

Lissy F. Jarvik, MD, PhD, a geriatric psychiatrist who was among the first to determine that “senile dementia” was not part of normal aging, and whose later work helped guide the field of Alzheimer research, died peacefully in her sleep on Friday October 1st, 2021 at the age of 97 in her home in Santa Monica.

By any standard she led a remarkable life. At sixteen years old, she dramatically escaped from the Nazi invasion of her native Holland during World War II (WWII), and eventually went on to become one of the earliest researchers in the new field of neuropsychogeriatrics and a leading Alzheimer researcher. She was preceded in death by her husband of 53 years, Murray Elias Jarvik M.D., Ph.D. in 2008. She is survived by her two sons, Laurence (Larry) and Jeffrey (Jerry) Jarvik, and their spouses, Nancy Strickland and Gail Pairitz Jarvik, as well as by her three grandchildren, Ella, Leah, and Ethan Jarvik.

Born in the Netherlands in 1924, Dr. Lissy Feingold Jarvik attended Hunter College in New York City, graduating *cum laude* in 1946. She earned both her master's and Ph.D. degrees in psychology at Columbia University in 1947 and 1950. As a pioneer in the field of neuropsychogeriatrics, she was one of the first physicians to demonstrate that mental decline was not a part of the normal aging process. Her studies focused on the mental changes that occur in both healthy and physically impaired people as they age. She also established the first inpatient psychogeriatric unit at the University of California, Los Angeles, and the first such unit within the Department of Veterans Affairs.

While a doctoral candidate at Columbia, Dr. Jarvik began her now-famous twin study. This long-term study, still the only one of its kind worldwide, grew into her life's work. Intending to "disentangle the whole question of genetics and the environment in aging" Dr. Jarvik followed 134 pairs of identical and fraternal twins who were at least 60 years of age at the study's outset. Dr. Jarvik traveled throughout the State of New York, meeting with twins to record their medical and psychological histories. Throughout the next twenty years, she continued to follow the twins, documenting changes in mental functioning, survival trends, cancer rates, and general health history. The study's findings demonstrated a strong genetic component of the aging process and a tie between physical and mental impairments in aging.

Given her later accomplishments, it is hard to believe that Dr. Jarvik had previously been unsuccessful in applications to medical school. She attributed this to being a woman and a Jewish refugee, but persisted by first completing her Ph.D. at Columbia University before enrolling at Western Reserve University School of Medicine (now Case Western) in Cleveland, Ohio. She received her M.D. in 1954. She then returned to New York and continued her research at Columbia's department of psychiatry and at the New York State Psychiatric Institute.

She married in 1954 and had her sons in 1956 and 1959. In the early 1970s the family headed west, where Dr. Jarvik became professor of psychiatry and biobehavioral sciences at the University of California, Los Angeles. There, she established the first inpatient psychogeriatric unit and the first course in behavioral sciences for first-year medical students. She recruited a diverse faculty from many departments throughout UCLA to participate in this introductory course. She was also instrumental in the invention of the nicotine patch, one of the most notable accomplishments of her husband Murray Jarvik.

From 1987 to 1993 Dr. Jarvik was the first woman psychiatrist, and the second woman ever appointed as a 'Distinguished Physician' in the Department of Veterans Affairs. She traveled throughout the United States in order to meet and interact with physicians in various specialties so that she could heighten their awareness to the needs of older veterans, mostly World War II veterans. She visited more than half of the VA Medical Centers at least once, and made numerous trips to VA Headquarters in Washington, DC to consult on strategies and implementation. Through face-to-face meetings, rounds, lectures, seminars, and workshops, she was able increase interest in the older veterans and facilitate the start of new training, treatment and research programs throughout the VA system.

In 1988 Dr. Jarvik co-authored *Parentcare: A Commonsense Guide for Adult Children*, with friend and colleague Dr. Gary Small. Written for the "sandwich generation"—adults caring for both their children and their parents at the same time—the book was one of the first guides of its kind. Dr. Jarvik explained, "The book came about because I saw in research subjects how involved the children became in their parents' healthcare and their parents' lives. I learned how they were committed to helping their parents, how they were bewildered by their new unexpected responsibilities and the unforeseen changes in their relationships with their parents."

Dr. Jarvik was at the forefront in the use of investigational drugs for treating geriatric patients with both Alzheimer's disease and major depressive disorders. She was also among the first to emphasize the role of microtubules in the pathogenesis of Alzheimer's disease, and to use psychotherapeutic approaches to the treatment of geriatric patients.

For her "distinguished contributions in the general field of psychiatry and mental health," Dr. Jarvik was the first recipient of the American College of Physicians William C. Menninger Memorial Award in 1993.

Dr. Jarvik summed up her life in academic medicine, "My career in aging spanned the field from mental changes, to psychiatric aspects, to genetic changes, chromosomal changes, also drug treatment and psychological treatments." She added that throughout her career it was the elderly patients, their spouses, children, siblings and other relatives who made it possible for her to pursue her research, and who contributed so much to the increasing knowledge-base on aging.

Lissy Jarvik's early life was marked by her narrow escape from the Nazis during WWII. Her family left the Netherlands for Belgium on May 9, 1939, when her father learned that the Dutch Army was scheduled to have maneuvers on May 10. They arrived in Le Zoute, Belgium late in the evening. The next morning, Lissy went to the bakery to get breakfast where there was a group of agitated adults. Her high school French allowed her to make out that they were discussing the Germans having invaded the Netherlands. She interrupted them and said that they must be mistaken because she had just come from Amsterdam the previous night. That's when she learned that during that very night, German paratroopers had landed in Rotterdam. It was May 10, 1939.

From that moment on, her family concentrated on keeping ahead of the advancing Nazis. She remembers a harrowing journey including being turned away from Dunkirk due to the port being overwhelmed by the retreating British, and being strafed by the German Luftwaffe on the road to

Paris. Luckily Lissy's father had a number of friends among the refugees in Biarritz, and one day that June, a friend came running to their house and excitedly urged her father to gather all four of her family's passports and join him on the train to Bayonne where the Portuguese Consul was issuing visas. Her father returned with the visas that were to take her and her family to safety.

On June 22, 1940, Aristides De Sousa Mendes, Portuguese Consul to France, had already been arrested in Bordeaux, France, the then capital of occupied France. Sousa Mendes began issuing visas to anyone who asked for one, regardless of whether they had money to pay the fees or not. The Portuguese arrested Sousa Mendes but upon leaving the Consulate, he told his captors that they were no longer in Portuguese territory but in French soil, and therefore, under French jurisdiction. He said he would go with them to Portugal provided they didn't hinder his activities as long as they were not in Portuguese territory. They acceded to his demand. They began their journey back to Portugal. When they arrived in Bayonne he went to the Consul's office and told the official that he was still the Portuguese Consul in France and ordered the official to issue visas to all comers. It was there that Lissy's father obtained the visas. It is estimated that Sousa Mendes saved around 30,000 refugees.

After seven months in Portugal, Lissy's family boarded a freighter for New York, knowing full-well of the U-boat danger in the Atlantic. She arrived in New York on February 8th, 1941. Although at the time she did not know the identity of the man who issued their passports, in the 1960s her mother saw an article in the New York Times describing a foundation created by the children of Sousa Mendes' and their efforts to reinstate his name. At this point, she realized the connection to her own journey and became involved with the efforts to share the Sousa Mendes story with the world, including appearing in a documentary by the Portuguese government and later being selected as the first president of the Sousa Mendes Foundation.

Lissy Jarvik played many roles in her lifetime including scientist, academic physician, mentor, wife, mother, and grandmother to name just a few. She excelled at everything and anything that she set her mind on. She achieved success despite fleeing her homeland as a teenager and becoming a refugee. She achieved success at a time when it was rare for women to become scientists and physicians. Her intelligence, determination and iron will allowed her to make seminal contributions to the field of psychogeriatrics and in particular, Alzheimer research. She used these same talents to become the matriarch of her extended family and to champion the cause of a Portuguese diplomat who had heroically saved thousands during World War II. Lissy Jarvik lived a long life and lived it well, improving the lives of countless others.

Some of the above was excerpted and modified from:

https://cfmedicine.nlm.nih.gov/physicians/biography_166.html