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Oral history interview with Efrén Molina Rivera, April 22, 2023

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ORAL HISTORY LAB (OHL)

University of Puerto Rico at Mayaguez

Oral History Interview with Efrén Molina Rivera

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview of Efrén Molina Rivera conducted by Gabriel S. Méndez Molina on April 22, 2023. This interview is part of coursework done by students at the University of Puerto Rico at Mayaguez.

Readers are asked to bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

Interviewer: Gabriel S. Mendez Molina

Interviewee: Efrén Molina Rivera

Date: April 22, 2023

Location: San Sebastián, PR

Gabriel [00:00:00]: Good afternoon, we are here at my grandfather's house in San Sebastián, sitting in the living room, it's 1:05 in the afternoon, I hope this interview is liked by all who listen to it. Well, before interviewing you, what is your name and your age?

Efrén [00:00:22]: Well, my name is Efrén Molina and I am... 71 years old

Gabriel [00:00:29]: Where and how did you grow up?

Efrén [00:00:31]: Well I live in San Sebastián, um, I have always lived here although I was born in Lares, PR but my parents brought me to San Sebastián when I was approximately two years old and we stayed in San Sebastián and here we are still.

Gabriel [00:00:48]: What was that stage of your childhood like?

Efrén [00:00:55]: The stage of my childhood, well, it's not, it wasn't the same as childhood now, at that time there were many needs, it was all different, but my childhood was pretty good. My

father worked, he was a carpenter, he earned money, it wasn't much, but he gave us enough to eat and have our things. While we had many neighbors who suffered too much, they didn't even have anything to eat, at Christmas they didn't give them any toys while I, thank God because my dad always bought us something. At first they didn't give us gifts for Santa Claus only for the Three Kings, then over time everything changed and evolved and more importance was given to Santa Claus, but at that time when I was growing up what was celebrated was the Three Kings... the Three Kings .

Gabriel [00:01:57]: When you reached adolescence, what was or was that stage like?

Efren [00:02:01]: Well... well, time went by, um, well, I was changing, I was more demanding, I wanted Lee pants, before Lee was the one that was in fashion, I liked them, but as I said first, I didn't everyone could have those pants or converse tennis, which was what was in fashion at that time. But thank God my dad, it wasn't much, but he bought me my pair. I kept growing, I made friends in the town because my house was near the town and my school was also in the town. And I played and practiced sports with the neighborhood, baseball and so on, but it wasn't in the park, it was in an empty lot and we played there. I had a bat, a ball, a glove and it was the only thing there was to play there because nobody had anything to play with. But, I shared it with them and we played and entertained ourselves until later I met more people from the town. At the age of 14 I started to go out at night because they wouldn't let me at home, I couldn't go out at night alone anywhere. When I was about 14 years old, I began to free myself, and I began to go out to town, I went to the movies, which at that time cost 45 cents, and at 8:30-9:00 pm the cinema closed and I had to return home. fast. There was no electric lighting on the roads, since I left the cinema I came in a darkness that I could not see anything. Then I reached the age of more or less 17 years, I met a girl... that I liked. After that, being a boyfriend with her, I had a

concern. The concern was that we were living in a time when there was a war, which was called the Vietnam War. There was a law called Compulsory Military Service, that was a concern for all the young men, because even if you didn't like the war or you didn't like the army, the armed forces, you had to go there. Now what happened? At that time when you were born they did not assign you a social security, when you turned 18 you went to the post office and there they filled out the selective service papers and there they assigned you a social security number. We are talking about I was about 17 years old, almost 18, that was about the year 1969, 1969. So, well, I had a teacher at the high school who taught English, his name was Mr. Montalvo, and that teacher belonged to the United States Army Reserve, what happened? We approached him with that concern that I told you about in the first place about compulsory military service and the Vietnam conflict. He told us that this was not a problem, but if we had any doubts or did not want to participate in that conflict, the problem was that it was mandatory, we had to go where they sent us, but there was an alternative and we asked him what that alternative was . Well, that teacher was very good and he told us that there was a branch of the army called the Armed Forces Reserve, so we asked him what that was, then he explained that it was a branch where... where those who are recruited there stay on standby. , in the event of a major national emergency that is meritorious, then they were activated, meanwhile one was participating in the activities, every 15 days they gave you some training and one went on weekends, Saturday and Sunday, every 15 days, and He showed up there and they gave classes and things like that, that's what the teacher explained to us. The thing is that after I turn 18 I have the concern about that military service, that they want to recruit us for Vietnam, I hadn't turned 18 well and people we knew who were killed had already arrived, compañeros who did like one year they had gone to the army

and had come back dead. That worried us a lot and there we decided to do what the teacher told us, in my case I signed up for the armed forces reserve, which had an office in Aguadilla, PR.

Gabriel [00:08:00]: Do you think that this alternative that the teacher gave you helped you in the enlistment process?

Efrén [00:08:06]: Yes, and the knowledge because I didn't know that it existed, he opened my mind and told me that it existed and I selected it. Many took the risk but in my case I signed up there in the reserve and enlisted. When I enlisted, I was already 18, since I enlisted I received the mandatory military service letter but I was already enrolled there and nothing, about 6 or 7 months after enrolling, they had accepted me in the reserve, that It was in Aguadilla, because I received a letter that I had to go to the United States for training, to take some training sessions. But I had already left school and I had a girlfriend, I still had the same one and currently she is still with me, but not as a girlfriend anymore, now we are married. *laughs* So then I received some orders that I had to report to Fort Knox, Kentucky. On December 27, 1970.

Gabriel [00:09:43]: How was that experience?

Efrén [00:09:45]: Well, I was the most excited until I got there, it was cold! I had never been to the United States in my life, I had gone once in the summer, but in the cold I I didn't know that cold was like that. When the plane arrives at the airport and they give the instructions, the pilot or the stewardess don't know through the microphone saying that we should bundle up because it was very cold, I look out the window of the plane and I heard the ugly sun shining brightly, I thought they were joking Because I did not know. When they open the door of the plane, you left on the runway, it's not like now that the plane leaves you in a corridor inside the airport, before it left you on the runway. And when they open that plane door it was like a blow from the cold that hit me in the face and I couldn't find how to get off the plane. The thing was that we had to get

off and I ran down until I got to the airport, then a colleague lent me a soft coat that he had because he had a fat one, but he was wearing it and he lent me the soft one he had, the Thing is, that was my first experience with cold. *laughs*

Gabriel [00:11:13]: And when you got there, did you know anyone?

Efrén [00:11:17]: I only knew a comrade who was on the plane and from there as we go with the army uniform on, they are waiting for us in a group, we reported to the group and from the group they took us to some buses, like school buses but big. And there were more than 5 or 6 buses full of recruits, and not all of us came on the same plane either. And from there they took us to the camp, all this was at night. I never knew where the airport was or the road to get to the base. It was called Fort Knox, Kentucky.

Gabriel [00:12:25]: So when you got to Fort Knox, how were the training sessions?

Efrén [00:12:33]: Well, there, they wouldn't let you go anywhere, you're just in training, they have you locked up in that camp, on the base. After almost a month, it only lets you get worse for a while, but since you get so tired because you were running all day and doing exercises and more, you didn't go anywhere. I was there for two months, January and February. There were trainings that we did under the snowfall, but some snowfall that in my life I had felt that; I got bronchitis there too. They made us run in T-shirts at 5 in the morning with that cold weather, but we had to do it, and that's where I got bronchitis.

Gabriel [00:13:34]: And after those basic training sessions, what followed, was there any occasion that you experienced some social injustice?

Efrén [00:14:03]: Well, when I was in Fort Knox there the discrimination was within the same camp. Because? Because the problem of race, I am Latino, I am Puerto Rican, there were also Mexicans, blacks, and white Americans. The fact is that there were some jobs that nobody

wanted to do because they were bad, it's not that they are bad but the dirtiest ones are not done by Americans, what they do is that they are assigned to Latinos and blacks. For example, when you had to work in the kitchen, there were some trays where they fried meat and things that made like one or two inches of fat. That had to be scraped by hand, some very large trays, and nobody wanted to do that and these jobs were not assigned to Americans, but to whatever Puerto Ricans there were, where I was only there were two of us and every so often we had to go to work in the kitchen when white Americans were not working. It was us and the blacks.

Gabriel: [00:15:16]: So you would say that the dirty or more complicated work fell to blacks and Latinos.

Efrén [00:15:22]: If that's the case, including the guards, you had to have guards at night or on weekends, it happens that like the Americans, it's not that they were smarter, it's that they are taking advantage of the opportunity that when they assigned him something, they took advantage of the fact that they were the "superior" race and gave him the job that nobody wants us to do. For example, you had to be on duty at the weekend and while the Americans went on vacation on Saturday and Sunday they took off, I had to be on duty 24 or 48 hours. He was on duty for two hours on duty and two hours off, thus completing the 48 hours.

Gabriel [00:16:12]: So the whites were given privileges over you.

Efrén [00:16:15]: Exactly, they gave them the weekend off, which was one of the reasons why I could never leave the camp because I always had something to do while the white Americans had the free weekend.

Gabriel [00:16:30]: And this was in Kentucky?

Efrén [00:16:32]: Yes. For me it was a great disappointment because I was one of those who thought that well, we are Americans and it was like our parents told us, that we had the same

rights as Americans, but I didn't know that was the case there. I thought I was an American like any other, well no, you're not American there, you're Puerto Rican, they treat you like a Puerto Rican, blacks like blacks, and always marginalized, they still do it at this point, they still do.

Gabriel [00:17:06]: And after those events, right after Kentucky, did he stay there or did they send him to another place?

Efrén [00:17:15]: I spent two months there taking basic training, after basic training they send you to another camp to take advanced training. In that advanced it is for you to acquire a specialty. You are going to specialize in something, that is for them to decide. They decide where they are going to send you, they sent me to a fort where they specialized in ammunition and explosives. When the orders for the day arrived, at night I was on a plane with two or three others. So we come to Fort Stewart, Georgia. I spent two months there taking advanced training, we worked there and they gave us classes so that we knew the types of ammunition and explosives that were used, from cannonballs to mines and things, rifle bullets, M60 bullets, submachine gun bullets.

Gabriel [00:18:30]: You were exposed to all those munitions.

Efrén [00:18:36]: Yes, yes to everything. There they taught us, in addition to the names of explosives and what they were like, also how they had to be treated to store them. In that, well, there were some bunkers that were like underground caves where we entered like in golf carts, more or less like this, because it was far and it was big, they were not on the edge of the camp so visible, they were hidden in the mountains. So they took us there and taught us how to store them, how to wear them, everything goes in the same direction as if one explodes, all the rights that don't spread inside the tunnel explode down there. I don't remember how deep that was,

but they were deep, it was a very deep and long, very large cave and there were many, not a few. So our work consisted mainly of when they brought these ammunition in trucks, well, we have to empty them from the truck and also register them and then store them, putting them as they went and where they went. They had to be recorded in the documents. After that, trucks from other bases or other camps also sometimes came to look for ammunition for the practices they were doing in their field. Well, we have to dispatch those ammunition so, well, we came back again, they came with the truck. They didn't go all the way inside, we took them out with some machines, then we took out the ammunition they wanted, we dispatched it to them and they filled out all the documents, they registered and they left. My work consisted mostly of that. Storage and distribution of explosives.

Gabriel [00:20:46]: Yes, what you did there was accept and dispatch ammunition.

Efrén [00:20:55]: Yes, and dispatch them when they came to request them because there were other camps that were practicing shooting and we dispatched the ammunition to them. In fact, one night they woke me up at about 1 in the morning because they forced a truck that had explosives to turn around, fell into a ditch and the trailer was turned on its side and they had to go in a group to empty it, and they didn't call the Americans whites who were there. There were about 5 or 6 blacks and two Puerto Ricans that we had. They were all black and Puerto Rican, the Americans were not called. They left them sleeping. And we had to leave for the and we were good until the sun came up. We had to empty that entire trailer to move all those explosives to another truck. After that they gave us a couple of hours off and then to work again in the afternoon.

Gabriel [00:22:13]: And aside from that, was there any other occasion that you experienced some social injustice in a restaurant or cafeteria there in Fort Stewart, Georgia.

Efrén [00:22:25]: Yes... there was more racism there, it was more pronounced than in other states. I mean the ones I had been to, where I had been right. Things were happening, but I wasn't very mixed up with those issues. So on one of those days, already in that camp, I could go out as many times as I wanted, to a restaurant, to the mall, or to the bars to drink, whatever I wanted, I could do it. But what happens is that I was friendly there with all the people, many of them, mostly the blacks because the Americans couldn't be very friendly with us because the problem was that they saw us as too inferior. Imagine that one of them dared to ask me if there were many Indians in Puerto Rico, that's how one of those Americans asked me. And I'm not going to tell you now in this interview what I answered him, but we had a problem because of what he answered. *laughs* This happened all the time, they even tried to hurt one of my classmates and without wanting to I am going through the bottom of the stairs and I listen when they are talking about what they did to my classmate. And from there, well, we had another problem because I went to look for the compañero, I told him what was happening and we went there, we had to fight and all with those people, but they were bad, they treated us badly. But we were friends with blacks and very few whites, so when we went to do the kitchen work, the same thing happened back in Kentucky, we did the dirty work. The Americans that was rare that any of them put them to work in the kitchen. So what happens that I had a problem with which I told you right away that we had to fight with an American, what they did to him was that they cut off his rifle, an M16 that's sacred you couldn't lose it if you lose it they could put you in even jailed for leaving him lost. What happens is that we told the kitchen supervisor what

happened and whoever had done it then asked for that boy to work in the kitchen. We had more problems there. When we went to do the work in the kitchen, they assigned me the job of drying the cups, taking the cups and glasses, taking a cloth and drying them. That was all. But they caught the American and sent him to clean the fat fat that I told you first was frying meat and things that was the worst job that nobody wanted to do. He thought he was going to dry cups but the sergeant sent him to the fat. That had to be done outside the building, in a space that was made of stone, so there he got more angry with us. The thing was that the days went by and I went out with some Puerto Rican coworkers to a restaurant that also had a bar, there were 5 of us so we rented a car because we were going to be together all weekend. When we entered the restaurant it was already around 6 or 7 at night and we entered, nobody said anything to us and after we were inside there the 5 of us sat at a small table... they didn't come to serve us, they didn't come to serve us. After a while, well, one of the compañeros got up and went there and told them that they hadn't taken care of us that someone was there to take care of us to order and when the guy came he told us that we had to leave. And then we told him to leave because, not that they were not going to take care of us, then the discussion began, but not a discussion about orientation. And then we had to ask them but they didn't want to tell us why, they had to tell us because we hadn't done anything, we just got there, we had never been there, they sell food, it's a business for everyone and we're here to spend, there are 5 of us and what we are going to spend here, eat and drink. And the man, as we demanded that, they brought another big bouncer, we call it here "mansaguapo" and then they told us that we had to leave and well we told them to tell us why. And we forced him and it was because there was a black man in our group. There it was not for Latinos, it was for blacks, a colleague of mine

from Aguadilla. So, well, we had to leave because they didn't want to serve us, I believe that all those things they did to me, they gave me so much to think about in those moments that my idea began to change and I began to think that it was a mistake to come to the army to serve them. these people, when they don't like us. They didn't like us in any way and we were so lazy that we went there to serve because it was mandatory that what they sell you is the homeland, what a homeland all that disappoints. The same people from the town, those from the camp, the same officers, they all discriminated against one. The thing is that from there we left that business because to see what we were doing we got into the car we had rented. We went to DSR around the same town and we see the kitchen sergeant who I mentioned to you first that he became a friend of us who was black, we saw him in the parking lot of a business and we stopped. We started talking and I don't know what and he asked us what we were doing out there and we told him that we're looking to at least give us a beer. He said well here you can enter now because you are with me, but if I am not here you can enter. And we wondered why, because they didn't allow whites, they are not Americans but they are white. So we were able to order a round of beer and we drank it but he himself didn't tell them that we couldn't stay alone, as soon as he left we had to leave too. And so it was, we were there with him, we had a couple of beers and even for the bathroom we went three by three because one could not go just in case. In one they did not want the blacks and in another the whites. So in my case I couldn't find what to do, I was in the middle so in other places they didn't want me either because I was Latino and all those things marked my life because when I got there I didn't know those things, they told them and that but until you You don't live them, you feel them in your heart, what you say against this shouldn't be, but it's happening to you, that's when you start to

reflect and I say that people still here want this to be a state when there are places that just for Not knowing English will kill you. That happened a few years ago, a guy killed some Puerto Ricans and when they asked him why he killed him because he didn't speak English. And that's gee at this point, but it's still happening. And nothing finished my two months and then I returned to PR and I was here completing 6 years, I never had to go to Vietnam which was my original concern, a war that my friends arrived dead in coffins. And when the six years were up I retired, I could stay and they would even give me a promotion if I enlisted but I didn't I decided to stay here and not mess with those people anymore, the times I have gone because I have gone to the United States many times but now it is different because I no longer respect them as before. Before I was even afraid because they were Americans now for me they are not the same as I am and if they do not accept me that is their problem and if we have to face them we face them. But at that moment it did cause me trauma.

Gabriel [00:33:08]: Well, thank you for sharing your story with us, the time is up.

Efrén [00:33:20]: For me it was a pleasure to share it. I am no longer 18 years old like when I started the story, now I am 71 but I remember all those things from that time, but nothing, thank God we are still here.