

Swim until you live

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So, let's meet the oldest competitor of men's swimming competition at the FINA World Masters Championships in Budapest, apparently a Hungarian, Bela Horvath Banki, aged 97.

Obviously, the first thing crossing your mind whenever you see ladies and gentlemen swimming competitively close to their 100th birthday is: Gosh, how comes?

Some people close to their 70s find hard to move – provided they are still alive.

Our heroes are getting ready to their respective races. As they take part in as many as possible.

In a live radio interview before this edition Bela Horvath Banki complained. “They let me swim only in five events. I would do more but we have this limit...”



Lucky him. He is not only able to swim, but also set new WRs in backstroke and free events.

Uncle Bela, as everyone calls him here, is a happy man (even if he could only race five times now, when the Masters are held in his home country).

His life is a mirror of the history of this side of Europe. He learnt swimming at the age of six (yes, 91 years ago).

He might have had a fine career in the pools as he started swimming competitively at the age of 16 (1936), but World War II halted his efforts. Soon he found himself in the Caucasus, the mountains where Europe and Asia met in the former Soviet Union.

He was held custody there as a prisoner of war. They were forced to work, digging, shovelling, whatever was required... Rather ordered... Heavy physical work. For almost four years.



History books tell you that only a small percentage survived those lagers. Uncle Bela belonged to the minority.

Swimming gave him a pretty good base to bear the workload and the mental pressure. Though the swimming career was no longer an alternative, he didn't give up his beloved sport. Later he joined the Masters movement where he has become a phenomenon by now.

Of course, 97 years ensure special recognition for any person showing up anywhere – but it's especially the case if you see such an old man on the starting blocks and between the ropes, completing leg after leg in the pool...

“First of all, it’s about genetics” says Mr. Horvath Banki.

“You need that. Many people running a healthy life don’t last that long. But if you are treasured and have good genes, you are also responsible to have a well-balanced life. I had never had too tense periods but never let room for laziness either. And of course I have always tried to take care of my nutrition. I mean, apart from the three years and eight months spent in the Caucasus...”



He talks with an unmistakable serenity and brightness. Smiling keeps his face fresh, rather reminding someone in his 80s.

I think this is about sport and could be thanked especially to swimming. It simply stops your aging. Just have a look at the Masters athletes’ competitions, in the higher age-groups.

Incredible. Uncle Bela is the living example of all this.

He has two brilliant mottos.

“I shall swim until I live because as long as I swim, I live.”

And the other one: “I can still swim because I’m healthy. But I’m only healthy because I swim.”

Print either one on T-Shirts, prepare posters. Both tell everything. And show a clean pathway for all of us.
