



NGO Committee on Ageing
United Nations, NY

**THE SUB-COMMITTEE ON
MULTIGENERATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS OF
THE NGO COMMITTEE ON AGEING**

REPORT OF PROGRAM

***A MULTIGENERATIONAL DIALOGUE:
REVIEWING PHOTOGRAPHS
OF “SUPERCENTENARIANS”***

June 2nd, 2005

The Program featured photographs by Jerry S. Friedman of “supercentenarians”, persons over 110 years of age. The aim of the program was to explore and understand the qualities that have enabled them to have reached their great age, to learn about the sources of their strength and their values.

“Yesterday is history; Tomorrow is a mystery; Today is a gift”

Eleanor Roosevelt

***Mission Statement of the Sub-Committee on Multigenerational Relationships
of the NGO Committee on Ageing***

To build lasting bonds among people of all ages, to share the world by living in the present, learning from the past and planning for the future in order to increase the understanding and visibility of the interdependence of values and interests among generations.

SOME ACTION SUGGESTIONS

- Ø Raise awareness and appreciation of the importance of multigenerational relationships in families and communities
- Ø Promote programs for grandparents and grandchildren in schools and communities, in places of worship, recreation, health care, civic organizations and the media
- Ø Advocate mainstreaming of ageing and multigenerational relationships in the work of governments, the United Nations and NGO Committees
- Ø Celebrate a Day of Multigenerational Cross-Cultural Relationships at all levels of society

THE NGO COMMITTEE ON AGEING

Sub-Committee on Multigenerational Relationships

PROGRAM

**Thursday, June 2, 2005
Time: 1:15 PM to 3:00 PM**

- Greetings and Introduction... Norma Levitt, Co-Chair, Sub-Committee on Multigenerational Relationships, World Union For Progressive Judaism
- Moderator..... Helen R. Hamlin, International Federation on Ageing, Immediate Past Chair, NGO Committee on Ageing
- Speaker..... Jerry S. Friedman, Photographer, Founder, Director, Earth's Elders Foundation, Inc.

Dialogue with the Audience

- Summary..... Dr. Rosa Perla Resnick, Co-Chair, Sub-Committee on Multigenerational Relationships, International Association of Gerontology, International Immigrants Foundation, Inc.

GREETINGS AND INTRODUCTION

Norma Levitt *

Welcome to this meeting!

As part of our mission to explore, support and promote multigenerational /intergenerational relationships, the Sub-Committee on Multigenerational Relationships of the NGO Committee on Ageing is presenting a program that introduces photographs of very elderly persons, global “supercentenarians” – persons over 110 years of age. These outstanding individuals have lived through their own histories and that of the world!

We want to explore and understand the qualities that have enabled them to reach these great ages, to learn about their experiences, sources of strength and resilience. Photographer Jerry Friedman has traveled the world to locate, to photograph and interview this remarkable group of elders. He will discuss his interest and experiences in developing this project and share the expanding nature of his work. We invite youth to join us in learning about this interesting project and contribute their own reactions and perspectives about the nature of ageing and the life cycles of these remarkable individuals.

In sum, the goal of this event is to bridge the gap between generations and connect all groups together regardless of age. The wisdom and resilience of the elderly lie in lifelong experiences. Our present learning is dependent on their past understanding. Fostering respect, acceptance, and compassion will create individual fulfillment and better the life of society for all.

** Norma Levitt, NGO Main representative to the UN; World Union for Progressive Judaism; Co-Chair Sub-Committee on Multigenerational Relationships, NGO Committee on Ageing; Wellesley, Phi Beta Kappa; Honorary President, Metro, UNIFEM, USA; Organizer/Chair, National Organizations Advisory Council for Children; Advisory for UN Environment Sabbath; Executive, World Conference of Religions for Peace; Honorary Life President, Women of Reform Judaism*

MODERATOR

Helen R. Hamlin *

Jerry Friedman is a photographer by profession. He has also played tennis; raises chickens and produces eggs on the farm. His activities and experiences in looking for and finding “supercentenarians” have generated a lot of interest in the research he has been conducting. He is the founder and director of the Earth’s Elders Foundation.^{1/}

Mr. Friedman is working on a book presenting his photographs and interviews all over the world, which will be presented on October 6th, 2005 at the United Nations following the celebration of the International Day of Older Persons.

Through Mr. Friedman’s presentation we want to understand the lives and qualities of these remarkable people. What has enabled them to reach these great ages? What can we learn from them? Do their sources of strength and their resilience reside within us? An ensuing dialogue with the audience will help us grasp the meaning of his most recent work.

* *Helen R. Hamlin, NGO Main representative to the UN, International Federation on Ageing; Immediate Past Chair NGO Committee on Ageing; Social Work Consultant.*

^{1/} *For more information e-mail to: jsf@earthselders.org*

Jerry S. Friedman*
(Excerpts from his presentation)

Jerry S. Friedman candidly recounted his experiences with the publishers after having submitted the 'cover try' of his book with the photograph of the 111 years old woman Jerry had shot at Okinawa. This work was rejected, he was told, because the sales people's response was "it was too upfront, too close, way too personal and it made them very uncomfortable to be that close to wrinkles," and further, the irony was that they suggested that it be an all typed book cover. Jerry underscored that photographs were the reason behind his book project and he started to narrate the following basic points about his travels and the story behind each of the portraits he exhibited.

This project started because I went to visit my mother in her health care facility. I wanted to stay for four or five days to see what it was like in a care facility and what her experiences were. My mother is blind so it added a different issue in her life. When I arrived I was shocked by a number of things. First, there were no young people at all. Second, the woman who read to my mother was 101, and was bright, sharp, ambulatory and happy. I realized that my mother would have no problems with this woman by her side. Then, in a few days, a couple of grandchildren came to visit and the whole place lit up. I realized that the pace of life changed with the arrival of the little ones. The residents, however, never left and were prisoners of the facility.

Last, I found that a gentleman in his nineties, a former physics professor at Princeton, had a show at this facility. It was a brilliant show and I felt that it was a shame that only two or three hundred people would see it. There was no way it would ever move outside the walls of the facility.

On my way home I asked myself what I could do about these experiences which bothered me. As a photographer, I realized I could take a picture of my mother's friend, Loti, who had an exquisite face, and perhaps connect other people in other care centers. I also wondered how old an older person in America could be. On the Internet I found Jim McMurrin who was 111. I connected with a gerontologist who knew Jim, Robert Young, who doubted I could accomplish my wish to photograph "supercentenarians". With friends I contacted the family of a woman in Massachusetts, who was 111, and photographed her. When I told Robert Young, he dismissed the accuracy of the story, since he is part of a gerontological research group which tracks people around the world after they reach the age of 105. I traveled to Atlanta to see him, and he opened his data bank to me for a world wide choice and explained the process of validation.

* *Jerry S. Friedman, Photographer, Founder of Earths Elders Foundation.*

Robert Young urged me to go to Australia to photograph the last survivors of the battle of Gallipoli. Because of financial constraints I delayed, and the last survivor died before I made a decision to go. I began to realize that time is of the essence. Robert Young told me, "You are the first person ever to do this, because others tried and failed for many reasons". I feel privileged to be in a position to photograph these people, because every one of them has a story. When all of them are put together they form a model for understanding how cultures deal with children and elderly. In other cultures the elderly are integrated into the every day lives of people, continuing to live at home with multigenerations. In our culture, however, there is a difference in the care that we can give versus the care that the culture does give.

I will show you photographs of an international group, out of approximately 450 persons in the world, 65 or 70 of them validated. I have photographed 60 and wish to continue in finding out something of their life stories. I have created narrative portraits with appropriate historical images in the background.

Kamoto Hongo in Japan was the oldest person that I photographed who, at 116, was a national hero revered by her country. She lived under one roof with her children, grandchildren and great-grand-children, who routinely on return from school would give her a hug and share with her the experiences of the day.

Fred was the oldest postman in the United States. He used to deliver mail from Boston to Maine and would hang a bag of mail on a hook as the train would slow down when he went from village or from town to town. At 112 years old his mind was sharp, and he had a great sense of humor. When he was 107 years old, after a heavy snowstorm, he jumped off his porch roof into a very deep snow bank. When he noticed there were flashing lights around his house, he came out to see the fire department. They said they had been notified he had fallen off the roof. He told them indignantly, "I did not fall. I jumped". Fred came from the New England area and was waiting for ever for the Red Sox to win. He remembers when the team called the Pilgrims, first purchased Babe Ruth. They had not won a world series in more than 80 years.

Caterina Tereno was born in 1891. I photographed her in a tiny little village on the border between Spain and Portugal. She had lived through four wars and had seen her children starve. I had already understood there were a series of threads that run throughout all the people I had photographed. Faith was a huge part of their lives. They were all poor and they had very meager diets. They were all extremely active. At 111, she was still walking through the village.

Swami B. was born in Palachi, India in 1889. At the age of two, because he was born with a terribly crippling disease, he went into some sort of coma. His parents decided he had died, so they put him on a funeral pyre to burn him. The heat would not come up, so he became an untouchable. He was banished to a monastery, where he learned a religion and moved from village to village preaching.

Juan at 114 rode a bicycle. He was the former mayor of his town. He lived an extremely active life, was a religious person, had a very strict diet, both meager and meatless. One of his characteristics, the secrets with all these people, was that he carried a genetic code that none of us may have.

Doris was born in 1893. She lived with her daughter and was one of the happiest people you could ever meet. That was one of the threads found in all these people, a sense of humor, an amazing ability to cope, a happy attitude and the support of a family network.

Dong Ian Chin Janjong was a Tibetan Lama who headed the Buddhist sect in Mongolia. At the age of 6 he saw the fall of Mongolia, Communists overrunning his country and his parents killed. He hid for about 18 years until Gorbachev left, then returned to his home and headed the Government. He lived in the temple with extended family and his younger monks, and had never been in the presence of a doctor. His entire day was spent in prayers. He was one of the oldest people to earn a PhD in Theology at the age of 106.

Betty Wilson is the oldest woman in the world at 115 and a half. Her parents and grandparents were slaves. She was a most gentle magnanimous person. One of the reasons for her long life is her ever present family structure, grandchildren, great grands and great great grands, 123 in her family. She lives at home and is devout and revered. All her sisters' and brothers' names came from the Bible. As with all the "supercentenarians", she is very active and thin

Mitoyo Kumato survived and lived through the blast of Hiroshima. She and her friends knew nothing of what was going on. Like all the other "supercentenarians", she was genetically predisposed not to get ill.

Harriet Mickey was born in this country in 1894. Her life showed the support of living in a community of seniors. From Harriet I learned about caring for others, even strangers. In the old house six or seven seniors were accommodated. She was a neat proud woman who never asked for help from anyone. Thin, active, devout, she was part of a very special family, unrelated by blood, but nevertheless bound together by this house. Their small community seemed to be surviving on a shoestring but surviving by the strength of the spirit of the house. They had very simple lives but were pictures of health and mental hygiene surrounded by a group of supportive seniors. As they rocked on the porch, they were an image of the value of community.

DIALOGUE WITH THE AUDIENCE

Moderator: Helen R. Hamlin

Overall, the discussion reflected a kind of awe at these very elderly persons who, for the most part, continued to function and interact within their particular social situations with families and friends. There appear to be common threads that include faith, values and optimism.

Following are selected comments, questions and answers offered after the presentation.

Comment: “I live in New York and Ghana. For the past five years, I have been trying to get information from people who have lived 100 years. My mother died last year at age 102. She had a wonderful sense of humor. From what I gathered, you could say anything and get away with it. Also, she was very creative, knitting, crocheting; she read without glasses. She was always surrounded by family and friends, she ate simple food, she went everywhere. We had many women that age and older; and great-great grandfather died at the age of 120.” She agreed with everything Jerry had said.

Comment: “I am a psychiatrist so I feel this is an opportunity for me to learn things that hopefully I can apply in my work with people. What is it that these supercentenarians seem blessed with? I think there are three things. The first is that each of these individuals share in common is genetics. We cannot change this. Second, they are repositories for the values they have lived by. These come from within the individuals themselves. The third is something that comes from outside, from the cultures in which they and we live. These elders are valued, even venerated by their respective communities and I think that is what we, as a society and a culture have to learn. I think that only when we feel valued do we feel we belong.”

Question: “All the photos that you showed us are people who seem vigorous and mentally intact. I am wondering among the people you photographed, if you found any who were not so vigorous. And also another question: was everyone still happy to be alive? I find in my work as a gerontologist that some people come to a point where they say ‘enough—I have been here too long’.”

Answer: “There were. There was one woman who was suffering from Alzheimer’s and it was difficult to conduct any kind of interview. To answer the second part of your question, there was a woman who had wanted to die for 50 years because she had lost her son and she felt she had lost her life. Her husband had died in 1913 in an earthquake; she brought up this child by herself and when he died she no longer had a purpose and wanted to die. She was physically in great shape, she prayed everyday to die but physically, she couldn’t. There were a few people who said ‘if I go tomorrow, I have had a great life and now would have no regrets’. There was one woman from Leipzig who cared for her 100 year old sister.

As soon as her sister died, she said to her niece, ‘now I can go’ and within a matter of weeks, she died. She was prepared to go. For the most part, those who had supportive families were happy and enjoyed every day. There was a woman from Peru who answered my question about why she thinks she lived this long. She said ‘I am like a stone thrown into the water and then I am the ripple – I keep on going and going. I love everyday; this is as good as the day before.’ So for the most part, they are generally optimistic. I think that is one of the secrets: they are optimistic and could cope.”

Comment: “I am looking at the slides that Mr. Friedman presented. It reminds me of a similar situation in my high school. As juniors, we have to do a service in our community and I chose service at a nursing home. As Mr. Friedman said, we have a culture based on efficiency and we forget how much wisdom and knowledge our elderly carry. It is quite an experience to listen to the stories of these supercentenarians. I think we need to pay more attention to older persons because they are interesting people.”

Comment: “I would like to thank Mr. Friedman because he gave us today a human face to our concept to ageing, also to UN Secretary-General’s advocacy to placing human beings and not economic interests, at the heart of the MDGs (Millenium Development Goals).”

Everyone agreed this was a most rewarding and enriching experience – to see these pictures and hear the biographies of these extraordinary elders.

SELECTED REFLECTIONS BY STUDENTS

I never knew that people lived past 100. Each of these individuals had their own story to tell, and they each led long, hard lives filled with many different experiences throughout the three generations they have been living in.

They had in common that they were surrounded by family. This love gets many people through each day.

The elderly can teach us many valuable lessons and we need to respect them a lot more than we do today.

Their memories will help us to live our lives to the fullest in the future.

I now look at my grandparents in awe because of all the experiences they have had in their lifetime.

This is one of the most memorable experiences I have had as a teenager.

If it were not for them, some of the luxuries we have in our lives would not be present. Women would not have the right to vote. And without the civil rights movements, African Americans may not have achieved equal liberties.

Ever since the presentation of “supercentenarians”, I have become more active with the elderly in my community. It brought a new understanding of the elderly in my life and made me want to interact more on a daily basis.

Hearing these experiences from first hand witnesses helps bring a new vitality to history because there are people who live through these horrible wars and depressions. We ignore all the struggles they encountered and complain about small and petty problems we have today.

This makes me reminisce about when my grandmother used to live with my family and me. When I was younger she would take care of me in many ways. Once she got older, the roles changed, I took care of her.

What I got from this experience was that having strong faith, being active, having a good diet, and being surrounded by loved ones, were what all these elderly people had in common.

I think it is very important to show love and respect to elderly people because they deserve it the most.

They have inalienable rights, such as to dignity, care and respect.

I think about the stories I will tell my grandchildren when the time comes.

SUMMARY

Rosa Perla Resnick, *

One of the issues on which Mr. Friedman put a lot of emphasis was on **culture**. This is one of the concepts that we have been trying to convey through all our work during all the meetings we held over the years with this committee on different cultures, nations and systems, to deal with older persons in a different manner. He, in some way, criticized what is going in the United States, where there are some problems that are not dealt with in the same positive way, in which they are resolved in other countries.

The other important point that he made was in reference to the **good humor** in most of those people, and also stressed the value of **beliefs, faith and religion**. Many people were feeling a lot of strength in what they believed and they just cultivated those values all their lives up until the end.

He also highlighted the role of **family support**. We are talking about this in this country, but we are not putting it into practice. The whole U.S. system is trying to separate older persons in general from their families, while the values of family presence and support have been outstanding in all the examples that were presented.

Another significant issue that was brought up was the role of **grandparenthood**. We are talking a lot about this and are doing this to some extent, but not so much as in other countries, particularly in developing countries. Mr. Friedman mentioned the importance of several generations living together and taking care of each other. Now this is what we are trying to convey through our work at the sub-committee: the multigenerational relationships that help both younger people and older people. He referred to three generations living together and this is what we do mean by multigenerational relationships today, which is one of the basic concepts that the United Nations had included in its conceptual framework for the “1999 Year of Older Persons”.

The concept of **reverence** for the older generation by the younger generation is prevalent all over, particularly in the developing world, and this is what he actually stressed when he showed some of those pictures.

It was very interesting to see the way in which he presented experiences from both highly developed countries like Japan, the United States and others that are not so highly developed, and the different feelings that those people expressed during the interviews. Some of them were tired, some of them wanted to rest, some of them were sleeping, some of them were crying...

So all of these aspects of his presentation were really very important. Now, I believe that what we have learned today was what we have been reading in books, but today, as Mary Toumayan put it, we saw “the human face of those older people”. The way in which they appear, the way in which they express their personalities, their feelings, their attitudes, their vision for the future. This has been a really great lesson for all of us. I would like to stress the fact that in our sub-committee we are trying to highlight these basic values. You are all invited to join us in this exciting journey.

**Rosa Perla Resnick, Ph.D. / D.S.W. – International Immigrants Foundation, Chair, Board of Directors; Co-Chair SubCommittee on Multigenerational Relationships, NGO Committee on Ageing; International Immigrants Foundation, (NYC), Int’l Assn. of Gerontology (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil); and Int’l Assn. of Schools of Social Work (London, U.K.), representative to the UN*

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