

MAY A NEW AMERICAN SPEAK?

By Juanita Wegner

I've only been an American a few days; officially, that is. It was Monday morning when my husband, a few friends, and I went down to Federal Court. The judge—a gray-haired man with a gentle voice—slowly and carefully asked me my final questions. Then he told me to raise my right hand and solemnly swear. I was so happy I cried a little. But one thing the judge said particularly struck me:

He told me my answers were perfect; that I must have known them a long time. I said I had—ever since Austria, where I was born. Through Italy, where I had to flee when Hitler came into power. Through Argentina, when the militarists took over down there. For all my life I've wanted to be an American. I've dreamed about it, studied, worked for it.

"We Americans," the judge said, "those of us who were born here or came when we were children, sometimes forget that."

I don't think I ever shall. For in the past two years I've been touring the United States as my husband lectured on his experience. Shortages and crowded hotels—of course I saw them. But it was the little houses, neat and proud, with gardens and laughter, where you didn't have to be afraid at night that somebody would come in the door and take your father away (as they did mine) nor frightened that every mail might bring new restrictions to be obeyed or else. . . .

It was in one of those houses that I first heard the President on the radio. Not as I'd listened to Der Fuehrer and Il Duce, or El Coronel in Argentina. The President explaining, talking to us like friends. And in another home I heard my first American political discussion. Everyone was saying what he thought—even youngsters—and no one afraid.

I heard and saw another side as well—the side the judge was thinking about. The woman in Spokane who invited us to a luxurious dinner and then spent the evening explaining that things

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were getting terrible. The war over almost two years and still no sugar or avocados! One had to go to two or three stores, sometimes, to get things! No maids and help becoming so independent! The country was surely going to the dogs.

There was the lady in Indianapolis. The closets in her apartment were so small she'd go out of her mind if Jim couldn't find a larger house.

It was then I wanted to tell them about the history of this, my new country—the troubles it had overcome in the past and the joy and wonder of what it meant to me. To tell them about the citizenship class, where I was studying to become an American—with French and Italians, Swedes and Russians, and two Chinese boys. How, forgetting our strangeness, different languages, funny accents, we were, word by word, learning about the groups which first came to the United States. Their unhappiness and persecution at home. Their desperate hunger. How they, like us, found a chance to help to build a new and different country.

I wanted to explain that perhaps to them it was ancient history—lessons studied at school and half forgotten. But how to me—and to thousands of new Americans like me—it wasn't textbooks and monuments but something we'd just lived through and were living now. Something we remembered in the middle of the night or whenever we picked up our papers.

IT MAY be that sometime, as the judge said, I'll forget it too. But down underneath, I don't think the feeling will disappear. True, our country does have doubts and confusions today. There are times that make many nervous, depressed, and uncertain. But we have something else—a country with freedom to work and play, to think and talk, to improve our lives and our families.

The book from which I studied my citizenship said that as Americans, new ones or old, we had rights, and also responsibilities. Privileges, but also debts. That it was our duty to defend the things we liked, and do something about things we didn't like.

I've been an American only a few days. But if I could have one wish it would be to go up to everybody I meet and say: "Aren't we lucky to have this chance! Let's never forget it."