

Interview with Elizabeth Deboer (her grandson, Derek Pomp, was present too)
History 201 Oral History Project
Interviewed by Andrea Apol
April 8, 1999

AA: My great-grandparents came over from the Netherlands too. Somewhere in Friesland, I think.

ED: Yes. But year did they come?

AA: What year? I'm not sure. We had some people come visit us from the Netherlands that we could trace back on our family tree and they came and visited us. But it was really far back.

ED: Oh. Yes. Maybe they are in this book.

AA: What was your maiden name?

ED: Schaap.

AA: Today is April 13, 1999. These are my first questions I am supposed to ask you. Your full name is Elizabeth Deboer?

ED: Yes, no middle name.

AA: Am I allowed to know your date of birth?

ED: Yes, [date removed], 1917.

AA: Place of birth?

ED: Oh, how do you say that? Let me write it down.

AA: You immigrated from the Netherlands in what year?

ED: 1956.

AA: Did you work in the Netherlands?

ED: No.

AA: Did you work when you came here?

ED: No.

AA: I don't know the geography of the Netherlands very much, but what part did you come from? North, south...?

ED: Oh. I was born in Gronigen, and we lived 18 years in Friesland.

AA: Is it true, I think it was my mom who said that they have their own kind of language.

ED: Yes! But we were just on the border so it was more their own language not the really Frisian. Modern dialect, you know?

AA: Was it hard to understand the dialect?

ED: Oh yes. Very hard. Just as hard as English. When we came here that was hard. But in Friesland too. Was different too.

AA: So you lived there during the war? What was that like?

ED: We had a bakery. Was very difficult to keep it going because there was no flour to bake with. So all the bakers went together in one bakery, and then they could make it.

AA: So your parents owned a bakery?

ED: I thought you were talking about Friesland.

AA: Oh! You owned the bakery?

ED: Yes!

AA: You and your husband.

ED: Yes.

AA: So you came over after the war?

ED: Yes.

AA: Why did you come over?

ED: Why? That we don't know. Not for any reason. My husband wanted to come.

AA: Did you know any English before you came?

ED: No.

AA: What was that like?

ED: Very difficult.

AA: How did you end up learning it?

ED: From the kids, from TV.

AA: How old were all the kids when they came over?

ED: The oldest one was 17, and the youngest one was 3 years old.

AA: Did they speak English before?

ED: No.

AA: Did they get put in schools right away when they got here? Were they mainstreamed right away?

ED: Yes. Right away to school, and they learned very easy I guess. So we learned from the kids, the radio, TV. Church we could not understand at first.

AA: This is going to be sort of a silly question, but how did you get here?

ED: On the boat. It took a week.

AA: Did you bring lots of stuff over with you?

ED: Yes, we took our furniture, bedding; yes, we took quite a bit.

AA: We went to the Holland Museum, and somebody said that when people came over from the Netherlands they would bring stuff over here and then get to the United States and

realize everything was more modern. Was that true?

ED: Modern here? No. Was not true. I thought it was more modern over there. Not any more. But when we came I felt that.

AA: Did you guys know that you wanted to come to Holland, Michigan, when you left?

ED: Yes, because we had family here. A sister of my husband was here. She immigrated before we did.

AA: Did she write you guys letters about Holland?

ED: Yes.

AA: We talked in class about a push from the Netherlands, and a pull from the U.S., and he talked about letters being a pull. So I was just wondering if that was one of the reasons.

ED: The last letter was that we got, "Don't come here."

AA: Why? She didn't want you guys to come?

ED: She always said it was fine. But just a week before we were leaving, we got a letter from her and she said, "Don't do it. You have to work so hard here to make it."

AA: So what did you think when you got the letter?

ED: Was very difficult because I did not want to leave. But my husband was full of it.

AA: Did the kids want to?

ED: No. Was very difficult for the oldest ones.

AA: What did your sister-in-law do here? Or her husband?

ED: I really don't know. I think he worked in Zeeland.

AA: Are you guys glad that you came now?

ED: Yes. Especially that we have Derek!

DP: You can omit that part.

ED: Yeah. But otherwise Derek I wouldn't have all of you! Oh, yes. (laughs)

AA: When you left the Netherlands, what concerns did you have about leaving?

ED: About leaving? The family. We left behind my dad, my sister, my friends--was very difficult to do.

AA: Did any of them ever come over here?

ED: Yes. My dad came, my sister came.

AA: So when you came it was just you, your husband and the kids?

ED: Yes, five kids.

AA: On the boat was it all people from the Netherlands?

ED: Yes.

AA: Did you know anyone else?

ED: No, all strangers for us.

AA: By the time that you guys got to the states, was anyone else from that ship coming to Holland?

ED: No. Not one of them. New York, New Jersey. But not one of them, we were the only ones for here.

AA: Why did you pick the U.S. and not Canada or somewhere else?

ED: For a while my husband wanted Canada. But I was so sure not to go to Canada because Canada was not settled as the U.S. When we came here, the churches were here the same as what we had over there. The Christian school was here the same as what we had over there. In Canada the immigrants had to do it, there was nothing there. That was the big

difference.

AA: Was there a church that you already knew you were going to come to when you came here?

ED: No, but we knew the same church would be here.

AA: And that was Christian Reformed?

ED: Yes.

AA: And that's the more strict one right?

ED: More strict one? It is almost the same as the Reformed. Yeah, Derek?

DP: It's not that bad. We have woman preachers and stuff like that. And they're able to hold office. What's the difference between RCA and CRC?

ED: There is really no difference. They separated in the time of Van Raalte. But there is really no difference

AA: Was Holland Christian opened when you came here?

ED: Yes.

AA: So did you send the kids there?

ED: Yes.

AA: When you got to Holland what was your first impression of it?

ED: We could not believe downtown, how poor it was. It was so poor there they had screen doors. And it was so different then in the Netherlands. The Netherlands was far ahead of Holland, Michigan. But in the 40 years that we are here, it is unbelievable how it has changed for the best. When we came here forty years ago, when we were walking downtown, women were walking with rollers in their hair. And we looked so funny on

that. And they did it forty years ago.

AA: The American women?

ED: Yes. The American women, and we couldn't believe that. The Netherlands was ahead of Holland, Michigan. And now Holland, Michigan, is beautiful, and downtown is beautiful.

AA: What jobs did your husband have when he came here? What did he do?

DP: Like the bakery.

ED: Oh, yes. He was a baker. First he worked at a bakers. When we were two years here, he bought Hempel's Pastry with a partner and we had our own bakery.

AA: When you guys came here did you have enough money to do everything or was it hard?

ED: We had enough money.

AA: Did you feel like that letter was right?

ED: Yes. Absolutely.

AA: Did you have any problems adjusting to everything?

ED: Yes, The first five years. Homesick! So homesick.

AA: Did you ever think about going back?

ED: Yes. We had the papers in the house to go back.

(Pause-phone rings)

AA: How many grandkids do you have?

ED: Grandkids? Seventeen? It is not easy to keep track of all of them.

AA: Do you have great-grandkids too?

ED: Twelve. I keep up with all the birthdays. This month I had fourteen!

AA: Do you have one of those birthday calendars up?

ED: Yes. How many sisters do you have?

AA: One.

ED: Me too.

AA: I had one sister, a really small family.

DP: Is Kay older than you or younger?

ED: Younger. I'm leaving for the Netherlands Wednesday.

AA: So she still lives there?

ED: Yes.

AA: She never came to the U.S.?

ED: Yes.

AA: Oh, she did?

ED: Oh yes.

DP: Just visits.

AA: Oh, but she didn't live here ever?

ED: No, never lived. Just visits.

AA: Did she ever think about living here?

ED: Yes, her husband did.

AA: Why did they decide not to?

ED: Because her children lived there.

AA: Are all her kids still living in the Netherlands?

ED: Yes. That was the reason. But her husband really wanted to come here. He loved it here.

AA: Why do all the guys want to come here?

ED: Yes! But you know, now I get homesick in the Netherlands for here when I am there four weeks. It's too long almost.

AA: What are some difference between here and there now?

ED: It's too small there. It's bigger here, more open here. It's different here, nicer.

AA: I've never been to the Netherlands. But I went to Vienna this summer, and the one thing that I could not get used to was that there was no Meijer, or anything like it.

ED: Really?

AA: You couldn't go just one place and buy everything! You had to go all over the place, and they had really tiny stores. Produce, and stuff like that.

ED: It is different in the Netherlands. There is a really big store there. And they have everything. They have groceries, clothes, and nice restaurant inside. It is very nice.

AA: When my sister went to the Netherlands, she was in Amsterdam and Enschede. She said that they rode their bikes everywhere. That everyone rides their bikes there.

ED: Yes. The gas is so expensive there.

AA: Did you have a car in the Netherlands?

ED: No.

AA: But you got one when you came here?

ED: Yes, right away.

AA: Were cars cheaper here?

ED: Yes, that too. But especially the gas.

DP: It's easier to get a license here too.

ED: Yes, I guess.

DP: It was really hard to get a driver's license there wasn't it?

ED: Oh, yes! Very difficult.

DP: Their just really strict on who can have a license and the test.

ED: It is very expensive. I think one test is maybe thousand dollars. It's very expensive.

And never the first time do you get a license. It always takes maybe four times before they get a license.

AA: So when you traveled, you just took a train?

ED: Yes. Transportation is very good there. Trains, buses all over.

AA: If you have any other stories that you can think of...

DP: Any stories about the war? Like the soldiers coming into the house?

ED: You have to know that?

AA: No, we don't have to know anything about that.

ED: So Derek that is not necessary.

DP: No. They are neat stories to hear though.

ED: Yeah, I can tell her that.

AA: If you don't want to you don't have to.

DP: I just like hearing them.

ED: We lived in a house that was 300 years old. Very nice house. And that house had a double ceiling so there was some room between the ceilings. And then my husband had the radio hidden and some sugar and flour for the baking. That was between the two ceilings. And we may not have a radio to listen to, so he hid the radio there. One

morning they said the Germans would be in town to pick up all the men and bring them to Germany to work there. We heard that and my husband went in his hiding place. They came in the house to look for him and my husband saw the big shoes they had on. He could see that. But they didn't find him. So they came back and went through the bakery. There was dough on the benches and they saw the dough was fresh. His fingers were in there. So they said, "Your husband must be here." And I said no, he isn't here. He said, "The dough--he has worked here this morning." No, I said, he is not here. "Okay," they said, "we come back."

AA: Where did you say he was?

ED: I just say he wasn't here.

AA: Did they come back?

ED: No.

AA: They never came back?

ED: No, because maybe because we had just a baby. And they saw the baby and the little basket. And they were so excited about him. Because they had children too, you know, in Germany. And so..yes..so they did not get my husband, but maybe two hours later, about 100 men walked through the streets with the Germans, and they had to go to Germany.

AA: So they took all the people from your town?

ED: Yeah, they came back later on. They were not Jews.

AA: Did you have Jews in your town?

ED: Yes, we hid the Jews. In the ceiling. Maybe for a couple of months. Then my husband

transferred them to farmers out in the country.

AA: Did Germans come and search the house for the Jews?

ED: No. They didn't know that. But it was very difficult to hide them. Last night on TV I could not watch *Schindler's List*. It was so bad what they did to the Jews. And we didn't know all of it. We didn't know it was so bad in Germany what they did to them. Later on after the war we found out. It had to be dark in the houses too. At night we had everything for the windows that it was dark. The Germans went over town, and if they could see some light, they would drop a bomb. One night they saw a house that was not completely dark and dropped a bomb. And the whole family was gone. We were sitting in the living room and all of a sudden so much noise. We right away under the table. The whole family gone, and we knew the family very well. Was so sad.

AA: During the war did you ever think about coming over here?

ED: No, not during the war. But I think that so many immigrated after the war because of the difficult times.

AA: What else was different about adjusting here? Other than homesickness?

ED: The food was different.

AA: Bad or good?

ED: We were not used to it so much. More packaged here. It is all more fresh there. That was the difference. The language was a big difference. In the Netherlands my oldest son was fifteen years when he came here. In the Netherlands you could do a lot. The boys. And the people thought nothing of it. They said "Oh, just boys," you know? That was very difficult for my oldest son because we lived on College Avenue the first year. And

we had real old people next to us. And if my son was climbing the tree, that was just terrible! You didn't do that here. When my oldest daughter came walking from downtown and students from Hope College were next door and waving to her. She waved back and that was terrible. She couldn't do that. The neighbors said that was so terrible that she did that, that she waved to the boys. So I said to my kids you cannot do that. You can not climb the tree. You cannot wave to the boys. That was very difficult for us. Because in the Netherlands they were free. And here the mother said you may not do this, you may not do that. Because I was scared for the people. That we would be so different.

AA: The people of the community, were they pretty welcoming other than that?

ED: I think so-so.

AA: When you were having trouble with you English, were people mean about it? Or did they try and help?

ED: No, never mean about it.

AA: What church did you start going to when you came here?

ED: Right away to Central Avenue. They were very good, they welcomed us. The first Sunday we went to the minister for coffee. And you know, they served on trays. They don't do that anymore? That everyone has a tray with coffee and cake on it? You never did that?

DP: They always had it set up on tables where you could get your own.

ED: Yeah. They served it on trays. Everybody got a small tray. But Grandpa didn't know that. So he took the coffee from the tray, and the cake, and he didn't know where to go

with it! (laughs) But then the lady of the house told him you leave it on. So that was different. But we are adjusted very well

AA: Were there a lot of people from your church from the Netherlands?

ED: Oh yes. And they still had Dutch services too there when we came forty years ago. In the afternoon.

AA: Did that make it easier? When you met the people from the Netherlands, did it make it feel more like home?

ED: Oh yes. And you know we still click together.

AA: Do you talk in Dutch when you see them?

ED: Yes. Dutch or English.

AA: Do you still go to the same church?

ED: Yes, and I love it.

AA: We're supposed to ask questions about the other groups that are coming to Holland now. Is it mostly Dutch background people at that church?

ED: Yes.

AA: Do you have any traditions that you still...

ED: Oh yes!

AA: Tell me about the traditions.

DP: Ole bollen, Sinter Klaus.

AA: Tell me about that one because his mom brought something over around Christmas. Is that December 5th?

DP: She brought the chocolate for Sinter Klaus.

ED: On New Year's Eve we bake ole bollen.

AA: What's that?

DP: Fat balls.

ED: But you can't call them fat balls. They taste a little different. My son has a bakery here and we all went there. There were maybe more than fifty people and they all can eat ole bollen, as many as they want.

AA: What do they taste like?

DP: It's a good doughy...you deep fry it, it cooks it and gets kind of brown. Kind of like a doughnut, it's got some raisins in it. It's basically a really odd-shaped ball, and you dip it in powdered sugar and eat it. It's really good.

ED: It's very traditional.

AA: Is this bakery the same one that your husband owned?

ED: No, that bakery isn't here anymore.

AA: What is the story behind the chocolate letters for Sinter Klaus?

ED: I don't know. It is the fifth of December.

AA: At my house, not on December 5th, but instead of stockings, my parents put fruit in our wooden shoes. It that...

ED: Oh yes, they set wooden shoes up too. What does mom put in it?

DP: She just puts the chocolate letters in them. That's all she does.

AA: Did they do that in the Netherlands too?

ED: Yes. That was a big thing in the Netherlands.

AA: Did they put their wooden shoes out?

ED: Yes.

AA: When you came here, did you wear wooden shoes in the Netherlands?

ED: No. But we did when I was younger. Then I had wooden shoes in the winter. When spring came, oh, we could have the shoes on. Henry in Kansas has wooden shoes. Walks maybe twenty miles in the wooden shoes.

AA: Did you like wearing them?

ED: It was fine, but we were very happy when spring came and could have the shoes on!

DP: My Uncle Henry still wears them. He used to own a farm over in Zeeland. So it was just easy walking through the mud and cow crud.

AA: Are there any other traditions that...?

ED: Family is very important for the Dutch.

AA: Do you get together on all the holidays?

ED: Yes. Especially on Sunday mornings. Then we have coffee and cake, and we talk about the sermon in church. And politics was a big thing; always talking about politics on Sunday morning and the preacher and what he preached about. Over coffee. And it was very, very cozy. Once a month we still come together for coffee.

AA: On the holidays do all your children come back?

ED: Yes, but the family is almost getting too big.

AA: When your kids were old enough to get married, did you want them to marry other Dutch?

ED: No, we wanted to marry Americans.

AA: Did they all marry Americans?

ED: Not my oldest daughter, but the others did.

AA: Did you ever think about leaving Holland, Michigan, and moving anywhere else?

ED: No.

AA: What is Tulip Time like compared to the Netherlands? Is it more American or more Dutch?

ED: More American. I never have seen all the costumes in the Netherlands.

[Tape malfunctions. End of interview.]