

Interview With Alida Kuipers

Dutch Immigrant

October 10, 1998

Devin Nuner

Interview with Alida Kuipers by Devin Nuner
Dutch Immigrant
10-10-98

DN: For the record please state your full name.

AK: Alida Wagenar-Kuipers.

DN: Where were you born in the Netherlands?

AK: Warmenhuisen...it's a small town just an hour north of Amsterdam.

DN: How long did you live there?

AK: Eight years.

DN: What was life like in your hometown?

AK: Well I went to school. It wasn't a very large town...the oldest church standing in the village was from the twelve-hundreds. I skated to school in the winter on the canals. It was a normal childhood, no cars, just bikes.

DN: What was school like for you?

AK: It was two rooms, first three grades in one room and four, five, and six in the other. And each class had the roll of maybe seven kids.

DN: Was your family active in the church in the Netherlands?

AK: My dad was in the church, I went to a christian school. He was on the school board, and he was in the consistory.

DN: What led to your decision to leave the Netherlands?

AK: My dad was a very headstrong person, who kind of stated things the way they were. And in his business he saw some wrong doings and he complained to his boss about it (this is of course my perspective of it) he was more or less ousted and he signed up to go to the States. His brother, who was killed in the War, had always wanted to go to the States and I think that he was fulfilling his dream, actually to come here. And then we had to wait three years after he signed up to come here. We had to wait three years, it was a huge influx of immigrants at that time. And we were about the last of them to come actually.

DN: How did your family react to you guys leaving?

AK: Well...it was tough on my sisters. My oldest sister stayed behind, because in the meantime she met her future husband. And they stayed there. He has a very good business there, so there is no point in them leaving. My one sister was eighteen, and she was in pre-kindergarten teaching, so she had to leave that. She was not too happy about that. The other one was sixteen. And for a sixteen year old to be uprooted from one culture to another, was not easy for her. When they came here they had to work hard and both of the girls had to hand over their whole paycheck to my dad, just to make ends meet. So it was not very nice for them.

DN: How did you decide to come to the US rather than any other country?

AK: I think because of my father's brother had always wanted to come here. And a lot of immigrants came here...kind of the thing to do. I think that all of Grand Rapids was quite an influx of immigrants in that area.

DN: Where did you live when you first arrived here?

AK: In Grand Rapids...in the southwest end of Grand Rapids. When we got here there was a sponsor who took care of getting a house for us and getting a job for my father. Basically getting us settled, and he found a house on the southwest side of Grand Rapids, so that's where we started out.

DN: When did you make the trip to the US?

AK: I think that it was the February of 1955.

DN: How did you come?

AK: By boat. A great big boat, a steamship the Ryndam, that was the name of the boat.

DN: What were your first impressions of the US?

AK: Big. Everything was very huge. We got off in New York, I remember sailing past the Statue Of Liberty and seeing that. And getting off in New York, everything was tall buildings, huge cars, huge streets, the houses were big. Everything seemed very large to me.

DN: Did you know English when you came?

AK: No, not a word.

DN: How long did take to learn it?

AK: I don't know. I was plunked into the school system. I remember learning by pictures...a face of a girl, a face of a boy and underneath it would state what the picture was. That kind of thing. So when the other boys and girls doing there lessons with their teacher, I was sitting in the corner basically learning English. I have no idea how long it took, but I do remember very well that all the sudden I woke up in the morning and realized that I dreamed in English instead of in Dutch. So I think that at that point I learned English. It didn't take that long. I think for kids, they acclimate very quickly and you are thrown into a situation where you have to learn. That's all there is to it. No one is speaking your language, so you go for and you go and just do it.

DN: Were people in Grand Rapids and Holland accepting you as an immigrant?

AK: I was kind of oblivious of some stuff, but I know that I looked different and I was teased about that. I was sort of oblivious of that because I didn't understand the language, so I didn't really know what they were saying. No, immigrants were not appreciated, they were kind of the down trodden, you know at the bottom of the latter of society. And you could sense that, you could feel it, you could hear it. At school, you are kind of the runt of society.

DN: What are some specific events in your early years in Holland or Grand Rapids most memorable to you?

AK: As a child...I don't know. I think that I just floated through those years. As an eight, nine year old, you are not as keen as to what is happening. As for a specific event, no.

DN: What was the most difficult adjustment for you?

AK: The most difficult adjustment? I think it was the sense of feeling different. My clothes looked different, my hair did. Of course the language... not understanding what is going on. Recognizing that you are being teased but not knowing why. It wasn't traumatic though, because I wasn't that way. I kind of floated through life I think, a little oblivious to stuff.

DN: Who were your friends when you first came?

AK: I didn't have any.

DN: No other immigrants?

AK: No.

DN: Have you kept in touch with friends and family back in the Netherlands?

AK: Family. My sister lives there and of course aunts and uncles have pretty much passed on by now. But otherwise through letters with my sister. I went back several times.

DN: How often do you write them?

AK: Now...not too much. I've gone back several times and my sister has come here. And she has three sons that come over occasionally, but writing no.

DN: How would your children's lives have been different if they had grown up in Europe?

AK: Well they would have more school around the year, I don't think that they would like that. They would be biking a lot more instead of each having a car. Winters are tough there, it's very cold. Not a lot of snow, but very cold. And life would be different. Use mass transportation, much more than here. The distances are so great here, you need your own car to get anywhere. But over there bus system, the train system. You hop on a train leaves every ten minutes so the buses as well. So you don't need a car, but if you do have one your life is in danger. People drive fanatically.

DN: In what ways is the religious life here in Holland similar to the religious life in the Netherlands?

AK: I think that in the States we hang on to tradition much longer to the people in the Netherlands do. I don't know if you want call it progressive in the Netherlands, but they move much faster. The Second Service was out a long time ago already. It's different, some of the concepts of Christianity are let go in the Netherlands much quicker than they are here. I think that we hold on to the traditions more here than there. I see my sister not going to church at all anymore. Her kids didn't go to the Christian school. There are much more accepting of different religions, different ideas, and kind of involving those in their own life. But not the traditional religious life like we have here, I don't think it's over there. Like in Amsterdam, they offer many different demonstrations. Amsterdam is kind of known for that. Just recently they have had a huge demonstration called the Rights for the Lesbians and Homosexuals. They are much more open on all that kind of stuff. You know, drugs have been legalized over there for a number of years already. I think that we have the tendency to think that the Netherlands is a small country stuck in Europe. Very traditional, very old fashioned and so on. Some of that is true, but I believe that they are "progressive". I am not sure it is, but things move a lot faster.

DN: Are you active in the church here?

AK: We go to Pillar and I am the music coordinator. I've been singing for a number of years, I play the guitar. So I've been singing in churches as well as my growth. But I can let go of that Second Service very easy.

DN: Tell me about your family here in Holland.

AK: My son is twenty-six, he lives in Florida. My daughter is twenty-four, is married living in Zealand teaching. I have a twenty year old going to Grand Valley, a daughter. And a seventeen year old daughter at Grand Rapids Community College. Each of them have jobs. They are good kids, pretty solid so that it is good.

DN: Where did you meet your husband?

AK: I was back to the Netherlands when I was about nineteen or twenty, no I was twenty-

one. I went back for a year to just goof around basically, I had my nursing degree. So I went over there and took some more classes with the girls over there, worked there. So when I came back we met in church actually. He went to the same church my parents went to. So then we met and ten months later we married. That was a little fast. He is the principle at Holland Christian Middle School. He likes it there so.

DN: What way has your life been most changed since you came here?

AK: Because I was a child, I was pretty dependant on my parents. Where ever they would be I would be. I would rather be here than there. I have been back several times to visit, but I would much rather be here then there.

DN: Why is that?

AK: I think that people are a little more accepting here than over there. I like the people here. There is more oppportunity for kids here, over there by the age twelve you pretty much have to decide which area of life you want to go into. Whether it's technical, or philosophical, or what ever and then you choose your school accordingly. That's awful hard to do at that age and by the time you're nineteen you still don't know sometimes. Where as here the opportunity is pretty good, I think. Grand Valley is considerably cheaper than some of the private colleges and we have a choice. Over there you do to, but it's...over there the taxes are extremely high, but balanced to that a lot of medical expenses are paid for them. And I like the climate a lot better here.

DN: So you are happy here?

AK: Yes, sure are.

DN: You don't want to go back live and live there?

AK: No. I love to go back and visit and see it. It is all very small and there is a big difference. And I like to go back and visit, but I have everything here.

DN: Where did you go to college here?

AK: Grand Rapids Community College.

DN: You would make the same decision again to come here?

AK: I would, sure. In fact my oldest sister always wanted to come here and she ended up staying behind.

DN: She envious of you?

AK: I think so. There is some feelings, but that is life.

DN: As a kid in the Netherlands, do you remember how you spent your free time?

AK: Playing in the street with some of the kids, poking around in the canals. We had a little boat, row boat. My sister used to swim in the canal, but I was too scared to do that.

DN: Have you raised your children with a Dutch influence?

AK: I tried. I tried to speak some Dutch when they were little, just to teach them the language, but it wasn't worth it. There is no purpose really, when would they ever use it anyway? But my husband and son went back for biking, maybe four years ago now. And the three girls and I went back maybe five or six years ago now. And we spent time over there, two weeks. I showed them where I was born and where I went to school. We just had a good time. We had always wanted to do that as a family. We were looking forward to it, but at least everyone got there. So that is kind of nice for me.

DN: What do your children think of having a Dutch mother?

AK: I don't know, they are part Dutch too. I guess to me, when I came over it wasn't good to be an immigrant so I shunned that as fast as I could. So you basically don't talk about it much, except that they know I'm from there and that they have an aunt over there. We have been over there. I don't think that they really care. It's fine with them.

After a momentary pause...

AK: One tradition that I liked over there is the Sinter Clause celebration. Which is the old Saint that would come from Spain and bring gifts to children. And that is done on the 5th of December. Which I really like, because it takes the gift giving away from Christmas time and the commercialization of Christmas and puts on a different emphasis and a different tradition. It is a very fun time with a lot of games and family gatherings. And it seems to me, here we kind of combine that with Christmas and we combine the spiritual and the Christian part of Christmas with the commercial fun part. The two don't really go together, they really don't have anything to do with each other, I don't think. So that would be nice if we had that here to.

DN: Any other traditions that you liked?

AK: Easter was a celebration of three days. That kind of stretched out. There were celebrations of the Queen's birthday, just fun things that kids like to be involved with and have a good time doing. But that it is here as well with the Fourth of July. Sometimes Saugatuck reminds of the area where I used to live. Going to the cheese market, but the streets are all smaller and crowded together. The outside cafes, in the summer time we would sit outside and have your drinks out there. Saugatuck is sort of like that, kind of celebrative feeling when you go there. I like that, I miss those parts. There is always tons of people outside. People flock to the beaches and takes advantage of the dunes for walks and bike rides. And here the spaces are too large to take your bike to the dunes and things like this. Except, my husband likes to, but I don't.

...I think that we missed the birth of my sister's children. You miss all of that when you immigrate. The deaths, illnesses, relations. Those things are kind of hard, we were hard on our parents. It was hard on them to leave a daughter behind and my parents were forty-six and forty-seven, which is kind of old to immigrate and start a new life. It was tough on them, especially my mother, I think, leaving her daughter behind.

DN: What did your father do when you came over here?

AK: He worked at the Hekman Company in Grand Rapids, the third shift. And then he worked gardening in the daytime. So he basically had two jobs and my mother did some babysitting, but he came from a culture where women didn't work. They stayed home and take care of the house for everyone, really didn't work outside the home. So she kind of kept that tradition, and that has all changed drastically now. They didn't have much money.

DN: When did you make the move to Holland?

AK: After we were married, lived in Ann Arbor for a while and then we came here

because my husband got a teaching job. So we moved here, just before my son was born actually, about twenty-six, twenty-seven years ago. It's a neat town to live in I think.

DN: What's your occupation here?

AK: I work right now as a receptionist kind of at Lakeshore Eye Care Center, north of town. But I work part-time, which is nice. I paint pictures, I like to do that, I've tried to do that. When the kids were young I was at home too, full time. I'm glad that I didn't have to work outside of the home. Four kids, it's a lot of work, which is physical, but also there emotional well being, trying to keep in touch with what is going on.

DN: How do you feel about Holland having so many people of different cultural backgrounds?

AK: I'm not real traditionalistic. Sometimes I would like to be somewhere else, but it's a great place to raise kids. I think that the influx of more people has caused the crime rate to go up here, as it does anywhere. And the drugs are available for the kids more than ever. And that is here as well as anywhere. It is not an isolated town...but is a good place to be, I think.

DN: Is there anything you could say about your family in the War?

AK: I didn't go through the War, that's before my time. My uncle was very involved in the underground, and he was eventually caught and shot at this firing squad. And another uncle was also chased and they burned his house trying to find him. My family was very involved of course, my grandfather was taken and put in a concentration camp until he was liberated. And that was just for listening to a radio. So I've heard a lot of stories of the War when I was little, pretty scary. I had dreams of the wars for a long time, it's hard to shake those off. It's a very bad time for the Netherlands.

DN: How was your trip to America in the steamboat?

AK: I was sick the whole way, so I really don't remember much, I was in the cabin for ten days. It take ten days to come over on a boat. There was a lot of partying going on those big ships, for the children, young people, and adults. We have three meals prepared a day. It's very beautiful, especially from where we came from. My sisters enjoyed that very much of course, they had a really great time meeting other young people. I was pretty well locked in the cabin. Nowadays I think that they give kids antimotion-sickness pills. I didn't know that existed.

DN: How did you know to go to Grand Rapids?

AK: I think basically because there were so many immigrants here and our sponsor was located in Grand Rapids, and he was willing to take a family on. Which I think is a great responsibility for someone to do, because if the immigrant family doesn't have a job or can't pay the taxes, basically the sponsor would be responsible for them. So we were pretty grateful to have him and he lived in Grand Rapids. So that's where we ended up as well. We used to go to the Dutch church service at two o'clock on Sundays and they carried that on for a number of years.

DN: Do you believe that there is a difference in raising children between the U.S. and the Netherlands?

AK: You know, I think that really depends on the personality whether they are in the Netherlands or they are here. Depends a lot on the personality of the parents, their

concept of how to raise a kid and how much liberty they give children or how strict they are with discipline; depends on how they were raised, you either do the opposite or you do the same. As I recall visiting my sister and her grandchildren, they are extremely polite, probably a little more polite than the kids here. So maybe that is stressed a little bit more, I think, the politeness. But I'm not sure that is the case nowadays in a household. It seems to me that the kids there are given an awful lot of liberty there too. Especially with some drugs, marijuana being legal, a lot of freedom out there. It's coming here more and more, the change of culture, it's changing fast. And not all for the positive, I think that some is negative. I think that that is happening in the Netherlands as well as anywhere else. I don't know if kids have cars like they do here. I don't think that my nephews did, my kids would freak out if they didn't have a car.

DN: How long did it take to become an American citizen?

AK: I really don't remember that, but I do remember going to court in front of the judge and raising your hand. I remember that. But of course after that you lose your citizenship in the Netherlands.

DN: Do you wish that you would have kept your Dutch citizenship?

AK: I don't think so. There would be no benefit, not really.

DN: Were you overwhelmed when you came here?

AK: Yeah, it was exciting. My parents didn't really tell us kids what was going on. So basically I didn't know that my sister wasn't coming. I really didn't know where I were going, it wasn't shown to me on the map, I had no clue that we were going over the ocean and to a new country. To be thrown into a whole new school system, I had no friends, didn't know the language, it's pretty scary. I tended to be a child who was very afraid of everything, shy. It was a little traumatic I would say, especially not knowing what was going on.

DN: When you first arrived to Grand Rapids, did you wish that you were going to go back home?

AK: At first, I did yeah. I was more familiar there, I had my friends there, I didn't look odd there, and I did very well in school there. From all standards, I was ok over there. But people are very adjustable to various situations, but at first I didn't like it too well.

DN: How long did it take for your family to make the decision to move?

AK: It was a process of my dad's job going well, jobs were not plentiful at that time and difficult to get. The economy was in a down slip, because of the War yet I think, it takes awhile to rebuild. By the time that my parents decided to go it took three years before we could actually leave, because there were so many going at that time. I guess they could only let x-amount in every year. But then a week or two before we left, my parents got a couple of huge wooden crates and told us to put our belongings in there, so that was it. That went on that ship too, it was all of our belongings.

DN: What do some of your family from the Netherlands think when they come to visit you here?

AK: They like it here. My brother-in-law loves the churches here, he loves the atmosphere, the friendliness in the churches. They definitely like it here.

DN: Did you leave a lot of friends when you left the Netherlands?

AK: Yeah, that was kind of traumatic almost, but I'm sure that that is the same as any kid

moving away whatever stage, from one city to another. I think that the difficult part was that it was such a cultural difference too, but I think now it's not anymore. Kids don't want to look different than other kids, it makes you feel odd. I had some good friends there and some extended family.

DN: How long did it take you to make friends here and not feel such an outcast?

AK: I remember having one friend after some time and I kind of clung to her I think. I was a real shy person. It took a bit of time though.

DN: Overall you are happy with your decision of coming here?

AK: Yes, I think that it was a good decision. No regrets for me. I think that my oldest sister, for her there are regrets, she's really good with young children and she also left behind a boyfriend who she really liked. And for her it was not very nice, and she could have had the choice to stay behind. She was seventeen, that's pretty young really think, but there are seventeen year olds who go to the States by themselves. Mostly guys I think. I know that my cousin came when he was seventeen and went to Canada alone. But for her it has been hard, but she is glad she is here now.

DN: Well that pretty much covers my questions. Thank you very much.

AK: You bet, I wish that I had a little more interesting story for you.