

## George Zwaagstra

[Start of recorded material]

George Z: I'm George Zwaagstra. I was born in the Netherlands and I came to Canada, immigrated through Pier 21. I arrived here on the 27<sup>th</sup> of April 1951.

### **On leaving the Netherlands**

George Z: I decided to leave the Netherlands because it was shortly after the war. [01:00:32:11] There wasn't much going on in the Netherlands. Rebuilding didn't start until early mid-50s. For a young fellow there was absolutely, at that time, no future. My oldest brother came here in 1950. He liked it here very much. Through a couple of letters back and forth, I finally decided that I think I'm going as well. [01:01:03:22]

Those times were different than now. At that time, as a young fellow and you finished high school, your parents set your future for you. You didn't have much choice for that yourself. My parents decided that they would send me to university. [01:01:31:19] They wanted me to become a minister.

What could I do? They bought the clothes. They got everything ready. And all of a sudden one night when I came home, I said, "Well you might as well sit down because there has been a change in my plans. I'm not going to university. I am going to Canada." [01:01:58:13] I think that was a tremendous shock for them.

One night I came home and my parents said, "You'd better sit down because we have decided to go to Canada as well. We want to be there as a family."

### **The journey**

George Z: The trip across was eight days. On the night before we came near Newfoundland, it was storming very bad. [01:02:34:10] There were icebergs and of course in those days, the ships did not have radar like they do now. So they threw the anchors over and we stayed overnight.

We arrived at roughly three o'clock in the afternoon. It was a beautiful sight coming into the harbour in Halifax. [01:03:00:05] First of all, you see land, when you haven't seen land for eight days. Then the thought comes, "I'm almost in Canada."

At Pier 21, we were on the ship hoping to get off. However they weren't going to let people off until the following morning. My brother was here in Halifax to pick us up. [01:03:30:21] He did his utmost to get us off, and he succeeded. The reason that he succeeded was that we

were the only immigrants at that time that stayed in Nova Scotia. The rest of the people onboard all went to Ontario and West.

*George was sponsored by complete strangers to work on their farm in Nova Scotia. The work was gruelling and after 10 weeks he left to join the Royal Canadian Air Force. [01:04:05:00]*

### *A new life*

George Z: When you come here, the idea is that you leave everything behind. You go to a complete new country that you know next to nothing about. [01:04:30:02] When you arrive here, you work at different places. You live here. After five years, you're allowed to apply for your Canadian citizenship. I think that is one of the things that you really look forward to, to become a Canadian citizen. [01:05:03:06]

Quite often, you have the feeling that, you know, "I'm in Canada, I'm a Canadian citizen now," and the heck with everything that is behind you.

It is very difficult to explain what the feeling actually is. [01:05:31:23] For me it was so bad that I didn't even want to go back for a trip. I couldn't care less about the people or relations that we still had there. I just wanted to get away from it all. That lasted and lasted.

It was 28 years later when we finally decided that we were going to take a trip back to the Netherlands. [01:06:04:15] The reason for that was – and otherwise I probably would have never gone back – is that my parents had their 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. They were invited to celebrate that in their home town. We three boys decided that we would surprise them. So 28 years later, I went back. [01:06:29:14]

### *Sharing the stories*

George Z: It's very important to share stories, not just mine, but the stories that a lot of people have. I came here. I couldn't care less at the time. I worked here for many years. Finally I retired. I came to Halifax. [01:07:00:01] I had the opportunity to go to Pier 21 and from one thing came to the other, I had my interview here and they hired me on.

Since that time, talking with people and the stories you hear from people, my story, my wife immigrated, her story, I think it's very important that those stories are being told and are there for a future generation to listen to or to read about it or whatever situation might occur. [01:07:52:19]

To me, that is very, very important. [01:07:57:12]

*George is retired and volunteers at the Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21 as a tour guide. He was awarded Maritimer of the week from CTV for his work, keeping history alive.*