

EI-258

HILDA SPOELSTRA REITSMA

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LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and it's March 2, 1993, and I'm here in North Haledon, New Jersey with Hilda Reitsma, who came to this country first with her family and her father, who was here on business. She was eleven years old then, and that was 1919. She did go to school here. Then in 1925 when Hilda was seventeen years old, the family immigrated to the United States. In 1927 she went back with her sister to Holland for just a few months, and then returned. Well, I'm very happy to get to talk to you, and I look forward to hearing about all your experiences.

REITSMA: Oh, my! ( she laughs )

LEVINE: Okay. Why don't we start, Hilda, by you saying your birth date and the town you were born in.

REITSMA: I was born on March the 3rd in 1908, in the town of Leeuwarden. That's the capital city of Friesland.

LEVINE: Oh. Could you spell any of the words that are unfamiliar?

REITSMA: Yes.

LEVINE: Would you spell them for me?

REITSMA: Yes. Any one. Leeuwarden? You want me to spell that?

LEVINE: Yes, please.

REITSMA: L-E-E-U-W-A-R-D-E-N. And the province was Friesland, F-R-I-E-S-L-A-N-D, the northern province of Holland.

LEVINE: Now, did you live in the same town until you immigrated?

REITSMA: Yes. I lived there since my birth, until I was eleven years old, when we immigrated to California. No, not immigrated. But I mean, traveled, for my father's business, to California.

LEVINE: Okay. What was, what was the community like that you grew up in?

REITSMA: Well, that was, it was quite a good-sized city.

LEVINE: What did people mostly do for work?

REITSMA: Whatever they do in big cities. I really don't know. My father worked for the gas works. And then he, later on, when aft—when the war broke out, they started to, instead of canning, they didn't do much canning in those days in 19, 1919, so then he started finding patents from drying fruit, to dried fruit and vegetables. And he traveled quite a bit in Holland to different factories where he had, for some company, make patents, and they dried the fruits there. So instead of having the packages of canned, you had the dried fruits, and you cooked them.

LEVINE: I see. You said he worked for the gas company?

REITSMA: First, before that.

LEVINE: Before that.

REITSMA: Before that. Then he went - then he was sent to California. They - they thought they would start it over there.

LEVINE: The drying of the fruit.

REITSMA: Of fruits, especially fruits, because they are more plentiful there. There we, somebody went ahead and built a factory there, and then after that was finished, then we went over so that my father could take charge.

LEVINE: I see. What was the name of the company? Do you recall?

REITSMA: It was a Dutch company, Vlessing.

LEVINE: F-L . . .

REITSMA: V. V-L-E-S-S-I-N-G. And it was a Dutch millionaire who had set that up, and my father worked for him, and he paid all the expenses then.

LEVINE: I see. What was your father's name?

REITSMA: Watze, but it's, translated in English it would be William.

LEVINE: How do you spell the Dutch, uh . . .

REITSMA: W-A-T-Z-E.

LEVINE: And your mother's name and her maiden name?

REITSMA: My mother's name was, oh, that was such a Dutch name, too, real Frisian. It was Tsiegje.

LEVINE: Can you spell that?

REITSMA: T-S-I-E-G-J-E. Dykstra, which is a very familiar Dutch name, Dykstra. D-Y-K-S-T-R-A.

LEVINE: And did you have grandparents who were alive?

REITSMA: Yes, I had, yes. My father's parents lived in Friesland and, a little south from us, and then my mother's parents lived in the city where we lived, near the city, where we lived.

LEVINE: Did you spend much time with your grandparents?

REITSMA: Uh, not that often. They were busy. And once in a while we'd go to my father's because we couldn't see them too often. We'd go to my father's parents, although my grandfather died when I was quite young. My father's grandfather. But when we went there, sometimes we went by train, and then we had to get off, that was just a little steam train, you know, then we had to get off and go on, wintertime we'd go on skates, and go from one little channel, canal, to another canal.

LEVINE: The whole family?

REITSMA: No, no, no, no, no. My father, my brother and I, just the three of us, because he couldn't take the whole family. With the whole family we would go by train and then they would hire a carriage. And those carriages were quite big, and they had little fringes on them and everything else. ( she laughs ) And we'd travel with the whole family to see them.

LEVINE: Can you remember any experiences with your grandmother, at least, your father's mother?

REITSMA: My father's mother used to come over if my mother had a baby or at Christmas, or Santa Claus, what they had. Then she would sit there with her big lap and her big skirts and she'd throw peppermints all over the floor.

LEVINE: And then the children . . .

REITSMA: And then we children would grab them. You know how that goes.

LEVINE: What was her name, your grandmother?

REITSMA: She was named, I was named after her, but her name was really Dutch, it was spelled H-I-T-J-I-E.

LEVINE: Oh.

REITSMA: And that, when I was born my father thought I guess that was too Dutch, so he made mine Hilda, and I was grateful for that.  
( she laughs )

LEVINE: So what was your father like? What do you remember of your father from when you were a little girl, experiences that you had with him?

REITSMA: He was a very, a very ingenu . . .

LEVINE: Ingenious.

REITSMA: 'Genius man, a very smart man. He worked for the gas works, and he worked himself up. We -- my sister and I used to bring him a lunch sometimes noon time, because in Holland in school you have off for two hours for noon. We'd bring him his lunch.

LEVINE: What would that be like? What would it be in, and what kinds . . .

REITSMA: I couldn't tell you. ( she laughs ) Probably the same things we ate. In Holland they eat a lot of potatoes and vegetables and meat, of course.

LEVINE: Do you remember any dishes that your mother made that you had when you were a little girl?

REITSMA: I know what I liked, as a little girl, I liked pancakes ( she laughs ) and rice. That was my staples. And the other stuff, I had to eat it, unless if I didn't eat it, I wouldn't get dessert.

LEVINE: And so your father was ingenious in his work.

REITSMA: In his work. And his mind was always busy, thinking, thinking, drawing. Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah. And did you, were there certain activities that you would do with your father that you recall?

REITSMA: No, not particularly in those early days. He was busy working. In those days people worked many hours, you know. They didn't just work eight hours and go home.

LEVINE: What would be like a typical day in your family? IN other words, your father would go off to work, and you'd go off to school.

REITSMA: And we'd go off to school. Mother would be home noon-time, and my father, I don't think he would be home noon-time, not that I can

recollect. But at night we would all be together, I suppose. But he worked good, long hours.

LEVINE: Like when would he get home at night? Do you . . .

REITSMA: I don't remember even. But in time for, I imagine, for the evening meal, especially later on, always for the evening meal.

LEVINE: And then how many sisters and brothers did you have?

REITSMA: Well, I have three brothers and two sisters. There are six children in the family.

REITSMA: And their names?

REITSMA: Oh, dear. The oldest was Dorothy. And don't ask me to spell the Dutch name. ( they laugh ) And I was next, Hilda. And then was Charlie, and then Gertrude, the one I had a paper of, and then Jack, and then Seagram. So it was quite a family.

LEVINE: Yes. And then, so your mother was busy being a housekeeper and a homemaker.

REITSMA: She was very busy with the children, because in those days she, housework was a little harder to do than now. We have our vacuums, and we didn't have those, right?

LEVINE: Do you remember what your mother had to do in taking care of a house in those days?

REITSMA: I remember seeing my mother standing over a tub full of hot water, soap suds and washing on a board. And in Holland they had to have it, after it was rinsed they put it on the lawn to bleach, out on hedges, if you had hedges.

LEVINE: Because there wasn't bleach, I suppose. The sun did the job.

REITSMA: Well, they had, the soaps were strong enough, I guess. But then to dry it, and partly dry it and bleach it because you didn't have driers either. Those days were pretty primitive. ( she laughs )

LEVINE: Can you remember what your mother cooked on?

REITSMA: Little gas flames. And then also they used to have little things with petroleum in it, and there was a little flame, and then they put a pot on the top of that. That would be for suppertime, I guess.

LEVINE: Would it be like a stove?

REITSMA: No. It was a small container, very nice, enameled and all. The bottom this way, with the flame in it, and the container for the oil, and then on top it would be where you put your pan that would match it. And they, and then later on you had a little plate, a gas plate, with two burners, maybe. But they didn't have big convenient kitchens like we had

in those days either. Some probably did, but we didn't. We were city people, you didn't have that.

LEVINE: Can you remember anything else about your house where you lived? What was that like?

REITSMA: Well, I lived in several. ( she laughs ) As they say, we went up a step further on the ladder. ( she laughs ) There were, I know, they had beds in the wall with doors in front of it, and a space underneath where you could store your potatoes or whatever you wan-- didn't want to use.

LEVINE: Were the beds in the wall at the height of a bed as we usually have them?

REITSMA: No, higher. I remember they kind of climbed into them, and then you slept two, I think maybe we slept three in a bed when we were very small. Then I remember one place my father had made a bed for my sister and myself. And they had put wallpaper on it to make it look nice. And we slept. That was up the attic, and we slept there. Later on we got regular furniture, regular beds with the big chiforobe where you could put your clothes in, because in Holland they didn't have many closets in those days. And then you had your wash bowl with your container for water in it. You didn't have running sinks, you know. Not in those days.

LEVINE: And so where would you get the water from?

REITSMA: Well, from a tap in the kitchen or somewhere, we had it. Yeah.

LEVINE: And what would be, like, the social activities of your mother?

REITSMA: I don't think they had many. No. Their family was their activity. And when all the children were in bed, they were happy to have them all in bed, I guess. And then there's mending to do, which they had to do. I know later on when we got a little older, then we used to knit. We used to knit socks, or stockings, my sister and I.

LEVINE: For your own use?

REITSMA: For your own use. And then when we came home from school we had to knit first, so many times around. And then my mother was rather smart. She put a nickel in the ball of thread, so when that was done you had the nickel. ( they laugh ) That was a good idea.

LEVINE: Yeah, very good.

REITSMA: That was the incentive. ( she laughs ) ( break in tape ) Money was scarce in those days, you know. You didn't spend a lot of money.

LEVINE: What would you spend money on, as a little girl?

REITSMA: On candy, of course. ( they laugh ) You go to the candy store and stand by the candy counter. And this was when I was a little girl. Then you pick a penny of this and a half a cent of that. And then it would be a treat.

LEVINE: What were the occasions that were fun for you as a little girl?

REITSMA: A birthday. ( she laughs ) That was one, especially.

LEVINE: What would happen on a birthday?

REITSMA: You could make your own choice of the food, what you were going to eat that night. And I remember my brother, they'd put a cake on his arm, and then he could eat it this way. ( they laugh ) It was not a cake. It was like, we call it kuck [ph]. It was like a honey loaf, you know.

LEVINE: Was it long and thin, like an arm?

REITSMA: No, not that long. But it was, to us it seemed long. When you're small, everything seems big. It was about this size, I guess.

LEVINE: Seven inches or something.

REITSMA: Yeah, seven, eight inches. And they tied that on his arm, and then he could nibble on it. ( she laughs ) And I think maybe we nibbled on it also.

REITSMA: Do you remember any foods that you would choose, when you could choose what you wanted for your birthday?

REITSMA: Yes. I would choose rice with raspberry sauce over it. That was my favorite. ( she laughs )

LEVINE: Was that a dessert?

REITSMA: It was like a dessert, but I ate it like a meal. Yeah. We had, sometimes we had beans and -- but potatoes a lot. Potatoes a lot, with meat and a vegetable. Not vegetables, you didn't have the variety in those days as we have now either.

LEVINE: What vegetables were most prevalent?

REITSMA: Carrots, peas, spinach. Cauliflower too, but broccoli we didn't know about.

LEVINE: Would you, how would your mother come by these vegetables?

REITSMA: Well, she'd go to the market, I guess. No, maybe a man came around. I really don't know.

LEVINE: But were the people who lived out of the city, would they bring the produce in?

REITSMA: Yeah. They would, there were like canals, and they would have these boats filled with vegetables, and they'd bring them to the market. I never shopped for my mother. My sister usually had to go to the store. ( she laughs )

LEVINE: I see. What were your chores that you had . . .

REITSMA: My chores? Oh, I'd have to baby-sit sometimes. Of course, with babies on the knee. And then we had our duties, probably do the dishes and things like that. Because your home was (?). Now, I'm going back years and years. The homes were not elaborately big, so you made probably, I made my own bed and things like that. Washing, we didn't have to do. Of course, then later on my mother sent it to the laundry when we lived in The Hague. We moved to The Hague then, later on.

LEVINE: Oh. About when did you move there?

REITSMA: We moved there after we came from California, yeah, in 1920.

LEVINE: Now, what was your mother, what kind of a disposition and what kind of a personality was your mother?

REITSMA: She was a hard-working lady. She was brought up that way, because she lost her mother when she was young, so she had to go out. Then she went, some aunt adopted her, or took her in, because there were so many children left, so that he -- the widower couldn't take care of all the children, so she went by an aunt. And when she was twelve, after school, then she went to work for people.

LEVINE: Doing housework?

REITSMA: Housework, like a maid. So she was used to working hard.

LEVINE: And did you, do you remember your mother cleaning the outside of the house and the street in front of the house?

REITSMA: Yeah. They scrubbed the street right in front of the house. Not the street, though, just the sidewalks, the sidewalk more, yeah. Then you polished the doorbell. That was brass, you know. It had to be polished every week. (laughs)

LEVINE: And was the house that you lived in there, could you describe it?

REITSMA: The one I lived in in 1919 I can describe to you. And before 1918, I guess.

LEVINE: Well, this was, but in Friesland?

REITSMA: Yeah. It was all in Friesland.

LEVINE: Okay. Could you describe that?

REITSMA: Yeah. That was a nice house. You came in in a vestibule, and then there was a long hallway with the stairs going up to the second floor. And on the left you had a sitting room, and a dining room, and a kitchen in the back. And underneath the stair was a toilet room, and that was quite an achievement in those days.

LEVINE: This was a regular flush toilet that you had?

REITSMA: A flush toilet. As far as I can remember, there was a flush toilet, yeah. And on the upstairs they had also two big rooms and a smaller bedroom.

LEVINE: Would you say that you were comfortable compared with . . .

REITSMA: Yeah.

LEVINE: . . . most of the people in the whole place?

REITSMA: Yeah. I have never known want in my life. My father provided very well.

LEVINE: And how about, what, in what ways did you, were you religious in your family?

REITSMA: We'd go to church with my father. My mother didn't go to church. She was not brought up. But my father was brought up in the church, so.

REITSMA: This was the Dutch Reform Church?

LEVINE: Yeah, the Dutch Reform Church, yeah. And so he used to take us to church on Sundays. Sunday school, we did go to Sunday school too, because I remember Christmas feast at Sunday school. Used to get us an orange and some candy, and that made you rich, you know. (laughs)

LEVINE: That made you itch?

REITSMA: Rich, not itch. ( they laugh ) Because oranges were scarce in those days.

LEVINE: And that was Christmas. You didn't observe it with presents the way we do here.

REITSMA: Oh, yes. Yes, yes. We used to have container and we put, and then mother would fill it, or father, they would fill it. And then they had a name on it, and then you had to hunt for it the next morning. They hide it.

LEVINE: Oh.

REITSMA: And then you had to find it.

LEVINE: So each child had a container with certain . . .

REITSMA: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: . . . little presents in it?

REITSMA: Of course, those little ones didn't, you know, because they were -- my youngest was -- brother was only a few months old. But, and, but we all had a little container, a little box. And they put presents in there. Yeah. Later on we used to make presents, too.

LEVINE: What kind of presents would you make?

REITSMA: Well, I made, I did a lot of handiwork, and I'd paint on a wooden spoon and make something out of that, different things.

LEVINE: What if you found someone else's container? You just . . .

REITSMA: No, no. You didn't do that. You knew your own container. They knew that. ( she laughs )

LEVINE: Okay. Well, so then your father was working his way up in the business of drying the fruits.

REITSMA: Yeah, for that company.

LEVINE: And then how did it come about that the family went to California that first time?

REITSMA: Then that company sent him there. And then we went there, and that's the first time we made a big trip to California, first by boat, which was quite an experience for a young person.

LEVINE: You mean, you went from . . .

REITSMA: From Holland, Leuwarden, yeah, to about, yeah.

LEVINE: To California by boat.

REITSMA: Yeah. There were no air -- planes.

LEVINE: Do you remember the voyage?

REITSMA: Oh, yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: Or the whole trip? Could you tell anything about it?

REITSMA: The trip was in October. It was pretty stormy. And I guess we were seasick, too. And my youngest brother was three months old, and my father had a basket made, so my sister and I, the oldest two, carried that basket with the little baby in it. And we went on the Rotterdam, and it was all right. We had good-sized cabins. And the trip was uneventful for that matter. It took you around ten days in the boat in those days.

LEVINE: Now, how was it decided that the entire family would go instead of just your father?

REITSMA: Well, my mother didn't want him to go alone, so then -- I guess then the company agreed to that, that they would, I don't know if they paid all the trip or my father paid part. That I wouldn't know. But then we were going to stay there for a while, I guess. You know, when you're eleven years old, you don't bother too much about things like that. So then we landed in New York. We landed in Pennsylvania Station, and had the baby put right there in the lobby, and everybody came out to see what was in that basket. ( she laughs ) And then we had a man traveling with us who had been a soldier, and he was going back to California, and he traveled with us.

LEVINE: And he spoke . . .

REITSMA: He spoke English. My father could speak a bit of English, because he had gone to the Berlitz School of Language to pick that up. And he had sent my sister and I to a teacher to learn some English when we knew we were going to go. So we knew just a few words. And the train, it was quite a ride from New York to California. We landed in - in Oakland, I guess. And then we went - we li-- the place was in San Jose. It was a nice spot. And there they had a big factory, and we lived in that factory on the second floor. They had rooms there.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything that struck you seeing the United States for the first time, that struck you as different from what you had known before?

REITSMA: Yes. Big, of course. Holland is small, everything is small scale, but America was big. And it was a wonderful experience going by train all the way to California because you went through the whole states, through the Rockies and all. That was a nice experience.

LEVINE: And do you, and then you went to school there.

REITSMA: Yeah.

LEVINE: And how was that different from what you had known up till then?

REITSMA: Well, first we went to kindergarten, because we couldn't speak English. And I had, we had to all sit in these little chairs. And then I had cousins there, too, that were gone there before, who helped build that factory. Then we sat all in a row, and I made it up to the fifth grade, because I had the knowledge, but I didn't have the English. But then later on you picked it up so quick as a child, so we could do quite well in school.

LEVINE: So in the beginning it was all your brothers and sisters that were school-age started out in kindergarten.

REITSMA: Yeah. We sat on these little kindergarten chairs, and I was eleven years old, and my brother was nine. My oldest sister didn't have to go. She was thirteen. She didn't, I don't know if she went, she went, too, I guess. I don't know if she went any more. Isn't that funny that I don't remember that.

LEVINE: But you remember you, you . . .

REITSMA: My brother.

LEVINE: Your brother next to you.

REITSMA: And my other brother under, and my sister under that. The others were too small yet. They didn't have to go. But that was a good experience, and I remember going to Sunday school there. Very friendly with the teacher there. I corresponded with her for quite a while later on yet.

LEVINE: Now, was there other Dutch people in this area?

REITSMA: Not as many, not too many. Because we - we kind of got together and had church services in homes.

LEVINE: Oh.

REITSMA: Uh-huh.

LEVINE: So how many families, roughly, would you say, that were having these church services?

REITSMA: Maybe only about two or three families, that's all. Because I know across the street from us there lived Italians, and others were English. And where we lived, we lived in San Jose, but we lived on the outskirts in the factory that was built right onto the railroad, right next to the railroad, for transportation purposes, too. There was a platform all around it, on two sides. We used to go roller skating there.

LEVINE: No ice there.

REITSMA: No. No ice, so we roller skated.

LEVINE: Let's see. So you were there for close to, well, ten months.

REITSMA: Ten months, about. Yeah. The middle of October to, because my dad's birthday was on the boat, to August, and then we had the Queen's birthday, till the end of August. So that's ten months.

LEVINE: So then why was it decided you would go back?

REITSMA: I think the company called him back again. Maybe, I don't know just what the reason for it was. But while he was there he had to go to Washington, back and forth, a couple of times, for his patents. My father had some patents.

LEVINE: Was your father an inventor, he himself?

REITSMA: More or less, more or less, yes, yes. He was a very smart man.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

LEVINE: So then do you remember the voyage back?

REITSMA: Yeah. Yeah, it was very nice. I enjoyed that. And August was very good traveling.

LEVINE: And the ship?

REITSMA: The ship was the same ship we came up on.

LEVINE: The Rotterdam?

REITSMA: The Rotterdam also, yeah.

LEVINE: So when you got back to Holland, did you, were there things there that struck you as different from the United States?

REITSMA: Well, we're not there too long. Of course, you miss a lot. Because here in California it was like paradise. They used to take us to a hotel for swimming. There was a pool there. And we used to have, well, we always had a car, and you could go around and go through these parks. It was beautiful. And in Holland, we lived in the big city again. In the Hague, and that's quite a big city. But you adjust as children, so I had to find a new school to go to. And that was the same adjustment for all the children.

LEVINE: And what, and was the school similar to the one you'd been to, or how was that different from the one in the United States?

REITSMA: I don't even remember that much of the school from the United States, because when we came and we went to school for a few months, and then the vacation came in between, too. So I haven't gone to school too long. I think I still have the report card. ( she laughs )

LEVINE: Were you a good student then?

REITSMA: Fair, I guess. Because I, from there on, I moved up to fifth grade. That's nothing to rave about when you're eleven, but anyway.

LEVINE: So did your mother and father encourage you to keep speaking English?

REITSMA: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: Even when you returned to Holland? Or did you not?

REITSMA: Oh, to speak English? No, we didn't speak that much English. I think, in Holland, in school, they taught English also. When I, the school I went to, they had three languages: French, German and English. So I couldn't take French because they were too far advanced, but German I took, and I took the English, of course. And that helped me with my English. But you picked English up from reading and, the English they used was not always too good. ( she laughs ) You hear that.

LEVINE: Oh, okay. So then you were, for about . . .

REITSMA: Five years.

LEVINE: Five years.

REITSMA: Five years that we lived in The Hague, yeah.

LEVINE: And then, were you in school that whole five years?

REITSMA: Yeah. No, up to sixteenth grade, I guess. Then I worked for my father. Because then my father didn't work for that company any longer, and he started a business of his own with someone else repairing shoes. People repaired their shoes in those days. Now they're going back to it. And he had a factory where I worked then and worked with, did some of the office work there. He had a bookkeeper there, and he had, the room next to it was a shoemaker's, about five shoemakers sat there and repaired shoes. But then they had about five men going around collecting shoes in the neighborhood. All these different parts of the city. They would have a big bag with them, and they'd ask the lady if she needed shoes repaired, and then they would give them the shoes, and then when they were repaired they'd bring them back.

LEVINE: Were these wooden shoes?

REITSMA: No, no, no, no.

LEVINE: No.

REITSMA: No, no. ( she laughs )

LEVINE: No. These were regular shoes.

REITSMA: Regular shoes, yes, yes, definitely. Because we didn't wear wooden shoes in those days any more. I had worn woode-- wooden shoes when I was younger, and we wore them, when it was cold in winter they kept your feet warm. And in wetness, too, they were good. But otherwise, when we went to the city after California, I never wore wooden shoes again. No. These were regular shoes. And it was interesting.

LEVINE: So did your older sister work in your father's factory as well?

REITSMA: No. She stayed home with mother to do housework, with mother, clean up. And she took sewing lessons and things like, from dressmaking, like, designing.

LEVINE: And how about your brother who was next to you in age?

REITSMA: He went to school, like I did, and he stayed in school till he came back here. But I was sixteen, so I guess I could quit school. Then I had enough of it. I started a little office work.

LEVINE: Then what was the basis for the decision to come, to really immigrate to this country?

REITSMA: Things in Holland were getting worse and worse. So my father said, "Would you like to go back to America?" To my sister and I, my brother, and, of course, my mother. And then we said, "Oh, sure." ( she laughs ) Go back to America. That sounded so good. So then, of course, immigration was very, very hard. There was, in 19, this was 1925.

LEVINE: '25.

REITSMA: You had to be on a list.

LEVINE: On the quota.

REITSMA: In order to come -- a quota.

LEVINE: Why did you and your sisters, why did you want to go back?

REITSMA: Well, you see the movies. ( she laughs ) In Holland, too, you know. That all looked so good. And we had been here before, so we knew a little bit about it.

LEVINE: Do you remember what you liked here that you missed when you weren't here?

REITSMA: No, I didn't miss anything. I had everything I needed in Holland. It's just that it would be a different kind of life, and it all looked so good again to go back. And it had been a good time we had in California, so that looked good to us. And I, my father had a brother here in this area, and he had a couple, he had a couple of cousins here that had immigrated, and an aunt and uncle, so there was family here.

LEVINE: When you said things got worse in Holland . . .

REITSMA: Yes.

LEVINE: What, what specifically? Economically . . .

REITSMA: Oh, economically, oh, yes. Economically, yeah. Oh, very bad. Yeah. It was getting worse and worse.

LEVINE: So what was your mother's attitude about coming back?

REITSMA: Oh, she didn't mind it too much. Her family was her life. You see what I mean? So if we decided we would love to go to California or go back to America, she would, as long as she could be with her children and her family, that was all she wanted.

LEVINE: So do you remember that trip?

REITSMA: I remember that trip very well. We were third class passengers, and we were on the Rijndam, but due to so few people coming - - immigrating, the boat was practically empty. So we could go in what they call tourist class for the price of third class.

LEVINE: And where did you leave from?

REITSMA: Rotterdam. Always Rotterdam.

LEVINE: So you were upgraded, as they would say today. You were put into the tourist class.

REITSMA: Yes.

LEVINE: What accommodations did you have?

REITSMA: Nice cabins, very nice. We could have almost the run o-run of the whole section there and back of there.. And, uh, well, what else? We had good meals. ( an appliance being run is heard in the background on the tape )

LEVINE: In the dining room?

REITSMA: In the dining room. Yeah, in the dining room. And they were very courteous. And I think the first trip, when we went, it was -- they had a lot of people from Poland and Russia and all that. There was people on board. But the second time, we didn't see that many.

LEVINE: The first time were you in the third class cabin?

REITSMA: Yeah.

LEVINE: A cabin? Not in steerage.

REITSMA: No.

LEVINE: Were there steerage passengers on either of your trips?

REITSMA: I didn-- I don't know. Not later on, no. Not on the last time we came over. But the first time, I imagine, there was steerage, because they were, like, in the hold. But when -- we were in third class the first time, because we couldn't get cabins in second class all together. See, that didn't matter to us because it was all paid for anyway by the company. And my sister and I could, at that time could have gone in second class, but my father says, "No, we want to keep them all together." Which was understandable.

LEVINE: Do you remember coming into the New York Harbor?

REITSMA: Yeah.

LEVINE: On, the first time did you come in there?

REITSMA: Yeah, the first time we came in there, too. I don't remember quite the first time. Maybe it was foggy, yeah, it was in October, huh? No, I don't quite remember what that looked like. But the second time, of course, then we came during the day. It was on a Saturday we came in. And that Saturday you couldn't, third class couldn't get off the boat. They had to stay on the boat, because they had to go to Ellis Island. But second class could get off, and first. But third class, they wouldn't let off. We had to be examined at Ellis Island. We had to be examined in Rotterdam, we had to be examined on the boat. You had the most healthy people coming in here, I tell you. ( she laughs )

LEVINE: So tell me your impression of Ellis Island?

REITSMA: Not great. It was a hot July day, because my sister had her birthday on the boat, and her birthday is on the 30th, the 27th, so it must always be July -- not quite July the first. It was the end of July-- June. ( an appliance being run is heard in the background on the tape ) And we were not really dressed for hot weather, because on the boat it was always cooler over the ocean. So everybody with packages and all, they brought us to Ellis Island. Because, oh, Sunday we stayed on the boat. Came in on Saturday, and had to stay on the boat over Sunday. And then Monday morning we went to Ellis Island, and there you come in a great, big building with a lot of people, and chicken wire all over -- where the people are. ( she laughs )

LEVINE: Inside?

REITSMA: Uh-huh. And then they have to examine you again. And my brother told me, the other day I spoke to him about it, and then he said, "Yes." He said, "We have to let our pants down. It was so embarrassing." ( she laughs ) My father didn't like that either. And I guess maybe they had to examine us -- our top, too. And you in the open with everybody else around you. It's very degrading. And they treat you like cattle, really. I want to be honest about it. You felt embarrassed. Because on the boat we had been examined by a doctor from the boat again, so we had had three different examinations before you came in here. Coming off the boat with all the packages and strings on it in hot weather. ( she laughs ) It can be hot here. That wasn't very, that wasn't very nice. But the family was waiting for us, some with cars, that the rest -- most of them could go in. And then my uncle and I, and my brother, we went by trolley car back to Paterson. They lived in Hawthorne, so we went to Paterson.

LEVINE: Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty? Did that make an impression on you?

REITSMA: Yeah, that's quite impressive when you come in the harbor, to see that. Yes, that's a beautiful sight. We could see the lights from Coney Island at night.

LEVINE: So then you went to Paterson. And then did you stay in Paterson for a while?

REITSMA: Prospect Park. That's a suburb of Paterson, more or less. We - we had a house there, we rented a house, and I was here about three days and I got a job in Weidman.

LEVINE: Weidman?

REITSMA: Weidman in the silk - silk factory, folding wet silk.

LEVINE: Wet silk.

REITSMA: Wet, washed. See, all silk, they wash it, and then they roll it up, and we had to fold it so that the other girls could sew it together for dyeing. So that's what, my first job was folding. And later on I was dyeing, uh, sewing it together in big stitches. And I did that for, oh, maybe about five years, four or five years. And my father had started a business, and he said, "I can use you."

LEVINE: What business did your father start?

REITSMA: He started putting tanks in for Gilbert and Barker. They was a Standard Oil subsidiary.

LEVINE: So he was, it was his company, and he was putting tanks . . .

REITSMA: No. It was his, he worked for Gilbert and Barker. Well, it was his company that put the tanks in. That was his own. He had a contract with them to put so many tanks in and they would pay him, see? And he had his own crew. And that was what he did for a long time. After that he went into the heating business, and now this business is still going on the Goffal Road [ph] here. And his grandsons are in it, three of his grandsons.

LEVINE: What's the name of that business?

REITSMA: Spoelstra Brothers.

LEVINE: Spoelstra Brothers? S-P . . .

REITSMA: S-P-O-E-L-S-T-R-A. And now the boys next door to it built their car wash. They started a car wash with that.

LEVINE: Now, that was your maiden name.

REITSMA: Spoelstra, yes. That was my maiden name.

LEVINE: Wow. Well, then did you marry? ( an alarm is heard in the background ) ( break in tape ) Okay. We're going to be resuming now after a fire drill.

REITSMA: Yeah.

LEVINE: And Hilda is the fire warden. ( they laugh ) Okay. Well, let's see. Where were we? You started, now, wait. You were working . . .

REITSMA: In Weidman. And then I started working for my father. And then I told you about, and my father worked for Standard, for Standard & Oil, putting Gilbert and Barker oil burners in, and oil tanks. First oil tanks, then oil burners. And after that he started his own business in putting oil burners in and heating systems, and then he did some sheet metal work. He had a sheet -they had a--. And then my brothers went in business with him, and they expanded it until it got to be quite a nice size business, and they're still in existence on Goffal Road. Spoelstra Brothers. It used to be, uh, just Spoelstra Brothers. Now it's Inc., incorporated. ( she laughs )

LEVINE: Now, tell the story about your going back with your sister after you were here a few years.

REITSMA: Uh-huh, yeah. She wanted, she had a boyfriend there when she came, and he wanted her to come to Holland. He wanted to marry her. And she didn't know just what she wanted to do, and she kind of stalled it. So now, Paulina. So then she wanted to go to Holland and see him, and that was in May of 1927. So then my father said, "If you go, I don't want you go to alone, I want Hilda to come with you." I was two years younger, but I had to come in with, go with her. So we stayed there for eight weeks, I think it was. Took off from work. You didn't get paid in those days, either. You took off and it went on your own. Then we stayed with friends that were good friends of us before we moved already to America. And we boarded, we boarded with them.

LEVINE: Excuse me, Hilda. Let me just . . . ( break in tape ) Okay. We're resuming now, having asked for a little quiet in the hall. So, now, let's, we were talking about your being sent with your sister to go back.

REITSMA: Yeah, right.

LEVINE: To Holland.

REITSMA: And, oh, I had a good time there. I had a boyfriend there for a while. He used to take me out, and that was very. But she broke off with him, and we went back to America.

LEVINE: Now, what would have happened had she married him? Would she have stayed there?

REITSMA: Yeah, she would have stayed there.

LEVINE: And then you, what . . .

REITSMA: Well, I would have come back, yeah. Or she probably would have come back and then gone back later to marry him.

LEVINE: So what, was your family, what was the attitude of your family? Was it considered, I mean, a good thing to go back to Holland to find a mate, or a spouse?

REITSMA: No. If she wanted to go back and marry him, they would have agreed to that. Although later on when they, I thought maybe I would go back to Holland and get married, but my mother was very much opposed to that. Not that she would have ever stopped me. My mother wasn't that way. But she was very unhappy because she didn't want me to leave.  
( she laughs )

LEVINE: Because you might have settled in Holland.

REITSMA: I might have settled in Holland.

LEVINE: And she wouldn't have had you around.

REITSMA: That's right, right.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, were there customs that your mother kept that she took with her from Holland, that she maintained here in the United States?

REITSMA: I can't think of anything in particular that she would have, no. We were not people that were so set in our customs. Some people are so set in their customs that they want to live that way all the time. No, I think we were pretty flexible.

LEVINE: How do you feel now just thinking about, you know, the fact that you started out in Friesland and came here?

REITSMA: I think it's been a wonderful experience for my life. Yes. I wouldn't have, first when we came here, and every spring, I would get a little homesick for Holland, but I got over that pretty quick. And some of the women that came here with their families used to get so homesick that they didn't like it here, although we liked it. But they didn't like it here, and then the husband says, "Well, you go back for a trip." And when they come back from the trip, they're glad to be back here.  
( she laughs )

LEVINE: Oh. Uh-huh.

REITSMA: That was a good cure for them. Yeah.

LEVINE: Now, when did you meet your husband?

REITSMA: I met my husband, well, he went to the same church I went.

LEVINE: So was he also from Holland?

REITSMA: Yes. He was born in Holland, and he immigrated with his folks when he was seven years old, and that was 1909. So I didn't know him in Holland. ( she laughs ) But he happened to be born in the same city I was born. So we had quite a bit in common. But I met him at, well, I mean, I met him in church. I knew him, and we all knew each other. But he was a bit older than I am, and we just, well, we just got to dating together, and after five years, of course, then it was the Depression, too, you didn't marry so quick. You kept company, and you saw your boyfriend once or twice a week, and that was just it. And then we got married.

LEVINE: And did you have children?

REITSMA: One boy.

LEVINE: And what's his name?

REITSMA: David.

LEVINE: David. And your husband's name?

REITSMA: Henry. And David lived in, lives here, right in North Haledon with his wife, and one grandson, I have.

LEVINE: And what's his wife's name and your grandson's name.

REITSMA: She was born in Holland, too. Her name is Marjo Dehan. She came from Amsterdam with her family in the '50s. ( an announcement being given over the public address system is heard on the tape )

LEVINE: And your grandson's name?

REITSMA: Mark. Mark David Reitsman. There's a picture right there. A lovely looking boy. He's in coll-- in Calvin College in Michigan for his second, finishing his second year.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Is that, that's the religious . . .

REITSMA: Yeah, religious, yeah, yeah, religious.

LEVINE: Well, what does the, how, what part does the Dutch Reform Church play in your life now?

REITSMA: Well, it's been my life, you know. It's been the big part. Everything that we have is connected to churches. Not that it rules us, the church, but we are faithful in attending the church and we believe the creeds of the church. And our churches have been here for so many years already. Now, Midland Park is having their 100th anniversary. That's a big church. But they're all affiliated with the same classes, the same church, with a church in the main, main . . . ( an announcement being given over the public address system is heard on the tape ) Most, main -- the main part of the church is all governed from Michigan. There's like a synod over it all, and they govern the church.

Each church is on its own, that isn't it, but we all work together for missions and everything else. We're Habitat for Humanity, building homes. They have volunteers doing that. I can give you a church paper. If you're interested sometime.

LEVINE: As soon as we finish.

REITSMA: I can give that to you.

LEVINE: So that was a big part of your life, your husband's life, your child . . .

REITSMA: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Have you yourself visited the Dutch center in Michigan?

REITSMA: No. No, I haven't ever been there.

LEVINE: Is there anything that you want to say about how immigrating to this country affected you and your life as an American, I guess?

REITSMA: I think when you live here for a good while you become Americanized. Your ideas are more Americanized, more liberal, maybe, a little more. And I wouldn't want to go back to Holland to live, never. This is my country. Right? After all, I've been here a lot longer than in Holland. No this is my country. And I love it. I think it's a good country. A lot of bad things go on, but you have that in all countries. And that's not the country. That's the people, right?

LEVINE: What would you say, do you have anything that you'd say you were most proud of that you, that you've done in your life, or that you regret?

REITSMA: Most proud of, I have nothing to be really proud of. I have lots to thank, things to be thankful to the Lord for all the good things He has given me. That is the main part of my life, that I live close to Him, and to thank Him for all He has done for me, for bringing me here even to this country where we have our freedom of everything.

LEVINE: Well, I think maybe that's a beautiful place to stop.

REITSMA: I think so.

LEVINE: And I want to thank you very, very much.

REITSMA: You're welcome, dear.

LEVINE: It's been a pleasure, and I'm going to close now. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service on March 3, 1993, signing off.

EI-258/REITSMA