

## AMERICANIZED, YES, BUT CUBAN ROOTS HOLD FIRM

# Wrapped in 2 Flags of Red, White and Blue

By CARMEN SANCHEZ SADEK

Nineteen years, seven months and 29 days. That is how long I lived in Cuba, my native country. Nineteen years, seven months and 29 days. That is how long I have lived in the United States, my adopted country.

Who am I?

By birth I am Cuban. I am fluent in both English and Spanish. For cussing, acclaiming, vociferating and for nagging and scolding my children I use Spanish. I use English for everything else.

Although my tastes in food are eclectic and multicultural, *cafe con leche* is still my favorite breakfast drink. And, like most Cubans, I must end every meal with a very rich dessert.

I can sing the Cuban national anthem, and Spanish folksongs and lullabies come readily to my lips. I still remember the songs I used to sing as a young girl, and the steps of the *mambo* and the *rumba* are forever locked into my feet.

As a Cuban citizen I had the opportunity of living under several corrupt presidents, a malevolent tyrant and a narrow-minded revolutionary. None of these leaders came to power through orderly elections that reflected the will of the people. I never had a choice, a vote or basic rights.

During my schooling in Havana I was prepared for the roles I was expected to play. I attended a public college-preparatory secondary school and received sex education and training in home economics at my mother's private academy for young ladies. At home I

also received training and experience in household administration, floor polishing and pot scrubbing.

By the time I left my country I was fully prepared to assume the roles that every woman in my family had played—wife, mother and career woman.

I can name by first and two to four last names the majority of the 52 members of my immediate family. In Cuba, family members always lived close together, knew each other well and provided mutual assistance and support.

In my family this tradition was maintained through the stories that the elders would tell about their forefathers and their descendants. I learned about the accomplishments that distinguish our family and about pride in our family name.

In the United States my tightly knit family unit has become quite loose. Brothers, cousins and parents have moved away from each other. Contacts between elders and young ones are rare. And my children have trouble remembering the names of their close relatives.

I arrived in this country knowing little English and entered college immediately. I had little time to overcome the language barrier. I also had to adjust to a colder climate. But I came psychologically prepared for the intellectual, physical and spiritual challenges I had to face.

Marriage and motherhood came while I was in college, and two months after graduation—

with two children still in diapers—I entered the labor force.

Today I am a naturalized American citizen. I have voted in several presidential elections and many state and local elections.

I must confess that I know only the last two lines of the "Star-Spangled Banner."

I have a terrible time with the cadence of English poetry. And on a recent visit to Disneyland I was unable to recognize many of the tunes presented in the "America Sings" exhibit.

As an American, however, I have learned to participate in all sorts of organizations and to work through committees. I've also learned that I can't live without a car.

I live surrounded by machines that slow-cook, cook in seconds, cut, stir, cool, heat, talk, listen and duplicate.

I seldom handle cash.

I can list at least five 6-digit numbers that identify me.

I am constantly finding things to do and feel guilty when I spend 15 minutes just watching TV.

The answer to the question "Who am I?" is and always will be "*Soy cubana*" and "I am an American." The red, white and blue colors of the American and Cuban flags will always evoke in me equal feelings of country and homeland. □

Carmen Sanchez Sadek teaches Spanish at Cal State Los Angeles.