

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY
NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH MELITA ALLMAIER
FOR THE
RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY
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TRANSCRIPT BY
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Nicholas Molnar: This begins an interview with Melita Allmaier on October 24, 2012 in Milford, New Jersey, with Nicolas Molnar. Thank you again for having me here today.

Melita Allmaier: You're very welcome.

NM: Just to begin, could you tell us when and where you were born?

MA: Yes. I was born in Villach, Austria on October 7, 1935. My parents were (Carl and Katarina?) Allmaier. They're both deceased now.

NM: Well, just to begin, we would like to learn a little bit about your family. Can you tell us about your father and his background?

MA: Yes. Well, my father, he was in World War II, naturally on the German side. He went as far as Russia. He was wounded a couple of times, but not really--I know with the knee and with the shoulder, because I was fairly young then when he came home. But he came home soon after the war ended, through the mountains. I mean, he was supposed to report, but naturally he didn't. We were occupied by the English. I was ten years old when the war ended.

NM: You mentioned that your father had served on German side in World War II. Did he ever talk about his experiences?

MA: No, they talked very little. I mean, I don't remember anything, that he [told] any stories that you hear, like Harold tells now. It seemed they didn't really want to talk about it.

NM: How did he get back from Russia to Austria? When did he get back? In 1945?

MA: Yes, he got back in 1945. I think a couple of months--I was young then, so I don't recall exactly when, but a couple of months after the war ended [on] May 8th. I remember that day clearly, but he came through the mountains, and at night. He just appeared. He was home. Then, he worked; he was an electrician, so he found really a lot of work privately, until he worked for the railroad--that's a federal job--as an electrician.

NM: You mentioned that you remembered the end of the war vividly.

MA: Yes, very, because my sister and I, we went to buy plants to plant in the garden, and the people kept really being happy--"The war is over, the war is over, and the soldiers are coming." So, I had my little sister by the hand, and we went to look. Everybody was waving and flowers and the English were coming on their trucks and jeeps. That was the day. Don't forget that.

NM: What about your father's background? Do you know anything about your grandparents?

MA: Yes. Actually, we lived with my grandfather on my father's side. I'm the oldest of four girls; I have three sisters. Well, to backup, my father was a mason, and he built many buildings in Villach. He was like a foreman, what you call polier. So, we were fairly, not well to do, but all right. Well, he's one of nine, two sisters and I guess seven boys.

NM: Can you tell us a little bit about your mother and her background?

MA: Yes, my mother comes from a farm family, a fairly good sized farm. They were thirteen children. She was a seamstress before she got married, and then, naturally we had a little farm, and the kids. So she was a housewife.

NM: How far back did her family go back in terms of being farmers? You mentioned there was a large farm.

MA: Yes, well, only farming. Then, it wasn't really talked [about] too much. I know her grandparents were farmers--that's about as much--in the same area. They didn't really move, only from one village to the next. They were always on the outskirts of Villach.

NM: So, you grew up on a farm?

MA: Yes, a small farm. We had a few cows and pigs and chickens, more for whatever we needed. We didn't sell too much other than a couple of eggs and some milk.

NM: So, as you were growing up, did you help out with the chores on the farm?

MA: Yes, that's all we had to do. [laughter] We did no playing. We couldn't really have friends over because [inaudible] that's how they farmed, with the kids. They were their help from very young on. I had younger sisters, so you had to take care of them while my mother was in the field or went shopping.

NM: What are your earliest memories of the farm? You said it was on the outskirts.

MA: Right, small. You can see the city from where we are, but it's where the field starts and now it's really built up when we went back last time in '07.

NM: What are your earliest memories of the farm and the town that was adjacent?

MA: Like I say, there wasn't too much fun. There were some festivals in the summer that we could go to, but there was no TV, and the radio was only on for the news, because they saved on the electric and mostly work. They always found something to do, knitting or mending or field work, watching the cows graze because they didn't have any fences. So, not [inaudible] like here, because it's very small. Every little spot was cultivated, so you could grow something first. And school. We had to go to school. Walked to school quite a distance.

NM: Talk about going to school. Was it in the town?

MA: No, it was two towns over. Well, I went to school during the war years. Especially the fourth grade before the war ended, we were more in the bunker than in the schoolhouse, because as soon as the alarm went [off], we went to a bunker and spent time there. On the way home, many times--the city is a railroad center, Villach, and so, they really tried to bomb. The dive

bombers came shooting down buildings and rubble. We would run home from school, and they came over this little mountain, very low. We could see the people sitting in the planes. We would run and when they were over us, we would lay down, and then, we'd run again. This was sort of, more or less, a game, but it wasn't. It was serious, but we were too young to really understand it.

NM: Was the war talked about in school?

MA: Well, very obvious, yes. I mean we had bombs and shelters. So, we definitely knew there was war.

NM: You mentioned that you were on the outskirts of the town. You could see this type of bombing happening?

MA: Yes. One time in particular it was Christmas 1944, Christmas Day. They'd tried to avoid the cities since it was Christmas. I'll tell you how I found out about this. They tried to drop the bombs in the woods, right below a fairly good mountain, but they missed the woods, and they dropped it on our village. Quite a few people were killed. The neighbor's house was completely demolished. However, I was outside looking up, because I was a little lively kid. So, I was looking up, and I saw those bombs floating down. My mother came, grabbed me, and threw me down the steps to the basement. Just as soon as I landed down there, I heard all this noise and back up I went. That's when the neighbor's house was demolished. I found out here, when I took my driver's test, half a year [later] when I was here. Well, I came in February and in July I took my test. The person that did the eye exam asked me where I was from--naturally, I had a real thick accent then, but I could speak some English. He said, "Well, where are you from?" I said, "Well, you wouldn't know, the town in Austria." He said, "No, tell me where." So I said, "Villach." He said, "Were you there on Christmas in '44?" I said, "Yes, were you one of those people that dropped the bombs on us?" He said, "Yes." He was in one of those planes. They felt very bad because then they realized that they missed the woods and dropped the bombs too far away. So, that's a real coincidence, right?

NM: Wow. Well, thank you for sharing.

MA: [laughter] Well, I don't forget that either because I was as surprised as he was.

NM: I know that you were worked on the farm. Did you have any other odd jobs?

MA: No, there was no such thing. Nobody had any money to hire kids. If you were picking berries for somebody they gave you a few berries to take home, but no money. We didn't have no allowance. On those festivals they gave us very little money to buy something to drink or like an ice cream. But no, money was very short.

NM: Your father was gone during this time. Was it hard for the family?

MA: Well, I mean we were little. I was the oldest of four children. My grandfather, we lived with him. It was his house or his little farm. My mother and him and us kids, we did this.

Sometimes we had help from somebody with a horse to haul something. We didn't have a horse. We had a couple of cows. But no, we did everything. Even to this day, I think, they do it that way.

NM: In terms of food, was your family self-sufficient?

MA: Yes. We were lucky because when you raise something yourself--but then we had to, they came to check what you had. Then, if you had ten chickens, and we were then six people--my father wasn't home--you still had to deliver some eggs to the grocery store and get a certificate that you did, because they had to feed the other people. Things didn't come from anywhere; everybody had to--like, milk, if you had more milk, then you could use--they figure out how much was allowed for a family. Then you had to deliver [it], you got paid a little for that, but [inaudible] little.

NM: I did an interview with a gentleman who was a farmer in Hungary, and he mentioned that often the Army would confiscate things or take things for the war effort. Was that something that happened on your farm or other farms?

MA: No, but we had to deliver it. You [inaudible] didn't eat it, because I don't know--see, I was too young to understand the whole thing, but I know they definitely didn't say they didn't have it. Whatever they had, it was written down how much you had to bring. That's what they tried to do, so there wouldn't be any trouble, because people, with the SS people in town that belonged to it, they would squeal on their own people.

NM: You may have known this after the war, but what was the feeling towards the SS and the officials and things like that?

MA: Nothing. I mean, they put in jail the ones that they knew about, once the English took over, because there were people from town locked up for a while, but then it all was forgotten. It wasn't brought up again in school. The books, we didn't have any books then. We had to write everything down. By the time they did print some books, new ones or use old ones, we had to blacken out many things from the war. I mean our history stopped when I went to school just as the war started. They didn't teach anything about the war. Whatever I found out, I found out here, later, through television. It wasn't talked about.

NM: We are talking about in grammar school?

MA: Well, see, out there I only went--well, everybody--four years to grammar school, and then four years to high school, but the last year in grammar school, we hardly had any school because of the war. The bombing was pretty severe, and in May it stopped. May 8th was when everything stopped. Then, I went to high school and with I wasn't even fourteen then; I was done with high school.

NM: In high school was the war or anything that happened talked about?

MA: No. Nothing. Like I said, that's when it then stopped. We were taught up until then, but they figured out how long that took, and then school, it was over.

NM: I know that you lived on the farm you talked about the food situation. I was doing a little research, and it said that during the war and afterwards, in Austria, there was a famine. Was that something that affected you?

MA: After the war?

NM: After the war. Yes.

MA: I mean many people died from typhus--I remember that--even in our little town, but that was from water and food. They got a hold of food that was bad canned food. One whole family was wiped out. I don't know of anything close that we had any kind of problem, but we lived mostly off the farm, other than sugar and flour. Even flour, we had corn meal ground up, so we had more stuff to eat.

NM: What kind of crops would you raise on the farm?

MA: A lot of potatoes. We lived really on potatoes and animals too. The pigs were all fed potatoes rather than corn. Cornmeal for the cows, for the milk. What kind of crops? Barley we had, because we had barley and people made coffee out of barley. So when they had it in their field cut to dry, and they left it stacked up, the next day somebody cut all the heads of the barley, almost all. Took it for coffee. All we had left was the straw. Well, that's a big loss. We didn't have big fields. So, corn. We had corn, smaller than here, like really small ears, because the temperatures are a little colder out there, and hay and, like I said, potatoes. Oh, turnips, we had a lot too for the cows and pigs.

NM: You mentioned that there were some supplies that you would get off the farm like sugar. Were these ever during the war or afterwards in short supply?

MA: Oh, very, very. They had stamps, stamps for just about everything. You couldn't get [inaudible] stamps many times, so you had to stand in line for hours. My mother would send me. That was [early], at four in the morning to stand in line somewhere if they opened at seven. Special bread, that was really in short supply. I stood many a hour. Then, they'd just hand it out. They didn't even take the money. Just to get rid of the people, hand out some bread, and then, close the door again.

NM: How long did this happen after the end of the war?

MA: After the war. Well, not that long after the war. It was mostly the last year in the war, when Hitler and everything closed in. I would say a year after the war that it was still short, and then, you got more if you paid extra. There were stamps for a few years after that, but then, you really didn't need them that much.

NM: You mentioned your farm and the nearby town were under the British Zone of occupation. What was life like under the British Zone? Did you have any interaction with these people?

MA: Well, not really close, but naturally--the village was together and the fields are separate out there. It's not like here, [inaudible] the fields. It's mostly you live in the village and you go to the--then, we had to go through a checkpoint, and even with the cows. I remember they would make fun. They would laugh. They gave us a little chocolate here and there. The British didn't have as much as the Americans. [laughter] It was too bad that we didn't have the Americans, but most of them had special candy, but they were very friendly. We had absolutely no problems.

NM: Would there be contact with the British on a daily basis?

MA: No, they didn't come and check your house or anything. They just had a point where you went through to the next town. Our fields were [quite] a distance away. So, there you had to--they just knew we were coming with the cows. They would open the gate. They had a gate.

NM: How far away was where you lived to the fields that you would tend to?

MA: Well, I would say half an hour walking. Some a little closer, fifteen minutes, but then, where we took their cows, there was more grass there. There's a nice area there. It's a spa. It's like warm water. So, we had fun that way. See, bathing was a big thing in the summer.

NM: Okay. I am getting a sense of what was going on. You mentioned that your mother and your father came from relatively big families. Did any of them serve in the war?

MA: Oh, yes. My mother had a couple of brothers. One was in Norway a long time, and he then came home and was so sick, and passed away quickly. Her sister's husband--it's an uncle too--they never heard what happened to him. On my father's side, were three brothers [who] immigrated to the United States in 1923, so naturally, they didn't serve here either.

NM: I was just trying to do research before the interview, and I was reading about the weather after the war. It mentioned that there was a drought or there was some type of adverse weather conditions for the crops. Did that ever affect your family?

MA: Well, I don't remember drought so much because the one section of the field is more damp. It was more too wet, that we couldn't plow and plant things there. I remember that and that's a big loss, because then you can't harvest if you don't plant. But in the wintertime, snow; we had a lot of snow, but that didn't really affect anything, not even school, because we just walked to school up to the hips in snow. We called them snow pants, then, I guess later, ski pants. That's what we called them. By the time they plowed, we already had to go to school. The only time they closed school [was] when it was really cold, that they saved on their coal. Then sometimes they closed a couple of days, but never for snow.

NM: Coal must have been another thing that you needed for your house or did you use wood?

MA: We used wood mostly, because we had the mountain, and then, big wood lots that people owned. Then, you go there and make wood in the summer and bring it down on a sled in the winter, big sled. My father, since he worked for the railroad, they got a coal allowance that came as a bonus. So we did get that coal, but otherwise there was really no money extra to buy this.

NM: One of the things that I have read about was in the British Zone of occupation, at one point there was a worker's strike. Is that something that rings a bell?

MA: No.

NM: Okay.

MA: Not any strikes that I remember affected us.

NM: You mentioned your high school years. Where you went to school during the high school years, was that in the same area where you went to elementary school?

MA: No, no. We had to walk. There was just one great big high school, boys and girls were separated. Half the school was girls and half was boys. So, I never really went to school with a boy. And it was in Villach. Kids came with the trains from the outside villages. It was a big school, but it was strictly learning. We had no ball games, no nothing. We had gym and we did play a little basketball, but that was just like fifteen minutes. Otherwise, it was just learning. We had to find our own way there, however.

NM: You mentioned you're in the British Zone of occupation. There is also an American Zone, a French Zone, and a Soviet Zone. What were the feelings toward the Allies who were occupying the country?

MA: There was a very friendly feeling, because people were glad--the average people--that the war was over and there was peace and life went on, better than before, really, because then jobs opened up. After high school, I was an apprentice in a bakery/grocery store, but when you were an apprentice they had to pay you very little. I had room and board there. That took three years. Then you made a test. Then you were on your own. But then you couldn't find work because there were so many people doing the same thing. So, then I went to Switzerland from there--Zurich, Switzerland.

NM: I want to just back track before we get to Switzerland. What were your plans after high school? You mentioned you took this apprenticeship.

MA: Yes. Well, I really was good at it. I worked in the grocery, waiting on people. You had to figure all the grocery, you had to weigh it, everything, measure it, figure it. I was really good at it. They thought I was already--that I was done with my apprenticeship. I really liked it there, but like I say, then when they had to pay you more, then they hired a new apprentice because there were many people waiting for the jobs. So, that's why I when I went then to Switzerland with the reason to find another job.

NM: How old were you when you began this apprenticeship?

MA: Well, fourteen.

NM: How long was the apprenticeship?

MA: Until seventeen, three years. Because my eighteenth birthday I was already in Switzerland. I spent a little time after at home, but not long because nobody gave you any money. You had to come up with your own.

NM: Just before we get into that, was this in the town where you worked?

MA: That was in Villach.

NM: That was in Villach, okay.

MA: Yes, that was in the city. The school was also in the city, only the grammar school they have on the outside. All around the whole city is really just [villages] and they have smaller schools.

NM: You also mentioned that during this time from fourteen to seventeen, as an apprentice you boarded there? You had room and board there as well?

MA: Yes.

NM: Could you talk about living there? You were living away from home.

MA: Well, we had three girls, we were three girls there. We had one room we shared. We only really spent the night there because during the day the bakery opened early, and we worked in the grocery store. I mean, still we sold the bread and rolls, too. It wasn't cakes so much, just more bread and rolls and stuff like that. Then at night, we cooked together. I mean, they didn't cook. We just figured out what we're going to eat, and then, we cooked something. A lot of spaghetti I remember. Then in the evening, whatever we did.

NM: Did you ever get a chance to go out on the town for entertainment?

MA: Yes, then we went to--all the time we made a little money, movies, but sparingly too. We could do a lot of working out there and on weekends--well, Saturday I worked. I worked six days, and then, Sunday I went home for a few hours for usually the main meal at noon. Then, in the afternoon, evening, went back to there. Nothing really too exciting. I know they had football a lot, like soccer out there. Many people went, but I never wanted to spend the money for that. Basketball I did like, but they didn't have any games where you could go watch. Just [inaudible]. Soccer is the big thing out there still.

NM: You mentioned after your apprenticeship, you had a hard time. You couldn't find a job.

MA: Well, I just was always eager to work and many girls went to Switzerland. I had a cousin that worked somewhere you had to work in the household. So, she sent me a newspaper and I looked for a job. Then, I wrote and they accepted me. So, then I went there with that little tiny suitcase with just a couple of things in there.

NM: Talk about going to Switzerland, what you did there.

MA: Well, I worked in the household. It was really not bad. They had two children. They had the clothing store. So, they both went to work. The man and woman in the morning and the kids went to school, and I cleaned. Then, they said, "Can you cook?" I said, "Yes," but I had no idea. Well, I said, "If you just tell me how you make it, then I make it your way. We cook different in Austria." So, that's what the lady said. They cooked fairly simple. So, I caught on to that. Then I wrote to my mother to send me a cookbook quick, [laughter] and I still have this cookbook. Then I looked up [recipes]. Those people, I stayed there for a year, and then, you meet other girls, and then, I changed jobs there. Then I really liked it. They were older people, an Italian professor. They also had a mountain chalet in Graubünden, that's a state in Switzerland. There I went skiing with the grandchildren. So, I really had a good time there. There I stayed then three years. Then came to America.

NM: You were there three and a half years. Were there any differences in the way of living or culture that you noticed that were hard to acclimate to?

MA: No, no. I am a person that really acclimates easy, very easy. I mean it was different, but I just started talking like they did right away and the cooking whatever. The Swiss do cook a little different, not so many dumplings [as] the Austrians. [laughter] Their daughter was a teacher in home economics. So, she tried to definitely teach me different things. I did learn a lot there. Then, I also went to school, because if you weren't twenty years old the city of Zurich, every girl--I don't know what they do with the boys, but every girl had to go for a year to a home economics school. That really helped me here in America afterwards. No. Switzerland was all good.

NM: What years were you in Switzerland?

MA: From '53 to '57.

NM: While you are in Switzerland, the Allies leave Austria?

MA: Oh, yes. In 1955, the other Allies, I think they left before. Anyway, we weren't bothered. But the Russians, they hung in there, and in '55 they signed a treaty, and they left. So, Austria was free in 1955. But the Soviet Union, they asked for all the oil. We only have one oil well, like an oil field, and all the oil that came out of that for ten years, they had to send to Russia. So, that was the payoff. Now that's that all long gone and now it's free.

NM: Was this something that your family or yourself had any feelings towards?

MA: No, no, because, like I say, everybody was glad the war was over and from then on, it went all uphill.

NM: You were in Switzerland for three and a half years. You went to home economics school. Why did you decide to leave?

MA: What happened is my father's brother and uncle from here, Pittstown, New Jersey, came to visit. That's the first time since he was there in, I think, 1926, the war years. My aunt had passed away here the year before. He had a good sized farm in Pittstown, New Jersey. Well, I'm a person that really had in mind to go to Sweden when I was in Switzerland just to see something else, and so he said, "Well, why don't you come over. I'm sure you're going to find a job in New York or somewhere," because I had also two uncles in New York, one of my father's brothers. So lo and behold, right away, I decided, and before I left Switzerland to go visit at home, the lady said, "I'm sure you're going to now go to America." I said, "No, never, because I really like it here." Sure enough, I came back and said, "In two months I'm going to be leaving." So, that's what decided it. Otherwise, I would have never really thought of coming here. Maybe. Since I had relatives, maybe. So, then I came [inaudible] in February of '57, February 2nd.

NM: So, you were in the United States by February 2nd?

MA: That's when I arrived in [inaudible]

NM: Let us talk about the process of just getting to the United States. Did you have to get documents?

MA: Yes, definitely. I got all my immigration documents. While my uncle was still out there, and we decided then that I was going to come, we went to the consulate in Zurich to find out what we had to do. By the time all the paperwork got sent back and forth, what they need, then I went to Vienna to get my final immigration papers, visa. So, that's when the Hungarian--I told you--Revolution was, at that same time when Vienna was full of Hungarian people, and especially at the embassy because they wanted all to get in there. Well, anyway, here I was way back in the line, and I was afraid to say I have to get to the door because nobody wants to let anybody push ahead. Anyway, I went to a policeman to say I got to get to this door, but I don't know how to get in. Well, he helped me to get to the door. So, that's it. Then, there I got my final papers. That was in January, and then, I came. I had three months to decide to come.

NM: Did you family members living in the United States sponsor you to come over?

MA: Yes, right, my uncle sponsored me. He did everything. I had absolutely no trouble. I was checked out [inaudible] and whatever, if you have any kind of record. That all was in order, and so, I had no problems. He paid for the ticket to come and everything was [taken care of].

NM: Your uncle and I guess two other uncles were in New York City. When did they all come to the United States?

MA: They came in 1923, the two together on one paper and the youngest in 1937. But they came before the war.

NM: The two uncles who came over, they were older than your father?

MA: Yes. One was younger, the last one, and my Uncle Peter, the one I was with, was born in '03 and the other one in '06 and my father in '10--no, my father in '09 and my mother in '10.

NM: Talk about the trip over.

MA: I was on a propeller flight. I was flying with four stops, and it took twenty-four hours. [Kennedy Airport] was called [Idlewild] then. Then, six years later, I wanted to go [back]. The first time I wanted to go back, there were no more propeller flights, because I insisted I want to go on a propeller flight, once you know something, and that's when the jets took over in that time.

NM: You already had relatives here, but what were the challenges? What struck you as different in the United States? What was hard to acclimate to?

MA: Nothing. I told you, I thought I almost belonged here. [laughter] I liked everything; it was really strange. The first thing I started reading, even then I couldn't read much, but Indians, and the wild animals like bears, that really struck me funny. But Indians, really, I was really fascinated, and that's how I actually learned English on my own. We had some in school, so I had a basic idea, but I couldn't speak anything. But I quickly adjusted, especially with somebody that understood you in both languages, so it was easy.

NM: So, you didn't have additional English language schooling while you were here?

MA: No, nothing, but I was brave enough to take the equivalency test, the high school. I wanted to see if I could pass what they learn here, but I passed that with flying colors.

NM: You mentioned that you flew into what is now known as JFK. What did you do while you were in the United States? Where did you go after that?

MA: Well, I came on the farm, my uncle picked me up, and it took a while, at least two hours, before they check all your papers. It's a lengthy process before they let you step in, but then, my uncle, picked me up and took me to my other uncle in Staten Island. That's where we stopped first. Then, they wanted to feed me all this food first. Here, it's just wherever you go, they always want to feed you. This is not so much in Europe. You get a little something, but not just--so I remember that very well, that I couldn't eat, and they kept thinking I don't want to eat, but that's nothing really.

NM: Did your uncles have any children who were your age?

MA: Yes. Well, my cousin, she is five years older than I am--he had a daughter. My uncle in Staten Island has a daughter that's three years younger. My Uncle John, the youngest one, has two boys, and they're younger, close to ten years younger I would say.

NM: Did any of them speak your language?

MA: German?

NM: Yes, did any of them speak German?

MA: No, the men, my uncles, definitely

NM: Besides the uncles, did the next generation speak German?

MA: No. They married women that spoke English. No, my cousin--well, really my cousin from Uncle Peter on the farm, she did speak German. Her mother is also from Austria. Actually, when she was little, so much that when she went to school she couldn't understand English, but as a little kid, you learn it fast. But the other ones, the other three, not.

NM: Your previous experiences growing up on a farm, they must have been beneficial while you were here.

MA: Yes, well, I really didn't want to stay on the farm, but it so happens that I did. We made it bigger, we got more animals, more chickens, and a full-time farm. We did this for twenty years, and really understood each other very well. Then, well, he passed away from a heart attack, and then, I stayed on the farm for ten more years and ran it by myself.

NM: Well, was there anyone besides you or your uncle who worked on this farm?

MA: No. It was just the two, and then, me.

NM: Were there any differences between your farm in Austria and the farm in the United States that you had problems overcoming?

MA: Yes, not problems, but here it was all with machinery, a lot bigger. Out there it's harder, because you have to do everything by hand, at least then, and here it was hard because there was that much more to do. Here everything is bigger, but we mostly farmed just him and I.

NM: Now was this farming different from when you were in Austria in the sense that you were selling this on the market?

MA: No, we here used everything too. We had animals. Rarely did we sell any cut hay or feed corn. Sometimes if you really had a good year, and otherwise no. We had enough animals to--then we sold the animals, pigs and calves and eggs.

NM: Okay, so you would sell those things.

MA: Yes. That was all his income. He didn't have any other income. When he lived in New York--first he left New York. He bought the farm in 1941. Then he was a machinist in there and had his own shop, but then, he traveled for six years back and forth on the train, and my aunt and his daughter, my cousin, they mostly did their work on the farm. Then he quit. Well, he already quit had years before I came, but then we just farmed.

NM: I am just trying to get the timeline together here, because you mentioned you were working on this farm for thirty years.

MA: Twenty with him and ten with me alone. But when I was alone, I also had two jobs.

NM: Yes, that is what I am trying to get at. I understand that you actually were working in addition to the running a full-time farm. Can you talk about that?

MA: Yes, well, I was [inaudible]. I mean, I thought I had to stay on the farm. [inaudible] nothing ever happened by myself, but just before I said, 'I'm going to be forty and I think I should have some kind of a job,' because he was getting older. You can't do it forever. So, I started to drive a school bus and work in the school kitchen at the same time. But then, I went to visit my folks in Europe. My father had already passed away, but my mother [was there]. In the meantime, he died here of a heart attack at that same time. So, that's when I knew that I belonged here. I just was--no "are you going to come back?" Nothing. Nobody asked me anything. They just knew that I belonged here. Well, I came back, and I ran it because my cousin lives near Pittsburgh. So, that was too far to come and I had those jobs started. So, I wanted to quit them, but they said, "Oh, it's good for you to work. You don't want to be alone at home." So I said, "All right, I'll try." So, I did this for ten years. Then I thought, "Well, it's time." But in the meantime, I switched my job after three years and started working at the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility in '81. So, then I worked there, full-time job, and still farmed until '86.

NM: So, you stopped farming in 1986 totally?

MA: Yes, right. He died '76, and then, '86--ten years I did it. Then I moved over here.

NM: You mentioned that the farm was in Pittstown?

MA: Yes. The address was Pittstown. That's all I can tell you, really. The Alexandria Airport is right near us.

NM: How did you initially get this position as a school bus driver and also working in the cafeteria?

MA: Well, I wanted to work in the cafeteria. I went to ask for a job, but many people [applied]. I was [on] a list. I was eager to get a job, then they said, "Well, we always need school bus drivers." So, I made the test, and then you're a school bus driver. That's all you have to do. They're always waiting. There's no problem getting a job there.

NM: You mentioned you had returned to Austria, and I want to ask a little about that. Had you ever considered going back to Austria?

MA: Never. Never. I mean I didn't know when I first came if I was going to stay here, but once I got here, like I say, I just seemed to belong.

NM: Going back to Austria, I think is 1963?

MA: Yes.

NM: How had Austria, the places that you had seen, changed?

MA: Really changed, yes, really. I was three years away in Switzerland, I came back, but still then it was like a long time that you lived there, and it really changed. I mean, I was really surprised. It was really built up, the whole area. There was no more space between the city--and all our fields were built up and really changed, too.

NM: Did your family continue to farm?

MA: Yes, my sister. My father passed away in '66, so it was soon after that. But my sister and my mother--well, my sister married and they farmed for a while, but then my brother-in-law passed away early too from a heart attack. So, then they quit farming because they all seemed to work for the railroad. That's a good federal job if you get in. So, my brother-in-law worked there, and my nephews now work there. One is an engineer. I don't know what the other one does exactly, but anyway, they all have pretty good paying jobs. Plus, they get a good pension and all the medical benefits. So, right now, no. There is somebody else farming the little fields. There are still a few farmers left, but very few.

NM: They still own the farm?

MA: Yes, they still own the same place, my nephew now.

NM: You were a bus driver and cafeteria worker for about a decade?

MA: No, for five years.

NM: Okay, for five years.

MA: Right. Then I decided--well, both jobs were conflicting many times, especially in the winter with snow, and I didn't like that. Then plus, while the lady was working--I was working with her, and her husband worked at the Edna Mahan Correctional place. So I said, "If there's ever any openings," and "How do you get in?" I had no idea how to get through the gates. So, then he knew when there was an opening in the kitchen, and so she told me. I went to apply for the job and I got it. Then, I got work and at least only had one job and the same benefits. I looked for something to continue my pension that I had started with school bus driving, because

I was already then older. Then, suddenly you think you better make sure you got something for when you get old.

NM: The bus driver and cafeteria worker jobs, were those part-time jobs?

MA: I mean worked full-time, but they are considered part-time. The bus driving, if you had three runs, if you only drive mornings and evenings, that's a part-time job, but if you get three, then they give you the pension and some little benefits. So, that's what I did. That's how come I had five years started on a pension that I wanted to continue, and I really liked it at Edna Mahan.

NM: Okay. Before we get into your time there, did having these other jobs conflict with running the farm full-time?

MA: Well, I had a good friend, farmer friend, that really helped me out when I was alone. He did mowing the hay and bailing the hay and plowing. First, I did everything myself, but that was just too heavy for me. If you have another man around--and I did try with a couple of boys, but that didn't work out either. So, anyway, then he really helped me. That's all I did, work and sleep and eat in between, but I had really good animals that got used to me and I didn't have any trouble, really, truly, because I had as much as thirty steers by myself and quite a bunch of pigs and sheep and chickens. So, it was almost a full-time everything, but I managed to do it.

NM: Since you really had this farm for a few decades, were there ever any adverse weather conditions in New Jersey that affected your farm?

MA: Definitely, but that was closer to when after I came, I wasn't here too many years. It was in the late '60s maybe. Well, in the '60s for seven years we had this drought, and it went for on and on and on, where we cut every stalk of corn by hand--we had fourteen acres, that's a lot--and fed all this to the animals because feed is very expensive when everybody needs it. So, that was really big, and there was hardly any hay and the water--our well went dry, so we had to dig in a well. Then it was pretty hard. That was the worst. The winters, we had a couple winters with a lot of snow where it's hard, because the water freezes, and you don't know what to do with the animals, and you have to take care of them, carry all the water from the house. Otherwise [I went] through a couple of storms, rip the roof off, stuff like that, but not extreme, no tornado.

NM: You mentioned that the farm was mechanized.

MA: Well, we had all the machinery. We had two tractors. We didn't have no milking machine because we always just hand milked. We had mostly steers or calves or young heifers that you raise, and then sell for money. But milking was mostly just all hand milking, as many as five cows, but that's not that much.

NM: I am just wondering about mechanical maintenance and things like that. Who does this on the farm with you and your uncle? If the tractor needs maintenance or if the plumbing gets broken, are you guys doing that yourselves?

MA: Yes, yes. All our ourselves. He was very handy as a machinist. He can do a lot of things. I mean water pipes, he could fix that. He could weld stuff. If really something mechanical like a garage [inaudible] garage. He would come and check the machine if the motor wouldn't run, but that didn't happen too much. Farmers are very handy. I'm not that handy in mechanical stuff, because I'll mess it up, but otherwise fixing things, I'm pretty good.

NM: You had mentioned that your experience in Switzerland had really helped you in your jobs here. Can you talk about that a little bit more?

MA: Yes. Well, it helped because once I started at Edna Mahan, you have titles. I started with the lowest title, and then you apply for other ones. Then, if you have any kind of college degree or any schooling, then it gets you a lot of credit for that. So, when I applied for the highest instructor title there, because I went up the ladder just automatically by the boss giving you a promotion. Then I had to send in some kind of certificate, proof that I went to school, and I did. Even though it was in German, they accepted it and that made me then, for many years, the only woman there to be ITI-1 because of this. If I didn't have this, then I wouldn't have made it. So, they're giving me good extra money.

NM: You mentioned that you started at a cafeteria, but it sounds like you became an instructor?

MA: Well, in the Edna Mahan reformatory. In the cafeteria, I was a cook; they had like food service workers and the cook. Well, I always tried, if I could, to get this few little extra money, so then you have to do a little extra. But there we didn't get any kind of certificate. When I left, I left. That was it. Then, at Edna Mahan from the state jobs you have titles from food service workers, senior food service workers, there's a cook one, two, three, and then, they had instructors. We called them ITI's. Then they had numbers for there too, one, two, three and one was the highest. So, that's what I strived for. Then many years I worked under that, but then they really relaxed it. But that's really not my story. They made almost everybody ITI's because they did away with so many employees and worked with the inmates. To be over the inmates I think that you have to be an instructor as a title. That was the idea.

NM: How long were you at Edna Mahan?

MA: I was there from '81 to 2002 in February.

NM: As you are advancing in position, how do your positions changed?

MA: Well, yes, in the beginning naturally, you work under other people. I mean the kitchen, first I worked in the dining room for a while, serving, and then, I worked for the diet area under other cooks that were there. Then, when somebody leaves, especially if the boss likes what you're doing then you [move up]. Actually, I was mostly called in the office to say, "Do you want that job?" because I always tried to work. They always said, "You don't have to work so hard. You're not on the farm anymore." Anyway that's how. But then, you also need from Trenton the "Okay," that you can advance because it all has to be okayed.

NM: In your positions, did you ever have to work closely with the inmates?

MA: Yes, of course. First, there were always some inmates that they have programs that they got credit for if they worked in the kitchen when I first started. So, there were very few, and they had little jobs to do, but then when the crunch came, the money from Trenton was less and less. So, then they gave the inmates--I don't know how much--but a little money to work in the kitchen, and we had to--then everybody became an instructor, because then we had to work mostly with inmates. The inmates can run it, as long as somebody is there with the key to open up stuff, they know what they do. They're very good workers. I used to like it, and they liked me a lot.

NM: So, in the instructor position, you are actually training these women in positions?

MA: Yes, right. You know we had to do that because we had to send food, first to the Hunterdon State School next door. That's the retarded people, the handicapped people. Then, there's inmates locked up in maximum cottages. So, the food has to be sent in with the truck there. So, you have to get all this ready. There's a lot of work. A lot of work. It's a big huge kitchen.

NM: It sounds like you are actually supplying different facilities with food.

MA: Yes, right. Five thousand people because they send food to Annandale for the boys. There's less people now at the Hunterdon--I don't know what they call it --State School. The prison itself has a lot more people now than years ago. They built new buildings because ever since the drug crisis came about, there's just so many more people in jail. But I worked mostly in the diet area. From the dining room, then they needed help in the diet area, and then, that's what I headed.

NM: Can you talk about your positions in the diet area?

MA: Average was around two hundred people we had to make diets for. Well, first I cooked it, when they were less, but then it all gets in the way. They don't build a new kitchen because there's so many more people. So, there's on one side the cook, and then the other side you [inaudible] you put it together. So, that's what we mostly did. We gathered the food, whatever was cooked already, and then packaged it up in bigger pans or in individual containers, because you have a sheet for every person that gets whatever they get. So, you have to oversee this, what other people do, that the right stuff gets done at the right time. It has to be all ready at a certain time, and it's a hustle.

NM: Tell me about these diet plans.

MA: [For] medical problems. Blood pressure and medical problems. They get a little special food or not seasoned food. Then if somebody is allowed pepper, they can put pepper on. You have to give them that, or salt, and the ones that are not allowed, they don't get it. No sugar for diabetic people.

NM: Now you had worked there for a little over twenty years and you had mentioned that there was an influx of inmates. Can you talk about some of the changes that you saw while you were there?

MA: Well, from two-hundred and fifty to twelve-hundred when I left. So, that was quite a lot more, but the inmates themselves, I felt safer in there than on the outside, because somehow--I don't know--it was nice. If you are nice to them--you can't do any favors. You have to be very strict, because that's how you get into trouble. So, it's like running a classroom, and they're very appreciative if you listen to them.

NM: Is this a type of vocational training that you're giving them?

MA: Yes, that's what they get credit for, the ones that come in the kitchen. I mean, they don't all come in the kitchen, but yes, they do get credit for that. They get some kind of pay, and they can go home sooner.

NM: Now are there other types of training that they could receive?

MA: Yes, they have sewing, and they used to have upholstery. I don't know if they still have that. I know people could bring sofas or chairs in there, and they do it for minimum pay do it, but I don't know if that's still in existence. You can't wander around in there. From the parking lot you go to your place of work, and that's where you stay.

NM: I want to just ask a general question about both your experience on the farm and also at Edna Mahan. Oftentimes people who are working in a position for a long time, obviously you notice changes, but there are sometimes vivid experiences that stand out. Are there any of those that really stand out in those situations where you were working?

MA: No. Nothing really. I saw one little fight in Edna Mahan and that wasn't anything. It was just two inmates having each other by the hair and screaming, but that was the extent of what happened, nothing really serious ever happened.

NM: Now obviously you have been in the United States since you came here.

MA: Yes, fifty-five years.

NM: Do you follow the events and the news of what is going on in Austria?

MA: No. Not really. I am really here, whether I know what's going on and definitely listen to, and do things--vote all the time, but not in Austria. I mean I couldn't name any president or nothing. When I talk to my sisters, it's mostly family, nothing politics. When I'm over there, not either, because when you get into politics you get [into arguments]. I think one way, and if somebody thinks the other way, then it's not a good [inaudible].

NM: I know you went back in '63. How often do you go back to visit?

MA: Yes. Quite a few times. I went on my own, at least three, four times after that. I forget the years, but then with Howard we went in '03 and '05. We went the last time? My god, it's seven years already. Ever since 9/11, it's not fun to go to the airports, very difficult, so I'd rather talk on the phone. Everybody is getting older.

NM: You obviously had a full plate in terms of working two full-time jobs.

MA: Yes, I always work. Work is my middle name. But I still do. I still like it.

NM: So, in retirement have you eased up on the work?

MA: Well, I was retired for two weeks. I worked until I was 67. So, I was older than most people that retire anyway. I was home for two weeks, and I said I can't stand this anymore. If I don't find a job, I'm going to jump out this window upstairs. Then, my neighbor came home from work in the deli nearby here, and I went over and said, "If they hire somebody just let me know." I went over and they gave me a job right away. Then, it was too much. Then they wanted me to work every day again. So, now I work just a few days a week.

NM: So, I want to give you the opportunity to add anything to the record that we may have missed.

MA: Well, I'm going to put Harold in there somewhere. [laughter] Well, it all started a long time ago on the farm when he came fishing. He swears I tied some big fish just to catch him. So, anyway that's how I know him, at first. When I came, when my uncle sent me to [inaudible] to say to get different things for the farm--nails or boards or whatever. He always said, "We'll go to Harold, he knows what I want." I didn't understand. Well, we sort of got to know each other early. After my uncle passed away, he came fishing, and then, slowly, we started dating. Well, then we got married. I don't know if I told you, but in '11, May 6th, '11.

NM: Congratulations.

MA: Thank you. We'll have to put him in there.

NM: But you knew each other much longer?

MA: Yes, like fifty years and sort of twenty-five years closer.

NM: Well, is there anything else you would like to add or maybe there is something we may have skipped over either about growing up in Austria, your time in Switzerland, coming to the States.

MA: Is it interesting that I did see Adolf Hitler with my own eyes when I was a child? Is that interesting?

NM: Yes. So talk about that.

MA: Well, that's the most famous person from school we went to see. He came on a train with a big picture window. He didn't get out of the train. It just stopped, and we were all there at the main train station. He came to the window and talked to us. I remember it very, very vividly, even made an impression then. Naturally, while the war was still on, [I was] probably eight or nine years old.

NM: So, towards the end of the war? Maybe '43 or '44.

MA: I know I went to grammar school, and the whole school was there. But it left, even then, a big impression. I know exactly how he looked like.

NM: Wow, that is amazing. I do not think we have interviewed anyone who actually met him.

MA: I didn't shake no hands or anything.

NM: That is okay, but you actually saw him.

MA: Definitely. They had the window decorated with green pine twigs like here from Christmas, I remember that too, and he stood in the middle, and we all went, "Heil Hitler." [laughter]. So, I remember that.

NM: Talk about what else you remember, since it is quite a unique experience. What did they tell you about who he was?

MA: Oh, well, I'm sure the Führer--we knew that because in school every morning before we went to the classroom we had to line up, like we had big steps going up. Then, there we had to say, "Heil Hitler" every day and on the way out the same thing, line up again. So it was a big thing. I was old enough to remember definitely all that.

NM: When you were younger, did you travel with your sister?

MA: No, they were very home bodies. One sister went to Switzerland, also my youngest, but she was very homesick and couldn't take it. She after a couple of months and went home. The other two never left the village. They got married there. One married to next village. They traveled out in Europe. Two sisters came here, but just to visit. No, I was the only one that always wanted to fly the coop. But once I got settled here, then I didn't have any desire to go. I traveled with my uncle. We did every year, traveled many times to Maine and to Yellowstone, through the West and Midwest and South. I went to Greenland. I better say that. Not that many people go to Greenland. [laughter] That was very interesting and other [places]--Europe, Italy and Ireland.

NM: One of the questions that I neglected to ask, but you were so young. This is after the war, but at least from the people that I've interviewed in Europe, at this time, there is a strong feeling towards the Soviet Union. Was that anything that as a child that you had?

MA: Well, not a good feeling, because that was like when the Cold War started right after war really. Then it wasn't a good feeling, especially that they occupied Austria. I had relatives in Vienna, and we needed, not a [inaudible], but some kind of thing with a picture ID. You had to carry that always with you, where you're from, that you have some kind of home base somewhere. I remember we needed that when we went to Vienna, but I didn't have any bad experience with the Soviets.

NM: So, your relatives lived in the Soviet Zone of Vienna?

MA: Yes, but during the war, they came and lived with us. Carinthia is the province I come from.

NM: You had your mother and your father, and they had many siblings. Did you have any relatives who lived in the Soviet occupied zones?

MA: Other than the two sisters from my father, but they went back after the war, but then it wasn't--I don't think it was that bad. One had a little winery and one had a restaurant. So, they went back to that and opened that and made a living that way. So, I don't know any bad experiences.

NM: Well, it does not have to be good or bad. I am just trying to get a feeling.

MA: Right.

NM: Wow, I am glad I if there is anything I missed in your time growing up. Is there anything that you would like to add? You had a long career in farming and at Edna Mahan.

MA: Nothing. We went through most everything. Right? The high points.

NM: Well, we did, but if there is anything that I neglected to ask please add.

MA: No, you did very well.

NM: Okay. On that note we are going to conclude the interview with Mrs. Melita Allmaier today, and thank you for having me here.

MA: You're very welcome.

-----End of Interview-----

Reviewed by Mohammad Athar - 6/26/15
Reviewed by Robert Kisch 8/26/15
Reviewed by Molly Graham 11/27/2016
Reviewed by Melita Allmaier 11/2/2016
Reviewed by Maura ElMegeed 12/14/2016