

## Manolita Iriondo



Manolita Iriondo was born Manuela \*Sáez on 25 July 1930 in Galdames, a small village in the Basque Country in Northern Spain. She was born alongside her twin sister Paquita to their mother Fonsa and step-father Julián, and for the first six years of their lives, the twins were brought up within the extended family at their grandparents' home outside Bilbao.

Manolita and Paquita were two of four thousand Basque children who were evacuated to the United Kingdom on the aging steamship SS Habana on 21 May 1937. They were ultimately housed in the *colonia* in Carshalton where they were known as *las twinas*. For many years there was constant pressure to raise funds to keep the colonias running. This was done partly by outside donors, but also by the resident children themselves, and Manolita exploited her musical abilities by participating in recording musical albums, going on tours around the UK dancing and performing.

Occasionally colonias would come together for joint social activities, and while Manolita was in her early teens, she met a boy called Kerman Iriondo at one of these events. Kerman asked her if she could dance. Manolita said no. Kerman told her that he would teach her, and so he did. After a few moments of dancing together, Kerman whispered: "I'm gonna marry you one day." He was right, of course, but not for many years.

Among some of Manolita's other favourite anecdotes was being evacuated to the stately home of Lord and Lady Strickland in Snettisham, Norfolk, and having fits of giggles as Edith Sitwell would theatrically recite poetry to her (no doubt in the process picking up a trick or two for her own subsequent fund-raising performances). Manolita also had fond memories of the Spanish President in exile Dr Juan Negrín who treated the twins for tonsillitis, and would invite them to stay for tea afterwards - a story she would tell decades later in her second home in Las Palmas, Negrin's birth place.

The twins remained in the UK throughout the Second World War, and as soon as they were old enough, they were sent out to find work, again under pressure to financially support themselves. Manolita ended up working in the office of Hackbridge Cables in

Carshalton, and this was a job that she truly loved, and indeed, sparked a passion for administration, work that she would eventually return to later in life.

But during the war, Paquita contracted tuberculosis, by 1947 her health had worsened so the twins were reclaimed by their parents and returned to the Basque Country in order to seek out treatment for Paquita. Having integrated so well into British society, not only were they both naturally apprehensive about returning to Spain, but also very sorry at what they were leaving behind.

Manolita and Paquita moved back to the family home in Plencia, on the coast near Bilbao, and for the first few months began reigniting their relationship with their parents, and refamiliarising themselves with the Basque traditions and ways of life. Very quickly, the two of them started working as English teachers, a lucrative role which pulled the family out of hardship. Such was the ability with which both sisters spoke English, and their renown around the area, that they became known as '*Las inglesitas*' – a label which stuck with them for many years.

Sadly, though, in 1953, Paquita passed away, leaving Manolita as the sole surviving *inglesita*. Following this devastating event Manolita remained in the country for the next few years to ensure her parents were still provided for. However, throughout her time in Spain, Manolita and Kerman, who had built a life for himself in England, continued to write to each other.

Kerman was a great source of support for Manolita after her sister died, and as their romance deepened, Kerman's prediction all those years previously at the dance came to fruition: in 1959, Kerman and Manolita got married in Plencia, went on their honeymoon to nearby Santander, before moving to Shepherd's Bush together, where Kerman already had a flat.

Very quickly, Kerman and Manolita set about creating a family setting that neither of them had been able to experience for themselves as children. In 1960, their daughter Keltse, was born, and two years later Iñaki followed. By 1964 they had moved to a house in Cricklewood in North-West London, and this would remain the family home for the next forty years.

For many years, family was the main focus for Kerman and Manolita. They were part of a community of other Basque families in London and would often host parties at the family home. Many of the guests were fellow refugees who they had met in the camps all those years ago, who had also settled in the UK and built lives of their own, so the Basque community spirit was alive and kicking in their small corner of North-West London.

As a mother, Manolita was protective of her two children, a natural reaction to the difficult losses she had experienced. Kerman and Manolita were very keen for the children to have the educational opportunities that they had lacked to fulfil their own potential. In fact, she was so proud of her children's endeavours, that conversations

with Manolita would almost always be punctuated with updates on how well her children were doing!

In terms of her own work, Manolita eventually returned to the office work that she had so enjoyed as a young teenager, and she gradually worked her way up to a role in the Civil Service as an Executive Officer. She adored her job and was very proud of what she had achieved, and rightly so – it was a job that defined her career, and she would continue to do it until her retirement in the 1990s.

Manolita and Kerman spent much of their retirement exploring their Spanish roots – they would often holiday in Spain, either on the mainland or in the Canary Islands, and by the time they moved up to Kirkby Lonsdale, Cumbria in 2004, they had already bought a flat in Las Palmas in Gran Canaria. These moves were to enable them to spend more time with their children: Keltse was now living in Lancashire, and Iñaki was living in Las Palmas.

Manolita was immensely fond of her sons-in-law, Barry and Alexis, so much so that in her final days, she kept asking after both of them – she had forgotten that Barry had passed away a few years prior, and such was her fondness for him that the family couldn't find it in their hearts to keep reminding her that he was gone.

Eventually Manolita became a grandmother, to Barry and Keltse's children Amaya and Elena, born in 1997 and 1999, respectively. *Amama* as they knew her, was a brilliant grandma, and was constantly teaching them how to crochet or knit and generally being her wonderful, loving self around them. She was as proud of her granddaughters as she was of her children. A keen listener of classical music herself, she loved hearing them play in school concerts and much to their embarrassment she would make her delight obvious to everyone present.

Always busy, even in retirement, Manolita would never just sit around doing nothing – she always kept herself busy, whether it was knitting and sewing her own clothes (because nothing in the shops would ever fit her 4-foot-10 frame), or cooking up wonderful Spanish dishes, learnt from watching her own mother in Spanish kitchens as a young woman, singing or whistling as she did so.

Manolita was fascinated both by music and language. Indeed she created a language all of her own with her idiosyncratic version of Spanglish. She also passed on her talent of whistling with two fingers to the grandchildren.

Manolita was exceptionally well-organised, as much at home as at work. Her home and routine were run with precision. She never failed to cook all the meals for the rest of the week on a Sunday, and had a wonderful collection of kitchen utensils and implements so well organised that it made her kitchen look like a Lakeland showroom.

Indeed, if you ever needed any sort of object or tool, Manolita was always the first person you went to, as she was unerring in her ability to locate absolutely anything; be it a small red button, a pair of AA batteries, or a pestle and mortar.

She was particular about her appearance – she would never be seen leaving the house without her lipstick and earrings on, and her hair curled. She'd also wear heels constantly because she was so short – even her slippers had heels on them, and in her later years the district nurses and carers became concerned that she would fall, before being reassured by the family that it was far more likely that she would fall over if she *wasn't* wearing heels!

Following Kerman's death in 2012, Manolita's physical and mental health declined, and after a bleed on the brain in 2021, she was no longer able to respond safely to the care package that had been prepared for her at her flat in Kirkby Lonsdale, so she was transferred to a residential facility at Moorside Hall in Lancaster where she spent the last few months of her life.

Despite her memory loss, Manolita *a/ways* remembered her family, whom she loved with all her heart. She was a wonderfully kind, passionate, and proud mother and grandmother, a fiercely loyal and caring wife. Right till the end, Manolita also jealously retained her strong Anglo-Spanish sense of identity; greatly loved at Moorside Hall, she would take every opportunity to teach EVERYONE Spanish.

Even at her feistiest, her sparkly and warm personality still shone through to all those around her. She was truly one-of-a-kind, having endured hardships and heartbreak as a young woman, but having lived a long and fruitful life into her tenth decade. Her life will continue to serve as a reminder of the importance of resilience and resolve to all those who knew her.



\*Manolita and Paquita's surname appears as *Abad* in official documentation during their childhood, it wasn't until much later that Manolita retrieved *Sáez* which was her natural father's surname

*This is an abridged version of the eulogy written and delivered by the celebrant Mark Gregory at the funeral service which took place at Beetham Hall Crematorium, Cumbria on 29<sup>th</sup> December 2022.*

*The text was interspersed with some of Manolita's favourite music:  
Peer Gynt – Morning Mood, Gernikako Arbola, Que Será Será, And I Love Her, Eres Tú, Silent Night,  
Hasta Mañana*

*Thanks to the congregation's donations, £230 was raised for Plan International*