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Adri Devries Part 1 - Holocaust Rescuers Interviews

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Altruistic Behavior Institute

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Sam and Pearl Oliner

Respondent: Adri Devries

Interviewer: Dr. Lawrence Baron

Date: Friday December 19, 1986

Location: In the home of Adri Devries

I. For the listeners' information, Mrs. Devries is 80 years of age. She is very sick and her voice will not show up very strongly. I intend to discuss with her some of the things that were involved in her rescuing of a little Jewish boy during WWII in her home of Harlan in Holland. She was a shopkeeper there. She was a woman in her 30s and unmarried. And the little boy was one of two children, as it was later disclosed to her, of a family that was being sent away to extermination camps, no doubt. And she took the little boy and kept him. His name was Max Italiander, and as I have mentioned, he had a sister, which wasn't known until after the war. So, following is a discussion with Mrs. Devries.

I. Adri, where did you live in 1939? In Haarlem, Holland?

R. Yeah.

I. Were you in business at that time for yourself?

R. Yeah, in the yarn business.

I. In the yarn business?

R. Yeah.

I. And were you aware when the Germans came and took over your country?

R. Oh yeah!

I. You were?

R. Oh yeah!

I. And you remember them quite well, I am sure. Were you afraid?

R. Sure.

I. For yourself?

R. No, not for myself. I was only afraid for the little boy. And about everything I lied. I told him everything was all right, because he didn't know. I told him certain things about his mother; like that she was in the sanitarium.

I. You said his mother was in a sanitarium. That was when people asked you about him? "Where did you get the little boy?"

R. Yeah. They would come home because they have to and thought it was strange that I would have him. So, that is when he was much in danger. He was just a good boy.

I. He was a good boy.

R. Oh, he was such a good boy.

I. And he loved you. What did he call you?

R. My mama.

I. My mama, that's right.

R. That's my own mama.

I. My own mama, I've heard you say that before.

R. Yeah, oh yeah. He was a great kid.

I. You know, people who did the things like you did are rare people. There weren't many people who did that. A lot of people helped of course, but a lot of people didn't. What was different? What made you different?

R. His aunt was a wholesale lady from Needles and I was very friendly with her and she was in my business and she was crying. I said, "Let's go upstairs and you can tell me about it?" Then she told me that she just left her children with her sister and told me about what had happened, you know. I said, "Let me. I can save one of the kids, but I can't save two of them."

I. You can't take both of them, but you would be willing to take one.

R. I really meant this with all of my heart. So I just get the little boy and the little girl went to a nice Christian family in Holland, in Amersfoort.

I. A Christian family?

R. Oh yeah.

I. And you were a Christian at that time?

R. Oh yeah, absolutely. And what was I saying?

I. You were saying that the little girl went to a Christian family in Amersfoort.

R. Yeah, a very Christian family. So the kids were safe, the kids were safe during the war. I was fearsome because I didn't know where the little girl was when the war was over because I wanted us to come together. He had been terrific. And the little girl was to those people. They were really fantastic.

I. During the war when the Germans were still there and the military was still there, did you think about what you would do if they discovered that the little boy was Jewish?

R. Yes.

I. Did you have any plan what you would do?

R. Yes.

I. You did?

R. I would have just taken the little boy and go drown this little boy and myself.

I. You would have drown yourself rather than give him up to the Germans?

R. Yeah, oh yeah, I would have done it.

I. Did you know at the time that Jewish people were being killed?

R. Yes.

I. You knew that at the time?

R. I didn't know everything, but I knew a lot. And they were things that were never going to happen to this boy. If they found him, then I would take him to the river, which was very close, and drown myself with this child.

I. Well, you would never have given him up.

R. Never.

I. I know you well and I know how you felt. Do you remember how old the little boy was when you took him?

R. Two and a half years old.

I. He was two and a half at the time. He was walking and talking.

R. Oh yeah. He was adorable.

I. You know, Tony thought he was younger than that.

R. No, he was two and a half years old.

I. You are sure of that?

R. Yeah, I'm sure.

I. That must have been in about 1942 because you kept him for more than two years after that.

R. Yes, yes.

I. Then the authorities came after the war and told you that they found his sister and they were going to be reunited.

R. Yeah. I was not allowed to keep him because I was not married.

I. Oh that is the reason, because you were not married, you were not allowed to keep him.

R. Right. And when the authorities came, I said, "what is the law?" And with the education I gave him, when they came they said, "I wish everybody was like you."

I. That is what the Dutch authorities said. "I wish everybody was like you."

R. Yeah. And it was not so much good you know. I told him not to be afraid, that they were there to help and to not be afraid. And then that evening came the bombs. I laid down with him in his bed and was very frightened.

I. You were very frightened. That was near the end of the war?

R. Yeah, yeah. He asked me, "Are we going to be okay, Mama?" And I said, "Yeah, the bombs are outside."

I. You assured him that the bombs were not going to hurt him?

R. Yeah, yeah.

I. But he was frightened like you were?

R. Yeah. Oh, I loved him so much too.

I. I know. And then afterward, after he was sent back to be with his sister and to be reunited with his sister, you went to see him a lot of time, didn't you?

R. Oh yeah, every week or every other week.

I. And he still called you what?

R. Mama. Oh, it was the best treasure, the best. He would be standing there in front of the house of the people he was living with and he would say, "There comes my own mama!"

I. "There comes my own mama!"

R. Yeah, and all day he would hold onto my skirt.

I. Hold on to your skirt, yeah. It took a lot of strength to let that all happen, to let him go.

R. Yeah, and after it all happened I have never had more love than I had for that little boy.

I. You've had a lot of love. Adri, you received a lot of love from your own mother, didn't you?

R. Oh, yeah.

I. You have very good memories of your mother, don't you?

R. Oh yeah, my mother was an angel.

I. Your mother was a little strict, but she was very good wasn't she.

R. Oh, she was marvelous. She was a sweetheart. And I still appreciate that she was so strict.

I. You appreciate that she was so strict?

R. Oh yes!

I. You loved her, and you respected her, and you still have good thoughts of your mother don't you?

R. Oh yes, even my dad. My dad was a little strict, but he was not always home.

I. Your father traveled a lot, didn't he?

R. Yeah, that was his job, but when he was home we would have to watch it.

I. Your mother was a very strong influence in your life, wasn't she?

R. Oh absolutely.

I. And that picture you have of her on the top of your television says to me that you remember her very fondly.

R. Oh, nobody has the pictures in the family that I've got.

I. I'm glad to hear you say that. Now later after the war you met Leo Devries. Incidentally, your maiden name was Vandermayden, wasn't it?

R. Yes, right.

I. Adriana Vandermayden, that is a beautiful name. Now, you met Leo, and Leo had escaped from a concentration camp. Do you know which one? Was it Auschwitz?

R. No, I think it was in Amersfoort.

I. In Amersfoort, I see.

R. There was a camp there on the border with Ireland and he escaped from there.

I. Did he crawl under a fence?

R. Yeah, he did.

I. And he survived all of that.

R. Yeah, and his home was back in Bregen, near Needles. He cut himself going under the fence and his back was bleeding.

I. His back was bleeding?

R. Oh completely. And a German car came along; they were the only ones with cars. He held up his hand, they stopped.

I. The German soldiers? They picked him up?

R. Yeah, and they said, "what is the matter?" And he said, "I have car trouble." "Where do you have to go?" "I have to go to Amsterdam." He didn't have a home anymore. Everything was stolen, everything. And there in Amsterdam, he gave them an address and everything of where to take him, but it wasn't his home.

I. He lied to them?

R. Yeah, and he saw an open door and he went in and left the Germans outside. The family inside gave him clothes and dressed him.

I. He knocked on the door?

R. No, he just went in.

I. And they gave him clothes and everything?

R. Yeah.

I. That's amazing.

R. It is amazing.

I. And his family died in the camp, a wife and one child?

R. Yes, one child, a little girl.

I. And he escaped, and you married him and you had a wonderful life didn't you?

R. The best.

I. And he died of Leukemia here in Eugene?

R. Yes, yes.

I. Back in the 1970s, do you remember what year?

R. Ahhh?

I. It isn't important. Well Adri, I just wanted to get some of these things down. I've heard you say these things a lot and I have a lot of them in my own mind, but you know there are other people who would like to hear this, because I am interested in seeing if someone would give recognition to you for your family. So, I really thank you for doing this and I know that you are week and don't feel very well, but I am glad you are having a better day. I miss you sitting in your chair. Your chair is empty. I thank you again for cooperating.

Respondent: Adri Devries

Interviewer: Dr. Lawrence Baron

Date: Tuesday December 30, 1986

I. This interview is taking place in the home of Adriana Devries in her home in Eugene, Oregon. There was one earlier recording on the 19th of December, and anyone who has heard that recording knows that at that time we said in the preface to the recording that Mrs. Devries was very, very sick. I am glad to say the Mrs. Devries has gained substantial strength since that time. She is considerably more alert; she is a lot stronger and is able to leave her bed and move around in her apartment. She freely visits and is very bright and welcomes this interview, which is done in the interest of communicating with those people who are capable of helping and establishing the deeds that she did during WWII, which we regard as heroic, in which she rescued a young Jewish boy in her native Holland. We are going to continue that discussion with her and we are going to go back to some of the basic information in the interest of getting a better recording in order to help substantiate the story.

I. Adri, tell me now when you were born.

R. I was born October 16, 1906 in Holland's province of Utrecht.

I. What town?

R. Utrecht.

I. Oh, that was the town, I see.

R. Town and province. Utrecht was also a province and a town.

I. Now, your name was Adriana Vandermayden. There were other children born to your parents.

R. Oh yeah.

I. How many?

R. As a matter of fact, I am one of thirteen, but five died young and we were raised with eight together. I did have a first class mother, I can say that. And a very good father, but was about never home because he had to work.

I. The nature of his work kept him from home.

R. Yes, outside the home.

I. What was the nature of his work?

R. What was he? He was the head of a barge.

I. A wheel boat?

R. No, not a wheel boat. There was a boat that would take out the dirt from the bottom of the river.

I. Oh, a dredge boat. Okay, he was gone all of the time.

R. About always, he was never home.

I. Your mother however was home about all of the time with the eight children who survived.

R. Always, always. And she was still running a small grocery store, and did a lot of work with it.

I. And your young life was spent in Utrecht, Holland.

R. Right.

I. And your mother had a small grocery store business and she kept a home, her house -

R. Everything.

I. And she cared for her children.

R. Yes she did. First class mother.

I. First class mother.

R. Absolutely.

I. You have very good memories of your mother, don't you?

R. Yes, beautiful.

I. She was a wonderful person.

R. Yes, she was.

I. Do you consider your mother as a very strong influence on your life?

R. I believe so. She did everything she could for her children.

I. Was your mother a very religious person?

R. Yes, she was.

I. What was her religion?

R. Her religion as we call it in Holland was Christian Reform.

I. Christian reform. Okay, and that was a very typical religious community in Holland, wasn't it?

R. Yeah, yeah.

I. The Dutch Reform Church.

R. You had your Protestants, the Dutch Reform -

I. It was not Dutch Reform exactly, but it was a reform church?

R. Yeah, it was a reform church. It was just Christian, simple. I compare it a lot to the Church of Christ.

I. And you remember the Church of Christ now?

R. Oh, yes. I love it. The only thing - we did have music in the church, a very soft playing organ. When we came and we were singing homage songs, it was always to soft playing organ music to lead us. It was beautiful.

I. The religious teaching you received is a lot like you do now.

R. Absolutely.

I. Love your neighbor and be kind to others.

R. Absolutely.

I. Did your mother teach you these kinds of things?

R. In the home.

I. Did she ever!

R. She did, if we didn't follow them, it was not her fault. She was just a great, great mother.

I. You've told me before that your mother was a strict person.

R. Very strict.

I. She had strong rules, very good rules.

R. But she loved children and had a very good sense of humor. She could understand sometimes that what we did as laughing it off.

I. She understood.

R. She understood.

I. She genuinely loved you and the other children, and you knew that.

R. Oh yes.

I. You always felt secure.

R. We would always go to Mother and ask her whatever it was.

I. Right, she was just very loving.

R. Mother was such a good person.

I. I've noted that your sister, Toni, is here with us and she lives in Burlington, Canada. Burlington, is that where you live? Did you feel close to your family?

R. I still feel very close. I feel very happy to have a sister here at this moment. But the whole family is about gone. When you are children, you don't know what you are doing. You think that you love one more than the other, but in case something happened then all you feel is love.

I. Then you feel close to all of them.

R. All of them.

I. And you always did, even when you were children?

R. I don't know. I don't remember that anymore. I was a little devil.

I. You were a little devil? I see.

R. Yes, I am now a big devil.

I. Did you know your neighbors?

R. At home?

I. Yes.

R. Oh yes.

I. Were your neighbors a mixture of people?

R. No, they were all Dutch.

I. Some were not Christian, some were Jewish probably?

R. Maybe, I don't know.

I. You weren't all that aware of it?

R. No, our teacher was cool, but it is just too hard to say. He was a Christian, and we went to a Christian school.

I. How far did you go in school?

R. How far, what do you mean by that?

I. Well, what grade?

R. Seventh grade.

I. The seventh grade, and then you left school to do what?

R. I became a permanent babysitter.

I. At home.

R. No, for a family.

I. For your family?

R. Not really. For two or three years - what we call in Holland a permanent babysitter. And I was there for a couple of years. When the little girl was grown up, she didn't need me anymore. They did have an office there, I didn't know much about it, and still don't believe it, but they took me in their office and told me that I have to go home because my sister Toni was ill. She had to go to Switzerland for her health and I had to go home to help my mother.

I. I see. How old were you then, do you recall?

R. Seventeen.

I. Seventeen years old. So you learned to be responsible very early.

R. My lady where I took care of the child, she always - later on she told me, "I could trust you more than I could trust myself." Because if I have a job, I take it serious.

I. That made you feel pretty well, I'm sure, for someone to tell you that.

R. I feel good about that.

I. Anybody likes to be complimented and told that she is trustworthy.

R. Sure, it gives you more power, more trustful.

I. Or strength. Now, jump ahead to the wartime. By that time you lived in the world of Haarlem.

R. Yes.

I. How far away was that from Utrecht?

R. About 50 miles I would say.

I. 50 miles. What caused you to move to Haarlem?

R. My parents were moving, so I moved with them. We were living in a nice small town, Haamstede. And Haamstede was very close to Haarlem. So we moved there.

I. By the time the came along you were in business for yourself, weren't you?

R. Yes, I was.

I. What kind of business?

R. A craft shop, yarn and embroidery and so on. What I could buy - what I could sell, I bought. I was a businesswoman. I still am.

I. You still are. You are a very good businesswoman, you manage things very well.

R. That's right.

I. Yes, you do - I know you do. Now, by the time the war came to Holland, the lowland countries by 1940 were pretty much overrun by the German military.

R. And we were too small to fight against them, so we gave over.

I. Holland was too small. They really weren't strong enough to withstand.

R. No, it really was impossible.

I. Very few other nations were able to.

R. Yes, yes. We were a very small country and when the Germans came, we gave over to the Germans. We had to do it.

I. German troops and German political leaders came into your town of Haarlem?

R. Oh, yes. I still remember it.

I. You were aware of their presence?

R. Oh yes.

I. And some of your own countrymen defected and joined with the Germans for whatever their reasons.

R. Now most people in Haarlem were against it.

I. You actually had strong feelings against the Germans. Did you ever belong to any kind of organizations of your own people, your own government?

R. They did everything underground.

I. Underground, but you didn't belong to any organizations?

R. My sister did much more than I did, because I did have an open door with my business. I had a hiding place, and it was too dangerous. I remember still at night when I had people in my house and I would hear a car in the streets - I was scared to death. I would just cradle that little boy out of his crib. I put him in my arms, so if something happened it would happen to both of us together. That was the thought that I had in my mind. They would never get this kid out of my mind. But I had to give him up after the war because I was not married.

I. Now let's go back to that time. We've talked about this a number of times. It was during sometime of the summer in 1942 - there abouts. It was 1942.

R. Yes, May or June.

I. Earlier summer, late May 1942. A woman came to you, a woman with whom you did business. This woman came to you. This was a Jewish woman. Did you always know that she was Jewish?

R. Yes. I had to go upstairs to talk to her.

I. She was a traveling sales woman?

R. Sales lady, yes.

I. She sold yarn wholesale to you?

R. Yes and embroidery and all kinds of stuff.

I. So you bought from her and had business relations with her.

R. Yes.

I. You don't remember her name, do you?

R. I forgot her name. How in the world is that possible?

I. It is okay. That was a long time ago. But, anyways, in 1942 she came to you and she was crying. She was just coming for business reasons primarily, but she told you -

R. Right. That she has to leave with a lot of other Jewish people, but that she was worried about her little nephew.

I. Who lived where now?

R. In Amsterdam.

I. The Italianer family lived in Amsterdam and little Max lived in Amsterdam not too far from Haarlem.

R. And I said yes without thinking of anything that I would take care of the little boy.

I. Now, she came to your shop and she was crying.

R. Yes, and I took her in my private place and said, "Tell me what is wrong."

I. You took her out of the store, upstairs, and said, "Come tell me about it."

R. Yes. And then she told me, "Adri, I love that little boy so much and I cannot see that little boy get killed too." And I said right away, "Can I take him?" And she said, "Do you mean that?" And I said, "100%."

I. You meant that 100%.

R. Absolutely. So she went home to talk it over with her sister, and they loved the child so much too. They came right away to talk with me, and I took the little boy away the other (next) day.

I. So, she told you about the little boy, she talked to her sister, who was the little boy's mother, and then what happened after that?

R. I took him. I was going over there and I took him away. That was okay, but she cried very hard.

I. The little boy cried?

R. The little boy cried, but the mother cried too.

I. The mother cried. Then what happened?

R. The other (next) day, they were gone. But I did have the little boy.

I. Do you think they understood what was going to happen to them?

R. Yes, they knew. They knew and that was the reason she was so nervous. I did not have a single piece of clothes for him whatsoever. I just took the little boy.

I. With no clothing?

R. Not whatsoever.

I. And you had no financial agreement with them whatsoever?

R. Yeah, they had a will and they put on my name right away.

I. They gave that to you?

R. No, they did not give it to me, but I could go over it. I will not say that I took it. I do not know, but I don't remember.

I. No, you didn't make any agreement.

R. No, money did not say anything to me. It was just to save the little boy.

I. And that was the sole reason. That was your motivation - to save the little boy.

R. And his little sister went with a very good Christian family in Amersfoort. And she was raised there and after several years we came together and brought the little sister and brother together. They were strangers at that time.

I. And that was after the war in 1945. The Dutch authorities came to you and told you that because you were single and not married.

R. That I was not allowed to keep the little boy.

I. Right. And that was the only reason - because you were unmarried and it just didn't look right and they couldn't -

R. I loved him. A mother could not love a child more than I loved that little boy.

I. Now, this was a big risk for you, wasn't it? You felt -

R. It was a big risk, but I didn't mind.

I. You did not mind taking the risk. Have you ever taken other risks in your life - anything?

R. Yeah, but I don't tell that. (laughs)

I. Okay. But you wouldn't mind taking a risk if it were something valuable.

R. No, if it is going to help somebody, I don't mind taking the risk.

I. Now, you undoubtedly had it in you mind when you took the little boy what you would say if someone saw you in the street or someone came knocking on the door - what would you have said?

R. It was a child from a friend who was sick in the sanitarium. The sanitarium was where you would stay for quite some time. See, that was a white lie.

I. Yes, it was a white lie and it was reasonable.

R. Sure, I saved that child.

I. And the little boy was upset at first?

R. At first, just two days and no more.

I. A couple of days.

R. And Toni my sister, who he first called Auntie, said, "Adri, let him call you Mama, so he feels more at home." It took me about a day and a half, two days, and then he calls me mama. And he didn't know better that I wasn't his mama.

I. And you acted like his mama. You took that responsibility.

R. I believe so.

I. And during the war you mentioned to me that there would be bombing and shelling and the little boy would be upset.

R. Yeah. And I took him right with me. If something were to happen, might it be a bomb or a bad thing, they never could have taken that child out of my hands.

I. But you assured him that the bombing wouldn't hurt him. That was outside.

R. It was outside and I took him in my arms and he asked me, "What is that Mama?" And I said, "Oh, that is outside." That was it.

I. And he believed that because he trusted you?

R. Yes.

I. Now let me see. So, the little boy was taken after the war and you remained in your business for a time, unmarried. But soon after the war, within a couple of years after the war, you met Mr. Devries, Mr. Leo Devries.

R. Yeah, yeah.

I. Mr. Devries was a - he was a refugee.

R. An escaped Jewish man.

I. He was an escapee during the war. That is an interesting story by itself. I've heard that story. In any case, you met him in what was it? 1947.

R. When I met Leo? (Asks her sister and Toni replies, "After the war.") Right after the war.

I. After the war?

R. Yeah, because I was out for dinner with a cousin of mine and her husband came there too and he brought Leo, and she invited him to stay for dinner too. And then he brought me home and so far, so good. And he made a date with me. So, that was our going. And within four months we got married.

I. And he had been married before and his wife and one child perished in the German labor camps.

R. Yeah.

I. But he escaped and came to Haarlem and later on you married Mr. Devries in what about 1947?

R. 1949. It was in 1949.

I. And you came to the States in 1952?

R. Yeah, right.

I. And both of you were in business here in the United States and Mr. Devries died of leukemia in Eugene, Oregon back in 1969?

R. Yeah.

I. In 1969 and you lived as a widow here in Eugene ever since that time?

R. Yes.

I. Now after the war did you belong to any organizations that were organized to help people or anything like that?

R. I believe not.

I. No, okay. You've spoken well of Jewish people - I'd say.

R. They are wonderful people, the ones I know. You know how it is. The Jews are good people. We are Christian, we are good people too.

I. Right. So you are saying that it doesn't have anything to do with that?

R. We are just human beings.

I. Right, just individuals. So, you didn't have any teachings earlier in your life that led you to be prejudice?

R. Oh no, never. You never forget that Jesus was a Jew!

I. Right, right. We won't forget that. If you advised young people today, what would be the best advice you could give a young person?

R. Be honest.

I. Be honest. What attitude toward other people would you urge young people to have?

R. To be good to each other.

I. Be good to each other, be fair and just?

R. That is all I can say. Right.

I. To be fair and just and show love to one another?

R. Right, right.

I. Do you remember any leaders in the world that have been dear to you in your mind? People you've really admired - leaders, world leaders?

R. No.

I. None really stands out?

R. Not special. Yeah, you love your own country and the queen and you feel for death, because that is all there is to it. But otherwise that doesn't say much to me.

I. You've never been particularly political?

R. No, never - never will be too.

I. Well, I am running out of suggestions and ideas here to and I will write this up eventually from this tape and we will keep the tape, but let's see. I don't see anything else on this list. I think that I will just stop there.