10-6-1999

Kleis, Margaret Oral History Interview: Class Projects

Brad Clark

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.hope.edu/class_projects
Part of the Archival Science Commons, and the Oral History Commons

Recommended Citation

http://digitalcommons.hope.edu/class_projects/19


This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Oral History Interviews at Digital Commons @ Hope College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Class Projects by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Hope College. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@hope.edu.
Oral History Interview  
Interviewee: Margaret Kleis  
Interviewer: Brad Clark  
October 6, 1999

BC: What is your name?

MK: Margaret Wolffensperger Kleis

BC: Where were you born?

MK: I was born in Zwolle. That's in the eastern part of the Netherlands. It's the capital of the province of Overisel. It was a city of about 70,000 people. I grew up there with my big family and attended grade school and high school, and then after high school I came to the United States.

BC: Tell me a little about your hometown, the economics, maybe the religion.

MK: Zwolle was quite an industrial city. We had several factories there. There were some oil refineries. We had a factory there where they made vinegar. There were also many, many farmers and markets and places like that where animals were fed and the meat was used and slaughtered. We also had a lot of wheat production in the area. Very little corn. Corn was only used for animals. Around here we use a lot of corn to eat, sweet corn, but in the Netherlands we didn't have that, we only had corn for the animals. There also was a lot of shipping going on. We lived close to the Yssel River, which is a side arm of the Rhine River which comes out of Switzerland. So the big ships would come to our city and they would unload, and from there stuff would be transported by freight to the different areas behind, or in the other part not so close to the rivers. So they transported by either train or rail or just freight, big trucks and stuff. There also was a big, very elaborate school system. We had several different
the rivers. So they transported by either train or rail or just freight, big trucks and stuff. There also was a big, very elaborate school system. We had several different kinds of high school. We had a classical high school, and then we had the business high school, and we also had what we call a commercial school for people who only wanted to become secretaries and learned different languages. Every girl in the Netherlands who goes to school further than eighth grade would be learning both French and English and, also quite often, German so that they could speak with the three surrounding countries which were Belgium and France on the South, on the East-Germany, and on the West-England. We also have, and I think that's been very well known in Europe, we had schools for disabled children. We had a school where at least a hundred students would be taking part. They were mentally handicapped. Here, quite often, we tried to put them in our school systems and in and out of different classes, more with the other students. But we found that if we had specialized schools for them, they really did better and they were able to learn a lot of things. And then from there they quite often could to go to school like we have here, the Ottawa Intermediate District now, where you can learn how to fix cars and where you can learn how to cook and all these practical things in life which you normally don't learn in high schools. I think since that time the United States has done more of that too. Previously we didn't really have so much here, but in Europe they were, kind of, really ahead. We had all these kinds of schools- technical schools- and a lot of people attended those schools. Even our mayor, Neal Berghoef, we used to have a mayor in Holland here a couple years back, and he went to one of those technical schools and learned about
woodworking, and he became quite an efficient woodworker and woodcarver by learning it already at quite a young age. It was worthwhile for them. They didn't always want to learn languages or "head knowledge" we call that.

BC: Can you tell me a little about your family from the Netherlands. Maybe some customs or traditions that they've kept.

MK: Of course, coming from a family of many children, my mother always said our family is like a community in small. The whole world consists of people that have to get along and she'd say, well we have a good start right here. When we have ten children it's a lot of giving and taking and a lot of things of getting along. Of course, we eat everything that was put on the table. When you have twelve people eating dinner, you can't go by what just number one or two like. You have to go by what's best for everyone and hope that they'll all eat some of it or most of it. It's amazing if you have not that many choices. You learn to like everything. My grandchildren, they always laugh about that: 'just give it to grandma, she'll eat it.' But it's true that, I think we weren't always so spoiled with a lot of fancy food. Most of our food was very basic—meat, potatoes, vegetables, and a lot of things like oatmeal for breakfast and salads. Desserts, not a lot of creamy pies and things. It would be more simpler, maybe like vanilla pudding would be special for Sunday. But the rest of the time it would be quite simple. As far as the culture goes, I think the things that really stick with the people the most are how they get along, how they treat one another, how they were loving. I think the religion is a very important part, at least at that time in the Netherlands.

When I grew up yet, nearly almost everybody went to church. Faith of the people was
really important during the war; we had in our home, first of all because we lived in the area where you could still meet with the farmers so you could get food from the farmers. While in the big cities, there was no food. These people were cut off by, partly rivers, and also by lack of any other transportation. So they couldn't get any food. While we were in an area where we could talk to the farmers and maybe get 25 pounds of meat or maybe 10 bottles of milk every night or whatever we needed. So we had five people living in our home who normally wouldn't have been there. So we had about 15 people living with us. Those were our aunts and uncles. Then we also had three Jewish people living with us from time to time. We had some other ones and then some of the other ones would go again. They would come and go a little bit. That was one of the things that people would say 'well, do you dare do that', 'do you think it's safe?' My mother would always say 'do unto others as you would like to have 'em do unto you.' She said, 'we taking chances? Yes, but Christ took a lot of chances too.' So I think the faith was really important for people in those days. We were by no means the only family; there were loads and loads of them. And I think that that is a good example how we learn, you know, how to get along and how we learn how to have faith from our parents. I think we set a good example. I think as you grow up, you keep setting that same example, and you keep trying to do the things that are right for others. Another thing that I think was always important too is things that we do as a family, like playing games. That was way before television's days and before computer days as you well know. So we played games like Monopoly all Sunday afternoon. We did go for long walks, we often did that. Things like that were really
important. When you are doing that you also talk to people, and you get a chance to really get to know each other. We also had other friends that would come over, you know like all families do. We would have friends from school or neighbors or something, and then we'd do things together. We'd spend a lot of time communicating and getting to know people. While I think today, so much time is spent with television and even athletics. I sometimes think people spend too much time watching athletics instead of doing athletics. We did walking and we did a lot of biking, of course, everybody in Europe's got a bike. So naturally we did that and that was good exercise. But we didn't have quite as many after-school activities. We had some, but that way we had more time to spend with our families. We tried to have, at least, breakfast and supper together as a family, which is one of the things that we hardly have today anymore, it's really difficult here. But I think the Netherlands is not a lot better. They have a lot more things like that today too because everything changes and the world goes and changes too. So that's to be expected.

BC: A lot of people might, we've learned about stereotypes and stuff of the Dutch, and coming where I come from, some people might classify the Dutch as frugal and conservative and maybe a little bit quiet to get in other people's lives- private, I might say. Do you find that true from your experiences?

MK: I think the frugal is definitely the truth because I lived through the war. So naturally, we didn't have a lot of fancy things and we didn't spend a lot of money for new clothes, there weren't any, you couldn't buy any. And so I think the Dutch people are very careful that they don't throw stuff away that could be used yet. I didn't know for
sure what you meant with that second part of the question. Can you explain that, what was that again?

BC: Being conservative, maybe, not likely to change their views.

MK: Oh, stubborn maybe. I think that in certain areas of the Netherlands, the farmers sometimes, were more likely to be very conservative and to not be so open to new ideas. While in the educated circles, now both my parents went to the university. My dad was a civil engineer and my mother studied chemical engineering. For that day, in the late Nineteenth century, that was really very unusual. Most of the women just did housework, and we found that the more education people had, especially at that time—maybe today that doesn't always hold true, but at that time it did, the more education people had, the more they were open for new ideas. I can give you one little example of my grandfather on my mother's side who also was a schoolteacher, and that was around 1870. At that time, the tomato was not invented until around 1890, 1900. And he said to the people, he was the 'hoofd,' (head or principal) headmaster at the school. He said, 'we've just got to all start trying those tomatoes because they're really good fruit'. So he gave an example by being different and trying something new. And that was already at that time, and I think my mother followed that example and my dad too, they both studied and they learned to get acquainted with other people who had new ideas too. So they were not nearly as conservative as a lot of other people were. That doesn't mean that they didn't sometimes disagree. Like they were in the Temperance Movement at that time around 1920, a little before that already. They couldn't see that all the students should be drinking that much, and so they started, kinda got involved
with the temperance movement. For years and years they wouldn't touch or drink any liquor. But towards the last, when we had weddings and so they would take a little wine. There were, in those days already in those days a lot of people who drank way too much, and it's really a disturbing thing in a family. Fortunately, we didn't have anything like that in our families.

BC: In the last part of the question, would you consider the Dutch a private people? Not wanting to get involved on other people's business.

MK: I think as a general rule, they probably are more private than some people. But they're very outgoing in other ways. Maybe they don't want to always share their own personal feelings, but they certainly are very willing to invite people to their home. If they've hardly met the people, they say 'oh, just come on over and we'll have supper together' or 'you can come for coffee, we'll have some nice coffee and cookies. We always have people for that, we can always have extra ones'. I think from that point of view, the hospitality was great, but maybe they were a little more private than some people. But that of course depends on families too. I was growing up in a larger family, and I don't think that we had a lot of private stuff. We all shared and everyone knew what was going on. I hope that kind of explains it a little bit.

BC: Why did you decide to leave the Netherlands? Maybe you could tell a little bit about how that came about.

MK: For the Centennial of Holland, Michigan in 1947, the Board of Directors decided that it would be nice if they had some foreign students from the Netherlands come, who then could share some of there experiences about their living, the way they grew up, and
what they were doing there, and what education was like, and what the faith was of the people in the Netherlands and things like that. So they, in order to get this accomplished, I don't know if it was Wynand Wichers but I think it might have been somebody like that, was able to get some advertisements in Dutch newspapers saying, 'we're looking for some students who would like to study at Hope College. If you are interested and you just finished high school, you might want to put in an application'.

So since I had just finished high school and I wasn't quite sure what I was gonna study, I decided, well- throw my hat in the ring- fill out an application and see what happens. Well, it wasn't long and maybe three weeks later I did get a letter back saying if I was still interested, because they would be interested in hearing more about me and if I could send some special papers and letters of recommendation and things. So I did that and then maybe the first week of September, it wasn't very long before I left, we got notice that we were invited. There were seventeen of us who came at that time. We were able to get transportation to the United States, which was only a couple of years after the war at that time in 1947. Not too many luxury liners running back and forth yet because they had all been used for other purposes during the war. So we came to the United States in a troupe transport ship. It had been originally a freighter, but then they used it for troupe transport. We came with at least, there were of course 17 students, but there were at least 500 immigrants who were going to Canada at the same time. Being it was a troupe transport all the women were on one side with the children and the other side, all the men were, which was quite interesting because the men had it pretty easy, and the women had it pretty tough. If you have three or four children with
you and you are all together in one place and your husband’s on the other side, you have to do it all by yourself. So I ended up finding out that I kept busy, especially in the evenings and during the night, helping some of these mothers who had these small children, because we were all older and we had, just like an extra pair of hands standing around. We were able to help some of these mothers, which was really nice. There were five boys who came to Hope College and twelve girls, no the other way around- sorry, five girls came and twelve boys. At the time when we came, we landed in Montreal and then we went by train to Kalamazoo and they picked us up, some of the delegates from Hope College who brought two cars and maybe a van or two came to get us and picked us up. Then we were distributed to the different dorms. Does that help in a little bit, what you'd like to hear?

BC: Have you been here since?

MK: Yes, I have lived here since. I have gone back, of course, many times to visit, but this has been my home since that time. I lived on campus for three years and then I lived with a family in Holland for one year.

BC: Were you intending to stay when you came over?

MK: No, I had no intention of staying. Of course I had a boyfriend back home, so who wants to stay? But all that changed after the first year. Then they said that if I wanted to, I could stay. Since I had a scholarship my first year for room and board, after that, they said I could stay but I would have just a scholarship for tuition. So then I started working and I earned some money for room and board. Then I stayed the rest of the way. I took a major in French and Spanish. I was glad that I learned Spanish because
at that time in Holland, we were getting some of the Spanish people from Mexico who came here as day laborers. And a lot of those people would come downtown to shop and they would know Spanish but no English and the clerks would know only English and no Spanish. So it was interesting, and I was happy that I was able to have studied some Spanish right away the first year when I came. And also, the Spanish was very easy if you've studied Latin and French. Those are both romance languages, so the Spanish was kind of easy for me. The professors were all very helpful. The first week, I had a little trouble following the courses. After awhile that got better. The best ones were the math classes where you don't have do much reading, you just get the book in front of you, you can do your own problems. Another class that was really difficult was my psyche. I took psychology first semester. That was very dumb, I shouldn't have done that, because first of all there's a lot of reading and then I saw all these great big long words. Some of them were somewhat familiar, but not enough that...I really had a lot of trouble with the psyche; I remember my professor was really helpful.

BC: Did you continue to speak Dutch when you were here?

MK: Yes, what was nice about it, in that time- in 1947, there were quite a few older people yet- either church members or people I would meet in the store who had maybe come here as very young children or some of 'em even had never lived in the Netherlands, but their parents had come here. And when both of the parents speak the Dutch language, naturally they're gonna talk it. So some of these people had picked up the Dutch language. So when we came, everywhere I went, quite often they'd say 'do you
speak Dutch?' I'd say 'yes, I speak Dutch.' I would talk some Dutch to them and of course they right away talk Dutch to me, the little Dutch they knew. It made them feel really good. Whenever you talk to someone in their native language, they always like it when they hear, you know, a little bit spoken. Just like I found out with the Spanish people. Even today, when I see Spanish people, even if they speak fluently English, I'll say to them 'como estas?' or something, or 'buen tiempo'- good weather, stuff like that. They like that! Even if they know everything else, there is something about it that says 'well you take interest in my language and you take interest in me, and you must be a nice person'.

BC: Can you tell me any concerns before, during, or coming here?

MK: I didn't have too many concerns before I came because I thought, 'well it's only going to be for a year and if I don't do so well or if I don't like it, I can always go back'. But I found out that during that first year there were sometimes like at the holidays that I thought 'Oh boy, it would be nice if I could be home'. Especially the first Christmas. I remember I had gotten a couple letters from a couple friends but they weren't writing anything too exciting and Hope College, the dormitories, closed at that time, I don't know if they still do or not. But at that time their dorms closed so they found a place where I could stay for two weeks with an elderly couple, and I could just use a room there and then I could just fix my own meals, or maybe I shared with them meals- I'm not sure how that all went. But I do remember there sitting at night and thinking 'oh boy, this is far from being home with ten brothers and sisters and singing Christmas carols and having nice gift exchange'. My parents did send me a little package. I
mean, there was nothing in comparison to having a nice Christmas. I did go to
different people who invited me, not always just at the Christmas necessarily, but
sometime- especially in the fall when I first came- at Thanksgiving time, somebody
would invite us and they'd invite maybe two or three Dutch students, and then there
were other people there too. It was a nice way to get acquainted with the people in the
community. I also worked at Heinz almost right away after I came here. I was taking
five classes in the morning from eight to one, and then after one I could kind of look
for a job, so I did. I thought I needed some spending money. So I went to Heinz, and
they said 'yeah they could use somebody'. It was nice because I got acquainted with
non-students, non-faculty. I talked to people who were making a living with the hands,
people who really had to work hard physically to accomplish what we think of doing
with our minds. Most of the people that I know, a lot of people, they're either teachers
or some professionals or something. But it was good for me, having been brought up
in a professional family, that I could meet some people who really worked with the
hands and so it was really interesting because some of these people even invited me to
their house for some coffee or supper or something. And I learned to see how much
they had to struggle or how hard they had to work in order to make ends meet and
provide for their family. Otherwise, that was my biggest concern that you're alone a
few times, especially during holidays. I think other people have this too, foreign
students who are missionary children or something- they can't always go home for the
holidays. Otherwise, other concerns I didn't have because I heard from my family, so I
never had to worry if they were okay. Sometimes if you're in a condition where you
say 'well, my parents are behind a iron curtain', or 'my parents are someplace where
we don't know it's safe', you worry about them. I didn't have anything like that
because my family was all well and they were all busy and I was having a good time
here. And I had good grades; I didn't have any problem except with my psyche.

BC: Have you run into any legal problems or was that all taken care of?

MK: Oh yes, I had some legal problems. After I was married in 1951, my husband and I
went on a honeymoon, and we decided it would be nice to go to Niagara Falls. A lot of
people, in those days, would go to the Niagara Falls for a honeymoon. So we decided
to go. I talked to Mr. Wichers here who knew something about immigration and visas
and stuff because I came with a student visa of course. Well, as I had a student visa
here I had been told to be sure to check when I left the United States that the visa would
be okay and that I would be able to come back in. Well, I thought I checked it well and
I talked to the gentlemen, 'no, everything is fine- you have a visa and it doesn't run out
until September' and it was June, you know. So he said, 'no problems, you just gonna
go right in'. What I didn't do is look at the number at the fellow's uniform- I've
learned that since. Any taxicab drivers, or any policeman, or any people you deal
with, you always look at the numbers. You might not know what they mean, but if you
know what number uniform they're wearing, you'll be better off. Well, I didn't know
that so I didn't look. So we had a nice time and we traveled through Canada and we
went to the Falls. Pretty soon we were ready to go home. We came at the customs and
they were very friendly and we were nice and 'where are you born?' 'In Holland', my
husband said. I said I was born in the Netherlands. He said, 'are going back to
school?' I said, 'no I graduated and I'm gonna be taking care of my husband now'.

'Oh, well, you have student visa here. That's only good for students who are going
back to school'. Of course, next thing he said is 'well, I can't let you go back'. But I
said, 'I talked to this gentleman when I left the United States'. 'You sure of this?' 'Oh
yes, everything is okay'. Now he said, 'who was this gentleman, what was the number
on his uniform?' 'Well,' I said, 'I didn't write that down, I didn't even look at it'. So
he said 'well, we can't let you go, even though somebody told you everything is okay.
Now, if you were going back to school, you'd be okay'. Well, I'd found that out after
I told him I wasn't going back to school. I think I could have used a little gray lie and
could have said, 'yeah I plan to go back to school'. So Anyhow I didn't and, to make a
long story short, we ended up- they were really nice to us but they said they wanted us
to get some money for a bond. They said, 'do you have some money with you?' Sure,
we thought we were rich, we had 200 dollars with us. And of course, we didn't have a
checking account yet- my husband had money in the bank at home, but that doesn't do
you any good when you're standing there. So they said, 'well, what we'll do is you get
some more money from your parents and we'll let you go to one of these motels on the
other side of the bridge and then you come back in the morning'. So they were really
nice, they trusted us and they knew we'd be coming back. And so we cabled for some
money having to get some money from my dad-in-law at that time. Because, the
money my husband had, we couldn't get because he couldn't sign for it. So
fortunately, my father-in-law had some money in the bank and so we had to post a bond
for $500. So he sent the $500 and that took quite a while, at least a day and a half or
so. But we finally got it so then they straightened out the papers and then they said, 'now here's the bond that shows that you paid $500 and when you get all your papers straightened out, you may stay in the United States. But only until you have all these papers straightened out, otherwise you have to leave'. It actually took me about four years to get it all straightened out- it takes a long time because you have to make an application as a wife and then you have to wait, who knows how long- two years- and then we had to wait some more before it was our turn to come to the judge when they pronounce everybody a United States citizen and all that kind of stuff. So it took quite a long time but I wasn't ever in any danger or fear of having to leave the country, but they did say at one time, 'well, the worst that can happen to you', and these guys were laughing of course, they knew we were honeymooning, 'well, you can stay here a year in Canada and your husband can go over and back to the United States'. Of course that was not anything we wanted to hear, and then we thought that was kind of funny. I think they thought too it's just a matter of paperwork. I think now that I've worked with for the United States government in the congressional offices, I realize that they have to be strict, but they scare people and I think maybe they're too strict. What they should have said, 'you just go back home, do your paperwork, get it all fixed up'. I think they were really fussing with that $500 bond and all that kind of stuff. I don't think that would have been necessary. But then, who are we to judge. You don't want just everybody and their friends coming into the United States either. We've got too many of those. Some are the people that don't behave but the majority of them are good people.
BC: How old were you when you then became a citizen?

MK: It was 1956-29. And I have voted ever since. I missed one election because I was on a long vacation and didn't know this thing was coming up. Otherwise, I think it's really important and I was taught, as children too, that my parents they always voted. In the Netherlands, that's one thing, you had to vote and everybody was a registered voter- they had to go and vote. The only way they would be excused if they're sick or something unusual. They used to get 99% voting because they said it's important that you do it. It's kind of like a requirement. Here, we call it a privilege. And it's terrible the way some people treat their privilege. They don't get to half of the elections. They think they're not important or if they don't know the people. Well, they're all important and they better get to know the people. You can tell maybe that I work for elections. I actually work at the polls too all the time. So I think it's important. If you don't vote you can't talk about it afterwards. You can't blame anybody because you didn't contribute towards the outcome.

BC: Can you tell me a little about Holland when you came and how it has changed?

MK: It's changed a lot. When I came, Holland was more like a little rural town. Most of the people went to church. Not all, but the majority of the people were members of a church. Most of the people were still walking back and forth. There were a lot of people who came to campus, for example, as students who didn't have a car. That wasn't necessary. You could just go from one building to the next. It was very simple. Today, with your education it's very difficult to come without a car because often you have to commute to, it could be a job but it could also be part of your assignments- that you have to go places or you have to meet
people be in another building that might be halfway around town, more so in the larger universities than at Hope but even Hope College has some of that. It can be really bigger distances than you really can't do by feet. I did also walk everyday to Heinz and back which looks like an awful long distance to me now, but at the time I didn't think it was so bad, it took me 20 minutes or so. I walked pretty fast because I want to get back and I had to be back in time for dinner. So I think that it was more a small city. People I knew from Hope College and I knew em from the stores, and I met em at different churches and schools. People would invite me to come over and talk to them. See, that was the idea of getting these Dutch students, and I think the people picked up on that. They would ask us to come and tell about the Netherlands, about the schools, about the churches, about families, and about culture- the kind of things that you're kind of talking about now too. And I think people were really interested in learning more and since that time this city has grown a lot. We have a lot more businesses, we have a lot more industry, we have a lot more people. The kind of people I saw in 1947 were all Dutch or Dutch origin. Maybe 10% that moved in yet that were not Dutch, but an awful lot of them were really of Dutch origin. In just '47, these Spanish day laborers, Mexicans mostly- there might have been some Puerto Ricans, but I think it was mostly Mexico- they would be starting and that was just the beginning of the settlement of some of this Spanish-Mexican community we have today. Today we have at least 25% of the population that is Spanish or Spanish descendent. Some of them are already born here in the United States after they came here and started working for Heinz. The city, of course, was smaller. The roads were still older. The little M21, the Chicago Drive now, was the main road to Grand Rapids, all one-way, well two-way traffic- you could hardly ever pass. The
people were driving slow and I remember that it took us a long time just to get to Grand
Rapids. Today, with the big highways we can really make good time. The people were
friendly and I think the people are still friendly today. I think that we have hospitable people.
People are willing to invite people. They don't always invite 'em to their homes, which is
maybe not so nice. I think today people are more likely to invite you to a restaurant to come
and eat out with them or they'll treat you to a cup of coffee in a restaurant, rather then having
them come to their house. The advantage of coming in homes is that you can see what their
surroundings look like, you can see what the furniture looks like, you can see how nice and
cozy they have things or how corny it might be looking or how dirty some of em might be, but
there weren't any dirty ones in Holland, Michigan of course. You know what I mean, it's nice
and that's one big advantage of people who travel to Europe or the Netherlands specifically,
when they go to a home, or if they go to meet people there who live there. They get a chance
to really get acquainted. If you go as a tour guide or as a tourist and with a tour, you get put
up in a nice motel and you get taken to a museum and you get sent back to your hotel and you
go to the evening concert, and you go back to your hotel... and you never see any people all
you see is the concert- that you probably could've seen in another city. It's really ideal if
people can see people the way they were. That was an advantage for us. When I came as a
student, I got to see the homes where the people lived because people in those days invited us
more into homes than they do today. Is there anything else in that connection that I could
maybe mention? I got that pretty well covered. You talk about the culture. I think the biggest
thing is, basically, it's much bigger all the way around. It starts with all the factories. Today
a lot of the people who work in Holland come from Muskegon, come from Grand Rapids,
come from Hudsonsonville, come from Zeeland. They come from surrounding, even Kalamazoo, because there is so much work here. And so naturally you get all these people on the road and people aren’t really living here, they’re all commuting and so you get a whole different kind of set-up. I find that if I go to organizations, there are a lot of people I don’t know because they are all younger and they all work at all these places.

BC: Did anything seem different from home? Perhaps traditions or ways of doing things.

MK: Not really, but the only difference is when I came to the United States I came out of a culture of 1950; 1945, 1950. When I came here, I came to a culture that looked like 1880 and 1900. These people who had come in 1847 and who’d stuck around here, they didn’t change much; and then when the 1880 people came, they all kind of stuck to the same kind of thing. They talked the kind of Dutch they talked in 1850 or 1900, and they almost even dressed, if they had clothes that were from that time. They said, ‘look at my nice Dutch clothes.’ Of course, they weren’t very Dutchy at all. They were just old-fashioned things that we don’t wear. In Europe, we usually go with the European fashion, Paris and so, I found that most of the people here, even in today’s clothes, they were behind in the fashions. But I think that has changed quite a bit now. Those were the biggest things that I found that they used old Dutch and some of the customs. But the customs and the people were always friendly and I think that that stayed with them. They were willing to share and they always showed their faith. I think that those people really, they can put all of us to shame. They are not afraid to talk about the Lord helping them. I’ve been doing some translation of older letters too from the 1850s and the 1890s for people from time to time, they say ‘I’ve got this letter
that came out of my grandmother's basket. Can you please translate it?' And invariably they'd say 'the Lord has been good to us'. They would write about that. They would say 'I noticed, I don't know whoever the kid was they were writing to, you have not been attending church. You know better, and the Lord does not want to bless you if you're not going to go to church'. Things like that. They were not afraid to say things like that, and I think that sometimes today, we are a little hesitant- we don't always witness like we could.

BC: Going along with that, you said you are a member of the CRC. Have you seen the church change over the years?

MK: Oh yes. In general, I think that the Christian Reformed Church is a little bit behind the Reformed Church. I grew up in the Reformed Church in the Netherlands, by the way and that's how I came to Hope College too because it's a Reformed Church. But the Christian Reformed and the Reformed Church really are very close in their communions and in their statements of faith. They're almost identical, but they split way back in 1880 or 1845, I can't remember exactly. They are very much the same, but the church here has changed. We're a little bit behind the Reformed Church, but we are changing. We are having women in office and we do believe in divorce. And we do believe in remarriage, even now for a long time. They wouldn't want any of that. There was time that, I think when I came yet in '47, people would frown on going to the movies yet. This church and other Christian Reformed churches, they said 'well when people go to the movies that's devil's work'. I think all of that has changed. They realized that movies, special education movies and any kind of form of
education that shows pictorial things, is wonderful because once you see it in the pictures, you remember it much better- it means much more to you. Those kinds of things have all changed. I think maybe some things aren't always for the better, but maybe in general if you can change the church services and the church life is more useful and more meaningful to younger people. I think that we need to do that.

BC: Do you ever have services in Dutch, maybe as a special service?

MK: Yeah, we have at Tulip Time yet. Just at Tulip Time, we have two church services. One on the Tuesday and one on the Friday of Tulip Time. Our minister, who happens to talk Dutch, he does give about a 10-minute or 8 minute- little sermon, but then there's a translation also on the paper. There are still a few churches who had Dutch services here until about 1970. They used to have a Sunday afternoon service. But, it has changed. The church is learning to be useful and more meaningful to the population of the people around em. I think that that's what we have to do. If we can not be understandable and if people don't really feel the way we feel. Like music, some of the hymns are nice, but some of the new music is perfectly fine to have some more lively music. And if that speaks more to the people. And I think that the Bible talks about music in Psalm 150. So I think that it is perfectly all right to do that. Just because they didn't do it before, doesn't mean it's not good.

BC: Do you see the church in this Holland different from the church were you came from? Maybe different views or traditions.

MK: I think the church here seems to be much more alive. A lot of activities are going out from the church here. I found that out already when I came in '47 and I think that's
still true. We have young groups of young Calvinists or young Teens groups that have a lot of activities going and they try to do things around church groups, while in the Netherlands that wasn't so. We went to church and we went back home. For a while there, there were some, what we call 'Christian boy scouts' when I was growing up, just the last couple years they had started those. But that was just brand new and I don't know if they even still have those. I'm not so terribly involved when I go to the Netherlands, I don't see usually too many couples or young children so I don't know, but basically I think the church here is much more active. Of course everybody complains about the Netherlands right now. People aren't going to church anymore. The people who are between 25 and 50 are hardly attending church. Now if they'll change when they get to be 75, if they think it's getting closer, they'd better be ready because we don't know. I don't know, it's hard to say. My mother always said that just going to church isn't going to make you a Christian. So we don't know and you can't judge if people who don't go to church, if they are Christians or not. But, just staying home isn't going to make you a Christian either. You've gotta either read the Bible or you have to do something. I think that big thing is that you live a life of service and that you know that Jesus gave the best example. I think the people here do that. If you look at so many people here in Holland, Michigan that I think are really examples of Christ and who are willing to give and do things for others.

BC: Do you see much competition between the Reformed Church and the Christian Reformed Church in Holland?

MK: No, I don't think there's really competition, especially for awhile in the 1950s there
was much more jealousy. Then the one church would have more or more churches or more attendance or better speakers, who feel a little bit like 'we have to do better'. I don't think that is here anymore. I think there are many ways in which we work together. The Reformed Churches in our churches here in Holland use, for example, publication material printed in Grand Rapids by our Christian Reformed publishing house. Another example is we work together on Maple Avenue Ministries. I don't know if you’re familiar with that but that's Christ Memorial Church and Maple Avenue Church and possibly another church all work together with underprivileged youth, especially quite a few black Americans are involved in that program. And that program is going really well- they get at least hundred kids at church service. Which, I think, is really important. And then we have Pentecost services; we combine Reformed and Christian Reformed church- we have a big meeting at the chapel. And we have Bread for the World meetings; we work together with a lot of Reformed and Christian Reformed. We have a big Crop Walk every year- we get lots of people and they all work together, not just the Reformed and Christian Reformed but all the other denominations too- the Presbyterians, the Baptists, some do more than others. I think as a whole we work together, the two denominations especially, but also the whole city, I think works... The Roman Catholics used to be so separate. We used to think that Reformed and Christian Reformed Church, they were the only ones going to heaven, now we think that maybe Roman Catholics will go to heaven too. I think that definitely a change. They didn’t think that in 1947. Also, I belong to a committee that’s called CRC-RCA committee. We do some planning of things we might be able
to do together. We also still talk about 'could we ever get together again as a church-be one church?' We don't know if that would ever... If you ask Elton Bruins, he'd say "no." If you ask John Hesselink, he'd say "maybe." And if you ask Michael De Vries, he'd say "oh yes." So we do talk about that. I think that as long as we work together on as many things as we can it's really important because that's what we're here for. And if the one has a couple more people in church or the other one, that's not important. It's how many people are saved and have faith in God, in Jesus.

BC: Do you think that your children have struggled with understanding your situation? Did you raise them that they were American?

MK: I think what you're trying to say is that 'did they feel like maybe they were brought up too Dutchy, or too strict?' No, I think my children were fortunate to have an American father. I came here young enough that I learned almost right away to do all the things that the American students do and I was young so that I kind of progressed with all of the students. Besides, my husband was American so we kind of followed the things that his family did here too. Some of it was a little old fashioned, but the kids never really complained and they seemed to be perfectly happy, well adjusted children. They loved to go to Europe and they loved to have their grandma and aunts and everybody coming because they have a good time. They're very interested in the Dutch paintings and Dutch pewter or Dutch delft blue or any Dutch tapestry or anythings like that. They love to have that and they like Dutch old-fashioned cupboards, they like to have those in their house. But it's not like they feel like 'I missed all that because I had this Dutch mother who didn't know what was going on'. Because there were some Dutch
girls, Dutch students who had parents who both spoke Dutch at home and the mother stayed in the home all the time. See I had a big advantage because I was right into the student world right away, so I got to know what people do. And then I started going to work, I'd see other people. And these women, the ones I'm thinking of, they didn't learn the language because dad always went to work and he learned English at work, but he'd talk Dutch to the mother. So sometimes, these kids were deprived a little bit from the kind of education that I've had. And I feel really thankful that I was able to come when I did, as a student.

BC: Did you teach your children Dutch?

MK: I started a little bit. They know just a little bit. But, I read Dr. Spock. Dr. Spock says 'don't teach them two languages because you're gonna confuse them'. That was one reason. And my biggest reason was every time I tried to start talking Dutch, my husband would say, 'now don't talk that way. I can't hear you or I can't understand you'. When one doesn't speak it, it's very difficult to try to have your children learn it. With just one parent it wasn't the easiest. And so I can't take credit for them knowing a lot of Dutch. But they understand a little bit when they go there and stuff like that but they don't, by any means, know anything fluent

BC: Did you teach them Dutch traditions like Sinterklaus?

MK: Oh ya. We do all those, we still do some of those. Yes, we do those. And different Christmas things too. At Christmas time we'd have little candles instead of light bulbs. We would give the gifts usually at Sinterklaus (Dec. 5) rather than at Christmas. We'd sit around the Christmas tree and tell Christmas stories and things like that that we used
to do. But a lot of them are even the same, it's not always so different. Western Europe basically, Western Europe never was so different from the United States. But maybe Holland, Michigan was a little bit more old-fashioned than New York or California.

BC: Do you still have Dutch costumes or do you still put on your wooden shoes?

MK: Yeah, I have a Dutch costume that I made when I was working downtown. And I thought, 'I've got to have a Dutch costume on like everybody'. So I made one out of some materials that I bought here, then later on I bought some parts that I purchased in the Netherlands like a scarf that fits with it and a cap. So half of my costume is original and half of it is American. It looks nice and I wear it every Tulip Time because I get involved with the different organizations that sell souvenirs and serve dinners and all that kind of stuff, every Tulip Time. I'm always busy for a week. It keeps me going.

BC: What are your views concerning the current immigration issues in Holland? There's a lot of hostility it might seem.

MK: Are you thinking that people think we have too many immigrants and we are to cut those down a little bit, is that what you're thinking?

BC: More the trying to get along between maybe, the Dutch people, the Spanish, the Vietnamese.

MK: I am concerned about that because right now it is maybe thirty percent Spanish and maybe five percent Vietnamese. Sooner or later there are going to be higher percentages yet. I don't know why these people make the problems. I don't quite
understand how this whole gang thing got started. I don't know enough about it. Except I think maybe once upon a time the Indians and the Dutchman had a little trouble too. So, I'm not so sure if it's all the people's faults who come in here. I think it's more amongst themselves that they make the trouble. Different Spanish gangs - I really don't know. I'm real concerned about that because the gang problem, I think, is about the biggest problem we have in Holland right. I don't know how soon that's going to change. You can't put all these guys in jail, because it's very difficult and sending out more policeman isn't the answer either. I think the biggest problem is the parental supervision and the parents aren't always home because the parents are working. They have to make ends meet, everything is expensive. Some of the people, especially in the Spanish community, lot of em have to work hard to make a living. And so they're not always home and then they start doing things. What I learned too, and I studied Spanish, the Spanish community is a macho community. They still believe that they can have three women and play around with three women. They don't believe that that's bad to do adultery. I think there is some of that in the culture. I don't know if that has something to do with the gangs too, that macho business, I don't know. I just don't know how you can change it so easily.

BC: How do you feel overall about your immigration?

MK: I think it's a wonderful experience for anybody to come to a different country and to live there, especially if you're received well. And I think the Spanish people also are received well. When they first came, we didn't have gangs. The people really felt at home. They were happy to be here, they were satisfied with the wages they were
making, they were happy that they could live on farms. Then pretty soon, someone started telling them, 'well, you don't have a nice place to live, somebody ought to get you something a little better, you're not getting the right kind of stuff'. I think that's when some of these Spanish people and Mexican people started getting into problems. I think somebody was telling them, 'you're not getting good treatment'. I think that most of the Dutch people who came here worked hard and accomplished what they wanted to accomplish. Most of them that came as families, they wanted to make sure that their children would get a good education and that they would get a good job, and so they worked hard. The Spanish culture is a little different. They were not so interested in getting good education for their children. I don't know if they were interested in making money, but they didn't have the same idea that the Dutch people have. The Vietnamese are all hard working people too. They all get education, they tell their children they have to work hard and study hard, and that's where you accomplish something in life. I don't if that's where some of the problems, but to me, it's wonderful if you can come as a family like these Dutch families did after WWII. There are at least, maybe 50 of em here, who all came after WWII with children. I think they all did well. There maybe are two examples of two families that went back to the Netherlands because the wives were so homesick. But the majority of them, they adjusted well. Sure these women didn't always have it so nice when they were sitting home, but as long as you are willing to adjust, you have to go and do what the people are doing like "in Rome, do as the Romans are doing." If everyone would follow that example we'd have no problems. It doesn't always seem that way. For me it was a
good experience too because, in this day and age, you can go home whenever you want to. Now, when these people would go years ago, they were here for 30, 40 years before they ever went back. Some of them never went back, never went back to see their parents. For me that was different so for me it was a good experience. I like it here, I've been doing a lot of things and I keep busy, especially now I do lots more volunteer work. It's always fun.

BC: Is there anything else you'd like to share?

MK: Not really, I'm just thankful that we have as nice a community that we live in. And thanks to Hope College I think there's a lot of nice things going on here all the time. We have a lot of nice culture. You can go to a concert almost every night. We have good movies if you want to see them; you can hear all kinds of lectures. I think we're really blessed to have that nice of community here where people can really take advantage of so many things. I am thankful to be here and I certainly appreciate all the programs that Hope College puts on. I hope this will be useful for somebody in the future.