



The Price of Reunion *or Lessons in Happiness*



*Are the senior immigrants a burden
or can they contribute to Canadian society?*

A documentary by Natalia Gaisenok



PRESS KIT

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Director, Producer: Natalia Gaisenok
Associate Producer: Anastasia Gaisenok
Language: English/Russian
Duration: 35:56 min

Genre: Documentary
Format: HDCAM 1080/24P
Screening format: DVD
Year of release: 2014

Short Synopsis

The right to unite with parents has long been a cornerstone of Canada's immigration policy. The film examines the challenges and triumphs of senior immigrants who come through family reunification program. Are the senior immigrants a burden on society, or do they have the potential to contribute to it? This question is explored through the stories of some remarkable senior immigrant women, experts' opinions and street interviews.

Long Synopsis

Eighty-four year old immigrant Maria is an incredible woman. After arriving Maria soon realized that life in Canada would be challenging for a senior immigrant. Maria has always been a very active member of the community, but without language skills, she felt useless in her new country. She has played accordion all her life, so she decided to talk to people in the language of music. In Canada she plays numerous concerts in senior houses and community centers. Few years ago a car accident caused serious damage to her right hand. The diagnosis was not promising. Maria believes that it is up to us to improve our situation in life. The secret is simple – never give up - and stay active! Trying not to overload her daughter's family with the medical expenses for her treatment, Maria decided to use sport as an alternative to the doctor's office. She went to the swimming pool and stayed there for hours training her hand. Once, she even saved the life of a drowning man.



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After arriving in Canada Maria lost her minuscule Ukrainian pension, and, like other senior immigrants who arrive through the family reunification program, for ten years she was not eligible for any financial support. But always the survivor, she collected empty cans and bottles, trying to get enough money to at least pay for a swimming pool visit.

The most common challenge faced by senior immigrants is the language barrier, as most of them don't speak English or French. As the result their life depends on the work schedule of their sponsors. Senior immigrants often can't use public transit, go shopping, visit a doctor's office or explain their problems without their children or grandchildren's help. Many find themselves stuck at home performing household duties and childcare. Shopping malls and churches become rare avenues for going out and socializing. Many of these seniors had very fulfilling and active lives before moving to Canada, but the future in a new country doesn't look optimistically for them.



Dr. Sharon Koehn is a Research Associate from the Centre for Healthy Aging in Vancouver. In her view, if, as a society, we believe in the principles of social equality, these challenges need to be addressed. Dr. Koehn also highlights the challenges faced by the most vulnerable group - older immigrant women of a visible minority. This group has very limited

opportunities for successful immersion in a new country due to language barriers, lack of experience outside the household, care giving duties and cultural norms of their home country. The families of some seniors expect them to work on farms or in factories if they are not taking care of children.

We return to Maria's story. She met her future husband at a concert in a small remote town where she was also performing. Victor and Maria married, and lived together almost fifty years. Victor was a very talented musician and conductor; together they played in duets on the radio, participated in different concerts, taught students. Maria and Victor raised five children, who were, of course, all given an excellent musical education.

Maria was sure that the most terrible part of her life was over with the end of the Second World War, and the feelings of fear and hunger would disappear from her life forever. For many

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people Perestroika became a real test on survival, another great challenge for millions of people. The first victims were seniors, intellectuals, teachers and other public service providers whose livelihoods depended on the economic stability of the Soviet state. Victor's death seemed like the end of Maria's life too. It became the last straw that made her leave the country.

In our film we also drawing on the opinions of other experts who advocate different paths towards changes, such as Charan Gill, the founding president of Progressive Intercultural Community Services Society and the Canadian Farmworkers' Union, Dr. Soma Ganesan, Cross Cultural Psychiatric Clinic in Vancouver and others. The interviews with the specialists are illustrated by two short stories of other older immigrant women from China and India. They share with us their challenges adapting in a new country.



Film ends with Maria's race at the BC Senior Games competition. The spirit of competition grips everyone in tension. Unfortunately Maria didn't win. Competing in a race lane with previously broken hand and hip is not easy. But Maria is not giving up. We see her filling up a new registration form for future Senior Games.

Maria is a very encouraging example for all other seniors. She gives them faith and hope that they also can find meaning and joy in their new life in Canada. Every immigrant senior has a different story. No matter how well individual immigrant seniors adapt and survive using their personal qualities, government support is essential. After years of research Dr. Koehn knows that. She tells us what changes need to be made to better support immigrant seniors.

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Director's Statement

The ethnic mosaic of Canadian society has become increasingly rich and diverse over the past several decades with many new immigrants and refugees arriving daily from all around the world. The right to apply to unite family members has long been a cornerstone of Canada's immigration policy. This has created a new group of senior immigrants that seems to have gone unnoticed, and presents a new challenge that Canada must now face.

On arriving to the new country, many seniors experience the loss of status, social ties and networks, language barriers, as well as discrimination based on skin color, ethnicity, age and gender. Instead of a happy life with their kids and grand kids, older immigrants in Canada often end up isolated, depressed and abused, which is increasing the health care costs. Senior immigrant women also carry the burden of unpaid care work, and face additional challenges.

Many Canadians look at senior immigrants as an economic and social burden, which increases taxes, affects healthcare system and raises unemployment level. This is one of the issues that fuels racism in our society. My film is an attempt to show the human side of the story. I am exploring something that many Canadians rarely see – the contributions that immigrant seniors make, and the potential that they carry. My film explores economic, social and moral dimensions of the issue.

My main character is Maria, a lovable 80-year old Russian musician. Despite many hardships in her life, she is an active member of her community, always positive and cheerful. She is an inspiring example for those senior immigrants who are struggling to adapt to the life in a new country, and want to contribute to the richness of Canada.

I want the viewers to feel empathy for the old people who lose their social status, their home, their income, their social networks and their independence by coming to a new country. They often become homemakers or baby sitters for the children with whom they live contributing to our economy through their unpaid and unrecognized labour while being isolated and struggling with depression, loneliness and other issues. But even if they become hostages to their choice, these seniors rarely complain. They carry their load with dignity, appreciating the luxuries of life in Canada.

Senior immigrant contributions go far beyond economy. Many from this unique generation went through the horrors of wars and revolutions of the 20th century. They grew up on the principles of mutual support, tolerance and spirituality - qualities that are in deficit in our modern world.

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As a democratic society we also have to respect and accept the people who fed and raised those skilled workers, who are ensuring Canadian economy continues to prosper. We have to give them an opportunity to complete their path in life with dignity. The way we treat our society's most vulnerable speaks about who we are as a nation.

Facts

- By 2031, there will be approximately 9 million seniors, and they will account for 25 percent of the total population. - Statistics Canada, 2005
- In 2003, only 14% of recent immigrant seniors had hospital charges insurance; these proportions were over three times higher for long-term immigrant (40%) and for Canadian-born seniors (47%). - Statistics Canada, 2006
- In 2003, only 48% of recent immigrants in the 55 to 64 age group were covered by insurance for prescription medications. In contrast, about 82% of the Canadian-born in the 55 to 64 age range had insurance for their medications. - Statistics Canada, 2006
- Only 10% of recent immigrant seniors who needed help received services from the government, compared to 20% of both Canadian-born and long-term immigrant seniors with the same need for help. - Statistics Canada, 2006
- Over the next 30 years the total cost from mental health problems and illnesses to the Canadian economy will have added up to more than 2.5 trillion. But it also cost business more than \$6 billion in lost productivity in 2011. - The Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2010
- Seniors who continue to live within the community tend to have lower rates of diagnosed depression (1% to 5%) compared to seniors living in long-term care facilities (14% to 42%). - Public Health Agency of Canada

Links/Resources

- [NeverHome.ca](#) – *Never Home: Legislating Discrimination in Canadian Immigration* is a project of [No One Is Illegal-Vancouver Unceded Coast Salish Territories](#).

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Expert Bios

Saleem Spindari came to Canada as a refugee in 1997. Since his arrival in Canada, Saleem has been actively working with immigrants, refugees and newcomers. Saleem has worked as a settlement worker, community outreach worker, translator and an advocate. He has presented in conferences and forums. Saleem is currently a Senior Manager of Settlement Programs at MOSAIC. Part of his job is to manage seniors programs. Saleem is also the past chair of Metro Vancouver Cross Cultural Seniors Network Society.

Dr. Sharon Koehn is a Limited Term Clinical Research Professor in the Department of Gerontology at Simon Fraser University and a Research Associate at the Centre for Healthy Aging at Providence Health Care. She has a Ph.D. in Interdisciplinary Studies that combined Medical Anthropology and Gerontology from the University of Victoria. The primary focus of her work has been on the constructions of health, illness and health care provision and on organizational barriers and solutions to health care access for ethnocultural minority older adults.

Dr. Soma Ganesan is the Medical Director, Psychiatry at Vancouver General Hospital and University of British Columbia Hospital; Medical Director for Adult Mental Health Services, Vancouver Community, and Vancouver Coastal Health; and Physician Leader for Riverview Hospital. Soma is also a Clinical Professor for the Department of Psychiatry at the University of British Columbia, and Director of the Division of Cross Cultural Psychiatry; and Commissioner for the Forensic Psychiatric Services Commission. Soma's research focuses on immigrant mental health, cross-cultural psychiatry, and spirituality.

Production Team Bios

Natalia Gaisenok – Director/Producer

Natalia is an independent filmmaker and a professional music teacher. Before immigrating to Canada with her family from Belarus in 2003, Natalia enjoyed a varied career spanning over education, music, media, marketing and journalism.

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She has a BA Degree in Music Pedagogy and a Diploma in Marketing Communications. In her native town of Minsk she worked as a freelance journalist for radio and newspapers, represented St. Petersburg publishing house in Minsk, wrote and produced musical theatrical performances.

In Canada Natalia continues her long-standing career as a music teacher and runs her own music school. Natalia also started realizing her long-standing passion for filmmaking. She is passionate about a range of social issues, and to date completed a number of documentaries exploring varying topics. Natalia is a member of BCRMTA and Women In Film.

Anastasia Gaisenok is a social justice activist and advocate. She works in the non-profit sector focusing on education and public engagement.

She is currently the Executive Director of Check Your Head: The Youth Global Education Network, and previously worked for the Justice Education Society of BC. Her educational background is in Anthropology (BA) and International Studies (MA).

She is passionate about advancing social change through creative engagement. Anastasia worked on producing a number of educational videos on such issues as Indian residential schools, youth civic engagement, women's leadership, and others.



Gabriel Colome is an award winning director and cinematographer who brought his creative edge into this project through camera work and editing. He has an extensive experience working in the film and media industry with varying clients, artists, and production companies both in local and international markets.

Having received formal training in Film Studies from Capilano University and Broadcast Media Communications from the British Columbia Institute of Technology, Gabriel is also a part-time studies instructor at BCIT.



<http://gabrielcolome.com/>

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Screenings and Awards

Awards

- The Rising Star Award, Canada International Film Festival 2015

Festival Screenings

- Commfest Art and Film Festival, Toronto (September 2015)
- The Sunrise Festival, Nova Scotia (October 22-24, 2015)

Community Screenings

- Public screening and panel discussion at Simon Fraser University, Vancouver (May 2015) in partnership with SFU Department of Gerontology.
- Public screening and discussion at Vancouver Community College, Vancouver (July 2015) in partnership with Metro Vancouver Alliance
- Private screening for the members of the Vancouver Cross Cultural Seniors Network Society, Vancouver (September 2015)
- Public screening, Renfrew Park Community Centre (October 2015)

Publicity

Immigrant Seniors: What It Takes to Call Canada Home

Gerontology Research Centre News, 34(2)

By Sharon Koehn

The Price of Reunion or Lessons in Happiness, is the recipient of a Canada International Film Festival Rising Star Award in the Documentary Short competition. On May 26th, 45 people gathered at SFU-Harbour Centre for an inaugural public screening of this 35 minute documentary followed by a panel discussion. The film probes the question, Are the senior immigrants who come to Canada through the family reunification program a burden on society, or do they have the potential to contribute to it? The mother-daughter film-making duo, Natalia and Anastasia Gaisenok, explored this question by following the stories of senior immigrant women from different parts of the world, most notably Maria, an elderly Ukrainian musician

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whose extraordinary resilience to hardship is inspirational. The film is grounded in both the expert opinions of people who work with and or conduct research with immigrant older adults, including the evening's panelists, Dr. Sharon Koehn (Gerontology, SFU) and Saleem Spindari (Community Outreach and Advocacy Programs, MOSAIC), and interviews with the public to showcase attitudes that prevail among Canadians.



The discussion that followed the film screening was moderated by Winnie Cheung (Founder of the Pacific Canada Heritage Centre – Museum of Migration Society, and winner of the Remarkable Woman of Vancouver award) and was structured around two main questions: (1) What are the recent immigration policy changes that affect sponsorship of seniors? (2) What are some of the strategies of supporting immigrant seniors in our communities?

Panelists spoke to the generation of dependency and vulnerability engendered by the long period of time that sponsored parents and grandparents are legally and financially dependent on their sponsors (Koehn, Spencer & Hwang, 2010; Matsuoka et al. 2013). Despite a recommendation by the Senate Committee on Aging that this ten-year period be reduced to five, as it has for sponsored spouses, it has since been increased to twenty years. Since 2014, older adults wishing to join their children in Canada are encouraged instead to apply for Supervisas, which are valid for up to 10 years and permit visits with family in Canada for up to two years at a time. Saleem Spindari pointed out, however, that eligibility criteria for supervisas exclude all but those who are relatively financially well-off. Moreover, the cap on the number of Supervisas issued per year is reached within the first two weeks of the year. As a result, getting a Supervisa may take several years.

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Speaking to the second question, panelists and audience members entered into a lively discussion about the diversity of immigrant older adults. While many are vulnerable to isolation, depression and abuse, older immigrants are extremely diverse (Koehn *et al.* 2013, 2014). Some have aged here and have the language skills and familiarity with Canadian society to navigate our complex health and social care systems at least as well as Canadian-born seniors. Many have successfully risen above the racism directed at them. As the film illustrates, they also enrich Canadian society with a remarkable wealth of skills and talents. Many members of the audience, such as Maggie Ip--soon to receive an honorary doctorate from SFU for her tireless work with immigrants--exemplified this group. Another group of seniors has immigrated later in life. Some may not have the work experience or language skills to fit in as easily, but they provide invaluable support to their families, particularly with childcare. Organizations that provide outreach and support services such as MOSAIC (among many others) promote the mental wellbeing of these seniors by connecting them with their peers, teaching them skills that increase their capacity to engage with Canadian society (e.g. English language skills, how to use transit, computer skills, etc.), and increasing their physical wellbeing through accessible healthy eating and exercise programs. Through these initiatives, older immigrants gain the confidence and ability to do more for themselves and for their families as well (Koehn, Habib and Bukhari, in press). Yet there is no stable source of funding to support these inexpensive programs that yield such significant benefits.

Audience members commented on the value of the film as a starting point for speaking with politicians as we approach the 2015 federal election, as a means of busting myths about immigrant seniors held by many among the Canadian-born, as a way of inspiring local community groups (and their funders) to implement initiatives to welcome and support immigrant seniors so as to benefit most from all they have to offer. In closing, there was considerable energy in the room to use the film as an advocacy tool. We encourage others to do the same. DVDs will be available for purchase this summer through <http://greenamber.ca/>. The Price of Reunion was produced in partnership with MOSAIC and with financial support from Embrace BC.

References

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Koehn, S., Jarvis, P., Sandhra, S., Bains, S., & Addison, M. (2014). Promoting mental health of immigrant seniors in community. *Ethnicity and Inequalities in Health and Social Care*, 7(3), 146-156.

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- Matsuoka, A., Guruge, S., Koehn, S., Beaulieu, M., Ploeg, J., & With Maxine Lithwick, Delores Mullings, Kerstine Roger, Charmaine Spencer, Vappu Tyyska, Christine Walsh, Frederica Gomes, Sophie Brisebois. (2013). Prevention of abuse of older women in the post-migration context in Canada. *Canadian Review of Social Policy, (special issue on Aging)*(68/69), 107-120.

Dr. Koehn's Publications and reports are freely available
at https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Sharon_Koehn/

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Production Credits

Directed and Produced
by Natalia Gaisenok

Associate Producer
Anastasia Gaisenok

Consultant
Craig Berggold

Cinematographer and Editor
Gabriel Colome

Additional Editing
Jessika Sturrock

Camera Operator
Valeriy Orlov

Additional camera
Anastasia Gaisenok
Sergei Gaisenok

Audio Post
Mix Media Productions

Translators
Anastasia Gaisenok
Daisy Au

Music used in film:
J.S. Bach, Partita #6 E minor, BWV 830 for piano
J.S. Bach, Partita #2 in D minor, BWV1004 for violin, performed by Monika Niedzielko
Romance for Guitar, Anonymous, performed by Raul Mangrau

Vivaldi Concerto In A Minor, RV 522, for two violins

A. Vivaldi, Concerto In A Minor, RV 522, for two pianos, arranged by Tatiana Ribnitska, performed by Tatiana Ribnitska and Natalia Stewart

F. Chopin, Fantasia-Impromptu cis-moll, Op. 66, performed by Tatiana Ribnitska

K. Debussy, Isle of Joy, performed by Marlee Emery

Music appearing in film:

Russian folk song "Svetit Mesyac"

Russian dance "Polka"

Ukrainian folk song "Nich Yaka

Misyachna" performed by Lilya Timoshkina

Ukrainian folk song: "Pidmanula

Pidvela" performed by Lilya Timoshkina

Russian wartime song: "Katyusha" M.

Blanter /M. Isakovsky performed by Lilya Timoshkina

Song "Podmoskovnye Vechera" V.

Solovyov-Sedoi /M. Matusovsky

Performances by:

Maria Loginova, accordion

Mikhail Budanov, balalaika

Special thanks to:

Dr. Sharon Koehn

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