

"The Coming of Age"

by Simone de Beauvoir

In the last decade, people concerned with the problems of old age, witnessed the publication of the monumental work of Simone de Beauvoir, "La Vieillesse", translated into English by Patrick O'Brian, under the title of **The Coming of Age**. It is a thorough study of old age in all its phases and can be considered a pioneering work in our century.

In the first part of her book, Simone de Beauvoir presents her subject based on her findings from a study of various disciplines, like biology, anthropology, history and contemporary sociology. It is from this first part that a review is offered of her study on old age and present-day society.

Family Situation of Old People:

The author claims that there is more respect towards the old in educated and middle class families than in poorer families. Usually sons are more affectionate towards their mothers than their fathers, whereas daughters are more loving towards their fathers. This Freudian interpretation of the attitude of children towards their parents the author accepts, for the most part, as a way of explaining some of the negative feelings expressed towards the aged. However, she has found out that daughters, in general, care more, and sacrifice more, for the sake of their parents than do sons. The latter are often influenced by their spouses, thus inclining them to demonstrate apathy and indifference towards the condition of their parents.

Young men and adolescents are found to be more affectionate and feel closer to their grand-parents than to their own parents. The children also love them and are taught to respect them. Children of working mothers are especially attached to their grandmothers or grandfathers if the latter live with them and take care of them in the absence of their parents. Conversely, it is also true that in some homes grandparents are made fun of, especially in lower class families. In others, they are humiliated and criticized for not being able to adapt to modern life conditions. For some old people, living with their children and their families has become a most ungratifying and unsatisfactory existence.

Housing for the old is closely connected with family life. Through urbanization of modern life, it has become almost impossible for parents and married children to live together in small apartments. Usually the old people stay in the country house while their children move to the city. When several generations live under the same roof, some advantages are gained by young couples. Child rearing and household chores are better managed through the help of parents. Problems also are created by the conflict between generations and sometimes divorces take place because of the parents' presence in the house. Japan has kept the patriarchal family system as it is a country that is strongly anchored to its family traditions. In Germany, young couples live with their parents because of a housing problem. The best arrangement has been practiced in

Switzerland, where the parents live in a small house close to the bigger house where the married children live. This way the older people have their privacy, feel more independent, and are happier.

The Scandinavian countries have made the best effort in housing old people. Copenhagen's "Old Peoples' Town" has been considered a striking success. Sweden has built 1350 homes for the retired since 1947, housing 45,000 people. Those who are unable to get into the special pensioners' buildings are given supplementary grants by the State to cover the high cost for rents imposed by the newly built apartments.

In Switzerland and West Germany many projects have been accomplished to house old people. Holland and England have improved the situation by building new dwellings for the aged. In Southern Europe, however, there are not any residential buildings for the aged. France started to put up some of these residences in 1964. Such buildings house from 100 to 125 people. Only ten percent of the pensioners' income is left after payments for rent and board are covered. Such arrangements in housing, therefore, are available for those who can afford it and not to the majority of old people.

In the U.S. "Victoria Plaza", a big modern block with a club, library and recreational activities, has been a great success. The lives of old people there have been completely transformed. Nevertheless, they do feel their shortage of money as they have many opportunities to spend money on buying clothes and furniture or spending on leisure activities and entertainment.

A question that is much discussed at present is whether it is good for old people to live exclusively among their contemporaries. Victoria Plaza is successful because it lies in the heart of a town and its residents are not cut off from their families. A plan much recommended at present is the setting of small independent houses in the middle of the town, so that the old people would be near their families. An even better plan would be the creation of dwellings combined with a center. These will be private dwellings but with certain common facilities, the whole forming part of a large complex inhabited by people of all ages.

Institutions

The author mourns the situation of the institutions that house those old people who are no longer able to manage for themselves physically and economically. In some countries the institutions are inhuman, no more than a place to wait for death. She gives the example of such institutions in France where sanitary services are bad and there is no medical care. In addition, the buildings are at least 100 years old and are not modernized. The dormitories have no screens to give any privacy to the patients. There are no lockers or bed-tables. The sick and bedridden lie all day without getting any attention or care.

Statistics show that more than half of the old people die within a year of their admission which is caused by one of two factors: uprooting of the old people; and the miserable living conditions of the institutions.

Employment and Retirement for the Old

Simone de Beauvoir has come to the conclusion that of all the countries in the world the Scandinavian countries, Denmark, Norway and Sweden, give the best treatment to the aged. These countries can be regarded as models for the rest of the world. There is some kind of humane socialism in these countries. The big incomes are heavily taxed and on luxury goods there are high duties. The aged people profit from these arrangements especially in Sweden where 12% of the population is elderly and the average age of 76 is the highest in Europe. In Sweden the retiring age is 67, but every citizen draws a pension. In Norway 70 is the age limit for retirement and in Denmark between the ages of 65-67 men retire; women get an earlier retirement between the ages of 60-67.

In Belgium, West Germany, Luxembourg and Holland the retiring age is 65 for men and women. In Austria, United Kingdom and Greece 65 is for men and 60 for women. In France it varies from 55 to 65 depending on the jobs and employers — government, or private institutions.

The reality behind retirement is the disturbing fact that people are unemployed before their actual age for retirement. The first to be dismissed from any firm are the employees over 40 or 45. Discrimination against employing elderly people is universally observed. The criticism against aging employers is that they lose much of their efficiency; they cannot adapt to new situations; they have less strength and, they are slower. But there are all the qualities that employees in their middle life possess which can counterbalance their weaknesses. They have a rich experience along with qualifications for their job. They are conscientious and loyal to their firm. These qualities are rarely found among the young employees. If there is good will on the part of the employers some of the physical failings of old age can be removed by providing spectacles for those of weak vision or making special seating arrangements, or giving the older employee a lighter task to do. Instead, he is often reduced in rank and earns less. In the worst situations he is asked to retire. The Scandinavian countries show that old age can be protected. They do not toss the workers aside as soon as they discover a failing but provide them with jobs that require less physical exertion.

Those who retire, for the most part, do not get good pensions, otherwise it would have been ideal to retire. The pensions old people get are hardly enough for survival. As one pensioner has remarked, "It is too much to die on and not enough to live on." "The position of executives and people at the managerial level is less disagreeable, but it is still not satisfactory. The middle-range executives, the lower civil servants and technicians, have very modest pensions. Women are particularly badly paid. For most people retirement means a loss of status and a much lower standard of living.

Suicides Among Old People

A French sociologist states that retirement, com-

bined with the falling apart of the family unit, renders the state of the aged person lonely, useless and gloomy. All gerontologists agree that living the last twenty years of one's life in a state of physical fitness but without any useful activity is psychologically and sociologically challenging. Those who live on must be given some reason for living. Mere survival can be worse than death. A gradual retirement would certainly be less hurtful than the "sudden chop". Jobs should be divided into several categories according to the effort required and the worker would move gradually down from the hardest to the easiest. Or his hours of work would be reduced.

Once the individual has grown old and discovers that he has no place on earth, neither in work nor at home, where oftentimes he is humiliated before his wife and children, he falls into a kind of despair. That despair reaches such a degree, sometimes, that he resorts to suicide. The reports of World Health Organization show that the highest rate of male suicides occurs at the age of 70 and later in such countries as England, France, Italy, Belgium, Holland, Portugal, Spain, Switzerland, and Australia. The maximum age for women comes 10 years earlier and the rate is far lower.

Hobbies and Leisure

In order to avoid depressive states and suicides among the old or elderly people, and to remove the feeling of uselessness, efforts should be made to engage them in useful and constructive activities. They should feel they are making a contribution to society in some way. If elderly people retain some of their activities, they will function much better as a whole. American research shows that between 40-65% of the elderly people have hobbies between the ages 50-70. After that they lose interest. The higher the person's intellectual level, the richer and more varied are his occupations. Among elderly people there is a high percentage of complete inactivity which causes an apathy and destroys all desire for useful leisure activity.

In England, Sweden and U.S. there are efforts to encourage elderly people to join associations, some of which bring together people of all ages. There are 40 "day-centers" in New York where retired people meet, engage in activities, do useful work, and have social life. The young people or the old themselves have committees that organize discussions, excursions, music hours-listening or playing. Some churches and trade unions also organize activities in their own centers to keep the retired busy in a meaningful way, thus protecting them against boredom and loneliness. There are some successful experiments in France where paid professional leaders and volunteers together organize cultural and other activities for their club members. Ninety percent of their members participate in all the activities. Certainly this is limited to the well-off among the old.

(To be continued)

**Azadouhi Kalaidjian
(Simonian)**