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Janssens, Zwanet Oral History Interview: Class Projects

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ZJ: I'm Zwanet Janssens. I live in Port Sheldon Township at the moment, on VanBuren Street. I was born in the Netherlands and have been in the United States for about forty-five years.

LM: Ok. Could you tell me, you said you were born in the Netherlands and what was the name of the town you lived in, where did you live?

ZJ: Groningen.

LM: Did you like living there?

ZJ: Yes, I grew up there and my family had been there for several generations and, I met my husband there- he was born in the same province. I come from the city of Groningen, but Groningen is also one of the northern most provinces of the Netherlands. My husband was in a school in the same city where I lived and went to school and that's how we got to know each other. I grew up there, also experienced the war, the second world war there. I always like living there. I thought the schooling was very good I received, I come from a family with two brothers and an older sister. I had a good youth despite all the war problems.

LM: Can you tell me maybe one of your favorite memories of your home town?

ZJ: Yeah, because it was so different from American cities. For instance, we live in a house, and the foundations of that house were the old city wall of Groningen. Because all the older cities in the Netherlands were built, like we have forts here as
fastages, with walls and gates and so on. So I grew up in the older part of Groningen and so I was exposed, as a child, to much history. Historical buildings, things of antiquity, and my parents were very much teachers too, they taught us about the history of the country. Of course part of that came with my education too. So the memories are, of my hometown, as a very well-rounded place to be. There were beautiful gardens. One was called the 'Prinzenhoff'. I played there a lot, which used to be a garden of a house which was used by the Princes when they happened to be in Groningen. But it was opened to the public and later on the house became a museum. I always had fond memories of being in history and being a part of history.

LM: Could you tell me your mother and father's name and maybe a little bit about your family?

ZJ: My father's family came from the city as far as four generations. His name was John, Jan Nuiver. Originally they were a Huguenot family and they came through Brussels, where they had lived for awhile, till they moved through the Netherlands and up to Groningen. They were people that had a certain trade, they were book binders and printers. And so my father inherited the family business, when my grandfather died. I never knew my grandfather, he died the same year just prior to I was born. My mom however grew up in the province on a windmill. Her father was not the owner of the windmill, he had a small farm, and then he also was the operator of the windmill, and it was a grain mill. It was a huge mill, and it's not there anymore. It was in the place Zeibroek. And that's where my mother grew up. However, my grandfather passed away when she was only sixteen of pneumonia. In those days, millers had to get up all
times of the night; If there was wind, they had to mill. I don't know, he must have had a cold and still worked- that's just guessing. But he died. And then my grandmother could not stay and operate the mill, so they had to leave the mill, the farm was too small to live off, and so she sold the farm to one of her cousins and she moved to the city. She went to school and she became a mid-wife. So my mom finished her school years in the city of Groningen, became a teacher, went back to Zeibroek because she taught there, and later on she and my dad somehow met in church.

LM: What made you decide to go the United States?

ZJ: My father had relatives, he had a brother who immigrated around the turn of the century to Patterson in New Jersey. There was always correspondence, he visited quite often in the Netherlands and so kept the family ties. My dad always wanted to go to the America. He had the gen too, but he was put into the family business because the brother who went to America, whose name was Pete, did not want to go in the family business. He was the oldest one, but at the age of nineteen, he just skipped to America. He did not want to go in the family business. He was very mechanically inclined, he did not want to be a printer, and he thought America was the land of opportunities. He knew about a family that traveled there, and he just made arrangements and he left. And my dad was in Germany at that time, an academy for, well he wanted to become an illustrator. He was quite artistic. He was in Koln- Cologne, and so he was summoned home and he had to go in the family business. And my father was a very mild mannered man, and so he did. He took over the business and worked for years with my grandfather. So that's really the story of his life. Oh we were at my uncles.
My uncle here, and why we came- I'm telling way off the track. Okay, because we had connections in the United States and also in Grand Rapids through cousins, my older brother, after the war, did not want to- he could not finish his studies during the war and after the war he felt he was too old for the studies. One of my father's cousins came to visit and talked him into going to the United States. Which he did. My younger brother was in the service after the war in Indonesia- he came back, he also disappeared to the United States. They were married with Dutch women. My oldest brother was married when he left. When the grandchildren came, my mom made several trips and so my father decided to sell the business and retire here. I came late in their lives and so I was still in school when he retired and they left for America. And I was still in school and I didn't want to immigrate. And I knew my husband already, we were engaged before my mom and dad left, and I was taken in by his family. It was a large family of nine children, and I liked it real well because I came late in my parents life, and I had a sister who was 13 years older and I did not have much of a connection with a 10 year old, 11 year old, a 9 year old brother. I came really on the trail end. So, besides that, I was still in school and I did not see the need for immigration. But we changed our minds after we were finished and my husband had to go in the service, and we really wanted to get married, but there was no housing. Really, the main reason that we immigrated was an offer from my mom and dad: "Well why don't you come for a year?" They offered to pay for us, for the trip, but they didn't have to because, by that time, so many people were entering the job market there was way too much unemployment. And so people who just finished college were
offered, you could go anywhere and the government would pay for your ticket and give you some pocket money. Wherever you could get a sponsor, you needed a sponsor. Well my family, of course, arranged for sponsors for us in Grand Rapids and so, we came here and we are still here! When we had been here five years, then my husband went back and then we had two little boys by that time and the oldest one was ready for school. We said "well if we want to stay in America, we have to make up our mind now before he goes to school, otherwise we've gotta go back". Because we always were like "well it's nice here but, we might not stay here". My husband went back for about six weeks, he took a leave of absence, and he traveled to the Netherlands, and he went to Germany, and he went to England looking for positions and job interviews, which he had arranged beforehand. And he came back and said "we should stay here, it's much better. Opportunities are better here". So really, there were several reasons. It was to evade the draft, and to join family, and the economic conditions in the United States were, at that time, much better yet than Europe, especially in the Netherlands too.

LM: What do you miss about the Netherlands?

ZJ: Not much anymore. We go back quite frequently because my father-in-law live until about two years ago. Then we would visit, you know make family visit- because my husband has most of his relatives there. He has one brother in South Africa and one in Ontario, Canada and then the rest are all the Netherlands. So for us to go, it's like a family trip. And we do quite often, we usually go for vacation and then we go to a different country too. Last year we were in England, we spent two weeks in England,
and then we go to a family reunion and catch up with everybody. And now we have in mind, we really like to rent something, and go there maybe for a month, and have our children come and introduce em too... and they all have been there- the children, but that was during their either high school or college years. So they haven't been there for a long time. And it would be nice for them to go and connect with cousins- which they know and some of them do correspondence.

LM: Since we are talking about your children, would you like to tell me a bit about them?

ZJ: There are four of them, three boys and there's one girl. And the girl lives in Charlot, she's married. The two older boys are married too, the third one is not married, yet! There are seven grandchildren.

LM: Have you enjoyed living in Holland, Michigan so far?

ZJ: We lived in Grand Rapids for most of the time, we have been in Pittsburgh for a short time. My husband has been working in Cincinnati, but at that time we didn't even move because he did not like what he was doing there so he came back to Grand Rapids. We have been living in Grand Rapids most of our lives- our children went through the Christian Schools there and through Calvin College.

In fact, I worked at Calvin College too. I have been an archivist there in the Calvin College Archives, so I know what you are doing with your interviewing, because I'm quite familiar with the immigrant story, apart from my own. So the Dutch-American immigration story goes back quite a long time, and I'm sure you have learned something about that already in the meantime.

LM: I'm gonna kind of change our focus, but not much. Now do you belong to a church or
a church family?

ZJ: Yes, we joined the Christian reform church when we lived in Grand Rapids and we were there most of the time. Our children grew up in the CRC, they attended Calvin and graduated from there- all four of them. My husband, at one point about seventeen years ago took a position with Herman Miller which was here in Holland and in Zeeland. I was working at the time at Calvin so he commuted. But when our youngest one was married and the house got too big, and we were looking around, "shall we go to a condo? Should we buy something? Should we build something?" And so we built this house as a retirement home. Then my husband didn't have to commute any longer, and I did commute then for five more years till we both retired. Till it was my turn to commute, he had done it for 12 years, so in all fairness- it was my turn.

LM: Do you think the church has influenced the Holland community over the years, or even when you were in Grand Rapids, the church? Do you think it's changed the community or help influence it?

ZJ: Yes, I think it did because the outreach of both the CRC and the RCA in Grand Rapids, and I cannot speak for CRC and RCA churches in America, but I have observed them and worked in them in the Grand Rapids and the Holland area, and I think these churches are doing a very, very fine effort to reach out into the community. And it's not just that they have separated in this effort either, there's a lot of cooperation between the local CRC and RCA churches in cooperation and in staffing, committees and institutions to reach out into the community. It's often not enough because the communities are growing so fast and the needs are growing so tremendously fast, so
it's hard for the church to keep up. And it's costly too, but what I see and what I'm able to contribute, I think we are doing the best we can.

LM: You have hit on your employment history, is there any other jobs you had while you were in the Netherlands?

ZJ: No. I did some internships in the Netherlands because we both graduated in '54 and we came here in '55. In my third year in college I did internships and I worked for the National Archives, and I worked for a publisher, and I am an Archivist by profession. It's a recognized profession in the Netherlands. And so people often times were assigned, and I did for three months through a stint with an antique dealer, for instance. So you got the feeling of how to restore antique books and deal with antique papers and so on. And, of course, I worked three months in a national archives. The Koninker. Really, I did not have a career before I was married. We were married when we were twenty-two. It was cool getting married, yes.

LM: Which one of the jobs did you enjoy the most?

ZJ: Oh, I have worked at Calvin as archivist is most pleasure, I just love it, I really did. It was just, being organized at that time and it grew tremendously during the time I worked. It was a career for which I really...

LM: Since you have you been here what physical changes have you noticed in the community and in your life?

ZJ: You'll have to explain more.

LM: I know since you have immigrated here there's been tremendous change but over the past, maybe even, couple years what changes have you noticed in the community as far
as immigration goes because I know now there are a lot of hispanics now. I don't what changes you've noticed over the years or maybe things that were different then.

ZJ: No, I don't think so except it's new to Holland. Since we settled first in Grand Rapids, we found there was quite a close knit Dutch community. They had the organization- we found we had German neighbors. We found the German neighbors had very close family-ties, even though they were not immigrants, but they were Germans from way back. They had their organizations and they had their festivities. And then my husband started to work across the river. There was a whole Polish settlement. I have observed that people work well together in industry but when it comes to home, they want to be comfortable. And they want, mostly, not all of them because the "melting pot" is there too, there is still the strong desire of people to congregate and too relax among, between quotation marks, "their own". I don't think that is changing because look in Holland, the Vietnamese should have their own and not live with the Hispanics- they would be better off if they could establish their own neighborhood. I noticed the other day, close to the mall, between the mall and Waverly, there is an enormous complex of apartments- they're all black people. I did not know that because there are black people, not in great numbers, but there are black people in Holland. And I always wondered "where do they live?" That is one congregation there where they, well congregation, one section of town where a lot of black people are living. In the area where we are living, it's a little bit of a blend but it's a lot of Dutch names, even though people don't know what it means anymore to be Dutch because they have been here for many generations. We have English neighbors, and I'm always interested- like
you are now- in the background of people. I think that people talk about that easily here. In fact, they like to talk about it. If you hear a name and say "Oh, that's a name, I've heard that name in, wherever", and they say, "Oh yeah but we are from, wherever". Well then you get a little story from "oh my grandfather, great-grandfather on my mother's side", like I'm talking to you. People are often times aware of their heritage, and they like to hang on to some of that. And so anyway, I think it's nice to stimulate that. Why not, I love the festivals. I think it's something that should be encouraged. Of course, it was encouraged after the year sixties- there became all kinds of money available for people, federal money, to do immigration pattern studies. to look into their heritage. We saw enough of that at Calvin and I'm sure at Hope they did that too. And I think that should be continued because I people are comfortable in their setting and feel secure, then they can reach out, so leave them to where they are, I encourage that. And if they feel so Americanized that they can go to larger centers, to larger cities and just blend, um.. fine. And that's what you see in larger cities. I mean, you and I are looking at Holland and Grand Rapids, and that's small. But when you go to Chicago, you go to New York, you don't find it as much; small clusters of ethnic people but not the melting pot. It will work itself out as long as people deny the need for some cohesion among certain groups.

LM: Do you feel that you have given your children enough information about their heritage?

ZJ: Yeah, they're very comfortable with being- of course they can say "we are third generation" because my parents lived and died here, but they're only second generation immigrants and they're very comfortable with it. There is one cute story that I like to
tell when my oldest son, his name is Mark, went to school and he was in kindergarten. One day he came home and he said, "They call me Dutch!", and I said "you are part Dutch, you know, in fact you're all Dutch because dad is Dutch and I am Dutch".

"Yeah, but I don't like to be called Dutch". "so well, then you have to tell him that. Now who told you that you are Dutch?" "Well, Jeffory DeBour". "So then tomorrow you ask Jeffory DeBour, if he knows what DeBour is! And if his dad was Dutch or if his grandfather was Dutch!" So it was solved that way. So, you know, Jeffery DeBour called him Dutch. And he was Dutch. He understood Dutch, could speak Dutch, he was bilingual at that time. He lost it, of course, a lot of it because after my parents died, we did not speak that much Dutch anymore. But, he still, when he goes to the Netherlands or calls there. And he took German, so when he goes half German, half Dutch and he can make himself understood. Now my daughter studied German, she's a German major and a math major- strange combination, but that's how she graduated. And she married in Germany, and she has a German husband who came to the United States. They raised their little boy, who will be three next month, bilingual. I mean, he's doing real well. He was here this summer and he knows practically the name for everything in both languages. He speak to his mom and dad in German, he turns around and he speaks english to us. We understand the German but we are kind of hesitant to speak it because we aren't used to that anymore, but we can understand them so there's no problem. You go for a walk with him and he says, "Oh, I see blue flowers- 'blaueblume'" you know, and right away he translates it for you. He gets such a kick out of that. He's just like a little bulky dictionary. In a way, our children grew
up. Our oldest one has a feeling for it, and the second one does not have a feeling for
languages, so he never picked up much. But the third one is real good again, and he
was not exposed to my parents anymore, he was three when my dad died. So he was
not in contact with Dutch speaking people because my parents could speak English
enough to go to the store and get around, but at home they only spoke Dutch. They
were too old to really change over. So, yeah, that's the language story.

LM: I'm interested in hearing more about the Netherlands just because I don't know much
about it. Maybe the landscape.

ZJ: It's much like Western Michigan, if you go to the North Sea and the North Sea is an
arm of the Atlantic Ocean. It's, in fact, a gulf stream from Mexico, from the Gulf of Mexico,
travels all the way across the Atlantic and hits the coast of France, Belgium, the Netherlands,
and cools off finally along Norway. Because the Netherlands has a mild climate, there's a lot
of rain there but it's mild because of the gulf stream. Apart from that, it also looks like West
Michigan. It's got the same kind of dunes. It's got the same sort of sand. No, the sand is
different— it's finer. And I cannot tell you the difference between USA, I've read about that
but I don't know and that's besides the point. But the landscape is very much like Western
Michigan except that most of the land, a great amount of land is below sea-level, and that's
why you have the dikes. But in between those dikes, you have farms. They grow mais, which
is our corn except the corn does not mature like we have it. They do grow it for their dairy,
cows I think and perhaps other animals too. But they grind it up by the time it's the end of the
season, they don't let it wither because the corn hop does not ripen. It only sets corn but it
never ripens. So then they grind it all up and they feed the whole stock and the, whatever corn
cob there is to the animals. So, that gives you little bit idea. The corn is ripe here in Michigan by August and it does not ripen in the Netherlands.

LM: Do you have any stories that you'd like to tell us just about your childhood, or maybe some experiences here that you had while you were still adapting to Michigan?

ZJ: I should mention that we found our home once we moved here to the Holland area, in the Reformed Church of America. I mentioned before that we always were members in the CRC while we were living in Grand Rapids, MI. Then when we moved here, we were aware of the new thoughts that were developing over the years in the CRC, much to do with women issues, women in offices in the church, but also changes in style of worship. We, once in awhile, we'd visit other congregations, and we would observe that even though we were always members of Calvin CRC, with Reverend Buursema for a long time, Clarence Buursema. We still were very much aware of the differences that went in all kinds of areas in the CRC. Then when we moved here to Holland, we found those differences much more pronounced, especially in the division of the churches here. Some churches were ultra-conservative, other churches went absolutely overboard. They had contemporary music that, well, would have fit better in a bar than in a worship center. And then we found churches that had blocked off, for instance, the organ and were not using the organ at all anymore, but were working with contemporary music solely. Much to the dismay of the older generation, who gave it a go often times because they said "well yeah, if we have to change, we have to change". Well, you don't change because the change is there. You question whether it's good and whether it's wholesome, and whether it's profitable for worship. Anyway, we
found that most of the churches here in Holland, Michigan were very contemporary—only in worship. They did not embrace the women in worship, but they were certainly going contemporary. And we found very haphazard approach. We would worship and the praise number was announced, and some people would straggle up to the front, pull up their pants and tuck in a shirt maybe, or pulled it out and looked at each other for 'what are we going to sing next?' What are we to do? And then they would stand there whispering among each other and all the sudden they would start grabbing microphones. So it was usually, to us, a very unrehearsed performance— which we did things very appropriate for a worship service. We found that. We found many churches in upheaval because certain segments wanted to have, and it was not always the younger people either, but certain segments wanted to have contemporary, other ones wanted to continue using the hymn book, ________________, you know praise hymns.

Practically every congregation where we went to listen, and it was all of them because we spent about two years going around finding a home, a church time. We got very tired of it, we really did. And we said, well you cannot just go one time, you have to go more times and see, you know, what develops here. But we couldn't find it in CRC because they were, even in preaching, they had become pentecostal or leaning very much to the baptist expression. And so we ended up in RCA, because the RCA happens to have a minister who really studies, who really preaches and a congregation that still sings with the organ and that appreciates a good choir and a choir that really rehearses. Have you tried going to Third Reformed Church, have you been there? It's in walking distance. And if you like a more traditional style of worship and you like to
hear an excellent minister, you have be at their church. So yeah, I'm doing a speel for
the church. We have been very blessed there.

LM: Have your children remained with the church they were brought up with?

ZJ: Yeah. We were in Florida two years ago and so on Sunday morning, or Saturday, we
grabbed the telephone book and said "okay, where do we worship tomorrow?" So I
look in the back, "what churches are here". We found a CRC church. That was the
closest one, there a Reformed too but the CRC was really close by. So we said, "okay,
it's all strange anyway- let's go to the CRC". Well, our one unmarried son had flown
up to stay with us for the weekend and a couple days to soak up the sun. And so he
came with us. We came in the setting, they did not have only a band and the guitars,
which can be good, they also had the strobe lights and the red and green and blue lights
up front, and we asked around and said, "to whom are you"- we thought maybe it was a
mission outreach, and even then I cannot excuse anything like that- but, no, it was an
established congregation and they were working with strobe lights. And then the
minister was commenting on a movie, and he had his sermon based around this movie
and then he had projections of flashes of this movie while he was preaching. And he
didn't preach and he missed the point too, yet. So, it was dismal- it was really dismal.
So now, you ask, my children. Would my son have like this? He said, "oh please,
what a waste of time". My daughter is in North Carolina, she's in the Presbyterian
Church there, and she sings in the choir, and they have a excellent ministry there. So
my children go for, first of all, the preaching and then they like to have also the more
structured worship. I think that's part of worship. We are there to please God. And
not to bring out all new talent or whatever. I mean, that's wonderful to do that, but if it's only in God only, we are not honoring or promoting some young person's talent in an appropriate way.

LM: Well, it is time to wrap up our interview. Do you miss the Netherlands at all?

ZJ: Not really. The war started when I was very young, but looking back at this time and especially now because so much is made of the change of the year 2000, and so people start asking all kinds of questions about the anit-Christ and about all these calamities that might happen and could happen. It all rings a bell to me because so much of the anxieties and the fear, I experience as a child because the German occupation of the Netherlands was terrible, terrible fearsome. For instance, I'll illustrate it as a story, we lived in a city, on top of the old wall and the mote was behind us. And it was a mixed area there: we had Lutheran and we had Jewish neighbors. And so the Jewish, pretty soon, I played with. There were two boys. One was my age and the other one was a little older. The youngest one was Jacob and I played with Jacob a lot, because we were right next door. Pretty soon he was carrying the Star of David, so I wanted the Star of David too. To make a long story short, that family went underground. And that house, while I was sitting on a curb, was emptied out by occupational forces. I saw all the toys go that I used to play with Jacob. I saw his winter coat go and his mittens and his favorite toys, and the things that I recognized from that house. Everything was taken away! Well, put the fear in a child, what can happen if everybody disappears- you don't know where they went. It took a long time to find out that they had not been taken captive, but that they had disappeared and were
underground. We didn't know where but at least we knew. But it took months before my dad finally learned about that. So here a whole family, and it was not just a mom and dad and two sons. No, there was an aunt living there because the house was a duplex. Downstairs lived the older parents- the grandparents with an unmarried aunt and upstairs the family I used to play with. So, all these people disappeared. Now, this aunt, Rosa was her name, she went underground close to where we lived. She became the housekeeper for older people and she went underground. But she came to our house when these people traveled or were gone or were ill or couldn't have her any longer. Then we would reach out to her. Then we stopped here because we sometimes talked about other things than the anxieties that were real at that time. This is what people are dreaming up that might happen. But those were the threats that really were there and very physical too for a child. And I can go on and on because the war years were very difficult and very hard. Our minister disappeared because he was taken hostage because a German officer in my hometown was shot by a so-called, the underground, which was the kind of the force among the people to help the allies- the English and the Americans to liberate, eventually the country. It was called the underground. So this officer was killed and right away, in retaliation, our minister was removed- the father of a friend who was a medical arzt was removed. A whole slew of people were put in concentration camp just to put the fear of the community- "hey, if you do anything like that. This is what happened and we have these hostages and they'll kill them all if you do anything like that again". And they did. I mean, they did not kill these particular people, but you saw that in other. And so many immigrants
that came here- like John and I...

[tape stopped- there is no other tape]