



JDC International Centre
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Interview with **DR GEORGE LEESON**

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In several communities around the world, Jews are at the forefront of the demographic changes that are taking place on a larger scale in the Western world. Low birth rates, combined with higher life expectancies, give predominance to the elderly in the Jewish age structure and open real questions about long-term demographic continuity. But if it is true that these changes are affecting the Jews, it is not less true that this is a wider phenomenon taking place in the Western world. How these transformations will impact in future societies is still unknown.

In an effort to better understand these phenomena, JDC-ICCD interviewed Dr George Leeson, co-Director of the Oxford Institute of Population Ageing, who specializes in the socio-demographic impact of aging populations. "We are moving into a world that is increasingly populated by older people," affirmed Dr Leeson, and added, "the 21st century could be well the last century of youth." A sociologist and demographer at the University of Oxford, Dr Leeson is part of an academic team that aims to address through research, modeling and scenarios, the range of complex interactions between environmental and demographic change over the first half of the 21st century.

In this interview, Dr Leeson describes how a society with a disproportionate amount of elderly individuals will look like and presented the challenges that societies will have to face in a world with a drastic decline of both mortality and fertility. What will be the consequences for the job market, public policy and the retirement system? Reluctant to resort to catastrophic forecasts, Dr Leeson reminded us that, "there's no *good* or *bad* demography, as such. It's the infrastructures within our societies which make a demography *bad*."

JDC-ICCD: Professor Leeson, during one of your past lectures, you described a picture of a radical decline of mortality and, at the same time, a radical decline of fertility. You also suggested that in the year 2100 Europe's population will account for 7% of the global population. We are interested in how you would elaborate on this scenario.

Dr George Leeson: We can look at our population structure as it is today—the numbers and proportions in different age groups, different socio-economic groups, etc. And of course, that is the result of development of over more than 100 years, and then starting today we can attempt to forecast how that structure will change in the future. What has happened—particularly in Europe over the last 100 years, and what is happening much more recently in other parts of the world, such as Asia and Latin America and maybe it will happen at some point in Africa—is that our mortality has declined dramatically, and we are talking very dramatically. From the beginning of the 20th century with life expectancies at birth of perhaps around 50 years old, we are now at the beginning of the 21st century with life expectancies which are over 80 and approaching 90 years old. At the same time, we've stopped having children—particularly post Second World War, where at that time fertility had settled. Now, we're not talking about biological fertility, this is demographic fertility and the two things are very different—we're talking about demographic fertility which is the number of live births to a woman during her reproductive period under certain conditions. Fertility declined dramatically from the Second World War, when it had reached a level called "replacement level" more or less, which meant that a couple pretty much replaced itself by having just over two children on average. We went from that, to very, very low levels of fertility, which no one had forecasted—it had never been experienced before. That has meant that a traditional population pyramid—which was very broad at the bottom, with lots of people being born, and that got progressively smaller as we moved through the age groups, because those cohorts, as we call them, slowly died out—and this was very much a stable situation for centuries. But what happened to that pyramid because of the declining mortality and declining fertility, was that it began to change and it's pretty much a lemon shape at the moment. And forecasts are that it could become a skyscraper with pretty much the same numbers and proportions in every 10 year age group. As again things will stabilize, but at a very different level and very different demographic than when we had the pyramid. So that's the situation we are in at the moment.

What will happen in the future? I suppose one could almost compare demographic forecasting to economic forecasting, or to weather forecasting—sometimes we get it right, sometimes we get it wrong! Obviously the further into the future we want to try and predict how our populations will look, the more difficult it becomes—and the more uncertain it becomes. Because, of course, we are talking about increasing numbers of people who haven't even been born yet. Further into the future, if we think about population structures across Europe at the end of the 21st century, when most of those people at that time are not yet on the planet—the shorter the time analysed, the more certain we can be about our predictions. However, the data would indicate that, as far as mortality is concerned, there are no indications yet that mortality is going to stop its downward trend and begin to come up. People have talked about obesity, surely obesity is going to ruin all of this—well, there are no signs of that really happening yet, but of course, we don't know. This may be something which hits our population in 50 or 60 years—but we don't know that. Certainly at the moment, there are no signs in the data that this would end. So, while at the moment we're talking of life expectancies of over 80, approaching 90 years old, we could be entering a world which has been called by Professor Harper—she's the Professor of gerontology at the University of Oxford—the last century of youth. We are moving into a world which increasingly is populated by older people—people over 50. We will be in a world where there are more people over 50, than under 50. Now that is historically unprecedented. The big question is of course—is that a problem? Well, it's definitely a challenge, but maybe it's an opportunity if we can actually grasp it and use it successfully. Does that answer the question?

JDC-ICCD: Drawing on this last statement about the surplus of people over 60, when compared with younger people, one cannot avoid thinking about the consequences that it could have in the long term, especially in the job market. Right now, we are seeing in some countries such as Italy or France, that the younger population is complaining about the so called "gerontocratic society"; key positions are not being liberated in many fields such as universities, politics, industry—what are the further consequences of that?

GL: Now, as a demographer I have to say, there is no good or bad demography, really. Obviously the kind of demography we have at the moment, where fertility is very, very low, and below this magical replacement level—then in the very long term, and we're talking very long term—if those levels of fertility continue to pertain, then humankind would die out because we would not be replacing ourselves, and eventually someone will have to switch off the light and be the last person on Earth! That is highly unlikely to happen. Of course, one would expect some sort of a reaction either from governments or from us as individuals, to change that situation. So there's no good or bad demography, as such. What I normally say is it's the infrastructures within our societies which make a demography

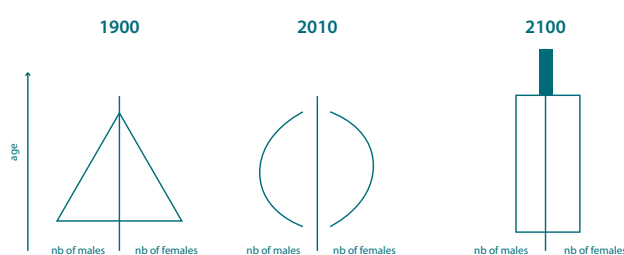


Fig.1 Population Pyramids over time

“bad”, and which means that we begin to talk about a particular demographic development as being a problem. So, 30 years ago in Europe, when the ageing of a population really began to hit the political agenda, quite dramatically, that was seen as a problem. There were going to be hordes of older people who would not be dying when we expected them to die, and living on and on and on. And these hordes of older people were going to be a huge problem—they would bring down the health systems, they would bring down the pension systems, they would bring down the work places, they would ruin the families—it was a real doomsday scenario. But of course, the problem is not the numbers of older people. The problem is the infrastructures in place. If you think about your societies—if anyone thinks about the society in which they live—the infrastructures which are there were actually set-up to service a completely

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different population structure, which was one of lots of young people—a typical pyramid—and lots of labour coming into our labour markets and they would stay for a while and then they would retire and relatively soon after retirement they would die. And there is no pressure on any part of the system, so to speak. Those infrastructures are extremely difficult to change, as our population is changing; but it is that that has to happen. If we look at our labour markets—are we in a situation where our labour markets are going to be clogged up with older people, with nowhere for young people to go? Well, I think the answer to that is, yes—if we are not able to think rather differently from the way we've been thinking before. And it's very complicated—I'm not intending to make this sound very easy, because it is very complicated. We have to think of different work-life balances. We have to think of different ways of putting our life-course together in terms of education, leisure, family, work. At the moment everything is still very, very traditional. I have children at university, and they are thinking “What is going to be my job?” And they're thinking of a career that then will last for 30 or 40 years and they will retire. It's that sort of thinking that we have to try and change. We also have to adopt taking the labour market again; we have to adopt our workplaces to enable this change to happen. But what we mustn't forget is that this is not just a demographic development, which is going to produce a lot of older people who will need support and who are going to be very costly. Of course, there will be a group or has been a group of older people—but also a group of people of other ages—who need support of practical caring, even financial in nature, and of course it's the duty of any civilized society to support those people, at

whatever age they are. That group will always be there. We are also seeing in this demographic development that “old age” is being pushed further, and further, and further, and further away from our current perception of what the old age is. So, if we think of our grandparents at 60, of course they were old! They looked old, they behaved old, they dressed old and they were ready to retire and they retired and they didn't live that long after retirement. If I look at my parents' generation—there is not much change. But the next generation and coming generations—“old” is something very different. We don't think of old age as beginning at 60 anymore. In fact, we've just completed a survey in the United Kingdom among the people born between 1952 and 1962 in this country; we call them “baby boomers” even though it's not really a convenient or appropriate term for that group of people. Well, it is a convenient term, because we can talk about “baby boomers” all over the world, but it's not an appropriate term in the UK. However, I'm looking at that group who are aged between 50 and 60, and if we talked to them about when they think they might retire, when will they think of themselves as old—well, they're not thinking of old until they are into their 80's and maybe even into their 90's. There's a lot of dynamic in this demographic development. So those increasing numbers of older people are increasingly not going to be regarding themselves as old and they're not going to be old in that traditional sense—they're going to be fitter, they're going to be healthier, they're going to want to contribute. Which again leads back to your point about the labour market; well, one of the ways we maybe have to start rethinking things is—how do we define an individual's contribution? Is it only through what we call “economically active” work? Or are there other ways for an individual to contribute to society at different stages of their lives? It could be volunteering for example, or it could be staying at home and looking after your family.

JDC-ICCD: It could also be that you have to work 40 hours, 35 hours or 25 hours. And maybe at certain age you'll start to work only two days per week—and then we'll have a multigenerational labour force. One bringing experience, the other bringing the enthusiasm of youth.

GL: Ideally, one would hope that would happen. You're talking about a sort of flexibility, which I think a lot of people have been trying to promote for quite some time. The fact that it hasn't really gained any momentum that's worth talking about underlines the fact that those infrastructures are very, very rigid. It's very difficult for people to think—not 40 hours, but 20 hours; not five days a week, but two days a week for ten years, or maybe three days a week—and I think the point that I would like to make is we need to think of flexibility throughout our working lives if we want to stay in the workplace discussion. And not just flexibility when that infrastructure thinks we are approaching the end of our working lives, but actually flexibility throughout our working lives; because that is beneficial to people of many ages. Flexibility for someone who is 65 may be the

same sort of flexibility which is useful for young people who are just starting families or who would like to start a family. Recently there is some data coming out of the UK, which would indicate that the younger generations of women would actually like to be able to stay at home and look after their children for longer than they are able to at the moment. And why they are unable to at the moment? Because everything is geared to having both parents at work. Maybe they just don't need more childcare to stay at work. Maybe we need to bring in that flexibility that enables them to say "I'd actually like to drop down to two days a week". Then someone at age 65 in that workplace can say "Well, that's ok, because rather than retiring, which you're trying to tell me to do, I'd like to work those other three days when she's not going to be here".

JDC-ICCD: A recent article stated that in a Scandinavian country the government was considering also giving parental leave to fathers, enabling them to stay at home with their kids.

GL: Yes. Of course, Scandinavia is very much at the forefront of all of welfare development, and has been for many, many decades. Part of that discussion in Scandinavian is also about gender equality and it's also about providing men with better opportunities to be part of their family as it's growing up and developing. It's actually not a new development in Scandinavia—giving paternity leave, so to speak, has been around for quite some time. But I think it's also the idea of flexibility within the family. And I suppose, one could argue, it's a little bit of a shame that we have to legislate to try and introduce that sort of flexibility and equality. But if that's the road we have to go down, then maybe it's the road we have to go down. But I think it's all about that flexibility and at the moment, it is proving very difficult.

JDC-ICCD: We were wondering about the impact that these demographic changes will have on politics. In France for example, one of the most solid electorate bases for Sarkozy and the conservative party was the elderly. On the contrary, in Latin America, where there are younger countries and populist governments, so to speak, rely a lot on young people—so, how do you see that relationship?

GL: It's a really fascinating question and I think it's one that has been around for some time, but I think it's one that's changing character dramatically. Some years ago, certainly in the United States, there was this Gray Panther¹ movement and to some extent it was successful, to some extent they were mocked a little, and then they became almost a form of amusement—the fact that older people should do this. But I think what we've seen over the last 25, maybe even 30 years, is a lot more power to older people through organisations. Of course, AARP—the American Association of Retired Persons² is always the classic example with maybe tens of millions, probably 40, 50 million members now—and hugely powerful in the political arena in the United States. One can ask is

that a good thing or a bad thing—but we've seen similar things happening in other parts of the world. And their success has been, in some cases, quite noticeable and in other cases it's been more limited. But it's definitely a movement, and obviously that movement was driven by the fact that there were more, and more, and more older

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people. So why did we not get political parties for older people? Well, we did in one or two cases and they had a brief success—I think in the Netherlands there was one and it did actually get into parliament. The problem is that an older people's parties might be united in terms of better pensions, better health care, better home care services, but you've only got to ask them "Should we stay as a member of the European Union?" and immediately you got lots of different opinions on that issue. It's very difficult to get a consensus on more than a few things which are only related to older people. The other problem was there's a misconception that older people politically all think the same, and of course they don't. They are very concerned about their own issues obviously, but they're also very concerned about much broader, deeper social issues affecting other age groups. It's therefore very difficult to get them together as a party. So I think what is happening—rather than older people coming together like that—is because of the last 30 years development, where everyone is waking up to the fact that these demographics we've been talking about are changing, in addition, everyone is waking up to the fact that this does mean things for older people. And we have to address these things. Why do we have to address these things as politicians? We have to address these things as politicians, because there are so many of them! And if we don't—we are dead in the water, as we say. It's no longer the realm of just one single political party. I think any political party in today's demographic has to say to itself, "Well, look, as well as having childcare and jobs for younger people, we've also got to have this, this and this for older people." So it's more a question of the issues, rather than a political party—and I think that is interesting. You're right also in the fact that different demographic, young populations, means different political focus, because one doesn't want to alienate that group of people either. Ideally, of course, political parties should be there for all of us! And we choose them not because of the fact they are doing something for me, but because they're doing something which I ideologically and politically agree with—and it then benefits everyone. Now that's the ideal world—that's the brave new world we haven't yet achieved.

¹ More on Gray Panthers: <http://www.graypanthers.org/>

² More on AARP: <http://www.aarp.org/>

JDC-ICCD: Let's talk about the impact of immigration on demographic and cultural changes. On the one hand, for decades Europe needed to import labour. This slowly created a lot of cultural and social changes, namely, the growing presence of immigrants coming from all corners of the world, who in turn started to challenge the traditional self-perception of Europe as a white, Judeo-Christian continent. This opened debates about multiculturalism, integration, and so forth. Europe was accustomed to homogeneity. It was an era—a Christian era. And now that there is an economic crisis and less to distribute, you see xenophobic reactions saying "No, no, we don't want these people here," you see it in Greece, in Holland, in France. There is this tension between bringing people into a country in order to perform all those jobs that keep a society going and the idea of closing the borders.

GL: Well, yes, there are a lot of points there—most of which are connected to a very, very sensitive area and that is international migration—particularly immigration. It works almost like a filter—even if we're only talking about certain sorts of immigrants—it can become a very, very muddy area to discuss. However, I think it raises a lot of interesting points—so let me just try and touch on a few of them. As our population ages, and as our infrastructures are perhaps not changing as quickly and as appropriately as one would like, not only are we seeing smaller cohorts coming into the labour market—now that needn't be a bad thing, in fact, as a small cohort—that can be good thing! It means that you are in demand, if you have the proper skills. So, it's more a question of—do we have the right skills in our populations? Because if we really are talking about flexibility, where we're saying—"as fewer younger people are coming to the labour market, we could keep older people on at the other end of the age scale," which is what everybody is telling us we need to do anyway. We're being told we shouldn't retire at 65—we need to retire at 85! This also means there has to be jobs, unless we can think of a different way of defining contribution. So, it needn't be a bad thing to belong to a small cohort—it can be a good thing. I think what we do have to acknowledge though, is that the younger generations are living in a completely globalized world. Not just in the UK, not just in Italy, not just in the United States—but in Asia, Latin America, Africa, you name it. So rather than them looking at their local workforce—if they have the correct skills they can look at the global workplace and decide "Do I want to work in Shanghai? Or do I want to work in New York? Or do I want to stay in Rome and work in Rome?" The opportunities will be for the people with the right skills. Therefore it's hugely important for governments to make sure their populations are going to have the right skills for the labour markets over the next few decades. What we also have to remember is that the UK or Italy—whichever country we want to choose—is not alone in this situation. This is happening all around the world. You can't sit in isolation anymore and say "Well, don't worry, we can just bring in some guest workers and they will do that work for us"; no, no, no—because every other country in the world is saying the same thing. Therefore, there's going to be

much more competition. Europe is not going to be in the situation that it's been in for the last two or three hundred years of being able to say "Well, we can import this human capital and in return we can give them financial rewards that improves their lives", which has been the case. Because now there will be lots of other places which are able to offer that. The competition is going to be much stiffer than it has been. Therefore, it does seem a little strange that the governments are almost competing with themselves, in some parts of the world at least, to keep people out rather than allowing people to come in. There is always another issue, which comes into this equation and this is what makes it very sensitive and very difficult to discuss. In the UK, for example, the population is predicted to reach 70 million in next couple of decades—well is that a good thing or

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is that a bad thing? As a demographer, one must say, "Well, it depends!" But there are strong forces saying, "That's a really bad thing. And therefore, rather than allowing immigration, we've got to stop it." Whatever the political decision is, whether it is to allow immigration or to stop immigration, it will throw up new challenges. It's a question of whether we're ready to meet those challenges—and again it's all about infrastructures.

The cultural history of Europe, as you say, is Christian. And that won't change until we've had a couple of thousands of years where it's not completely Christian, but it's a mix—and it will become very different. Whether that is a good thing or a bad thing, I think it's difficult to say when we're standing here in 2012. But certainly from a purely demographic point of view, immigration is an interesting component. It's very difficult to measure, and we only have to listen to the discussions occasionally about how many migrants are there actually coming into the particular country. Well, it's very difficult to give a precise figure—which makes it very difficult to have a sensible debate about whether it is too many or too few. Immigration has always been seen as that particular demographic component, and probably the only one—in a civilised society at least—which can be turned on or off. Mortality—I think we will all agree we want as low as possible. Fertility—we tend to say "that's a private issue"—in most countries at least. But immigration, that's something that we can do something about, because we can close the doors or we can open them. Or we can open them, but only to certain types of people. So, debates about skilled migration for example—are they the sorts of debates we should be having? Rather than just saying, "Anyone can come"—no, no, no, there is a checklist of qualifications that people need to have. These are all things that are being discussed. But certainly, just case in point, in the UK—and it pertains quite neatly to the discussion about

an ageing population—because, as we've talked about, there will be a group in need of care and the care sector in the United Kingdom is relatively reliant on migrant carers. And this is true in other countries. It's true to a huge extent in Italy. It's true in Ireland, it's true in the United States, and it's true in Canada. We can highlight these countries around the world, where migrant carers are actually the ones who are going into that profession of caring for older people. That opens up the whole debate about why that's the case, but let's take it as it is—that is the case. Without those tens of thousands of migrants coming into countries and looking after our older people, we would be in a rather bigger mess than we probably think we are at the moment. It's not a black or white discussion. It's a very coloured, very nuanced and very complicated discussion.

JDC-ICCD: We noticed that some minority groups are showing early patterns of what you've been describing; in terms of ageing they already feature an inverted pyramid finishing with a skyscraper. How will the minorities in this situation survive? I remember, in one case you showed us something about the Korean group, that the projection was not so good.

GL: Yes—one can talk about minorities within a country having problems, of course, in demographic terms. One can also talk about nation states demographically, potentially having problems; and Korea, demographically, is an interesting example because its fertility has declined in one generation by as much as it took Europe 150-200 years to decline. Of course, in those 150-200 years we had the time and the resources to put in place all of those little infrastructures that we needed to address these dramatic changes in our population. When you have one generation change, it's difficult. You can have all the resources in the world, but time is not on your side. And particularly Korea, as with most of Asia, again an interesting example—because care of older people in those societies is very family based. The Confucian idea, filial piety and all of these issues—it's very family based, but of course because of the inversion of the pyramid, that family is disappearing. Therefore, the scope for family support is being reduced very, very, very dramatically—at a time when we're getting lots of older people at the top of the pyramid. I'd say that the nation state level, if we begin to look at minority groups—however we would wish to define them—there are lots of other things at play there. Because a group can be defined so strictly, that in itself begins to create a problem for the group—because people may move out of the group, yet are they then still a part of that minority by definition? Or there can be people who are not by definition part of the minority group, who are coming in. I'm thinking of mixed marriages for example, which, if you like, is thinning down the group. You can also retain your minority definition status, but leave the group—migration for example. A case in point would be rural populations in Central and Eastern Europe. Now, one probably wouldn't define it as a minority group, but let's call it a sub-group within that national population. They are suffering to a huge extent, because of out-migration.

And of course, in a way, it's all the wrong people who are leaving; the people who migrate are young, able-bodied, and looking for a job. They are leaving the rural areas of Central and Eastern Europe. They are leaving behind the old people; and very often leaving behind their own children to be looked after by the older generation. Those areas become depopulated—and are left to the old, and of course, there are no jobs and no support in those areas either. That is a population which is being dramatically affected by demographic change. Not just by natural ageing, but by this massive, massive, massive out-migration. So, yes, minority groups can be threatened from within, but also from the outside.

JDC-ICCD: One of the things that demographers usually say is, given that the majority of the Jews today live in the Western world, they adapted to western patterns much more rapidly than other minorities. Jews today are not having 2.1 children, which is below the replacement rate; they are delaying marriage; the elderly is the population that is becoming the majority, so this is one of the debates in Jewish demography. Another big debate is the one that you just mentioned—intermarriage. You know that Judaism repudiates intermarriage— however, while a generation ago to intermarry meant that you wanted to be outside of the group, today that's not the case. Given the postmodern condition of cultural choices and multiple identities, people who intermarry can easily say "Look, I'm intermarried because I share a lot of things in common with the person I'm married to. However, I still feel deeply Jewish, and I want to be part of this nation or people." As a result, demographers have started to count Jews through different categories – halakhic Jews, non-Jews but living in a Jewish household, and then we have different numbers of Jews depending on the categories we take into account when estimating a final number.

GL: And we've seen this with other groups, so to speak. What you're describing is there is a threat from within, but there is also a threat from the outside. And as you say, depending on "Do we want to have lots of people defined as Jewish? Then we use this definition; or do we just want a very, very restricted group which is this one, and then there are not so many of us"—But we saw this issue also with the question "What is an immigrant?" And when does someone stop being an immigrant? The Scandinavian welfare states were very much at the forefront of this discussion and this really quite complicated statistical issue of how do we define an immigrant? And so in Scandinavia they built-up very complicated definitions that take us into third and fourth generations—was it your great-grandfather or your great-great grandfather? But you can retain your immigrant status many generations down the line, if you can tick all the right boxes, so to speak. Or you can lose it very quickly, by just ticking one box maybe! And it does muddy the water somewhat. Of course, the Jewish population is an interesting one—because it is defined as a population, even though it is spread all over the world, and it's defined as a community. Of course, as well as that community, they are part of another community in the country that they are living in. So yes, they would

be part of the Jewish community in that country, and of course they are also part of that bigger community in that country—and I can envisage a lot of issues. And as you say, the postmodern—if that’s what you want to call it—definition of what is Jewishness becomes very, very complicated and in itself it can present problems within the group. But I think that the different groups around the world face different problems. And I’m thinking only of problems in terms of behaviours and identities, and assimilation in a way, because we are all part of the community in which we live. To some extent, we’re trying to retain our identities, whatever that may be. In Britain—I will retain my working class identity, even though I’m now a peer of the realm, “I am a working class man, you can call me Lord whatever, but I am working class”. And that same sort of behaviour, you can translate into other groups.

JDC-ICCD: You mentioned that with this new demography, which is new for humanity, the industrial society that was organized during the last 200 years will experience a shock. How will we adapt? The changes we need to make will take time. What are the institutions or the models, the social “boxes” that are now being challenged? Can you elaborate a little on what areas we need to build for a society that went from people retiring and dying fast, to a society where people don’t want to retire, but are living longer? What are the challenges for the politicians today?

GL: Well, I think in some sense we’ve discussed some of these issues already. And when I’ve been talking about what I call infrastructures, and you mentioned in your question the fact that people retired and didn’t live very long after that—so let’s just think of retirement for a second, as a concept and why we suddenly developed a concept called retirement? This concept did not exist centuries ago—there was nothing called retirement. You lived and you worked, and in some way or another you died. There was no retirement, as such. When we introduced this concept of retirement it was, one could argue, the beginning of what we now call the welfare states. And maybe—who knows—there was also a political motive to it; because by introducing retirement—or perhaps I should more appropriately say, by introducing a pension and therefore the concept of retirement, because you got the pension when you retired from work—politically it may have been a very, very good strategy, because it sounds good. It was also at a time where not many people reached that age where they could get the pension and therefore retire, because it was a time of high mortality, particularly among very young people, but throughout the life-course—higher than we are now experiencing. It also meant that of the relatively few who reached retirement, not very many lived to a great old age, and therefore would be draining the pension fund. But having created retirement, and then when we see demographically what happened—that more people were getting to retirement and living much longer in retirement, suddenly this retirement was not just a very short span of your life—it’s potentially a third of your life. As that began to happen, we had to

do something about retirement, because what were we going to do? Just sit in our armchair and drink coffee for 30 years? Of course not! So what happens when we get this development in retirement? If you think about it, one could argue that’s when we began to talk about leisure. Leisure is a relatively new concept as far as humans are concerned—because previously it was work, work and work. There was no leisure. So leisure became a thing for retired people. We had to put something into this retirement, because people were no longer working. And there were lots of threats from all of this. This is why the “boxes” now have to be re-shaped and even moved, because lots of people are living long retirements. The pressure on the pension fund is massive. And because retirement stretches now over so many years, it’s almost impossible for anyone during their relatively short working lives to put into a pension pot the amount of money they are going to need to finance such a long retirement. So that’s a box that needs reshaping; or at least it needs pushing out in some way or another. It also means we maybe need to rethink the way that we fund our retirement. The state needs to think about its contribution. Should a government be paying people for thirty years of leisure, just because they’ve become 60 years of age? Well, if I were 30, I would say “Look, can I have my 30 years of leisure now please? Can I start drawing down on that account now?” Should governments be doing that? I think, in a way, we get back to the discussion that we were having earlier about that disadvantaged groups have to be supported—must be supported—there has to be that solidarity with those groups. But the state needs to rethink its role. Not withdraw completely, but rethink its role. You and I have to rethink our contribution to funding our retirement and we have to ask our employers to think about their contribution. Now, of course, these contributions need to be made while we’re working—while we’re able to make a contribution. But again, we need to introduce flexibility. In some countries they are talking about a citizen’s pension and that everybody should have one.

We don’t think of “old age” as beginning at 60 anymore. For the next generations “old” will be something very different.

The minute you are born, you have your account and your lifetime citizen’s pension. That’s what you’ve got! You can draw down on it whenever you like. If you’re 25 and think “I’d like to go somewhere for 5 years without working”, you say “Right, I’m going to take 5 years now”. Of course the harsh realities of a system like that are when you get to 75 years old and want to stop working and realise your citizen’s account is empty! But of course, it’s not a question of either-or, it’s a question of “bits” of all of this—so we’re having to rethink how big is the box and where is the box; but also, if we open the box and look at the little boxes inside—where are they coming from and how big are they individually.

JDC-ICCD: We would also need to re-think the economic contribution of retired people under this social re-engineering. On one hand, retired people no longer put money in the pension system, yet they take out money from the pension pot. At the same time they consume leisure, they consume clothes, food, computers—

GL: Really what you're touching upon is the existence of a lot of myths about this group we call "older people". And let's be honest, we haven't really agreed on what that is even. Can we really talk about the group of older people when across that group there are such differences? Some people are old at 30! Some people never get old in the way we think of what "old age" is. So there are lots of myths about older people—one of which is they are no longer contributing to society. Now unfortunately, that was also a view of older people which contributed to the idea that older people were a burden. And unfortunately, in demography we even have a term which is called the "dependency burden" of which older people are a part—and of course, those words form our views and attitudes. And they are changing, I must admit. Remember we were having the discussion about the political power of older people, or the issues to do with older people—I think the fact that that is all changing has also contributed to the fact that a lot of these myths are being broken down. But as far as

Our relatively short working lives make it impossible to finance such long retirements. We maybe need to rethink the way that we fund our retirement.

consumption is concerned—well yes, I'm sure we can all remember our parents at 65 saying "No, I am not buying another refrigerator. This one will last me the rest of my life." For many of our parents that proved not to be the case, because they outlived their refrigerator which of course was not expected! You're right that older people are not only consuming, they are actually contributing. There is also this myth that older people have never had it so good. Well, that may be the case, but surely that is a good thing. Some people think, "They've never had it so good and no future generation of older people is going to have it as good as they've got it now!" That may also be the case, but that is no fault of theirs. They have not rooked the system—they have abided by the rules, they've done what they've been told to do and luckily it pays off. For coming generations, and we've just surveyed this generation of 1952 to 1962—now that may be a different generation in terms of what they can expect in their old age. Because they may have also played by the rules, but suddenly, the playing field has moved! They're so close to retirement, but they don't have time to make amends and change their lifestyles, or even to put more money into the pension pot. It's not possible! But what we forget, is that older people contribute huge amounts of, let's call it "resources" to

society in the workplace—let's not forget a lot of older people do carry on working beyond pension age and that number is increasing as we speak. Older people also contribute huge amounts of support within the family. Grandparents are almost replacement parents in many families. Without grandparents' support families today would find it very difficult to be able to go to work and have children. Older people also make huge contribution as volunteers within their communities. The older age group actually comprises the biggest group of volunteers in many sectors. If we started to put money—or a value onto this contribution, we are talking billions and billions and billions of dollars that this group, who is just sitting down and drinking coffee all day, is contributing in the family, in the community and in the workplace. And they want to do it—that's the other thing. That's a huge resource, which again, our infrastructures are not good at utilizing.

JDC-ICCD: Well, this is the first generation and they are like boy scouts walking into a new territory. And the baby boomers are coming. The thing is, as you said, this is changing as we speak. Even for the baby boomers coming after, they won't find the same landscape as the previous generation—

GL: I think you're highlighting a very important point here, and what we're really saying is—coming back to what we were talking about earlier—all these concepts are changing, part of these infrastructures, and I'm sorry I keep mentioning it, but they are really much at the heart of the problem. Part of this infrastructure issue is our concepts of things. We've had this concept of retirement—and when a government proposes to increase the pension age by one year over the next 40 years, which doesn't sound too dramatic, does it—we have very young people saying "No, no, we can't have that. I don't want to work an extra year!" Well, that's all part of that very, very, very rigid infrastructure. All of that has got to change. All of that has got to become much more fluid. And as you say, the landscape—it's a very good way of describing it—is changing. And while retirement was pretty much the same for generation, after generation, after generation—yes, those people born after the war were the first ones coming into a landscape which was very, very different. It's changing for each of us as we move into that landscape—because individually we do want that landscape to be rather different, as well. Retirement need not be and should not be the same for every person. This is where we really have to think seriously, because as you mentioned, the liberal professions had the opportunity and the ability to continue working for as long as they wished. But if I was a manual labourer, I would probably not have the ability to continue as a manual labourer until I'm 90. I would probably, I suspect, not have the inclination. I would want to get out as quickly as possible. But because of the rigidity of the system and the structures, it meant that it was a take it or leave it situation—either I stayed as a manual labourer or I got out. And of course people chose to get out.

JDC-ICCD: We can talk about re-training, not for changing jobs, but for jobs adjusted to age.

GL: Yes, and looking at our workability, and looking at workplaces, which will enable me—if it's what I want—to work for as long as possible. If I'm not able to work in this workplace, then maybe I would actually like to volunteer over there, and that should then count as contribution. Maybe we ought to look at volunteering contributing to pension funds.

JDC-ICCD: You know, you also have all the people in the service system, which is not physical work. Or the generation that was born with the computer—well, they can work from home. I think we are in a society that has to change; the policies have to change, because the target keeps moving. And that is part of the problem. It's not "OK, you cross this line, that is the new landscape and it's fixed"—no, it's a moving target.

GL: Again you're hitting the nail on the head! The policy-making institutions are also part of the problem. In a way they are addressing the structures that we've got. Part of that structure is that we've sort of piecemealed our lives into these "boxes": in this box, I am young—educating myself; and in this one here, I am older—working; and here, I am even older—retired. We need policies for this bit of our life, that bit of our life and that other bit of our life. We need to think in terms of policies for life-courses. Now, this is going to make being a politician more difficult, because it also means you need to think beyond the next election and the next election, and the next election! But it would produce—as it looks at life-courses rather than compartments—the sort of flexibility, the sort of fluidity that means even though things are changing as we speak, we can change equally as quickly.

JDC-ICCD: It's a fluid situation or, as Zygmunt Bauman said, a fluid society. This concept of the rigidity of the boxes, as you say, has to change. When I think of the infrastructure of the cities, the sewers for example— we still have Roman ones working in some parts of London—

GL: That's right—and Paris! The Parisian sewers are spectacular!

JDC-ICCD: Yes, and when governments build up modern cities, like New York for example, politicians try and win their elections based on short term policies—they can't start a project that no one will see and of course there is also the effect 40 years down the road—no one is going to do it. But if we think about a fluid society and fluid policies, in a time in history where change is rapid and constant, we cannot just build the same boxes, we have to push forward and try new things and make mistakes, and experiment and we'll see.

GL: You can build boxes, but it means you will end up with something rigid and immovable. It's a juggernaut, it's a super-tanker.

JDC-ICCD: It's super interesting. You know, the people that invented the industrial society and the post-industrial society also faced these changes. And I think it's not just the politicians, because today citizens—the members of our society—make their opinion work for them. And today, with the Internet, one person can send ten thousand people into the streets in a minute—

GL: This is one of the issues—I mean, we were just about to talk about it—but this is one of the issues we haven't actually discussed, and that is the new technologies and how they will contribute to this massive change that I think we are going to go through. Technology, if we think about it, it's not even post Second World War—it's within the last 20 years that technology has changed everyone's life. We now all have one of these devil machines in our pockets, that both enables us to remain in contact with everyone we want to be in contact with at any point in time, but it also means that we are constantly alert to what's going on. It provides sources of information—I see it with my own children—I see how it makes their lives much easier. It's a constant source of information and knowledge—even about "Oh my goodness, I'm on my bicycle and I seem to have gotten lost!" They don't pull out a map or stop someone; no, they use their mobile phone and it gets them to where they want to go. I think that the technological development is going to be equally as dramatic as the demographic development. Maybe even it will contribute to a more dramatic demographic development than we think, because with medical technology—who knows? We may not be talking maximum lifespans of 120, we may end up talking about maximum lifespans—because we have medically, technologically manipulated them—of 140 or 150, who knows? Then we'll definitely need to do something about those "boxes" if we get to that stage, won't we?

JDC-ICCD: Well, thank you, I think this is a good point to close this dialogue and leave something for the next generation to discuss! The generation that will live not to 100, but to 140—you know it's a huge jump for humanity—

GL: Well, it's almost too big a jump. People both individually and collectively can't really get their heads around it. If I say to someone you've got a pension pot that is going to last you for 25 years, but what if you live for 70 years beyond retirement? How? Seriously—that's why we've got to stop thinking "boxes" and instead start thinking life-course and fluidity. It's difficult, but exciting!

JDC-ICCD: Very exciting. Thank you very much!

GL: No, thank you! It's lovely to see you again!



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The JDC International Center for Community Development (JDC-ICCD) was founded in 2005. It aims to identify, understand and analyze ongoing changes and transformations taking place in Europe and Latin America that impact particularly Jewish Communities.

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