

Marianne McCall World War II Oral History Interview

An Interview Conducted April 4, 2011, by William McWhorter as part of the *Here and There: Recollections of Texas in World War II* Oral History Training Workshop series. This interview was possible due to the generous support of the Houston Endowment and the Summerlee Foundation.

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ABSTRACT

Marianne McCall was born into a Jewish family in Darmstadt, Germany, in 1920. At the age of sixteen her family emigrated to the United States and settled in Dallas, Texas, where her father set up a medical practice and the family eventually secured American citizenship. Upon graduation from high school McCall received a refugee scholarship from Southern Methodist University in Dallas. In 1942 she graduated with a languages degree and proficiency in Spanish and German. Her language skills enabled her to secure a job as an interpreter and censor at Kenedy Enemy Alien Detention Station in Kenedy, Texas.

In her interview McCall discusses her memories of emigrating from Germany to Dallas, Texas, and beginning a new life; the entry of the United States into World War II; her parents' interrogation by the Federal Bureau of Investigation; her employment as a translator and censor at Kenedy Enemy Alien Detention Station; staff living arrangements; conditions at the camp; some aspects of her post-Kenedy contributions as a wartime interpreter; and her current reflections on World War II internment and the removal of Latin Americans into the United States.

**ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW
TEXAS HISTORICAL COMMISSION**

Interviewee: Marianne McCall
Date: April 4, 2011
Place: By telephone
Interviewer: William McWhorter

McWhorter: This is William McWhorter with the Texas Historical Commission, and today is Monday, April 4, 2011. I am conducting an oral history interview – part of the Texas Historical Commission’s Texas in World War II initiative. Today I have the opportunity to speak with Marianne McCall. And, Marianne, if you don’t mind, would you please state your name and spell it out for me again.

McCall: Yes. It’s Marianne M. McCall. M-a-r-i-a-n-n-e, and the last name is M-c- capital C-a-l-l.

McWhorter: Thank you very much, I appreciate that. Well, thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. I know it’s never appropriate to ask a lady her age, but since we’re doing a historical document, if you don’t mind, when were you born?

McCall: I was born in May 23, 1920.

McWhorter: Oh, well you have a birthday coming up next month.

McCall: I have a birthday coming up. Yes.

McWhorter: Excellent. And, where were you born?

McCall: I was born in Darmstadt, Germany, a town close to Frankfurt.

McWhorter: Excellent. If it’s not too much trouble, would you mind spelling that town’s name?

McCall: Yes. D-a-r-m-s-t-a-d-t.

McWhorter: So, you were born in Germany in 1920.

McCall: Correct.

McWhorter: And, in growing up in Germany in the 1920s, did your parents decide to move to the United States, or did you grow up as an adult in the United States – uh, in Germany?

McCall: Well, my parents decided to come to the United States in 1936, three years after Hitler took over Germany. We are Jewish, and my father had the feeling that things weren't going to go very well, and he had the foresight to have us leave in time – emigrate to America.

McWhorter: So, you were almost twelve or thirteen years old when your family decided that they were going to leave Germany.

McCall: I was sixteen when we came to Dallas [Texas], when we came to America.

McWhorter: Excellent. Well, growing up in Germany, did you have any brothers or sisters born into the family?

McCall: Yes, I have a brother.

McWhorter: And are you the eldest, or is he the eldest?

McCall: No, I'm the eldest.

McWhorter: You're the eldest. So, when your family decided to leave Germany, it was because – for lack of a better word – your father could see the writing on the wall...

McCall: Exactly.

McWhorter: ...under the Nazi regime...

McCall: Right.

McWhorter: ...and decided to emigrate to the United States.

McCall: Correct.

McWhorter: Did your parents ever express to you why they chose the United States as the country to move to?

McCall: Well, it was as far away as you could get from Europe.

McWhorter: The reason I'm asking is, in 1936, the United States – much like most of the world – is going through the Great Depression, so it would be hard to find a place to start a living, start a business, or even get a job, even in the United States at that time. Did your parents have trouble finding jobs when they first moved to the United States?

McCall: My father was a respected doctor in Germany, and he had his own hospital, as a matter of fact. And he had to leave all that, which was really tough. And there was

a shortage of doctors in Texas, and he had met a colleague some time at a convention who said, "If you come to Dallas, I will help you get started." So, that was the reason for coming to Texas.

McWhorter: Oh, okay. So, your dad saw that there would be an opportunity as a medical doctor to find work in Dallas.

McCall: Correct.

McWhorter: And your family moved from – emigrated – from Germany to Dallas, Texas.

McCall: Exactly.

McWhorter: Where did you guys leave Germany at? What port?

McCall: Oh, from Hamburg.

McWhorter: From Hamburg?

McCall: Uh huh.

McWhorter: And did you take a ship over?

McCall: Yes.

McWhorter: Or did you fly?

McCall: Now, don't ask me the name of it. I don't know.

McWhorter: Oh, that's okay. That's okay. But, in coming across from the ship, did you arrive at the American east coast, or did you come through Galveston?

McCall: No, no, we arrived in New York.

McWhorter: You arrived in New York.

McCall: Ellis Island.

McWhorter: Ah, so you went through Ellis Island. Okay. Excellent. So, in making your way to Dallas, Texas, did your mother go to work, or did she stay home and take care of you and your brother? I'm sorry – what did she do?

McCall: She was a housewife.

McWhorter: She was a housewife.

McCall: Yeah.

McWhorter: Okay.

McCall: That was the thing to do in those days.

McWhorter: Mmm hmmm. And, in arriving in Dallas as a teenager, did you go to public school in the Dallas system?

McCall: Yes, I went for one year to high school there to improve my English.

McWhorter: And what did you think of Texas upon arriving?

McCall: Well, it was all very strange, and it took a lot of adjustment to get used to the different culture, the different language. We had learned – we had studied English from a British lady before we left Germany, and our British English was not too well understood in Dallas.

McWhorter: [laughs] I would say so.

McCall: [laughs] Yeah. So, it took a little while, but it was, you know – we made it.

McWhorter: Well, I can say so. Well, in addition to being tough, was there anything that you really liked about Texas when you got here?

McCall: Well, the open spaces were fantastic. The endless roads with, you know, trucks and whatnot. It was just a whole different country. We didn't know what to expect. We expected that Dallas had cowboys riding on horseback in the middle of the city, which didn't happen, of course. But, we all work from stereotypes if we don't know where we're going.

McWhorter: Well, in arriving in America, and your father taking work as a doctor, were you able to become an American citizen before the war?

McCall: Yes.

McWhorter: Okay. So, you went through one year of high school. Did you go on to college?

McCall: Yes. I had a refugee scholarship at SMU [Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas].

McWhorter: Oh! And, did you enjoy SMU?

McCall: I loved it. It was wonderful.

McWhorter: Excellent. Were you able to graduate?

McCall: Yes, I did, with a major in Spanish and German and a minor in French and English.

McWhorter: Oh, so you love languages.

McCall: I was a language major, yeah.

McWhorter: What year did you graduate from SMU?

McCall: '42.

McWhorter: '42. So, while...

McCall: The first class after Pearl Harbor to graduate.

McWhorter: First class. I was going to say, so you were in Dallas, and you were in College when you heard of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

McCall: Yes.

McWhorter: Okay. As a freshly minted American citizen, as someone who had escaped Germany in the 1930s, how did you feel when the United States was brought into the war?

McCall: Well, Pearl Harbor was a horror story. We couldn't believe what was happening there. We were – America's entry into the war – well, we were hoping that Hitler would somehow or other be defeated. And, it looked like a just cause for a world war.

McWhorter: And, about how old was your brother in 1941.

McCall: He is eight years younger than I am.

McWhorter: Oh, so he was still a child during the war.

McCall: Yes.

McWhorter: Okay. Well, being relatively new to Texas – just a few years, being relatively new to being an American citizen, and, of course, having your German accent – after the war started did you happen to notice that people's attitudes changed towards you and your family?

McCall: Well, some of the ones that were not very astute assumed that everything that's German and came from Germany had to be an enemy alien, and we did have some unpleasant experiences to the extent that my brother came home from school at one point and found the house empty. And, as it turned out, the FBI had taken my parents in for questioning. They found that my father had a [shortwave] radio with a – some kind of a short band attached to it so we could hear news from everywhere, and that had to be disconnected. And so then, he was – the radio was

confiscated, but later on returned to him. Furthermore, we were not permitted outside the city limits for a couple of years.

McWhorter: And this is all happening to your family, even though you've become American citizens.

McCall: Oh, yes.

McWhorter: Okay. Well, how did that make your parents feel? Did you ever observe it, or did they ever tell you?

McCall: Well, we couldn't understand it because we were refugees, and here we were being treated as though we were enemy aliens. It didn't make any sense to us.

McWhorter: I've seen that common thread a lot in the people I've spoken with. Did you happen to remember reading in newspapers at the time if there were announcements asking aliens – enemy aliens – to report to the post office to register early in the war, so that the FBI and the other groups such as the Justice Department – would know where they were residing at?

McCall: I don't know how that was done. I have no idea about that.

McWhorter: No problem. That's okay. Well, in graduating from SMU in 1942, that's the same year that [the internment] Camp [at] Kenedy was established.

McCall: Correct.

McWhorter: How did you go from living in Dallas to living in Kenedy, Texas?

McCall: Well, as I had graduated from college, I was then ready to find employment, and my first choice would be somewhere where I could use my language skills. And, so there appeared an advertisement in the *Dallas Morning News* by the INS [Immigration and Naturalization Service] asking for someone who was able to speak German and offering this opportunity at this camp, this job. And, I was thrilled, and applied for it, and got the position.

McWhorter: Was the camp listed, or did it just say, "at a camp?"

McCall: I don't recall that.

McWhorter: Okay. Well, in applying for it – how did you apply for it? Did you go down to a local business, or did you travel to Kenedy and apply in person at the camp?

McCall: That I don't remember either.

McWhorter: Okay.

McCall: Probably done in writing – fill out some forms or something.

McWhorter: Well, in taking the job with Camp Kenedy, do you happen to remember what month or year that you arrived there?

McCall: It was in '43 – I think in the fall of '43.

McWhorter: The fall of 1943. Okay. Well, by then, the [Texas internment] camps at Seagoville, Kenedy, and Crystal City are all in place, and you're starting to take a job working at one of the camps. Before we start talking about what it was like to work at the camp and what you did, did you have to find yourself a place to stay, or did they have.....?

McCall: They offered us a place to stay inside one of the barracks, directly behind the barbed wire, inside the camp.

McWhorter: And, did you take them up on it?

McCall: Yes, for a while, until I couldn't stand it any longer.

McWhorter: Oh, really?

McCall: Then I moved into town and rented a room from one of the inhabitants there.

McWhorter: Was the accommodations too spartan for you, or did you just not like living behind the fence?

McCall: Well, the summers were boiling hot, and the winters freezing cold, I mean, I shouldn't say summer and winter. When it was cold, it was freezing. When it was warm, it was hot. And, it felt like we were interned, as well, because we were sitting behind barbed wire with guard towers around. It was a very strange feeling. I spent the whole day there.

McWhorter: I'll bet, and then not be able to leave at night because you sleep there, as well.

McCall: Mmm hmm.

McWhorter: Well, you're giving me some good impressions. Do you have any other impressions when you first saw the camp?

McCall: No, it was kind of foreboding looking, with the guard towers, the searchlights at night, and that was the first impression. What have I gotten myself into here?

McWhorter: Were you able to make friends with your fellow employees there?

McCall: Yes, to some extent. The man I worked with was a small-town lawyer who was of German descent, but had lived in this country for two or three generations. And, his German was actually, by far, worse than mine, so I was able to assist him, because he was not...he hadn't been using it. So, yeah, we were the ones that ran the show there as far as censoring, interpreting, translating.

McWhorter: Very interesting. And, can you remember if the camp was run by the U.S. military or the Department of Justice when you got there? Through the INS...

McCall: Department of Justice – the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

McWhorter: And, the guards there, were they the border patrol, or were they local sheriffs?

McCall: They were local sheriffs, I think. No, border patrol that – I never had heard of them.

McWhorter: Well, what were your duties there as a censor, and as a translator?

McCall: Well, it was our job – alright, let me start at the beginning. The Geneva Convention permitted detainees or POWs [prisoners of war] to communicate with Germany during the war. So they could both receive mail from Germany, and send it. And it was our job to make sure that certain information would not get out, and – for example, they were not permitted to voice complaints about conditions or the food that they had, or lack of things. And, so, the other thing we were looking for is attempts at escape. Sometimes they would make comments like – to their families back home – “I’m going to take a look at the outside of the fence tomorrow.” So, we wrote up a note and said possible escape, or such and such. So, that was basically our function there, as far as reading mail. When it came to translating or interpreting, eventually they were being interviewed by someone from the INS to find out whether they were there for a reason or not, because they were swept up in a great fear of, you know, what might happen. The United States was afraid of infiltrations of Germans and Japanese from Latin America, so they grabbed these folks up and put them into the camps, and only later on were

they given the opportunity to clear their names. And, this was done by the INS in the camps individually.

McWhorter: Okay. In working in the camp system, did you often have the chance to read correspondence coming in from Germany, or from South America?

McCall: Yes.

McWhorter: Would you apply the strategies you just discussed, you know, looking for information that might be detrimental to the camp security, or to...

McCall: Yes, but that wasn't likely to happen. But, yes, we did have that capability.

McWhorter: And, how long did you work at the camp?

McCall: One year.

McWhorter: One year.

McCall: Until the camp closed.

McWhorter: Well, in doing so, working at the camp – on your off hours, when you weren't working there, did you ever go into town? Did you travel around Texas?

McCall: Yes, we went into town and there were a couple of, you know, places where you could hang out. I spent some time in San Antonio, which was very lovely. And, once in a while went to see my parents in Dallas on the weekend.

McWhorter: Did you have a car at that time, or did you have to use the bus?

McCall: No, I had to use the bus.

McWhorter: And, did you help support the war effort while you were a civilian working at the camp – such things as scrap driving or buying war bonds during the war?

McCall: Yeah, we bought war bonds, sure. We did whatever we could.

McWhorter: And, are there any features of the camp – you've mentioned barbed wire and guard towers and spotlights – are there any unique features of the camp that you remember, like a garden or a swimming pool or anything?

McCall: No.

McWhorter: So, it was pretty spartan.

McCall: It was pretty spartan.

McWhorter: Okay.

McCall: And there were men only. This was a camp for men only.

McWhorter: Alright.

McCall: In contrast to Seagoville [Enemy Alien Detention Station] or these others.

McWhorter: At the Crystal City camp, we've found documentation that there was internal security division, which was made up of internees on the inside that helped do their own policing, working with the guards and the staff at the camp. Was that similar to Camp Kenedy?

McCall: Not that I'm aware of.

McWhorter: And were you and the small-town lawyer – were you the only two censors and interpreters working there, or were there others with you?

McCall: Yes.

McWhorter: Well, then you certainly filled a very small niche there by applying for that job and getting it.

McCall: It was just fascinating.

McWhorter: Well, when the camp closed in 1944 – or at least stopped being an internment camp – it later on became a POW camp – when it stopped being an internment camp, did you continue to work in this capacity for the INS someplace else?

McCall: No, but I worked in New York for the War Department doing similar work as a censor for POW camps around the country.

McWhorter: Interesting!

McCall: It was a whole other story. It was in a large building in New York where they censored ninety-eight languages and dialects.

McWhorter: Wow! So, you went from small-town Kenedy to large New York City.

McCall: Exactly.

McWhorter: How did you get that position?

McCall: I don't know. It was another someone looking for somebody that could do what I could do.

McWhorter: Oh, so you saw another opportunity to apply for.

McCall: I don't know how that happened anymore.

McWhorter: Okay. Well, have you had the chance to return to the camp – to the confinement site since you worked there?

McCall: I have never been back.

McWhorter: Okay. Do you have any desire to ever see it again?

McCall: It would be interesting, yes.

McWhorter: Well, one thing that we're working on right now is trying to pinpoint its exact location near Kenedy. We think we have a good footprint to start with with the water towers. There are twin water towers that are still standing today. Do you remember there being two water towers standing next to each other at the camp?

McCall: Not really.

McWhorter: Okay. Well, what we have been able to find is where five of the former internees are buried out at the cemetery. That's been marked by our agency since 2005. One of the things we're going to do with the [Japanese American Confinement Sites Program] grant from the National Park Service is research the primary documents associated with the camp at the National Archives [and Records Administration]. And as we compile that information and we do learn where it is we'll continue to take pictures – not only of what it looks like today, but we've started to collect historic photos of what these camps looked like during the war. Do you happen to have any photos from when you worked there?

McCall: No, I can't help you with that.

McWhorter: Do you happen to have any letterhead or documentation of you working there?

McCall: I doubt it, but I can take a look. I kept a diary while I was there.

McWhorter: Oh, you did? Excellent.

McCall: That's what I have.

McWhorter: Well, you've pretty much touched on everything I wanted to talk about at the camp. I've got just a couple of extra questions for you. You can feel free to answer or not, it's just opinion-related questions. Working as you did, as an interpreter and a censor, did you feel that you were adding towards assisting the American war effort?

McCall: Oh, absolutely. And our whole ambition was to become Americanized, to become part of the society here, and we were grateful for our lives, after all. And, we were anxious to assimilate.

McWhorter: Very nice. And, in putting together your efforts as a censor and interpreter at the camp, were you ever told by the administration, “Hey, thanks! You’re doing a great job!”? Or did they look at you a little sideways, kind of like the FBI had looked at your parents when the war first started?

McCall: No, I don’t think so. I didn’t feel that at all. They were happy to have me there.

McWhorter: Good. I’m glad to know that your efforts were appreciated by the people you were helping at the time. Well, I always make sure that when I conclude an interview – I always ask if there’s anything that you wanted to talk about that I haven’t brought up yet. Because I wouldn’t want to miss the opportunity to discuss something that you had prepared for, but I haven’t thought to ask yet.

McCall: Uh huh. Well, there’s one thing that has to be mentioned, I think. [It] is that this sweep of civilians from South America into [internment] camps [in the United States] was probably an injustice because none of them were accused of any crimes in South America. A lot of them were businessmen who had gone there years and years before, possibly married natives, established a coffee plantation, or whatever. And, now, without precedent, without being accused of anything, they were rounded up and brought to [the United States of] America. And, we told these countries, well, we will seize them and take care of them – not to worry. And, here they were, and then they had to clear their names after the fact. That was not what I would have considered American justice.

McWhorter: I’m seeing the same, the same opinions with people that I speak with – with the same facts they share with and I’m glad to know....

McCall: They were civilians. That’s the whole point. They were civilians. Now, whenever – with prisoners of war, from the Afrika Korps and whatever in New York, that was the enemy. That was a whole other story.

McWhorter: Do you think that the Latin American countries that participated in this – if their governments are, too, partially to blame for this injustice to the[ir] citizens?

McCall: Well, they're the ones who selected who was to be culled out. And it may have been envious neighbors, for all we know, who decided, well "we don't need these guys here. We can run the show ourselves", whatever.

McWhorter: Well, I'm certainly seeing that in much of the research that I do – that, although it's not a bright shining star in how the United States prosecuted the war – the internment of alien citizens in the United States, Latin American citizens brought to the United States during the war, and then of American citizens that were interned in the camps, in addition – the FBI talking to your parents and going through their stuff and disconnecting the short band on his radio – is part of the overall World War II story that needs to be talked about just as much as the battles or as the home front industry.

McCall: Well, let me make one funny comment, though, that has nothing to do with what you just said. The camp itself, when it first opened, had both Germans, Japanese, and a few Italians. At first, food was delivered to the kitchen at the camp and equally distributed. They had a lot of Germans who lorded it over the Japanese and so they made sauerkraut and pigs' knuckles for dinner, which made the Japanese retch. They wanted dried shrimp and rice. So, they finally had to establish two separate kitchens to have these two major groups of folks satisfied. Otherwise, there would have been riots. I thought that was kind of interesting.

McWhorter: That is very interesting, and I do appreciate you sharing that. That's a first-person perspective to history that you don't really see in books or reports.

McCall: No [laughs].

McWhorter: Very good. Well, Ms. McCall, I certainly appreciate you taking the time to speak with me today. I know that your perspective as a censor and a translator is adding greatly to our research, and I'm glad that I had the chance to talk with you.

McCall: Okay. Thank you.

McWhorter: Thank you for coming to the United States when you did. Thank you for becoming a citizen and embracing America and thank you for your service to the United States during the war.

McCall: Oh, you're welcome.

McWhorter: Excellent. Well, I'm going to stop the recording now.

[End of interview]

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