

## A Tale of Two Grandmothers

The papers I have inherited from my paternal grandparents include three interesting documents. (Scans of all three of these documents can be found in [It's All in a Name: Rediscovering Lost Family Ties](#)). The first is their marriage certificate showing that Macy "Senkewick" married Rose Celakto on January 21, 1921 in Sacred Heart Church in Staten Island, New York. The second is my grandfather's certificate of naturalization dated in Jersey City, New Jersey, May 27, 1926. (Here his name is Macey Senkewicz.) And, the most interesting of all, an "Application to Take the Oath of Allegiance to the United States Under the Act of June 25, 1936, as Amended, and Form of Such Oath" which my grandmother, Rose Senkewicz, signed in Jersey City, New Jersey, on February 19, 1941. The oath she had to take stated that

I hereby declare on oath, that I absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty, of whom (which) I have or may have heretofore been a subject (or citizen); that I will support and defend the Constitution and laws of the United States of America against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; and that I take this obligation freely without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; SO HELP ME GOD. (caps in document).

What is striking about these documents is that my grandmother was born in Peekskill, New York, on October 30, 1904, and was therefore, by the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution, a native-born citizen of the United States. But, because she married my grandfather, who was born in Czarist Russia and who was not a US citizen at the time of their marriage, she lost her citizenship and had to reapply for it.

How could this be? All of this happened because of the [Expatriation Act](#) passed by Congress in 1905 and which decreed that any woman who married a non-US citizen automatically lost her citizenship. (The same was not true, by the way, of a man who married a woman who was not a citizen. In fact, that woman automatically became a citizen.) NPR recently aired [this piece](#) about the law.

My grandmother often talked about her need to reapply for citizenship. I also remember a visit my grandmother and I made to her younger sister who married a Canadian in 1922 and the two sisters chatting about their different situations. My great-aunt Helen did not lose her citizenship because the Expatriation Act has been repealed by then by the Cable Act of 1922, also known as the [Married Women's Independent Nationality Act](#).

Having worked through all of this history, I now have a quandary because my maternal grandparents appear to have been in the same situation. My grandfather, Erasimo Liguori was born in Italy but my grandmother, Harriet Smith, was born in Haddam, Connecticut on December 14, 1895. They were married on November 30, 1916 in Hoboken, New Jersey, and my grandfather did not become a naturalized citizen until February 19, 1920. So, theoretically, my maternal grandmother was also affected by this law, but I do not recall any conversations about this in that family. Did she, too, have to swear an oath to regain her citizenship or did she somehow slip through the net and continue to act as a citizen even though she had married a foreigner? There is no one left alive in the family for me to ask so I may never know the answer to that question.

But everyone in our family, and especially the women, should remember this tale and appreciate the privileges we have as US citizens.