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Separated by a protective screen: son Daniel visiting father Reymont at a care home in Le Locle (left)

Spontaneous solidarity, socially distanced: donations for people in need in Zurich (middle)

Improvisation required: a makeshift hospital in the sports hall Rämibühl in Zurich (right) Photos: Keystone

COVID-19 and the older generation

The high-risk group

Older people felt the effects of the lockdown in particular. They received help and support from the rest of the population, but were also made scapegoats. The epidemic has put intergenerational relations to the test.

SUSANNE WENGER

Pro Senectute launched a campaign in mid-May, just as Switzerland began to ease the lockdown. The short video shows elderly people doing various jobs and activities – such as Lola (66) reading a bedtime story to her granddaughter, and Henri (84) trimming his neighbours' hedge. The clip ends with the tag line "Elderly and indispensable". Pro Senectute is a Swiss non-profit organisation that has been serving the elderly for over a century. Its current campaign is a reaction to how COVID-19 has radically narrowed our view of older people. Anyone aged 65 or over belongs to the high-risk group. At the beginning of the crisis, the Federal Office of Public Health announced that elderly people were especially vulnerable and needed protection.

The infection statistics prove that the older you are, the more likely you are to die of COVID-19. But the disease also affects younger people, as we now know. Almost half of the people who ended up in intensive care in Switzerland were under 60. However, we knew less at the start of the outbreak in mid-March than we do now. The government urged older people especially to stay at home, avoid contact with others, and refrain from going to the supermarket. Barring exceptions, the elderly followed these instructions to the letter.

Collective isolation

These instructions were issued on medical grounds. But they also had social consequences. Switzerland's over-65s, who account for a population of 1.6 million, were sent into collective isolation. The cantons banned visits to care homes – a move that caused much anguish but failed to prevent fatalities. The overwhelming majority of older people in Switzerland live at home. Birthdays had to be spent alone, as the elderly suddenly found themselves cut off from the outside world. Pensioners were also unable to fulfil their societal duties. No more looking after grandchildren. No more charity work. Caritas Switzerland suffered volunteer shortages as a result.

A large proportion of Swiss pensioners do voluntary work. Many stay fit and active long after retirement, not least on account of good healthcare and a good quality of life. Their contribution to society is significant in a country that relies heavily on individual responsibility. For example, families and the government save eight billion Swiss francs a year on childcare thanks to the role of grandparents. In turn, the working population has been paying into the state pension system (old-age and survivors' insurance) for over 70 years. The intergenerational contract – the 'glue' that binds young and old – is a Swiss institution.

"Made scapegoats"

COVID-19 put this contract to the test, and the outcome was double-edged. On the one hand, there was a great deal of goodwill. People went out of their way to help the elderly in many parts of the country. Young people frequently did the shopping for their older neighbours, for example. That the old 'will soon die anyway', regardless of COVID-19, was and is a cynical minority view. However, politicians and the media began to wonder whether the whole of Switzerland really had to shut down to protect the old and vulnerable. Some suggested that pensioners with secure incomes should foot some of the huge bill associated with the lockdown – otherwise the younger generations would be forced to pick up the tab for a long time to come.

Resentment began to bubble among older people. While many accepted the restrictions with a certain sangfroid, the younger baby-boomer group who value their independence had particular problems adapting. No longer pillars of society, now they were nothing more than 'at risk' and a burden. Some received verbal abuse for not staying at home – although they were always allowed to go out in Switzerland. A 74-year-old man told Swiss television that this was the first time he had ever experienced discrimination. Why the backlash? Intergenerational expert Pasqualina Perrig-Chiello: "Older people were made scapegoats during this difficult time." The crisis brought out the latent negative associations ascribed to older people.

Implications for the state pension?

She says we have a "clichéd" view of the elderly: all frail, all well off. This view is far from correct. The Berne-based academic criticises politicians for also having helped to fuel this stereotype. The longer-term impact of the coronavirus crisis remains to be seen. Intense debate surrounded the issue of 'intergenerational conflict' even before the outbreak. Switzerland has an ageing population. Solutions are needed for social welfare, nursing care, pension provision, etc. "NZZ am Sonntag" believes that competition for a slice of the cake will increase after COVID-19. Young people need more support and the intergenerational contract looks shaky, argues the newspaper.

If anything, Perrig-Chiello thinks that the epidemic has proved how little the different generations are acquainted with each other on a societal level. Yet the Swiss have shown a remarkable amount of intergenerational solidarity in her view, "regardless of what the media say". This is something on which to build. "Then we could renegotiate the intergenerational contract on a more rational basis." Older people can also play a part, as the epidemic itself shows. The retired doctors and nurses who returned to the front line are perhaps the best example.

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