

EI-630

ELSIE FINNEMA

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- **THE NETHERLANDS: HEEREVAEEN**
- **THE US: WHITINSVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS**

LEVINE: Today is July 3rd, 1995, and I'm here in Whitinsville, Massachusetts. And I'm here with Elsie Vanderkuk Finnema, who came from the Netherlands, another person from Friesland, when she was eight years old, in 1920. Mrs. Finnema is eighty-three years old at the date of this interview. And I want to say I'm delighted to have discovered you here.

FINNEMA: Well, thank you.

LEVINE: And to be able to talk with you.

FINNEMA: Nice to meet you.

LEVINE: Thank you. Let's start with your birth date, if you would say it for the tape.

FINNEMA: My birth date. Well, in was in April, 29th, 1912. I was born in Heerevaen. And do you want me to spell that?

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LEVINE: Yes, please.

FINNEMA: Capital H-E-E-R-E-V-A-E-E-N. You see, a double E in Dutch is like a long A here. Heerevaeen.

LEVINE: Say it again.

FINNEMA: Heerevaeen.

LEVINE: Heerevaeen. Now did you live in Heerevaeen up until you left the Netherlands?

FINNEMA: Until I left the Netherlands, yes.

LEVINE: Okay. Now what do you remember about the town itself?

FINNEMA: It was nice. I went to school; I went to a Christian school there in Heerevaeen. For three years I went there. And we had—as children we didn't have much. We were rather poor, but we made our own fun. And it was nice, especially Christmas time was always a very nice time for us.

LEVINE: What did you do at Christmas?

FINNEMA: Well, one thing: in the church we always had a huge Christmas tree, which was so—we didn't have much of anything else, but that Christmas tree meant a lot to us, and we would all go and be very happy.

LEVINE: Do you remember the tree? I mean, like, did some people go and cut it down, or--?

FINNEMA: Yes, it was a fresh tree, and they had it all full of candles. Of course, at that time they didn't have the lights like we have today. They were real candles, but there were men there that watched it! [Laughs] But it was nice. And then we had a regular program, and then when we got home, we always got a box of candy, a book, and an orange. And that was the only orange we got for the whole year! [Laughs] So, but it was nice. And we had a beautiful church, too. We went to church, and my father was very active, when he was living, in the church. And my mother, we all went, as a family.

LEVINE: What was your father's name?

FINNEMA: Gerba, G-E-R-B-A. Gerba.

LEVINE: Gerba. And your mother's name?

FINNEMA: Elizabeth.

LEVINE: And her maiden name?

FINNEMA: Vanderbrug.

LEVINE: Vanderbrug, B-R-U-G?

FINNEMA: B-R-U-G, yes, Vanderbrug.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And how about brothers and sisters?

FINNEMA: I had two sisters and one brother. My older sister Ann passed away a year ago last June. Well, the first of June. And then my sister Hilda has been gone, I would say, about twenty years. She had cancer. My other sister had Alzheimers. And my brother is at the Lincoln Street Nursing Home. He's been there now fifteen years. He had a massive stroke, and his right side is paralyzed. And it also affected his speech. So he's there in the wheelchair in the nursing home. But I go to see him whenever I have a chance, which isn't very often because we don't have a car anymore. Gary can't drive; he hasn't driven for four years, and so I don't get to see him as often as I would like. But, anyway, and then I'm the youngest of the four.

LEVINE: Oh, you're the baby?

FINNEMA: Yes.

LEVINE: So how about grandparents? Did you have grandparents in the Netherlands?

FINNEMA: No, not in the Neth—I had an aunt. My father had one sister, and she lived in Sneek, and that's spelled S-N-E-E-K, Sneek. And she had—they had a very lovely home, and she had one daughter, and they were very good to us as a family, you know, especially after my father passed. It was hard for my mother to bring up a child after her husband died, you know. That's not easy.

LEVINE: Why don't you—wait, just let me pause for a second here. [Tape off/on] Okay, we're resuming now, having corrected the hearing aid noise.

FINNEMA: Yeah, noise, mm-hm.

LEVINE: Okay, let's see. We were—why don't you tell the story of your father, and how he died young?

FINNEMA: Yes, he died young, and he died of pneumonia. And he was only forty-one years old, because he was going to be forty-two in November, I guess. But anyway, he was forty-one when he died, and that's young [laughs]. And he had pneumonia. And he had been working; they were building a new Christian school in that area, and he collapsed. And he hadn't been feeling good, and my mother didn't want him to go to work, but he wanted to go. Well, anyway, that's part of the story. But he died, anyway, when he got home, he passed away.

LEVINE: Now, was he a carpenter?

FINNEMA: No, he was working there on the Christian school. It was rather hard work for him to do. He wasn't too well a man, you know. All his married life he wasn't too well, but that's beside the point.

LEVINE: Now how old were you when he actually died?

FINNEMA: I wasn't born. My mother was—

LEVINE: Oh, your mother was pregnant with you!

FINNEMA: --was four months pregnant when he died. So you see, that wasn't easy, to bring up a small baby, and that you have three. Let's see, Ann was ten, and Hilda was seven, and Bill was five, and then I was on the way, and it wasn't easy. Of course, she had children in between that, too, that died.

LEVINE: Now, can you remember any, either your mother later, or anybody else, actually having a child, giving birth, I mean, how it was done in the town that you lived in?

FINNEMA: Well, you had a midwife. My mother had a certain lady, and she took care of all four of her children [laughs], and this is what they did. They had the babies at home. And she was a very good lady; she was very good to my mother in other ways, too. She was a very nice person.

LEVINE: And how about the church? What kind of a part did that play in your life as a child?

FINNEMA: Well, we went to the Reformed Church in Holland. Where we go now is what they call the Christian Reformed Church. But my father wasn't, didn't approve of that. There was a separation years ago between the Reformed Church and the Christian Reformed.

LEVINE: Oh, really?

FINNEMA: Yes. The Reformed Church is really the Church of Holland. That's the Church of Holland; that's where the Queen goes. But the Christian Reformed was in when? Early sixties, I would say, 1860 something, that started that. It was a certain group that started that. But my father never—we always were for the Reformed Church, and that's where we went. In Holland, the Reformed Church is almost more like the Presbyterian Church. Like, their catechism, their rules and regulations, are similar to the Presbyterian Church. But of course when we came here, we couldn't speak English, naturally. And of course, the Church, everything was in the Holland language: your sermons, your catechism, your Sunday School. Of course, when we came here, that was nice for us, because that's what we could understand. But this is America, and we have to learn English. The first thing our cousins told us when we came to this country: "You're in America. You've got to speak English!" And we did!

LEVINE: Now, between the Christian Reformed and the Reformed—you were in the Reformed Church in Holland—

FINNEMA: In Holland.

LEVINE: And when you came here, you were—

FINNEMA: Christian Reformed, because it was in the Holland language. That's what we could understand. There was no Reformed Church here; it was just the Christian Reformed. And all our relatives went there, so we automatically went there, and I still am a member there.

LEVINE: I see. Well now, getting back to when you were still in Holland, what do you remember doing, like on a given day, a little girl, before you left?

FINNEMA: Well, Christmas was always a big event. I told you, not only church. But of course, you have two holidays there. The sixth of December is really Christmas, like, for the children. That's when you have your gifts, and that's when Santa Claus comes, you know. And it used to be, if we went to school, the day that Santa Claus arrived from the North Pole, see, he came in a big barge down the canal, and he would have—he'd be on a beautiful white horse, and he had a white robe on, and he had a crown with gold on it, and he had a gold staff. And he would ride down the street, and the kids, all of us, were elated! Saint Nicholas, of course, that's Saint Nicholas! And we were elated! And then we'd get maybe a book, or something. He'd give things, you know? Of course, if you were bad, then [unclear] Piet, they called him, Swarte Piet. He was all painted black, and he had a bag on his—with two feet sticking out. That was supposed to be a bad boy or girl, you know. But anyway.

LEVINE: What did you call him before you called him—[Unclear] Pete?

FINNEMA: Swarte Piet.

LEVINE: No, was there another name for him?

FINNEMA: No, Swarte Piet. He was Black Peter, because he was all painted black [laughs]. And he was the one that picks up the bad boys and girls. That went along with the children. Well, we didn't have much at all; we didn't have much in the line of money or gifts or anything. But my aunt that lived in Sneek, she always sent us a nice big [unclear]. We always got a nice gift, maybe a nice sweater, or something of that order. And then she always had nice pastry, you know. We always got a big chocolate, each one our own initial, you know. Mine would be E, you know. And we'd get that, along with a gift, and a lot of cookies. She used to make nice cookies, and she sent—we always looked forward to that. That was [unclear], you know. But then, the real Christmas, the twenty-fifth of December, was in the church. That was a holy day. No gifts, you know, it was sacred, and we went to church, and so on. But it was nice.

LEVINE: This aunt that sent you the gifts on Saint Nicholas's Day—did you see her?

FINNEMA: Oh, yes! I went there often. I used to go with my mother. We had what we called a tram. It was on the same idea as a trolley car, on that idea. And we used to go to Sneek from Heerevaen. My two older sister and brother were already in school, see, so I was the youngest. I wasn't in school. But the neighbors would take care of them, and I would go with my mother to my aunt, because she used to have—I told you, she had a beautiful home. And we'd go over there, and she'd help her, because around the holidays, especially. She was a lady, [laughs] if I ever had a picture. She was a beautiful woman!

LEVINE: What was her name?

FINNEMA: Tante. We called her Tante. That means Auntie. Tante [Unclear].

LEVINE: Now, was she your mother's sister?

FINNEMA: No, she was my father's sister. My father only had the one, excuse me, had only the one sister. And then we would go over there, and my mother and I would sit—we'd sleep in the alcove. She always had an alcove off the living room, you know. And my mother and I—I can remember going on the tram—

- LEVINE: How do you spell that, tram?
- FINNEMA: We spelled it T-R-A-M, tram. [Laughs] And go there. And then my cousin was there; she had the one daughter, and she had a bicycle, and she put me on the back of the bicycle, and take me all around town! [Laughs] So, those are the good memories I have of Holland. And then we came here. It was, it was nice coming here and meeting all our cousins and everything. Of course, we couldn't talk to them at first, but we soon picked it up, yeah.
- LEVINE: Uh-huh. Now what else did you do for enjoyment? Did you have grandparents who were alive?
- FINNEMA: No. They were all gone. The only one we had in Holland was my aunt, my mother's sister. And the grandparents had died long before, you know.
- LEVINE: This aunt was your father's sister—your mother didn't have sisters or brothers?
- FINNEMA: My mother, all her sisters were already in Whitinsville. That's why. She had one brother, and he's the one that paid for our way over here, because after I was born, they wanted us, as I say, right away. But—
- LEVINE: If you need to stop, you can—
- FINNEMA: No, [unclear]. He just has to go to the bathroom; I hope he's all right. So anyway, where was I?
- LEVINE: The brother of your mother—
- FINNEMA: My mother's brother—he paid for our way over here, because—
- LEVINE: And he was already here?
- FINNEMA: He was already here. My mother's sister were already—she had four sisters, and they were already here, too.
- LEVINE: And then the war broke out.
- FINNEMA: And then the war broke out the first time, so we had to stay another three years. So, I was three years old the first time that we were going to go, and see, I was eight, so we had to wait five years before we could go. Then, he paid for our way, he was [unclear], because my mother was a widow. It was hard, you know, and especially during the war. There

were many, many times that we didn't have much to eat, either. Because everything was rationed. But we managed.

LEVINE: What else do you remember about those war years?

FINNEMA: Well, it wasn't very pleasant, because my mother used to work for these rich people, and sometimes they would get things black market. And she would, like, this one of the ladies would give my mother, for over Saturday and Sunday, some tea and some coffee, and a few things, so she could make herself a cup of tea, you know, during the war. But everything was rationed. It wasn't very pleasant. So then afterwards, when my uncle did send the money, and we came, we planned to go to America. My mother's cousin, who was a minister, who lived not too far from where we lived, and he was very good to my mother. He took her to Rotterdam to get the passport, and things like that, you know. And I can remember going there for Sunday dinner, you know, sometimes. A very nice man. So it wasn't all bad. There was a lot of good things, too.

LEVINE: Can you remember any times, any experiences that you remember fondly, about being there? I mean, you mentioned Saint Nicholas's Day. Were there any other times that--?

FINNEMA: Oh, there were things, I don't know, to me, some people it must make sense, but my mother used to make an arrangement with one of the neighbor ladies, because the night before Christmas we always have peipernuten, you know, the little round, you know? Edith makes them.

LEVINE: How do you spell that?

FINNEMA: Oh, piepernuten. P-I-E-P—oh, I don't—

LEVINE: It's pepper nut, right?

FINNEMA: Pepper nut, but we call it piepernuten [laughs]. I don't know off hand just how I spell it, but anyway, she'd make arrangement with this lady, one of the neighbor ladies. And of course we kids—all of a sudden there'd be a banging on the door, you know. My mother said, "Who's at the door?" And she'd say to Hilda, "Go to the door and see who's there?" And my mother would have a whole bag; my mother had bought them at the bake shop, piepernuten, and she'd give them to this lady. And she'd throw them all on the floor! [Laughs] And we'd all land on the floor, and get [unclear], see who could get the most, you know! Like kids would. But other than that, we didn't have too much; we were poor.

LEVINE: How about skates, skating?

FINNEMA: Well, I didn't skate. My sister Ann did, and Hilda. They skated, but I didn't. My mother had a nice pair of skates, because she was a good skater when she was young, you know. As a matter of fact, we had them here, and my nephew wanted to borrow them one time, and I never saw them again! But I have Gary's father's skates here. He used to be a racer. You know, they had to, when there was ice, and then you'd have to go through thirteen counties! And his father won the prize, and I got the skates that he—

LEVINE: Oh, how wonderful!

FINNEMA: Yeah, there right in that chest there.

LEVINE: So this would be an annual event?

FINNEMA: An annual event, oh yes. And some of those Dutch people are really wonderful skaters, you know. They just sway back and forth. Because we had this couple that live here, the Skitannises, and they like to skate. And one time Cade Pond here was frozen; it was one of those cold winters, and her and her husband, her and Gerba, they'd go like this, you know, and they'd sway along, and they'd skate. Oh, beautiful skaters, yeah! Of course, everybody had skates in Holland, but my mother—we were, as I say, we were poor. My mother couldn't afford it. But my sister Ann got skates, and Hilda. They both skated.

LEVINE: Now how about the canals in general? Can you think of any either experiences on the canals, or--?

FINNEMA: Oh yes, it was nice! Because I can remember, most everybody had a little boat, you know, and you'd go down to the canal. And I can remember this man—it was when I was just a small child—but I can still remember this man, "Would you like a ride?" you know, on the canal? [Dutch] [laughs].

LEVINE: What is that?

FINNEMA: [Laughs] Come in the boat. And I would go, and I'd tell my mother, you know, and okay, I'd have a ride on the canal with him. But it was nice. Other than that, I don't know so much, you know. I was only eight. But my sisters there, they—well, they had friends, and they went out, you know, for walks. Of course, you didn't have much money. You had to entertain yourself in the best way you could. You know, you'd go for long walks. Oh, we had a very nice park. They called it the orjanje wout.

LEVINE: How do you spell that?

FINNEMA: O-R-J-A-N-J-E, orjanje, and then wout was W-O-U-T, orjanje wout. And it was a nice park, and they had bird and everything else. That would be our entertainment.

LEVINE: How about music? Was there any music or dancing?

FINNEMA: Not so much dancing, but music. We used to sing a lot, you know, and even like sometimes on a Sunday, Sunday night, we'd have supper, and my mother'd say, "Well, let's sing a hymn." And my mother and the four of us kids, we'd all sing them. You know, in Dutch they sing—they take the Psalms, and they put it to music. And they're sung as [pause] wait a minute now. They're sung as a chorale. All the notes are of even length. Like, I know still some of the hymns, a couple of them, that I learned in school in Holland, like the sixty-eighth Psalm.

LEVINE: Could you sing like a part of one?

FINNEMA: Oh, no, I can't [laughs]. No, I don't want to do that.

LEVINE: No? Okay.

FINNEMA: And the forty-second Psalm, the sixty-eighth Psalm. Yeah, we used to—

LEVINE: And they were all equal notes, of equal length?

FINNEMA: All the notes. I have a little Dutch Psalm book. But all the notes are of equal length. I don't know just where they are. If I had known, I should have—they're like—well, I can't find it now. I know that it's in the drawer, but that's the way—

LEVINE: Is this a little book that you brought from--?

FINNEMA: A Psalm book. We brought it to church, and that's what we sang.

LEVINE: And you brought that from the Netherlands to this country?

FINNEMA: Oh, yeah, and we have some. But most of them you could buy because in Grand Rapids there was a lot of Dutch printing, and New Jersey, too. So yeah, and of course as I say, when we first came here, the first two years that we were in this country, it was still all Dutch, your catechism, your Sunday School, your sermons. But then, Dr. Baume, he went to Harvard. He was a student at Harvard, and he could, of course, speak English. So he decided—well, he talked to a lot of people, the [unclear] and so forth. He said, "You know, you have a lot of young people here, and you are in America." And he says, "These people have got to learn the English language." So he used to come down I think it was every

other Sunday, and he'd preach at night. See, we used to have services ten o'clock in the morning, three o'clock in the afternoon, and then he would preach at night in the English language. Well of course, you learned English all week in school, and it was—so the kids, and all of us kids, we loved that, English. But the old people were very against it at first. But of course, now it's all different, because everything's English. Everything. The only thing, well there's one Christmas song that we have in our hymnal, and you can either sing it in Dutch, or you can sing it in English, you know. [Dutch] is the name; it's a Christmas hymn. And so at Christmas, the minister will always say, "Those who can sing it in Dutch, sing it in Dutch. If you can sing it in English, sing it in English." And it's kind of nice [laughs].

LEVINE: Now, the title of that—what does the title mean?

FINNEMA: Eere? Eere means honor—Honor the Lord.

LEVINE: Honor the Lord.

FINNEMA: Yes,

LEVINE: Now, could you spell that, the title, in Dutch?

FINNEMA: In Dutch, it's spelled: eere is spelled E-E-R-E, and then God is G-O-D, but the G you pronounce [H sound].

LEVINE: God, I see, uh-huh. Well, so as far as other recreation that maybe your mother had, what would they do for recreation? Or your mother, just your mother?

FINNEMA: My mother. Well, we didn't do much. We made our own fun. As I say, we'd sit around the table as a family. We'd play dominoes, or anything like that, any game like that, and we'd sit around the table. That's the way, they call it—what do they call it? Kenya, we used to call it. What do they call it here? Oh, they have a lot of it going around the different churches.

LEVINE: Bingo?

FINNEMA: Bingo, it's on that idea, and they call numbers, you know. But we used to play, we used to do that, you know, as kids. And that was—we made our own fun. We didn't have any money to spend on anything else. And it was the same when we first came here. Everything was strange, and we had to learn the language. But it was—as children, I mean, going to school, it seemed in no time at all I was talking English. You know, you're in it every day, and you soon learn. But we all had to start in the

first grade, to learn the language, see. And this girl that goes to the Women's Club, Christian Women's Club, it's once a month—we were talking about that. And I said to Frances, "Yeah," I says, "Your mother was my first teacher in the first grade." [Laughs] Yeah, so, yeah, that was—it was quite an experience to come to another country when you can't speak the language. Of course my older sister, when she was married, her and her husband and daughter went to Holland, because his folks were still living, and they spent three months there. And they enjoyed it! The only thing [laughs], they had one daughter, Louise, and they have a Dutch dish, supenbrae we called it, it's made with buttermilk. And Louise says to her mother, "Mommy, I don't like that Dutch soup, that sour soup," she said. So she explained it to Peter's father. She said, "Well, if she doesn't like it, she doesn't have to eat it," you know. But that's what she called it, she called it sour soup. It's made from buttermilk, you know. But to the Dutch people, it's quite a treat. There's even a lady upstairs here, she's Dutch, and she makes it. And then this other lady who lives next door in the retirement home here, she'll go over and she'll say, "Das heerlich." That means delicious! [Laughs]

LEVINE: And what did you call it, the name of the soup?

FINNEMA: Supenbrae. [Laughs] No, don't put that—it's already on it? I should be careful what I say [laughs].

LEVINE: Okay, let's see, anything else about food that you remember the Netherlands?

FINNEMA: Well, I think, of course, as I say, my mother being a widow, and when we first came here, of course Ann—when we came here, Ann was seventeen, Hilda was thirteen, and Bill was eleven, and I was eight. So my sister Ann got a job in a shop. And my mother got a job in a shop, and she hated it! And my sister Hilda got a little job as housework. Bill and I were home, and my grandmother took care of my brother and I. He was eleven, and I was eight. But then when we went to school, and then my mother stopped working, and things changed, which—for the better.

[End of Side A/Start of Side B]

LEVINE: Before you left there, were there any customs that you remember over there, that either got dropped when you came here, or changed somewhat?

FINNEMA: What do you means, customs?

LEVINE: Any ways of doing things. How about dress? Do you remember that?

- FINNEMA: Oh, well, we came—yeah, well we dressed just like the other people do. When we came here, yeah, we just had our ordinary clothes. But of course, in those days you didn't have a car or anyway, but you sent for things. You had, like, so many catalogs. And my sister Ann, she was working in the shop, and she was working with this lady, and this lady could speak Dutch a little bit. And so she said, "You know, I'd like a new dress." She said, "Well, you know what we do here? We have catalogs, and then you send out of it." And she says, "I'll show you how to make out an order." So she taught Ann how to make out an order. From that day, we had some nice clothes! Because we all worked, and we all—and Ann would make out the order, so—
- LEVINE: How about the clothing in the Netherlands? Do you remember?
- FINNEMA: Well, it was similar to here. I wish I had some—I have a lot of pictures how we looked when we came from Holland?
- LEVINE: Oh, yeah?
- FINNEMA: Yeah, yeah.
- LEVINE: Can you describe it for the tape, how you looked when you came?
- FINNEMA: Oh, it's hard. In one picture, it was my mother and I—I was a baby then—and my two sisters. And they both had white and black checkered dresses on, because they were still in mourning for my father. You know, they mourned a lot in the old country.
- LEVINE: Oh, really? How long?
- FINNEMA: Oh, my mother wore black for a long time. And my sisters, Hilda and Ann both had—I have pictures of that, of the white and black checkered dresses, and black stockings and shoes [laughs]. And as a matter of fact, seeing I was born after my father's death, one lady says, "You know," she says, "I'm making her a Christening outfit." She made a bonnet and a dress, and what do you suppose she trimmed it with? Black. I said to my mother afterwards, "That was terrible to put white and black on a baby!" [Laughs] But she thought she was doing a favor, and she thought it was the right thing to do, so—
- LEVINE: Do you remember any of those kind of ritual things, like weddings or funerals, in the Netherlands, that were different--?
- FINNEMA: Well, at that time my mother told us when my father passed away, they would put a robe on him, like say, a choir robe? It was white, my mother

said—she explained it to me—and it had a big black bow all the way down. And that's the way—what they do. They don't put on their own clothes; they just put a robe on him in the casket, and that's the way he was buried. Where here, you're fully dressed.

LEVINE: I see. Let's see. Is there anything else about the old country, when you think about the Netherlands?

FINNEMA: My niece, the one that lives in, her summer home now in—oh, what is it? Duxbury, she lives in Duxbury. She has a beautiful summer home there. All her kids are there just now. And, now, what did I start? Oh, and when we came here, well, it was different, with the clothes and everything, but we slowly got used to that, yes.

LEVINE: Now do you remember when you first heard you were going to leave?

FINNEMA: Yes, well, my mother talked about it, and in a way she hated to leave, you know, because she said, "We don't know the language," and so on. But my folks out here in Whitinsville, they kept writing and writing, and my uncle said, "Don't worry about the cost; I'm paying for everything." And he did; he paid for all five of us, which was nice. So, and he was the only brother she had. And they've always been good to us, very good, because we didn't always have the best of everything. And then pretty soon, well, I went to school. Two of us went to school. But Ann worked, but Ann was a saver. She was always a thrifty one. But she was very good. And Hilda took up sewing, and she was a seamstress, so she made me a dress, [laughs] different things like that. But I don't know if these things matter.

LEVINE: Yeah, well, they're all interesting. So, okay, so when you left, do you remember what your mother took with you, or what you brought?

FINNEMA: Well, we had—my mother's friend, whose husband was the carpenter, made these huge boxes, oh, bigger than this table, you know, square, and as high as that. And we—I even have my mother's old sewing machine from Holland here, and I sewed on it a lot. I made a lot of things. It's one of these you can turn with hands, you know. And it's well over a hundred years old, because she bought it when she was seventeen years old. She started working. The first thing she bought was a sewing machine. So that went along to America.

LEVINE: Anything else you can remember that came along?

FINNEMA: Well, my mother had some nice things in Holland. She had a nice stoofkje. We called it a stoofkje. You put it on your table when you have tea. I have one in here. And if you have company—like, I do this a lot in

the winter. Then I call my Dutch friend who's upstairs down. I says, "Jean, come on down. Have a cup of tea." And especially if it's a cold, wintry day, then I have that stoofkje going, and with a teapot on it, and we sit here and we have tea [laughs].

LEVINE: How do you spell stoofkje?

FINNEMA: S-T-O-O-F-K-J-E, stoofkje. Oh, my mother had a beautiful one, and she gave it to my sister. I missed out on that one. The one I got there is Gary's grandmother's stoofkje.

LEVINE: So that came to this country, too?

FINNEMA: Yes, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And did you personally, as an eight year old, bring anything that you didn't want to leave behind?

FINNEMA: No, I didn't have—we didn't have much! You know, we brought just the clothes, and as I say, my mother brought the sewing machine, and a few things. Not much. But other than that, we didn't have too much to bring. We were glad to get here, and so on.

LEVINE: Now, do you remember leaving, the departure?

FINNEMA: Yes, we went to—we stayed with a cousin of mine in Rotterdam, and then they took us to the boat the next day, and we slept there the last night we were in Holland. I can remember that, that's all. And from there we went on the boat.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And the name of the boat?

FINNEMA: New Amsterdam.

LEVINE: And do you remember anything about the passage?

FINNEMA: It's cost, you mean?

LEVINE: Well, anything about the trip over.

FINNEMA: Well, I think, well Bill and I, see, we were eight and eleven. We went for fifty dollars each. And my mother and my two sisters were a hundred dollars each, for passage.

LEVINE: And what were your accommodations on the boat?

FINNEMA: Oh, they were very good! We had good meals and everything. And then, of course, Bill being the only boy, he had to be downstairs with the men. And so of course my mother felt bad, and she—the Captain was very nice, and he was very sympathetic, and he spoke Dutch also. And he says, “Don’t be afraid. I’m going to take care of your son,” he said, because she was worried about him. He was eleven at the time. And she said, “Well, it’s my only boy,” she says. So he says, “Don’t you worry. I’ll take care of him.” It was very good; they were very good.

LEVINE: Now, were you in steerage? Were you in Third Class? Were you in a cabin?

FINNEMA: We were in a cabin, yes.

LEVINE: And were there any events that happened en route?

FINNEMA: Well, we had a couple days when it was pretty stormy, when it was up and down, you know? And seasick, oh man! Yeah, the first two days, you know, everything was so good on the tables. And, “Come and eat!” the Captain says; we did. But oh, then everybody got seasick. You know, that was the end of the food! [Laughs] But it was a good trip. And but when we landed into Ellis Island, my brother was always on the ball, and he looked, and he said, “There’s Uncle Hetsen,” he said to my mother. “There’s Uncle H—”. He remembered him from the picture, you know?

LEVINE: What was his name?

FINNEMA: Hetsen, H-E-T-S-E-N, Hetsen. He says, “Oh, there’s Uncle Hetsen!” And my mother says, “You stay here!” She was so afraid he was going to get lost! [Laughs] So anyway, they were very nice on Ellis Island, you know.

LEVINE: Do you remember any examinations, or any procedures?

FINNEMA: Oh, yes, you were there, and your eyes. And they weren’t too gentle, either, you know. Of course, there were so many people, and there were all kinds, all nationalities, you know. And there was one lady there in our room, and she kind of clung to my mother. And her boyfriend—she came alone, and her boyfriend was supposed to meet her. She was supposed to get married. But we had to go, because my uncle came after us, and I don’t know what ever became of her, whether her boyfriend ever came or not. I don’t know. He was supposed to meet her at the boat. What ever happened to her, I don’t know.

LEVINE: Did you stay overnight at Ellis Island?

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FINNEMA: I don't think so. I'm not sure about that, but I don't think so, because we, as I say, my brother Bill saw my uncle, and so we were all anxious, you know, to get there. So there he was, with another man. And so from there we went on the train to Whitinsville. And then they had a truck there, and they took them to one of my aunt's. They live up on the Williams Hill, the other end of town. And that's where we landed, up on Williams Hill. So it was quite a trip. We were ten days on the water, on the ocean.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And do you remember when you first got to this country, any of the things that struck you?

FINNEMA: Well, I came to the—we came to my aunt's, and of course all the children there speaking English! I looked at one, and I looked at the—[laughs]. And my sister says, "We'll never learn this. We'll never learn." I says, "I don't know." I was only eight years old. But anyway, we soon picked it up. When you start going to school, you soon learn.

LEVINE: Mm-hm. How about things you saw? Did you see any things that, I mean--?

FINNEMA: On the water?

LEVINE: No, when you first got to this country, that you know, you'd never--?

FINNEMA: That impressed us?

LEVINE: Yeah.

FINNEMA: Well, of course, we were there I think two or three days up in Williams Hill. We stayed at my aunt's; she had quite a big house, and we stayed there. And then we lived—then we went to Goldthwaite Road. I don't know as you know where the Fairlawn Church is. You probably don't. It's at the other end of town. Well, we lived in the house directly across from that Fairlawn Church. Of course, at that time, the church wasn't there, and it was all pasture, and some had gardens there. And it was so different. It was really beautiful! When we first came to Goldthwaite Road, it was real country! And it was in the spring of the year; the trees were all in blossom. It was really beautiful! And so then, that's where we had four big rooms there. This man that owned the house, his wife had died the year before. So it was six big rooms, so he had the kitchen downstairs, the bedroom upstairs, and we had the other four rooms. So it worked out very nicely. Yeah, and we were happy to be there.

LEVINE: And then what did you mother do for work?

FINNEMA: Well, she used to do a lot of home nursing. You know, as I say, she didn't like working in a factory. She said she didn't think it was nice for a woman to work in a factory. And so anyway, she did a lot of that, home nursing. But that, you didn't get much money. I'll tell you that at that time—of course, everything was cheaper then, too. You've got to figure it that way. But she'd get two dollars a day; with that she had to take care of the mother, the baby, get the baby washed, and then the husband would come home at noon for dinner. She'd have to cook the dinner. And then she'd come home after supper. So that wasn't an easy job, either, but she enjoyed doing that. And she did that for a long time. She welcomed a lot of babies into the world [laughs]. Yeah.

LEVINE: And then you sister went to work right off?

FINNEMA: Yes, my sister Ann worked in the shop. She was seventeen. And she doesn't care too much about it. And then later on she got a job working for Mrs. Rainer. She was a former schoolteacher, and she worked there, her, and her husband was a foreman in the shop. And so she got a job there cooking. So she did that, and she liked that very much. She was a good cook. And my sister Hilda, well, what did she do? I don't know. She did a little of everything, I guess. And Bill and I were in school. Of course, Hilda had to go to school, too, because she was only fourteen or fifteen. She had to go to school, too.

LEVINE: And did you learn any new things here, like games, or--?

FINNEMA: Oh yes. We had neighbors near us there, and they had, I think, six children. Oh, yes! Well, children soon learn, and chime in with other kids. In no time at all, we were playing hopscotch, and all the other games that the children have. I think it was interesting.

LEVINE: Now, were you ever called, like, greenhorns? Or were you singled out for having just come to this country, in the beginning?

FINNEMA: No, I can't remember that. No, no, and I don't think that would be very nice, either [laughs].

LEVINE: No, no. It happened, though. It happened a lot, but maybe more in cities perhaps.

FINNEMA: Yes, maybe so. No, and I can't say but we went to church every Sunday, and so on, had to go to catechism, Sunday School. And then of course we had to learn that in English. The first few years that we were here was fine, because it was in Dutch, and we could learn that more

easily. But then when it was English, well, by that time we could speak English pretty well, so it wasn't that hard after all.

LEVINE: And then when did you stop going to school, and what did you do?

FINNEMA: Well, I only went through the eighth grade, because my mother worked so hard, and bringing us up. And my two sisters by this time were married. My brother had—in the meat business; he had his own meat business. And so I went to school; I was in the eighth grade, and I quit, because I felt so sorry for my mother. I said, "I'll get a job." And so I said to her, "Ma, you stay home." So that's what I did. And then I worked in the shop for quite a few years. And then, before that, I took care of Mr. Brown; he had brain cancer, and I took care of him. And then the doctor wanted me to go in training. I says, "I can't, because I don't have the money. I don't have the money, and," I says, "I didn't go to high school." But at that time you only needed two years of high school. But I said, "I can't afford that anyway."

LEVINE: Is that something you would have like to have done?

FINNEMA: Oh yes, because after I got through—worked twenty-seven years in the White Machine Works as a Purchasing Inspector. Then after I got laid off—it was a big lay-off, and I was one of them. And so then I went to work in Saint Camillus. That was a hospital for chronic diseases, where you had cancer, heart, stroke, anything like that. And I loved it. I worked there, and I retired from there. I liked it. And then after I retired from there, then Northbridge Nursing—I had been home for probably eight months. And I met this other girl who worked with me at Saint Camil. She said, "Do you know that they want help in Northbridge Nursing? How would you like to go back to work?" Well, I wasn't as old as I am now, so I says, "Well, let's go up." And I didn't think they would hire me. "You can start right away, if you wanted to." [Laughs] I says, "No, no way. I'll start Monday." This was on a Thursday. I says, "I'll start the beginning of the week." So then I worked two and a half years there, and then I quit for good.

LEVINE: So when did you meet your husband?

FINNEMA: [Coughs] Well, I had a very good friend [laughs], and it happened to be Gary's cousin. And Gary's mother had been very sick, so her father said, "I want to see my sister." They were living in Blackstone. And, "I want to see my sister," she'd been very sick. So he wanted to go on the bus, and my friend Gert said, "No way are you going on the bus. I'll take you by car." So we went up there, took the car and went up there. So we walked around a little bit, and then we came back to the house, and there was this young man sitting here [laughs]. And she says, "Oh,

here's my cousin Gary." She said, "I want you to meet him." So he had a—he worked in some mill in Woonsocket, but he also had a dog food business. So he was sitting downstairs, at the bottom—downstairs from his house. So that's how I met him, and that's how it happened. And if all goes well, and he lives 'til the ninth of September, then we'll be married forty-five years. Yeah. It was nice. We had a good marriage. He was very good to me, very considerate. I've had cancer twice, and I almost died the first time. And when I came home, four weeks in the hospital and then I came home, I still couldn't do anything. He washed, he ironed, he sewed. He's a beautiful sewer, you know [laughs]! He did everything, yeah. He was a good husband. I never regretted being married, and I was thirty-eight when I got married, and he was forty-one, so we weren't too young. But I've had other boyfriends, but I guess this was it.

LEVINE: Oh, that's nice. Now his name is Gary—

FINNEMA: Finnema.

LEVINE: Finnema. And do you have children?

FINNEMA: No. I did lose one. I mean, that is, by miscarriage. When I was forty, I became pregnant. I was four months pregnant, and then I lost it. It would have been nice if I had had just one, but that wasn't to be.

LEVINE: Right, mm-hm. So how is this time? I know it's difficult because you're taking care of your husband now, but this time of your life, after retirement?

FINNEMA: Well, I really enjoyed it, because I have some nice friends, and we go out. You know, we go out to eat, or here or there. Of course, now, I'm, well might I say tied down. Well, I said, because the other day when he had that bad spell he says to me, "Why don't you put me in a home?" I said, "Gary, as long as I'm able, I will take care of you." And I'm going to. Well, I've had enough experience in Saint Camillus Hospital. I know how to handle him. So anyway, that's it.

LEVINE: Yeah. How about any attitudes, or any ways that your mother tried to bring you and your brother and sisters up?

FINNEMA: I think my mother did a very good job bringing us up alone. We had to toe the mark, and sometimes we thought she was strict. But she says, "You know, some day you're going to thank me for it." She was strict; you didn't get away with anything. And that was all right, too. We had to be in at a certain time, or else, you know. And that's all right. I think some parents are too easy today.

LEVINE: How about advice? Would you have any advice for, you know, an eight year old who was immigrating to this country, you know, based on your experience?

FINNEMA: Well, I would say, if you came to this country, be sure they have good friends, and they go to a good school, and start them off right. Of course, now they have a beautiful Christian school here, they have right through high school, you know. And they have everything for those children. They have orchestra, they have band, they have everything! And they have a dress code and everything. They're very, very strict, but it's a wonderful, wonderful school.

LEVINE: Now, can anyone go to this school?

FINNEMA: Yes, yes. I think about a third of them are Roman Catholic, I think, and other nationalities, too. Some come from Worcester; some come from Northborough. They come from all over. And a lot of people have moved to town. I know one family, they have two daughters, and they came from Northborough. And she used to, when she first brought them, used to commute. And she said that was too much, so then they bought a condo. Now they live here. And there's so many, and a lot of them have joined the church, too. But, I think it's nice, wonderful school. And they have a dress code, and they don't get by with anything.

LEVINE: Now, what part would you say that the church has played in your life, since you came here as an immigrant?

FINNEMA: Well, I don't know how I'd word it. We have our rules and regulations that we go by. We were brought up, now, like going to catechism, and you know what's right, and what's wrong, and you abide by that. And you know, whatever you do in this world, you have to answer for someday. And it better be good. So, yeah. So, that's the way it is, but I think the church, and I think, now, some [unclear]. They came at Christmas time. There's two couples—three young couples from the church. One has three children, the other has two, three girls, and the other one has one. And they came here at Christmas. They called me; that was the first time they came from the church. They knew that Gary was a shut-in. "Could we come over?" I said, "Love to have you." All young couples, you know, they have three children. So they came; they brought food! Honestly, it was lovely! And, oh, it was so nice! And then Judy, she's a beautiful singer, too—she was a schoolteacher, and told us how she met her husband in the Christian school. And she talks to Gary, you know. She talks—she's very religious, and she says to Gary, because Gary doesn't belong to the same church I do, and a lot of the Dutch people resent him for that, which isn't right. I shouldn't say that [laughs].

LEVINE: [Unclear]

FINNEMA: But that's true. So she, Judy, will come over. There she'll sit on the divan with her—and talk to him. It makes me feel good. You know, he's such a good living person. He really is. Like, his brother was a wonderful violinist. Gary played the accordion, and they used to go, when they lived in Blackstone, to the Blackstone Grange Hall, where young people—because Gary will not drink, and his brother either. They will not drink. They'd have a group of young people. They'd entertain them, and they could dance. And then there was a quartet they had, Gary and his brother. They both were good singers, and they would had two other fellows. They'd have like a quartet, sing in church, sing for socials, things like that. He always led a good life, you know. He's a good, clean living fellow, yeah. But he does not—well, the reason—some things I hate to say on that. Like, I wouldn't say that now, but I'll say that when it's turned off.

LEVINE: Okay, well let's see. Is there anything else that you can think of, do you think, coming here as a young person? Do you think that made a difference in your life?

FINNEMA: Yes, I think, we were glad. This is a good country. I know there's a lot of things going on, but it's a good country, and I'm thankful we're here, yes. Although everybody was good to us in Holland, too, I will say they were wonderful to my mother! There was a—there were two brothers and a sister, and they were not—neither one of them were married. They were very wealthy, and they lived on our street. And they used to come over to our house. And when they heard we were going to America, they said, "Mrs. Vanderkuk, why do you want to do to America? We've helped you. We'd do anything for you." And they did. How often did they bring us a nice Sunday dinner, or things like that? But my mother says, "All my relatives are there; I have no one here." So, that was the reason.

LEVINE: Mm-hm. And how about your mother? Did she become a citizen?

FINNEMA: No, she didn't. She couldn't, see? As I say, everything was in Dutch. And she—no, she did not become a—it's too bad, that she said, "I wish you'd help me." But we had to go, you know, really go to school. You had to read, and do everything. We all became American citizens, you know, just as soon as we were old enough.

LEVINE: Was your mother happy she had come here?

FINNEMA: Yes, yes she was, after she got used to it. You know, it's a switch, from going from one country to another. Yes. There's a lot of nice things. My niece went down last year. Her—and she wanted me to go. I said, "No, I can't go." Her son is with the computer science, and they sent him to Amsterdam to teach. So he says, "I'm going for a week." So he says to his mother, "Pack your suitcase; you're going with me." So Betty says, "What can I bring you? I want to bring you something?" I says, "Oh, I don't know. I've got plenty of dishes." And I says, "Okay, bring me some blue Delft, sugar and creamer." It's beautiful; I'll show it to you. It's very nice. So she brought me that [laughs]. But she wanted to take me to Holland. Oh, it was about three years ago. But then Gary had to go to surgery. He had—one week he was operated on, too. On Monday, he was operated on for prostate, and on Thursday he was operated on for a kidney. He had a malignancy on the kidney; they took out one of his kidneys. So he couldn't. I said, "I won't leave him." So I never did get to Holland.

LEVINE: When you consider yourself, do you consider yourself sort of part Dutch and part American?

FINNEMA: I don't know. I think I'm all American, I would say. I mean, how can you say otherwise? This is a good country. And I think you should be glad that you live here. You're never without food, or any number of things, and it's a wonderful country to live in.

LEVINE: I think that's a perfect place to end. I want to thank you very much. It was a lovely interview.

FINNEMA: Oh, well thank you.

LEVINE: And I'm speaking with Else Vanderkuk Finnema, and she came at eight years old from Holland in 1920. And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and I'm signing off.

[End of Interview]