Chapter 14

The First Supercentenarians in History, and Recent 115 + –Year-Old Supercentenarians. An Introduction to the Following Chapters

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We established the Committee of Age Validation of Exceptional long-livers (CAVE) at our Supercentenarian Workshop in Tallinn in June 2016 with the aim of documenting the first supercentenarians in history¹. Another aim of this committee was to validate the longest-living supercentenarians; i.e., those who have reached the age of 115 years or older. The following chapters are the result of this work, and are therefore extensions of the chapters on the age validation of long-livers in earlier books (Jeune and Vaupel 1995; Jeune and Vaupel 1999a, b; Maier et al. 2010).

Young (1905), Ernest (1938), and Bowerman (1939), who disproved almost all of the alleged supercentenarian cases from the 1700s and 1800s, believed that the Canadian Pierre Joubert, who allegedly died at the age of 113 in 1814, could have been the first supercentenarian in history (Jeune 1995; Desjardins 1999a, b). He was reported as such by the Guinness World Records. However, in the 1980s, the Canadian demographer Charbonneau (1990) systematically verified the list of Canadian centenarian cases from the 1800s onward, including that of Pierre Joubert. He found the death certificate of Joubert's wife in the 1786 parish register of a little village southeast of Montreal, where the couple resided. It specified that she was a widow when she died, which obviously was not in accordance with the claim that her husband survived to 1814. Going back in time in the same register, Charbonneau found Pierre Joubert's true death certificate from 1766, which indicated that he died

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at the age of 67. The Pierre Joubert who died in 1814 was his son. This kind of mistake is not unusual, because in the past it was common practice to give a parent's name to a child, or to give the name of a child who died to a younger sibling (see Thoms 1873; Young 1905; Ernest 1938).

However, Bowerman (1939) – who, like Thoms (1873) before him, was very sceptical about early supercentenarian cases – claimed to be convinced by a few other cases from the 1800s apart from that of Pierre Joubert, including the cases of Thomas Peters (died on 26 March 1857 at the reported age of 111 years) and Geert Adriaans Boomgaard (died on 3 February 1899 at the reported age of 110).

We would have expected the first supercentenarian to be a woman. But according to Bowerman (1939), the first women who reached the age of 110 died in the beginning of the 1900s. They were: Margaret Ann Neve (died on 4 April 1903 at the reported age of 110), Louisa Kirwan Thiers (died on 17 February 1926 at the reported age of 111), and Delina Filkins (died on 4 December 1928 at the reported age of 113). Another probable candidate, whose age has been relatively well documented by Thatcher (1999), was an Irish woman, Kathrine Plunkhet, who died at the age of 111 on 14 October 1932 (born on 22 November 1820), i.e. having reached the age of 110 in 1930.

We now know that the exceptional age reached by Thomas Peters is impossible to validate simply because no birth certificate or other documents referring to his early life have been found. For the other cases, validation appears to be possible; especially for Boomgaard, Neve, and Filkins, for whom several documents were available. In the following chapters, we present the validation of the ages of these first supercentenarians in the history of mankind (see Chaps. 15, 16 and 17). The age validation of these individuals was possible because they all lived in the same place most of their lives. In these three cases, several documents were found that, when taken together, make it very plausible that they reached the very high ages claimed, and were among the very first supercentenarians in the history of the world. However, this does not exclude the possibility that others – including a woman who is not publicly known – reached the age of 110 before they did.

Delina Filkins was probably the first person to reach the age of 113 years (see Chap. 17). This record, set in 1928, seems to have held more than 50 years, until Augusta Holz became the first person known to have reached the age of 114 years in 1985, and then the age of 115 years in 1986 (see later). During the 1990s, several women and one man reached age 115 or older (see Maier et al. 2010). The man was the Danish-American Chris Mortensen, who in 1998 became the first validated man to reach the age of 115 years (the Japanese man Izumi, who was reported dead at the age of 120 years in 1986, and was once considered the longest-living individual in the world according to Guinness Record Book, turned out to have died at the age of 105 years).

Since 2000, no long-livers in the world have successfully challenged the three longest-living individuals, all of whom died in the late 1990s. The French woman, Jeanne Calment, who died at the age of 122 years in 1997, is still the person who has lived longest (Robine and Allard 1998; Robine 1999); the American woman, Sarah Knauss, who died at the age of 119 years in 1999, is still the person who has lived second-longest (Young 2010); and the Canadian woman, Marie-Louise

Meilleur, who died at the age of 117 years and 230 days in 1998, is still the person who has lived third-longest (Desjardins 1999a, b; Desjardins and Bourbeau 2010). Their cases have all been documented in our previous books (Jeune and Vaupel 1995; Jeune and Vaupel 1999a, b; Maier et al. 2010).

However, remarkably, five other women have reached the age of 117 years since 2015 (three of them in 2017): the Japanese woman Mikao Osawa, who was born on 5 March 1898 and died on 1 April 2015; the Italian woman Emma Morano, who was born on 29 November 1899 and died on 15 April 2017; Violet Brown from Jamaica, who was born on 10 March 1900 and died on 15 September 2017; the Japanese woman Nabi Tajima, who was born on 4 August 1900 and died on 21 April 2018, and a third Japanese woman Chiyo Miyako, who was born on 2 May 1901 and died on 22 July 2018. Thus, the lives of four of these women spanned three centuries. Regretfully, the cases of Violet Brown and Nabi Tajima have not yet been thoroughly validated. So far, their cases have been investigated by the Gerontological Research Group (GRG) that require only few criteria for age validation.

The case of Miako Osawa is reported and documented (see Chap. 21). As was noted in the chapter, the documentation process might have been taken further, but it seems very probable that she reached the age of 117 years. The authors reported that they had not been able to get in contact with Nabi Tajima, despite several attempts. However, the third Japanese woman included in the chapter is Chiyo Miyako, who is relatively well documented and very probably reached the age of 117 years.

The chapter by Gondo et al. starts with the life story of Jiroemon Kiruma, who was born on 19 April 1897 and passed away on 12 June 2013 at the age of 116 years. The age validation of his case is thoroughly documented in a paper by Gondo et al. (2017), which includes a family reconstitution and additional documents from his educational institutions and workplaces. It is now assumed that Kiruma is the longest-living man in the world after the Danish-American Chris Mortensen, who held this record for 15 years. Chris Mortensen was born on 16 August 1882 and died on 25 April 1998 (Wilmoth et al. 1996; Skytthe et al. 1999).

Another long-living man was the Holocaust survivor Israel Kristal, who was the oldest man in the world from January 2016 until he died on 11 August 2017 at the age of 113 years (almost 114 or maybe 114 years: he was probably born on 15 September 1903, but may have been born on 1 May 1903). As Kroczeck and Young show, the age validation of this case has been extremely difficult, especially because Kristal was born near Lodz in Poland, which was part of the Russian Empire at that time, and was occupied by Germany during the two world wars (see Chap. 22). Therefore, his name and his parents' names, as well as the names of the villages where he was born, was married, and worked, were spelled differently in the different documents. Despite the lack of an original birth certificate, it seems very probable that Kristal had really reached the age of 113 when he died in Haifa in Israel.

The case of Emma Morano is reported and documented by Jeune and Poulain (see Chap. 18). The documentation for her case is exhaustive, including documents on the dates of birth, marriage, and death of her parents, of all of her siblings, and of her husband and son, which were collected from various archives in four municipalities in the Piemonte province in the North of Italy.

Ana Vela Rubio is a Spanish woman who reached the age of 116 in 2017. She was born on 29 October 1901 and died on 15 December 2017. As she migrated from Andalusia to Barcelona in the 1950s, the validation of her case was not easy. Despite facing difficulties, Romez-Redondo and Domènech succeeded in carrying out a thorough age validation. They describe this process along with Rubio's amazing life story (see Chap. 19).

Finally, Young and Kroczeck present an extensive account of the age validation of 10 women from the US who reached the age of 115 or older (see Chap. 22). Among these cases is that of Augusta Holz, who seems to have been the first woman in the world to reach the age of 115. She should have been included in the previous chapter on US women aged 115+ (Young 2010), but no document proving her date of birth had been found when the chapter was published. According to her birth record, which was recently found in a little village in Poland (formerly part of Germany), Holz was born to German parents on 3 August 1871. The documentation of her emigration to the US at the age of 11 months was also recently found. As she died in the US on 21 October 1986, we now know that Holz reached the age of 115 before Jeanne Calment, who reached the age of 115 in 1990.

The other nine individual US cases are Edna Parker (115 years, 1893–2008), Gertrude Baines (115 years, 1894–2009), Besse Cooper (116 years, 1896–2012), Dina Manfredi (115 years, 1897–2012), Gertrude Weaver (116 years, 1898–2015), Jeralean Talley (115 years, 1899–2015), Susannah Mushatt Jones (116 years, 1899–2016), Bernice Madigan (115 years, 1899–2016), and Antonia Gerena Rivera from Puerto Rico (115 years, 1900–2015).

It should be emphasized that for some of these cases, there are lingering uncertainties about the exact dates of birth. It is therefore important that Young also presents an invalidation of the case of Lucy Hannah, who was presented as a validated 117-year-old in the previous chapter of our 2010 book, and was ranked as the fourth-longest-living person in the world (Young 2010). This is an interesting case that shows how a marriage record found later on can invalidate the information given in the 1880 census, in which a four-year-old “Lucy” was reported, despite further age data consistency in later censuses and documentation from the Social Security Administration. Lucy Hannah is now shown to have been born in 1895 instead of 1875 and to have died at the age of 97 instead of the age of 117.

The age criteria have been discussed in all our books on long-livers (Jeune 1995; Jeune and Vaupel 1999a, b; Poulain 2010). A certain degree of family reconstruction is necessary to avoid mistakes caused by, for example, namesakes between siblings. A younger sister was often given the name of an older sister who died as an infant or a child. Having information on the dates of birth of other siblings is, therefore, very important. It is also important to know the ages of the long-liver's children if the person in question has died in order to evaluate whether the spacing of the ages between, for example, a mother and her children, is plausible. The few age validation criteria used by the GRG represent a good start (early and mid-life evidence of the date of birth, and the death record) but they are not sufficient to allow us to conclude that the age at death of an individual case has been verified. In trying to assess the possibility of namesakes, age validation should include a certain degree

of family reconstitution, such as the dates of marriage of the parents and the names and dates of birth of all of the siblings.

At the end, Young and Krozcek note that a growing number of individuals have reached ages 115+ since Augusta Holz first passed this threshold in 1986. They concluded that reaching the age of 115 or older “is becoming more common over time”. It is certainly remarkable that four women reached the age of 117 years in the 2015–2017 period after 20 years with no validated cases of 117-year-olds.

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