

10-5-1998

Meilof, Alice Oral History Interview: Class Projects

Stephanie King

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Recommended Citation

Repository citation: King, Stephanie, "Meilof, Alice Oral History Interview: Class Projects" (1998). *Class Projects*. Paper 7.
http://digitalcommons.hope.edu/class_projects/7

Published in: *Class Oral History Projects (1998) (immigrant residents of Holland) (H98-1351)*, October 5, 1998. Copyright © 1998 Hope College, Holland, MI.

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FYS Dutch Oral History Interview
October 5, 1998
Interviewee: Alice Meilof
Interviewer: Stephanie King

SK: For the record, please state your full name.

AM: Alice Meilof.

SK: Where were you born in the Netherlands?

AM: I was born in Workum, Friesland.

SK: And how long did you live there?

AM: I lived there for two and a half years, then I moved to Balkbrus.

SK: Can you tell me about your family?

AM: Sure, my dad had his own butcher shop. I had a mother and two brothers.

SK: What was life like in your hometown?

AM: Well, it was a small town so it was very quiet and nice.

SK: Where did you go to school?

AM: In Balkbrus, where I used to live from 1929-1953.

SK: Okay, what was school like for you?

AM: Oh, I didn't like school too well.

SK: That is normal.

AM: Yes, and I was really enough into the war, so there was nothing to do anymore.

SK: What do you remember about life in the Netherlands during the war?

AM: My dad and I were in the underground, so I could tell you a whole story about this, but it is in the Archives. Larry Wagenaar had us all talk about it and there is a tape about this.

SK: Wonderful. Did you work in the Netherlands?

AM: Yes, I did I worked in a store for awhile.

SK: Did you do any other work?

AM: Not in the Netherlands, no. I was home most of the time.

SK: Did you enjoy this?

AM: Oh yes, very well.

SK: How did you spend your free time.

AM: Oh, this is hard because I grew up in the war and I was fourteen when the war started. After a couple years we couldn't be out after eight o'clock. First it was after ten o'clock, then after eight o'clock. So at night we were always home. We didn't do much. We went to choir at night before we all were supposed to be home and just have friends over and play games. That is what we used to do because there was not much electricity in the last couple years so my youth was not very eventful.

SK: You mentioned choir, what type of choir?

AM: Just Church choir.

SK: Was your family active in Church in the Netherlands?

AM: Yes.

SK: What do you remember best about it?

AM: About the Church?

SK: Sure.

AM: Well, that we just went to Church, and that was good. We

enjoyed going to Church.

SK: Which Church was this?

AM: It was the Christian Reformed Church.

SK: What led your decision to leave the Netherlands?

AM: Okay, this was starting in the war, of course, everything that we had in the Netherlands was taken by the Germans. They took everything to Germany. So, after the war was done, there wasn't really anything left: no wood, no stone, no tires, and not much food. It was very bad and then I met my husband, boyfriend first then. He worked for the Department of Justice. We went together for just about three years and wanted to get married, so we asked if there was any chance that we could get a house. They told us, "Are you married?" And we said, "No, we are not married, we want to get married, but we want to live somewhere." They said you could not get a house until you are married. So, we decide to get married; this was in 1950. I lived with my mom and dad, and my husband worked all over the Netherlands, so he came home once every two weeks. So anyways, we went to City Hall and told them that we were married and could we put in for a house. They asked us, "How many children do you have?" We said that we had just married. We were told, "Oh there are so many people with two and three children, they come first." So we decided to sign up for Canada, but in the meantime my dad said he would like to go to America because he had a brother and a sister living here. So then, we put in for America too, and that is why we came here. Stepped on the boat 45 years ago today.

SK: Sounds good. How long did you think about immigrating before you actually did it?

AM: Well, so that would be about two and a half years.

SK: How did your family react?

AM: Well, my mom and dad went too; so we came together on the boat, so they didn't mind. My brother was here already, a year before, so we didn't really feel bad about getting out of the Netherlands.

SK: What about your husband's family?

AM: They didn't like it too well, but he was married, so he could do what he wanted. (laughter)

SK: Did you have any concerns about leaving?

AM: Oh yes, a little. We didn't have a job. When we came here, people were going to help us, but we still had to wait and see what would happen.

SK: What had your husband done in the Netherlands?

AM: He worked for the Department of Justice. He worked with taking people to court and escorting people to court, like a policeman, but then for the Department of Justice.

SK: You mentioned this some, but how did you decide to come to the United States rather than another country?

AM: Well, we were planning to go to Canada, and my mom and dad were going to America. When we got our call to come for examination so we could go to Canada, I was seven months pregnant with a baby and I couldn't go on a boat. We couldn't travel at all. So, then we decided we were going

to wait until my mom and dad were ready and then we could go all together to America.

SK: Why did you come to Holland?

AM: Because I had an aunt and uncle living here and they were going to help us out.

SK: Super, how did you go about getting a Visa to enter the United States?

AM: Oh, we had to ask for one and then go to one of the big cities, Rotterdam, for an examination and a check up by the doctors. Then we got a clearance to go.

SK: Were there legal issues you had to deal with?

AM: No, we never were in jail or anything, so there was nothing to check out.

SK: Would you say you were primarily motivated by a desire to leave the Netherlands or a desire to come to the United States?

AM: Not a desire to leave the Netherlands, really, but we wanted to have a family, and we wanted to be together. This way we were always apart, and I saw my husband every two weeks; there was no life for a married couple.

SK: I wanted to ask some questions about your trip to the United States.

AM: Oh boy. (laughter)

SK: Not too many.

AM: No, because I don't remember too many.

SK: Okay, you had mentioned this a little, but when did you make the trip to the United States?

AM: In October, October 5-14, 1953.

SK: You came by boat?

AM: By boat, the Maasdam.

SK: Can you tell me anything else about your experience on the boat?

AM: Yes, that we had terrible storms, terrible. It was about a seven-day storm. A lot of people were sick. I didn't feel the best either, but we weren't that terribly sick. My husband and my dad were just fine. My mother and me were kind of a little bit sick once in awhile.

SK: You said that you came with your parents and you had one child at this time.

AM: Yes, one year and a half old girl.

SK: Who else was on the boat with you?

AM: Lots of people, but no one that we knew.

SK: Okay, what were your reactions to the trip itself?

AM: Well, the trip itself wasn't so bad, but I remember that my husband said when he saw the Statue of Liberty, "Oh boy, I wish this boat would turn back, that they wouldn't let us in."

SK: Why did he say this?

AM: He was kind of scared. There was no job yet, a wife and child, and he was kind of apprehensive about the whole thing.

SK: That makes sense. What were your first impressions of the United States?

AM: Oh, it was very strange, there were so many houses that were

of wood, and we didn't see that in the Netherlands. That was something that we really noticed and people didn't have flowers in the gardens. Well, this was after we were here for awhile because we came in October. That was our first impressions over the first year. It was kind of dumb maybe that there were no flowers, but no body had flowers, it was all green stuff, green bushes and everything but no flowers.

SK: How did you react to all this?

AM: I was homesick, and I wasn't homesick for home, it was just not comfortable the first couple months. Of course the language had a lot to do with this too. We went to Church and we couldn't understand a word, and people would talk to us and then we tried to express ourselves. That was very hard at first, we knew some words, like table and chair and small words, but to put a sentence together was very hard.

SK: That's interesting. What were first impressions of Holland? Were they similar to when you first arrived?

AM: Yes, we thought it was a nice town, but that was it. Although there were some older people that could say a couple words in Dutch and that would help us out, like in the stores, but there were a lot of things we didn't know the name of and then we had to point out what we wanted or use signs.

SK: Where did you first live when you arrived?

AM: With an old lady for about ten days, and there was an apartment rented but it wasn't empty yet. For the first ten days we lived with someone else, someone we didn't even know, but she could talk just a little Dutch, so that helped us out a little bit too. Then we moved into our own apartment.

SK: This was in Holland?

AM: This was in Holland.

SK: Did your parents live with you?

AM: No, my parents stayed back in New Jersey.

SK: Oh, wow, where did they live in New Jersey?

AM: They lived in Patterson, first they went to Midland Park, New Jersey, and then they went to Patterson and Prospect Park, New Jersey. They are two cities next to each other.

SK: How did you decide to...

AM: Okay, my uncle in New Jersey sponsored my mom and dad. You had to have a sponsor otherwise you could not get into the United States. They are responsible for you for the first five years. If I would get sick and we didn't have any money, then the sponsor would have to pay the bill. If something happened with an accident or so, they were, for five years, responsible. So, my uncle in New Jersey was responsible for my mom and dad, and my uncle and aunt here in Holland, Michigan didn't have the money, so they couldn't be a sponsor, so they asked one of the neighbors and they did it. They signed up to be our sponsor.

SK: So did they arrange the apartment for you?

AM: No, my uncle and aunt did that. The sponsor didn't really have anything to do because my uncle and aunt told them, "Well the people that are coming here are responsible

people, they are Christian people, and you don't have to worry about it, but we just cannot do it." My own uncle and aunt had come just a couple years before we came.

SK: Did they arrange for you to live the first ten days with this lady?

AM: Yes with this lady, it was a lady from Church. They found out she would take us in. We had to pay her, it was not a free deal. We had a little money that we could take along, but not too much. We had to pay our own trip to America. A lot of people later on got subsidized by the Dutch government because there were too many people there and they wanted to help pay for people going to Canada or America. We came too early though.

SK: Did you husband find a job?

AM: Yes, he started working for the city. He was on a truck that picked up all the leaves because we came here in October and the leaves were all falling; they needed people to work for the city. So he helped pick up leaves with a big vacuum cleaner type thing. He worked on that, and in the winter on the snowplow.

SK: How did he find his job?

AM: The first job he got through my uncle. My uncle knew some people and he asked if they could hire him too and they did. That is what my uncle first did too, worked for the city, but later on he became an accountant.

SK: Did you have a job when you came over?

AM: No, not right away, I did later on.

SK: What did you do?

AM: I worked at Meijer for nineteen years, but then I quit. It was only part time.

SK: Was you husband's work at all similar to his work in the Netherlands?

AM: No, not at all. Later on he went to BASF, that's a factory here. He worked there for thirty-one years.

SK: What did he do at the factory?

AM: He painted everything that was paintable.

SK: You had mentioned you didn't know English when you came over, how did you learn it?

AM: By listening, by reading, and by buying a television as soon as we had the money. My daughter was one and a half when she came, so we listened to Captain Kangaroo together in the morning. That is the way I learned a lot, because he told the children how to count and the letters and all this. So, I learned a lot from this; plus, I went to choir right away. I did not know how to speak English, but I kind of listened to how the people were singing and I just sang along and it went fine.

SK: How did your husband pick up the language?

AM: Very slowly.

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

AM: I still don't know it (laughter). I don't know, it didn't take long. I could communicate, at least, with the people after a year and it goes so slowly on that you really do not put a time to it. You just go along. I think they have

probably laughed at us once in a while when we said things the wrong way, and I still do, I know.

SK: Were the people in Holland accepting of you as an immigrant?

AM: Not too much, no.

SK: In what ways?

AM: We never really got invited to people's houses. We had to find our own friends among the immigrants, and even in the churches it was really a clique. That was the one thing we did not like about the churches here. I think it is changing a little bit now, but when we came it was not very good. You can ask a lot of Dutch people and they will all say the same thing. There were some people who would say "Hi," but they never would invite you for coffee, which was hard sometimes.

SK: Then, how did you meet people?

AM: We met people who came from the Netherlands, there are so many here, so we made our own friends.

SK: Did you sense hostility from anybody or just not welcoming?

AM: No, not hostility, although we felt the people were jealous. When the Dutch people came here after the war, they would just take any job to make money. They did not care what type of job they had, they would just "dig in" and do the job. I remember, we came in 1953, and in 1960 we went back to the Netherlands for the first time. We had just bought a new house and we had just bought a new car, a good car. My girlfriend over heard some people saying, "How did they do it? They were only here seven years, and now they go to the Netherlands, and they have a new house. We were here for so long already, we were born here, and we could never do that." Those things hurt. We did not think that was a very Christian to say that, because we worked for it. I cleaned houses the first couple years, and my girlfriends would take care of my baby. I would clean houses, which I hated to do, but just anything to get going.

SK: What specific events in your early years in Holland are most memorable to you now?

AM: (pause) I think when the kids got a little bigger, and they established friends, and we established friendships with people around us. All Dutch people, no American people.

SK: How was the schooling different for you children?

AM: Pretty good, they got along quite well, and our daughter got along a lot better than our son. We took him out of the Christian school when he was in third grade, I think. The kids teased him since he was a quiet boy, and he still is. So we took him out of the Christian school and sent him to the public school, and that went a lot better for him.

SK: You said you had two children, a son and a daughter, when I had I had called you earlier. When did you have the second child?

AM: In 1955.

SK: What was the most difficult adjustment for you or your family?

AM: I don't know, I think we coped pretty well with things because you had to. We knew we had to find our own way, and

I think going to church and believing in the Lord would help us along a lot.

SK: Was there ever a time during your first years in America or even later that you considered returning to the Netherlands?

AM: No, never.

SK: Why not?

AM: I don't know. We never really thought about that. We loved to go visit, but not to live there again. The first time we went back, we said, "Oh all the houses are so close together and the streets are so small." So we never really wanted to go back and live there.

SK: Did you frequently return?

AM: Yes.

SK: You had mentioned the other people who came over from the Netherlands were your friends, did you have any other friends when you first came to America?

AM: No, we did not know anyone here, so we had to meet people at church or some where else. Slowly on, we became friends, we just started talking and having a cup of tea in the afternoon together and a cup of coffee in the evening. That is the way we Dutchmen do that.

SK: Can I ask some questions about your life in America?

AM: Sure.

SK: How have you kept in touch with you friends and family back in the Netherlands?

AM: Writing, calling on the phone, but mostly by writing.

SK: You had mentioned you had been back to visit some, do you stay with your husband's family?

AM: Yes, I stayed with my husband's family. I stayed with his sister, but then I visited all his family. I visited my cousins, I visited my brother, and I visited friends and neighbors that I used to live next door to, but a lot of them were older than me, so they are gone already. I visited quite a few friends that I grew up with, so we stay in touch.

SK: Have they come to visit you?

AM: Oh yes, not all of them, but different ones have come to visit us. Two couples came, one at a time. Two sisters of my husband's came together. I had my brother and his wife come and later on my brother alone. People from different choirs that sing here would stay with us and we would keep our friendship since ten or twelve years ago that they were here and sang with the Dutch choir and came over to America. I had them in the house because they wanted to have places for them to stay. We are still in contact with three of those couples, and they came at separate times. It really, the Netherlands still pulls at you even though you do not want to live there anymore. It is still kind of home.

SK: What were their reactions when they first came to visit?

AM: Yes, they thought everything was so big and far away. That was their biggest thing, that we could go to Grand Rapids at night just for coffee. They could not believe you could just drive all the way to Grand Rapids just to visit with friends for an evening.

SK: How often did you call on the phone, or was this even a possibility?

AM: Oh yes, we called every so often, but not too often. I would rather write, you can tell a lot more in a letter than on the telephone.

SK: Do you believe there is a difference between child rearing in the United States and the Netherlands.

AM: Then or now?

SK: Both, or then, when you had your children.

AM: Yes, I think there is, not the child rearing. Not the values so much, but my kids would go to bed at seven o'clock no matter what. Here the kids stay up at all hours of the night. There are probably some people who bring them in bed early, but we were always surprised kids were always still out of bed.

SK: Were there other differences that you noticed?

AM: Oh, well yes. It was different but not different, but not different. I really just do not know the answer right now.

SK: What relationship did you children have with your parents?

AM: With my parents or with us? With the grandparents, they did not grow up with the grandparents. We kept in touch when we went to New Jersey, but my husband's parents were in the Netherlands. They only saw the kids once.

SK: Did you see the relationship between the children and parent different here than in the Netherlands?

AM: No. We were just too far away and my in-laws did not want to travel to America, so they did not see the kids. We took the kids once to the Netherlands, so they saw them then, but they could not talk together. My kids did not know any Dutch and they did not know English, but they are long gone now. That was the sad part of immigration, that they did not have any uncles and aunts around. I had a brother and his wife living in New Jersey and a brother in the Netherlands, so they did not see him at all, only a few times. My husband has eight sisters, or had eight sisters, so they a lot of uncles and aunts there and cousins, but they do not know them at all. That is a thing we did not think through when we went to America, which is really a shame that they do not know their family as well as they should have.

SK: Did you do things at home to help them. . .

AM: Oh, yes, we showed them pictures, but it does not mean much to kids. Up to the 1960's or 1970's, people did not travel that much, that really came later on once we were established here and had some money. We would go back to the Netherlands and the people from the Netherlands would come here. In the 1950's and early 1960's, there was no money to do this. It is getting so much easier to travel and communicate.

SK: You came over to the Holland area because you had a brother in the area, correct?

AM: No, he lived in New Jersey. My uncle and aunt lived in Holland and they found a neighbor to sponsor us, and I had an uncle and aunt in New Jersey and they sponsored my mom

and my dad.

SK: Did they have any children?

AM: No. My youngest brother was twenty-three, when they came here.

SK: How do you think your children's lives would have been different if they would have grown up in the Netherlands?

AM: I do not know. I think they would have been the same kids and they would have done the same things that they really do here. You cannot change a person by the way they live. If they live in the Netherlands or if they live here, they are going to be the same person, so I figure they would have had the same ambitions if they would have been there or here.

SK: In what ways was the religious life in the Netherlands similar to the religious life in Holland?

AM: We went to church twice on Sunday's there and we go twice on Sunday's here, so with those concerns it is very similar.

SK: The Church style was similar?

AM: Yes, about the same. The only thing in the Netherlands we never had a choir singing in Church on Sunday. Here they have all Church choirs, by us they have more choirs from people of the Church but they are not a Church choir. They are separate choirs, we pay dues to buy our music and needs. Here you go to Church to sing in the Church and you get your music and you get your organist, but in the Netherlands we practiced on Thursday nights from 8-10pm. We had our own organist and we had our own director that we paid out of our dues. We bought our own music. We only sang in Church once a year, but not on Sunday, it was during the week.

SK: What did you practice for? Or what did you perform?

AM: We performed once a year in Church. Once a year all the choirs out of our county would go to a certain place and compete with each other. It was in a big open field and we would all stand there, choir by choir, and perform. They had people that would rate us, so that is why we really sang: for our own enjoyment and to show people once a year how good or bad we were. There were never Church choirs, though.

SK: Was this a festival you went to?

AM: It was some type of festival.

SK: Did it fall on some holiday?

AM: It was usually on Easter and Pentecost, but in the Netherlands, we have a second day of Easter on Monday. They always have Easter on Sunday and then Easter Monday is a free day for all of the Netherlands. That was too early in the year, so on Pentecost, a Sunday, on Monday we had another holiday for the whole country. Pentecost is a religious holiday, but everybody had off the second day of Pentecost, which was on a Monday, and quite often we did this on those half days. We called it a "half Sunday." We even used to have Church on Easter Monday Morning. With Christmas, it's the same thing. We have Christmas day, and then December 26 is half of Christmas day and everybody was off. We used to have Church on that second Christmas Day, but they do not have that anymore. They stopped that

because the minister had to preach three times then, so the ministers got tired, but they still have this half-day of a whole free day.

SK: Were there other religious traditions of holidays that you noticed were different when you came here?

AM: Thanksgiving Day. That's sure different. I never saw a Turkey in my life until I came here. They probably had them, but I never saw one. We have Thanksgiving's Day in the beginning of or the last of October, but it is really just for the farmers after the crops are in. Here, they have Thanksgiving something like that, but they have the whole day off. It is a holiday here, and in the Netherlands it is not. We just enjoyed having a holiday without all the trimmings and the turkey.

SK: Were there other holidays or festivals that you missed here?

AM: No, not really.

SK: Did you continue most of the traditions that you had brought from the Netherlands?

AM: We used to, but slowly on you get along. I've never made a turkey yet, though (laughter). We had a Turkey last year, but I did not cook it, my daughter and granddaughter and her friend helped me here.

SK: Did you regret not being able to keep up the traditions as much, especially as your children got older?

AM: Yes, Christmas was different. Christmas was Christmas to us, and December 5 was Santa Claus' Birthday in the Netherlands, and he would come at night and on December 6 there would be the presents by the fireplace. Quite often we would do it on December 5 at night and my dad would hide the presents. We had to find them, but that was Santa Claus and his birthday was really the sixth, but we did it the night before. Christmas was Christmas, though. There were no festivals or anything. I think that Christmas is being pushed away because of all the presents. We really would like to have it back to December fifth or sixth.

SK: Did you keep that up with you children?

AM: At first, but not anymore. They would talk to their friends, especially when they were small, and they would ask each other what they got for Christmas. The children would forget that they got it before. That is one thing that struck me, that Christmas was so pushed away by presents.

SK: Do your children try to continue any of the traditions with their grandchildren?

AM: No, they do it the American way.

SK: Can you talk a little bit about the ways your life has been changes because of your decision to come to America?

AM: (Pausing for though) I never really thought about my life as changed. I came here with my husband and we just picked up where we left off. In a way, I was not glad I was here, but just really happy we were together as a family; we did not have that even though we were married for about three years. We did not have a family life together. So, with those concerns for me, this is really where my family life began, with my own family. I cannot really compare.

SK: Have you been happy here?

AM: Overall, yes.

SK: Would you make the same decision again?

AM: I do not know. We've often asked ourselves that. We have been happy here. We have really made, I'm not rich, but I came with nothing. Well, we came with nothing, but by the time we needed all our big and little stuff, we did not have a penny left, so we really had to start from scratch. We have really made a good living here. I can do what I want, but would I do it again? I don't think so, because I think I deprived my kids of from having cousins and uncles and aunts. When you are young you do not think about that, but I think no. I really think my kids were kind of hurt by not having family around. Although I do not think they will notice this, but for my feeling I think it is so important to have family. We only have two children, so they never really had brothers and sisters, which wasn't our fault either, but I really think we deprived them from having contact with uncles and aunts and cousins.

SK: How do you think that would have changed if they did have family around?

AM: I think they would have been happier; I really think they would have been happier.

SK: Were there times when they were unhappy here?

AM: No, I cannot say they were unhappy here because they did not know the Netherlands. Faith was only a year and a half and George was born here in 1955, so they did not miss this. We took them along in 1967 and they had such a great time with their cousins. At that time already we started thinking that it was too bad that we had to go back. Not that I did not want to live here, but for them. We did not really give it a thought to go back. I would not do it again, but America has been very good to us, so we cannot complain either. See, you are always pulled to two sides and you will always keep that. Here, now I just came back from the Netherlands and then I think it would be nice, I do not have to sit by my family all the time. So often they talked about the sisters going away together and having a great time. Then I think, here I set alone, I do not have sisters, only one sister in law that I never see. No, I would not do it again, that is it.

SK: I do not have anymore planned questions for you, but is there anything else you would like to talk about?

AM: I do not know, what do you want to know? (laughs)

SK: I find the life in the Netherlands so fascinating.

AM: Yes, it is a nice country. When we left, there were hardly any cars. Where we grew up, the doctor had a car, and the veterinarian had a car. Some people would have garages and they would rent out cars. My dad, every so often, would rent a car and we would go a day to our family who lived in another province. If it was a half Sunday, like the day after Easter, or so, we would go to my grandpa and grandma's. My dad would rent a car so we did not have to go sixty miles on a bike, which was much to far for one day.

So then we would go see my grandpa and grandma and my uncle and aunt. Other than that, nobody had a car. This was of course when we grew up, but then after the war there were some more cars. Normal or regular people did not have cars. Now, everybody has a car; it is really so changed in the Netherlands. When I come back I think about the changes and how they drive like maniacs, but here in America, on the whole, they drive pretty decently. Then I think that is not a way to live, with all the cars and all the bikes. It is so crowded there, and then I think this is a good country. This country has been good for us (pause) and we have been good for the country. We do not evade taxes or steal or rob or whatever, so I think we have a pretty good trade off. We try to obey the law, but of course, you are brought up like that anyways.

SK: Well, if that is everything. . .

AM: Yes, but if you think about anything else later please give me a call, and maybe I'll think of something I have forgotten to tell you.

SK: Well, thank you very much.

AM: Oh, you are welcome.