only thing, but they certainly were whole-hearted behind me in these plans.

DR: What part of the Netherlands did you come from?

MK: I came from Zwolle. That's the capital of the province of Overijssel. Overijssel is one of the eastern provinces. The city itself is approximately fifty miles from the German border. It's one of the larger cities of the Netherlands. The railroad crosses through there frequently. It's a point where many people pass through and so they all say, "Oh, yes, I know where Zwolle is." It was a somewhat industrial city. It was prosperous. The city itself was founded in 1230, which was more than seven hundred years ago. I know in 1930 they celebrated the seven hundred year existence of the city. We can't always quite think about that in the United States.

When we think about cities like that, it's really amazing.

DR: What was your journey like to the United States?

MK: I was happy and I was eager to go. Actually, I ended up going on one of the few ships that were crossing the ocean to America. You could not get a Holland-America Line tourist ship or some fancy. Those were not available yet because right after the war there were so many other people who needed to go places. There were not many ships. However, most of the ships were either used for other reasons or other things. I came with a ship. The name of it was Steamship Tabinta. I've never heard of it since, and I don't think too many other people have either. I think it was a ship that was used during the war. It was changed from a freighter or a freight shipping vessel to transportation of soldiers. That's what it was used for. So there were bunks and there were fifty or eighty bunks in one little area. There were about another eighty or hundred in another area. You were not exactly private. The washing facilities were all open. I guess there might have been some showers, but I don't think I did a lot of that when they were in the open.

Most of the people on board were all immigrants. Almost everyone except those of us who were students--and there were fifteen of us. We of course were all happy-go-lucky; we were going out for an adventure. A lot of these people who were on board with us were mothers with children--a two year old and a four year old--and they were saying goodbye to their aged parents or at least older parents who were standing on the shore--i.e. on the wall--I remember them being with tears in their eyes and saying farewell thinking,

"Oh dear, I don't know if I'll ever get back." But that was different for me because we thought, "Oh this is fun." So we waved goodbye and that was it.

On the ship itself, except for the facilities which were somewhat limited, most of the time, well, all of the time, we had very good meals. It wasn't that we were suffering, it just was that the facilities were not so nice. I think I slept on a second or a third bunk way on the top because some of the smaller children couldn't climb up so easily, so they kept them below and we got to sleep on the top. I would say I didn't sleep a lot at night. We were excited because we met all these different students. We were introduced to each other. Well, right away we started talking about "What are you going to do?" and "What are you interested in?" Night after night after these mothers and fathers with their children all had gone to bed, we went upstairs on the deck and we talked until the wee hours of the morning, until three or four in the morning. Then we'd maybe go to bed, and these kids would wake up at six. So you can imagine, we did not get a lot of sleep.

By the way, the fathers were separated from the mothers and the children, so we were of course on the ladies side. That was a little bit of a problem because sometimes we helped these mothers with their children because some of them had two or three little children, or sometimes maybe even more. I remember at times saying, "Can I hold some of your children?" or "Would you like me to do something for them?" because we weren't tied down with anything, and we were able and willing to do that. That was one of my first

experiences really helping people, which is very important I think if we can do those things we like to do them.

DR: Did you get a lot of chance to talk to a lot of the other immigrants on the ship?

MK: Yes, we talked to them a little bit. I would say not a lot because they were so busy with their families. I think we talked more to a couple single boys who were going over. There were a couple fellows who were about twenty-two, twenty-three and they were going over because there was an uncle or an aunt living in Canada. By the way, we landed in Montreal; it was not a ship that came to New York Harbor, so I never went to Ellis Island, and I didn't see it. I saw it many years later. But I did not come through Ellis Island like a lot of our other European immigrants did. This ship was mostly directed towards Canada, and most of these people were all going to Canada. Now these two boys I was mentioning, they were going to go to Alberta in the state of Alberta. They had an uncle there and the uncle was going to employ them, and that way they were hoping to make a go of it here in Canada.

I've only met one other person since that time who was on that steamship. She came to visit from Canada into our church two or three years ago one time. She said, "Which year did you come from the Netherlands?" I said, "1947." She said, "What ship did you come on?" I said, "I think it was the Tabinta, but I'm not sure." She said, "We were on that ship!" Just a coincidence. Of course I did not remember her. The woman was maybe almost my age too. She had been a mother with several children at the time, so she probably



was very tied down, and I hadn't of course known. There were about one thousand people on that ship, so it's not like a couple people. So you don't get a chance to meet everyone. It was interesting.

We talked to these boys, and of course, those younger boys who came alone, they were more happy-go-lucky, too, because they knew where they were going. Now a lot of these families, especially the ones that were going to Canada, somebody was sponsoring them, but they didn't have a farm where they could go. They maybe could help on a farm. Some of these people started out as laborers with very little money, and they were given housing, but then after a while, as they earned more money, they could buy their own house, or at least pay for some of their own things, and they could move out on their own, which is what they eventually wanted.

DR: What were some of your first impressions once you landed in North America?

MK: I was very happy to see the big city of Montreal. It was a beautiful city. We came in at night; we had to stay on board until the next morning. It was interesting. I knew how to speak French, so that was an added incentive to talk to some of the people there. After that I was amazed at all the advertising and the different things I saw in the streets: the neon lights and so. So much of that had not come to Europe yet at that time. From Montreal to Detroit and then to Kalamazoo is where the train took us. We went by train. There was no airplane flying at those days. We took the train. In Kalamazoo some of the professors from Hope College picked us up. I know one of them was Dr. John Hollenbach who's been

retired just not so long ago, maybe ten, fifteen years. I think Dr. Fried was with us. At that time also there was a treasurer, somebody in charge of facilities here. That was Mr. Rein Visscher. I remember those three. I don't know how many other ones there were. They picked us up in Kalamazoo, and from there we came to Holland. We arrived here like 11:30 at night. They feasted us to a nice supper yet. I think the train was later than they expected. Some of the wives, and some of the officials at Hope College, too, they had planned to give us supper, so even though it got to be 11:30, they thought we still better have the supper. That really tasted good; there was all kinds of fancy food, especially when you've just been sitting on a ship. And coming from a family of ten children, we didn't have a lot of choice. My mother served what was good for all of us to eat, and we couldn't say we liked this or we liked that better. Coming here, one of the first things I noticed, the fresh food. We had been able to get some apples in the Netherlands, but never in the last five years during the war. We could not get any bananas and other tropical fruits, because they all had to come from southern parts of Europe, and that was not available. The Germans probably got some, the army and some of those kind of people, but not the regular people. We couldn't get any of those.

DR: Can you talk a little about your experiences as a student at Hope College?

MK: When we first came, we had to sign up for different classes. Mr. Timmer, who at that time was helping me select the classes. He said

now would be a good time to take some things that you would be interested in and that you would like. I looked over the schedule, and I thought, well, maybe studying Spanish would be interesting, because I already had studied French and Latin, and I thought that would be something easier than too much reading material. My English wasn't as good as it became later, and so it was important for me to be able to take some classes where I would do mostly quick learning, and the other ones where I would have to do a lot of reading. I took some mathematics, which I had had in school too, in high school. I came from a classical high school, and I studied six foreign languages and I had a math major and a science major, too. So I had quite a bit of background, and that really was very helpful, because most of the classes did not give me any problems. That was really our first impression, and we were happy to go to the classes. The students were all very helpful, and whatever we couldn't understand, they would help us translate or they would give us directions. The first couple days on campus were somewhat hectic because you wouldn't know what the buildings were called or where to go and how to get your meal tickets, but the administration and the different teachers and professors were very helpful.

DR: Did you associate mostly with the other Dutch students, or with the American students, too?

MK: I would say the first week maybe quite a bit with Dutch students, because we had to go to different events. They were asking us to go here, to go there. They had several receptions for us. They were very cordial with the invitations. Quite often the first week we

were together. I would say shortly after that, we got our own friends. I happened to be rooming with a girl from Iowa, and so she and I started doing things together. Also being in a large dorm, it doesn't take you long to get acquainted with some other people, other girls in the dorm, and so we spent evenings together, coffeering and whatever else you do, maybe go downtown for milkshakes and things like that.

The atmosphere was wonderful here. Everyone was so receptive and so kind and we really felt like this was almost like the Netherlands. Not only did people talk to us nice and were receiving us with very open arms, but we also found the townspeople, when we would go shopping and people would say, "Oh, you just came from the Netherlands? Please talk some Dutch to us." There were still quite a few people in those days who spoke Dutch because they had learned it from their parents here. They were not all Dutch born, but several of them, I remember different people where I worked, or when I went to the stores, who just loved to speak the Dutch language. So instead of me learning English, I was helping them with their Dutch, which was fun. It didn't really matter to me because I did learn the language alright. It just took a little longer that's all.

One of the experiences I had the first year, about three months into the fall of that 1947 year, my roommate said, "You dreamed last night." I said, "I dreamed? I never dream." "Oh yes," she said, "and you dreamed in English, so evidently your subconscious is now Englishized and ready for the English language." It's amazing how

quickly that might come. It amazed me that in two and a half or three months you would really have accepted the language as part of your daily behavior. That's why, for any foreign student who comes or travels from or studies a foreign language, it's so important to go to the country. To be able to spend a summer there. Ten days isn't enough, but a summer or three months, especially if you know the grammar of the language before you go, if you know how to speak it a little bit. That was a big advantage for me, having studied English for four years, I didn't have as much trouble as some of the other immigrants did. There were many men and women who said to me in later years, fifties, sixties, after I was married and had children. They said, "Oh, I couldn't understand the people and nobody could talk to me and I was so lonesome until my husband came home from work and then we could talk," and it really was difficult for them because they really had never studied the language. To pick up a language by just listening to it is not easy, if you have not had the background and the grammar and everything that goes with it.

DR: How many other international students were at Hope while you were there?

MK: There were sixteen and all that came with us. There was one student who had come about a week or two earlier. He was not a student just out of high school like all of us were. He had been at the university in a kind of a journalism class, and he came especially to study journalism and see what he could learn here. So he joined us, and then there were seventeen of us.

DR: What did you do then after the first school year was over?

MK: At the end of the school year I thought, I'm not really ready to go home, so I told my parents I'd like to stay another year. The people at the college, the administration, had offered me another scholarship, but it would not be a full scholarship; it would just be for tuition. So I had to earn money for my room and board, which was possible in those days. Today it's very difficult to earn enough during a summer to be able to go right on to school, but at that time it was very easy. Something I neglected to tell you, we all came with some pocket money, but of course the college did not supply any pocket money for toothpaste and cups of coffee and sodas and whatever else, even paper or things we needed for classroom activities and things like that.

Shortly after I came, by maybe the middle of October, two or three weeks into the school year, I was looking for some work, and I thought, it would be important to go to some place where I don't have to talk too much English or where the people don't have to understand me, because they would get frustrated and they'd say, "Lady, I can't understand you." So I went to the Heinz pickle factory. I walked over there. I applied at the personnel office, and I told them I was interested in doing some work. I purposely had put all my classes in the morning. I started at eight, and I had five of them in a row until 1:00 or 12:30. When I went over there, I told them I could be at work at 1:00 if necessary. The next day they called me back and I said yes, I could start. Those were the days when you could just get a job. Part time, you could

tell them what you wanted to do, and you would get that job. I worked there every afternoon for the whole year until the next summer. Then I worked at someone's home for the next summer. I actually worked in the Woolworth's dime store. By that time I really felt I knew the language; I didn't have any problems. I thought I could easily be a sales clerk. That way I didn't have to walk all the way to Heinz and back. Not that I minded it; it was good, but it took a half an hour of my time over and a half an hour back. Once in a while I would get a ride from somebody half way or someone who lived close to the college. They'd know me; they'd always see me walking down Sixteenth Street. That took almost twenty-five minutes, and I think today we'd all be laughing and say, "You walked that every day and back?" because it is quite a distance from here. Well, I was used to walking a lot during the last couple years of the war because we didn't have the bicycle--tires were worn out--so we did do a lot of walking, and I didn't really mind the walking. I figured it was good exercise. I didn't have a choice, I didn't have a car, and I didn't have money to buy a car. I never did have a car until I was married and my husband provided me with a car.

DR: What was one of the most difficult adjustments to make coming here as a student and being a student at Hope College?

MK: I think probably the biggest adjustment was the language barrier and trying to find out what kind of manners people use here. Some of their cultural manners in the Netherlands and the United States are a little bit different. You might want to think of sitting by the



table, for example. In the Netherlands, it is proper to keep your hands on the table when you're eating; you keep your left hand on the table while you eat with your right hand. Actually, you use your fork and your knife quite often, but when you just sit, it's not nice, it's not polite to keep your hands on your lap. And that is more of what most people do in the United States. If you sit with your hands resting on the table, they think you don't have manners. Those are some of the things I started watching quite carefully in the beginning, because I thought, I don't want people to think I'm an oddball. Those were just little things--Listening to people, what their interests were. I had been somewhat limited in learning things about the United States, so I was very eager to speak with different people, and to get acquainted with and know how they tick, and especially the people from the east and west coasts that were here at school, gave me another impression again about what's going on and stuff like that.

DR: Did you have any chances to travel in the United States while you were a student here?

MK: No, the only thing I ever did was go home on vacations with some of the college students. That was another very nice experience. There would be students from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and I would go with them for Thanksgiving vacation for four days. They either had their own car, or the parents would pick them up. And if they would be willing to take me along, they invited me, and I said, sure, I'd love to come. That was one of the earliest experiences I had to see how people live in their homes, how they act and what they do, how



they spend their time, what interests they have. College girls have different interests, they talk about different things than families. In some cases you learn more about people and how they act together.

That was one nice thing about working in the Heinz factory. I'd been brought up in a family that had been very well educated. My dad was a civil engineer, my mother was a chemical engineer. The kind of people we met were mostly educated people, interesting people. I really didn't know anybody who worked in a factory, what they did or what they talked about. Here for me it was a great experience to get to talk to some people besides college students and professors, because that's what we saw, and those were just kind of the same type of people I had spoken with while I'd gotten my education with my parents and everybody else. It was really great to see how ambitious the people were. I could tell that many of them had the Dutch culture behind them. They were still very concerned about the ethics of work and not wasting any year, doing the very best they could and trying to learn about some of the problems they had: why they were working. Many of them at the time when I was working on this one unit, were women who had either grown children or children in college, and they needed additional money. I had never seen, my mother never worked outside the home, so I thought everybody stayed home, only to find out that these ladies definitely needed to work and supply some additional money for their family. Then there were some widow ladies whose husbands had passed away. It was nice to talk to those women and see what their interests were and things like that.

DR: How did you go from originally going to stay here for one year to living here now?

MK: The second year, as I was telling you, they offered me this additional scholarship for another year. Then after that second year, then I was acquainted with my husband-to-be. He was in my Spanish classes. Quite often he had a couple other friends. He didn't spend a lot of time with me because in those days it seemed like we were doing things more in groups. There would be three girls and maybe five or six guys, or six girls and two guys. So I got acquainted with him and different times we would go to sorority parties or things that were going on. I thought, well, I'm this far, I might as well stay another year and get my college degree. I told my parents I was going to stay another time, and they started thinking, boy, I don't know if she's ever coming back; this doesn't sound good. I didn't tell them about the boyfriend. I just told them I was so close to getting my degree, I might as well keep going. They didn't really object to that. Besides I was here and they were there.

At that time I was working at Woolworth's all the time when I could. I had some classes that were split. Sometimes I had afternoon classes. I'd maybe worked at Woolworth's on a Monday. When the store would be open until 9:00, I'd work maybe from 3:00 until 9:00. Other days I could work maybe from 10:00 until 2:00. They were very flexible and they didn't mind, as long as I could just come in. I started helping some of the office girls, and doing things that didn't really matter, I wasn't quite involved with the

public all the time, so I could do this work whenever it was convenient for me. That was very nice; I did that until after graduation.

DR: When did you eventually tell your parents about your boyfriend?

MK: After I graduated, then I started telling my parents, I've got this boyfriend, and I thought maybe I'd like to stay longer and maybe think about getting married. They said you'd better think about it because I'm not sure if that's what you want to do. They said how will you go about it? I said I can't get married just yet because I don't know if I want to marry him yet. I talked to the college administration and he said I could stay on for another year as a student. You also have this immigration problem. People have that today, too. You can only stay so many years on an education student visa. It usually is four years if you want to go to college; they'll give you four years. When the four years are up, they'll say, "Wait a minute. How many more? What are you going to do next?" Then you have to write them and you have to explain that and say you want to get some extra experience. Today it's almost impossible. At that time it was possible, but I did have to take twelve hours at college, that's minimum load. For immigration I needed to do that to continue to be on my student status.

After I got those hours, I picked some things that I hadn't really learned so much of before. I figured I'd take some extra English literature classes, I took some extra Spanish that I thought would be of interest to me. These were past my requirements for my degree. Then I kept working more because I was only attending the

twelve hours of school and I didn't have so much schoolwork. At that time I was staying with a family off campus. They asked me to take care of their children during some times when they had to go away, and the lady had had some surgery recently. So she would need some help with housework and with heavy lifting and this kind of thing. During my last year I didn't have to pay room and board, that was pretty well taken care of, so I only had to pay the tuition at that time.

Then my parents knew that something was going wrong, especially during that last year that I stayed on as a student. Then we talked about getting married, and we decided to get married in June after school was out. We got married in June. We asked my parents of course if they wanted to come, or if I should go to Europe to get married or if I should get married here. We decided it was easier all the way around if I would just stay here and get married. So my mother came for the wedding. She came for six weeks. My dad was very close to retirement. He decided not to come because he would come later. She was the only one who came. She came about ten days before the wedding. She's also the one that gave me away. She didn't walk me down the aisle. The gentleman where I stayed that last year, that was actually Mr. Willard Wichers, he and Mrs. Wichers had invited me, so Mr. Wichers escorted me down the aisle. My mother stood up and when the minister said, "Who gives this woman away?"—like they do in our American weddings—she said, "Her father and I do." That was how our wedding went. A lot of people were very nice when I was planning the wedding because I didn't have a

mother to help me plan it. Mrs. Wichers was very helpful and several of the people I got to know over the last year or so especially when I was thinking about getting married. Girls with whom I worked at the Woolworth's company, they started giving me showers. I had never known what showers were until I came to the United States; we don't have showers, we have nothing like that in Europe. That was another good experience.

DR: What was it like marrying an American husband?

MK: Actually I really can't say that it was something too unusual, because by that time I was speaking the language, I knew his interests, I knew what he liked and didn't like, just the getting married part--the plans. He helped a lot with the plans. His family also helped very much, because they knew that we had to get involved in doing things that couldn't always be done during the daytime when he was working. My husband had also started working the year before. He and I graduated the same year, 1950, but I took the extra classes from 1950-51, and then we got married in June, so he had a full time job. Everybody was very helpful and helped me plan it. We had a lot of people there at the wedding. It was fun.

DR: What did your family think about your decision to stay in the United States?

MK: My parents really never said, it's too bad you stayed. My mother was very happy when she came. She thought that the people were wonderful to her when she came, and whoever she met were always very kind and they always spoke highly of her daughter. It was a good experience for her. She knew I had gotten to know so many people

and that certainly she was not going to leave me behind with just a stranger in a strange land, like there's this book called A Stranger in a Strange Land by Reverend Scholte. He's one of the persons who started immigration in Iowa. That was one of the books. She didn't really worry about me when she was leaving. She had met everyone that I knew, that I was acquainted with, she had seen that I had a lot of support of people, and as far as my husband, he was very helpful. I can't really ever say that I really was homesick, even at Hope College.

I think my biggest problem was at one time at Hope College during my first Christmas vacation, the boyfriend I had left behind in the Netherlands wrote me a letter and he said, since we're so far separated, maybe we better quit our relationship, kind of indicating that you can start a new relationship and so can I. We had been writing letters before, but after that, that stopped.

Talking about these parents leaving children behind, my parents never said anything to me. But I had a cousin who came to the United States maybe six or seven years later, after I had been married for a while. She came to study at the University of Chicago. My mother had said to her mother, "I hope the same thing doesn't happen to you that happened to me. You realize this when you send them over there as a student, they may not come back." Exactly, this girl, too, married a student. He was of Swedish origin, but she had a lot in common with him. She was actually a psychologist, after she studied some more she ended up being a psychologist. Her husband was a PhD in English, but he also was

studying Dutch history. So once or twice over the last thirty years they did go back to the Netherlands and studied in Amsterdam for a while. I didn't ever do that; I went back many times to visit, but not to do any kind of work in the Netherlands. I know some students have done that; they've gone back to do some research for a year or so during a sabbatical. I think from that, I know that my mother thought, "Well, once you let them go out of sight, who knows when they'll come back?" That's the closest I ever got to having her think, wait a minute, that's not really so nice.

We did have nine other children. Not that one gone, the nine make up for it. But I think she felt that she had many other children who would be able to communicate with her and help her if she needed help, or just be together as a family. They always say, Margaret isn't here, they always make a big deal of that, but it's still, that does make up for it. I've seen some families whose only child left for another country. Then it gets to be much more difficult. Not that the pain of losing just one temporarily is anything different, but it's really very difficult if you send one child overseas. I know that some of the people who I've seen who are only children, they have gone back more frequently because they've really felt they needed to.

DR: Did any other members of your family emigrate after you did?

MK: They did not emigrate because they all had their positions and they all had their jobs. Each one of them was working, not at the time when I left, but over the years. I had one sister who worked for about five years for the Shell Oil Company in Aruba in the Dutch



West Indies, and my brother was in the Dutch East Indies during the war, he was there as a medical doctor. Different ones have gone places for short time, but never took any citizenship in any other countries, because they were quite well-educated, so it wasn't a problem for them to make a good living.

The people that emigrated to the United States were mostly farmers with large families. The oldest one or two could maybe stay on the farm and they could make a living, but when you have five or six children, they couldn't begin to make a living there for each one of them, so they decided, we'll go to this nice country, they have their doors open. At that time it was really easy to emigrate to the United States. The Dutch government was willing to let these people go because it's a small country and we were getting more populated, more densely populated. After WWII we were getting Indonesian people that were coming back because the situation in the Dutch East Indies had changed so much.

DR: What are some of your impressions now when you go back to visit the Netherlands?

MK: I'm very happy when I go back. Every time when I see my sisters and my brothers. I don't meet any of my high school friends hardly ever. Maybe I'll talk to one on the telephone, but not really very many, because each one is so occupied with their own things that, when I go to visit, I usually only stay two to four weeks at the very most. Since I have nine brothers and sisters and about twenty-five nieces and nephews, and I have some grand nieces and nephews, we really keep quite busy with family parties and family events.



I'm always happy to go back.

I think the Netherlands is still a wonderful country, even though it is a little bit more liberal than the Midwest United States. There are things there that I personally wouldn't do. People are doing things. But neither would my family probably. Not everybody is in the Netherlands the way sometimes the news describes them or the way you hear people talk: "Oh, this is all so terrible over there." They do some little things that I wouldn't approve of, but there are a lot of people who live just like we do here in the Midwest, and who do a lot of nice things for one another. They do all kinds of volunteer work, they give very generously, whenever there is a special project, or a tornado hits, people will give money endlessly. They're willing to share, they'll do anything. Sometimes you get the impression that people don't have any money; that they do not want to share, but they're very generous people, and they're very hospitable, too.

I think it really has not been changed that much except the religion. People say they don't go to church. But I say going to church doesn't make a Christian. It's your relationship with Christ and how you act and what you say about Him and how you show in your deeds more than in your words. Just because these people don't go to church—my sisters don't always go either—but sometimes they're with my mother or sometimes they're doing other things for other people. So I can't judge, and I think people sometimes are very quick to judge and say nobody goes to church anymore. Who knows what's in the hearts of people and who knows the reasons why they

don't come?

DR: Do you have a church affiliation yourself?

MK: Yes, I'm a member of the Pillar Christian Reformed Church. It just so happens that that's where I met my husband more frequently, too. I was living in Voorhees hall during that last year (1949-50), when we were in the senior year. I would go to church there because we didn't have regular church on campus at that time. There was a chapel and we had to go there every morning at 8:00 until 8:15, and if you were absent, you got your name written down. Then on Sundays we didn't have campus chapel. For a while I went to Hope Church. I would go with some of the other girls, but then after I started seeing more of my at that time boyfriend, I thought, I'll go to that church because then I see him there. I had these grandiose ideas that if I kept going there he'd probably get a little bit more serious and things like that. That's how I started going to Pillar Church, and since he was a member there, we always stayed there and kept our membership there, even though I was at heart Reformed. I come from a Reformed family. People would say how can she feel at home in a Christian Reformed Church? I say you're just as Christian Reformed or just as Reformed as you feel yourself, your relationship. There is no difference in a relationship with Christ no matter what church you hang onto or whatever church you support. I said just going to a Christian Reformed Church does not make me an overly conservative Christian who maybe some of us would not like. Others might say they're fine.

I must say that when I first came, there were many people in

different churches who invited us to come down and speak to them, like in a girls' society on Wednesday night. They would say would you come and talk to us about the Netherlands, about the education, about the different things, because they were really eager to learn more about the Netherlands. They had heard about it from their parents, but they thought this was a nice way to get a program for the church group and at the same time learn something.

I don't know how many recent post WWII Dutch immigrants there were in Holland when I came in September 1947, but I would say I was probably one of the first twenty. By the way, the other fourteen students, five of them stayed in the United States, some of them went on to graduate school and then were married and settled down here. Eleven of them went back, and we had some contact for a while with them, but later on we didn't.

These different churches would invite us to come down and speak with them to learn more about their fatherland or whatever they knew. I don't think there were very many people in this area--I've gotten to know some of them over the years--I didn't have a lot of contact with them because I was in a college community. Over the years, after I was married, and we started going more frequently to church and got to know more families there, then I found out that a lot of them came in 1952, 1953, 1956, you may find one or two that came earlier, but I would be inclined to say that I'd be one of the very earliest. I have not met one that came before 1947. Like I said, the only one I knew in Canada, she was on the same ship I was. So there were people on that ship but none of them were coming to

the United States, they were all going right straight to Canada. Since I was one of the first ones here, they started asking me to come and talk to their groups. I'm sure as the years went by, and the next five or ten years, they started getting some of these people to join their churches and they learned first hand from them frequently, how things were in the Netherlands.

DR: When you were first living in Holland, would you have considered it to be a Dutch community?

MK: Yes, I would say so, especially when I finally saw Tulip Time. In many ways I thought yes, because there were several people who wanted to talk Dutch which gave me an indication. Secondly, I thought the city was laid out so practical--streets, you couldn't miss your way around town. If you knew where Central Avenue was, the one was east, the other side was west. If you can count from one to forty you can get all the way through town. I thought it was laid out very practical, and I thought the streets were clean, the parks were neat, the flowers were quite a bit, nothing like the Netherlands, but the parks were kept well, and there were flowers in many places. People had some flowers around their homes, but everything was kept very neatly, you could see children were dressed well.

We didn't see a lot of poverty, some of these areas, these homes that were later on dilapidated, those were not so dilapidated when I came in 1947. Some of them were just torn down within the last three years when Freedom Village was built. There were streets that were called Fourth Street, Fifth Street, and Sixth Street, and

that area had many older homes.

In the 1940s and 1950s those homes were quite well kept. They were still trying to keep them neat. There were Dutch people living there, but then later on there were more people coming and those houses were getting older. If you have a real old house, it's very hard to keep it up. That's why older homes eventually have to be razed to make some room for newer things and that's what we're doing here in Holland. At Tulip Time I saw this abundance of all these nice things. I think basically you could tell that this was really a city that was proud of its heritage and that tried to do everything to keep things going to have it done well.

DR: How did you react to Tulip Time when you first saw it?

MK: I was just amazed and I thought, I'd better take part here, this is going to be really exciting. I could not believe all those Klompen dancers, because in the Netherlands when we have a little, in a little village sometimes they have a special village feast, maybe once or twice a year. If they have twenty Klompen dancers that would be a lot, or maybe two groups of sixteen at the very most, but nothing like this. Of course it has multiplied many times since I came in 1947. I would say they had three hundred at that time and we probably have pretty close to three thousand now. But just to see all of them along the park, that's just about how many of them we had, just enough to go around the central park here in town. That really amazed me.

Then when all these popcorn stands came to town and I thought, what is this going on? This is not exactly Dutch, but I could see

when you have people, you have to have something for them to eat. It was a business, and it was very limited at first. Tulip Time had actually started, I think, in 1933 or 1932 so it was just still in its infant stages. Previously business had been mostly income for the city of Holland. As they developed more tourism it became a little bit more business and tourism rather than just people who lived here and worked on the land like the original was when they first came. They all had forty acre farms with a house on them. Those forty acre houses are now subdivisions.

DR: Would you still consider Holland a Dutch community today?

MK: Yes, I would still consider it a Dutch community. I am happy to see that we have other people of other nationalities living here with us, for example, some of the Latinos from different areas of the globe, and of course the Laotians, Cambodians, there are many other ones now who have moved in and they also needed a place to work and needed a place to grow up and develop. I think it's good to be diversified and have different people living here. Just Dutch is not the only answer. I think it's good to be diversified and have different people.

What I sometimes object to a little bit is the bilingual thing that people want to keep stressing in the schools and in public buildings. I honestly think that if you are living in a country where English is spoken, like the United States, I think it's really important that we speak English in all our public places. That doesn't mean that you can't have your own cultural things. You can have lots of festivals, you can have Dutch Tulip Time, you can have

whatever you want. But I think it's important that we stress the fact that people need to really learn the English language.

In my present position working for the Federal Government I get a lot of people from these other cultures coming in for help, as there are Dutch people who also come in. It's very difficult when I see people who say they've been here ten years and they cannot communicate at all in anything but Spanish, for example, or once in a while I get a few who cannot communicate in anything but Laotian, and that's worse because I don't know Laotian. I know some Spanish so I can help them along, and between the two of us, between their little English and my little Spanish we can get along. It's very discouraging. I tell these people, you're going to have to live here a long time and you really need to make the most of it and learn this language, which is the one that everyone speaks here. I think sometimes some people think that if you speak English, you lose your culture. You don't. Your culture will always stay there, and you can still speak Spanish with all kinds of other people along the way. There are many hours of the day that you're not in public places. It's really important, in fact, I find out that some of these people learn from their children. When their children go to school, their children come home and they're all babbling English. That's when some of the mothers learn to speak English. And some of the fathers who work in the factories, they sometimes pick it up easier. It depends sometimes on their jobs. The Dutch people had the same problem. The Dutch housewives, they did not know the language, and then they were staying home and did not learn it as



easily. When their children went to school, that's when they started picking it up. It was one way to learn it. I think most of them felt that if you're in a country where English is spoken, we really need to all learn English. That doesn't mean you have to give up your Dutch, or your Spanish, or your Vietnamese, or Laotian.

DR: In what ways do you think these new immigrants are changing Holland?

MK: I think there is more diversity. We learn more about their culture. They have some of the activities that we see, like things like Liberty Fest. It's so good to see different people have their own way of celebrating and to learn about their food for example. That's one time that we see a lot of their food. And also when there are arts and crafts shows. We see how some of these people have their own crafts and have their own beautiful handiwork and we learn about their dances, especially the Mexican dances. And maybe some of the other Latinos, too. They have these beautiful music, and it might not be something that everybody likes, but I think a lot of us do like to learn about some of their music and their ways. Then it's very important for everyone to, at least, support them and say you should keep this culture going, but not at the expense of the everyday language.

DR: Do you see any parallel between some of your experiences when you came in 1947 and the experiences they're having now?

MK: Yes, I would say so. They're going through the same thing that they have to somehow make an impression or somehow learn to adjust to what they find here. I had to adjust. Maybe my adjustment wasn't as clear-cut because I came from a country where they spoke Dutch



and where some of the original people came from. But there were plenty English people at that time already who were living here. People would come from the East and the West here, and some people from the South. Actually, the first Latino influx came in about 1946, 1947. They were just coming in here. When I started selling in the stores, it was nice for me to be able to speak to them in Spanish, which I had learned at Hope College, and to help them along. I think they do find that it's different after they get here. It's an adjustment, especially for the people who are not in the work force or who are not in school. It's more difficult to adjust to things and learn what the ways of the people are. But we like to learn from them, and they should learn from us. It's a two-way street. That's what I did, and I think that's what they're doing. Any one of them, I think the Latinos do, and so do the Vietnamese, and the Laotian.

When I first saw them, I thought they were all the same, but I soon found out when I talked to each one differently at different times that "No, I'm not Laotian," or "I'm not Vietnamese." "I'm so and so." That's understandable; they're proud of their country. I'm proud to be a Dutch person. At one time people said, "Don't you want to get rid of that accent?" I said yes and no. Yes, I want to get rid of it so not everybody knows I'm a foreigner. Then I said, no, because I don't really mind if they know. When I talk to people the first thing they usually say is, "Oh, you sound like you have a little accent. Where are you from?" It breaks a little gap and it starts some conversation going, and sometimes people say, I came

from so-and-so country or they'll say my parents came from so-and-so country. Sometimes they're Swedish, sometimes they're from Texas, or sometimes they're from Spain. Not very many Spanish-speaking came from Europe. Most of them came from Central America or from Texas or some other southern area.

It's good for people to adjust and I think most people adjust well. Once in a while there are people who just sit back and feel so discouraged that they can't communicate anymore, and then they almost get a mental block, and then it gets to be a real burden for them. I know there have been a few people. I wonder if you have interviewed or heard about these. There are several people who actually went back to the Netherlands and never came back. If they don't know the language and have been in a large family and have been used to communicating a lot, and they're sitting home with two, three, four little children under six or seven, I can see that. It's just like when you lose somebody like a husband or a wife. If they did, and if you're out in the work force. But, if you can go to work and keep busy every day, and every night think about your husband or your wife, and every day go back to work, you're busy all day with all the things that occupy you and are important to you, then you can easily get through the evening. But if you sit home between the four walls and you're an invalid and your husband dies, there's nothing to live for. Those are the people who get so depressed. I think that's about the way you have to look at it. They lost their country. It's like a death, like someone they just lose. They thought by going back they could pick it up for a while.

DR: In what ways have you been involved in the Holland community?

MK: I first got involved with the church. I did some things there. After I had been there for a couple years, then I joined Junior Welfare League. That was a good thing because it was a community thing. I got to know other people beside the people at the college and the people at the church. I got to know a lot of people there, and from that it went from one thing to another. I was involved with Good Samaritan Center. That's an organization here that helps people. I worked on the board for the Hospitality House—we take care of abused women and children—I was on that board. I've been on the museum board now for about eight or nine years, maybe ten, I don't know just how long. I've been involved in H. O. M. E. That's an agency that's concerned about people that don't have housing. I'm a member of Bread For The World and I work with that organization to also see what we can do there.

I keep doing things all the time. Through my church or through my community I get involved with a lot of things. I certainly feel that that's part of life. If you don't get involved, you really are never going to be a part of the community. You need to reach out. You can't just say I'll wait and sit home until somebody calls me. That's not the way you get a date either. You have to want it. You have to be aggressive. I love people and I saw people who needed help so I helped them. I think that's what you need to do. Get involved and volunteer. I volunteered many times. People put announcements in bulletins or in the paper, "We're looking for volunteers; we can't get volunteers; these volunteers should be

coming." It's a wonderful thing to be able to serve your city or your church or your God or whatever might be the case.

For myself, I've also been involved not only just in the church itself, but I've also been involved in different Classical committees. I've been working on that, and also on some Synodical committees for the Christian Reformed Church. You really learn more and you enjoy it more because you feel like you're a part. If you just sit on the sidelines, it's like a game of sports. If you sit on the sidelines, you're taking it all in, but you're not really enjoying it like the participants. I think we have to be participants. The first couple years it's difficult for some of these people who come here because they don't have the know-how. They're usually tied down. Like I was as a student. I did not get involved in anything except the church. I went to church services at Hope Church. I hardly knew there was a Junior Welfare League because you're so busy with your school. But I did go to Sorosis Sorority. I was a member of that, so I have my Sorosis sisters. My husband was an Arcadian and so he has his Arcadian brothers. There were activities, May Day at Hope College, and you get some of these medals and all kinds of stuff. Then for quite a while I was very involved in Village Square. I did that for four or five years. I had a specific job that I did all the time. I've been involved in the college, too, and I go to some of the alumni things that are going on.

I think the college has been a wonderful thing for the city of Holland. When I came there were 1200 students, and we're well over

the 3000 mark. Sometimes now we fluctuate a little bit, but it's been very great because we get a lot of opportunities to attend cultural events. At that time we didn't have a Holland Arts Council, we didn't have all these other activities that are going on. We certainly didn't have a Dewitt Center where we had all the plays. There weren't any plays in those days. There were mostly music events, those were some of the things going on at Hope. We had speakers, people coming in to talk about current events or some other. Those were nothing like today. I can read the paper every Saturday or Sunday, and seven days a week I can go places, but I don't. There are so many things. I think it's a wonderful place to live. I think it's good to be diversified. I think it's good to keep a good work ethic. People should be working. It's not wise for people to sit back and say well let somebody else do it. I think we have to all be participants and continue to do that.

DR: Do you have children?

MK: Yes, I have three children. I have a boy and two girls and all three of them are married. My son has three girls and he works here in a factory in town. He works in the office; he does accounting work. Both of my girls who are nurses (they didn't get to go to Hope-Calvin yet because the program wasn't there yet—it was just a year or two before it started). They went to Calvin and they went to Blodgett Hospital and got their training there. They both still work as nurses and they're both married. My oldest girl has two boys and a girl and my youngest girl has two boys right now. They're all busy, and we are all still busy. I get to do

babysitting once in a while, not all the time because I have a full time job yet. Since working for the federal government I have enjoyed that very much.

DR: Did your Dutch heritage at all influence the way you raised your children?

MK: I would say so, yes. Growing up in a large family, as I did, we had to do a lot of things and we all had to share in the jobs. I think I taught them different things the way we do it in the Netherlands, and I said you may pick what you like. If you think this is better, then do that way. If you think that is better, do it that way. There were some things that I have taught them, and I think it has been helpful to them. Some things, just little Dutch ways, and maybe some Dutch words that they've learned. But I did not teach them any Dutch specifically because my children grew up in Dr. Spock's days. In those days he was the person you had to follow for training your children. This is what you had to do: never speak to them in a foreign language, because they're going to be emotional kooks. They'll be so confused; they'll be such sad little kids. Well, I believed Dr. Spock, with the result that as my kids grew older: "Why didn't you teach me mom?" I see that, too, the result of some of these real older people who live here in Holland. They've been told and taught Dutch by their grandparents by listening and speaking to them. I think it didn't make any basket cases out of them, and it probably wouldn't have out of my kids.

My husband didn't speak Dutch which made it much more difficult. If there are two parents speaking Dutch, that's when you

learn quicker, because most as most of these older families used to say to me, "I learned Dutch by listening to my mom and dad. When they didn't want us to hear, that's when they talked in Dutch. So we soon learned what they were talking about." It was an incentive for them to learn because they thought this is something that if I don't know it and don't learn it, I'll never know what Mom and Dad are talking about. It's really funny how some of those things, like my parents, too, they would say something in French at home. After we got to know French, they couldn't do that anymore. That's what parents do sometimes if they can. They use something to quick talk to each other without having the children know it.

Anyhow, I think that's one big mistake I made in my life. I should have taught the children because now they every so often say, "Mom, why don't you teach us some more Dutch." Even now. The grandchildren are learning a little bit. I tell them some once in a while. You really need to have people around twenty-four hours a day to really teach you. It's not enough if you have them even two days. A couple times I did try, and then my husband would say cut this out, because he didn't know what I was talking about. That bothered him I think. He thought, this is not good, she's going to talk and I won't know what she's talking about. The kids will only know. I think he thought that wasn't a good deal. It's something that would have been nice, but I didn't do it.

DR: I'm through my list of questions. Is there anything we haven't talked about that you'd like to say?

MK: No, as far as I know. I think we've covered a lot of ground. I



think I should tell you one more thing. About four weeks ago, maybe a little longer, maybe six weeks ago, my brother and sister-in-law were visiting here from the Netherlands. It was a busy day, and we went here and there and looked. Then we went to Evergreen Commons. We talked some Dutch as we were waiting for our coffee. We were going to get some coffee and cookies; while we were looking at the building, I said, let's have a cup of coffee here. The lady who was standing at the desk and who served us the coffee, she was listening to us, and it sounded like she was understanding quite a bit of it. After we settled down at the table--the three of us--she came with a cup of coffee and she said, "Would you mind if I join you? I love to talk Dutch." We said we'd love to have you join us. We said where are you from? And she was talking to us.

This lady was so hungry to talk Dutch. She had learned it from her parents. Her mother had come here when her mother was fourteen, so she knew the language well. She had taught this woman who's now eighty this language by talking to her. I'm not such a connoisseur on language anymore, but my brother, who watched her and listened to her speak, he said, this woman has a typical accent yet of the area where this mother had grown up. The mother grew up as a child until she was fourteen, she then came to the United States, she taught her children Dutch from what she knew, and her children had the accent of the place where she came from. This is this woman at eighty who was still doing it. She also told me she had no children and her husband had died within the last couple years or so, and so she was really hungry for someone to talk. Normally you would be



embarrassed to say to someone, "Do you mind if I join you?" I was so glad she did.

Now we've decided, I talked to the Evergreen people and I said do you think there are other people like that who would love to talk some Dutch? They said, well, let's find out. This week Friday we're going to start a little program at Evergreen, and we're going to have that twice a month at 10:00. We're going to call it Coffee Klatsch and we invited everyone who wants to just talk Dutch, and if you don't want to talk it yet because you don't feel like you know it well enough, come to listen. Just come and listen and maybe you might enjoy coming. So we're going to start that for an hour this week Friday. I'm sure if this lady doesn't know about, I'm going to call her, because I want to make sure that she'll be coming, that she's been made aware of it. It's been publicized, but sometimes people miss it. We don't quite know what we're going to talk about, but we're going to talk about something. I even wrote in the newspaper, if you have any heirloom or something special to talk about. We're really looking forward to that. I think it will be fun. If there are people out there who are so hungry that they'll say to some strangers, "Would you mind if I joined you?" they've got to be really eager to talk it. We figured that would be worth trying. At that note I guess I'll stop.

DR: Well, thank you very much.

MK: That's quite all right. One of the things that really helped me too was the whole family of my husband that was here. That made it really easy for me. I knew the language well enough because I had

studied it all those many years. I think that's really a great asset.

DR: You have a really interesting story.

MK: I want to thank you very much Donna for doing this project. I think it's marvelous.

DR: It's been a lot of fun. I've learned a lot.