Holocaust survivor crowned as world’s oldest man

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Isrkel Kristal was officially named the world’s oldest living man by Guinness World Records in a special ceremony in Haifa on Friday. The Holocaust survivor, who immigrated to Israel from Poland in 1950, claims the title at the age of 112 years and 178 days (as of March 11, 2016). He was awarded his official certificate at his home in Haifa.

“I don’t know the secret for long life,” he said. “I believe that everything is determined from above and we shall never know the reasons why. There have been smarter, stronger and better looking men than me who are no longer alive,” he continued. “All that is left for us to do is to keep on working as hard as we can and rebuild what is lost.”

Kristal is the first Israeli to hold the record of the world’s oldest. In addition, he is definitely not the first Israeli to hold a Guinness World Record.

Indeed, the listed Israeli entries in the “Guinness World Records 2016” book is a perfect reflection of the complexity of life here. It includes inspiring, silly, sad and funny records. Alongside the oldest head of state (Shimon Peres, when he was 90 and the shortest hostage rescue operation (Entebbe, which included a 35-minute battle), Israel also boasts records for the largest dance class at a single venue (9,223 dancers, at Tel Aviv Port in 2010), the world’s heaviest lemon (5,265 kilograms – 11 pounds, 9.7 ounces), the most passengers on an aircraft (1,088, on an El Al flight during Operation Solomon in 1991), and the largest gathering of monkeytail beards (244 people in Tel Aviv, 2013). Haaretz contributed to the record for Kristal by conducting a wide-ranging investigation following the death of the previous record holder – Japan’s Yasutaro Koide, who died in January, two months before he would have been 113. Koide had held the record since last July.

Kristal, a confectioner by trade, was born in the village of Zarnow, Poland, on September 15, 1903. At age 3 he started to study in a local heder and began speaking Hebrew. At 4, he learned Bible and the Mishnah at 6. “My father would wake me at 5 in the morning to teach me,” he told Haaretz in a 2012 interview. “I didn’t want to get up so early, but I had to.”

At 17, in 1920, he moved to Lodz, where he started a family and established a candy factory. In 1940, along with his wife Chaia Feige and their two children, he was sent to the ghetto. In August 1944, Israel was deported to the death camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau, where he spent two months before being sent to other camps. His wife and children did not survive the Holocaust.

After the war, he remained in Lodz for several years, re-established the candy factory and started a new family with his second wife, Batsheva. In 1950, they immigrated to Israel and settled in Haifa, where he continued to manufacture confectionary.

His family doesn’t like to discuss the number of his children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren for fear of the “evil eye.” In accordance with Guinness World Records rules, for a person’s age to be recognized, it is necessary to have an official certificate attesting to the person’s age that was issued during the first 20 years of his life. Thus, theoretically there could be a man who is older than Kristal somewhere in the world, but an absence of sufficient documentation is denying him the title. One claimant to the title might be Rabbi Zakharia Barashi of Jerusalem, who, according to Interior Ministry records, was born in 1900 in Kurdish and is therefore now 115 or 116.

Kristal, however, is the oldest man in the world who has provided Guinness with enough old documents that confirm his age. Among these were the list of deportees from Auschwitz in 1944; lists of inhabitants of the Lodz ghetto in the 1940s; his marriage certificate from 1928; and also the final document that was located: a 1918 registry of inhabitants of Lodz.

Obtaining these documents took a lot of effort. This was because they were written in various languages and were kept in small archives in different places in Poland, some of which are not accessible to the general public or entail bureaucratic and technical difficulties in order to view them.

The breakthrough was provided by the organization Jewish Records Indexing, Poland, which specializes in finding archival information about Polish Jewry. Its staff, headed by executive director Stanley Diamond, succeeded in recent months on getting their hands on the documents that were required to complete the picture and to have Kristal recognized as the oldest man in the world.

In addition, Kristal is also the oldest Holocaust survivor in the world. However, the record of which he is proudest doesn’t exist in the Guinness World Records: He is the most veteran layer of teffilin (phylacteries) in the world. It has been nearly 100 years since he began doing that.

Although Kristal is officially recognized as the oldest man in the world, he is not the oldest person in the world. That honor goes to a woman, Susannah Mushatt Jones, who was born in July 1899 and is now 116. The oldest living person in history was Jeanne Louise Calment of France, who died in 1997 at the age of 122 years and 164 days. And if Kristal aspires to beat the Guinness record for the oldest man who ever lived, he will have to outlive Jiroemon Kimura of Japan, who died three years ago at the age of 115 years and 283 days.

In the meantime, Kristal is not overly excited by the international recognition he has won. Four years ago, he told Haaretz that “it’s no great bargain” to reach such an advanced age.

When asked at the time if he had a formula for longevity, he replied, “Every person has his own fate. It’s from heaven. There are no secrets.”

From the perspective of a man who has lived through more than an entire century and two world wars, he says that the world has become “worse.” He is especially adamant against “permisiveness,” as he calls it. “I don’t like the permisiveness here. Everything is permitted today,” he said. “Once, young people didn’t have the chutzpah they have today. They had to think about a trade and earning a living. They were carpenters and tailors. Today, everything is high-tech, easy things, without effort. It’s not the manual labor of the past. When we were kids, the parents said, ‘You’ll marry this person, not that one.’ Today, the kids decide everything. Once parents had a say.”