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## Orinda seniors celebrate longevity, romance and survival at annual luncheon event



Photos Victor Ryerson

**Vic and Fran Smith receive the Longest Married trophy.**

**By Victor Ryerson**

About 90 of Orinda's most senior citizens were feted in the Orinda Community Church on May 15 at the 20th Annual Orinda Three-Quarter Century Club Luncheon. The

lively gathering featured music, a lighthearted awards presentation, a delicious roast chicken lunch, and a poignant account of life in Nazi death camps by 87-year-old Holocaust survivor Bernat "Bernie" Rosner.

The music, a short Bach

program, was provided by Pamela Freund-Striplen and Amy Likar of the Gold Coast Chamber Players, who are currently providing pop-up Bach performances at various local venues. Indeed, one of the players had to rush off to Diablo Foods to "play Bach among the vegetables," as she explained.

Honored attendees must have reached the three-quarter century mark to qualify for attendance, but many far exceeded that milestone. Several received awards for their longevity. The "Baby of the Year" award went to Hazel Salessi, who had barely earned her seat at the banquet by turning 75 on May 9. The "Longest Married" award went to Vic and Fran Smith, who will mark 70 years on their June 4 anniversary.

"King" George Jedenoff will hit 102 years of age on July 5 – and was still skiing this winter's abundant snow-fall! "Queen" Ruth Jaffe trumped his longevity; she will be 104 in October. Elva

Rust, Queen for the past two years, is 101, and another brave soul stepped forward to confess that he was only 100.

"It wasn't until last year that we had anyone attend who was 100, and now we have four centurions," beamed Master of Ceremonies John Fazel (a mere piker at 82 years), who has organized the event for the past 20 years under the aegis of the Lamorinda Sunrise Rotary.

The event took on a more serious tone when Rosner recounted his experience as a 12-year-old internee at the notorious Auschwitz and Mauthausen camps. Separated from his father, mother, and other family members he never saw again upon arrival at Auschwitz, his inspirational tale of survival and success after enduring horrific treatment at the death camps kept the audience enthralled. With help from, among others, William Merrill, Jr. (of Merrill Lynch), then a GI at a refugee camp following liberation, he came to

the United States rather than returning to his native Hungary. Here he flourished, attending Cornell University and Harvard Law School, and eventually becoming Safeway's top lawyer for 10 years. Now retired, he has co-authored his memoirs with another Orindan, Fritz Tubach, in "An Uncommon Friendship," which tells the story of two boys caught on opposite sides of the Holocaust.

All in all, the event was a celebration of life, a recognition of the fact that it was remarkable to be there. As Fazel reminded the assemblage at the beginning of the luncheon, in 1944, the birth year of the youngest attendees, the life expectancy of a newborn was 62 years. You would never know it from the looks of the lively crowd that had long ago surpassed that mark.

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