

4-7-1999

Wagenaar, Mary Oral History Interview: Class Projects

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Recommended Citation

Repository citation: Heavilin, Jeremy, "Wagenaar, Mary Oral History Interview: Class Projects" (1999). *Class Projects*. Paper 68. http://digitalcommons.hope.edu/class_projects/68

Published in: *History 201 Oral History Interviews (1999) (immigrant residents of Holland) (H98-1351)*, April 7, 1999. Copyright © 1999 Hope College, Holland, MI.

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History 201 Oral History
Interviewee Mary Wagenaar
4-07-99
Interviewer Jeremy Heavilin

Date of Birth: 2-25-25
Place of Birth: Enkhuizen- North Holland
Where she emigrated from: Sint Pancras

JH: This is Jeremy Heavilin and I'm Interviewing Mary Wagenaar. Today's date is April 7th 1999. Like you said, you were born in North Holland?

MW: North Holland. There are 11 provinces in The Netherlands, it is right on the ocean. That is where I grew up.

JH: Could you describe your homeland and what it was like to live there?

MW: We moved quite a bit, we had a nice home there were three kids, father, mother, and three kids. We had a good Christian home.

JH: Is it picturesque Holland? Windmills, dykes?

MW: There was one windmill where we lived. Close by were certain dykes that had six windmills for example. We had one windmill in Sint Pancras.

JH: How old were you when you left Holland?

MW: I think I was 28 so I was pretty old already.

JH: Would it be a village or town?

MW: Yes, a small town with three streets.

JH: Being on the ocean, was fishing a major part of the industry?

MW: No, that was more in the former Zuiderzee that became the yselmeer after the afsluitdijk was in place between Holland and Friesland. And that is where all the fishing was. And also on the ocean but different places.

JH: Did you hold a profession while in Holland?

MW: Yes I worked for the postal service. I went to places where the postmaster was sick or had died and I would go there and replace him until there was another one. I did that for ten years until the day I got married.

JH: Interesting...So then you are 27, you lived in Germany for almost two years and then to America?

MW: Then to America.

JH: What was the reason for first leaving the Netherlands?

MW: Because of my husband, he left in 1950 for the United States and then when he was there only about a year and he had to go in to the service during the Korean War... I can still not understand how that they can do that, but they did and he had to go, if he wasn't going in the Army then he would have to leave and never be able to enter the United States again. They had a kind of thing over his head. So he went in the Army and ended up in Germany.

JH: That is when you joined him in Germany?

MW: No, then he came to visit every so often and then we got married in the Netherlands and then we lived in Germany in a one room apartment until we moved to America.

JH: What was his reason for setting off to America?

MW: Adventure! He is very adventurous. He worked for a seed company and he did quite a bit of traveling there. Then went in to the army to Texas, Fort Hood, for training and then to Germany.

JH: So he was there only a year and pledge his allegiance?

MW: Only one year, he was there.

JH: What concerns were there when you decided that you were going to go to America once you were in Germany? Were you married in Germany?

MW: No, Netherlands.

JH: What were some of your fears or concerns?

MW: My father and mother were shocked, but I always said, "oh don't worry cause we will not be going there for several years." You know how you do that to make it easier. It was hard because I did not know anybody. Neal knew people from the same place that he came from. They were in Grand Rapids or Wyoming, and Kalamazoo. We moved to Kalamazoo first and he knew a lot of people there, but I did not know anybody and we were poor. We had spent all our money. We got here and we had nothing. First day we got here on a Saturday. First he had to get out of the Army so he put me in a room rented then he went to Texas to pick up his car and I was alone in the room. Can you just imagine? I know no English, only school English that is not exactly the same.

JH: Different than conversational.

MW: That is hard. It's like you listen to a Mexican, it is hard to understand.

JH: They say English is one of the most difficult languages to learn.

MW: Could be...so that was kind of hard. The first year I was really homesick, but then I got used to it. We were poor and it was hard.

JH: You had his circle of friends to build off of.

MW: That was good!

JH: You were coming to something, it is not like you came to nothing with just yourselves.

There was some structure when you arrived.

MW: He had friends and that helped a lot. We had a hard time because all our savings we had spent. We got in on Saturday and bought a living room set, was not expensive, a couch and two chairs and a table and dinning room table and chairs. We bought a baby crib and a bed and dresser and all had to be done on Saturday. We had nothing and they delivered.

JH: You had one child at this time?

MW: Just a baby at 5 months old.

JH: When you traveled it was just the three of you?

MW: We arrived on Christmas Day and were in Highland Park railroad station. Not a soul around and we did not know what to do. We did not know anyone in Highland Park, so a little man, a dwarf, big head small body and he was a paperboy and he was so nice. He said he thought he knew someone that he thought we could rent a room from. He was our saving grace.

JH: Wow, a Godsend.

MW: We did not know were to go because everybody was in church on Christmas Day. Mary, Joseph and baby are what we felt like.

JH: Looking for a stable.... We spoke about why you left.... Your husband.

MW: I would never, ever have gone. No.

JH: The parents?

MW: They were very upset especially my mother. She never got over it. It is a big step, you leave all of your friends behind and you don't know anybody.

JH: I can't fathom.

MW: And you are poor and you didn't know what poor was but we managed. The Lord provides me.

JH: Your husband adventurer.... Why America?

MW: He kind of liked it. Was in England for awhile, before but he choose America. His father died in a concentration camp, so there was the whole family and he thought that they would come, but they didn't, which I was glad about.

JH: What is the perception of America as a foreigner? Is it, as they say, "Roads of Gold?"

MW: I don't know, I did not have much of an idea. I did not have a preconceived idea. I tell you, one time we had a taxi on road to hotel and I said all these people here are Roman Catholic. He said why? I said, all over the place rooms, it says rooms. He said, that means Rooms for Rent (Rooms in Dutch means Roman Catholic). That was really funny.

JH: The first place you saw in America?

MW: New York. Drove in New York to get to hotel.

JH: Flew in?

MW: By boat and that was another experience. That took about 8-9 days and we had a storm in an Army boat. With soldiers family were separate and it stormed and I was in a room with two other women and they were sea sick and I had no problem. And baby was in the crib, it was fastened to it there. We had steel beds. It was all steel. We were not sea sick, spent most of the time on top, on the outside. I wasn't scared. Other people looked green. In dining room, you saw the sea or the heavens and everything was fastened. We were almost the only ones eating.

JH: That is no way to start a new life.

MW: I was not scared or seasick. Probably now I would get sea sick if I had to do it.

JH: New York is the first U.S. city you saw. What was your impression?

MW: I saw Statue of Liberty, but that didn't impress me. Some people say, "oh Statue of Liberty." But it didn't impress me. I did not feel that I had to move out of country, we had a good life, you see. I did not have that feeling. The train had beds and we slept the entire time and got into Highland Park.

JH: So when you pull into New York and see all these big buildings, all this iron and massive structures...

MW: That's quite an impression, but you know you get so many impressions and you arrive on with a baby already, things to worry about, and I suppose it impressed me but, I can't recall that it was the biggest thing.

JH: Yah there was a lot of other stuff going on in your life at that time to preoccupy your worries to worry about buildings. You said Kalamazoo and then eventually moved from Kalamazoo.

MW: We went to Dutton. Neal worked there for Somerville Construction Co. and from Dutton we went to Wyoming, lived there four years and then we came here. So seven years we lived in Kalamazoo, two years in Dutton, four years in Wyoming and then here, 31 years already, 32 almost.

JH: What drew you to Holland then?

MW: My allergies, I had the most horrible allergies. I was here 5 years in U.S. and had all those allergies, horrible. I got all those shots every week. It was something else and then we were camping at the beach I was perfectly ok. Neal said, "I will look for a place close

to the beach" and he found it right here. It was all open, there was nothing but woods on that side with one house next to us and that was all. This was all woods. Those houses were not there on the other side, Eagle Crest. So then he bought this. We got a good deal on it except, he had to build right away then and that is what we did.

JH: In hindsight imagining if you could have bought all this and how much money it would be worth now.

MW: A lot but still, they did not pay you that much Your salary was not so that you could really save. You had three kids and two in Christian school and Larry was five so he started. I thought if, I could just live here two hundred years I would appreciate it

JH: And the Allergies.

MW: Allergies gone, at first a little bit yet, when I got through my change of life then miracle miracle of miracles my whole body came clear, and nothing any more.

JH: In you go back in state?

MW: No problems at all I got rid of all my allergies.

JH: Holland, Michigan and Holland, Netherlands.

MW: From Holland to Holland, but it took a while before we got here.

JH: What did you think when you got here? Did you realize there was a large group of Hollanders from Holland Netherlands?

MW: No, I don't think we ever gave it a thought. We went to Gun Lake and Little Gull Lake, we didn't even think about Lake Michigan. Now when we lived in Wyoming, then we started having a second hand tent and we were here at the beach and it was marvelous, and we liked that. But I can remember the first time in Dutton, where we lived, I had my

Dutch costume then before I was ever heavy and I was slim and I had a Dutch costume and Neil had his Dutch costume and the kids didn't but they had nice straw hats. Was really neat and we went to Holland to go to Tulip Time and you won't believe it we couldn't find the town. We were on Pine where the park is there, you know, the park with the windmill. We did not know where Tulip Time was.

JH: You saw a windmill!

MW: We saw a lot of traffic. Where in the world is this little town? I couldn't find it then we went all the way out to the beach and we thought that we would never get to the beach it's a long way out. Sat there and had a nice time on the beach. And then we went back to Dutton and imagine we were that close to it. There was nothing going on there we were early and later we found out what Holland was all about.

JH: What were your first impressions of Holland? You see all these tulips and windmills?

MW: We grew up with that, but it is not that much compared to the Netherlands, there fields and fields of tulips and everybody had beautiful gardens.

JH: As opposed to Kalamazoo were you hard pressed to find a windmill or a tulip.

MW: Now the summers are different too, warmer than there.

JH: Did it make you nostalgic at all when you see something like that? Did it remind you of your childhood?

MW: When I see the Tulip Times dancers and I think those are not really the original costumes, and the girls are boys. That would never happen in the Netherlands we would have real boys. Now they are starting having a few boys in there. There ought to be boys. It would be more authentic but we enjoy it.

JH: You said some of the problems that you faced.... You were young and didn't really know anyone.

MW: And the money, Neal was studying for his CPA at night and he didn't get enough to live on and too much to die on that kind of thing. So instead, I can remember, I baked a lot of cake and cookies because you got 5 cake mixes for a dollar. When the kids got home from school they get tea and a little piece of cake that was the cheapest you know. You always had to eat hotdogs and meatballs and liver. I can't even stand the word liver anymore.

JH: And after living a good life in the Netherlands,

MW: It's hard!

JH: And struggling here.

MW: But you know, you are together and you can stand anything when you are together.

JH: English you spoke.

MW: Listen, you can hear I am Dutch. I never tried to get rid of the Dutch accent. If I had gone into the business world I probably would have lost it. When I worked in the post office and people came in and bought stamps or paid their taxes. Then if they had a German or English accent of whatever foreign country, I just loved it and thought isn't that marvelous that they have such an accent. But now I have it myself, I am not aware of it myself. I can hear it, but you know.

JH: That makes me wonder, in the Netherlands, were there other ethnic groups? Would you encounter a German?

MW: Yes, some German people lived there, and some English, but they kept an accent

supposedly. But I always thought that was marvelous. I never thought that I'd have one.

JH: Other than your husband, there were no other connections of relatives here?

MW: No. He had an uncle in Wyoming, so we saw them.

JH: Do you think that influenced his desire to come to the United States? Did he ever receive a letter from his uncle or anything of that sort?

MW: His uncle didn't particularly like it because Neal was on the side selling flower bulbs, but Uncle Henry, who is now dead, he was also selling and there was another Wagenaar, who was also selling flower bulbs and they came right away to visit us. They don't like competition. We did the business on the side to make a little money.

JH: Where were you first employed?

MW: My friend worked in a nursing home in Zeeland and I said maybe I would like to do that.

I love old people, I thought I would like that so I went to the director and she said, "Are you sure you want to do this." Yeah, I am awful glad I have absolutely no smell or taste which was in my favor, I would have gagged a lot and I really did like the work. But I did not last long. They fired me. Because one day I got so mad and when I get mad, I get mad. I had worked and had so many patients and they told me to eat my lunch and I said, "I can't eat lunch. I am not done." They said you have to so I went to the director of nursing. I said, "You need to have more aids or else I can't keep this up. I work and I work and I get nowhere. I got too many patients to take care of." She said "No, we are not getting any." I said, "If you are not going to get more aids then I quit." She said, "No, you are fired!" And those nurses were so upset. It was like an assembly line and it made me so angry. She was fired two weeks after that for firing me. But I wasn't going

to go back there any more.

JH: Was it difficult to find employment, based on your ethnicity? any...

MW: No, but I thought it was nice, a nice experience. I went for nursing and I went to college, but you know you have kids at home and I almost had a nervous breakdown. You can't keep that up. I did one semester and I said I better quit.

JH: Where at?

MW: J.C.

JH: Nursing home was the only real job you had?

MW: I volunteered at the hospital. I did a lot of volunteer work, and for Christian school I volunteered a lot.

JH: Your husband was employed in Holland? Where at?

MW: At Bill Mar he was a controller. He is a CPA.

JH: Did he retire from Bill Mar?

MW: Yeah in '88, he retired and just about the time Sara Lee took over. He was in time.

JD: Sure bet he's glad he's out now. You ever thought about a career in the postal service here?

MW: No, you'll find out in life sometimes, when you quit something after you get married, and you do it for all those years and it is your life and I just loved all that traveling and meeting people and then you're out of it, and my father experienced it too. Then you have to say goodbye to it and after a while it does not interest you anymore. You won't believe it, but it is true and Neal found that out too. First you think, how can I do this and you still go there and they hardly know you anymore, you know, they're all new people

and things change.

JH: A new chapter in your life and move on.

MW: Yeah, there's a point behind it.

JH: You said that your family was a little distraught by your move. So how did it affect you and your family?

MW: You make a new life you know. You can't dwell on what you can't change, for my mother it was hard and she was already very disturbed after the war. She really became mentally ill because the war was so tough. It killed her in the long run.

JH: What traditions did you bring with you that are still part of your family.

MW: Dutch traditions.

JH: The other day your son gave us things you had in the bathroom like a birthday calendar, that is one example of a tradition you brought. Anything else?

MW: I wish Sinterklaas was here instead of Christmas. The gift giving of Christmas takes away a lot of Christmas. But that is something that you just have to let go of. It will never be. But it is amazing, I always thought Sinterklaas, Dec. 5, was a terrific holiday. To get gifts you always had to make rhymes, you always had to make rhymes with each gift. And that is all it was. Now it is so commercialized.

JH: So you let the rhyming go, you didn't try to keep it going?

MW: We went the way it is here to do it at Christmas. My mother always said you go to another country you say a you say b. You are not sticking to your Dutch language, you go over to the English completely. Now sometimes we say we should probably not have done that, because now the kids don't know Dutch at all. At that time you have to make a

decision.

JH: It makes it easier to conform with what's around you in the Netherlands.

MW: Yeah, you go and talk to your neighbors...

JH: And people are cynical, I mean if there is a foreigner, there is a lot of resentment towards foreigners.

MW: Now I resent it for example when I go to the store and all the Spanish speaking people and all they do is speak Spanish. Now if they want to speak Spanish so badly why don't they go back to where they came from! That is my opinion.

JH: You learned English.

MW: I have gone completely away from the Dutch.

JH: What would you consider the most difficult adjustments that you had to make?

MW: Probably, family, like birthdays. Those were big days, you got together there and that is all over now. Nobody comes. So birthdays and holidays that was the hardest.

JH: Yeah, I keep trying to put myself into the same position and I realize that it takes a lot of courage.

MW: Neal wasn't bothered by that but his family was different you know they weren't that family oriented. But that is the way it is, you pay a price.

JH: What did you find easy? What transitions did you find easy to make?

MW: Getting to know people probably. I love people so that was easy. I didn't have any hardships on that score. I talked. When people didn't understand me, they would ask me. When I wasn't clear, they ask you. No, I had no problem with that.

JH: Social skills are.....

MW: You go right away to the ladies aid societies and stuff like that and you throw yourself in there.

JH: Yeah, if you are open and inviting people are going to respond. You stayed in Holland because of your allergies right?

MW: Yea, we came here only because I was so miserable with my allergies and here it got all cleared up.

JH: You said you have done a lot of volunteer work. In what ways have you been involved in the Holland community?

MW: Just Holland Hospital and Holland Christian schools.

JH: Both intricate parts of the community, so in one respect you can say that you have played a strong role in the community.

MW: Yes some role. You just do your thing, but I enjoyed it always very much. Now we don't do it as much at Christian school anymore. We used to have big pigs in a blanket sales you know you make pigs in a blanket or apple dumplings that kind of thing. They don't do that anymore because the women all work and you can't do both. You just drive around and see all the beautiful castles of houses and you go by there and it is like you go thru Death Valley, you don't see anyone around. So the whole day work and then home.

MW: I can remember one time we went to Florida, when we lived in Wyoming and they called us at the hotel and they would give us a day travel thru Florida as a courtesy of Florida. I thought that was strange but it is a big deal. So we went the next morning and Larry was with us and he was about 10 ...12. Anyway we went there and we drove in the bus all the way to the other end of Florida. We went to Sun City where they had retirement

homes and we got there, they wanted to sell us one of the houses so we had the dinner there and you have to listen 2 hours to a speech and Larry could not have a dinner. He had to go with other kids for a hotdog and then after awhile we went back to the bus and the whole day was lost and that made me really kind of angry. We were there only 7 days.

JH: And one lost to go listen to retirement home spiel. Have you had any desire like a lot of the other snowbirds to head south?

MW: And then I went to the place that you had to look through and I said to Neil that looks like Death Valley, not a living soul around. We didn't see anybody. Where were they? And then they had a place where they could bowl or other things but there was nobody there, no cars no nothing. I can not get excited about Florida. I like entertainment like Disney World, or Epcot I love, but to live there I do not see it. If I could play golf then, I was going to learn golf and there, I had a stroke so golf playing was out then.

JH: Obviously you have a church affiliation and that would be?

MW: Christian Reformed. I was Reformed and then became Christian Reformed through marriage.

JH: What influenced your discussion to attend the church? And that would be thought marriage. What church do you attend now?

MW: Harderwyk—CRC on Lakewood Boulevard.

JH: Increasingly Holland is becoming more culturally diverse when you see new immigrants in Holland how do you feel? Per se the Hispanics. You said you feel like that they are not making the attempt to assimilate through the language?

MW: Nah, they complain that they don't get accepted, you always get accepted if you speak the same language. That is my hang up, only if those people come from Vietnam. Look how good those people do who come from, what are the other places Vietnam, Laotian. We have them in our church and they speak such good English. They're helpful and they're learning. Now that I appreciate! But if you don't do that then why are they here? They take the money, they take all of the privileges. So when they complain, that is their own fault.

JH: What are your feelings about the Asian community? You said they are making the strives and efforts.

MW: I think they are really doing a terrific job. They are in our church, quite a few, and now they have their own church and they are really doing great. They give the whole effort and I couldn't speak their language if I wanted to. That is a difficult language. So they had to make quite a step. Same as the Koreans. They always did terrific.

JH: Make the effort.

MW: But I am sure there are Spanish-Mexican people who really speak the language, I haven't met that many so I am not that familiar, but they have a right to be here just as much right as the others.

JH: We spoke briefly about Holland and Holland and how do you feel about the Dutch heritage that Holland has tried to preserve?

MW: Oh, I like that, but in the long run you have a lot of Mexicans here and they have their heritage here also. That is important and that should be a part of it also.

JH: Have you met others who have emigrated from the Netherlands since being here?

MW: Oh, yeah in our church we have some and we know some, but it is not so that we get together. Have always said, I do not want, to be a separate entity there. I don't want that. I think it is nice to talk to each other at church and all that, but I do not want to be separate.

JH: Could you please describe you feelings toward Tulip Time? Does it mean anything to you?

MW: Yeah, I enjoy that it is something from Holland that they tried to do. I think that is really great. We are in the show, you know? We have the senior Tulip Time show. We practice twice a week now, pretty soon every day. Then we do a show during Tulip Time at Evergreen Commons

JH: The Hispanic community has Cinco de Mayo, which is the 5th of May, their independence, I believe. How do you feel about festivals like that in which they bring their culture. Do you think cultural ties are strong and essential?

MW: I think that is great! Because their children then get some feel of it. And for our kids like that with Tulip Time Parades and the girl Klompdancers all three of our kids were in Tulip Time parades and the grandchildren are in the Tulip Time parade and kind of that is a heritage. I don't know how in the future that will go if they keep it up or not.

JH: Do you feel that you have experienced any discrimination in Holland?

MW: I didn't and if they ever do that I will give them...

JH: What paths have your children, the second generation taken?

MW: Now Allen is working in Wisconsin. He obtains employees for businesses, for offices and all kind of work. He goes and interviews those people and then they go to what ever

that it is, a big office or factory and then they get the job or not he is real good at that. He had those Video Today stores here, but they went bankrupt. He lost everything because he wasn't open on Sunday and most are open on Sunday. He had quite a few stores but they went belly up. That was hard.

JH: That takes a lot of courage in itself right there. So how many children do you have?

MW: 3 and now Frank has his masters in Chemistry and he works for Abbot in Chicago and lives in Gurnee, Illinois.

JH: All your children studied at Holland Christian, but then?

MW: Frank went to Hope and then Larry went to Hope and Allen you could talk your head off but he didn't want to go to college. He was real smart but did not want to go, but he is terrific in the business world. Now sometimes he says yeah maybe I should have gone to college. He can still do it but now he is 46 and that won't happen probably.

JH: Do they speak any Dutch, your children? Have you taught them bits and pieces?

MW: Yeah we have tried, we even said, "Okay now one Sunday a month all we do is speak Dutch. Now it was the quietest Sunday we had cause they would not open their mouths."

JH: A lot of yeahs and nos.

MW: Now Larry is trying. He is really trying. It is not an easy language to learn.

JH: Do the children have a lot of interest in your heritage, in the Dutch heritage? I'm sure Larry does.

MW: Yeah, Larry is the one. I was always real good at history too. He is a history buff and maybe Frank yet, but Allen I don't know. He lives in a different world. He lives in Milwaukee, so I don't know.

JH: What would you say to a friend who is considering moving to the United States?

MW: I would say that you have to work hard. When I returned for the first time in 1959, when my mom was really reacting kind of strange and I went there, they always thought that money grows here on trees, really they had that crazy idea. I said, "If you go there you can make a good life but you have to work hard." Our kids always had to work hard. Because during the summer as soon as we moved here Neal made an ice cream cart, couple of them he made, and then the kids had to sell ice cream in town. We called the outfit "Shortstop." So they worked every day during the summer and on Saturday they had off and at Saturday Tulip Time they had Monday off, that kind of thing. But they worked, and they never complained. They didn't make much money but still better than nothing. You did not sell it expensive, I never felt that I wanted to soak people, so you made it always so that they could afford it.

JH: Hard work, perseverance, and faith.

MW: You have to have a lot of faith. It is tough. Nobody cares what happens to you, wherever you go in the world. Everybody has his own life and you have to make your own life.

JH: So none of your relatives from the Netherlands followed in your footsteps?

MW: No.

JH: Or saw the great life you were living in the United States and said I have to be there?

MW: My mother never got here. My father got here when Allen got married in '74 and that was the first time he came and then the year after he died. My brother died of cancer at 53 and had been here twice. My sister now comes almost every year.

JH: What can you gather were their impressions of the way you were living in America.

MW: Oh they loved it here but they had their own, he was postmaster there and he was having his own life.

JH: But they were happy for you and saw that you were doing well.

MW: And you miss each other because you see each other once in a blue moon.

JH: Well Mary, thank you.

MW: I didn't have that much to say.

JH: Oh yeah! It was great! It was very interesting. The War? I think that's amazing.

MW: The War was just a horrible time. That was terrible. At 8 o'clock you had to be in the house. There was no electricity, no heat. So 8 o'clock you went to bed. In the beginning of the war we had black strips on the windows so that there were no lights shining out, Germans ordered blackout because Allied planes flew over.

JH: I'm sorry, who did you say was killed in the concentration camp?

MW: My father in law. In September 1999, Larry, our son, went to The Netherlands to visit Mr. van Lieburg who knew him in the concentration camp. He was only 25 years old then and he survived the ordeal in the spring of 1945. Neal's dad perished while the English troops were in front of the gate. He was 43 years old at the time. Mr. van Lieburg took Neal, Larry, and Frank to visit the area where the camp had been. There is now a memorial site and a museum. The three of them conducted a brief remembrance ceremony at the site of the mass grave at Sandbostel, Germany.