

Future Citizen
of the World

Irma's First Voyage

November 1961

Irma and Peter quickly realized that snow was not quite Irma's preference when the train stopped in the middle of the night close to Saint Louis. Out the window, everything seemed to be white. One of the train's waiters brought a little heap of snow on a silver platter. Irma had told him before they retreated into their sleeper that she had never seen snow.

They dressed quickly because they were allowed to leave the train for a few minutes. A large herd of cattle was blocking the tracks and had to be moved before the train could continue. What a surprise for Irma, with her flat shoes and nylon stockings. She was back in the train within seconds, almost losing her flats in the hurry.

The waiter brought hot tea, and Irma and Peter sat down to make a list of what they had to purchase in New York before heading for the port and the German ocean liner *Bremen*. When they went back to bed, they were soothed to sleep by the sound of the rolling wheels on the tracks.

The next day, a taxi dropped them off at the dock in front of the bridge to the *Bremen*. They stood there next to their bags and

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little suitcase, holding onto each other. Irma had a shawl wrapped around her head against the cold wind.

She had told Peter the night before that she was eager to see his country but that she was also afraid she might not be accepted. She already spoke some High German, but she wasn't sure it would be enough when the time came to have the baby, especially without her mother there with her. He had tried to deter her fears, telling her Germany was advanced in medicine. But she had been with her sisters for the births of their children, and they had all had their relatives around them, and she would not have the same. She made Peter promise to be with her.

The *Bremen* left the docks and passed the Statue of Liberty. Irma and Peter stayed on deck until New York disappeared in the mist, and then they went to their beautiful cabin to relax. Her parents had sent a large bouquet of flowers and a telegram for their first wedding anniversary, and the captain had sent an invitation for dinner at his table.

Although the sea was rough and the wind got very cold at times, they spent lots of time on deck. Irma slept in the fresh air or took long walks. Peter always tried to stay close to her. She had finally recognized that her home, America, was slowly disappearing in the distance.

The two of them became even closer, and Irma continued learning German phrases. She was intent on speaking German to her in-laws. The wives of the German officers who were traveling with them helped with the pronunciation. Irma impressed everyone with her quick understanding and learning. She also impressed everyone when she conversed with some of the South and Central Americans in perfect Spanish.

By the fourth day at sea, she had become very quiet and was fighting tears quite often. Peter tried his best to cheer her up. He really loved the smile that Irma displayed whether they were in public or alone. She had smiled a lot when Peter met her, when they dated, and when they were first married. Now, the smile, when it

did come, seemed to be coming from within. It was radiant just like in the official picture taken in the hall of the motel during their wedding reception.

The weather turned rough, and passengers became seasick. So did Irma. The headwaiter asked her to stay in her room where she would be served, but she insisted on being on deck in the fresh air. Peter stayed close to her.

As soon as they reached the English coast and entered the Channel, the storm died down. Irma became even more anxious, knowing that her mother-in-law and Peter's sister, Hannelore, would be waiting for them at Bremerhaven, where she and Peter would leave what had been their seagoing home for the past week. They had made a few purchases in the ship's souvenir shop and now waited their turn to disembark. One of the officers brought Peter a teletype message from his future headquarters, ordering him to report to Uetersen on January 10, 1962. Their luggage was transported from the ship to customs at the train station across the pier, where Peter bought tickets and handed in their luggage for transport to his hometown.

In the train station, they saw Hannelore and Peter's mother. Peter introduced Irma, who hugged Peter's mother and tried to kiss her the way she was used to with her own mother. But Peter's mother seemed very stiff, not responding to the hug and kiss. Hannelore hugged and kissed Irma the way she had done when she had visited them in Arizona.

Irma went to Peter with tears in her eyes and held on to him. Peter had forgotten to warn her about the different, somewhat cold behavior of his mother. He tried to make up for it by holding on to Irma and kissing her on the cheeks.

They all walked to the platform for the train to Hamburg and climbed into a second-class compartment, which they had to themselves. Irma sat next to Peter, his mother next to her daughter. Irma tried to make some conversation in German, but Peter's mother asked her to use English. In Hamburg, they stayed overnight. Pe-

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ter had a hard time cheering up Irma, who was getting depressed, thinking she was being rejected.

Irma was shocked that the bathroom in the hotel was in the hallway and Peter had to go with her. In their room, there were two beds with thick feather blankets, and Irma crawled into bed with Peter and held him very tight. Peter had to make sure all night that she was covered.

At breakfast, Peter's mother sat next to Irma. For the first time, she took Irma's hand and said, "Welcome to Germany; welcome to your new family."

With tears in her eyes, Irma answered, "*Danke, wie darf ich zu Ihnen sagen?*" ("Thank you, how may I call you?")

"Call me *Du und Mutti*," she answered. Peter told Irma afterwards, when his mother was not paying attention, the offer to call her mother-in-law *Mutti* meant she was accepted into the family. Irma cried.