

Nordic Heritage Museum
Nordic American Voices

Interview of Margret Solvadottir

At Seattle, Washington

On March 5, 2011

Interviewed by Mari-Ann Kind Jackson and Caitlin Cotter

Mari-Ann: [0:03] [This is an interview of] For the Nordic American Voices Oral History Project. Today is March 5th, 2011, and I'll be interviewing Margret Solvadottir, Margret Solvadottir. [0:18] We are at the Nordic Heritage Museum in Seattle, Washington. My name is Mari-Ann Kind Jackson, and I am with Caitlin Cotter.

[0:28] Welcome, Margret.

Margret Solvadottir: [0:29] Thank you.

Mari-Ann Jackson: [0:30] Thank you for agreeing to be our guest and sharing your life story with us today. Would you start by just stating your full name, and your date of birth and where you were born?

Margret: [0:43] My name is Margret Sigríður Solvadottir. And I was born in Iceland, 1945, in Reykjavík.

Mari-Ann Jackson: [0:55] And then, we would just like you to share your life story with us. Go back and tell us your family history, talk about your parents, give us their names and then tell us your life story.

Margret: [1:13] OK. My mother's name is Laufey Guðmundsdóttir. And my father's name is Solvi Páll Jonsson. They were farmers in Iceland, north of Iceland, a place called Adalvík. It is probably the nearest part of Iceland to Greenland. [1:37] They were farming there until my mother got sick of tuberculosis. And everybody in Iceland that got TB, they had to go to an isolation place.

[1:53] So, at that time, I had a sister who was, I was not born, of course. There was a sister of mine who's five years older than I, her name is Halldóra. And I had a brother, three years older than me, and his name is Hermann. Both those siblings of mine were put to grandmothers, one to my father's, and my brother was to my mother's mother.

[2:23] My mother was shipped, first, to Isafjordur, it's the next town, and then to Reykjavik. She was put in a place where they had all the TB patients, which was called Reykjalundur. That was in Reykjavik, or kind of outskirts of Reykjavik.

[2:47] My father, he could not bear to live on the farm after my mom had gone. So he took his mother, which was living with them, and my sister and moved them to Isafjordur and they had a house, he bought a house for them. Then, he went to Reykjavik, and seeking a job on a fishing trailer.

Mari-Ann Jackson: [3:18] Trawler.

Margret: [3:19] Trawler, yes. Sorry. Trawler. He did get that job, and so, he was fishing or going between Iceland and England, all the wartime. He was shot down, not him, the ship. And they were all survived. So, he was stuck in England for a little while waiting for another courier to go to Iceland. [3:44] Meanwhile, my mom was in this isolation place, and many of her friends died there. She survived it. Then, I came, then my dad came back and I came about and they started their life in Reykjavik. They never went back to farm.

[4:13] So, my siblings came, then, later. My dad's mother with my sister, she lived with us all the time she had left. And my brother came a little bit later. He kind of was happy with his grandmother up in the country. So, he came when he was about, maybe, eight, I can't remember, exactly.

[4:41] But I remember my first time in Reykjavik. I was probably four or five. This was after the war, and it was a very tough time in Iceland, there was not much of anything.

[4:56] I remember standing in line outside of a shoe shop and everybody was lined up before they opened, because they knew that a new container with shoes had come to the country. So, and I think that this was really the only big shoe shop in Reykjavik.

[5:19] So, that's kind of, I remember I was bored, and I didn't want to stand there in line, and it was cold. And I remember I had rubber boots on, and that's it.

[5:30] Then, I had a wonderful childhood. And we were moved from the place that I grew up in until I was six. We moved to the barracks where. We had a lot of barracks where the soldiers had a camp. We had about three or four camps in Reykjavik, from that wartime.

[5:55] Housing was very difficult in Iceland, they didn't have any materials to build anything. We don't have the woods in Iceland, so. There was no concrete, not was any fabric there at that time.

[6:09] So, my mother had my youngest brother when I was six years old. And where we had been renting from a lady, spinster, was a nice lady, but she did not want more children in the house. So, she told my mother that she had to move.

[6:31] So, Mom was alone with us, because Dad was on the sea, so, she decided to buy one of these barracks. Is it barrack, what you call it?

Mari-Ann Jackson: [6:46] Barrack.

Margret: [6:47] Yeah. So, she went out and she bought one, and we moved into that place, and when Dad came home to Reykjavik, he did not know where we lived. So, he found out, so.

[6:57] And then, when I was about 11, he stopped going to sea and came inland. Then, Iceland had really, doing really well. We had a new fabric for the...

Mari-Ann Jackson: [7:14] Factory.

Margret: [7:15] It was a factory, factory for fertilizer. So, my dad got a job there, and he never went to sea after that. So, that was much better. [7:30] When I was 11, my dad started to build our home which my mom and dad lived in all their lives until he died. My mom is now in a home. She's going to be 96 in May.

[7:49] So, and I had a good childhood. I was brought up in a loving family. We were four siblings. Then, later on, my mom and dad fostered one little boy who was three years younger than my youngest brother.

[8:12] I think that the change in Reykjavik from my first memory and, until I left, is enormous, but if I think about the change from my parents' life and until then, that is unbelievable.

[8:35] I remember that the radio was the best thing you could think of. When I was sent up in the country to be with [8:45] my relatives there, that was a usual thing in Iceland, they would send all the kids that had relatives up in the country, they would go there in the summers, which was really good.

[8:58] And the radio, that was the thing that all these thrilling stories -- in the evening, we would all be with the ear by the radio. And that is something, when you talk to young people today, they don't understand the life that we used to live. So that's that.

[9:21] And then later on, I married, like everybody. If you did not marry before the age of 18, in Iceland at that time, you were talked about that you were not going to get any husband. So I guess that was the thing to do. So I married young. I was 18, and I had two sons with my husband. And we divorced when I was about 30-something, I can't remember.

[9:52] There have been 32 years since we divorced, so you can calculate. Well, anyway, I went into another, not marriage, but relationship, six years after I divorced. And I had one boy, David, and he's still in Iceland. But my two sons in my marriage, their father moved out here about 10 years after we divorced. And then he got the citizenship. He was always saying to our sons, "Why don't you come out here, I'll get you the green card, you can come out here and try it out?"

[10:32] So they came out here. I think one of them, it was before he was 20, and the older one, he was about 24. And they never came back. So I kind of missed them, but in the meantime in Iceland, I had many jobs. I founded my first company when I was 27. And I put up a gym.

[11:05] And everybody thought that was a thing not to do. My ex-husband, he had it calculated that I was on my head before I even started. But, I was determined to do this. And I got about 200 women to come in every day. So we had a lot of activity. That was really good. And I was having gymnastics or aerobics or whatever you call it today. It was exercise. And then I had massage, and then I had a sauna, and a tanning lamp.

[11:42] And that was very popular, so I kind of was at first starting that thing in Iceland. I had that for about 10 years, and, when I divorced, I wanted to do something new. So, I applied for a job that was asking for a man, a male, to sell medical things. And I applied. He said, "Why do you apply for this? This is, you're not a male."

[12:16] And I said, "Well, I can do it better than any male." So, I did, and I worked for them four years, and I was very successful in that job.

[12:27] Then, I had David, who is now 28, and I'm very proud of him. He's a very, turned out to be a very good boy. After that, when I had David, my life changed. I had to be a mom again.

[12:45] My oldest son was 20 years old when David was born, and my younger one from my marriage was 17. So, there's a big gap and I was a career woman, so I wasn't really planning for this.

[12:59] I always remember that, going to the doctor and he telling me that I was pregnant. I was in a relationship with his father, but I had not planned on changed life. So, I remember when the doctor asked me if I wanted to have an abortion. That was really something.

[13:24] I had to sell abortion equipment, because I was selling medical stuff. But I had never thought about it. And I thought, I had lost two, a miscarriage two times. So, I thought, if I could feel so guilty about my miscarriages, I could not do anything about, how am I going to feel about this?

[13:52] So, I said no. And I had David. And I'm so grateful to God that I did. He turned out to be a wonderful kid.

[14:01] So, then, when he was a little bit older, I did all kinds of jobs. I went back to school and got better education. I had a radio show. It was an idea of mine.

[14:17] I went to the station and I said, "I want to put this program on, and I'm going to introduce people together," you know. I interview somebody on the air, and if somebody likes him, he can phone in. That was very popular show, and I had that until they sold the station.

[14:34] And I had put up a company, I founded a company importing tiles from Italy and Spain. That all started because I was always going for holiday in Spain. Then, when I bought a house. I bought a house that I had to make all the interior myself, and I thought, tiles would be the wonderful thing on the floor. So, I bought my own tiles in Spain and brought them in.

[15:08] Then, everybody said, why don't you, "Can't you do that for me?" So, I thought, OK, why am I doing that for free? So, I founded my company, and that grew pretty well.

[15:21] Then, at this time, my two oldest sons, which would be helping me, they decided to go to America. So, I decided I needed to employ somebody. But every male that came to seek the job, I could see that they thought they were more clever than I, you know, they brought their briefcase and they had their own ideas. So, I said, no, no.

[15:48] So, I sold the company and I moved to Spain, because I had already bought a flat there that I used for summer. So, I thought, OK, I am just going to go and see how it is to live in Spain all year round.

[16:05] So, I did. I bought a big house, and the bank was taking it from the owner anyway, so I got it for a good price. That was a house with 10 bedrooms, five bathrooms and three kitchens. It had a swimming pool and patio and a fruit garden, and a little bit of woodland, and a tennis court.

[16:34] So, I thought, OK, maybe I can put a guest house here. But I found out that that was very difficult. You had to have all kinds of insurance and you had to have an elevator in the house. So, that would have cost a lot of money.

[16:50] So, I put up a restaurant. So, I made a restaurant, The Icelandic Bar, I called it. And I cooked most of the year, but over the summertime, I had, I was always so fortunate, always something came up to my lap.

[17:08] One day, two young guys come bicycling and they see that name, so they come in for a drink. And we, of course, talked in Icelandic, and they said they were cooks. If they could maybe stay only to cook for me over the season, and only for the board and food. I had a big house, so it was no problem. So, they cooked for me, and we had a popular season.

[17:34] And I could never make a guest house out of my big house, but what I [17:39] did, because I had written a book, sometimes in Iceland, it was published in '89. I was in this club of authors. So, I got writers to come and stay, finish their books.

[17:58] That was wonderful, because we had a wonderful evenings. I would just give them dinner, they would have to seek for themselves for breakfast and other food. But at dinner time, we would sit and talk about books, were some of my favorite. So, that was a wonderful time, that I had there.

[18:16] So, we stayed in Spain for, I think, my son was about, we stayed there about five years. I put my son, David, into an English, it was a private school, it was rather expensive, but he was a clever boy.

[18:40] Even though he didn't know any English when he went in the school, after the semester, the headmaster wrote on his paper that "if somebody had told me that a child with no English knowledge would enter this school and be on top of his class in English history, I would not believe it." But that was David.

[19:03] So, David learned Spanish when he learned English, and of course, Icelandic, in the time we were there. Then I moved back to Iceland, I think, in the '96 or 7, and got a job in a hotel. I sold everything that I had in Spain.

[19:22] Got a job in a hotel, first in Ork in Hveragerdi if anybody knows that place, that's where all the tourists are taken when they go, the Golden Circle in Iceland. Then, later on, in Icelandair hotel, Hotel Loftleidir. For one year, I was at Radisson Hotel, Hotel Saga.

[19:46] That was when I was kind of getting my life back in Iceland, and David educated in Iceland. When he graduated, I had been, because I worked for Icelandair, I could come out here and visit my two other sons, which are living here.

[20:10] Then, when I got to be a grandmother, in '99, my first grandchild, I was coming here four times a year. One time I stayed, her first year, I stayed her for two months and took care of her. That was a wonderful bonding time for us.

[20:34] So, that was tough, to be with my teenager in Iceland and with my granddaughter, here. But I was kind of torn between those two countries. But fortunately, for me, to get free flights was helping a lot.

[20:51] My oldest son, he sponsored me and got me a green card in '99. So, I could keep that card by all my visitings, but I wasn't living here. I came and stayed, but Iceland was always better, in my eyes. I only wished I could take my boys and my family and bring it back there. So, it took me a long time to adapt here.

[21:22] I think, about the last six years, maybe, four or five, six years that I've been here permanently, kind of, only going home to Iceland to visit.

[21:37] But now, here, I'm fine. I teach Icelandic, here in the museum. I have a lot of fun with that. I started to do that about four years ago, first at home, and then, here, in the museum. I've met a lot of people through that, and everybody is so kind and nice about learning Icelandic, and it's wonderful to teach students that are so enthusiastic about learning. So, it's been a lot of fun to do that.

[22:10] And I was working, after all, with hotel work. I worked in real estate in Iceland, you don't need to take any tests or anything there, you can just work in real estate if you like to, because every real estate office has to have a lawyer, anyway, so.

[22:32] So, I thought, OK, since I know this job, why not try to do that here? So, I, while working in Iceland, I took my test through the computer, just the course, and then, I came out here in 2004 and took the test, and that was in December, so I had my license here, 2005. And started to work in real estate, 2005 or six when I kind of moved over here.

[23:00] Now, my little granddaughter is going to be 13 this month, no, 12, 12 this month, and I can't believe it. She has grown so much. She was born three months premature, so, she was, her father's, if he held her, she hardly got up to his elbow, so. And now, she's a big, nice, beautiful looking little lady.

[23:28] And I have another one, Alexis, and she is seven, will be eight in June. So, that's a wonderful addition.

[23:38] So, now, I am kind of settled here. My mother's in a home. She's in a wonderful home. In Iceland, we have wonderful care for older people so I don't have to worry about her. I can talk with her on the telephone nearly every day.

[23:57] And, my son David, he decided that he wanted to get away from all the glamour and party life in Reykjavik. One day, I think it's nearly two years ago now. Maybe it's one and a half year ago. And he decided that he should go somewhere where he couldn't spend money. He should pay off his debts and go back to university to finish what he wanted to study to be a psychiatrist.

[24:28] So, he found a job on a tiny island which is called Grimsey, and that is a tiny island between Iceland and Greenland. I think there's about 50 people that lives there. And he works for a family who has two boats and live on their fishing industry and he works there. He loves to stay there.

[24:50] And he says in two years I'm going to buy a boat and then I'm going to go to university and finish my study. And David has always managed to do what he plans to do, so I'm pretty optimistic. And I know he's in a good place as well, as my mom.

[25:12] And I have my siblings, two of them living in Iceland. One brother in Sweden. But they bought themselves a house in Thailand. Which, they are now all together in Thailand. Are going to be there until May. So, I wish someday I'm going to be rich enough to visit them.

[25:33] So I think that's kind of my story.

Mari-Ann Jackson: [25:37] Good. Good. [25:41] What changes did you feel were the hardest when you came here to the United States?

Margret: [25:51] Well, I tell you... Can I be honest?

Mari-Ann Jackson: [25:55] Yes.

Margret: [25:57] Because, I think it's ignorant... I know now it's ignorant to be like I was at first, because every culture has its own. But when you come from one culture and you have to look at another one, and then you think, "That's stupid." [26:18] You think, "Why are they doing it this way? It's so much more clever to do it the other way, the way I know." But that's ignorant to be like that, and I was a lot, I had a lot of criticism in myself, and I could not, many things here, I could not stand. I wanted to live in Iceland, because I thought, oh, this is so ridiculous. Why do you have to do it like that?

[26:40] Then, my son, my very clever oldest son, he said, "Mom, if you want to live here, shut up." And that's exactly what I did. I could see that, you know, often, the local way of doing things are the best at the place that they are.

[26:58] So, then my sister stayed with me for two months and she was the same. I saw myself in her. So, I said, "Shut up. If you're going to stay here with me, don't criticize."

[27:10] So, when you come from one culture to another, that's what you find. They don't do it the way that you know it, and you think it is not the right way to do it.

[27:21] It's the same when I went to Spain. Why can't they be more clever with the computer? Why do you have to sit for hours if you're going to pay your electricity bill, because the man working on the computer doesn't know how to work it, or something like that.

[27:36] There are, of course, but that's why I say, you need to adapt. You need to adapt to the ways that you are living in. And I understand everything much better now.

[27:49] Though I, have to say that it would be much easier for everybody if you wouldn't have all these regulations that you have. Because I have founded a company, I founded a company

two, no, a year ago, in February, a year ago, that I was going to import things from Iceland to here, because I had been in the import business before, so I thought, OK, this, I can do.

[28:16] But unfortunately, it is like, the regulations that you have to go through, and small companies like we have in Iceland that have excellent, excellent products, they cannot turn everything around in their companies, just to make those new labels. Because, you know, everything is digital, and it's in the computer and that's how their labels are.

[28:48] So, to do all that for a special market, you would have to sell, they said, that's OK, we can do that, but then, you will have to sell millions, you know. Because they can't afford it. So, I've kind of given up. I've kind of given up, because it's just too difficult.

[29:05] And I think, many of it, I mean, the products coming from a country like Iceland, it is so clean and pure, and this shouldn't be so restricted. But, all this, nutrition, who reads it? [29:28] The nutrition.

Mari-Ann Jackson: [29:30] The labels?

Margret: [29:31] Yeah, the labels. I don't know if there are many people that, if they're going to eat candy, I mean, you know that it's sugar. So, I mean, is it any less sugar than the other? Well, I don't think it would really matter. But that's the way it is. [29:44] That, for instance, I think that's very difficult, and makes difficulty for every company that wants to import to America.

[29:58] The immigration here, that is a difficult thing, too. I am still a green card, or, I am not a citizen. I am a, what do you call it, a permanent resident, something like that.

Mari-Ann Jackson: [30:14] Does Iceland allow dual citizenship?

Margret: [30:18] They do, now, yes. And I guess I could be a resident if I wanted to go through that. But the last time I went to, I had to renew my card every 10 years, I had to renew my residency. I did, and that is procedure that you don't want to do it more often than 10 years, believe me. [30:44] So, I understand about the terrorism and everything, but I don't know. Sometimes you think, this is a little bit too much.

[30:54] But, otherwise, living here is wonderful. You've got wonderful weather, much better than in Iceland. You have wonderful parks to walk in, and I'm a walker, I like to walk. I have a lot of friends that I would not want to be parted with.

[31:19] I think that you could choose, you have the freedom to choose what you want to hear or watch. You don't have to complain about it, because you have the freedom of choosing. And I think that's great.

[31:35] I think the Americans, they are very warm, nice people. They are concerned about you, they say hello to you. I have to explain to my friends coming to Iceland, they say, "Nobody says hello. And if I say, 'Good day,' nobody answers me."

[31:55] That's the culture difference. You see, in Iceland, you don't talk to people that you don't know. It's not considered to be polite. So, that's why nobody answers. But, so, there's probably, when an American comes to Iceland, he has the same thing as we coming over here.

[32:16] But that's wonderful that nobody, I mean, not all the countries are the same culture.

Mari-Ann Jackson: [32:22] I agree.

Margret: [32:23] Yeah.

Mari-Ann Jackson: [32:24] What about your son? When, you left to more or less establish your residence here, how did your youngest son feel about that?

Margret: [32:36] Well, first, he partied too much. He said 'Momma I'm sorry but, you know, I got too much freedom, I couldn't handle it.' [32:45] He's very sensible; he's always been like an adult. And I went back home, I was not here. I don't think I would have been here permanently at that time. I went back home and I said well I'm going to stay in Iceland for the next year and you better, you know, finish school and he said that that was fine and he did. So, he kind of agreed with me that he should be a good boy and not party too much.

[33:20] For instance, he always had a girl friend, he's a very handsome guy. And, he would always part with them, you know, dumped her if you want, but he would dress himself up, he would get flowers and he would go over there and explain. I thought it was kind of funny, but it's a nice way isn't it?

[33:44] He would say I'm not mature enough to be in a permanent relationship. That's kind of his way of thinking. Later on in life I talked to him, and I said maybe you were too young when I moved over here. He was in university when I moved over here.

[34:04] I said as well, you know, I've been moving with you from one country to another, maybe I didn't be a good mother.

[34:12] He said I'm so grateful for the life you brought me up in. It made me understand much more, be more mature, and you have to remember Mom, I am an adult, and I don't need you to watch over me like a hawk. I think I did a good job with him and he was OK with it. Yeah.

Mari-Ann Jackson: [34:45] Does he come often to visit you here? To the United States.

Margret: [34:52] He is rigid; he's not ready to move out here. We are hoping that some day he will, but he is happy where he is. I am happy if he is happy in doing and where he is. That's fine

with me. I'd much rather he's there doing what he wants to do and be happy, then to be here and not finding himself. He finds himself there. [35:16] He's like probably the outcome of a generation that knows all about computers and things like that and he comes into this little island with 50 people. They are having problems with things, he always goes over there and he helps.

[35:33] That's probably a good thing, too. I'm sure he feels good about that. And gives him, well, he's happy. So, I'm happy.

[35:43] I am going, I plan to go next summer and visit where he is on that little island. I've never been there. Yeah, so, even though I've been all over Iceland, I've never been there.

[35:59] This is a very unique island because they have the, I think they are sitting on the line, you know, the line on the globe.

Mari-Ann Jackson: [36:10] The Arctic Circle?

Margret: [36:11] Yes, where you can kind of step over and then you, they have a sign there. So, it's very north, yeah. It's a beautiful island. So, he's fine, yeah. [36:24] My boys here, they are happy where they are. One is married, the other one is not. And I have my two little granddaughters that we all take care of. And that's pretty good. So, my life is good. I am very happy here. I hope that I will stay here longer, but I don't know. I might want to go back when I'm older. I don't know yet.

[36:51] It takes a long time to feel at home. And I don't think that I do feel America is my home forever, though I feel like home here now, you know.

[37:10] The ties to Iceland are very strong. And Iceland is, I think that it has some kind of attraction and I don't know if it's, I love nature and nature in Iceland is wonderful.

[37:25] I always hear that people that visit, you know, Americans that go to visit Iceland always want to go again. Many of them fell in love with Iceland. Most of my students which have been, I don't know how many now, I should count them, probably, 100.

[37:43] Most of them are people just, that fall in love with Iceland, or fell in love with Iceland then want to, you know, go visit again and again. And they want to be able to understand them speak.

[37:55] I think that's incredible, not, I wouldn't have thought, first when I started to teach, it would be people that had some grandmothers or something, descents of Icelandic in them. And of course, there's always some of them.

[38:08] But many, many others are just young people. they love the music, they love the country, and they want to go there someday, or they have been there. They want to go again.

[38:19] I think that's incredible, and that's exactly what Iceland is. It gets a hold on you. That's why, I think I'm probably going to go there in my old age. Maybe David's going to take care of me.

Mari-Ann Jackson: [38:33] Is the social welfare system in Iceland much better than it is here for the elderly and so on?

Margret: [38:46] Yes. I have to say yes. Of course, Iceland is more. There are only 300 and maybe 20,000 people there. So, it would be a shame if you couldn't take good care of our elderly. [39:05] It's different when you're talking about millions. And all these private homes here that you don't really know what's going on inside.

[39:15] In Iceland, they have very new housing for elderly people. Like my mother has a room nearly as big as this stage, and there's a private bathroom. Then, they have a restaurant downstairs for them, not the restaurant, well, it looks like a restaurant. They have a menu, even. Then, upstairs where she is, because she is that old, they have a kitchen with a kind of a family room with TV. So, it's very nice.

[39:53] Of course, there are hospitals where they keep those that are sick with Alzheimer's or something like that. That's kind of like a hospital. Then, older senior homes.

[40:09] But I would say, yes. Everybody's very well taken care of. Maybe too well, because they live to be 100, you know, because they are so well taken care of.

[40:23] My mom wants to go, she cannot understand why she's here still, you know. Everybody that she knew is gone, so. So, yes, unfortunately, that would be the truth.

Mari-Ann Jackson: [40:39] Yeah. When your ex-husband came to this country with the boys, how old were they?

Margret: [40:51] No, he came here alone, 10 years after we divorced. Maybe it was even shorter, maybe six years after we divorced, because then, when we divorced, my oldest one was 12, no, he might have been 13 or 14, and my younger one was three years younger. They lived with me until they were out of school, had graduated in school and they were working. [41:26] Because he didn't get his citizenship, I don't think, maybe five years after he had been here. I think he married for it or something, you could do that then, I guess.

[41:40] Then, he was talking to them and telling them how good it was out here, and come and try it out. He got them the green cards, so they went out to try. The younger one had to go for a visit, and then they decided to move altogether.

[42:01] They were out of my home, then. They were grown up. My older one had been living with a girlfriend for a couple of years.

[42:13] My younger one, he probably came out here when he was 17, stayed for a half a year. Came back home and lived with me while he was, he wanted to learn how to make the nets, for the fishing. Because he had heard that if he knew how to repair the nets, he could get a job in Alaska.

[42:39] So, he learned that in Iceland, and went back and went on the crab boats, when he was about 20. And he went on some of the crab boats in Alaska. It was scary to see the, from the video that he sent me. But when they are grown up, you just have to let them do what they want to do.

[43:03] Then, later on, he studied to be a captain, and he graduated, so, he's a captain now.

Mari-Ann Jackson: [43:11] Good. Wonderful.

Margret: [43:13] And he still goes to Alaska to fish, because that's what he wants to do.

Mari-Ann Jackson: [43:17] Yeah. Good.

Margret: [43:22] So, they were grown up when they went. I had my company, and they were helping me out and kind of left me alone there.

Mari-Ann Jackson: [43:33] Well, now you are here.

Margret: [43:34] Now, I am here and with them. And, you know, you can't stand in the way of your kids. They have to have their own lives, that's how I feel.

Mari-Ann Jackson: [43:43] Yeah.

Margret: [43:44] Yeah.

Mari-Ann Jackson: [43:45] Very true.

Mari-Ann Jackson: [43:47] Do your granddaughters speak Icelandic?

Margret: [43:50] I'm so ashamed to say no, because I teach Icelandic, and I'm always trying to get them to. I know they have listened to it all their lives, so I know that, you know, a month in Iceland, they would probably speak it. But the problem is that their mother is from here. [44:14] And, as well, my oldest son, who is married, my daughter-in-law is from here. So, when we are in their company, we always speak English. The mother of the girls did not like us to speak Icelandic among us or with them when they were growing up, because, I don't know, she didn't understand it, she didn't think that was proper.

[44:37] So, we didn't do that, which was how it began. So, when they only speak one language, it's difficult to change to, I sometimes say something in Icelandic, and they kind of know what

I'm saying, but they don't speak it no. And I planned on getting them into class so they learn it proper.

Mari-Ann Jackson: [44:59] Are there traditions, Icelandic traditions that you have in your home and things that you do that your children also have learned from you?

Margret: [45:11] Yes, and when I came out here to live, I got to be a member of the Icelandic Club. And later on, and I guess I brought a lot of stuff to the Icelandic Club that I thought was Icelandic tradition that they had kind of forgot. Or their generation, which got it from their mother and fathers, grandfathers or whatever, you know, it gradually changes. And, of course, things are changed in Iceland since that time. [45:45] So, and later on, I was the president for one year of the Icelandic Club. I think that I brought stuff to this country, or to the Icelandic Club from Iceland, tradition from Iceland.

[46:03] Of course, my sons, they grew up in Iceland until they were over 20 years old. So, their way is the Icelandic way, but then, of course, when you're married to Americans, then you have to kind of, we are a minority, if I can say so, yes.

[46:30] But we still make planer and ponnukokur.

Mari-Ann Jackson: [46:34] Pulla, no, pulla, that's Finnish.

Margret: [46:38] And then, of course, we have our thorriplot, which is our annual ball, here in March, which, we eat the old Icelandic traditional food. My sons have never been very much in favor of that, anyway, so.

Mari-Ann Jackson: [46:57] Tell us what that traditional meal is.

Margret: [47:01] Well, I have to tell you, maybe, I have to start about Thorri, thorriplot. Blot, you know, is that, when you sacrifice something, that is what do you call it? There is a word in English for blot. Well, anyway, Thorri.

Mari-Ann Jackson: [0:03] For the Nordic American Voices Oral History Project. Today is March 5th, 2011, and I'll be interviewing Margret Solvadottir, Margret Solvadottir. [0:18] We are at the Nordic Heritage Museum in Seattle, Washington. My name is Mari-Ann Kind Jackson, and I am with Kaitlyn Kotter.

[0:28] Welcome, Margret.

Margret: [0:29] Thank you.

Mari-Ann Jackson: [0:30] Thank you for agreeing to be our guest and sharing your life story with us today. Would you start by just stating your full name, and your date of birth and where you were born?

Margret: [0:43] My name is Margret Sigríður Solvadóttir. And I was born in Iceland, 1945, in Reykjavík.

Mari-Ann Jackson: [0:55] And then, we would just like you to share your life story with us. Go back and tell us your family history, talk about your parents, give us their names and then tell us your life story.

Margret: [1:13] OK. My mother's name is Laufey Guðmundsdóttir. And my father's name is Solvi Pall Jóhannsson. They were farmers in Iceland, north of Iceland, a place called Adalvík. It is probably the nearest part of Iceland to Greenland. [1:37] They were farming there until my mother got sick of tuberculosis. And everybody in Iceland that got TB, they had to go to an isolation place.

[1:53] So, at that time, I had a sister who was, I was not born, of course. There was a sister of mine who's five years older than I, her name is Halldóra. And I had a brother, three years older than me, and his name is Hermann. Both those siblings of mine were put to grandmothers, one to my father's, and my brother was to my mother's mother.

[2:23] My mother was shipped, first, to Isafjörður, it's the next town, and then to Reykjavík. She was put in a place where they had all the TB patients, which was called Reykjalundur. That was in Reykjavík, or kind of outskirts of Reykjavík.

[2:47] My father, he could not bear to live on the farm after my mom had gone. So he took his mother, which was living with them, and my sister and moved them to Isafjörður and they had a house, he bought a house for them. Then, he went to Reykjavík, and seeking a job on a trailer, a fishing trailer.

Mari-Ann Jackson: [3:18] Trawler.

Margret: [3:19] Trawler, yes. Sorry. Trawler. He did get that job, and so, he was fishing or going between Iceland and England, all the wartime. He was shot down, not him, the ship. And they were all survived. So, he was stuck in England for a little while waiting for another courier to go to Iceland. [3:44] Meanwhile, my mom was in this isolation place, and many of her friends died there. She survived it. Then, I came, then my dad came back and I came about and they started their life in Reykjavík. They never went back to farm.

[4:13] So, my siblings came, then, later. My dad's mother with my sister, she lived with us all the time she had left. And my brother came a little bit later. He kind of was happy with his grandmother up in the country. So, he came when he was about, maybe, eight, I can't remember, exactly.

[4:42] But I remember my first time in Reykjavík. I was probably four or five. This was after the war, and it was a very tough time in Iceland, there was not much of anything.

[4:56] I remember standing in line outside of a shoe shop and everybody was lined up before they opened, because they knew that a new container with shoes had come to the country. So, and I think that this was really the only big shoe shop in Reykjavik.

[5:19] So, that's kind of, I remember I was bored, and I didn't want to stand there in line, and it was cold. And I remember I had rubber boots on, and that's it.

[5:30] Then, I had a wonderful childhood. And we were moved from the place that I grew up in until I was six. We moved to the barracks where. We had a lot of barracks where the soldiers had a camp. We had about three or four camps in Reykjavik, from that wartime.

[5:55] Housing was very difficult in Iceland, they didn't have any materials to build anything. We don't have the woods in Iceland, so. There was no concrete, not was any fabric there at that time.

[6:09] So, my mother had my youngest brother when I was six years old. And where we had been renting from a lady, spinster, was a nice lady, but she did not want more children in the house. So, she told my mother that she had to move.

[6:31] So, Mom was alone with us, because Dad was on the sea, so, she decided to buy one of these barracks. Is it barrack, what you call it?

Mari-Ann Jackson: [6:45] Barrack.

Margret: [6:46] Yeah. So, she went out and she bought one, and we moved into that place, and when Dad came home to Reykjavik, he did not know where we lived. So, he found out, so.

[6:57] And then, when I was about 11, he stopped going to sea and came inland. Then, Iceland had really, doing really well. We had a new fabric for the...

Mari-Ann Jackson: [7:14] Factory.

Margret: [7:15] It was a factory, factory for fertilizer. So, my dad got a job there, and he never went to sea after that. So, that was much better. [7:30] When I was 11, my dad started to build our home which my mom and dad lived in all their lives until he died. My mom is now in a home. She's going to be 96 in May.

[7:49] So, and I had a good childhood. I was brought up in a loving family. We were four siblings. Then, later on, my mom and dad fostered one little boy who was three years younger than my youngest brother.

[8:13] I think that the change in Reykjavik from my first memory and, until I left, is enormous, but if I think about the change from my parents' life and until then, that is unbelievable.

[8:35] I remember that the radio was the best thing you could think of. When I was sent up in the country to be with [8:45] my relatives there, that was a usual thing in Iceland, they would send all the kids that had relatives up in the country, they would go there in the summers, which was really good.

[8:57] And the radio, that was the thing that all these thrilling stories -- in the evening, we would all be with the ear by the radio. And that is something, when you talk to young people today, they don't understand the life that we used to live. So that's that.

[9:21] And then later on, I married, like everybody. If you did not marry before the age of 18, in Iceland at that time, you were talked about that you were not going to get any husband. So I guess that was the thing to do. So I married young. I was 18, and I had two sons with my husband. And we divorced when I was about 30-something, I can't remember.

[9:51] There have been 32 years since we divorced, so you can calculate. Well, anyway, I went into another, not marriage, but relationship, six years after I divorced. And I had one boy, David, and he's still in Iceland. But my two sons in my marriage, their father moved out here about 10 years after we divorced. And then he got the citizenship. He was always saying to our sons, "Why don't you come out here, I'll get you the green card, you can come out here and try it out?"

[10:31] So they came out here. I think one of them, it was before he was 20, and the older one, he was about 24. And they never came back. So I kind of missed them, but in the meantime in Iceland, I had many jobs. I founded my first company when I was 27. And I put up a gym.

[11:05] And everybody thought that was a thing not to do. My ex-husband, he had it calculated that I was on my head before I even started. But, I was determined to do this. And I got about 200 women to come in every day. So we had a lot of activity. That was really good. And I was having gymnastics or aerobics or whatever you call it today. It was exercise. And then I had massage, and then I had a sauna, and a tanning lamp.

[11:43] And that was very popular, so I kind of was at first starting that thing in Iceland. I had that for about 10 years, and, when I divorced, I wanted to do something new. So, I applied for a job that was asking for a man, a male, to sell medical things. And I applied. He said, "Why do you apply for this? This is, you're not a male."

[12:16] And I said, "Well, I can do it better than any male." So, I did, and I worked for them for years, and I was very successful in that job.

[12:27] Then, I had David, who is now 28, and I'm very proud of him. He's a very, turned out to be a very good boy. After that, when I had David, my life changed. I had to be a mom again.

[12:45] My oldest son was 20 years old when David was born, and my younger one from my marriage was 17. So, there's a big gap and I was a career woman, so I wasn't really planning for this.

[12:59] I always remember that, going to the doctor and he telling me that I was pregnant. I was in a relationship with his father, but I had not planned on changed life. So, I remember when the doctor asked me if I wanted to have an abortion. That was really something.

[13:24] I had to sell abortion equipment, because I was selling medical stuff. But I had never thought about it. And I thought, I had lost two, a miscarriage two times. So, I thought, if I could feel so guilty about my miscarriages, I could not do anything about, how am I going to feel about this?

[13:52] So, I said no. And I had David. And I'm so grateful to God that I did. He turned out to be a wonderful kid.

[14:01] So, then, when he was a little bit older, I did all kinds of jobs. I went back to school and got better education. I had a radio show. It was an idea of mine.

[14:16] I went to the station and I said, "I want to put this program on, and I'm going to introduce people together," you know. I interview somebody on the air, and if somebody likes him, he can phone in. That was very popular show, and I had that until they sold the station.

[14:34] And I had put up a company, I founded a company importing tiles from Italy and Spain. That all started because I was always going for holiday in Spain. Then, when I bought a house. I bought a house that I had to make all the interior myself, and I thought, tiles would be the wonderful thing on the floor. So, I bought my own tiles in Spain and brought them in.

[15:08] Then, everybody said, why don't you, "Can't you do that for me?" So, I thought, OK, why am I doing that for free? So, I founded my company, and that grew pretty well.

[15:21] Then, at this time, my two oldest sons, which would be helping me, they decided to go to America. So, I decided I needed to employ somebody. But every male that came to seek the job, I could see that they thought they were more clever than I, you know, they brought their briefcase and they had their own ideas. So, I said, no, no.

[15:48] So, I sold the company and I moved to Spain, because I had already bought a flat there that I used for summer. So, I thought, OK, I am just going to go and see how it is to live in Spain all year round.

[16:05] So, I did. I bought a big house, and the bank was taking it from the owner anyway, so I got it for a good price. That was a house with 10 bedrooms, five bathrooms and three kitchens. It

had a swimming pool and patio and a fruit garden, and a little bit of woodland, and a tennis court.

[16:34] So, I thought, OK, maybe I can put a guest house here. But I found out that that was very difficult. You had to have all kinds of insurance and you had to have an elevator in the house. So, that would have cost a lot of money.

[16:50] So, I put up a restaurant. So, I made a restaurant, The Icelandic Bar, I called it. And I cooked most of the year, but over the summertime, I had, I was always so fortunate, always something came up to my lap.

[17:08] One day, two young guys come bicycling and they see that name, so they come in for a drink. And we, of course, talked in Icelandic, and they said they were cooks. If they could maybe stay only to cook for me over the season, and only for the board and food. I had a big house, so it was no problem. So, they cooked for me, and we had a popular season.

[17:35] And I could never make a guest house out of my big house, but what I [17:38] did, because I had written a book, sometimes in Iceland, it was published in '89. I was in this club of authors. So, I got writers to come and stay, finish their books.

[17:58] That was wonderful, because we had a wonderful evenings. I would just give them dinner, they would have to seek for themselves for breakfast and other food. But at dinner time, we would sit and talk about books, were some of my favorite. So, that was a wonderful time, that I had there.

[18:17] So, we stayed in Spain for, I think, my son was about, we stayed there about five years. I put my son, David, into an English, it was a private school, it was rather expensive, but he was a clever boy.

[18:40] Even though he didn't know any English when he went in the school, after the semester, the headmaster wrote on his paper that if somebody had told me that a child with no English knowledge would enter this school and be on top of his class in English history, I would not believe it. But that was David.

[19:02] So, David learned Spanish when he learned English, and of course, Icelandic, in the time we were there. Then I moved back to Iceland, I think, in the '96 or 7, and got a job in a hotel. I sold everything that I had in Spain.

[19:22] Got a job in a hotel, first in Ork in Hveragerdi if anybody knows that place, that's where all the tourists are taken when they go, the Golden Circle in Iceland. Then, later on, in Icelandair hotel, Hotel Loftleidir. For one year, I was at Radisson Hotel, Hotel Saga.

[19:46] That was when I was kind of getting my life back in Iceland, and David educated in Iceland. When he graduated, I had been, because I worked for Icelandair, I could come out here and visit my two other sons, which are living here.

[20:10] Then, when I got to be a grandmother, in '99, my first grandchild, I was coming here four times a year. One time I stayed, her first year, I stayed her for two months and took care of her. That was a wonderful bonding time for us.

[20:34] So, that was tough, to be with my teenager in Iceland and with my granddaughter, here. But I was kind of torn between those two countries. But fortunately, for me, to get free flights was helping a lot.

[20:51] My oldest son, he sponsored me and got me a green card in '99. So, I could keep that card by all my visitings, but I wasn't living here. I came and stayed, but Iceland was always better, in my eyes. I only wished I could take my boys and my family and bring it back there. So, it took me a long time to adapt here.

[21:22] I think, about the last six years, maybe, four or five, six years that I've been here permanently, kind of, only going home to Iceland to visit.

[21:37] But now, here, I'm fine. I teach Icelandic, here in the museum. I have a lot of fun with that. I started to do that about four years ago, first at home, and then, here, in the museum. I've met a lot of people through that, and everybody is so kind and nice about learning Icelandic, and it's wonderful to teach students that are so enthusiastic about learning. So, it's been a lot of fun to do that.

[22:10] And I was working, after all, with hotel work. I worked in real estate in Iceland, you don't need to take any tests or anything there, you can just work in real estate if you like to, because every real estate office has to have a lawyer, anyway, so.

[22:32] So, I thought, OK, since I know this job, why not try to do that here? So, I, while working in Iceland, I took my test through the computer, just the course, and then, I came out here in 2004 and took the test, and that was in December, so I had my license here, 2005. And started to work in real estate, 2005 or six when I kind of moved over here.

[23:00] Now, my little granddaughter is going to be 13 this month, no, 12, 12 this month, and I can't believe it. She has grown so much. She was born three months premature, so, she was, her father's, if he held her, she hardly got up to his elbow, so. And now, she's a big, nice, beautiful looking little lady.

[23:28] And I have another one, Alexis, and she is seven, will be eight in June. So, that's a wonderful addition.

[23:38] So, now, I am kind of settled here. My mother's in a home. She's in a wonderful home. In Iceland, we have wonderful care for older people so I don't have to worry about her. I can talk with her on the telephone nearly every day.

[23:57] And, my son David, he decided that he wanted to get away from all the glamour and party life in Reykjavik. One day, I think it's nearly two years ago now. Maybe it's one and a half year ago. And he decided that he should go somewhere where he couldn't spend money. He should pay off his debts and go back to university to finish what he wanted to study to be a psychiatrist.

[24:28] So, he found a job on a tiny island which is called Grimsey, and that is a tiny island between Iceland and Greenland. I think there's about 50 people that lives there. And he works for a family who has two goats and live on their fishing industry and he works there. He loves to stay there.

[24:49] And he says in two years I'm going to buy a boat and then I'm going to go to university and finish my study. And David has always managed to do what he plans to do, so I'm pretty optimistic. And I know he's in a good place as well, as my mom.

[25:12] And I have my siblings, two of them living in Iceland. One brother in Sweden. But they bought themselves a house in Thailand. Which, they are now all together in Thailand. Are going to be there until May. So, I wish someday I'm going to be rich enough to visit them.

[25:33] So I think that's kind of my story.

Mari-Ann Jackson: [25:36] Good. Good. [25:41] What changes did you feel were the hardest when you came here to the United States?

Margret: [25:51] Well, I tell you... Can I be honest?

Mari-Ann Jackson: [25:55] Yes.

Margret: [25:57] Because, I think it's ignorant... I know now it's ignorant to be like I was at first, because every culture has its own. But when you come from one culture and you have to look at another one, and then you think, "That's stupid." [26:18] You think, "Why are they doing it this way? It's so much more clever to do it the other way, the way I know." But that's ignorant to be like that, and I was a lot, I had a lot of criticism in myself, and I could not, many things here, I could not stand. I wanted to live in Iceland, because I thought, oh, this is so ridiculous. Why do you have to do it like that?

[26:39] Then, my son, my very clever oldest son, he said, "Mom, if you want to live here, shut up." And that's exactly what I did. I could see that, you know, often, the local way of doing things are the best at the place that they are.

[26:58] So, then my sister stayed with me for two months and she was the same. I saw myself in her. So, I said, "Shut up. If you're going to stay here with me, don't criticize."

[27:13] So, when you come from one culture to another, that's what you find. They don't do it the way that you know it, and you think it is not the right way to do it.

[27:21] It's the same when I went to Spain. Why can't they be more clever with the computer? Why do you have to sit for hours if you're going to pay your electricity bill, because the man working on the computer doesn't know how to work it, or something like that.

[27:36] There are, of course, but that's why I say, you need to adapt. You need to adapt to the ways that you are living in. And I understand everything much better now.

[27:49] Though I, have to say that it would be much easier for everybody if you wouldn't have all these regulations that you have. Because I have founded a company, I founded a company two, no, a year ago, in February, a year ago, that I was going to import things from Iceland to here, because I had been in the import business before, so I thought, OK, this, I can do.

[28:16] But unfortunately, it is like, the regulations that you have to go through, and small companies like we have in Iceland that have excellent, excellent products, they cannot turn everything around in their companies, just to make those new labels. Because, you know, everything is, it gets all, and it's in the computer and that's how their labels are.

[28:48] So, to do all that for a special market, you would have to sell, they said, that's OK, we can do that, but then, you will have to sell millions, you know. Because they can't afford it. So, I've kind of given up. I've kind of given up, because it's just too difficult.

[29:04] And I think, many of it, I mean, the products coming from a country like Iceland, it is so clean and pure, and this shouldn't be so restricted. But, all this, nutrition, who reads it? [29:28] The nutrition.

Mari-Ann Jackson: [29:30] The labels?

Margret: [29:30] Yeah, the labels. I don't know if there are many people that, if they're going to eat candy, I mean, you know that it's sugar. So, I mean, is it any less sugar than the other? Well, I don't think it would really matter. But that's the way it is. [29:44] That, for instance, I think that's very difficult, and makes difficulty for every company that wants to import to America.

[29:58] The immigration here, that is a difficult thing, too. I am still a green card, or, I am not a citizen. I am a, what do you call it, a permanent resident, something like that.

Mari-Ann Jackson: [30:14] Does Iceland allow dual citizenship?

Margret: [30:18] They do, now, yes. And I guess I could be a resident if I wanted to go through that. But the last time I went to, I had to renew my card every 10 years, I had to renew my residency. I did, and that is procedure that you don't want to do it more often than 10 years, believe me. [30:44] So, I understand about the terrorism and everything, but I don't know. Sometimes you think, this is a little bit too much.

[30:54] But, otherwise, living here is wonderful. You've got wonderful weather, much better than in Iceland. You have wonderful parks to walk in, and I'm a walker, I like to walk. I have a lot of friends that I would not want to be parted with.

[31:19] I think that you could choose, you have the freedom to choose what you want to hear or watch. You don't have to complain about it, because you have the freedom of choosing. And I think that's great.

[31:35] I think the Americans, they are very warm, nice people. They are concerned about you, they say hello to you. I have to explain to my friends coming to Iceland, they say, "Nobody says hello. And if I say, 'Good day,' nobody answers me."

[31:55] That's the culture difference. You see, in Iceland, you don't talk to people that you don't know. It's not considered to be polite. So, that's why nobody answers. But, so, there's probably, when an American comes to Iceland, he has the same thing as we coming over here.

[32:15] But that's wonderful that nobody, I mean, not all the countries are the same culture.

Mari-Ann Jackson: [32:22] I agree.

Margret: [32:23] Yeah.

Mari-Ann Jackson: [32:24] What about your son? When, you left to more or less establish your residence here, how did your youngest son feel about that?

Margret: [32:36] Well, first, he partied too much. He said 'Momma I'm sorry but, you know, I got too much freedom, I couldn't handle it.' [32:45] He's very sensible; he's always been like an adult. And I went back home, I was not here. I don't think I would have been here permanently at that time. I went back home and I said well I'm going to stay in Iceland for the next year and you better, you know, finish school and he said that that was fine and he did. So, he kind of agreed with me that he should be a good boy and not party too much.

[33:20] For instance, he always had a girlfriend, he's a very handsome guy. And, he would always part with her, you know, dumped her if you want, but he would dress himself up, he would get flowers and he would go over there and explain. I thought it was kind of funny, but it's a nice way isn't it?

[33:44] He would say I'm not mature enough to be in a permanent relationship. That's kind of his way of thinking. Later on in life I talked to him, and I said maybe you were too young when I moved over here. He was in university when I moved over here.

[34:02] I said as well, you know, I've been moving with you from one country to another, maybe I didn't be a good mother.

[34:11] He said I'm so grateful for the life you brought me up in. It made me understand much more, be more mature, and you have to remember Mom, I am an adult, and I don't need you to watch over me like a hawk. I think I did a good job with him and he was OK with it. Yeah.

Mari-Ann Jackson: [34:45] Does he come often to visit you here? To the United States.

Margret: [34:52] He is rigid; he's not ready to move out here. We are hoping that some day he will, but he is happy where he is. I am happy if he is happy in doing and where he is. That's fine with me. I'd much rather he's there doing what he wants to do and be happy, then to be here and not finding himself. He finds himself there. [35:16] He's like probably the outcome of a generation that knows all about computers and things like that and he comes into this little island with 50 people. They are having problems with things, he always goes over there and he helps.

[35:33] That's probably a good thing, too. I'm sure he feels good about that. And gives him, well, he's happy. So, I'm happy.

[35:43] I am going, I plan to go next summer and visit where he is on that little island. I've never been there. Yeah, so, even though I've been all over Iceland, I've never been there.

[35:59] This is a very unique island because they have the, I think they are sitting on the line, you know, the line on the globe.

Mari-Ann Jackson: [36:10] The Arctic Circle?

Margret: [36:11] Yes, where you can kind of step over and then you, they have a sign there. So, it's very north, yeah. It's a beautiful island. So, he's fine, yeah. [36:24] My boys here, they are happy where they are. One is married, the other one is not. And I have my two little granddaughters that we all take care of. And that's pretty good. So, my life is good. I am very happy here. I hope that I will stay here longer, but I don't know. I might want to go back when I'm older. I don't know yet.

[36:51] It takes a long time to feel at home. And I don't think that I do feel America is my home forever, though I feel like home here now, you know.

[37:10] The tides in Iceland are very strong. And Iceland is, I think that it has some kind of attraction and I don't know if it's, I love nature and nature in Iceland is wonderful.

[37:25] I always hear that people that visit, you know, Americans that go to visit Iceland always want to go again. Many of them fell in love with Iceland. Most of my students which have been, I don't know how many now, I should count them, probably, 100.

[37:43] Most of them are people just, that fall in love with Iceland, or fell in love with Iceland then want to, you know, go visit again and again. And they want to be able to understand them speak.

[37:54] I think that's incredible, not, I wouldn't have thought, first when I started to teach, it would be people that had some grandmothers or something, descents of Icelandic in them. And of course, there's always some of them.

[38:08] But many, many others are just young people. they love the music, they love the country, and they want to go there someday, or they have been there. They want to go again.

[38:19] I think that's incredible, and that's exactly what Iceland is. It gets a hold on you. That's why, I think I'm probably going to go there in my old age. Maybe David's going to take care of me.

Mari-Ann Jackson: [38:33] Is the social welfare system in Iceland much better than it is here for the elderly and so on?

Margret: [38:46] Yes. I have to say yes. Of course, Iceland is small. There are only 300 and maybe 20,000 people there. So, it would be a shame if you couldn't take good care of our elderly. [39:05] It's different when you're talking about millions. And all these private homes here that you don't really know what's going on inside.

[39:15] In Iceland, they have very new housing for elderly people. Like my mother has a room nearly as big as this stage, and there's a private bathroom. Then, they have a restaurant downstairs for them, not the restaurant, well, it looks like a restaurant. They have a menu, even. Then, upstairs where she is, because she is that old, they have a kitchen with a kind of a family room with TV. So, it's very nice.

[39:53] Of course, there are hospitals where they keep those that are sick with Alzheimer's or something like that. That's kind of like a hospital. Then, older senior homes.

[40:09] But I would say, yes. Everybody's very well taken care of. Maybe too well, because they live to be 100, you know, because they are so well taken care of.

[40:23] My mom wants to go, she cannot understand why she's here still, you know. Everybody that she knew is gone, so. So, yes, unfortunately, that would be the truth.

Mari-Ann Jackson: [40:39] Yeah. When your ex-husband came to this country with the boys, how old were they?

Margret: [40:51] No, he came here alone, 10 years after we divorced. Maybe it was even shorter, maybe six years after we divorced, because then, when we divorced, my oldest one was 12, no, he might have been 13 or 14, and my younger one was three years younger. They lived with me until they were out of school, had graduated in school and they were working. [41:26] Because he didn't get his citizenship, I don't think, maybe five years after he had been here. I think he married for it or something, you could do that then, I guess.

[41:40] Then, he was talking to them and telling them how good it was out here, and come and try it out. He got them the green cards, so they went out to try. The younger one had to go for a visit, and then they decided to move altogether.

[42:01] They were out of my home, then. They were grown up. My older one had been living with a girlfriend for a couple of years.

[42:13] My younger one, he probably came out here when he was 17, stayed for a half a year. Came back home and lived with me while he was, he wanted to learn how to make the nets, for the fishing. Because he had heard that if he knew how to repair the nets, he could get a job in Alaska.

[42:38] So, he learned that in Iceland, and went back and went on the crab boats, when he was about 20. And he went on some of the crab boats in Alaska. It was scary to see the, from the video that he sent me. But when they are grown up, you just have to let them do what they want to do.

[43:03] Then, later on, he studied to be a captain, and he graduated, so, he's a captain now.

Mari-Ann Jackson: [43:11] Good. Wonderful.

Margret: [43:12] And he still goes to Alaska to fish, because that's what he wants to do.

Mari-Ann Jackson: [43:17] Yeah. Good.

Margret: [43:22] So, they were grown up when they went. I had my company, and they were helping me out and kind of left me alone there.

Mari-Ann Jackson: [43:33] Well, now you are here.

Margret: [43:34] Now, I am here and with them. And, you know, you can't stand in the way of your kids. They have to have their own lives, that's how I feel.

Mari-Ann Jackson: [43:43] Yeah.

Margret: [43:44] Yeah.

Mari-Ann Jackson: [43:44] Very true.

Mari-Ann Jackson: [43:47] Do your granddaughters speak Icelandic?

Margret: [43:50] I'm so ashamed to say no, because I teach Icelandic, and I'm always trying to get them to. I know they have listened to it all their lives, so I know that, you know, a month in Iceland, they would probably speak it. But the problem is that their mother is from here. [44:14] And, as well, my oldest son, who is married, my daughter-in-law is from here. So, when we are in their company, we always speak English. The mother of the girls did not like us to speak Icelandic among us or with them when they were growing up, because, I don't know, she didn't understand it, she didn't think that was proper.

[44:37] So, we didn't do that, which was how it began. So, when they only speak one language, it's difficult to change to, I sometimes say something in Icelandic, and they kind of know what I'm saying, but they don't speak it no. And I planned on getting them into class so they learn it proper.

Mari-Ann Jackson: [44:59] Are there traditions, Icelandic traditions that you have in your home and things that you do that your children also have learned from you?

Margret: [45:11] Yes, and when I came out here to live, I got to be a member of the Icelandic Club. And later on, and I guess I brought a lot of stuff to the Icelandic Club that I thought was Icelandic tradition that they had kind of forgot. Or their generation, which got it from their mother and fathers, grandfathers or whatever, you know, it gradually changes. And, of course, things are changed in Iceland since that time. [45:45] So, and later on, I was the president for one year of the Icelandic Club. I think that I brought stuff to this country, or to the Icelandic Club from Iceland, tradition from Iceland.

[46:03] Of course, my sons, they grew up in Iceland until they were over 20 years old. So, their way is the Icelandic way, but then, of course, when you're married to Americans, then you have to kind of, we are a minority, if I can say so, yes.

[46:29] But we still make kleinur and ponnukokur.

Mari-Ann Jackson: [46:34] Pulla, no, pulla, that's Finnish.

Margret: [46:37] And then, of course, we have our thorriblot, which is our annual ball, here in March, which, we eat the old Icelandic traditional food. My sons have never been very much in favor of that, anyway, so.

Mari-Ann Jackson: [46:56] Tell us what that traditional meal is.

Margret: [47:01] Well, I have to tell you, maybe, I have to start about thorri, thorriblot. Blot, you know, is that, when you sacrifice something, that is what do you call it? There is a word in English for blot. Well, anyway, thorri.

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Margret: [0:04] In the old almanac on almanac Iceland, there was a period of months that was called names like thorri, is the first, from January until in the beginning of March. Then, after that, there's another period called Goa, and so on. [0:26] So, thorri was the time of year where farmers... Of course, there were no refrigerators in Iceland at that time, in the old time. So, what they would do, they would preserve the food by putting it in sour or smoke it or salt it to survive the winter.

[0:47] Then, when thorri came, that meant you were coming to springtime, so you're on, if you had any leftover, you make a feast, and eat up all the old food that you have reserved. So, that came about in this period of time that they would eat up all this sour food and the blood pylsa and whatever. We call it blodmor, and lifrapylsa, liver something: [1:34] Sausage? Liver sausage or blood sausage?

Margret: [1:37] Yeah, all of that, in sour. At the end, of course, hangikjot.

Mari-Ann Jackson: [1:41] Pickled, lots of pickled things?

Margret: [1:43] Lots of pickled things, hangikjot is the smoked lamb meat. All that stuff. [1:53] I don't know when, maybe 1960 something there was a restaurant in Reykjavik that thought this was a good tradition and they started to do that, make this food. They served it in a wooden, kind of like, a tray.

[2:12] So, that started thorriblot and now, today, every restaurant has thorriblot, every club has a thorriblot. That means, thorriblot means only that they're going to eat that old food. Then, of course, we have a dance, we have a band, so we can dance and socialize. So, that's thorriblot.

Mari-Ann Jackson: [2:38] OK, yeah. Does your family do that here? Or, I know the Icelandic club does it. But your family doesn't do it?

Margret: [2:48] No. We would not get that kind of food. The club does it and brings the food over from Iceland, but that is very difficult to do. They have to have all kinds of papers and everything. This is not something that you can easily get, yeah. [3:07] Me and my family, we are not so fond of that sour, blood sausage and all of that anyway. I never got... I was forced to eat that, anyway, so.

[3:18] But I don't eat meat, not today. But hangikjot and saltkjot and all this, you lamb salted or lamb smoked, that's all very delicious food. Yeah.

Mari-Ann Jackson: [3:32] Is it mainly restaurants in Iceland that do thorriblot now? Or do the families there also do it?

Margret: [3:39] No, mainly, in Iceland, it's the companies, all the big companies, they put on thorriblot. The restaurants do, but the restaurant does it like, they just had the food available, yeah. [3:54] But the companies, big companies, all the clubs and the socialization, they do it, do a thorriblot. yeah. It's always fun, thorriblot is always fun, even though you don't eat the food.

Mari-Ann: [4:10] Wonderful. Good. Do you have any other questions for her?

Caitlin Cotter: [4:19] Not that I can think of. I know, I'm trying to think about it.

Mari-Ann Jackson: [4:24] Well, then, we want to thank you so much for taking the time and sharing your story with us. Well, this will be a nice part of the archives at the museum.

Margret: [4:34] Thank you.

Mari-Ann Jackson: [4:35] Thank you very much.

Margret: [4:36] It's just another Iclander Viking going from one country to another. Like they always did.

Mari-Ann Jackson: [4:42] Yes, exactly. [4:45] All right. Thank you.

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