

Woman in the News;

Immigration Expert Who Takes Broad Approach -- Doris Marie Meissner

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By MARTIN TOLCHIN,

By MARTIN TOLCHIN, Special to The New York Times

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Body

4 A child of immigrants, *Doris M. Meissner* grew up in a German-speaking household in Milwaukee during World War II and suffered the anguish of ethnic discrimination early.

"I can clearly recall sitting on buses and streetcars and hearing my mother tell me not to talk, because it wasn't good to be heard speaking German," she said in a telephone interview from Milwaukee.

Ms. *Meissner*, 51, is now expected to become the custodian of the hopes of today's immigrants and those trying to gain entry. President Clinton nominated her on Friday to be Commissioner of *Immigration*, which requires Senate confirmation.

Ms. *Meissner* (pronounced MICE-ner) has specialized in *immigration* issues for nearly two decades, serving at the Justice Department in Democratic and Republican administrations. She served briefly as acting Commissioner in 1981.

Her family nurtured her longstanding interest in government and public issues, she said. "I think it probably came from my home and from my parents' strong feeling that you give back," she said. "They were always very grateful to have been here and to have built a life here."

Paying a Debt

She has spent her life trying to give something back to her country, in two areas: *women's* rights and *immigration* policy. "I'm committed to the full participation of *women* in the life of our society," said Ms. *Meissner*, who for a time led the National *Women's* Political Caucus.

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Ms. **Meissner** has won plaudits for bringing diverse groups together during 13 years at the Justice Department and during her present role as director of the **Immigration** Policy Project of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

"**Immigration** has traditionally been the province of advocacy groups only," she said. "We have created a dialogue that looks at these questions as serious policy questions, not just as questions for advocacy groups."

"We have to place the issues in an international context," she continued. "The movement of people is emerging as one of the critical global issues of our age. It is based on huge deficiencies in human rights and deep economic differentials."

When she **takes** over the **Immigration** and Naturalization Service, Ms. **Meissner** will be charged with, in President Clinton's words, insuring that the United States does not "lose control of our borders." Ms. **Meissner** indicated in the interview that she would **take a broad approach** to that mission.

Treating the Cause

"Today, people have information and cheap transportation," she said. "They know what their circumstances are and can act on it. We can't deal with this only as an enforcement issue in the United States. We have to look at it worldwide and attack the conditions that create the desperation."

Her nomination won immediate praise from those involved with **immigration** issues.

Doris Marie Meissner was born in Milwaukee on Nov. 3, 1941. Her mother, Hertha Borst, was 10 when she came to this country from Berlin, Germany, and her father, Fred Borst, was 22 when he arrived from Stuttgart, Germany.

Her father was a tool and die maker and her mother a bookkeeper. "My parents were definitely the pivotal influences on my life," Ms. **Meissner** said. "They were both very hard-working and absolutely devoted to their kids. Our family life was very much devoted to our German heritage.

"Good parents make kids feel special and are proud of what they do. When you grow up in that kind of an environment, you're ready to meet the world when that time comes."

She attended public schools and met her husband, Charles **Meissner**, now an economist with the World Bank, when they were both undergraduates at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. She stayed to earn a master's degree in political science when he served in the Army during the Vietnam War.

Drawn to Politics

While studying, she recalled, "I wanted to get involved in a campaign, some kind of political activity." She managed the campaign of Midge Miller, an opponent of the war who defeated a 20-year incumbent for a place in the state Legislature.

After the election, her husband returned from Vietnam and the couple moved to Washington. Ms. Miller provided the connection that enabled Ms. **Meissner** to become a founding member of the National **Women's** Political Caucus and its executive director in 1971.

In that post, she assailed both national political parties for not providing campaign financing for **women**. She devoted special effort to the successful campaign of Patricia Schroeder for a House seat.

Ms. **Meissner** won a White House fellowship in 1973 and went to work at the Justice Department, where she later specialized in **immigration** issues, becoming Acting Commissioner in 1981 and Executive Associate Commissioner from 1982 to 1985.

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Ms. **Meissner** and her husband have two children: Christine, 28, a high school teacher, and Andrew, 24, a film student.

She inherited her parents' sense of family. "The most important thing is to be there for the people who are closest to you: family and close friends," she said. "And it's important to do work that is satisfying to you and useful to the world. If I can do those two things, I'm satisfied."

Graphic

Photo: **Doris Marie Meissner** (Reuters)

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