

# FAMILY SECURITY MATTERS

ENGAGING AMERICAN FAMILIES IN OUR NATION'S SECURITY

## 101 Years in America, But Unable to Speak English

by [PETER GADIEL](#) October 19, 2010



A few days ago, KRGV-TV in Brownsville, Texas reported that Eulalia Garcia Maturey of that city has become a United States citizen. That's terrific for her and it could have been a great story about the American melting pot, but there are a few flies in the pot.

Ms. Maturey is one hundred and one years old. She arrived (legally) in the U.S. as an infant with her parents on October 12, 1909, one hundred and one years to the day before she became a citizen.

But you see, the problem is that Mrs. Maturey doesn't speak English, and after becoming a citizen she said "soy una cuidano Americana."

It's not easy learning a foreign language, but one hundred years does seem to be a reasonable period during which prospective citizens should be able to learn the language. Si?

I contrast this with the story of my immigrant family. My mother arrived as a thirty-five year old refugee in 1946, joining my father, from whom she had been involuntarily separated by World War II. Mom spoke not a word of English. But this was America she felt and you couldn't be really American if you didn't speak *English*. And what Mom wanted was to be American; to read the newspapers; learn the history of her adopted country; be able to hear President Truman when he addressed the Nation. To learn the politics and participate in the social and political life of the United States of America.

So Mom made the effort. She made the basic steps in learning English, and listened to the radio as much as possible so she'd get a true sense and understanding of spoken American English. So, within a year she was nearly fluent. My sister, who arrived speaking only French, mastered English so completely that after six months she refused to utter a single word in anything other than the language of her new country.

Mom's native language was German, and to the end of her life she never lost her German accent. Never once in my life did I hear her say the "th" sound. It was always "ze," as in "ze phone" or "ze car." Similarly, I never heard her say "what, which, where or why," only "vot, vich, vare, and vie." (Until corrected by a teacher in third grade I thought the word "clothes" was pronounced "closes.") Accented though it was, she spoke, read and wrote in English, the language of her adopted country. As a very old lady living in Florida she would go to a German delicatessen to get her wursts. Hearing her accent the owners would immediately speak to her in German, but she always

replied in English only. Though too polite to scold the shop people, she told me: "This is America, we speak English here."

So, forgive me if I find the circumstances of Ms. Maturey's citizenship less than wonderful. One hundred years in our country and she doesn't speak the language. She may not speak English, but she has sent us a clear message that in a whole century she never felt any desire to be, as my mother would say, "really American." She has also communicated to us that the schools and teachers in Texas have failed, failed completely, to make Americans out of foreigners.

When the Maturey family was asked the reason for her deciding to become a citizen after all these years, they didn't say it was because she loves this country, they said it was because her old border crossing card was no longer valid for getting back into the U.S. after visiting her family in Mexico. . . she needed a passport.

Thus it is clear that from her infancy to her old age our nation failed to encourage this lady to become integrated into our society or feel a true attachment to our country. When she admitted she became a citizen because she needed the right documents, this one little old lady speaking in Spanish did a better job of exposing that failure than the most eloquent of English speakers could possibly have done.



When KRGV aired this story, it ended with Ms. Maturey's niece, Yolanda Ovalle, speaking of how happy her aunt was to be a U.S. citizen. Ovalle, evidently in her fifties, needed someone to translate her own comments from Spanish into English.

Welcome to the United States.

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