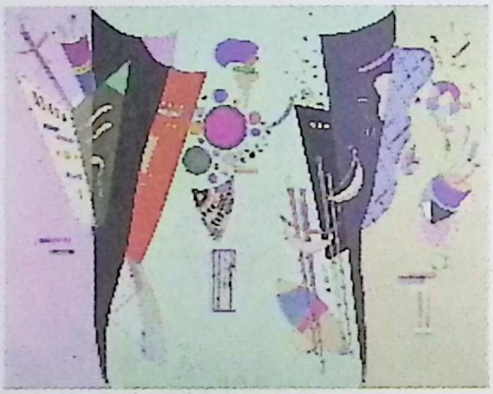
Old is Sold

SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

A remarkable woman was Alice Herz-Sommer, the oldest holocaust survivor the Los Angeles Times ran an obituary on, late last month following her death at age 110. She used to play piano while languishing in the Theresienstadt concentration camp, located in what is now the Czech Republic. 'Music was our food', she would say as the subject of an Oscar-nominated documentary.

"Alice's hands slid furiously over the keys, zigzagging up and down from the heights to the lowest registers, with the final four chords ringing out, like so many shrieks of despair," biographers Melissa Muller and Reinhard Piechocki wrote in 2006.

I personally heard her crooning over a recent BBC interview: 'Life is so beautiful'. And she had lived every bit of it zestfully savouring the sheer miracle of everyday living gifted to her as the survivor from holocaust days. This is somewhat remindful of Rabindranath Tagore's famous verse: *Morite chahina aami e sundar bhubhane, manober majhe aami bachibare chai* (I don't wish to die in this beautiful world, only crave to live in the midst of humanity).



An artwork by Wassily Kandinsky.

There is another Alice with the second name Munro who into her early 80s won the Nobel Prize for Literature for 2013, the first time in the short story genre.

She told The Toronto Globe and Mail early last year that she planned to retire after *Dear Life*, her 14th story collection – "spare, graceful and beautifully crafted" – reviewed Claudia Puig in USA Today. But when asked by the Canadian Broadcasting Corp. 'if winning the Nobel would change her plans, Munro said, "I don't think so, no, I am getting old.'"

That is a very touching statement coming from one who has reached the pinnacle of her glory, not a late bloomer if you take into account the impressive output in the most difficult craft of literary writing called the short story. One would have thought that in creative writing one needn't feel age-barred. For as long as creative faculties have not lost out to the lowering energy levels, encore is possible.

Nirad C. Chaudhuri, a famous litterateur, equally brilliant in both English and Bengali creative writings lived to the fullness of life and creative productivity right up to age 102.

Reverence and respect for such iconic figures are emblazoned in perpetuity on the hall of fame. But what of the ageing men and women who have been successful in various professions and some only lucky to be offered an Emeritus role or those living off their lives' savings in relative isolation and neglect from their offspring living their own demanding lives. Each world religion enjoins upon children to squeeze time out of their mundane pressures of life to devote it to lifting the spirit of their parents but for whom they would not be where they are. Whenever hurt our parents would say, you would realise how it feels only when you will have children.

Old helpless parents need consideration not just from their children but also the community and the government at large so that they can discover a new meaning to their existence. Unfortunately, the concept of 'senior citizen' is still alien in our country, even though it has been prevalent for a long time in India. This recognition entails some material concessions such as in traveling and medicare. Mere pittance of Tk 100/- as old-age allowance puts a smile on the recipients and how much more soul-soothing it would be for them if the benefit was raised. With longevity reaching 67 years, we have to have a holistic geriatric management policy that addresses the welfare concerns of the poor, vulnerable elderly population in the fast place.

Such an agenda becomes compelling in the outrageous backdrop of two cruel instances of abandonment of parents by their children. One 83-year old lady of Comilla had been dropped by a drainside in Gournadi by her sons and there she crouched in a mangled form for eight days shivering from cold and yet not budging in inch away as her sons had promised to come back to pick her up. Eventually through the kindness of some people she found place in a home for the old, that too after sons when approached refused to take her back. In the second case we have the inhuman story of unconscious Giasuddin who had to be rescued from beside a dustbin in Jurain to be placed under the care of an old home.

These heartbreaking occurrences are a blot on social conscience and collateral to a system heavily lilted towards carrying coal to Newcastle.

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