

## **FHS Oral History Project – Maria Mercedes**

### **Description:**

Maria de las Mercedes Nunez-Salgado was born on June 12, 1972, and grew up in Madrid, Spain. In addition to recounting her time living in Spain and Europe more broadly, Maria mainly discussed her immigrant experience in the United States. Maria spent most of her time in Philadelphia, as she recently (2020) moved to Orlando for work reasons. Maria reflected on her half a decade living in Orlando, sharing her observations and perspectives about the city generally and how it has compared to her time in Philadelphia and Spain. The acculturation process, embracing American culture while maintaining values from home, and the Hispanic community between Philadelphia and Orlando remain among the most central themes during the oral history.

### **Transcription:**

00;00;00 - 00;00;24

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** This is Sebastian Garcia interviewing Maria Mercedes on February 2nd, 2025, at the Zora Neale Hurston Festival of the Arts and Humanities for the Florida Historical Society Oral History Project. Maria, can you please tell me where you were born?

00;00;24 - 00;00;27

**MARIA MERCEDES:** I was born in Madrid, Spain.

00;00;27 - 00;00;42

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Madrid, Spain. And you were just telling me moments ago before we turned on the mics, that your entire family history, you lived in one specific area in Spain, and then within your generation, you moved. Can you talk to me about that, please?

00;00;42 - 00;01;18

**MARIA MERCEDES:** Sure. So my father's line. So my the Nunez line, my my first, last name, it's been in the Andalusian region of Spain. As far as I been able to do research, that that goes back to 1562. Maybe, farther, I don't know. I couldn't I haven't been able to go any farther. So they've they're natives from that area. My father is native from that area. I was born in Madrid, and somehow I moved to the US.

00;01;18 - 00;01;26

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And can you tell me a little bit more about life in Madrid, growing up in Madrid? What was that like for you?

00;01;26 - 00;02;08

**MARIA MERCEDES:** So, I'm born in the 70s, so, it was very safe, very almost a little bit very traditional, frankly. Everybody was same color, same religion, same social cues. So it was very, homogeneous society, very traditional. My mom was kind of unusual. She worked at the time, many women didn't, didn't work outside the house. So my parents were fairly modern in that sense. But yes, it was a very it was a traditional society.

00;02;08 - 00;02;10

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And what did your mom work as?

00;02;10 - 00;02;32

**MARIA MERCEDES:** So she was—she is a geologist. So she worked, on the field, like finding water for agriculture. Later on, she moved on to work up on water plans for the government. But, yeah, when I was little, that's what she did. She she would find water for agriculture.

00;02;33 - 00;02;34

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And what about your father?

00;02;34 - 00;02;52

**MARIA MERCEDES:** My father was also a geologist. And he worked more in the in the oil industry. So when I was young, we we lived in different places like Africa because that we would follow his work.

00;02;52 - 00;02;57

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And. Well, tell me about that experience living in Africa since you mentioned it.

00;02;57 - 00;03;16

**MARIA MERCEDES:** So by himself, he lived in, in, in Zaire and then he moved to Angola and that they felt it was safe enough for us to live there, even though it was during the Civil War. But yeah, I lived there as a teenager.

00;03;16 - 00;03;21

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And then, you know, in your 20s, you went back to Madrid?

00;03;21 - 00;03;34

**MARIA MERCEDES:** I went back for...I went to college in France, and then part of it was in France, part of it was in Madrid. So I went back for my last two years of college in Madrid.

00;03;35 - 00;03;36

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** What did you study?

00;03;37 - 00;03;38

**MARIA MERCEDES:** Business administration.

00;03;38 - 00;03;44

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Business Administration. And what was that experience like doing college in two different locations?

00;03;45 - 00;04;20

**MARIA MERCEDES:** I was thrilled. I felt that Spain felt a little bit little for me. Maybe because I had lived abroad. I was very happy to enter on a college program that would allow me to travel during my studies. So we kept the same class. So it's not like you are alone going

abroad, like, nowadays, but the same 40-some people follow each other for those four years in two different countries. So it was very enriching. Yeah.

00;04;21 - 00;04;25

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And where in France specifically?

00;04;25 - 00;04;28

**MARIA MERCEDES:** Reims, where the champagne comes from.

00;04;28 - 00;04;36

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Nice, nice. Did you find a job immediately after you graduated college?

00;04;36 - 00;05;02

**MARIA MERCEDES:** I was lucky enough to get an offer before I finished, and I thought, oh, that's so easy if I'm going—if I got an offer, I didn't finish, I'm going to find ten. And then the recession came, and it was a little bit harder because Spain was in a little bit of a hard spot, and there was not a lot of work, but eventually, you know.

00;05;02 - 00;05;17

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And you told me as we were, as I was trying to convince you, that you ultimately emigrated from Spain around five years ago, and you came here directly to Orlando or somewhere else in the USA?

00;05;17 - 00;06;25

**MARIA MERCEDES:** No. So you're partly right—to Orlando I came five years ago. But actually, what happened? I got married to a Frenchman. Who at 20—I don't even know how long—but in 1998, he got an offer to work in Philadelphia. So, of course, we were a family, and I followed. So we moved to Philadelphia in 1998, and then we follow the whole process of first being on a visa. I couldn't work at the time as a spouse. And then we went on through the green card process. I didn't speak English at the time, so I could not find a job because I did not speak English. But eventually I learned, thanks to neighbors and, and, and TV shows and, we I got my green card, and then we decided to stay, and we became Americans. We were lucky to be able to have that choice.

00;06;25 - 00;06;36

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And what was that experience like, leaving Spain, leaving your homeland in 1998, going to Philadelphia. What was that like for you?

00;06;36 - 00;07;43

**MARIA MERCEDES:** For me in particular, it was very hard. The first two, three years, because I did not speak English and that it was a huge, how could I say, you feel very vulnerable when you do not speak the language. As you can tell, I still have an accent. There's no way I can get rid of it. But not being able to express yourself or to understand, it felt like, I was always at somebody else's mercy, either of somebody else that would help me to translate, or I was never sure if I understood or if somebody was taking advantage of me. So I was on a

mission to learn English as a must. So it was not easy in my 20 because it was—I mean, I didn't want to go to classes, so I just learned from speaking to people, but it was a bit hard. Yeah.

00;07;43 - 00;08;06

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** I think the fact that we're doing this right now is a testament to how much you've learned, and you've grown in English. So I commend you because learning a different language could be very challenging and scary, so that's awesome. Aside from the language, what other things—once you arrived in Philadelphia—surprised you about the United States?

00;08;06 - 00;09;49

**MARIA MERCEDES:** So there were things that we loved and there were things that we didn't care for. So some...the very first thing that we did, we went to a supermarket and, and we just tried to buy every single product that we, we didn't know what it was. So that that was a fun experience. Some of the habits, American culture are things that we embraced and we loved and we still do, and that's and they are the reason why I'm still here. But some of the things that are and mostly more traditional things, the way I was brought up, I kept doing at home, like there things that it's very particularly on how I, I educated my kids that are a bit more traditional. I would say a little bit more—I'm not going to say strict—but it just different than what people do here. For example, at home we always have dinner or lunch all together at the table. There are no snacks. They've never been—my kids complain and—but we all cook or I cook. Somebody my husband cooks, my daughter, and we all have dinner at the table every single day, either lunch or dinner. However, whatever it is. So if they're friends at home that I know from my kids, especially when they were teenagers, oh yeah, they can hang out in the room. But dinner time, even if you're not hungry, maybe you already have dinner at home. You have a seat at my table and you're—I'm going to serve you a plate. Even if you don't eat, that's fine. But this is family time.

00;09;49 - 00;09;54

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Absolutely. And were both of your kids born in Philadelphia?

00;09;54 - 00;10;01

**MARIA MERCEDES:** So I have three kids. My first one was born in Spain, and he came here when he was two years, and the other two, yes, they were born in the Philadelphia area.

00;10;01 - 00;10;06

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And how long did you that you and your family last in Philadelphia?

00;10;06 - 00;11;10

**MARIA MERCEDES:** Until five years ago. Well, that is not that is not quite true. In between—so between 1998 and and 2000, we, we went to Canada for four and a half years, and we went to France for two years. But we came back to Philadelphia. We, we felt—we came back to Europe, and we had this idea of home. So my husband is French. I'm from Spain originally. And what we miss about our original homes was a life that did not exist anymore. And I, I think a lot of immigrants here will feel the same way that we miss things that that's not—that the world has evolved there, the same way it has evolved here, but what we miss is

not there anymore. So we went back for a couple of years for work, and then, very consciously said, no, our home is in the US. So we came back.

00;11;10 - 00;11;19

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And what—can you talk to me a little bit about the decision to leave Philadelphia for Orlando in 2020?

00;11;19 - 00;11;44

**MARIA MERCEDES:** Sure. I mean, our, our, we've been brought up, my husband and I in a time where our parents went through very, very hard, times. They—my my dad lost his job in Spain for a very long time, and that kind of always haunted us, for us to be able to sustain your family, it's a security financially. And and so we've always followed work opportunities. And, so we lived in Philadelphia, we were living in Philadelphia, and my husband's company got acquired by, Orlando-based company acquired, or there was a merger, I mean, something like this. And he moved here for work. I stayed in Philadelphia for a few years because my kids were in high school, and I commuted or he commuted, so we followed work, and then eventually, you know, kids left home and, and COVID hit, and it was for us actually became an opportunity because all of sudden I could work remote. And so we decided to move here to Orlando. We love it. It's a very—it's a smaller city, but it's very, very close to nature with there's a lot of things outdoors. We love it.

00;12;46 - 00;12;54

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And did your job career change when you moved from Philadelphia to Orlando? You're doing the same thing.

00;12;54 - 00;13;09

**MARIA MERCEDES:** No, I, I had to change. So that was, I had to make a choice. I was lucky enough, I found right away. So, I really, really that was very, very lucky. And we feel very, very blessed.

00;13;09 - 00;13;18

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** What were some of your initial reactions or initial observations when you moved to Orlando?

00;13;18 - 00;14;10

**MARIA MERCEDES:** You know, it depends. Life has taken us to many, many different places. And one thing that—so we've lived in Paris, we've lived in Madrid with it in big cities—and it was we were very happy to be in a smaller city where everything is closer, where where things are simpler. And that was the right time in our lives to, we love water things. And then one of the things that was a lot of fun, we said, okay, if we're going to live in Florida, let's do what the Floridians do. They said, we they go in a boat, they fish. So we learned how to do both. We went and we bought, you know, we started renting kayaks to go out. We love it. Now we have our own kayaks. So we just tried to adapt. It was fun.

00;14;10 - 00;14;26

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And when we compare your experiences with Philadelphia to Orlando, do you do you think there's a more vibrant Hispanic community in Orlando compared to Philadelphia?

00;14;26 - 00;15;36

**MARIA MERCEDES:** I would say yes. It's very different. So let's put it in the in the timeline because I need to qualify my, my answer. When we first moved to the US there were very few people that spoke Spanish, in Philadelphia even. It was rare and people were a little bit embarrassed of speaking Spanish. Nowadays that's not the case anymore. I think Florida, because of the influx of more closer to the, to to Latin America, hasn't had that, or maybe I'm wrong, but I, I, I've never felt that people were embarrassed. I think that this country has grown a lot in accepting other cultures and make it being an enrichment instead of, of an embarrassment. So I do see a very big difference in that.

00;15;37 - 00;15;54

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And, you know, being here in Orlando for five years, you know, and your first years were COVID, so that of course, influences things. But, you know, have you enjoyed your time here? How how have these five years been for you and your family?

00;15;54 - 00;16;47

**MARIA MERCEDES:** So it's they have—we love it. We have decided to make it our home so that that tells a lot. And, we are—we feel very blessed in Florida. I, I am lucky enough that I can, you know, that we have we are healthy and we can we love take the car and go and and travel to places and and visit places in Florida. I could live with a little bit less humidity in the summer, frankly. But, you know, this is what makes it interesting. Everything grows here. Everything. And, I mean, this is in many different ways, not only physical. It's a happy place, and we love it.

00;16;47 - 00;17;23

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** You know what— kind of what I was telling you before we started recording—how you're the first in your family's history to emigrate from Spain to the United States. And I just—I don't even know how to frame this question—but, you know, because me personally, I also have a similar history where my grandfather was the first. And so what does that mean to you being the first from your family that left your homeland to the United States and, and clearly have found success and happiness in that decision? What does that mean to you?

00;17;23 - 00;19;00

**MARIA MERCEDES:** Moving to a place that you don't know, it is always a brave thing to do. However, in my case, I came here with my husband, who already had a job. So it was it was scary for other things, and it was like when you move to another place, you always lose something of yours. And and that is the reality. It took me a little while to come to terms with the concept that my kids will not be French, that they will not be Spaniards because they do feel American. So you lose a little bit along the way, but you gain so much. So it it takes some courage to come. But what really took courage wasn't to come, it was to stay. It was the second time, actually. So I told you that we moved to France and what took really courage—because

the first time, it's an opportunity, you're young, you follow life. We were lucky, and we were not one of the people that, came here because of necessity. Let's say we came here with a good job. And so our reasons were different. But the second time it was a conscious choice of saying I feel home. This is my this is my home. And and that process took a lot of courage, us as a person, as a couple, as a family.

00;19;00 - 00;19;13

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Absolutely. And you know, you mentioned how your kids feel, they feel American, but do you think they still embody, you know, French and Spanish values?

00;19;13 - 00;20;05

**MARIA MERCEDES:** Absolutely. My, my three kids are trilingual. My husband speaks French with them. I speak Spanish, and English is all around us. They they're very proud of their origins. They're very proud of what they—for example, my son, just had to to has two kids right now, so I'm a I'm, I, I'm a grandmother now. And and remember what I was telling you about having dinner at the table, in their house everybody has, like, they have dinner at the table. And I'm so proud of that, that some of of what I brought with me on the airplane because I did not came on a boat, but on the airplane, is still standing here as a new tradition. So it, it it is very encouraging. Yep.

00;20;05 - 00;20;18

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Excellent. And what do you what do you see in Orlando's future in the next five, ten years? You know, broadly speaking, as a city, as a community.

00;20;18 - 00;20;54

**MARIA MERCEDES:** I think, I think Orlando needs a little bit more of cultural life—that is the truth. And I believe that the the Hispanic world can help a lot in that respect. I don't know about other cultures because I'm not part of other cultures, but I think that the Hispanic world is very rich in traditions, and that will help Orlando's cultural landscape.

00;20;54 - 00;21;04

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Absolutely. And speaking of cultural events, you know, today we're here at the Zora Neale Hurston Festival of the Arts and Humanities. What brought you here today?

00;21;04 - 00;21;24

**MARIA MERCEDES:** I'm going to be totally truthful. I was alone this weekend. My husband is traveling for work. I said I typed “what to do in Orlando on Google, what to do, how to have fun in Orlando this weekend.” And the Zora Festival came up. I called a friend and a colleague and said, let's go. So and we love it.

00;21;24 - 00;21;27

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And is today your first day or you've been...?

00;21;27 - 00;21;31

**MARIA MERCEDES:** Yes. No, because we didn't I didn't know there were several days, there was several days. I am embarrassed.

00;21;31 - 00;21;34

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And what do you think of it so far being here?

00;21;34 - 00;21;57

**MARIA MERCEDES:** I'm leaving with bags of things, goodies and books, and it's a very, I think this is one of those things that I was saying about cultural. This is a very cultural, experience is not only artist it is cultural. And, this is really for sure something that will enrich and it's enriching Orlando's landscape.

00;21;57 - 00;22;10

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** And why do you think events like these, like these cultural events are important? Why should they exist?

00;22;10 - 00;22;30

**MARIA MERCEDES:** You know, I think we all need to be curious about—we need to carry our culture, and we need to be curious about somebody else's culture. That's the only way we're going to be able to, live, work together. And simply because something simple, it's fun. It's just fun.

00;22;30 - 00;22;49

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Lastly, what is something from your life observations that you want future generations to know, future generations within your family, future generations of Americans? What's something that you wish to tell those people?

00;22;49 - 00;23;12

**MARIA MERCEDES:** There is a lot of lately, there's a lot of talk about immigration and diversity. And what I would like to tell everyone is that we should not be scared of diversity. We should be curious and see how we can make this a better world.

00;23;12 - 00;23;15

**SEBASTIAN GARCIA:** Excellent. Thank you so much, Maria, I appreciate it.

00;23;15 - 00;23;17

**MARIA MERCEDES:** Of course. Glad to be here.