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The New Old Age

Caring and Coping

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Caregiving, Laced With Humor

By JUDITH GRAHAM

"My grandmother, she's not a normal person. She's like a character when she speaks. Every day she's playing like she's an actress."

These are words of love, and they come from Sacha Goldberger, a French photographer who has [turned his grandmother](#), 93-year-old Frederika Goldberger, into a minor European celebrity.

In the photos, you can see the qualities grandson and grandmother have in common: a wicked sense of humor, an utter lack of pretension and a keen taste for theatricality and the absurd.

This isn't an ordinary caregiving relationship, not by a long shot. But Sacha, 44 years old and unmarried, is deeply devoted to this spirited older relation who has played the role of Mamika ("my little grandmother," translated from her native Hungarian) in two of his books and a photography exhibition currently under way in Paris.

As for Frederika, "I like everything that my grandson does," she said in a recent Skype conversation from her apartment, which also serves as Sacha's office. "I hate not to do anything. Here, with my grandson, I have the feeling I am doing something."

Their unusual collaboration began after Frederika retired from her career as a textile consultant at age 80 and fell into a funk.

"I was very depressed because I lived for working," she told me in our Skype conversation.

Sacha had long dreamed of creating what he calls a "Woody Allen-like Web site with a French Jewish humor," and he had an inspiration. What if he took one of the pillars of that type of humor, a French man's relationship with his mother and grandmother, and asked Frederika to play along with some oddball ideas?

This Budapest-born baroness, whose family had owned the largest textile factory in Hungary before World War II, was a natural in front of the camera, assuming a straight-faced, imperturbable comic attitude whether donning a motorcycle helmet and goggles, polishing her fingernails with a gherkin, wearing giant flippers on the beach, lighting up a

banana, or dressed up as a Christmas tree with a golden star on her head. (All these photos and more appear in "[Mamika: My Mighty Little Grandmother](#)," published in the United States last year.)

"It was like a game for us, deciding what crazy thing we were going to do next, how we were going to keep people from being bored," said Sacha, who traces his close relationship with his grandmother to age 14, when she taught him how to drive and often picked him up at school. "Making pictures was a very good excuse to spend time together."

"He thought it was very funny to put a costume on me," said Frederika. "And I liked it."

People responded enthusiastically, and before long Sacha had cooked up what ended up becoming the most popular character role for Frederika: Super Mamika, outfitted in a body-hugging costume, tights, a motorcycle helmet and a flowing cape.

His grandmother *was* a super hero of sorts, because she had helped save 10 people from the Nazis during World War II, said Sacha. He also traced inspiration to Stan Lee, a Jewish artist who created the X-Men, The Hulk and the Fantastic Four for Marvel comics. "I wanted to ask what happens to these super heroes when they get old in these photographs with my grandmother."

Lest this seem a bit trivial to readers of this blog, consider this passage from Sacha's introduction to "[Mamika: My Might Little Grandmother](#)":

In a society where youth is the supreme value; where wrinkles have to be camouflaged; where old people are hidden as soon as they become cumbersome, where, for lack of time or desire, it is easier to put our elders in hospices rather than take care of them, I wanted to show that happiness in aging was also possible.

In our Skype conversation, Sacha confessed to anxiety about losing his grandmother, and said: "I always was very worried about what would happen if my grandmother disappeared. Because she is exceptional."

"I am not normal," Frederika piped up at his side, her face deeply wrinkled, her short hair beautifully coiffed, seemingly very satisfied with herself.

"So, making these pictures to me is the best thing that could happen," Sacha continued, "because now my grandma is immortal and it seems everyone knows her. I am giving to everybody in the world a bit of my grandma."

This wonderful expression of caring and creativity has expanded my view of intergenerational relations in this new old age.

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