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ELLIS ISLAND ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interviewee: Cornelia Do
Interviewer: Amelia Green
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GREEN: Amelia Green interviewing Cornelia Do on October 25, 1981,
All Souls Unitarian Church. Now, Cornelia, please
tell me again when and where were you born?

DO: I am a native of the Netherlands. The city where I was
born was a small town at the sea, a capitol of the
Navy, and its called(?). And I was born in July, 1924.

GREEN: July, 1924. Now about your family background, your mother,
your father, your brothers or sisters.

DO: And was born onto a family where there was already one
child, an older brother about five years older. And
my father was a Hollander who had lived in many different
towns. He was a chemist and a pharmacist. He Worked as a
chemist for the city of Den Helder. My mother had been a
pharmacist aide; that's how they met each other, in the
pharmacy.

GREEN: (Chuckle)

DO: She came from the town of Edam, well known to the world
because the Edam cheese which is produced around there and is marketed in
the weigh house in Edam.

GREEN: Anything else? Well tell me, what do you most clearly remember about your home town and growing up as a child?

DO: My home town was on three sides of the sea. Towards the east was the harbor, the Navy port and the Navy college, and the Marines and there was Navy yard. And then there was a fishing harbor, the fisherman's harbor. And to the north was a little straight, a very strong current and that's where the dike was. And we lived just about two, one block away from the dike. There was a fort of the Coast Guard between my house and the sea and one street with a little canal. And from the roof of our house you could see over the dike into the water, into the sea. And you could see the ships coming by. And then towards the west was the North Sea. The home town had about thirty thousand inhabitants, and most of them were Navy people. But as I told you before, we were not Navy, and sometimes in school that got me to feel that I was, the children of the Navy families used to make you, to try to make you feel inferior because you weren't Navy. You were only a civilian. But my father had a very good antidote for that. He said, "Well, they have so little else." (Laughter)

GREEN: How far did you go un your education in schools?

DO: In that town I went through my junior year in high school.

And then the War came and we had to flee because the town was bombed by the Germans after the capitulation to the Germans. And then habitually by the RAF to hit the targets. And it was too dangerous there. It was just too frightful, and we fled and we lived in a town thirty miles south--(?) which is also a big cheese center. And I finished a gymnasium there. Then I went to college in Amsterdam and I went to the school for social work. So I have my education as a Social Worker in Amsterdam, Holland.

GREEN: What kinds of jobs have you held, both in Holland and here?

DO: Well, before I graduated, I did all kinds of things because

I was terribly interested in popular education and I worked in the folk high schools, mostly as a volunteer. And then when I became employed as a Social Worker, I worked for four years in the Netherlands railways as Social Worker for female personnel. It sounds ridiculous to me now that I would ever have accepted the job like that, but that was a very, very male oriented organization, the Netherlands Railways. And they used the female personnel as a buffer. If they needed more personnel, they hired females and they got rid of them by attrition because they didn't have any married women in their employ. If you got

married, you were fired. So one of the problems was that there were a lot of unmarried women there who were living in sin, and they had babies sometimes and they came to the social worker for advice and guidance, and I took care of that.

GREEN: Oh, no!

DO: And most, they were always office workers. So they were the middle-class office worker population. Also, there were a lot of problems (chuckle) with the women because they really held an inferior position. And very few of them could climb up in supervisory or professional parts because the engineers were never women in the railroad. It was unthinkable, although they had women engineers. There were never women engineers in the Netherlands Railroad. I mean, electro-technical engineers. I don't mean real train engineers, of course. No such thing. So I travelled all around the country to help straighten out personnel differences and difficulties these male oriented supervisors, station chiefs and things, had very often great difficulties to treat the female personnel properly. They would really tread on them in many ways and be disrespectful of their rights as workers.

GREEN: Were you employed by the government or by the railways?

DO: Well, the railways happens to be ninety-nine percent government owned in Holland, so it was more or less a civil service thing, but you were employed by the railways. It was different from state job. It was still railway employment.

GREEN: I understand. And in this country what type of work are you doing at the present time?

DO: At the present time I'm a Social Worker with elderly people and my job is with the city of New York Department of Social Service. I work in a day center for old people. It's now called a Senior Center. The people live in the neighborhood and they come to spend a day and to have a meal in the senior Center which is located in the city housing project in Long Island City.

GREEN: Yes, you told me about that. Thank you. Now you have a continuing interest in social work. Could you tell me when you were married and to whom?

DO: In 1952 I married Dennison Do who was an emigrant from french Indo China since 1942. And I met him in Paris, France in 1949. We lived in Manhattan for a year

and then we moved to Astoria, Queens, where we lived for twenty-five years. Presently we live in Long Beach, Long Island.

GREEN: Oh, I see. Now tell me, what kind of a picture did you have of America before you immigrated?

DO: I must say it was rather muddled, it was rather vague. Of course, I had studied in college about America, in high school about American history and international history and world history. And economic history in college, in which we studied a lot about the economy of America and its development. And I should have known a little more also about literature and knew something, but the vivid picture I had was of the crude Texan with the ten-gallon hat who didn't have much other culture than cowboys and things like that. And I didn't think--I took a lot of, I suffered a lot of offense by American Army personnel that came to liberate us after World War II. They stayed in our country and I found in general that, although they were jolly and easygoing, they were also very often crude and not well mannered. And I think that stood out in my head and I thought, if I go to America, that's what I'll meet by and large. Of course, I knew that there were scholars here but I was not prepared to meet any. I knew about the universities, the great universities, Columbia, Harvard, Princeton. I knew a lot about that, but I was not prepared to meet that part of America which was really of a high education or high culture. I was just thinking of the Texan with the ten-gallon hat.

GREEN: (Laughter) Did you ever go to Texas?

DO: No. I don't plan to go. (Laughter) I like it fine in New York.

GREEN: Now please refresh my memory about the story of your immigration. You met your husband-to-be, Dennison Do, in Paris, and then you--

DO: In 1949, yes. And we planned to get married in the fall of 1951. In the fall of 1951 I said, "Oh, yes, I finally gave into his wishes to marry me because he was never going to come back. And then I said, "Well, I have to marry this guy because I don't want to do without him." And we celebrated fantastically, and when he left on his ship, I found out I was pregnant. And so I had to hurry up and come to America a little earlier than I planned to come. (Chuckle) And he was very concerned that I should have the baby in Holland, but I wanted to be married before I had the baby. And so we had to rush up and get me here to America so I could get married here. And that is where my little immigration travels started. Shall I tell you about that now?

GREEN: Just briefly. You'd resolved that you had a deportation hearing?

DO: I had a hear-- First, I had a parole hearing on Ellis Island. And then I was paroled for a year because when I had--I thought, I came to America on the thirty-first of March. I was married on April 16, 1952, and the baby was born July 16 that year. And then in October or so, my visa had run out and I had a hearing, and they paroled me because I was instrumental in taking care of a little American citizen. And I couldn't be deported. I was given a stay of departure for a year. And after a year they told me I'd better get out. They said, "We will give you voluntary depart-- We will grant you voluntary departure in lieu of deportation." And I went back to Holland in September, 1953, pregnant again. And I applied for my immigration papers in Holland. Then I got them by January, 1954. So I came here again six months pregnant, and then I gave birth to my son in 19--, in May, 1954. And in 1958 we had another daughter. So that's my family.

GREEN: Thank you very much. Was the deportation hearing a very difficult thing for you?

DO: Well, this was not a deportation hearing. I think this was

a parole hearing. That was quite an excitement because I had to go there with my lawyer who was not an immigration lawyer. And he didn't prompt me, and I gave all the undiplomatic answers just as I thought they, I honestly could give them. But I could have given them a little bit more diplomatically and I might have had an easier time of it. But the interesting part of it was I took the four-month old baby with me to Ellis Island and with the lawyer, and the people in Ellis Island who were there behind bars for one reason or another said, "Oh, look how sad, such a little baby and in prison already," because it really was a prison. There were nothing but doors with keys and locks and locks and keys. And I think I must have gone through seven or eight doors before I got to the hearing room. They were all unlocked and locked behind me, unlocked before me and locked behind me.

GREEN: But you succeeded in--

DO: And they asked me why did you marry this man, and I said, because I wanted to. And then the lawyer said on the ferry back to Ellis Island , "Why didn't you tell them that you loved him?" I said, "Well, I don't say these private things to people in a courtroom." But that's what they wanted to know, you see, that I didn't do it for reasons of coming into the country in an easy way. But that's where I spoiled my immigration

hearing.

GREEN: Thank you very much. I think well--

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GREEN: Was your early life in America what you expected it would be like with ten-gallon hats on the streets of New York?

DO: Definitely not. The first week I came here my husband said he discovered a Dutch building. We lived on West 71st Street by West End Avenue and on West 76th Street on the corner of West End Avenue is the West End Collegiate Church and it looks like the Dutch building. It is a replica of an antique Dutch meat market in (?) Holland. And so I went there to church and was immediately greeted by some members of the congregation who spotted me as a Dutch girl and welcomed me there and welcomed in the family of the minister who was a scholar of Holland and of Dutch history. And he was the absolute opposite of what I had envisioned. He was a real, very scholarly erudite and liberal man, so liberal that he hardly belong to the Dutch Reformed Church, I think. And that's how I became a member there and met many fine people and was very happy in that

church for our first year here in Manhattan. It was my only social contact, as a matter of fact, except for one German lady who I met in the park who was babysitting. And that's where I learned to talk German, in Riverside Park, because we walked the babies together.

GREEN: And you never learned it back home?

DO: Yes, but not to speak it fluently like I speak English now.

I had to have studied seven years of German in high school, but I had never had a chance to speak it on a daily basis, so I became so fluent in German.

GREEN: You told me the last time that your Queen's community was very international. Was the Riverside Park community also international?

DO: I think so. I did meet a Norwegian baby nurse because I was always with the baby in the park, and the housewives would be in the park only until it got a little colder. The baby nurses kept coming, so I met an English baby nurse who was working for the Rockefeller family. And this Norwegian baby nurse who had been a bookkeeper in Bergen, Norway, and decided she wanted to see something of the world, so that's how she came. And this German lady

was here on invitation of a family because she had written a fantastic diary, anti-Hitler during World War II, very humanitarian it was. And she was here on the invitation of some friends from the Friends Society. And I met-- Of course, there were many Jewish immigrants on the West side at that time we had from before World War II. And I met some of those. My doctor was a Jew from Holland who lived about five blocks away from me. He was a very well respected physician in Amsterdam who had to flee for Hitler.

GREEN; So you could use your Dutch as well as English in your early days here.

DO: Well, i didn't speak Dutch except--no, I think maybe just for the fun of it. I had a Dutch friend in Queens. She was the only, she's the only Dutch person I still keep in contact with, in touch with. The Ditch Reformed Church, the West End (?) Church had a Dutch ladies circle, but I think I went there once or twice. They were much older than I and I didn't relate to them too well. And I have never really dug for Hollanders because I found out very early on that it is not the language, it's the common interest that people have that makes you friends.

GREEN: I see.

DO: And in, on the other hand, my husband had some Vietnamese friends here whom we had very nice contact with. Some of them were not people that you would want to be friends with and that was very interesting to us. So we didn't look at nationality or ethnic background very much really.

GREEN: You looked more for what people were inside themselves.

DO: What they were and what their interests were, and what our common ground would be. And that didn't stop at nationality level. And when I lived in Astoria, I was very interested to find many neighbors who were connected with the United Nations. And so it was really a little United Nations there. I remember there was one family who was Dutch. He was the night watch for the Dutch Consulate. And there was a Filipino Ambassador to the United Nations; also his chauffeur lived in the same development. So it was all ranks and different ethnic backgrounds. There was a very interesting group of people. I remember I stood on line in the supermarket one day and spoke to a lady who was Persian. And then I started to count, and I said, "You are the fortieth nationality I'm meeting here in the neighborhood." That was very interesting.

GREEN: Please refresh my memory, the names and the ages of your children.

DO: All right. First we had Lotus, born in July 1952.

GREEN: She was the baby in jail on Ellis Island.

DO: She was the baby in jail. Lotus (?). Those were her Baptismal names, although, of course, it's not Christian. That Vietnamese.

Lotus is the maiden of the charm of the spring. And then we had Kim, the son, Kim San Do, born in May, 1954. And then in 1958, in May, we had another girl, Ann Mi Do. And Vietnamese, Do Mi Ann would be the American girl of peace, peace American, Ann, and Mi, in Vietnamese. But in Dutch it would be sort of (?) and that's what she calls herself now, which is kind of a nickname for Anna Marie also.

GREEN: Wow! As to the raising of these three children, did you bring them up with Dutch, Indo Chinese or American culture? How and why?

DO: Very, very well question because it's easy to say all three of them. We tried to expose them to all three cultures and all three heritages. And it was very funny to notice that when my son was in fourth grade, people would say, "What are you?" And he said, "I'm half Dutch, half Vietnamese, and all American." But when I asked him when he was in high school, this was in the sixties, I said,

"What are you?" He said, "I am a person." Because he didn't want to have any ethnic connotation attached to him since this was the time of ethnic awareness and first Black awareness and the Asian awareness. Oh, no, no, no, I made a mistake. In junior high school, you would ask him what was he. He said, "I am a person." And then in high school, I asked him, he said, "I'm an Asian American," with the ethnic awareness. And now I think only my oldest daughter feels that she's a third-world person because she's very involved with ethnic art and intercultural communications in art. And she teaches ethnic art. and this is her major in her graduate studies. And the other two are just people. They don't think of their Asian-Dutch background as much any more. They just pride themselves in whatever they are doing in their profession. My son is an artist and a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania. Has his degree in fine arts. And my daughter Ann has a degree in liberal arts with a major in drama-literature from NYU. And I think they're involved in, she's involved in the theater and doesn't think of any ethnic connotations except that it pays off for her because she's very pretty as an Asian, a caucasian person, and that pays off for her quite a bit. She gets jobs easily and she bears herself well. She's popular because of her beauty, I think. My husband was right when he asked me to marry him because we

would have beautiful children. They are indeed. I think they are beautiful. (chuckle)

GREEN: Last time you were telling me a very interesting story about how your husband rediscovered his family roots after being away for so long.

DO: Oh, yes. He left his home in 1938 because his father wanted him to step into his father's role as head of a large family, the oldest son of an oldest son of an oldest son, et cetera, and have a wife chosen for him whom my husband did not to marry. So through a cousin he got his seaman's papers and ran away and became a merchant seaman in the French Merchant Navy, and then in the Free French Merchant Navy. Then when he came to America in 1942, he got sick and was in seaman's hospital when his ship took off. And so he was ashore waiting for his ship to return and then he had a chance to get into the American Army instead of into the , back into the French Navy. And so he chose to remain in America as an American soldier. And after three months they made him a citizen because you couldn't serve as a foreigner in the American Army. And so he circumvented very neatly the difficulties that Asians had in those days to become American citizens. And some of his friends did the same thing, I think. He was one of a

group of about six that he knew of who were Vietnamese who became American citizens by serving in the American Army during World War II. Then after World War II, he had GI rights and he could study under the GI Bill of Rights at college. And he chose to study in Paris, and that's how I met him there, when he was a student in Paris, an American student in Paris.

GREEN: And you say recently after the Vietnam War, he rediscovered his family.

DO: In the meantime his family had to flee because they were under the Japanese and they were all dispersed and after World War II he couldn't find them back until 1960 when my son was in the hospital. And he took a trip off from the sea because by now he had become an American Merchant Marine. And he took a trip off because he wanted to be with the child that was in the hospital. Now he walked from Sixth Avenue close to Radio City, and he saw some oriental men. And he said, "By, golly, I went to school with that fellow," And he accosted him, and it turned out to be indeed that man that he had been to junior high school with or whatever it was. And he took two men home and they were in New York for one week, and indeed this man knew my husband's cousin who had helped him to his

seaman's papers. They were both in oil. This man worked for Texaco and my husband's cousin worked for Shell in Saigon. They fled from the north and continued their jobs in the south Vietnam in 1960. And after two months, there was not only a letter from my husband's cousin, but also from his favorite sister who now lives in Saigon. And, incidentally, she stayed there until 1979, to 1980, and just came out as a refugee after the fall of South Vietnam and is living in Paris. And now has her American immigration papers, and we expect her to come here soon.

GREEN: Oh, nice! Now also can you repeat a story you told me about singing hymns on board the ship when you were immigrating to this country from Holland?

DO: When I came to America, of course, I was Very much, I was very insecure of my future because I was engaged to this man and going to marry him, but I really had not too many ideas about what life was going to be like and after all I didn't know him all that well, although I had met him three years previously. But I didn't know him all that well. I had been together with him for maybe about two or three weeks in all, and in between it had been correspondence. So I was rather insecure, but there were a lot of other people on board ship that were also

immigrants, not so much to America, a few to America, but most of them went to Canada, especially to the neighborhood of Alberta because--Alberta is a province?

GREEN:GREEN: Yes.

DO: Yes. To the province of Alberta because that's where many
Hollanders went, to Toronto. After World War II, they couldn't go back to the Netherlands, Dutch Indies, the Netherlands, East Indies, because that had become independent and in that time they didn't want any Hollanders there at all. And so there was such an overpopulation in Holland that people had to find a place to go to. Foreign families didn't have land to spread around among their offspring. They had to send some people to go to farmlands someplace else. And many Hollanders went to Canada and New Zealand after World War II. And so that ship was full of immigrants and they were all very insecure. There was a minister on board ship that was going to a Methodist convention in America, and he organized hymn sings because in March the seas of the Atlantic are very rough, too. And we had fifty feet high waves there. And the ship was rather a small ship, the (?) and it was a very rocky ship. Later on they put stabilizers on, but that was a very rocky ship. And can

you imagine you went up fifty feet in the air and then the ship would plunge down in the valleys of the sea. And it was a very rough voyage. And the hymn sings were very well attended because people were afraid and insecure, and they found great, some of us singing of hymns on board ship. And I went, too, and I enjoyed it very much.

GREEN: Did you sing hymns in Dutch or in English?

DO: Oh, I sang mostly in Dutch. I don't remember. the Dutch hymnal was there. Maybe there was an English hymnal there, too. I don't remember.

GREEN: Of course, you say that many Dutch people knew English.

DO: Especially, many of the immigrants tried to learn some English before they go. But I think we spoke all kinds of languages on board of that ship. I remember there was also the (?) Choir, (?)?

GREEN: That's right.

DO: They were there. They were on board ship, too, so they sang in Russian, but they didn't come to the hymn sings for sure. (chuckle)

GREEN: Quite a voyage. Now, Cornelia, you've told me that from your own experience you've been an immigrant. Also you said that you had many neighbors in the two neighborhoods where you lived, that they were United Nations as you said at one point.

DO: Yes.

GREEN: And also as a social worker you must deal with immigrants. Could you give me some, a few, you see, of the biggest problems that you see that immigrants, both the old ones and the new ones, have in coming here?

DO: Well, the older people that are here now do not speak so much of their--yes, some of them do. Some of them--I have this lady, a Jewish lady, who came from Poland and she was only twelve, eleven years old and she lied about her age because of financial needs she had to go to work. And she said that she was fifteen. And she never learned to read or write in English. And up to this day she's, she can write her name now, but she can't read. And, well, she's in her eighties now. Some of the problems of the early immigrants were, of course, to be in the melting pot and to deny where they came from. And many of them had to

change their name. Mr. Brownstein had to become Mr. Brown. And in order to get a job they very often had to deny their ethnic background. And nowadays it's the opposite. And they were very much legal immigrants, even if they came here without a sponsor. They went through Ellis Island. They stayed there until they had a job and they could support themselves. Now these people are very disturbed about the present situation of all the illegal immigrants in this country. We had to work, we had to learn English, and nowadays the whole aspect of it has changed so much that I think there is a lot of resentment against immigrants as there always was, but in a different way, because they come here now and take jobs, although they are not legal immigrants and they are here illegally. And they take away jobs of people that are here legally. And their children go to school here and are accommodated by instruction in the native language which, I think, is grand as long as it goes hand in hand with teaching them English, too. But this is what people resent a lot, older people. The younger people that come in here, of course, if they come here legally, they still have the difficulty with finding jobs which very often they are better prepared I think. And they certainly do have better chances. I always seem to feel that the population that comes in new, even when they are refugees and they didn't come here

really of a free will, but because they had no other choice and somehow, well, willing to do work. We can see it here in our own church. We have refugees working in our, in the porter's jobs and in the kitchen jobs, and they do very well. And the refugees we have helped here in the church have all found good jobs and they have been able to adjust well. I don't know if I'm rambling; I think I am.

GREEN: This is all very interesting, very interesting indeed. And
I want to thank you very much for participating in our project. Thank you very much.

DO: Good luck, and thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW