

Irma's Story

Q & A

with Peter B. Gawenda



What inspired you to write *Irma's Story*?

Irma was an out of the ordinary young woman. When I met her, I immediately realized that she had abilities and interests that set her apart. Her talent to learn languages and to communicate made her very likable to anyone she met or worked with.

There is a quote on the back cover of the book by Irma's grandmother that states "Always remember today's date, *El Diez de Mayo*"—the tenth of May. What is the significance of that particular date? Does it have something to do with her prophecy?

On May 10, 1947, on her deathbed, Irma's grandmother told her that she would meet someone special on a tenth of May. That is exactly what happened on May 10, 1960, in McAllen, Texas, in the Rio Grande Valley, when I parked my car next to her fancy 1959 Chevy Impala. While I had not been told an exact date, Irma had been given that date.

You reference the fact that your ultimate meeting had been prophesized—for Irma by her grandmother and for you from a gypsy. Can you explain the circumstances?

Neither one of us, at our first meeting, immediately knew that the other was the one who had been talked about in the distant past—for Irma by her grandmother and for me by the gypsy. But after a short while, we both knew somehow that we belonged together. I had the suspicion when I saw Irma for the first time, and Irma recognized it after several dates, especially during our meeting on Padre Island.

Was it love at first sight?

Yes, it sure was.



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Irma could be called an ambassador for Hispanic women, as she stretched beyond the traditional role of a young Hispanic woman of her time growing up in McAllen, Texas, in the forties and fifties. What are some examples of her accomplishments?

Irma picked up the saying: “Fear only fear itself, so prepare yourself that fear never enters your mind!” She made a point of knowing multiple languages and being fully engaged in the cultures she lived within.

During her time in Europe, Irma added several new languages to her flawless American English and her Spanish languages (she previously spoke Mexican and Castilian Spanish). She learned her father’s Basque, my German (which she eventually spoke without an accent), her friends’ French and British English, and later, limited Dutch. When she worked for NATO, she learned to understand and speak Italian and to a certain extent Portuguese.

She was always up-to-date in American and European politics. She was able to participate fully in the military and political circles I belonged to, and also created her own.

Could you have ever imagined, while growing up in Germany, that you would end up in the state of Texas?

From my earliest youth—I must have been six or seven years old—I wanted to live in Texas, close to the Rio Grande . . . and I finally made it.

You are both referenced as heroes in the eyes of many. Can you extrapolate on that?

In my case, maybe this is because I lived through the second World War and was injured, but never gave up. My focus has always been on helping and supporting others. In Irma’s case, I think this is because she dared to break out of her culture while never losing sight of her background. We were not afraid of taking risks (although we were careful not to endanger others) and we both ventured to live out of the ordinary lives.

How did Irma impact your life and the lives of others?

Irma had a superior work ethic and never left anything undone or incomplete. She had the gift of anticipating my thoughts and those of my and her superiors. When we decided on our careers, she researched and helped design all the necessary steps. She did the same for her peers and later for our children. Even today, I will still meet her former colleagues who confirm that she played a key role in their lives. Her most intriguing ability may have been her quick grasp of the different languages and cultures she encountered.



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You can sense from the photo of Irma on the cover of the book that she had a zest for life. Was it innate?

Her enthusiasm and passion for her work and for friendship with the people around her was contagious. She had a natural instinct for always doing the right thing and for recognizing danger. She also had an intrinsic sense of humor. Since she was quickly “at home” in different cultures, she was able to differentiate between the humor of different countries. During her lifetime she prevented many situations that could have become dangerous or uncomfortable. And although we had never really agreed on it, we never went to bed angry at each other.

Do you feel her presence with you always?

Yes, I do, and I know I always will.

What is the most important message you hope to convey to readers?

Find your strengths as early as possible, never hesitate to use them, trust yourself, and continue learning. Remain ethical, modest, and humble. Irma was never arrogant. She never attempted to be only an American; she embraced her Hispanic heritage as well as her newfound European family. Irma set an example as a proud wife, mother, leader, and organizer, and led a fearless life. But I always tell people that she had to do more and work hard to get where she was throughout her life—and I’m sure she wouldn’t have had it any other way.

