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PIETERNELLA ISEMAN
BIRTHDATE: 1940
INTERVIEW DATE: DECEMBER 5, 2000
AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 60
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INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.
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TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: TAPESCRIBE
TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: IRV SILBERG

NETHERLANDS, 1947
AGE: 6

SHIP: GRIPSHOLM
PORT: STOCKHOLM, SWEDEN
RESIDENCES:

- **THE NETHERLANDS: AMSTERDAM**
- **US: MERRICK, LI, NY.**

LEVINE: It's December 5th, the year 2000. I'm here in the studio with Pieternella -- called Nelli -- Iseman, who came from the Netherlands in 1947 at the age of six on—on the Gripsholm. And Mrs. Iseman's husband, Samuel Iseman is with us. And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. Please, again, your birth date and where in the Netherlands you were born.

ISEMAN: I was born in 1940 and I was born in Amsterdam.

LEVINE: Okay. And your mother and father's names, please.

ISEMAN: My father's name was Frank Alexander and my mother was Gerardine Bonnier.

LEVINE: And maybe you could spell that.

ISEMAN: G-E-R-A-R-D-I-N-E Bonnier—B-O-N-N-I-E-R.

LEVINE: Okay. And on both sides of your family—your mother's side first—do they trace back to Amsterdam?

ISEMAN: My mother's family, yes. They lived in Amsterdam for a number of generations, from what I can ga—gather, and still live there to this day. My father's family lived principally in Arnhem and for a time—my dad was born in Germany and came back to Holland when he was three years old and resumed living in Amster—in Arnhem.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ISEMAN: And—

LEVINE: I'm sorry. Go ahead.

ISEMAN: Uh—

LEVINE: You mentioned before that your—your father's parents were Dutch, even though he was born in Germany.

ISEMAN: Yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ISEMAN: Yes. Yeah, they had gone there to look for a job on opportunities and ended up coming back to the Netherlands.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So—so actually—you mentioned also that your mother had come to the United States at some earlier time.

ISEMAN: No, my father had.

LEVINE: Oh, that was your father.

ISEMAN: Yes. My mother had never been in the United States. My father lived here for about three years in his early teens.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ISEMAN: He had to return to the Netherlands with his parents because he was 17 and his mother insisted that he had to go back with them, even though he would have preferred to have stayed here. And so when he returned to the Netherlands, he met my mother there. He was married in 1936 to my mother. And then the war broke out and Dad had always wanted to come back to the United States. That was his plan. And, of course, we couldn't come because of the war. And in that interim period, I was born as well.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Right, now, you were the—the first child?

ISEMAN: Yes. I have a brother but he was born in the United States.

LEVINE: I see.

ISEMAN: So there's about a 10-and-a-half-year difference between us, age-wise.

LEVINE: Okay. And we were talking about your memories. You said that you—you can remember some things about the war. What—what are those memories?

ISEMAN: Well, we lived in an apartment in Amsterdam, in the western part of Amsterdam. And when war broke out, my father's brother and his wife and three children became refugees from Arnhem and they moved in with us. And so we all lived together for a period of time. My father had decided he was not going to Germany and aid the war effort there, and he went into hiding. So my father was in hiding during the entire period of the war.

LEVINE: Oh.

ISEMAN: Which made it difficult acquiring food, et cetera. But he managed to make it in hiding that whole time period.

LEVINE: Did you see him during that period?

ISEMAN: Yes, I did. And I was told that if I was stopped on the street by the Germans, that I was to say that my father was in Deutschland.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-hmm.

ISEMAN: I had been told to say that.

LEVINE: What was it like for you as a little girl, you know, seeing your father? Did you have to, like, go to the same place every time to see him or did he move around?

ISEMAN: No, he was in hiding at home.

LEVINE: Oh.

ISEMAN: Right in—in our home.

LEVINE: Oh.

ISEMAN: In fact, the apartment building in which we lived, almost everyone was in hiding for one reason or another. They all had various backgrounds and histories and they were all in a similar condition.

LEVINE: Wh—what did it—what did it mean, that he was in hiding? I mean, did he, like, walk around the house or—

ISEMAN: Yes. Yes, he did. In fact, what he did do was he had foreshortened my dresser, so that if you pulled the drawers out, that they were short. And he could hide in the back of the dresser in case the Germans came to the door. And they did on one occasion, I remember. You could hear their cadence up the steps and their banging on the door. My mother and myself and my two aunts and my father were at home in our apartment. And they hesitated opening and that made them even more [chuckles] adamant to have the door opened. And finally, my mother opened the door. And they asked for my father by name. They mispronounced his name, which my mother was thankful that they had, because they were religious and my mother did not want to lie. And she was happy to be able to say no, that that person did not live here. But—

LEVINE: In other words, it was Alexander that—that he—that they mispronounced?

ISEMAN: No. I don't know. His name was Franz, so I'm not sure—

LEVINE: They said something else?

ISEMAN: Yes, I'm not sure. You know, it was close.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ISEMAN: And evidently, they had a record. And so they came in, stormed into the apartment and searched all the rooms and did not find my father.

LEVINE: Did they pull out the drawers?

ISEMAN: My father wasn't in there.

LEVINE: Oh.

ISEMAN: As it turned out, after the Germans left, and they were pretty angry because we had delayed opening the door, my aunts and my mother searched the apartment but couldn't find him. So finally, my mother decided to go outside and she started singing a hymn that they sang in church. And—and my father whistled to her. He was hanging by his fingertips, outside the apartment window. So when they had searched the room they couldn't find him. So he's hanging several floors up over the sidewalk. And my mother ran in and pulled him back up in through the window. So that—

LEVINE: And you saw that as a little girl?

ISEMAN: I was there at the time, yes. So—

LEVINE: Can you—did you—were you fearful a lot of the time?

ISEMAN: No, I was not. I was a very happy child. I'm sure I didn't understand the—the full gravity of what was taking place. I do know that when I went to bed at night and I would pray, I would pray and ask God to protect us from the stripes in the sky. And evidently, from the airplanes and whatever you had

from the bombing, I suppose, although Amsterdam itself wasn't bombed where we lived.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ISEMAN: So—

LEVINE: What was your father like during that period? I mean, what did—what—what kinds of memories do you have, like, with him during [unclear]?

ISEMAN: Well, my father was a very warm, outgoing person. He readily made friends and he spoke Dutch, German and English, because he had lived in Germany for a while. And that was to his advantage during the war in many ways. And—but it was a—what should I say? I guess the main objective was to survive, to get food and to try to make it through this time period.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. How did you—how did you survive and get through?

ISEMAN: Well, my parents would take turns going to the countryside. They no longer had tires on their bicycles. They had stripped the rubber from the—the trucks and the cars and made their own tires. They would go for days on end into the countryside. Money was of very little value at that time. My mother knit sweaters. She would take old sweaters and take the yarn from those and knit new sweaters. And they would go into the countryside and, perhaps, a farmer would—his wife would be happy to have a sweater for her child, and maybe give them some bacon. So it was kind of a barter thing. My father went by himself. My mother sometimes went with her sister. They would sleep in barns. One time, my father was with a cousin of his and there were two groups of—I guess I don't know whether you would call them platoons—of Germans coming in both directions. My dad was on a bicycle with his cousin. And they managed to get into the haystack, pull their

bicycles after them. And then the two groups just passed by.

We have—also, we had an interesting thing in our home—in our apartment building in Amsterdam lived a young Jewish girl—woman. And she was married to an SS officer and—but she was fearful for her life. And she would sleep on our couch at night because she was afraid. He was away. And she would sleep on our couch. And in the morning, when we would wake up, she would be gone. And also, my mother's sister visited one night. And you were not to be on the streets at night. You were to have your shades drawn so that, I guess, the planes couldn't see where to bomb or whatever. And my mother's sister showed up with a little Jewish boy in tow, that she was attempting to bring to someone else, and then hopefully, get the child into Switzerland. And so one night she showed up with this child.

LEVINE: And do you remember that? Do you remember the child?

ISEMAN: I don't remember that child. I remember a child on the boat when I came over.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ISEMAN: A little boy who was being escorted by a cousin of my dad's, I believe. And he had been hidden. His name was Arnold and I have pictures of Arnold and myself on the Gripsholm.

LEVINE: Oh, really?

ISEMAN: And the child was being escorted to the United States.

LEVINE: Wow.

ISEMAN: And so I recall that.

LEVINE: Yeah.

ISEMAN: Also, my father was an artist and he had a *atelier* up in the attic where he painted, you know. And [chuckles] I'm losing my train of thought here.

LEVINE: That's okay. Take your time. Were you to—were you going to think of another wartime incident?

ISEMAN: Yes, I was.

LEVINE: Well, we can just keep going and it'll come to you and you can say it whenever.

ISEMAN: Oh, what I wanted to mention was that, because he was an artist, he was starting to change the—the documents that people had to carry on them. And he would try to remove—I don't know whether it was a Star of David or a "J" that the Jewish people had to carry. And he was removing those from the people's papers. And my mother was upset that he was doing this because she thought that he would be caught. And she said that if—"You know, if you are caught, it's not just your life. It's also mine and our little girl." So he discontinued doing that.

LEVINE: Hmm. Was your father a politically—inclined?

ISEMAN: No, he wasn't but he had very strong religious convictions.

LEVINE: What religion was the family?

ISEMAN: Well, we were born-again Christians.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ISEMAN: And we went to a Brethren Church. It was in a little storefront. It was on the Prinseegraacht on the same street that Anne was in hiding.

LEVINE: Oh.

ISEMAN: Of course, we had no knowledge of that at all.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ISEMAN: And—but it was right on the same street, on the same side.

LEVINE: What's the name of the street?

ISEMAN: The Prinseegraacht.

LEVINE: How—how do you spell that?

ISEMAN: P-R—

LEVINE: Just make a guess. [chuckles]

ISEMAN: [chuckles] P-R-I-N-S-E-E-G-R-A-A-C-H-T.

LEVINE: Huh, wow.

ISEMAN: So—

LEVINE: So did you go to church and—

ISEMAN: Yes, we did, even during the war. Yes. I don't know whether the trolleys ran the whole time or we would walk. And it was, like I said, a little storefront church that we met in.

LEVINE: Hmm.

ISEMAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: Wow. Do you remember—I guess all of your memories then took place during the war years.

ISEMAN: Well, it was war almost the entire time that I was—

LEVINE: Right.

ISEMAN: —living there.

LEVINE: Yeah.

ISEMAN: Yes. I remember also that, if people didn't show up for church, that members would go to check on them. And sometimes, they were deceased in bed. They had died from cold and hunger in bed.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. But you never knew of people personally who—who were casualties of the war itself?

ISEMAN: Not personally, no.

LEVINE: Oh. So, let's see. So you mentioned that your father had come to the United States some years earlier.

ISEMAN: Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: And why did he—why had he come when he did?

ISEMAN: He came because his parents came—

LEVINE: Why did they?

ISEMAN: —and his siblings came.

LEVINE: Do you know?

ISEMAN: Well, for a better life in the United States.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ISEMAN: And—

LEVINE: Did he ever tell you about those years?

ISEMAN: Oh, yes. Yes.

LEVINE: What were the things that he—

ISEMAN: Well—

LEVINE: —recounted?

ISEMAN: One of the things I found interesting was that he bought, I think for something like 25 cents, a whole big bunch of bananas, because he had not

experienced bananas before. And he bought the whole thing and went and sat behind a garage in the town of Freeport and ate every single banana. And of course, you know, he had a bellyache, I'm sure. But it was so special to be able to just purchase those bananas and just sit there and eat them by himself without having to share them. [laughs] Hmm.

LEVINE: And so he—he kind of li—he liked it here?

ISEMAN: Oh, he liked it here tremendously. The—he was one of nine children and he was number—he was the youngest. And his brothers owned a car, which, of course, he got to drive as well. And he thought that that was, of course, wonderful. And the siblings all got together and bought a nice home in Freeport, a new home. And with all of them working, they were able to manage to live in this house.

LEVINE: Well, now, that was the first time that that happened?

ISEMAN: The first time when he came.

LEVINE: So all nine of them came?

ISEMAN: Yes, all nine of them were here at that point.

LEVINE: Wow.

ISEMAN: And then several of the brothers married here in the United States.

LEVINE: So not all of them went back.

ISEMAN: No.

LEVINE: But he was one of the younger ones.

ISEMAN: Yes, and his mother insisted that he come along. And of course, when he was back in Holland, he was back on his bicycle peddling in the rain and wishing he were back—

LEVINE: In an automobile.

ISEMAN: —in an automobile, [chuckles] in New York. So he determined that he was going to come back.

LEVINE: Do you know why his mother and father returned and didn't stay?

ISEMAN: Yes, his father was very homesick. Very homesick. And so they just decided to go back.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ISEMAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: And how about, like, the difference? I mean, they had come for a better life. Was—was life better? I mean, like, for his father as a wage earner, was it better here than it had been?

ISEMAN: Well, his father was older. I don't think he really worked.

LEVINE: Oh.

ISEMAN: I think just the young people worked. They were in their teens and early 20s.

LEVINE: I see. So for him, it was really to be where he most wanted to be—

ISEMAN: Yes.

LEVINE: —[unclear] work.

ISEMAN: And of course, he didn't speak English either. And neither did his mother so that it was a language barrier there as well.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. And your father, did he learn English during those years?

ISEMAN: Oh, yes. Yes.

LEVINE: Did he attend school?

ISEMAN: He did. He attended Freeport High School for three years.

LEVINE: Is there anything else that pops into mind about what he told you about those three years in America before he went back?

ISEMAN: He liked the freedom in the United States. My dad was the type of person who liked working for himself. And the business opportunities and the opportunities to do things like that were so much greater in the United States. And when he did finally come back to the United States, he did start his own business.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ISEMAN: So that was something that he—he did not like the thought of working for a boss. He was rather independent and, you know, being an artist too. And so he really liked the—the freedom that he had in the United States. There weren't so many rules and regulations and everything that you had in the

Netherlands. Everything was very controlled and tight. He liked the freedom.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. So when he went back to the Netherlands then, you say he was a teenager?

ISEMAN: Seventeen.

LEVINE: Seventeen. Then did he—was he finished with school? Did he then work or—

ISEMAN: Well, he—he went to art school.

LEVINE: In the Netherlands?

ISEMAN: In the Netherlands in the fine arts. He was a painter.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ISEMAN: You know, he painted landscapes—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ISEMAN: —primarily.

LEVINE: Wow. And then did—did—did—when did he meet your mother? Did—do—do you know the story of how—

ISEMAN: He—

LEVINE: —he met your mother?

ISEMAN: They were biking somewhere and he was with a cousin and I think she was with her sister. And they met. I don't know, you know, too many of the facts. I have some pictures.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ISEMAN: But I guess he was smitten with her. She was a very pretty girl and so maybe it was love at first sight. I don't know. But they were married in 1936. And then, of course, you know, there was the Depression and the war.

LEVINE: Right.

ISEMAN: And then I was born in 1940.

LEVINE: Now, was your father working as an artist at—at some point?

ISEMAN: He was. Yes, he was, in the beginning. It wasn't that lucrative, of course, during the war. It wasn't that easy. He did end up doing a lot of painting, lettering, little ice cream carts, putting the lettering on them. Anything, just to make a living. But he always painted on the side, you know. And he would sell his paintings, even if he were doing something else. But he always said, "You can't make a living being an artist."

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ISEMAN: You know, you need to have some other training or schooling. You know.

LEVINE: What kind of paintings did he make?

ISEMAN: They were pri—primarily landscapes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And were they oil paints?

ISEMAN: Yes, oil paints. Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: Hmm. Were there any particular characteristics that, you know, you would recognize one of your father's paintings by?

ISEMAN: Hmm?

MR. I---: [Whispers].His lettering --- [Not understood]

ISEMAN: Oh, yeah. That was later on. When he first came to the United States, he attempted to sell the paintings. And he walked the streets of New York City with these paintings under his arm for days. And he could see that that wasn't going anywhere because all the GI's were just coming home. And they were looking to set up their fam—their homes. And they weren't interested in the fine arts. And he realized that that wasn't going to be workable. So then he went into sign painting, lettering, right in the little house that we were living in.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ISEMAN: And that's how he started out. And then finally, he got a larger sign shop and a business in Hempstead.

LEVINE: Oh.

ISEMAN: And he bought an old—he rented an old house and refurbished it so that it could be used as a—a sign shop. And so that's how he started out, yeah.

LEVINE: Wow. Okay, well, now—so the war—the war was over and after the war was over, you were still in—in Holland for some time.

ISEMAN: For several years, yeah.

LEVINE: A couple years.

ISEMAN: Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: What—what was that like, once the war was over? How did your life change?

ISEMAN: Well, I started going to school.

LEVINE: That was your first time going to school?

ISEMAN: I started kindergarten in 1945, actually, in the summertime. I don't know why in the summertime but that—I had started school and attended maybe for a few weeks prior to that. But there was no heat. We had a potbelly stove in the school. There was nothing to keep the—the school warm. And so there was no schooling at that point. And so I did attend kindergarten. And then when I came to the United States, I went to first grade here.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ISEMAN: But—

LEVINE: And how about your father, once he didn't have to be in hiding anymore? What—what did he do prior to coming?

ISEMAN: Those—those years are very vague.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ISEMAN: The—the war years are—are stronger in my memory. He started painting and lettering. I guess, basically, lettering. It was a time of, I guess, reconstruction in the Netherlands. It took a while for things to start improving. When we first came to the United States, I remember we were always sending packages of clothing, of sheets and towels and things like that, because there was still a very great need to the family back in the Netherlands.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Was—was food more plentiful after the war?

ISEMAN: Yes, my parents—I remember my first chocolate bar.

LEVINE: When was that?

ISEMAN: My parents showed it to me and they said, “Here, Nellie. Smell this.” And they said, “Do you know what that is?” [sniffs] And I smelled it and I said, “Soap.” And my mother cried. [chuckles] And she realized that I had no idea even what chocolate was.

LEVINE: Yeah.

ISEMAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: Wow. So how was it that you—I mean, had your—had your mother or father saved up money? How was it that you got to—to come here?

ISEMAN: Well, I'm sure they had saved a little money. But they sold our possessions, our furniture and everything. And I think that's primarily how they got the money to come here.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Did your mother want to come?

ISEMAN: She did. But she wasn't as excited about coming as my dad was because, of course, she hadn't been here previously. She did not speak English, although Dad held classes in our home for friends and family who wanted to learn speak English, because he was trying to teach Mom English. And then we had a number of friends who also wanted to learn English.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ISEMAN: Some of them had learned English by listening to the BBC during the war. Of course, we were not allowed to own radios. But many Dutch people listened to the BBC to find out what was going on during the war.

LEVINE: Yeah.

ISEMAN: And they learned English as a result.

LEVINE: Hmm.

ISEMAN: In fact, I met several friends of my parents, when we went back to the Netherlands a few years ago, who told us—me that they learned English that way.

LEVINE: Wow. You mentioned earlier that practically everyone in your apartment building was harboring or hiding some—someone. Were there—could you say any more about that? I mean—

ISEMAN: I remember my mother telling me that. Of course, I would have no knowledge that that was the case.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ISEMAN: But they were in hiding for various reasons, from what I understand. And whether they just did not want to go to Germany and aid the war effort and risk their lives, or whether they were Jewish and they were in hiding, as that young lady was who could stay in our apartment at night. They had various reasons. But I—I really couldn't tell you.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ISEMAN: During the war sometime, though, because we had my father's two sisters, my father's brother, the brother's wife and three children, who had all moved in with us from Arnhem, because they were refugees—my dad had heard about an apartment that was being vacated a block away. And so we moved to that apartment and left the rest of the family in our old apartment. And it was nice for us to have a little bit more space. And it also had a little garden in the back because we were on the ground floor. And the building was built around this little garden area. So we were able to have chickens, which meant that we could have an egg a day. Of course, we had to watch, the chickens didn't disappear, because the neighbors were all viewing from their verandahs these chickens that we had. And—but it meant a—a privacy that we didn't have with so many folks living with us at the same time. We still interacted closely with them.

And also, one instance that I remember during the war is there was nothing on the streets. There weren't even small scraps of paper. People would gather them up because they would use them to make fire or heat, food.

And we lived directly across from a school yard. And it had several trees in it. And one day, a man who lived down the street from us, a neighbor of ours, went and cut down the tree. Of course, this was an illegal thing to do but this is wartime. And it was too large for him to carry the whole tree back to his apartment, so he proceeded to cut it in half, took half back to his apartment. And my father said to his brother, Albert—he said, "What do you say we go get the other half of the tree?" So they tore out of the apartment, ran in—back into the apartment with the tree, knocked a huge clock that my parents had received as a wedding gift off the wall in the interim. And that smashed to pieces, but they had the tree.

LEVINE: And the tree was for wood for burning?

ISEMAN: For burning. The people were in—removing the pilings on the house—the apartment buildings. The old apartment buildings were on wooden pilings in Amsterdam. And they rested on the skins of—cow skins, you know, or leather.

LEVINE: Oh.

ISEMAN: I guess to prevent the rot or decay. And people were removing the underpinnings of those homes and they were starting to collapse. But they were doing it because they needed to have heat or to cook food. So it was really a survival of the fittest thing after a while, you know.

[END OF SIDE A] [BEGIN SIDE B]

LEVINE: How did they get disposed of [unclear]?

ISEMAN: Well, they had many family members and friends. And they sold furniture. And then my mother and I, of course, came several weeks earlier. And my

father continued to sell some furniture, much to my mother's chagrin. She was upset because he had sold a—a sewing kit that she really wanted to have. And she would remind him from time to time that he had sold that sewing basket that she so much wanted to have. So years later, my father bought her this lovely sewing basket. But it was not, of course, that original sewing basket. And so we still continued to hear about it from time to time. [laughs]

LEVINE: How about you? Did you personally bring any particular toy or—

ISEMAN: I brought a doll with me. But that is the only thing that I can really recall bringing with me.

LEVINE: How about your mother? Can you remember some of the things that she actually brought?

ISEMAN: Yeah. Well, a few household items, a jar, a large—I don't know how you would describe it—made of a salt composition, a jar that she brought with her and—but very few belongings. Oh, [chuckles] a rug beater, of all things.

LEVINE: Oh.

ISEMAN: And I have it to this day [chuckles] because in those days, they didn't have the vacuum cleaners. They'd have to carry the carpets outdoors and beat them and then return them to the room, you know. So the rug beater is still in my possession.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ISEMAN: We really didn't have very many things. And we could bring very few things with us. And when we came, my aunt and uncle, my father's brother, Bill,

and his wife and two children lived in Merrick. They sponsored us. And we moved into their one-car garage—it was a flat-roof garage—in the summer of 1947. It was brutally hot. And we lived there for a number of months. And I was playing with the children out on the street and got to know the children and their parents.

And one of the children I played with, Paulette—her father owned a little house on his property. That was being used as a chicken coop. They had made little doorways in it where the chickens could come in and out. And they told us that, if we cleaned that house up, that we could live in this little home rent-free for three years. So that sounded very good to us. We were living in a one-car garage. And so my parents set hard at work to clean this place up. It was very small. It was a very small place. But it was our own to live in and—so that was how we first started living in the United States.

LEVINE: How—how—could—just roughly, what were the dimensions?

ISEMAN: It was a one—really, a one-bedroom house. In the kitchen, it had one of those hand pumps. And the only heat in the house was a little potbelly stove. There was no running water in the bathrooms. You had to pump the water at the sink and—with a pail and—to flush the toilets or fill the bathtub.

LEVINE: It—but it sounds like it had several rooms so it couldn't have been tiny, tiny.

ISEMAN: It was very tiny. Small. [chuckles]

Mr. I---: The size of this office.

ISEMAN: Yeah, from the front to back. It had been some—one's summer home, I think at the time. Someone, probably, who'd—

LEVINE: Oh.

ISEMAN: —traveled from the city out to the country, and Long Island was at that time. And just—

LEVINE: And then it was made into a chicken coop and then it was [unclear].

ISEMAN: Yes, yes. And in the walls there were squirrels. There was wainco—sco--coating on the walls and the squirrels would scramble up and down to the roof. And in the basement, because there were still chickens in the yard behind us, there were rats in the basement. And my dad would take my mother's scissor and put it on a broomstick and spear the—the rats in the basement. And of course, my mother, being a city girl, this was not something she was very happy about. She didn't expect to have to live this way, I'm sure.

LEVINE: So in other words, for—in some ways, it was—the living was not as good—

ISEMAN: Right.

LEVINE: —in this country as it had been in Amsterdam.

ISEMAN: Right. Oh, yes, because we had a—a nice apartment in Amsterdam with French doors that opened onto a patio, onto a yard. We had a—a nice home by Amsterdam standards.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ISEMAN: And then to come here. And then people would say, "Well, aren't you happy and aren't you grateful to be out of Amsterdam?" And I think that was difficult for my mother. My mother was very homesick. She was very homesick for

many years. I didn't realize it, but in retrospect, you know, I could see that she really was.

LEVINE: And how about your father? Was he always happy to have come?

ISEMAN: He was happy to come and he—he was working round the clock because he was going to make this work. He was working very hard to provide for the family and to improve our situation. And—but for my mother, it was difficult because she still really didn't speak good English. She did enroll in classes for the foreign born in the grammar school that I attended. And that helped. My first grade teacher asked me whether my mother did house cleaning. And she sent home a note with me. And my mother said, "Well, I can clean houses. I'll do that." And so she went to work as a domestic, cleaning the home of my first-grade teacher.

LEVINE: Oh.

ISEMAN: So—where in the Netherlands she was just caring for myself, you know.

LEVINE: Right.

ISEMAN: So that was quite a—but you do what you had to do, was kind of the attitude. And they were going to do the best that they could. And they finally did get to the point where my dad's business did better. And they bought a home of their own, you know.

LEVINE: Well, it sounds like you were a very important member of the family as far as a liaison with—with this new American culture. I mean, it was your girlfriend's father who had the little house.

ISEMAN: Yes.

LEVINE: Your first grade teacher [chuckles] that provided your mother with—

ISEMAN: Yes, yes.

LEVINE: Interesting. Well, you must have learned English very quickly—

ISEMAN: I did.

LEVINE: —as a child.

ISEMAN: Yeah. I was speaking English in three weeks. The children were very kind to me and, if I said a word incorrectly, they would correct me. And it was very positive. And so I was playing on the streets and I learned English quickly.

LEVINE: And did you act that way? I mean, in your family, were you kind of—what should I say—the contact person [chuckles] for the family in some ways?

ISEMAN: Oh, with—in regards to my mother, perhaps, yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ISEMAN: But my father was out in the—

LEVINE: He was fluent.

ISEMAN: Yes, he was fluent in English and, you know, he was able to manage well with the language. He had no language problems.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. But of course, your mother had the—had the companionship of the family members who were here, that she could speak with and everything.

ISEMAN: Yes, she did, especially when we were living in the garage at that time. Later on, my aunt and uncles started a—a Carvel stand, a custard stand. And so they were working all the time. So we really didn't interact with them that much.

LEVINE: I see.

ISEMAN: There was a new business that they had just started then. That was, like, the rage in—that time, you know.

LEVINE: Right.

ISEMAN: And so we didn't interact with them that—that much at that point. And my two aunts, my father's two sisters, both found work as domestics in the United States. And they lived where they did their work.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ISEMAN: So it was primarily the three of us.

LEVINE: Right. And there weren't other people from the Netherlands—

ISEMAN: No, there weren't.

LEVINE: —around that you knew of?

ISEMAN: None at all.

LEVINE: Oh.

ISEMAN: None at all. So I think that also necessitated—you know, increased the need for us to speak English, for my mother and myself, because there was no one else to speak Dutch with.

LEVINE: Right, right. Well, do you remember going to the port and what—what that experience was when you were actually leaving the Netherlands.

ISEMAN: We have some pictures that we even took, was—I think it was a—a sobering thought that, now, here it was the time to leave. You can see it from the expression of the adults on the picture, although I was beaming, unaware of the gravity of it all. My mother was very close to her mother and her—she never saw her mother again. In those days, when you traveled to the United States, that was pretty much it. That was the farewell and you didn't see members of the family again until many years later when air flight was more common.

But my mother had asked her family to let her know if her mother ever became ill or anything like that, because she wanted to try to return to Holland, if that should be the case. We didn't have the monetary means to return to the Netherlands for many, many years. And her family did not tell her when her mother became ill. They thought it was too late and why should she, you know, come all the way from the United States? And so her mother passed away while my mother was living here, and that was very hard for her, very, very hard for her, because I always heard, "I never saw my mother again."

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Yeah. Well, you went to Rotterdam first? Is that how it worked?

ISEMAN: We were to go to Rotterdam. We missed the boat, [chuckles] literally. I remember on my father's motorcycle. My dad had a motorcycle and my mother, my dad and I rushing to attempt to catch the boat. And we missed the boat. So we ended up having to fly to Stockholm, Sweden, stay overnight in a hotel. My two aunts also accompanied us. I'm not sure just how they did that but I remember us on the motorcycle. And so we stayed in this hotel. We asked a lady who worked at the hotel whether she would awaken us at a certain hour. And my aunt spoke Dutch, German and English and the lady spoke none of those languages. [chuckles] But it—they felt that she understood them and that she was going to awaken us. And needless to say, she didn't. But we did make the ship from Stockholm and then we came into New York. And—

LEVINE: Was—was Stockholm new and different? Do you remember it from a child's eyes?

ISEMAN: I—I just remember the hotel. Yeah. And then coming into New York.

LEVINE: How about the passage itself? The voyage?

ISEMAN: Oh, the voyage. I enjoyed the voyage.

LEVINE: What did you like about it?

ISEMAN: There were swing sets on the boat. And I would play with little Arnold, the little boy that had been hidden. And we would run around all over the boat and we—we went from class to class. We didn't stay in our area. [laughs] Also, I recall a—very much --that one evening we went to dinner and there was no one in the dining hall, or very few people in the dining hall. And we couldn't understand why they weren't in the dining hall. But evidently, the ocean had gotten a little rough and the people were sick in their berths. They

had not come to—to eat. And I guess this continued and a day or so later even my mother did not feel well, and my aunts. So they stayed in their beds and Arnold and I continued to run around the ship and swing on the swings. [chuckles]

And people were sick and they would throw up in different places. [chuckles] We would count these places and—and report back to my mother and my aunts, who were sick in their berths. [laughs] And they would just say, "Go away. We don't want to hear that." And of course, being a child, I didn't understand what the fuss was about. But that was definitely one of the things that I recall. And I also recall when we came into the—the harbor of New York that we had a lot of war brides on the ship with us-- women, Dutch women who had married American or Canadian or whatever soldiers, and also, I guess, some that were engaged to be married. And when we pulled in, they were throwing bouquets of flowers up for the women to try to catch. I remember that.

LEVINE: You mean when—when the ship pulled into the New York—into New York? Uh-hmm.

ISEMAN: They were trying to catch these bouquets of flowers. And I recall saying to my mother, "Look at all the churches." And of course, they were the tall skyscrapers. But all I was familiar with that was tall in Holland were churches. So I thought that I was looking out at all of these churches in New York.

LEVINE: Do you have any other memories of the war brides aboard the ship while you were—

ISEMAN: No.

LEVINE: —on the voyage?

ISEMAN: No. I think I was just too busy playing and—

LEVINE: Playing, right.

ISEMAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: And how about—let's see. Oh, okay. I guess it was at Ellis Island that you remembered seeing that—

ISEMAN: Yes. We ended up on Ellis Island because—and I'm not quite sure of the facts, but we came on a German quota that was not being filled or used at that point after World War II, because my father had been born in Germany. And so that was one of the reasons why we were able to leave as quickly as we were. And then they detained us here on Ellis Island, trying to find out, I guess, what was going on with us. And that's the best that I could say, you know.

LEVINE: Just to make sure that your papers were in order.

ISEMAN: Yes, that it was in order.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ISEMAN: And—

LEVINE: I see. Well, had you traveled third class?

ISEMAN: Yes, I believe so.

LEVINE: And did—did not all the third class passengers come to Ellis Island at that point?

ISEMAN: I don't believe so. But I—I'm—because I don't recall my father's cousin staying on Ellis Island or being on Ellis Island. But it—my memory's vague in—in that area. But I do remember staying here and I also remember that they told me that up in the area, you know, where the balcony is, that they had Italian prisoners of war there, and that they had gypsies up there. And this is what I was told. At night, evidently, they tri—some of these people tried to break out. And I would stand and watch the man repair the lock in the door in the morning. And I remember standing there watching this—this man repairing the—the door lock.

LEVINE: Hmm. Did you personally ever see them, Gypsies or Italians—

ISEMAN: There were people up there.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ISEMAN: But this is what I was told that they were. And of course, I wouldn't have any knowledge as to whether this was correct or not. But that's what we were told.

LEVINE: So how long did—were you detained at Ellis Island?

ISEMAN: I don't know the exact number of days.

LEVINE: But you—it was overnight anyway.

ISEMAN: Oh, three days at least, I would say. Maybe five. I'm not sure. But I'd say three days, probably.

LEVINE: And was there—do you have any other memories of Ellis Island? Maybe description of what you remember about it or [unclear]?

ISEMAN: No, I just remember the rows of beds that we slept in, going to the dining hall.

LEVINE: Was it a—an unpleasant experience or—

ISEMAN: It wasn't for me.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ISEMAN: I'm sure my parents—my—my mother and my aunts were anxious to depart. I know my aunt and uncle had come to pick us up at the ship. They were sponsoring us. And of course, we couldn't go with them. We had to be detained. So that—that was not a pleasant experience, I'm sure, but—

LEVINE: Was it crowded at the time you were there?

ISEMAN: It seemed to be crowded, yeah. There were a lot of people.

LEVINE: So when you were finally released and going, what hap—who—who picked you up or—

ISEMAN: My aunt and uncle picked us up.

LEVINE: In a car?

ISEMAN: In a car. In their car and took us back to their home in Merrick.

LEVINE: And can you think of any first impressions of this country, you know, over the first days or weeks or—

ISEMAN: Well, I really enjoyed being in this country a lot. I enjoyed school very much. And the school was so different from what I had been used to.

LEVINE: In what ways?

ISEMAN: They were very strict when I was a little girl in school. You didn't have the freedom. One time, my mother had passed by the school and she had looked in to my classroom as she walked by. I was in the first grade. And I had gotten up to sharpen my pencil and, you know, sharpened my pencil and sat back down. And when I got home, my mother said, "What were you doing walking around the classroom?" And I said, "Mom, I got up to sharpen my pencil." She said, "Just like that? You could just get up and sharpen your pencil?" And I said, "Yes." Well, I enjoyed this tremendously. And then, of course, my first grade teacher—my mother also started working for her. And she was very nice with me. She let me do a lot of talking in class, because she felt that this would enable me to learn English better and more quickly. And so I really thrived on the idea of going to school. In fact, if my mother said I had a cold. Would I like to stay home? And I'd say no. I really wanted to go.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

ISEMAN: And I really enjoyed the freedom. And they were not nearly as strict as they had been in Holland. I remember one boy who would—I don't know what he would do that was not right. But the teacher would pull him by his ear. And his ear was all sore from being pulled. I could even see that as a child. And I would—I found that upsetting. And it was very harsh and strict compared to what we had here.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ISEMAN: And it was such a nice environment to go to school here.

LEVINE: Yeah. Did—do you remember—[clears throat] did your mother and father want to become American? Or were they more inclined to hold on to the ways that they had—

ISEMAN: My father would have become an American instantly. My mother was very hesitant. It took her many years. She finally did become an American citizen. I did not become an American citizen until I was married to Sam.

LEVINE: Hmm.

ISEMAN: And I was 21 years old and then I applied for my citizenship.

LEVINE: Hmm. Was there a time when your mother started to like it here, that you can remember maybe what that turning point was?

ISEMAN: The turning point for my mother was when she was able for the first time to go back to Holland for a visit.

LEVINE: Hmm.

ISEMAN: And that made such a difference in her life. And she could see that Holland wasn't what she had become to think that it was. As a child, I heard about Holland from my mother, not realizing that she was homesick. And I thought Holland and heaven were pretty much on the same plane. And I think when she went back to Holland, it helped her to realize that it was like any place

else, and it wasn't what she had dreamt it to be. And it was a sobering experience for her.

LEVINE: Yeah.

ISEMAN: And after that, there was quite a change in her.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ISEMAN: And I—

LEVINE: And so did your—did your father prosper in his—in his sign making business?

ISEMAN: He did, eventually. But not—not until later years. And while I was growing up, it was—it was a struggle, you know. But it was not an unhappy experience.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Do you remember moving out of the—of the small cottage and into some other place?

ISEMAN: Yes. There was a church that we attended and I heard that the pastor was moving out. And I came home and I told my parents about it.

LEVINE: You were an emissary—

ISEMAN: [chuckles]

LEVINE: —for the family. [chuckles]

ISEMAN: And my dad investigated and sure enough, he was going to be vacating this apartment. And it was a nice apartment and we took over the apartment. And so I was very happy.

LEVINE: That must have felt good for the whole family.

ISEMAN: Oh, it did. It was a very positive experience. And then my mother became pregnant with my brother. And he was born here in the United States.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ISEMAN: And while we were living in that apartment. And from there, we bought a home of our own in Bellmore, and a home that also could house my father's sign business. So the home was in the front and the sign business was in the back. And so that—that was a very positive experience for us.

LEVINE: Is—is there any of your father's handiwork around?

ISEMAN: Yes, from time to time we still see his work. He did a lot of truck lettering. And because he was an artist, he often painted scenes on the trucks. Of course, today a lot of the truck lettering is done—is computerized. And so it isn't done the way he did it any longer. But we still see his work. I will be driving along and come across a truck or a sign or something that he has—he has done. Yes.

LEVINE: Well, looking back on it, how do you think coming to this country, even as a young person, has—has made a difference in—in you, in the kind of person you are, the way you see things or do things? I mean, do—how would you think it's affected you, as compared with, say, had you been born in Long Island?

ISEMAN: I think that—of course, I'm very happy to live in the United States. I would prefer to live here anytime. I mean, I enjoyed visiting Holland and I've been back several times. And my family will say, "Where would you rather live?" And I would rather live here. And of course, I have my family here. I have six children and I have nine grandchildren. And so this is home for me.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ISEMAN: The only thing that I did miss, I had so many cousins and aunts and uncles all in the Netherlands when I came here. And I think that—that was one of the reasons why I had a large family. I think I was trying to reconstruct this in my thinking, to some extent. I wanted family.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ISEMAN: But outside of that, I'm very thankful. I would never have met Sam.

LEVINE: How did you meet?

ISEMAN: We met in church.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ISEMAN: And he came from Washington, DC and his father had—was working for the government at the time. And they were either going to come to New York or to China. And they came to New York where we met and we married.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ISEMAN: So I'm very grateful. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And what—what do you think has given you your most satisfaction when you think back on your—

ISEMAN: On my—

LEVINE: —life so far?

ISEMAN: Well, there are a number of things—several things, I guess. Family, a tremendous amount of satisfaction. Six children and doing well and watching them grow and—and—

LEVINE: Are there any attitudes or values that your mother or father passed on to you that you, in turn, passed on to your children?

ISEMAN: Yes, especially religious values. We had a strong faith in God and we believed that this was meant to be and this is how God—we see the hand of God in this in that he led us to come here.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ISEMAN: And he—and that he's still taking care of our lives and—and caring for us. We have a strong religious faith.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ISEMAN: And—

LEVINE: How about the opposite? Is—are there ways that—attitudes and values that your mother and father had and tried to instill in you that you did something else [chuckles] with your own children?

ISEMAN: Not too much. It basically is the same as my parents had.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ISEMAN: The same values.

LEVINE: Hmm.

ISEMAN: Yes. God, family, you know. Love of other people and human kind and trying to live a life that's pleasing before God.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. And how about now? We have about a minute left. How—what—what—what do you see in your future? Things that you want to do or—

ISEMAN: Well, of course, the family again.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

ISEMAN: Having raised six children, I was primarily concerned with the raising of the children and that was my business [chuckles] for the most part. I mean, I was involved in other businesses that we had. We had a bike shop for a while, et cetera, and got involved with that. But primarily, the family and seeing them do well and nurturing them and, even at this point, encouraging them and being there for them and enjoying my husband. We have a very happy marriage and we really are enjoying some freedoms and things together now that he's retired. And so I guess that—that is essentially it.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ISEMAN: You know.

LEVINE: Would you like to say anything, Mr. Iseman, before we close?

MR. ISEMAN: Well I just want to say that it was an enjoyment to go back to see where my wife lived in Holland. We went last summer. We went five years ago to see where she lived. It was enjoying to see the family over there. There's still quite a bit of family over there. Some of them have visited us here. We certainly are thankful that they did move to New York so we could meet each other and we've had a busy life, but we certainly have had a happy life.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, I want to thank you both.

[END OF INTERVIEW]