

Interviewee: Domenick Molinaro

Interview: March 21, 2015

University of Houston
Oral History of Houston Project
Houston after World War II

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Place: Domenick Molinaro's Home in the Houston Heights

Interviewer: Johnny Zapata

Transcriber: Ethan O'Donnell

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Abstract:

A student at the University of Houston interviews Domenick Molinaro on his life and Houston's history after his arrival in 1960. Born in Germany, the interviewee describes his rough upbringing alongside the backdrop of World War II and his life in service. He then details his coming to America, his assimilation, and serving in the Army and the National Guard during the occupation of West Berlin, where he was stationed at Checkpoint Charlie. He answers questions on the development of Houston after the war, the growth of the city, its demographic and social changes, and historical occurrences. Ending, Molinaro compared the United States and Germany, and Germany's "Americanization."

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JZ: This is Johnny Zapata interviewing Domenick Molinaro on March 21, 2015 at his home in the Houston Heights. I want to know a bit about your background, your upbringing, where were you born, what time period was it?

DM: Okay, I was born in Saarbrücken, Germany, 1937, 6 October and the area is like being in the middle of two mountains which divides the city, the Saar River, S-double A-R. Nothing to it, if you don't get your wood by the beginning or middle of November when it starts snowing, it's too late. Otherwise, everything is all right. It's nice and green all the time.

JZ: Around the time you were growing up as a child, what major historical change or historical happening that occurred that you remember?

DM: The historical happening was during the time that, about when I was two years old, we move from there to go France where my father was military-type, engineer really. After two years in France we moved to northern Italy, which in 1945, the war was over, and the main thing that happened at that time, it was while we were in Italy. We had to change our last name because of being a German name after the war we had what they call "liberty fighters" or prisoner, you know. And whoever's name kind of German attitude into it, they didn't like it and they would just go ahead and shoot you away. The main thing that happened is that the SS came by the house one morning, got my daddy, and I'm still waiting for him. Never seen him again. So, that was in Italy at the end of the war.

JZ: Growing up, how was Europe? You said you moved around a lot.

DM: Wartime.

JZ: Can you describe the war?

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DM: It was wartime. The best thing to do while the bombardments were going on is to go to the cemetery. Those people are already dead so they don't bomb those places. But sometimes they miss, then they bomb those places.

JZ: When the war ended, how old were you?

DM: Well, at the time I was eight years old.

JZ: You said you were part of the military, or that you served? No?

DM: I am, yes. I still am the retired people. Matter of fact, I don't know how, but when I came in this country while the time was that older people that they were born here in the United States, they were not going for the draft, the place to be drafted. They would move either to Mexico or up to Canada because they didn't want to do the service for their country. Like a dummy, myself, I went and volunteered for it which I spent two years in the regular army, which I was stationed in the same country where I was born. When I came home, I had another four years to do so I decided, with the help of a friend to talk to me about it, to go ahead and join the National Guard. I've been there for seven years.

JZ: So, you said- I was going to ask you how you first became involved- but it seemed that you volunteered, right?

DM: Yeah, I volunteered for the draft.

JZ: What kind of job, like what position do you have in the National Guard? What types of things did you do when you went into service?

DM: I was an interpreter.

JZ: An interpreter?

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DM: Yes, because they found out that I speak seven language, read and write, and they say “Ooh, this is a good one!” Matter of fact, when I went to the M&N building, I had a deeper accent than I have now, which it was in 1960. ’61 really, and the sergeant says, “You’re not from here.” I say, “Yeah, I live off of _____.” He said, “Really? You speak any foreign language?” And like a dummy, I told him, “Yeah, I read and write and speak seven.” “Oh, come on, sit down, son!” Next thing I know, I’m in uniform, and I was stationed, like I said, in Germany in the town of Frankfurt. I spent six months in Berlin, at Charlie’s Point and that wasn’t too pleasant but that’s life.

JZ: Up to what year did you actively serve?

DM: Well, active military, two years. 1963 I went out of it. Seven years in the National Guard. And I made Staff Sergeant which is three up and two down when I left. I joined the airborne, them dummy guys that go up on a real good airplane and they still jumping out the window when they ready to jump. At that time, we were ready to go into Korea or Vietnam, and that’s where we are going, ‘Nam, from that time.

JZ: I skipped a question but I was going to ask about how was your life after the war?

DM: Great. In the United States, perfect.

JZ: What year did you first come to live in America?

DM: 1960.

JZ: 1960? Did you first settle in Houston?

DM: Well, no, I had to stop in New York because the boat stop in New York.

JZ: Did you go through Ellis Island?

DM: From New York to Houston, here. Three days on the bus going to St. Louis, Pittsburgh, St. Louis, and down to Dallas, then down to Houston.

JZ: When you came through New York, did you go through Ellis Island?

DM: No.

JZ: It was closed? I'm not sure when it closed, so that's why I asked. But you had in mind coming to Houston?

DM: Yeah, that's what my papers said, to go to Houston, period.

JZ: Was that your family, did you have family here?

DM: No, nobody. I came here by myself, my mother was waiting for me overseas and when I got my citizenship in 1966, I went to the office where I got my papers and I told them that I would like to have my mother over here and they said, "Sure!" That was it. About a year after that, I had my mother over here in '67.

JZ: What made you choose Houston over any other city in the country?

DM: Well, the man that we knew overseas was a military man, he was living in Houston and he said that whenever I think about coming to the United States go ahead to let him know and he's going to try to help.

JZ: Had you ever heard of Houston before, before you came here?

DM: No.

JZ: No?

DM: No.

JZ: When you first came to Houston, which part of the city did you settle in?

DM: Huh?

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JZ: Which part of the city did you live in...?

DM: Down in the south part, what they used to call "Little Mexico" in those days. I don't know why, because there was a lot of Chinese down there, too.

JZ: You said that was off Harrisburg Street?

DM: Huh?

JZ: Off Harrisburg Street?

DM: Harrisburg, yeah, off of Harrisburg on Avenue C.

JZ: I think that used to be a German neighborhood back in the day.

DM: Oh, way back when that was all German down there, yeah. That was the first area where the- Harrisburg, matter of fact, was the capital of Harris, Harris County at one time.

JZ: So, how was the city when you first came here in the sixties?

DM: Just as it was now, only with less tall buildings. There were not too many buildings, because when I left for the army in 1961, when I came back home in '63 if I did join the army for another three years- which I would have been staying overseas somewhere because they don't send you back where you join. You join in Frankfurt or rejoin in Frankfurt, they don't keep you there, they send you somewhere else. If you been there too long, you got too many friends. If I did join, I would have had to make sure that when I got to the airport, I got myself a taxi, because Houston was already changed. The Astrodome was on, couple of buildings in downtown, they were tear down and build something else on it. Oh, yeah, was changing already for the better.

JZ: Could you describe the city a little when you first came? What was your impression of Houston?

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DM: Nice and warm, for sure. I enjoyed that.

JZ: Did you come here in the summer or in the spring?

DM: No, no, that was March. Wintertime. Or wintertime over there for me anyway. It was great, I got here, it was sunshine and I was wearing a heavy outfit from over there. I got rid of that one right quick and got myself some blue jeans, cowboy boots and made myself a Texan, which I love it today just the same.

JZ: Did you ever get treated badly for being an immigrant or a German?

DM: No. As an immigrant, no, but as a German, they kind of fuss about it a little bit and all them and all the German over here. I would tell them right back, without getting mad or make a big deal of it, "Yeah, we coming over here now," I was telling them, "in civilian clothes. We going to take over the country without you knowing it." Some did laugh and some of them didn't talk to me about it for a while. I guess I have to work their mind over on what I tell them.

JZ: You seem to have came to the city around the end of segregation. When you came to the city, was the city still segregated among racial lines?

DM: Yeah, one time I caught the bus and there was nowhere else to sit down, I sit in the back and all the white people in the bus look at me like, "What in the hell are you doing?" Overseas, we don't have that or at least at that time we didn't have that, because the _____ came over there to liberate, they were black and white so we got used to it.

JZ: Here in Houston, can you describe race relations when you first got here?

DM: Never bothered me.

JZ: Never bothered you?

DM: No.

JZ: Did you ever see other people mistreating non-whites?

DM: No, not really.

JZ: No, not really?

DM: No.

Unknown: Can I interrupt you a second? How you doing?

DM: Yes, how are you?

JZ: I'm great.

Unknown: Good. I don't see you all very often or I'm not out very often, but y'all can eat candy, can't you?

JZ: Yeah.

Unknown: I've been wanting to catch up with your mother, but would you give this to her?

JZ: Yes, of course.

Unknown: She'll share it with everybody, I'm sure.

JZ: Of course.

Unknown: I didn't mean to interrupt y'all.

JZ: No, that's fine.

Unknown: Okay.

JZ: Thank you.

Unknown: You stay good.

JZ: Sure will. When did you first settle here in the Heights, in this home?

DM: In this home? After we got married, about forty five years ago.

JZ: Forty five years ago. When was that, in the seventies?

DM: Sixties.

JZ: Sixties. How is the neighborhood different?

DM: Right here?

JZ: Yeah.

DM: Just like it is now, nice and quiet. And I'll fight _____ to keep it quiet. Sometimes we have problems with the young people that they like that bing-a-boom music, but I guess somebody else besides us called the police at night and they cool it off, you know? Sometimes I don't understand when they wait for the police car to go around the corner and they turn those things up again. It don't take long to make another phone call.

JZ: Yeah.

DM: Otherwise, it's nice, kept proper. Some of the people, they have a lot of stuff in the front and back yards, but that's the way they are, I guess. I can't help them.

JZ: Houston, as a city, transportation-wise, how has it changed?

DM: Traffic?

JZ: Yeah, traffic.

DM: No problem.

JZ: How about the people? When you first came here, there was less people from other countries.

DM: Just Texans. Just Texan people, proud of 'em all.

JZ: When did you first start noticing people from other parts of the world coming from Asian and Latin America?

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DM: After we joined the German Club, which I'm a singer in it, and we were invited to sing in different festivals and we found out about other outfits that they had singing groups. They didn't bother us, we didn't bother them, always enjoy it.

JZ: I wanted to talk to you about some various historical things that have happened in the city that you were alive when it happened, and the first one I wanted to mention was the oil embargo in the seventies. Do you remember how life was then? How did the scarcity of oil-

DM: Nothing, you just in place of get a full tank of gas, you get whatever they give you. That's all.

JZ: How were the prices compared to now, do you remember?

DM: At that time, I think it was maybe a dollar and a lot of people were complaining, as they complaining now that even though gas went down. It's just, tell them about it, "What are you complaining about? Overseas where I come from, it's \$5 a gallon, so what's the worry about it?" It's gonna be coming here, too, and they say, "Oh, no, not here." But it happened.

JZ: So, that was back in the seventies and that still continues to now?

DM: Oh, yeah, yeah.

JZ: Do you remember watching the first man on the moon?

DM: Oh, yeah. Watched the television.

JZ: Were you here in Houston at that time?

DM: Watched it on TV. One step for somebody to one step to another world. Nothing to it.

JZ: Okay. Since the interview has to do with Houston history, could you tell me some positive things that have changed in the city since you first came here? Some good things that you've seen, like new buildings, maybe bigger roads.

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DM: People in your days are different in a way, but that's not everybody. They're more... They get mad earlier. Used to be soccer and basketball and baseball, but they didn't have any fights one after another because they get punched or they get pulled or pushed. Now, people, they're too inclined to punch somebody in the nose. Otherwise, I guess I was in the right places all the time. I didn't have no problems.

JZ: Looking back, back back, when you were growing up, did you ever imagine we would have technology like a cell phone or the dryer, I don't know? What are your thoughts on how technology has changed since you were growing up?

DM: It changed, in some things- Come on, get up there. Some things changed for good and some of it changed for bad, which we found out by now that people were have a chance to get into your computers and stuff like that, you know? Personally, when I was working, we had computers that, in those days, were called "IBM machines," tall as I am which I'm six-foot-something. Now, it's like in the movies, they had Clark having the watch, now we got watches. It's just one of those things, you know? And I don't like it, I worked with those for thirty five years, I don't want to mess with it. Telephone is already plenty.

JZ: Have you been to Germany ever since you left, like recently?

DM: Oh, yeah. Beside when I went in the military, I went over there with my wife. She wanted to know where I was living or the country that I was in. We didn't go to the born town in Saarbrücken, but we went to Frankfurt, went to Mainz with a family that we knew there and we went around with them, and then we spent a full week down in Bavaria, stayed in Munich.

Funning thing was, I always told my wife about that the Bavarians, they thinking they're their own state, their own country, which that's what it is. I told her, I said, "We're going to get up in

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the morning, look out the window where the flags are, and you will see that they pull the Bavarian flag first and then they put the German flag up.” Which they did.

JZ: That’s something that we’re studying in German history class, a German course that I’m taking right now, the attitude of Bavaria. How has Germany changed since you left, or since you were a child?

DM: Oh, it’s very changed, or like Frankfurt used to be the icehouse, the bank, the church, people, another bank. Now you go to Frankfurt, you think you’re in farmer’s market out there, so you got groceries all over. You go to Frankfurt now, they got banks all over. That’s what’s changed. Business took over the town. If you want to see the real Germany, then you need to go to Bavaria. Go in a little town. Munich is a fifty – fifty thing, but you go to Garmisch, then you really find out about what Germany is. People still wearing their lederhosen and _____ . Oh, yeah, with all that music, too.

JZ: So... let me think... ran out of questions, but... I wanted to ask you about the German Club that you’re a part of. Could you tell me more about it?

DM: Yeah, we are formed in 1924 and we just a group that likes to keep the German language alive, the German way of do things, respect and so forth, and we love to sing, and drink beer, and wine for the women. We invited in different towns to sing during their festivals, mostly all the German towns up in the north part of Houston, and now we come out with a maritime group that we sing old songs for the navy, of American town navy, they just go ahead and call us for that, too. That’s just like everybody else’s, you know, they want to keep their heritage going. That’s all we’re doing.

JZ: So, you’re a singer in the club?

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DM: Yeah, used to lead the _____. I sing bass. Second bass.

JZ: Let me see if there's anything else that... Is there anything that you would like to add about your experience here in the city or how the city has changed throughout time, what you see through your eyes? What are some of the things that you've seen?

DM: It changed for the best, always.

JZ: How has it changed, can you give me some examples?

DM: The best part of it is, which always money is number one. Where I come from, like the Autobahn, we are having a form of a train coming from Dallas to Houston now. They don't even have the drawings and people are already complaining, "I don't want it to come through my lane!" When I was growing up, when Adolf wanted freeway or streetcar running from one end to the other, he just put his finger on the map and that's where we're going. You come out and say, "Well, this is my lane." I say, "Good. Get a doggone pick and shovel, and start working on it. Get that thing ready for the train to coming through or whatever." Here, it takes too long for everything and number one is always money. Why money? You know, get the darn thing done and right now the freeways are so crowded, they want to widen them. Why widen when they can put pylons and have one-way on the ground and one-way on top? It just don't make sense, but that's the way we do things here.

JZ: When you first came here, were the freeways weren't as packed?

DM: They were okay, yeah. They were not as wide as they are now. Just like when I was in Arkansas for basic training in the military, I realized how big Texas really is and how big things we do here when, by car, from Fort Chaffee, Arkansas to Houston with a sergeant that invited us to go there and when you get to the border of Arkansas, it is two lanes. You cross the border, six

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lanes when you're in Texas. So, that shows you right there that we don't mess around. That's the only thing, though, I don't understand why they complain all the time. They're really good complainers.

JZ: Yeah.

DM: Like when my mother came over here, we went to Wayne Gardens, she stop at the door, she says in German, thank goodness, "My God, the Americans are complaining. See all that food?" And I told her, "Mama," I said, "the Americans will complain all the time, it don't matter what."

JZ: That's true. You mentioned riding the bus when you came here.

DM: Yeah, I had to.

JZ: Did they have just the bus, were there any other things to ride?

DM: Oh, yeah, the buses that they have now, they're fancy. In those days, they were just antique bus, like a school bus almost.

JZ: So, there wasn't no train back then? No railcars? Just buses?

DM: Here in Houston?

JZ: Yeah.

DM: Yeah, it was a train. It was more trains at that time then now. Now, it's just commercial. I think it's just one train coming to Houston either to New Orleans and Alpine, going to California then back and it stops in Houston. And the railroad station in Houston now, the old one, they made a baseball park and the new one is just a two-by-four building. It don't even look like no railroad station that I know anyway.

JZ: Have you ever ridden the METRO Rail that's downtown?

DM: No.

JZ: No?

DM: No. It's nice to have it, but...

JZ: There's no need when you have the bus.

DM: I'm just being Americanized, I get in the car. Get in the car, get in the car, you know, no walking, which makes a difference. My wife, when we were over there, she said, "We don't have any transportation here?" I said, "Yeah, plenty of it. We got underground, buses, electric buses, what you want?" And it was snowing like a son of a gun that morning. She said, "Dom, we go downtown walking." I said, "Okay with me." It was about fifteen blocks. She never complained.

JZ: So, you can agree that here in Houston we have really bad transportation?

DM: All right. I don't need it now, so I don't know how the really thing is, but it looks like that they're getting better.

JZ: So, I want to ask you, did you have any children when you were... you and your wife, did you ever have any children?

DM: Surgeries?

JZ: Huh?

DM: Surgeries?

JZ: Children.

DM: What that word?

JZ: Kid, then?

DM: No, I don't think I know...

JZ: A son or a daughter?

DM: Huh?

JZ: Did you have a son or a daughter?

DM: No, no, no, no kids at all.

JZ: No kids?

DM: No, thank goodness.

JZ: I was going to ask you about raising up a kid in Houston. Do you have anything...

DM: My wife, she said, "If we have kids, I feel sorry for them because they be marching before they can say 'mom' and 'dad.'" I told her, I said, "You're right."

JZ: How has your active service in the military, how has that affected your life?

DM: Nothing.

JZ: Nothing?

DM: I love it.

JZ: You love it?

DM: Yeah.

JZ: What do you love most about it?

DM: Everything. Everything.

JZ: Like what?

DM: No complaints whatsoever.

JZ: What was your favorite thing to do when you were abroad?

DM: You just do it and that's the way I was brought up. A lot of people, they ask me, they say, "How can you be the way you are? Always happy, happy-go-lucky, so-forth." I said, "I grew up during the war. We didn't have time to do nothing good or bad. We just have to worry about

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finding a place to eat somewhere, find a place to sleep, and get to work. Hopefully, we have a job. That's all, I mean, nothing to it. I remember that like my wife, she said, "You like your bread, you know, toast burnt up a little bit?" I said, "Yeah, please. It reminds me of the days of when me and my daddy used to go to a factory and scrape the doggone bricks on the walls after the bombing." It was black as a black one can be. I love it.

JZ: So, you've been happy here in Houston?

DM: You better believe it. Nothing to it.

JZ: Nothing to it?

DM: Can't complain. When you get up in the morning, which I did today, but you're looking in the mirror ready to shave and that face smiles at you before you do, nothing else to ask. I'm in good health, I drink my beer, drink wine at lunchtime. Just like if we were overseas, have a good meal, my wife's a good cook. Nothing to it. No complaints about nothing, period.

JZ: Is there anything else you would like to add about yourself or your life?

DM: Nope.

JZ: Nope?

DM: What I have is just what I have because when I was overseas, I didn't have nothing. The first time I bought a bicycle, the policeman came home and said, "Did you really bought the bicycle?" I said, "Yeah." I gave him a ticket that I paid for it. And then you have to get your lessons to ride a bicycle over there. I had the same problem when I went to pick out my first motorcycle and nothing to it. You just get used to it. It's amazing how these people here, they're so free, they don't even know how to spell that word. Terrible.

JZ: When you first came here, you said it was in the sixties, right?

DM: Yeah.

JZ: So, you were in your early twenties?

DM: Huh?

JZ: You were in your early twenties?

DM: Twenty one, twenty two, I think, yeah.

JZ: You had already lived in Germany after the war, right?

DM: Well, after the war, we stay in Italy.

JZ: Oh, in Italy.

DM: Yeah. That's where I came from, Italy to here.

JZ: When you first came here and saw how full the stores were where people had all these things, what did you think?

DM: I think, "I hope they enjoy it."

JZ: Did you ever feel like "I want that?" Did you ever say, "I wish it was like that back home?"

DM: No, because it's a different country. They're getting Americanized now, having all that we have. That's why we have all the problems over there. Start fussing about this, fussing about that, and when we didn't have nothing, we don't have nothing to fuss about. And it was okay. If you don't have nothing, you can't fuss about it. When you get to be too much, this is getting bad here in case something happened, but somebody will take over the country from another place. A lot of these people here, they be killing each other, and you if have it changed to have a yard or something in the back and are able to grow something, since there's nothing in the stores, you will have to stand up at night with a rifle and people would come and try to steal. They do that

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already now, it's like those people driving a truck through the stores. It's a simple thing to do, just put steel bars on it and pipes in the front of it, and you don't have to worry about it.

JZ: Having lived so long here in Houston and seeing how things have changed throughout the decades, what do you envision for the future? What do you think's going to happen five, ten, twenty years from now?

DM: The young men that we have now, they start thinking about it, it'll be great.

JZ: Is there anything that you look forward to?

DM: No. The only thing I look forward to is tomorrow to go to a concert at a club. We have a big concert there, have a few beers and enjoy ourselves. Besides that, there's my wife's birthday, so... Yeah, I'm into it.

JZ: Okay. All right.

DM: I look forward now, in May, I'm going to at the veteran's cemetery. I'm going to be in the parade up there with the flags, carrying the United States flags. Then, I look forward for the 11th of November, the Veteran's Day downtown. Do the same thing. In May, we have a music festival, all the German groups of Texas, once a year we get together and this year is going to be in Houston. Looking forward to that. I'll be carrying the flag and the banner of the club there, all that time marching in and marching out. Just enjoy life.

JZ: Okay.

DM: That's all.

JZ: I think that's it.

DM: That will do it, huh?

JZ: Yeah. Let's see...

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DM: When we had sixty years of liberated Germany, they had Channel 11 came by here and _____ TV thing, and asked me what I think about it after sixty years. Yeah, I think somewhere I was going, “Pfft! I don’t have to worry about it.” But I’m used to this stuff.

JZ: Oh, okay.

End of Interview

