

Audrey Moonyeen Thornton World War II Oral History Interview

An Interview Conducted February 16, 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

Audrey Moonyeen Thornton (née Neugebauer) was born in 1935 to an English mother and German father. The daughter of Royal Dutch Shell Oil employees, Thornton led a life of relative privilege in Venezuela until the outbreak of World War II. After relocating to Costa Rica Thornton's father, Eric Neugebauer, was arrested and the family was deported to the United States at the request of the U.S. State Department's Special War Problems Division. Thornton, her parents, and her American-born younger sister were held at Crystal City (Family) Internment Camp in Crystal City, Texas, before being resettled in New York City after the war.

In her interview Thornton discusses aspects of her childhood and internment, including the impact on her family; child labor; mail censorship; languages spoken at the camp and educational opportunities; leisure time; the difficulties faced by multi-national families who faced deportation to separate countries; memories of the camp commander, Joseph O'Rourke; and her post-war resettlement and life in New York City.

**ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW
TEXAS HISTORICAL COMMISSION**

Interviewee: Audrey Moonyeen Thornton

Date: February 16, 2011

Place: Dallas, Texas

Interviewer: William McWhorter

Other Participants: David Thornton (Audrey Moonyeen Thornton's son)

McWhorter: This is William McWhorter with the Texas Historical Commission and today is Wednesday, February 16, 2011. I am in Dallas, Texas, preparing to do an oral history interview, part of the Texas Historical Commission's Texas in WWII Oral History Training Workshop and Interview Program. Joining me today is Moonyeen Thornton, and if you don't mind, would you please say your full name, and then spell your name out for me.

Thornton: My name is Audrey Moonyeen Thornton. My maiden name was Neugebauer. A-U-D-R-E-Y, M for Mary, O-O-N-Y-E-E-N, Thornton, T-H-O-R-N-T-O-N. Maiden name, Neugebauer, N-E-U-G-E-B-A-U-E-R.

McWhorter: Thank you very much. Now, I know your first name is Audrey, but we've talked in the past, and you don't mind if I call you Moonyeen?

Thornton: I have always been called Moonyeen.

McWhorter: Moonyeen, then, I'll make sure I pronounce it properly [laughs]. Well, thank you very much for meeting with me today to talk about your experiences in Texas during World War II. And also as part of the German, Italian, and Japanese Latin Americans that were brought up to the United States, part of an exchange program between the United States and the Axis nations during World War II. And, your experience is not only in Texas, but post-war. So, why don't we just begin by putting together a context of your life story. Where were you born?

Thornton: I was born in London, England.

McWhorter: And I know I'm not supposed to ask this, but when were you born?

Thornton: I was born in 1935.

McWhorter: The month and day?

Thornton: August 22, 1935.

McWhorter: Born in August 1935. And born in London, England.

Thornton: London, England.

McWhorter: Were your parents English citizens at the time?

Thornton: No. My father was German, he was born in Breslau, Germany, which is now Poland. My mother was English, but she was born in Shanghai. My father worked, my grandfather worked for a British steamship company and was based in China. When my mother and father, my mother and uncle, were nine years old, my grandmother brought them back from England --- to England. And they lived there, went to school there. My mother graduated from nursing school and got a job with Shell Oil – the Royal Dutch Shell Oil, and moved down to Maracaibo, Venezuela. My father fought in the First World War in Mexico, for Germany. He then came back to Germany, got a job with Shell Oil as an accountant, and moved down to Maracaibo, and that's where he met my mother. My father had two brothers who fought in the Second World War and were interned and died in Siberia, in a concentration camp. My father was left with one sister, whom I later on met. When my parents got married my mother was very English and she wanted me born in England. So they traveled first to Germany so she could meet her in-laws, and then to London so I could be born in London. That was in nineteen-thirty ----- the beginning of 1935. And there were rumblings of war and everything. I was born there. I lived in London for nine months, and then my mother and I went back down to Venezuela.

McWhorter: What was your mother's name, and what was your father's name?

Thornton: My father's name was Eric, E-R-I-C, Neugebauer. Do I have to spell it again?

McWhorter: No ma'am.

Thornton: And my mother's name was Gwyneth Audrey Howlett. Spell it?

McWhorter: Yes, please.

Thornton: G-W-Y, no, I'm sorry. G-W-E-N-Y-T-H, Audrey A-U-D-R-E-Y, Howlett H-O-W-L-E-T-T.

McWhorter: So, you were named after your mother.

Thornton: I was named after my mother, but when I was in kindergarten, there were five Audreys, so my mother decided she would be one of the ones that would always call me --- and I have always gone by my middle name.

McWhorter: So were you their first child?

Thornton: I was their first child.

McWhorter: Okay. So, if I understood correctly, both your mother and your father were working for the Dutch Shell----

Thornton: The Royal Dutch Shell---

McWhorter: ---in Venezuela, but they didn't know each other prior to coming to Venezuela?

Thornton: No, they didn't. They met when my father was hospitalized with a carbuncle, and he met my mother.

McWhorter: I see. So did she ever tell you if they dated for very long.

Thornton: She never talked about any of our past ever. Neither did my father. So everything I remember is just things I remember. My mother was very closed-mouthed and ended up a very, very bitter person. My father, on the other hand, everybody loved. He was just a teddy bear.

McWhorter: Well, I want to talk more about that as we discuss your parents living in Venezuela. But, if you're born in 1935 in London, and then your family returns to Venezuela, during 1935, the United States and most of the world is feeling the effects of the Great Depression.

Thornton: Right.

McWhorter: Do you ever remember, in the late 1930s, seeing any effects in Venezuela of the Great Depression?

Thornton: Oh no. We lived a very, very nice lifestyle. My mother had maids. I had a nanny. I didn't see much of my mother and my father because my nanny was always with me. They played tennis. That's one memory I have, of carrying shandy down to

the tennis courts. Shandy is a drink that's made with lemonade and beer. They used to drink it. And that's one memory, not many, that I have of Venezuela. But that is one.

McWhorter: Well, with Germany going to war with Poland in 1939, and then France and the Low Countries in 1940, and eventually Russia in 1941 – all of this before the United States is in World War II. Living in Venezuela, was your father ever experiencing any sort of grumblings from the British company about being a German citizen?

Thornton: Oh, absolutely. That's why we left Venezuela. My father and all the Germans were temporarily let go and we had to move to a neutral country, which we chose, Costa Rica, because Shell thought it was going to be just a few-months war. So we moved to Costa Rica. My father had a friend who owned a coffee plantation. And we lived there for a few years and, you know, just a normal, nice lifestyle. And then we moved in to San Jose, the town of San Jose, Costa Rica. And there it already seemed that it was what I remember. I went to a Catholic school because it was right across the street from the apartment we lived in. The zoo was right across the street also. And all I remember was that I had to speak Spanish. It was always Spanish. And the next thing I remember, of Costa Rica, was, we were in our apartment and these men came in. I remember clearly. I don't know how many, but there were more than one. And I remember specifically them taking all the pictures off the walls and then they took my father and pulled him and as they were pulling him he fell and he tore his Achilles tendon because he fell off the sidewalk and they imprisoned him. They put him in prison. And I don't know what the length span is, but next thing I remember is we were in a part that was for women and children. And we spent a Christmas there. The next thing I remember was being on a ship. I don't remember much of it.

McWhorter: Before we go on to that part, when you're living in Costa Rica and this raid takes place on your home and your father's taken away, and then you and your mother are sent to a facility for women and children, is this 1941? Is this 1942? It's okay if you don't remember, but I thought I'd ask.

Thornton: You know, I think it was....[counting to herself]....it might have been '42 or '43. It was probably '42 or '43.

McWhorter: Okay. That would make sense by that time. All right.

Thornton: And they took us by troop transport, and we landed in San Pedro, California. I think it was San Pedro. And by there we flew on a DC-3, and I remember, it was an Army plane because all the seats were lined up against the wall. You know, it wasn't a comfort plane. And then we landed in Costa----in, uh, Crystal City. Well, we landed in Texas. I'm not sure what the airport was.

McWhorter: It's possible you landed in Uvalde.

Thornton: Well, I know we were close to Uvalde. And then there's a long period that I don't remember. I just remember snippets. I met my best friend, Anne Marie, whom I still keep in touch with. And I'm going to give you her phone number and address.

McWhorter: Thank you.

Thornton: And I remember snippets. I remember we had a pool.

McWhorter: Well, before we start talking about the camp life, can I talk to you some more about being----

Thornton: Absolutely!

McWhorter: ----transported from Costa Rica. Because your story of coming from Costa Rica is very similar to a lady I've done an interview with in the past whose family also was brought by troop transport to California and then sent to Texas, but they went on a train, a train that went through El Paso, down into southwest Texas. My questions are 1) is this the whole family? You, your mom, and your dad? Or just you and your mom?

Thornton: Me, my mom, and my dad. We were connected again in Costa Rica.

McWhorter: All right, so you're moving together on that ship. What was the experience like on the ship? Do you have any memories of it?

Thornton: I have very few, except that I got a big boil on my butt.

McWhorter: Mmm hmm. I heard there was quite a few children got sick on that troop transport. And, arriving in California, you were flown to Texas.

Thornton: Yes.

McWhorter: Was that the first time you had flown in an airplane.

Thornton: I'm not sure, but we used to travel from Venezuela to New York quite a bit by ship. So, it might have been the first time I remember flying.

McWhorter: I see. Well, getting on the plane and being sent to Texas, or the troop transport taking you from Costa Rica to California, how did you feel? Do you remember feeling nervous? Did you understand what was going on?

Thornton: All I remember was that my mother and my father were very angry. Because, they said that if there were torpedoes going off all around and that they had no right having women and children on these ships. And that's all I remember of that. But, they talked about it, you know, when I could hear, or with themselves.

McWhorter: Well, you said that while living in Venezuela your family had a very comfortable lifestyle.

Thornton: Very. And my father came from a lot of money.

McWhorter: I see. And, being pushed off to Costa Rica, was your family able to do anything with their belongings before that?

Thornton: We brought very few belongings with us. I --- there were pieces of jewelry that I have and my sister has. We really were only allowed to take what we could carry. Everything else stayed there.

McWhorter: So the lifetime of work that your father and mother put together working for the Shell Oil Company, whether it be homes or their position in society, or whatever the case may be – that's being uprooted and taken from them----

Thornton: That's finished.

McWhorter: ---as you're being pushed off to Costa Rica. And then, whatever you had at Costa Rica, when the raid comes and your father is hurt in the arrest, it sounds like even less than that was allowed to go with you on the troop transport.

Thornton: Well, we had very little by then anyhow because everything was left in Maracaibo.

McWhorter: I always try to make it a part of each interview, when we talk about this, that so much is taken from these people – whether they be of Italian descent, Japanese

descent, or German descent – that it's really a testament to your parents' character and the strength of your family that decades later you're able to have a life somewhere in the world, whether it be in South America, the United States, or Europe. So I always make sure that for future people to listen to this that they understand that when you were coming to Crystal City [Family Internment Camp], you're not coming with a baggage claim ticket that says all my stuff is in a U-Haul.

Thornton: We came with nothing.

McWhorter: You're coming with nothing. So, to get back to your plane ride and arriving in Texas ---- what did you, what did you think in some of these snippets of Texas compared to the Venezuelan and Costa Rican environment. You're now in Zavala County, Texas and I'm from Uvalde County, which is just north of that. I know that the two climates are not the same.

Thornton: It was just, I guess that's one of those things, that I knew it wasn't happy anymore. I knew that my life was changed. It would never be the same. And I blocked it out. I've blocked out so much that has come back since I started talking to you because somewhere between the time I was in Crystal City, I decided if nobody knew anything I couldn't ever be hurt. So, that's the way I lived until I had my first child. And then I suffered from post-partum depression, which they didn't know about then. And I'm chronically depressed. Clinically depressed, not chronically. So, I suffer from depression now, because it was never treated the way it should have been. And as I get older, I seem to remember more things that had been forgotten because I shut them very tightly.

McWhorter: Maybe, possibly mimicking what your mother was doing.

Thornton: Well, absolutely. My mother never discussed anything that I can --- I don't remember my mother in my life – from the time we left Venezuela, until I was older, you know. But, I never remember her in those years being part of my life. It seemed I always had a nanny and that she was never there. I remember sitting at a table once, all four of us. So, there had to be somebody else there. It might have been my nursemaid, my nanny. There were four of us sitting at a table. I remember

an earthquake starting. Maybe that was when we were at the table. And the houses in Costa Rica were built with ?_____ so they wouldn't break apart. And I remember us all going outside. I remember that, and nothing much else. I remember looking out my window and seeing the coffee being put out because we lived on the coffee plantation. But I spent a lot of time with the workers, it seemed.

McWhorter: And this was before your sister was born.

Thornton: This is in Costa Rica.

McWhorter: Well, I certainly am appreciating your strength in talking to me right now. If you don't mind, let's talk some about those snippets that you were bringing up. One place I like to start with when I talk about these confinement sites, these camps is, as a child there, in '43, '44, you're eight, nine years old by now. You've said you've blocked some things out, but can you tell me if you realized that you were being detained. If you realized you were at a camp and you couldn't leave if you wanted to.

Thornton: Oh, there was no doubt about it. I knew we were incarcerated. There were guards with guns and we were behind barbed wire fences. And every now and then there were guard stations with guns. I remember my grandmother in Germany died and I still have a snippet. We were, my father and I, were standing under a guard station and that was the first time I ever saw my father cry. And I can remember the barbed wire I was hanging on to.

McWhorter: Because he had just found out that ---

Thornton: He'd just found out by letter from his sister. I---

McWhorter: I'm going to show you something here real quick. This is a copy of what mail would look like coming in to Crystal City. It's from the City of Crystal City's archives.

Thornton: Oh, yes!

McWhorter: And, do you ever remember seeing anything similar to this.

Thornton: Yes, but they'd open it all.

McWhorter: Oh, of course. The censors would open and take a look.

Thornton: Yeah, it's very much, so. We got a lot of mail. We had a friend of my father's in Germany, was an artist, and we sent him food packages.

McWhorter: Oh? From the camp?

Thornton: You know, see that picture [points to painting nearby]? He did that one over there with the woman with the grapes right over the chair. Now I don't know if there's a date on there. So, it would tell us. Z_____? Was his name, and he sent us a lot of paintings.

McWhorter: To you ----

Thornton: But I don't know whether it was after we were out of the camp and we were living in New York. But all I remember is we got all these paintings in thanks for the food packages. But I remember the trucks coming with the food in the beginning they used to come and give us food. And we all went to the truck and got our rations. Then after that, they made little money.

McWhorter: That's right.

Thornton: And we could go to the store ---

McWhorter: Little tokens.

Thornton: They looked like plastic.

McWhorter: Kind of like this?

Thornton: Yeah.

McWhorter: Yeah. What we found with these tokens is that in an effort to prevent detainees from storing up cash that they would earn for doing jobs in the camp the camp currency was these paper plastic tokens.

Thornton: Right.

McWhorter: And you could use them to supplement your diet or buy, you know ---

Thornton: Whatever, right.

McWhorter: --other items you could have in your home.

Thornton: I don't think we had money, ever. I had a job.

McWhorter: What was your job?

Thornton: My job was I had a little cart with wheels. We used to use kerosene, and we had the kerosene jugs, and I had a bunch of people and I used to go and collect the empty kerosene things, go and fill them, and bring them back, and they would pay me ten cents each.

McWhorter: Now that's a job I don't think they'd let an eight or nine-year-old have today, but that's terrific that they would let you go fill the kerosene jugs.

Thornton: I remember that vividly. I remember Anne Marie had beautiful, long hair.

McWhorter: And this is your friend.

Thornton: My friend that I met there. And we went through a long time together. My family and I were sent to Ellis Island before she went and we were already out when they were in Ellis Island. But I used to go visit her...I was only about thirteen, from, you know, Regal Park. I'd take the subway, the bus, and go down to the south ferry and go over to Ellis Island and take her Ausschnitt [meat cuts], they called them. I used to go to Schaller & Weber, on 86th Street, which was the German town.

McWhorter: All this in New York City.

Thornton: In New York City. But I'm getting ahead of myself. I'm sorry.

McWhorter: It's okay.

Thornton: But, yes, we got a lot of this mail.

McWhorter: You've showed me some photos here of schoolteachers and of classes. I take it that you went to school while you were in the camp?

Thornton: Yes.

McWhorter: Were you ever in the L-shaped building that you can see on the ---

Thornton: You know, that's what I was looking. I'm wondering if this was it.

McWhorter: It's quite possible. I wouldn't know----

Thornton: I don't remember very much. All I know is we did German. So, my German got better, my Spanish was pretty good, so----

McWhorter: When you went to school did you go to school all day long, or did you go to school

Thornton: I think we had a fairly rigid...now the other thing I'm remembering in Crystal City, they used to have meetings. Now most of the people there were German, both the parents. And, a lot of the children had been born in the United States, or South or Central America or whatever, but they used to have these meetings and it was like the bund, and my mother was British, and I was a British subject. And she would have a fit because they would sing "Deutschland Uber Alles" with their right hand up in the air. We left.

McWhorter: When Germany and England are in mortal combat with one another.

Thornton: So, she would always pull me out when that started. We had a movie theater we went to, because I saw "The Life of Dorian Gray" there. And it scared me for years.

McWhorter: Yeah, Dorian Gray is a scary story.

Thornton: And, um, I remember swimming in the pool. Those were happy times, because we made believe we were mermaids.

McWhorter: Oh, you did? The pool was quite large, I've seen the photos you showed me and from the information I've gleaned in the past with these diving boards that it was a very large pool. There was also changing buildings right in front --- one for the Germans, and one for the Japanese.

Thornton: Yes.

McWhorter: And it was set up that way because the Geneva Convention said with a camp you were not supposed to have multiple nationalities in a camp, but they got around that because the German people that were there first, went to the INS [Immigration and Naturalization Service], the Department of Justice, and said, "We're willing to stay here, can you work it out?" That's a nutshell explanation, and they did. And you had both Japanese, German, and a few Italians there. So, they also, for the Geneva Convention, in front of the pool, had separate bath houses. Do you ever remember using one of the bath houses to go to the pool.

Thornton: Oh, yes. I remember, they had, like, wooden, what are they called?

McWhorter: Benches?

Thornton: Pallets.

McWhorter: Pallets.

Thornton: That you would shower, and I found a snake under one once.

McWhorter: Yeah? That's about right. Those snakes would crawl in wherever they could find some humidity or some water. Do you remember seeing the orchard that was next to the camp? Or any of the baseball, football, basketball fields?

Thornton: I remember only that there was a place that we played that was full of cactus and scrub, and we used to build houses in the scrub, and, you know, like Anne Marie and I would go and we would build something and play. Everything was make-believe. Always. The whole time I was there, it was always make-believe. Nothing was real, because we knew we weren't going to be there forever.

McWhorter: That's right. Well, while you're at the camp, your family has an addition to it.

Thornton: My sister was born March 5, 1947. And, '47, oh. Yes. Three months old. No. I think it was, '46 or '47. And, she was born there. My mother did not want to have any more children, and she was very unhappy. And that's another part of my life I don't remember. The only part I remember was, she went to the doctor once and there was goulash my father had made. My father was the cook in the family. And I was the cleaning person. My mother just vegged out.

McWhorter: She was having a very difficult time with this all.

Thornton: With everything. And she never came out of it. In all the years I knew her, she never had one friend. And, but, I remember, she went to the doctor and I put the goulash in the double boiler, and they were just plain tin boilers, and I filled it too full and it boiled over, and it caught fire, and all I could think of was she would be mad. So, I went in and grabbed it with my hands and I burnt all the top layer of my hands off. And that's...I remember that.

McWhorter: You're in the camp ---

Thornton: ---in the camp

McWhorter: ---most probably having to go to the hospital for your wounds.

Thornton: No, I put 'em in cold water myself.

McWhorter: You didn't want anybody to know.

Thornton: Well, my mother found out. We didn't go to the hospital for that. My mother was a big believer in "stiff upper lip," and "pull yourself together." So, she, you know, just --- but she loved my sister, once she was born. She adored my sister.

McWhorter: And what is your sister's name?

Thornton: My sister's name is Dilys. It's a Welsh name. D for David, I-L-Y-S. Her middle name's Muriel, M-U-R-I-E-L. And, do you want her married name now?

McWhorter: Sure, why not.

Thornton: Coviello. C for Charlie, O, V for Victor, I-E-L-L-O.

McWhorter: So, your family are living together at the camp as late as 1946, possibly '47...both your father --- who was the teddy bear that everybody loved, your mother --- with the stiff upper lip policy, but also herself dealing with a lot of pain, and then you and a very young Dilys. Is that correct? Dilys?

Thornton: That's correct.

McWhorter: You mentioned that while you were at the camp, in addition to the pool and education, you had a very strong memory of the camp commander taking you on a trip one day. Mr. O'Rourke? What was that about?

Thornton: Well, somehow, I used to go to his office a lot, and he was always so kind to me. And one day he said to me, "Would you like to go into town with me? I'm going into town." And I, of course, said yes. And, it's funny, I remember getting in the truck with him. I think it was a truck, and we went to town, and we stopped in front of Popeye's statue. And he told me the whole story, which I don't remember much except that it's the spinach capital of the world. And he bought me a soda. And that's what I remember of Mr. O'Rourke. He was a gentle, kind person to me.

McWhorter: One of the stories that you often hear from former German detainees is that German residents in the camp were often assigned the ice truck duties. They were going to town to get ice. Do you ever remember the ice truck coming into the camp and people, such as you described with the food truck, coming to the back—

Thornton: Yes. And I also remember now that my father worked on a road gang, like with prisoners. That was the way they could work. And he went out and I'm not sure,

because that's when I first heard of Seagoville [Enemy Alien Detention Station]. When the, maybe they even traveled to go and work. He did a lot of work, manual work, outside.

McWhorter: It's possible. Seagoville closed before Crystal City, so if you were at Crystal City after the war it's possible that he might have had a work detail there. With the camp being set up the way it is, and knowing that you're confined inside of it, you finally came to the day that you were going to leave Crystal City. Was that announced, do you remember, just, "Hey, pack your bags we're going today" or did you know that we're going on to this next place which eventually turned out to be Ellis Island.

Thornton: What I remember was that we were in the camp waiting to be deported. That was what the purpose was there. I remember the Japanese. I don't remember so much the Germans leaving. But I remember the Japanese. The Japanese in their part of the camp made beautiful gardens. They had lovely gardens and then they were sent to Ellis Island to be deported. They used to take all the belongings that were left and put them in the street and burn them. I have, somewhere, a neckerchief that I pulled out of the fire.

McWhorter: Really?

Thornton: Somewhere in my belongings. But that was very sad to see everybody's life go up in flames.

David: Who burned it? The Japanese?

Thornton: The camp. The camp.

David: Or the camp?

Thornton: The camp burned it.

David: So, the Japanese weren't burning their own belongings.

Thornton: They cleaned out.....oh no, no, no. And this was after they'd left the camp.

David: So, when they left the camp they were told not ----They couldn't take anything but what they could carry.

Thornton: But that's basically what you had – what you carried with you.

David: But during the years they would accumulate ---

Thornton: It was very hard to accumulate because we had our clothes given to us, we had a place to go to get clothes.

McWhorter: Yeah, there was a store inside the camp. And, real quick, for the interview, this is Moonyeen's son.

David: David Thornton.

McWhorter: David Thornton, asking a question.

Thornton: And, you know, I can remember, my very favorite pair of shoes were wedges. And I remember I was so excited that there was a pair that fit me.

McWhorter: So, if I understand it correctly, and the way David asked for some clarity --- when they left, they left their belongings out in front of the buildings that they were living in and personnel from the camp later came by and instead of picking it up and throwing it away or picking it up and recycling -----

Thornton: They burned it.

McWhorter: -----it, they burned it there on the spot. Okay. Well, not living six and a half decades ago, I'm not exactly sure why they did that. It could have been possibility of an order from higher up that, you know, we can't run the risk of there being any sort of contagious disease in their clothing. Or it could be just spite because of how long the war was taking in the Pacific because it went on months after Germany surrendered. You don't know the mindset of the people six and a half decades ago.

Thornton: And that's when they tried to, you know, then all of a sudden we were in Ellis Island and I don't remember how we got there.

McWhorter: But you know that you were sent there.

Thornton: We were sent there.

McWhorter: You didn't choose to go there.

Thornton: Oh yeah. And then my mother got a hold of her brother who was in England. And he was part of the stock exchange, and he got a hold of the British Consulate here

in New York and they started working for that whole year. They said you cannot send an American citizen ---

McWhorter: Your sister.

Thornton: My sister --- two British subjects, my mother and I, and a German. You can send the German, but what are you going to do – separate the family? And they wrote an article in one of the newspapers and I think my sister has it. You know, four-nation family to be separated.

David: The process at the time was that you had to go back to your country of birth, not your nationality, your country of birth. That was the deciding factor. So, that would have sent Eric Neugebauer back to Germany. It would have sent...

Thornton: no, no – oh, Eric, my father....

David: my grandfather. That would have sent my grandmother back to China, my mother back to the U.K., and my aunt would have been able to stay as an infant.

Thornton: See, now I didn't know that.

McWhorter: And then once you're over there, you'd have to find a sponsor to get you back.

Thornton: See, I didn't know that.

McWhorter: So, it sounds like that letter writing campaign may have worked to prevent your family from being sent to post-war Germany.

Thornton: Yes. And then when my father came out of Ellis Island and we got a basement apartment through somebody, and then he got a job with a company called Toepfer whom he'd known through Crystal City. T-O-E-P for Peter, -F for Frank, -E-R. They dealt in nuts, bolts, and screws. Up on 86th Street.

McWhorter: In New York City?

Thornton: In New York City which was German Town, a lot of Germans. And he worked there 'til he died. And, you know, he went from living in a basement apartment...we got an apartment in Brooklyn where he was the manager of the whole apartment house and fixed things --- the janitor. And we got our apartment free, and then we moved to another garden apartment in Bayside Queens, and then he was able to buy a house in Laurelton, Long Island.

McWhorter: Kept working his way back up.

Thornton: Yep.

McWhorter: And, was your mother still around at this time?

Thornton: My mother was still around and all I ever remember is her sitting in a chair watching TV day in and day out.

McWhorter: The whole experience really took a toll on her.

Thornton: I never remember her cooking. My father cooked. I cleaned and did the laundry and the ironing.

McWhorter: And did you and your sister grow up in Long Island?

Thornton: Yes.

McWhorter: How did you eventually come back to Texas?

Thornton: Well, my sister went to Albany State and became a teacher. My father, I broke his heart because I didn't go to college. But I had been to eleven schools at that time. And I just couldn't see another four years of college. So I went to work for an insurance company and then I went to work for American Airlines. And I worked, I started out as a ticket agent, and then customer service, and then I opened up the Admiral's Club at Kennedy. And that's where I met my ex-husband.

McWhorter: And you went on to have two sons? Matthew and David?

Thornton: I have three sons.

McWhorter: Three sons.

Thornton: Eric, my oldest,

McWhorter: Named for your---

Thornton: --- named for my father.

McWhorter: Excellent. Well, I have two questions I do want to ask. One is, we talked about this briefly before the interview, which was Italians in the camp. My understanding is the following: and, please feel free to shoot that right out of the air because I don't even know.

Thornton: Right.

McWhorter: With Crystal City's camp opening in December of 1942, and Italy being knocked out of the war by the middle of the next year – 1943, Italians at Crystal City wouldn't have been there in great numbers. But how long would they have been there. My question got a new wrinkle to it about two weeks ago when I went back down to Crystal City for a meeting and I was looking at the birth certificates. I can probably find your sister's down there next time I go.

Thornton: Yes!

McWhorter: And I found Italians being born there as late as 1946. So, it's my understanding that there may have been Italian families still at Crystal City as long as you and your family were there – if your sister was born in '46. Do you remember seeing Italian families?

Thornton: I don't ever remember knowing an Italian.

McWhorter: Okay.

Thornton: ...or meeting an Italian, ever. Just Japanese. And even that was iffy. I mean, they kept us separated.

McWhorter: Yeah, while there was free access across the camp because the German side, Japanese side, and the pool's here – you've got to go through it.

Thornton: Right.

McWhorter: There was kind of a division.

Thornton: That's why I remember the gardens because I must have had to walk through them. But somewhere in here [points to map] was scrub land. I wonder if I considered this part of it-----

McWhorter: It's possible. It's possible. And if not that, maybe near the football and baseball fields.

Thornton: ----where I played.

McWhorter: Well, I always end up each interview by saying, "Is there anything we didn't talk about today that you wanted to discuss?"

Thornton: Not....I told.....I have remembered so much more. My mind opened up a little bit since I talked to you the first time. And, I've tried really hard to remember as much

as I could. It just --- it's still very painful because it obviously screwed up my life....emotionally, you know. It did a lot of ours.

McWhorter: Well, the whole process, whether it was American German, Japanese, and Italians or Latin American German and Japanese and Italians, for the benefit of catching the 8 or 12% that really were Fifth Columnists, that really might have been saboteurs, that really did have a favorable opinion of Germany or Japan winning the war, you still have that 80% plus that were loyal, or in your family's case, loyal to the English nation and just trying to make business for themselves in Venezuela --- swept up into this whole mix. It's a part of the World War II story that is very undertold. The Nicaraguan, the Venezuelan, the other ten Latin American countries involved with this in the United States, it's a part of the story that needs to be told – in my opinion – just as much as we need to stress the Battle of Iwo Jima or the D-Day landings in Normandy. Because, if you don't tell a complete story of the World War II experience, you're really not learning from it. So, I really appreciate your time talking with me today and sharing, not only your family's history, and these historic photos, but also having your son with us today. Before we end, was there anything you wanted us to talk about.

David: I have just one other question. Did you speak Spanish or German in the camp?

Thornton: German

David: No English at all?

Thornton: I spoke English at home.

David: You knew English at this time

Thornton: Oh, oh yeah. My mother always made sure I knew English because she spoke to me in English only. But then, when I was in Venezuela and Costa Rica, the nanny only talked to me. But I went to a German school. So I learned German there.

McWhorter: What we learned with the schools is that there was definitely English being spoken from all groups because they were interacting with the administrators.

Thornton: We were learning.....

McWhorter: Your trip with Mr. O'Rourke -- but, as a way of making this as comfortable as possible for the detainees, the offering of Federal High School for both Japanese and Germans, the elementary schools gave the nationality of their homeland -- whether it be German, Italian, or Japanese -- the chance to continue that education.

Thornton: Well, see, my mother and father would not speak anything but English. Well, my mother -- and then my father had to.

McWhorter: There were three camp newspapers - one in German, one in Japanese, and one in Spanish. So, there were three different camp newspapers circling around because you have this influx -- like I mentioned -- you have American Germans from New York City, you have people from Venezuela and Costa Rica that may be Japanese or German descent, English descent. You have people from the West Coast. My last oral history interview was with a gentleman from San Francisco whose parents were here with his little brother. So they came from all over the place. So inside the camp a bunch of languages --- and even over here --- somewhere around here, I haven't pinpointed it -- by the football fields, there was a small section where Indonesian sailors, on board a Dutch ship that came into New York City during the war were held there during the war for a short time. Not really interacting with the Germans or the Italians so much because -- what's the situation in 1943? Well, Japan has conquered Indonesia and it hasn't been liberated yet. Germany has conquered Holland. It's occupied. Where are these sailors going to go? So, they brought them down here to Crystal City for a while. So, there are Indonesian sailors of Muslim faith in Crystal City for a while. So, it's an international story -- which makes this camp quite significant. Well, I thank you for your time today. I thank you for offering to do the interview in your beautiful home. I really appreciate it.

Thornton: You're very welcome.

McWhorter: And, although I'm very sorry for this experience for your family, I am happy that you were willing to talk to me about it.

Thornton: Always! And if I remember anything, or if ever you need anything call me.

McWhorter: Well, I appreciate that.

[End of interview]

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