

Forgotten Elder Lonely at Christmas

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Mexico City, December 25, 1984. This Christmas Day I find myself in a dark green room, alone with a kindly 74 year old man who is seated at a small table covered with photographs from the 1930's and 1940's. He gasps for air at this oxygen mask connected to the two big green metal bottles standing against the wall.

His stately gray hairs combed straight back, held there by the green tinted glasses he wears, he begins to tell me about himself.

His name is Stanislaus Shiliski, one of the greatest living stars of Mexican stage and screen. I spent several hours with him looking at all of those old photographs, including those taken of him with his partner "Manolin", in which they acted with all time latin greats like "Cantiflas".

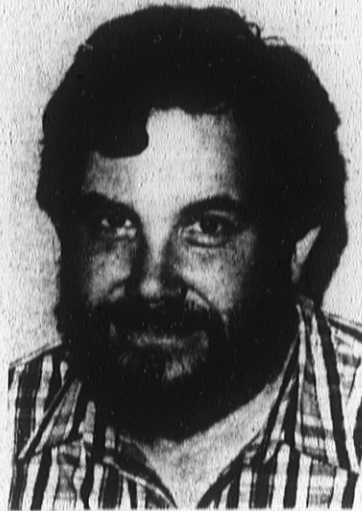
It reminded me much of look-

ing at the old photographs I have of my father. He knew my name as they had just finished showing one of my father's films on Mexican TV the week before.

The room was poorly lit and was stuffy, certainly not where you would expect to find such a great man. Actually it was a poor house for retired film and screen actors which is staffed by the Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the same nursing order that ran the hospital I worked at in Guadalajara some ten years ago.

"Why is he here?" I asked Sister Zenorina. The answer was a simple one. "Because his family put him here." The thought put a knot in my stomach. Here was a man of such great stature who dedicated his life to others and now was abandoned by his children.

His wife had died several years earlier and every peso he had he



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gave to take care of the same children who now abandoned him.

A knock at the door. In comes an elderly woman who owns a candy factory accompanied by a young man who is head of public relations for a chain of theatres.

They practically bowed down in solemn reverence to Mr. Shiliski. Earlier that day, Shiliski had been interviewed by local television.

"I used to entertain the old people at this home," he said, "but I never believed that I would end up here. I don't like people to do anything for me, even help me get up, because I am so independent."

I then thought of the pioneer home in Kotzebue and how many steps have been taken to assure that each person has his or her own room, and as much dignity as one can have in an institution.

I thought of how Alaska Natives have "rediscovered" our elders and how much we can learn from them.

I saw other well known actors alone this Christmas Day. It seemed strange how in a city of 16 million people a person could be "alone".

Then I thought about the quality of life and how it goes down with the more people that live in the same space.

Just yesterday there were 15 murders and 240 auto accidents reported here over the holidays. Mexico is a country where the daily living wage is still five dollars.

I told Sister Zenorina I felt that life was better in Alaska in our rural areas because there are so few people around and so we tend to look out for one another.

One accident or one death hurts us all. Yet in this metropolis of millions, several deaths hardly cause a ripple. We might not have all of the advantages that larger cities do, yet we are way ahead of our neighbors to the south.

Shiliski was in Vladivostok when the first shots of the Russian revolution broke out in 1911. He and his new Russian bride escaped and subsequently lived in Japan, China, Germany, and Mexico, where he has lived for the past 61 years.

He has survived revolutions, world depressions, life in Hollywood as well as in Mexico. Now he faces the greatest challenge of his career: living out the rest of his days with the same excitement and gusto he has given to millions of people around the world.

Thank you Stanislaus for giving me one of my best Christmases ever. We have so many elders of our own to look to. May they live out their days with the dignity and independence they have exercised all throughout their lives.

"Feliz Navidad", Shiliski. Here's a toast to you from all of us in Alaska to many more years of life and happiness.