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**Dr. Väinö Kannisto:
A Reflexion**

James W. Vaupel

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A Reflexion

by James W. Vaupel¹

Abstract

This reflexion is published in memory of Väinö Kannisto, who died unexpectedly on 16 February 2002.

¹ Founding Director of the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research,
Doberaner Strasse 114, D-18057 Rostock, Germany. Email: JWV@demogr.mpg.de

Väinö Olavi Kannisto died suddenly in Lisbon on February 16, 85 years old. He was born in Helsinki on September 24, 1916. He was actively engaged in important demographic research until his death.

It seems appropriate to publish a brief account of Kannisto's life and scholarly works in *Demographic Research* as he contributed three articles to our journal (direct links given on start-up page). Our very first article, "Finnish Life Tables since 1751", authored by Kannisto, Mauri Nieminen and Oiva Turpeinen, Volume 1, Article 1, was released on July 1, 1999. By the time of his death, this article—not just the title or abstract, the entire article—had been downloaded in PDF format some 4023 times. Kannisto also co-authored one of *Demographic Research's* most recent publications, "The Survivor Ratio Method for Estimating Numbers at High Ages" by Roger Thatcher, Kannisto and Kirill Andreev, Volume 6, Article 1, published on January 4, 2002. Finally, Kannisto wrote "Measuring the Compression of Mortality", Volume 3, Article 6, published on September 12, 2000.

Väinö Kannisto wrote two pathbreaking books, *Development of Oldest-Old Mortality, 1950-1990: Evidence from 28 Developed Countries* and *The Advancing Frontier of Survival*, published in 1994 and 1996 as Odense Monographs on Population Aging, Volumes 1 and 3 (links given on start-up page). He assisted Roger Thatcher in writing *The Force of Mortality at Ages 80 to 120*, published in 1998 as Volume 5 of the Odense Monographs on Population Aging (link given on start-up page). Kannisto also was co-author of two books published in 1996 and 1997 by Statistics Finland: *Revised Life Tables for Finland 1881-1990* (with Mauri Nieminen) and *Abridged Life Tables for Finland 1751-1880* (with Oiva Turpeinen).

In addition to these books and articles, Väinö Kannisto wrote a major article about centenarians published in *Population Studies* in 1988 and an article about frailty and survival published in *Genus* in 1991. He also was the first author of an article on reductions in mortality at advanced ages published in *Population and Development Review* in 1994 and of an article entitled "No Increased Mortality in Later Life for Cohorts Born during Famine" published in *the American Journal of Epidemiology* in 1997. In January 2002 his article "Years Added to Life in Old Age" was published in Finland in the *Yearbook for Population Research*.

Note that this impressive record of innovative publications began in 1988 and continued to the month before his death. Indeed, up until the day of his death Väinö Kannisto continued to work on research publications, including a paper he was scheduled to present at a symposium on cross-national trends in mortality at older ages to be held at Duke University in May of this year. When his article on centenarians appeared in *Population Studies* in 1988, he was 72 years old. The thirteen years and a few months between then and his death were years of extraordinary productivity and creativity.

Over this period, Kannisto, with assistance from Roger Thatcher, created and then began analysis of the Kannisto-Thatcher Oldest-Old Database, a pioneering effort that compiled and organized death and population counts at ages above 80 in some 30 countries, mostly from 1950. This initiative enabled demographers to peer into the outer reaches of survival. The Kannisto-Thatcher Database was started at Odense University Medical School; the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research now maintains and updates this crown jewel of the Institute's data holdings. As a Distinguished Research Fellow in the early 1990s at Odense University Medical School and subsequently at the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research, Väinö Kannisto visited Odense, Denmark, and Rostock, Germany, many times. He also frequently travelled from his home in Lisbon to Finland, England, France, and the United States for various meetings and presentations.

In 1997 the enduring importance of Väinö Kannisto's research contributions was recognized with the award of the Prix de la Longevité by the Foundation IPSEN in Paris. He donated the sizeable prize to support doctoral students in Finland.

Before his productive career of research into oldest-old mortality and longevity began in his 70s, Kannisto had a distinguished career as a United Nations advisor on demographic and social statistics. His UN employment lasted a quarter of a century, from 1957 through 1981, followed by about 30 planning, advisory, and evaluation missions for the UN from 1982 through 1990. Earlier in his life, Kannisto worked as a statistical expert for various organizations in Finland and for the World Health Organization. He served in the Finnish army from 1939 to 1944 and was awarded the Freedom Cross IV and III.

Kannisto received an M. A. in Economics and Statistics from the University of Helsinki in 1938 and a Ph.D. in Statistics in 1947. His dissertation focused on "The Causes of Death as Demographic Factors in Finland". In 1947-1948 he pursued studies in biostatistics at the School of Hygiene and Public Health, Johns Hopkins University, followed in 1948-49 by studies in advanced economic statistics at the University of Pennsylvania. Over his life, he learned to understand, speak and fluently write seven languages—Finnish, Swedish, German, English, French, Portuguese, and Spanish—and he could get by in several others, including Turkish, Indonesian, Italian, and Danish. He was a cultured gentleman who was kind, modest and sympathetic.

Väinö Kannisto deeply understood how to appraise demographic data and how to glean new insights from demographic data. He had an unsurpassed feel for demography, an intuition and uncommon sense that led to profound insights. He generously helped and encouraged me and many others, in Finland, Germany, Denmark, England and elsewhere, in many ways. I first met him in late 1989, when he was 73 years old, in Cambridge, England, at a small meeting organized by Peter Laslett; we quickly became research colleagues and friends.

Väinö Kannisto's life exemplifies how much can be accomplished by a dedicated person not only during the years before retirement from paid employment but also in the years afterwards.