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Interview conducted June 15, 1988, for the German Historical Institute by Gabrielle Simon Edgcomb at Howard University, where Erna Magnus was a professor of social welfare in the graduate school from 1947-1966

Audio only, 13:05

Born in Hamburg, Dr. Erna Magnus emigrated to the United States in 1938 and conducted research on household workers for the Social Security Administration. She was a professor of social welfare and research in the Howard University Graduate School of Social Work in Washington, D.C., from 1947 until 1966.

SUMMARY: Marcella Daniels recalls her impressions of professor Erna Magnus as “very imposing, stern” but “a pussycat” under that façade, which Daniels and other staff of the Howard University graduate school attributed to her “stern, austere, German upper-middle-class upbringing”; tells of Dean Inabel Burns Lindsay remonstrating with Dr. Magnus about her social rigidity, such as expecting the secretaries to wash her coffee cup; remembers her helping out needy students financially as well as academically and teaching Jewish and black students from the broader area because the only other school of social work was at Catholic University, which “didn’t accept blacks, period,” and which Jewish students were reluctant to attend because of the “religious indoctrination”; recalls that despite her failing eyesight, Dr. Magnus continued to commute by train from Baltimore and read all the students’ papers herself; recounts other faculty members telling how “traumatized” Dr. Magnus was on first coming to the United States and living in the South, where “she really could not abide the prejudice and the discrimination ... She couldn’t understand the persecution of the people” and left the South; and recalls that Dr. Magnus was reticent about discussing the conditions that led her to leave Germany and the scattering of her family to Brazil and elsewhere. Edgcomb, whose aunt was the professor’s “closest friend,” tells of Dr. Magnus being “livid” when barred from renting an apartment in the Woodner in Washington, D.C., because of her Howard University association.