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Vander Kallen, Sophia Oral History Interview: Class Projects

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Oral History Interview
Michigan History – Spring 2000
Interviewee: Sophia Vander Kallen
Interviewer: Gretchen Bouwer
18 April 2000

GB: So you said that you immigrated in 1957?

SVK: Yes, we left the Netherlands on January 1.

GB: What part of the Netherlands did you come from?

SVK: I come from Leyden. It's the west part. It's kind of in between Amsterdam and The Hague, in Zuid-Holland. It's on the West Side by the North Sea.

GB: Okay, my ancestors came from Friesland.

SVK: Friesland? That's way in the North--that's a different country.

GB: That's what they all say.

SVK: I have a friend who is from Friesland. When they start talking Fries, I'm lost.

GB: You still speak Dutch then?

SVK: Oh yes. I still have family there so I still go there to see them.

GB: Oh really, do you travel there a lot? Like every year?

SVK: Once a year. Like September or October I try to make it a point to go there for four weeks. I have a brother there, and my sister is still there. So that is why I go back, really. I still have the family there. I was the youngest one in the family and they did not like it that I went, but my husband told me to go.

GB: Why?

SVK: Well, when I met him, he had just came back from Korea. There he was in the service

with all the Americans and I think he was over here too for a little while, so he liked it and he always wanted to come back over once he was out of the service. Especially because he was in Indonesia and he was in Korea and then the Netherlands is too small, and those guys didn't like it anymore. Of course I didn't go overnight, I decked out one time for sure. I was 23, 24 never been away from home really except for vacation so that was a big step. I never really even lived on my own at this point. In those days you didn't do that yet. You stayed by pa and ma. So that was hard to do, but he could get special papers because he was in Korea and it was easier to get here at that time. But like I said, the first time everything was ready and I backed out and then his sister went with her husband and their two kids instead of us. Well then she was here and she wrote letters and then I fell for it anyway.

GB: Are you glad?

SVK: Now I am, in the beginning I was not happy

GB: How come, did you miss back home?

SVK: I was homesick you might as well say and I couldn't speak the language and you were kind of like a stranger when there is nobody you know. It was hard, but then we were really planning on going back because he knew that I didn't like it. But then the last minute I said no we are not going to go back either. Then we were here about a year I think, or about 8 months 9 months, and so we stayed and now I am glad that we did that. I like to go to the Netherlands for a visit - it's nice. Sounds like people, who live in the Netherlands, don't like it there. That's not the case. It's that I don't like to live there

anymore, because it's too crowded! When I go there just on vacation I like it that the Netherlands is small so you don't have to drive for hours or days to go see something. That's what I meant to say. Most people don't like it who live there - it's small and you live all together, but I like it because when you go there it's like a half an hour, but here you have to drive three days to see something. That's what I always say, the USA is I love it but it's too big

GB: Yes, it is quite large, and it doesn't have the transportation systems.

SVK: Well, you have to fly everywhere. If you've got company you have to drive three, four hours to see the bridge and you have to take a day to go to Niagara Falls if you want to show them something. Then you sit in the car and your family asks, "Now in which state are we now?" Well, you're still in Michigan! We had a lot of fun in the beginning. The first ones that came over don't realize how big this country is, the first time they come over it's a surprised

GB: Did you know anyone when you first came. You knew your sister you said....

SVK: Except for my sister-in-law,

GB: Did they live close by?

SVK: Yes--they lived here in Holland, that's kind of why we came here. But they are the only ones that we knew really.

GB: Is that why you came to Holland instead of somewhere else?

SVK: Yes. Later on I said that we should have gone to California but we didn't do that. I like Holland.

GB: What were your first impressions of it?

SVK: To be honest I thought it was small, and stiff, very little interests. Here you met strangers and the first question they asked you was which church are you going to. We were not used to this at all because in the Netherlands that was not the way it was. That is the really big impression that I got. They could hear that you were just here because you could hardly talk any English, and in the grocery store you stand in line and they would ask you which church you were going to and we always said - and maybe they got mad about this - but we said "It's none of your business." We were not used to that.

GB: Did you find people friendly for the most part?

SVK: Yes, I mean it was just the way. Now it is not like that, Holland has changed a lot. In the beginning, you think my gosh--why do they ask those questions? I think that that was the worst thing that I thought that Americans were nosy. But later on you learn a lot. It's just the way it was, over here. If we would have moved to Chicago they would not have asked that question either. It was just Holland, Michigan.

GB: Did you work while you were here at all?

SVK: No, not really.

GB: Did your husband?

SVK: My husband had all kinds of jobs. He had sometimes two jobs at the same time, and then he even worked in Chicago for a while because he could not find anything here. In the meantime we got our first baby. I stayed home, at that time you did that. And I'm still glad that I did that. But then he came back and he bought a gas station and he built it up

and up. I helped him with bookkeeping and cleaning it and all those things. So I really never layed around. I had a job, but then we were married for a long time already and the kids were bigger. I worked for about four months and then I gave it up again. So I never really had a full time job here. But I worked because we didn't have much money so I cleaned an office and stuff like that on the side, but not a full time job.

GB: You said before that your husband moved to Chicago because it was hard for him to find work here?

SVK: He couldn't find what he really wanted to do. He sold cars which he did in the Netherlands, and that was used cars mainly, but you know in the beginning I do not think that we were accepted that quickly and they try to push him out. Because he could speak good English and he could sell cars because he was a good salesman and he always said that 'they just can't stand me because I sell too many cars' so then they just pushed him out. He worked for Donnelly and there it was the same thing. He worked in the factory and he kind of improvised one machine so that it would make more mirrors in an hour. The other ones didn't like that because then they had to work harder so they saw to it that he quit. So then he went to Chicago. And he worked for Carson, Pierce and Scott for quite a while and that was not easy because he came home only on the weekends. Then he bought the gas station together with my brother-in-law. My brother-in-law kept his job though. That's how we kind of started out in our own business. But it was not easy. We didn't have a lot of money but we managed, now a day when we look at our kids it's quite different.

GB: Did you bring along any traditions from the Netherlands that you kept doing?

SVK: Well I guess in the beginning you try to find in the grocery store what you are used to in the Netherlands. You look at something that you never saw before and you don't buy them because you don't even know how to cook them. I have Dutch friends who I say stay very Dutch, but I didn't. I am away from the potatoes and the veggies and the meat. Especially since I'm alone. I don't think that I'm really real Dutch anymore. Don't get me wrong, whenever you here the Dutch Anthem your ears open up and if you hear anybody speak Dutch or you hear anything on the TV about the Netherlands, you always stay that Dutch. But there are people who stay more Dutch, you can almost pick them out because they dress differently. I can't really explain it. In the beginning I had that too, I never wore slacks before I came here, always skirts and I always swore that I would never wear slacks...until you bought your first pair and now I wear blue jeans. When I go to the Netherlands I never take my blue jeans, I take my slacks though and one skirt, but my blue jeans stay here. Even though, people in the Netherlands are changing too now. Very much so.

(Dog interruption)

GB: What were some of the most difficult adjustments?

SVK: The main thing is to live without your family. You are alone. I think that was the hardest, to get used to that. In those days when I left the Netherlands, I really thought I would never see them again. At that time the travelling back and forth--the distance it was much farther--it was more expensive, there were no jets yet, it took about seventeen

hours by plane

GB: You took a plane over then?

SVK: Yes, we took a plane. There is another reason that I came over here. I always wanted to fly so badly and I thought that this was my only chance. We had a choice and I said that I would like to go by plane because then at least I flew once in my life, not knowing that I would go back and forth quite often. When I left the Netherlands I thought that that was it. I thought that I would never come back there. When you come here it's hard to think like that. That's why I think that I had homesickness because I thought that I would never see them again. But to make up my mind, we had really already sold to people everything that we had. We were going to go back for that money, but then I didn't feel good about that either. Then all of a sudden I said that that was that and we say forget it. You have to really make up your mind and then it goes better. But you have to get used to a lot of stuff like in the grocery store, and some things taste really different. The vinegar was different. I made my cucumbers and they didn't taste the same.

(Dog interruption)

Like I said, over the years, you learn.

GB: Are you involved in anything in Holland that...

SVK: Not really, we never went to church either and that is why I think for us it was really harder even yet because we never went...well, that's a whole different story. But I never went to church, my husband was really Catholic, but we never got married in church and I was never baptized. Well, like I said, that is a whole other story. We never went to

church, and I think that that made it kind of harder for us too because when we came here everybody went to church, whether they like it or not, they went. And I just heard a story about something that is still going on. I swear that people went to church so that the neighbors could see that they went to church. Otherwise they were not accepted like we were not accepted. But we didn't do that, we refused to do that. Over the years that changed too, and we got friends and slowly we found some other Dutch people. But I think that because of that reason it might have taken us a little longer to settle.

GB: There are lots of newer immigrants coming to Holland, like Asian communities or Hispanic communities. Do you have any feelings towards them at all?

SVK: Hey--they are all welcome. The only gripe I have is to please learn the language--especially the Spanish. I don't agree with that at all.

GB: How long did it take you to learn the language?

SVK: I had it in high school in the Netherlands, so I knew the basics. But when you went to a store here and you asked for something, then I kind of pronounced it wrong I guess and they didn't know what I was talking about. But, I read the newspaper and if I didn't know it I took the dictionary and we watched TV. There was one show, a police story, and the guy talked very fast. My husband loved to watch that story and I said one day if I can understand him and follow that story, then I have it made. But you have to learn. You have to look it up then if you don't know it. In the beginning here, they get all the help. Then they start putting it in Spanish. Well then you don't learn that way. I got the papers from my kids from school in English and I had to figure it out. And that is how you learn.

Don't get me wrong, when I have my Dutch friends over, not anymore as much, but we used to talk Dutch. But I hated to hear people speak a different language with people who don't understand it. I don't think that is very nice. My younger son, when he was in junior high, and he had a few months of Spanish, so I went over there and I talked to that lady. Well, we don't want to forget our language and that is a poor excuse, because you don't. We didn't do it the way they did and we don't forget it either. You talk to your family, you write to your family; there are a lot of ways to remember. But hey, I'm an immigrant, if they are hard working people... The only thing that I think now is that they get in so much easier. I always say we almost like we had to sign our life away before we got permission to enter this country which is fine. I can see that. But now if you hear sometimes and see sometimes and they don't even have papers. Then you can get upset about it sometimes.

GB: Do your children speak any Dutch?

SVK: Well, not really. But they understand it. And I always thought my younger son wouldn't know any Dutch. You start speaking Dutch less and less because you are here longer and at that time we thought that if we speak Dutch in the house and they have to go to school, we thought they would get confused. That is one thing I would change. If I had to do it over again we would speak Dutch in the house and they could speak English in the school. When my father and mother came over, in the long run, of course they got along. But it was hard to get conversations going and I'm always sorry about that. But my younger son went to the Netherlands and my sister said that if that kid had been here one

week longer he could have spoken Dutch so well. And he can understand it pretty well.

GB: Is there anything that you would like to add?

SVK: Just that I like it here and that I'm glad I came. My husband liked it here very much. We had to work hard, very hard, much harder than I think sometimes they work now, but we're never sorry that we did it. And, I always stayed home with the kids which made it harder again, and the house is not big and huge, but we were happy it.

GB: Have you always lived in this house?

SVK: Well, just about. We came here with four of us. We got married because we wanted to come here together. We were engaged, but if we were not married then my husband would have to come here first and establish himself and then I could come. We didn't want that so we got married and my cousin got married too and we came here - the four of us - and then we first lived on 28th street in a house that we rented for \$80 a month which we split--whole house--didn't have a garage. So each \$40 and we split everything, but he couldn't find work he wanted here in Holland. So he finally, about 4-5 months later found a job in Benton Harbor in the radio repair business. So they moved over there, and we had to get out of the house because we couldn't afford the \$80 a month. So we went to an apartment for \$55 a month at that time and there we had one bedroom, kind of a big kitchen, and one bathroom. And there I got my first baby, I got my second baby--in one bedroom, and then when I was expecting my third baby I said I think we should move out. But we didn't have that much money, we couldn't really afford it to go bigger, but we had to after the third baby. And then with a lot of help from the man who

used to live over there. It was their house here. Because when we went looking for another apartment, whatever we could afford was old and dirty. Then my husband had the station then and there was this salesman who always came in and he asked him "well, you get around a lot. Do you know somebody that lends a house or an apartment for not too much money?" And he said, "I think I know. Why don't you come over with your wife and come and look at it and see if you like it." And that was this house. And it turned out that it was his house. He didn't say that yet though. And of course I loved it. I had a bedroom over there, three smaller bedrooms upstairs, a bathroom, a kitchen...so I loved it. And because he helped us a lot with giving us a break, that's how we could buy this house otherwise we could not have bought it.

GB: Did you stay friends with him?

SVK: They used to live right there because when he bought this house it was one lot so they split it in the long-run everybody split their lots so he built his house there. I still see him once in a while. They are very old and he is almost blind. But I still see him, and I always told him how grateful we were. I'm not one to like to move. My husband passed away about 10 years ago. I mean, we've remodeled and pretty soon it's going to be painted. I'm not a mover, so I stay here. So we had help. You need help, and friends, and....then my husband passed away, and then it was hard again and people thought maybe I would go back the Netherlands but I have three boys here. They are married now and I have four grandchildren. But I love to go back to my sister and my brother. And that I think is about it. Like I said, it was a hard time we had a hard time, but we made it

and you can be proud of that.