

BETTY WESSELS

THE NETHERLANDS/CANADA

WORLD WAR II

Interviewed by

Renia Perel

&

Reva Hollander

(October 10, 1991)

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INTERVIEWEE: Betty Wessels (W)

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INTERVIEWERS: Renia Perel (P), & Reva Hollander (H)

P: Hello, Betty.

W: Hi.

P: Good to see you.

W: I'm glad to make it today.

P: Thank you for coming down. I appreciate the interview.

W: My pleasure. My pleasure.

P: Today is October 10th and it's two p.m. and we are interviewing Betty Wessels (née Kleermaker). Kleermaker is the English pronunciation. We have already interviewed her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Kleermaker, and now we'd like to interview the daughter, the little infant survivor of the Holocaust. Please tell us where were you born, Betty.

W: I was born in Amsterdam in The Netherlands on August the 24th in 1943.

P: That was during the [German] occupation?

W: Yes it was, yes.

P: During the war?

W: Yes, it was right in the middle of the war, yeah. There were no Jews allowed in Amsterdam anymore at that time.

P: So how, where were you born...in what place?...if Jews were not allowed in Amsterdam. Did your parents tell you what room you were born in? Were you born in a hospital?

W: No, no certainly not because as I said there were no Jews

allowed anymore, so my father was wandering around in Amsterdam and he met a cousin and she said, "What are you doing still here? I thought you were already, you left already [from] Amsterdam." So he said at that point, "Well, you know we are desperate because my wife she's very, very pregnant and she can deliver [at] any moment now and we don't know where and when and we don't know any doctor; we don't anything." They were quite desperate, so she said, don't worry I know a family and they came from one of the South American countries and the country was still free; they had something with Hitler that the Jews who were from that country, they could still wander around. And they had an apartment in Amsterdam. So my parents went over there and there they had their first warm meal after so many days and they made sure that they had an apartment what was already made 'Juden frei' they called it. The Jews were already taken out of the whole neighbourhood and so my parents could sleep there.

P: Free of Jews.

W: Free of Jews. Ya, that's right. And there was also a doctor who took care of it and I think I was born two days after that and ah, on [in] an attic there.

P: So this family was a Jewish family from South America and this family, the South American family had permission to remain in Amsterdam...

W: Absolutely.

P: And because of the agreement between that South American country and the Nazi regime; and so your parents were truly lucky to find such a family.

W: Yes, yes.

P: What was the name of that family, do you know? Did they tell you?

W: I know the name and we talked to them just a couple of months ago when we were in the [United] States because they live close to the Niagara Falls...I can't think of it right now. I mean I know the name, but I just can't recall. Maybe it comes in later. It's just blank now.

P: That's fine. We'll get that name...leave a blank please for the name. And ah, and then after your birth, [then] what happened? Were you told that story?

W: Yes, yes. I was kind of yellow [jaundiced] so I couldn't leave right away because my dad had already made arrangements with the Underground people that I would leave first and then my mum and then my dad as the last one of our little family. And, but because I was yellow the doctor thought it was better if..., and I had an infection in my eyes so I needed some drops so when that was all finished after twelve days, the twelfth day I was brought away...a girl, I think she was nineteen years old from the Underground, and she brought me to my foster parents. She brought me to a village, the name is Renkum, in Gelderland. And this is close to Germany, it borders Germany, the province Gelderland. And she [girl from the Underground] came there and she was going to bring me to a family, but that family was already, the house was filled with people, the Jewish people and there were also I think boys who refused to go to Germany to work there. So, she didn't know what to do so they said to go to the neighbours opposite the house and those were going to be my foster

parents. They had one son and I think he was at that point he was around his twenties, going to get married, but because of the war he didn't get married and uh, she had a girl, a baby girl...

P: Who is she? Your future foster mother?

W: My future foster mother and the baby girl died of "Dypttheritis" [likely Dypttherial] when she was three years old so this was all like fifteen years before the war, but she always wanted to have a baby girl and she couldn't get pregnant anymore. So there...the Underground girl came with me in her arms and my foster mother fell in love with me right away because she always wanted to have a baby girl and there was her baby girl! And I think [that] my foster father had some doubts in the beginning because it was really risky and was really dangerous and he thought, he saw all the facts she didn't see the facts, she only saw the baby girl that was the girl she always wanted. But they kept me and they told everybody that I was from a family from Rotterdam because Rotterdam was bombed; it was the harbour from Holland and that was bombed and the mother was...I think the mother they told everybody the mother died when she was delivering me and the father was sent to Germany to work in one of the plants, so there I was and I was very blond and blue eyed so I didn't look really Jewish and that was the baby she took care of and she spoiled me rotten. And ah, my foster brother...

P: He was twenty years old...

W: He was twenty years old and he really, he loved me like a real brother, maybe more, I mean there is a real connection between us. But ah, the girl he was engaged [to] with at that time

who became his wife later, she was here and there a little bit jealous of me because my foster mother did literally everything for me. She went to work at a farmer just to get milk and food for me and she did everything for me. My clothes were there everything, she sewed everything for me. And she forgot here and there to do some things for her son like ironing his shirts or little things like that and his fiancé was a little bit ah, well, she thought, you know, this was just a kid to take care of while her real son is the real blood. But ah, she really, she really, they both spoiled me. My foster father, I could never do even after the war whenever I went there as long as he lived, I could never do anything wrong. And he really, they, I was really loved there, I mean they spoiled me always...and I think when I was about maybe nine - ten months old, we had to evacuate Renkum because it was too close to Germany and it was the V-1's and the V-2's were sent from Germany hoping to try [to hit] England [with] those bombs...

P: Ah...

W: It was the 'V' from...the V-1 and later the V-2's and in the beginning they dropped too soon after the border so they were dropped on the village where I was living.

P: Ah...when you say 'V' for Victor one and 'V' for Victor two you mean the name of the bombs.

W: Yes, yes.

P: That would were being used...

W: Yes.

P: To bombard...

W: England.

P: England. You're talking about the German type of bombs that was used and how does this refer to what you just said about your evacuation?

W: Because in the beginning, a lot of mistakes were made and those bombs dropped right on our village.

P: Who made the mistakes?

W: The Germans.

P: Oh.

W: They were made to reach England. But sometimes, like in the beginning they made a few mistakes and they dropped over the border where I was living so the whole village had to evacuate.

P: And they actually ah, ah...there was actually ah, mistaken German bomb dropped on Renkum...

W: Oh yah, oh yes, oh yes, oh yes.

P: They damaged...

W: Oh yes, they damaged our house too. Because our house was ah, um, two houses under one roof. And half of it was bombed. There was nothing. There was just ruins. It was built up later.

P: So how did you, how did the whole family...

W: Village...

P: Survive. Yes.

W: We had just to evacuate. We were just...

P: Why were you not hit? What was it? You were away?

W: No, no, no. It was ya, we were already gone.

P: So the village was bombed or hit by mistake when you were absent.

W: Yes.

P: And who told you to evacuate?

W: The Germans.

P: I see.

W: Because we just all had to...

P: They knew that this must have been the passing route, is that it? The direction that...

W: Yes, yes, yes. But before I...

P: I'm assuming, I don't really know. Do you know? Did they talk about it?

W: Yes, well. They talked about it, but I mean everything I tell you is that I heard about it because either my parents or foster parents told me.

P: Of course.

W: And before, before we were, we moved from the village, the Germans came with tanks and cars and they went from one house to another house to see if there were Jewish people hidden there and they were taking away everything and my foster dad saw the truck coming and he saw a toy ah, um, a doll on top of the trucks and I didn't have any toys. So, when the Germans went in one house to look for Jews, he went on his belly and he, he went out of the house, he crawled out of the house and he waited till the Germans were in that house and he stole that doll for me. And I kept it all those years.

P: Do you still have the doll?

W: No. They never gave it to me because it belonged to the house. I had always there something to play with and they wanted to have it as a remembrance. And I never got it from them. But that's how much they loved me. I mean it was a dangerous thing to do. And then we went to another village



and we were...

P: You are talking now about the evacuation?

W: Yes.

P: O.K. Go ahead.

W: And in that province where I lived in Gelderland, the farmers they had like, it was like um, where I don't know what you would call it here. It was like uh, they called it their summer place. But it was not a summer place. They had a big farm. And because they were very busy in the summer, they didn't want to live in the farm because it was too much for the wife of the farmer to keep it clean and so they had built...like, like, maybe half a garage... or one car garage with just one door no, no windows and that's where they would live during the summer. They slept there, they cooked their meals and they were there and it was easy because everything was in one room. And that place was for us to live for the rest of the war...as the family. And uh, they always told me that I was smart. I was walking when I was ten or eleven months old, but I am not sure if that is correct because they were just so much in love with me that I was the most clever, [most] beautiful thing whatever was on this earth so I have to take it with a little bit of - a Dutch expression - a little bit of salt. I'm not sure if that is the correct thing. But ah,...

P: In English I think it is the saying to take it with a grain of salt.

W: Grain of salt. Yes, that's it. And it was also, there were German soldiers enquartered [stationed] there. They lived there too. Not in the same house, but in the same village

there was like, [there were] regiments of Germans and they had to live also in regiments and they were close by and there were a couple of Germans who became very fond of me because I remembered [reminded] them of their little baby and they came and brought me chocolate bars or whatever they had and of course, I was always told that the Germans were bad and only the American or English soldiers were good. And they told me, I assume that even when I was a baby of ten or eleven months old or twelve months old that I should never be friends with them and here they were and they were playing with me and I always said: "No, you're no good and bah, bah." And they loved it about me because I was the only one who was probably sincere to them. So. Well those are things I remember that my foster parents told me.

P: You, you, is that you're first, you actually remember this as a child.

W: No, no, no.

P: No. But your parents told you.

W: They told me. My foster parents told me. Yes, yes.

P: That you used to say bad ..... about them and they actually gave you chocolates.

W: Yeah. That's right. So uh, we stayed there till the end of the war and then after the war we went back to Renkum and they rebuilt our house.

P: Who is they?

W: My foster parents and I am assume the real owners of the house who lived next door and that's where I used to go on every holiday and whenever my parents...or for weekends and whenever. But I stayed there of course till my parents came

to claim me.

P: So, uh, uh, tell...it's just a wonderful heartwarming story about your foster parents it's just...

W: Yeah, yeah. My foster parents spoiled and adored and loved me and that's the only thing I can tell and I was very, very fond special on my foster father. He and me had a special thing. My foster mother loved me too but she was a little bit more honest and I was just a human being. And my foster father I was something sent by G-d out or something special. And we had a special bond and I've got the same bond with his son. I mean sometimes we don't see each other for years, but whenever I phone or whenever he sees me, he laughs. If I open my mouth, he laughs. Everything is funny what I say, everything is smart and they are much smarter than I am, but I've got that bond with him. It's something special.

P: Just wonderful. What is his name? What do you call him?

W: His first name [is] Jan.

P: Jan. J-A-N.

W: Yes. Yes.

P: How did you call your foster parents? How did you address them?

W: That was a problem in the beginning because I used to call them Momma and Papa. Because those people were my momma and papa. But when my parents came back after the war they were my momma and papa. And I had, they told me because I don't remember I was not yet two years old, but I used to say you're not my momma. My momma is over there. And then I pointed out...just in the middle of the air, my momma is over there. And my real momma was of course, well she was so happy that

she had her baby, her infant back that she said, "No, I'm your momma, I'm your momma." And I would say, "No you are not my momma." But I think it took only maybe a couple of months and then I, I mean I started saying [to] her 'momma'. But I said for a long time to my real dad, "You're Papa Mauche. My dad's name is Maurice, but in Holland, it was Mauritz, and the short name was Mau. So it was like little Mau; I made it Mauche. So, they told me that when my foster brother got married in '46, I was still using Papa Mauche. And I was sitting in the church. I was the bridesmaid and because the trains didn't run very good [well] at that point...still they didn't...

P: What year was that?

W: '46. The beginning of '46. And my dad arrived a little bit late in church and dead quiet and I said in the middle, "Oh, there's my Papa Mauche!!" Ha, ha! So, but I, I, couldn't say to two people, "Momma and Papa," so there had to be something different. But I did...my mum said it wasn't good to say "aunt and uncle" because those people were closer than an aunt and uncle. So, um, I think I found a solution because where my foster parents lived it was like a dialect the children called their mother "Moeke." So I called her "Moeke" and I called my dad "Vader."

P: The word, "father" as in English, "father."

W: Yes. Though you write it different. But, it is the same thing. You would write it, V-A-D-E-R. But for the rest of their lives I called them, "Moeke" and "Vader."

P: That's very moving.

W: I mean that's why I don't like to go to Holocaust meetings because all those people have such sad stories and I've got

such a happy story. I think I am the only one, I mean all my friends in Holland, they all missed a mother or a father or both. And I was the only one who was so lucky to have both parents.

P: Actually, two sets of parents.

W: That's right.

P: So, could you tell us what religion were these foster parents, these wonderful people.

W: They were Christian. And they...I don't know if you've got it here...Reformed.

P: Well, say it in the way that they would say it. And how do you spell that?

W: Oh, gosh. H-E-R-F-O-R-M-E-D. It's Christian; it's not Catholic.

P: It's Reform, maybe.

W: Yeah, yeah.

P: Maybe it's like Anglican or Protestant, maybe. [In fact, the "Dutch Reformed Church."]

W: I guess. I'm not sure, but I guess something like that. Yes. But my foster mother never, ever went to church. And my foster father went on Sunday to church. And I loved to go with him...to church. And nobody, even his later on, I'm talking about when he had his grandchildren, nobody liked to go to church with him because we were not allowed to open our mouths to talk. And I was a little blabbermouth, that's the expression? And I couldn't keep my mouth shut. And I was the only one who was allowed to talk. I mean he just couldn't have anything wrong for me, right? I mean, so he always let me go on and on and on. And his grandchildren I can't

understand that they never hated me, because they were not allowed to do or to talk in church or to do everything in their house, while I was allowed to do anything and everything. So I liked to go with him because I always got peppermints; I remember when I went to church on Sunday. Um, he always had when he walked back from church to the house with neighbours and family and friends, I was always his centre. I was the middle of his life. So that's, I think that's what I loved to be the centre of the party and he always allowed...he pushed me to do...to be that.

P: That's ah, ah a most remarkable...

W: Yeah, I think so.

P: ...human being.

W: Yes, they're special people; they were special people.

P: Now, maybe you can tell us a little bit [about] what is your first recall of when you went to live with your natural parents.

How old were you then, and do you remember that time?

Or just, you can tell us when you recall...that you realized that you had these two sets of parents?

W: No, I think if I really look back it's about maybe three and a half to four years that I can remember and for me it was always something natural that I had two sets of parents, because I mean I can't remember of course that I didn't have them and for me it was a natural thing: two sets of parents. I was during the year with my natural parents and every holiday, I went to spend with my foster parents. And of course, my parents went often during a weekend together with me to my foster parents. But they always sent me every

holiday by myself. Or they, when I was a little girl they brought me there and left me there for one or two or three weeks and when I was older my mother used to put me on a train and my foster mother was at the end of the ride in the station, to pick me up. So for me, it was a natural thing. I had two sets of parents. And for me there was nothing strange with having two sets of parents because you know, like my friends in Amsterdam, they all had foster parents.

P: Survivors, like yourself.....

W: Yeah.

P: Jewish children.

W: Yeah, well you know, if they weren't survivors they were too little, too young for me. My friends were my age or a little bit older, or a little bit younger, but all in my age and they all had foster parents.

P: Two sets of parents.

W: Yeah, it was for us, I mean, I mean you're asking this now and I'm just thinking, yeah, I had two sets of parents. I never, ever doubted the fact because we all had two sets of...we all had foster parents. For us it was a natural thing. But I, I think I passed one time an exam because of it, because I was doing English from [in] high school and in ah, I was saying something about foster brother and the examiner [examiner] had never heard the word "foster brother." So, I explained to him and he thought it was so fantastic that I knew a word he didn't know. I got a big, very good mark for English. So, it even saved my...well, it didn't, well, it literally saved my life, but it even saved my English [grades] at that time.

P: Ha, ha, ha. So, um, speaking of your exams, maybe you could

tell us about your education now.

W: I just had high school. Just elementary school and high school and I was seventeen when I came out of high school and in Holland it's tougher, not tougher, you have to be real smart to go to university. And it's not like here that every kid can go to a college, if it is a good college or a little bit not so good college or university, in Holland you go to university if you really want to study and really want to become a lawyer, a doctor, etcetera. So, I was definitely not as smart as my foster parents thought I was, so I finished after high school. But I wanted to learn languages so I went to London, England to learn some English. And I stayed there for nine or ten months and then I got homesick and then I went back home and I never went to France to learn French or to Switzerland to learn German. I stopped at that part and I just got jobs.

P: Uh, huh, so what did you uh, uh, what kind of jobs.

W: I was a buyer's assistant, from a store, a department store like Woodward's and Eaton's. And I just became a buyer's assistant and I had a ball there because there was like, probably like twenty-five to thirty buyers and they all had assistants and we were all in one...about one age and it was a very, very good time to be a buyer's assistant there because we always covered for each other and we had a...we went out to lunches together and it was the time I got engaged and met my future husband and we were all going out together. It was a very nice time of my...part of my life.

P: Well, how did you meet your husband and where and how? Now that you mentioned your engagement.



W: Well, my...I, we, we, used to go out on Saturday night and first we went to...um...

P: What do you mean?

W: A Jewish crowd, I mean, we would meet each other...all the...well the group, it was a totally Jewish group for coffee...the place was called 'American' and everybody would meet each other there. I don't know anything like that here in Vancouver. But it was a big place, like a big restaurant. And you could have dinner there too, but everybody would meet each other for coffee there and starting from there we would all go to a dancing [place] in the neighbourhood and that's how I met my husband. He was Jewish; he was living in the United States at that time, but um...he had a problem. He got sick, he thought he had something with his heart which was totally untrue, but he thought, "Oh, I'm living in the States and I never saw anything in my life...I go back to Europe." And he went back for half a year to travel through Europe. And the last two months he spent in Amsterdam and he became involved in the same Jewish crowd I was always in and he also went to the place where we had coffee and he went with our whole group to the dancing and that's where I really saw him for the first time. And it was love from the first time we saw each other. I mean, if you believe anything like that, it happens. I saw him, I fell in love, he saw me and I was really totally in love and I couldn't see anything; I didn't think any farther [further] I was in love and that was it. But he thought, "She comes out...", he met my parents the next day and he...

P: The next day?

W: Yeah, we had not that much time because he was going back in six weeks to the United States, remember? So, I mean, he was living in the United States, in Michigan, Grand Rapids. And he picked me up and I always brought everybody home because my father was really strict. He had to see who I was dating. So, I was sleeping that night at a girlfriend's house. So, he brought me back to my girlfriend who was also in the group so, he brought us back to the girlfriend's place where she was living...and he...

[End of Track 1.]

INTERVIEWEE: Betty Wessels (W)

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(continued from Tape 1, Track 1)

W: So, I had to always to bring everybody home so I invited him in and he talked with my parents and then we went out and he told me later, that he thought, "Well, she comes out of a pretty neat Jewish family, and if the girl grows up like her mother I can't go wrong." But like I said I was just in love so we dated...but then in the beginning I thought, "Well, I'm only having a good time for six weeks and then he goes back and I might never see him again." But we were so much in love that we thought well, we get engaged and he went back to the [United] States for one more year to make some money because he wanted to own his own business. So, he went back to Grand Rapids, Michigan for one year and we wrote each other every single day. I still got two sets of three letters, that's three-hundred and sixty-five [365] letters, all kinds of tapes and he came back and we waited one and a half more years and we got married.

P: In Am...

W: In Amsterdam, oh sure, oh sure.

P: Now tell us a little bit of the background of your husband. Where was he born?

W: He was also born in Amsterdam. And his family was totally intact after the war because one of his family members got smart and had enough money to get the certain stamps [proving]

that his family was not Jewish. And so they survived the whole war...the whole family intact. They never were sent away. They never had to go to foster parents like the rest of us. They just survived the whole war.

P: And no one questioned them...about their Jewish...

W: No, they had papers that they were not Jewish. They could have papers that one of their ancestors was not Jewish so they were not Jewish and I don't know how it all went, but they survived on false papers.

P: So, they had documents to prove that they were Aryan... non-Jews.

W: That's right. That's right. And my husband was the only son and both of his parents are dead now. And we don't have any contact with the rest of the family.

P: So, what is his first name?

W: Bernard.

P: Bernard.

W: Yes.

P: And is this now his real name: Wessels, your married name?

W: Yes. Yes.

P: That's how it was spelled.

W: Yes.

P: How is it pronounced in Dutch?

W: Vessels. It's more like with a 'V' here. Yes.

P: So, ah, describe the wedding. What kind of a wedding was it? It was obviously a Jewish wedding, I suppose.

W: Oh sure, oh sure.

P: What synagogue and ah...?

W: Um, I was, um,...in Holland you married twice. You married

for the government on a Friday, ...the Jewish people like to do it on a Friday and the 'hoppa' [Khupa] on a Sunday.

P: What is 'hoppa'?

W: The Jewish wedding is the 'hoppa' [Khupa]. And mine was...I wanted to have it [on] Sunday morning, but there was another Khupa before me so we had to compromise and those were people my parents used to know and so we compromised. She was first. She went around eleven o'clock and I went an hour and a half later - half past twelve, and we had a big reception afterwards and, um, at night we had a dinner. But it's not as grand and it's not as big as Jewish ceremonies here because we didn't have any...or I mean I don't have any relatives. I don't have any uncles and aunts and cousins and nieces and nephews because those people were all taken away. So we had my parents and my own friends which is I mean like, I think we had about two hundred [200] people at the reception and about if I remember well forty [40] people at the dinner. And in Holland you don't have showers or like rehearsal dinners and stuff like that. It looks like plain if you compare it with weddings in Canada and United States. But that's the way in Holland you do it.

P: Um, so the 'Khupa' that's the Hebrew word. Riva, could you elaborate what it means.

R: Well, it actually means the wedding canopy.

W: Yes.

R: So, it's the Jewish ceremony that takes place under the canopy.

P: Thank you. Alright, so the rabbi, do you remember the rabbi's name?

- W: Oh yes. Oh sure, of course. He was the...
- P: What year was it?
- W: 1965. June the 18th on the Friday I had my...what you would call government...ah...
- R: Legal. [Civil]
- W: Yeah? ...wedding, and [on] the 20th I had the 'Khupa.' [i.e. Jewish wedding ceremony] And it was the head rabbi of Amsterdam and why I had to have the head rabbi...as a little girl, I always looked up to him. He was so gorgeous, he was a real...if you closed your eyes and you would think how a rabbi looks that's the way how he looked. He was tall, he was very dark, he had a gorgeous black beard, and he had something around him what a rabbi should have. He looked like a rabbi and he was a rabbi. And the name was Schuster. Like S-C-H-U-S-T-E-R. And he still lives in Israel. And my father who was an accountant had a customer, a Jewish customer in Amsterdam, who was a relative of Rabbi Schuster. And because normally he wouldn't do weddings because you know his, his...the normal, the general, regular rabbis do weddings. And because as a special request he did my wedding.
- P: So, there is another special thing in your like.
- W: Absolutely. Yeah.
- P: That's wonderful. So, do you have children?
- W: Oh, I've got two super boys. They're wonderful kids. I was three years married, when Leslie the first one was born on June the 15th, in 1968 and he was so gorgeous, he was such I mean, a beautiful baby. And two and a half years later, Jeffrey, on January the 25th, 1971, the second one was born. And as beautiful as the first one was, as ugly was the second

one. (laughing) He hates it when I tell him. But he grew up, he's got a wonderful personality and he's very much outgoing and they're both very good kids. But the first one was gorgeous, beautiful, big black curly hair, beautiful eyelashes, a little bit tanned with beautiful red cheeks. And the second one was born. He was bald, he was over ten lbs., he was so fat, he was really I mean, he was an ugly baby, but I love him the same way. They're both very good kids.

P: (laughing) It's just wonderful to hear you talk. And when he was ten lbs. that's quite a handful. (giggle)

W: Ah, he was born in fifteen minutes. I came in the hospital just in time. I mean, he's still like that, he's very fast.

P: Strong, too.

W: Yeah, they're both strong. Yeah. My other one was, well say ten lbs. those are the Dutch ten lbs. so it would be here ten percent extra - it's eleven lbs. The other one was seven and a half Dutch lbs. would be over eight lbs. of your lbs.

P: Oh dear, dear.

W: Very easy deliveries, no problem at all.

P: And that's it. No more.

W: No more. No. No more.

P: Uh huh. So they were both born in Amsterdam?

W: Yes.

P: In a hospital?

W: Yes. Yes. Yes. Both in a hospital. Yeah.

P: So, were your foster parents alive still then?

W: Um, my foster father was already very sick when I had my first baby. But, he had cancer and when Leslie was about two months old, I went with Leslie and my mother to visit my foster

parents and we stayed there for one week to ten days. So, he saw that baby. And um...I was pregnant with the second one, when he...I was just pregnant I think I was just in my first month. I think I was just in the beginning of my pregnancy, when he died. And I...

P: So he knew that you were expecting another one.

W: I don't think he realized it. No, he was very, very, sick. No, no, no, no. I don't think so. And my foster mother, she died half a year before we emigrated and I never told her that I was going to move. Because I, when we were going to move, I had a hard time telling...you know, I mean she was like my mother so I had a hard time telling her. And then I didn't have to tell her because she passed away a half a year before we moved.

P: To Canada?

W: To Canada, yes. . Yeah.

P: Are your children going to school here and how do they feel about the move? I mean, how old were they when you moved?

W: My younger son was eight years old. He was going to be nine the next month. And my oldest one was twelve years old when we moved. And we moved because I thought this was the perfect time to move because they were still small enough to go with me or [go] with our family and they were big enough to realize what was happening. And they...

P: Excuse me. Just what was happening? I guess you're going to just tell us.

W: Yeah, the move. Because you know, the reason we moved was the whole Holocaust, because I had nightmares, because what my mum did, she gave me to Underground people when I was twelve years



old...

P: Twelve days.

W: Twelve days, excuse me twelve days old. And it didn't bother me till I had my own children. And then I thought, what would happen if there was another war or another Holocaust coming. And I mean, I always thought I could never give my babies away. You know, you never know if you're able to do it or what your doing what your....., but it bothered me very much that I would have to give my babies to Underground or to foster parents. And would I ever see that. And I, I, I, just couldn't live with that anymore. So, I was going to immigrate to the United States. But my parents didn't want to go to the United States. And I say my parents don't want to go because I could never move without my parents. We were like one family, my parents...we were living in different houses, but we were like one family. My husband and my two sons and my parents, and I couldn't do the move without either one of them. And my parents didn't want to go to the United States so I thought I'm going to Australia. And I went already to meetings, but Australia didn't appeal to me. It was like the end of the world and was too...it didn't appeal to me. So, I met people. My parents were in Israel at that time and my husband and myself we went to a play and I met people there whom my husband knew very well and I just knew them and they said "Oh, how are you? I haven't seen you in years," and they said, "Well, you're lucky to see me [us] now because we're emigrating to Canada." And I was speechless. I said, "Where in Canada?", because Canada never came up in my mind as a place to immigrate. So they said, "Well, we're going to

Vancouver." And I said, "Vancouver? Where is Vancouver?" I mean you know about Winnipeg and Toronto and Halifax and Ottawa, Montreal, but Vancouver, where's Vancouver? And he said, "Well to make it easy it's a little bit higher up than uh, San Francisco." And then the bell rang so we had to go to the play and I said to my husband that's the play, that's the place I want to go. I just made up my mind like that. (snaps her fingers)

P: To whom did you say it?

W: To my husband.

P: Oh, to your husband.

W: So, we saw those friends in the interval again and we had coffee. And I said, "Can I please come and talk with you because I want to know everything you know about Vancouver?" And he said, "Sure." So, the next day, on a Monday, we went to a kind of immigration office and we found out whatever you have to do if you're really serious to immigrate and we filled in all the papers and we filled in for my parents, too. But, we never sent them away because I had to wait till my parents came back from Israel. And then I didn't dare to tell them. We had a store at that time and my mother used to work used to help us out in the store and she worked in the store.

P: The store was yours and your husband's business?

W: Yes. Yes.

P: And what kind of business was it?

W: 'Schmatas'...ladies' fashion.

P: Ah, thank you.

W: You're welcome. And on the Monday, afternoon, my husband was most of the time closed, but sometimes he went to buy stuff

and my mum went with him and they unpacked in the store. And while they were unpacking on a Monday afternoon, he said, "Well, Ma, I think uh, we're going to ah, you can pack your suitcases, we are going to emigrate. What do you think about Canada?" And my mum said, "Canada, what about it?" So she had like about a dozen or fourteen questions and my husband wrote them all down and he said, "Well, hold it, I'm going to phone right away the embassy or consulate," I don't recall what it was in Amsterdam, "and we'll ask all those questions." So that's what they did and then they phoned me and my mum said, "Start packing your suitcases 'kiddo' because we're going to Canada." This is all a joke of course, so I said, "What, oh you have dinner at my house tonight and we can talk about it." So they came over for dinner and we started talking about it, the four of us, after I put the children in bed. And we decided that we would ask visas and we would continue all the papers and everything, but if one of the six, like my parents, my husband, the children and myself would be refused for one or another reason, none of us would go. If we all got visas, we would discuss it later. Well, of course we discussed it day and night, but we didn't tell any of our friends and [or] anybody else because it was a hard time to make up your [our] mind. Not for me, because I wanted to get out of Europe, no matter what. But, my husband had a very good business and my mother didn't speak any English. So, we were going into stages. This was like January, I'm talking about January 1980 when we started to make all the arrangement. So we filled in all the papers and we sent them away. Then we thought it would be a good idea if one of us

would go to have a look what Vancouver was like. I mean you cannot go on what people tell you. So we made up our mind that the best persons to go were my husband because he had to make...to start a living again and my father because my father was the one who had doubts about going to immigrate period. My mother would go any place I was going, I mean no doubt about that. So they went for three weeks in March...

P: Of 1980.

W: 1980. And my momma and I stayed home and we went to the business and they would phone us each Friday night. But my husband loved everything about the United States. He had lived there for seven years and everything was better what came out of the United States. So I mean, we thought well, he would love Canada, because we assumed Canada was like the United States and my father would hate everything because he didn't want to move and he thought it would be difficult. So the first Friday night we had the phone call. It was exactly the opposite. My father loved everything from Canada and Vancouver and my husband hated everything...because there was absolutely nothing like Grand Rapids. Grand Rapids is a village, it's a town, but I mean, if you would compare it, it's like a village...

P: To Vancouver.

W: To Vancouver. And there is between the houses, ten times more space as in Vancouver or Richmond, where we live. So, and it rains. And in Grand Rapids, it never rains. It's either thirty degrees below, freezing, snowing or it's hot and summer. So ah, the second week, my father still loved it; my husband well, he didn't hate it, he didn't like it and [but

by] the third week he thought it was quite a nice place and my father still loved it. So, they came back and we got back the papers then you [we] have to go to the doctor to get his approval that all the six of us were healthy and we got all the papers back and we could go if we still wanted to, to the United St...to Canada. So then we talked and talked and talked and talked, and we made a decision that we would sell everything and move to Canada and that's what we did. And I never, ever regretted it.

P: So, did you buy your house before you came to Canada?

W: No. No, no, no, no. We came to Canada and we lived for three months in Tsawwassen in the Tsawwassen Inn [a motel]. And a lot of people said, "Ugh, nebbish, they are living in a motel, but my mum and I we loved it because we had nothing to do there. I mean, we didn't have to clean; we didn't have to cook and everything was so clean here and I mean, we had a ball for three months and then we put the children in school in Richmond, because we figured out we were going to live there. Well, we moved, I should say December the 19th, so we didn't put the children into school till the end of the Christmas holiday which was January the 6th or the 7th...

P: '81?

W: '81. And we travelled around. We went to North Van., West Van., Coquitlam, Vancouver, North Vancouver, South Vancouver, East Vancouver, West [-side] Vancouver, Tsawwassen; we went to Surrey, we went Richmond, we went all over and we decided we were going to live in Richmond. Why Richmond?...

P: You left out Delta and Burnaby... (laughing) I'm joking.

W: I think, I think we went all over the place. But Tsawwassen

was too far, we didn't want...and Richmond were where a lot of young Jewish families lived. And that's why we chose Richmond. So, the children went to school and we were very optimistic, happy family so the children never had any problems in the school. They just went to school like that and it was um, we never had any problems.

P: So, you, you bought your residence where you are now living?

W: Yes, yes, yes. And we decided that it would be better if my parents lived for the first year with us. Because my mother didn't speak any English, and we didn't know anybody and as we came the six of us and we were already very close, so we decided for the first year it would be better for all of us if we would live together. But after almost eleven years we are still living together. We still love each other. We even go together on holidays and there is no problem there whatsoever.

P: You mean, that your parents are living with you?

W: Yes.

P: The entire family, your father and mother...

W: And my two sons and my husband and myself. And we love each other very much and we are a very happy family.

P: This is wonderful. Do you attribute this to the way you were brought up and...

W: Absolutely, absolutely. I mean, there is a special bond between my parents and especially between my mother and me. I mean, my father is a very quiet, good natured man. And I mean, my mother I think I, the talking and the aliveness, I've got from my mother and I mean, if people meet us for the first time they'll say, "Your mother, no. It must be your sister." We are more like friends, than like mother and daughter. And

my kids got used to the way that they've got like me...two sets of parents. Mainly...because I mean, they're the grandparents and they're entitled to spoil my kids because they never had me as a baby so I let my mum spoil my babies when they were babies because she never had me and...I'm her only one and that's, I mean that's okay.

P: So, you have made one step ahead, you have two children now. Mum had just one...just you. Mum and Dad...

W: Yes. That's right, yes. And my husband just fitted in and he loves my parents as much as I do and I mean we get along very well. They've got their own side of the house, I mean, we don't sit on each other's lap everyday and every second. They've got their own living room and their own bedroom and their own bathroom, but we have dinner together. And ah, but after dinner my mum and dad go to their room and watch T.V. there and I sit with my husband and then most of the time...we share everything like the household and the cooking and everything, but I'm the one who is responsible for the coffee so I make coffee at night and I'll bring two cups of coffee or two mugs of coffee with the cookies to their room and afterwards they get fruit. And that's...that's it. But everything's done in harmony. Nobody is the boss of every...anything; I mean, we all do everything together.

P: This is just a most admirable situation...

W: Yeah, I guess so. I'm used to it.

P: ...an example.

W: Yeah.

P: Do you think that you, you were talking about being spoiled or being loved...do you really mean, have you transmitted that to

your children?

W: Do I spoil my children? Sure. I guess we do.

P: Do you think you are?

W: Yeah, but I mean they're not spoiled brats, I mean they're very good. They're the best children anybody could wish for. I mean, they're very good kids. They were...but I guess I mean, I guess all Jewish kids are a little bit spoiled and of course they are spoiled because you want to give them...and it's not always good, but I mean, they grew up good so I mean, that's okay.

P: Did they have any Jewish education, or mainly public education?

W: Public education, but I sent um...they both had their Bar Mitzvah here. And we are members of the Schara Tzedek. Not that I am so religious, I'm not even Orthodox or not even keep kosher at home, but when I go to shul I want to go to a "real" shul and this is part of my tradition. So, that's why we're members of the Schara Tzedek and that's why I had both of my children had their Bar Mitzvah there.

P: And um,...what are your contacts with Holland today?

W: Well, I've got my friends and I've got my foster brother in the first place of course and his family. But, I'm still I mean not that his wife is any longer jealous of me, I'm still...I must say fonder of my foster brother than of her. But, they've got a wonderful family. They've got three sons and a daughter. Of course, they are grandparents by now. But, I love him as my brother and I mean, whenever I feel like it I take the phone and I call him.

P: And he does the same?



W: He calls not as regularly as I do. But I don't think of money probably, the way he does. I mean, I don't think money is everything in the world, not that he does think that money is everything in the world. But they are more like the real Dutch, they count their pennies more. And I think more of everyday is a day I should enjoy. And if I feel that today would make my life happy to call him, I would call him. Yeah.

P: And so, what are your...are you feeling more content or more secure now that you are here, in relation to your thoughts...because remember you said that you moved because of the Holocaust, so was this a fearful image...

W: Yes.

P: ...that you had of Europe? So how do you feel now that you've been here for more than ten years?

W: Well, you ask me content, or secure? The word is secure. I feel very much more secure here. I don't have nightmares anymore. And I feel happy here and I'm very glad I made the move. I should have done it ten years before. Because I would have had ten years less of nightmares. But um...it was very difficult for my mother who didn't speak any English and she was the one and my father too, of course...my father spoke English...but they,...like my mother needs other people and she was the one with ten thousand different friends in Holland. And that was very hard, I mean you have to realize that it's very hard for her. She likes to talk and she likes to go out shopping and lunches and going out for coffee...and she did all those in things in Holland with her friends. And that was very hard for her because, here it's hard for her to communicate, period. So, I mean, I can understand that what

she did, she did because of me and my family, but it's still...it was very tough for her. It still is hard for her. She's got friends, but it's still hard for her. And it was hard for my husband in a way because we had a good, very good store in Holland and to start a business again, is not an easy thing in this time of year and in this place. But um, it's, I mean those are not real problems so everything settled out and I'm glad that I made the move.

P: Well, I'm glad for you, too.....So, what are your plans for the future now? Are you involved in any way yourself socially and...

P: Oh sure. First of all I'm a Hadassah member; second of all I work as a volunteer for L'Chaim in the B.I. shul. I work also in [B.C.] Children's Hospital, but that is nothing to do with the Jews. But, I work in L'Chaim and I love to do it. I mean, there are a lot of people there who don't speak English only Yiddish and I don't speak Yiddish. But, they teach me and the first thing that [they] told me is that I've got a 'yiddisha kup.' [Yiddish, for a "Jewish Head."] And I use that expression in a...whenever I go there and I just...I love going there because they're like...I mean they're like real 'mensch' there and it's uh, it's, it's so nice because all they need really is an ear. I mean they're only lonely and they're only lonesome and all they want to do is talk to you...

P: Are they elderly people you are talking about?

W: Yes. Yes.

P: And they...are they impaired or are they still able to talk.

W: They are still able to talk and there are, there are some who

have difficulties with remembering or ah, with Alzheimer [Alzheimer's disease] or with Parkinson [Parkinson's disease] or can move badly. But, I mean, that's why they are there, and that's why I am there to help them. And ah, I think the whole thing, L'Chaim, is wonderful because those people are...it's, it's on Mondays and on Wednesdays. And I go on Wednesdays. And it's ah,...I love to go there. It's a little bit selfish...

(End of Track 1 side 2)

INTERVIEWEE: Betty Wessels (W)

DATE OF RECORDING: October 10, 1991

FILE NUMBER: #019-2

TRACK NUMBER: T2-S1

INTERVIEWERS: Renia Perel (P)

(continued from Tape 1, Side 2)

P: Betty, you were talking about the L'Chaim centre where you volunteer and you were telling us how much you enjoyed working there.

W: Oh, yeah. I...I really, really love it. I mean, I love to go there. It's really Jewish, it's the atmosphere, it's the people. I don't know what else to say, I love going there.

P: What kind of fulfilment do you feel when you work there?

W: I don't know what you mean by that.

P: Um,...is it fulfilment...you love to do it because you enjoy giving of yourself and helping others?

W: No, I don't see it like that. It's just the atmosphere what I love. And it's just the people I love, so...I don't consider that I give anything, it's just that I love helping the people of [by] going there.

P: Well, that's most selfless of you.

W: Yeah, but it's just me. It's just that I go to Children's Hospital once a week, too. I like that too. And ah, I mean I could never do it if I didn't like it. I mean I think that all volunteers are like that. I mean if you don't like to do volunteer work, you don't do it. So, you've got to pick out something what [that] you like and I always like to do something Jewish and something [with] children. So, this works out perfect for me. I go to Children's Hospital to

fulfil my side what I think I do with children and I go to L'Chaim because I love to be with the Jews. And especially those older Jews because they're funny and I, I love it to be there.

P: You are amazing. It looks like...

W: No, I don't think so...

P: ...the love that you have received when you were a child, has just penetrated you through and through. And now you are just giving it off.

W: I hope so. Well, I hope so. I mean, I, I, don't know how to say this. It's just what I like to do.

P: Well, that's wonderful. Canada, and the people that the people that you do it for, appreciate it, I'm sure.

W: Ah...

P: So, um...is there anything that you would like to say? Did you foster parents ever say to you about the Holocaust, when you were an adult...when you were growing up?

W: I don't think we ever really discussed it. Well, just that it was a real bad thing whatever happened. But, it brought me to them, and I mean, I was for them happiness even that there was a war. And, I don't think we further discussed it. It was just like something happy when I was there for them and for me. So, I don't think we ever really discussed the fact of Holocaust with them.

P: Did your parents ever bring it up...your natural parents?

W: Only that, well, you know, yeah, sometimes when its like in Holland, you remember the Holocaust...the 4th of May because we were liberated [on] the 5th of May, so you go there, you bring your flowers and then they, ...well, you know, I never

had grandparents, I never had uncles and aunts, I never had relatives, ...so, and they told me what happened the day that their whole family in one day was taken away. But, that's, I mean, that's it. I think people who lived in the Holocaust they're either...they talk all the time about it or they never talk about it. And we hardly talked about it...just occasionally when there was something like the Remembrance Day.

P: Um hum, so they would go together with you to that Remembrance Day and you had this commemorative service...

W: Yeah, yeah. And everybody had to be quiet at eight o'clock for two minutes. And I think the first twenty years, even...there was no traffic in Amsterdam, no trams, no buses...everybody stopped at eight o'clock. But, that's all history now. It's just the people who remember, who are quiet for two minutes.

P: You mean that all of Holland and Amsterdam was stopped for two minutes, at eight o'clock...Jews and non-Jews?

W: Yeah, yeah. You could hear the birds in the trees...yeah, everything was dead quiet.

P: But they don't do that anymore, nationally.

W: No. The remembrance is still there, but only for the people who want to remember or who want to think about the Holocaust. But the rest of the world continues, yeah.

P: Is there anything [that] you want to say in conclusion or is there anything that you have forgotten?

W: No, I don't think so. I had my doubts coming here, but now that...because I thought there was nothing [that] I could tell you or [con-]tribute to your wonderful book you are going to

write. But, I hope you've got something from me, because I couldn't rem...I mean, all I remember is from what I heard...what people told me and I thought it would be more interesting for you from the people in the first hand. But, I'm glad I came here. You explained to me that it was important, so I'm glad I came here.

P: Well, you realize that you are very special even though you were twelve days old...the fact that you survived meant that somehow, somebody had to take care of you. And that there were good people too during the war who saved your life.

W: Exactly, ...very good people.

P: And from the interview, I can see that they were not just good people, they were extremely beautiful and wonderful people and ah...Betty, would you like to name your foster parents so that we can remember them in you story.

W: Absolutely. You want them...different...like my foster mother and my foster father...different names? As different people?

P: Yes.

W: Mr. A-R-E-N-D A-A-L-B-E-R-S, and his wife is Mrs. P-I-E-T-J-E A-A-L-B-E-R-S and the son, Mr. J-A-N A-A-L-B-E-R-S. That's it.

P: Perhaps, you could uh, make a note here that your foster parents are now deceased and what year...if you'd like to just put in a year, we could record that and the date of your foster brother's birth and so that indicates he's still alive.

W: Okay. My foster father passed away...it must be 1970, and my foster mother passed away in 1980. And my foster brother is still alive.

P: And what is his birth date?

W: His birthday is April the 13th, 1923. I think it's very nice of you that I can...my foster parents, and my foster brother...have remembered because of them I am sitting here and telling you the story.

P: Thank you. That's precisely why we are having the interview. And we thank you for coming down and we are delighted that you have agreed to participate, because your story is truly an enlightening story to humanity. Thank you very much.

W: It's my pleasure. So, I just want to add one last thing. That because of all the Holocaust, because of all the bad, nasty, terrible things that happened, I'm still a happy person...because I've got two wonderful people, I've got a husband who I love very much and who loves me, I've got two wonderful children...I'm only waiting for two nice Yiddisha [i.e. Jewish] girls to marry my boys...and that's it. I mean that would make my whole life even more complete. And that's it. I mean that's all I really want for the rest of my life. Then I could, I mean then I would be really hundred percent...hundred and one percent satisfied. I'm satisfied for a hundred percent now, but I would be for one hundred and one percent satisfied.

P: (laughs) Oh Betty, you're so full of love that...

W: But that's what they put in me. I can't help the way I am, because, I mean that's the way I was born and I mean, I only received love. So, I mean you cannot change yourself. I've got everybody who loves me and who I love around me.

P: Well, everyone who will read your story will certainly be filled with love for themselves and for others and enjoy life.

W: That's a nice thing of you to say.



P: I beg your pardon.

W: That was a nice thing of you to put it. I never thought of it  
that way.

P: Well, that's the way it is (laughs).

W: Ya.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]