Indra Devi at 100
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The "First Lady of Yoga" tackles her second century of mission

Indra Devi has traversed the entire twentieth century. In the 1920s, she toured Europe as a star of a Russian theatre group. In the 30s, she played the lead role in Indian movies. In the 40s she taught yoga to Greta Garbo and Gloria Swanson. In the 50s she brought yoga to Mexico. In the 60s she talked the Kremlin leaders into lifting restrictions on yoga in the USSR. In the 70s she moved to South America, and in the 80s finally settled down in Argentina to teach yoga there. Along her way through life Indra Devi has outlived two husbands (but had no children), become fluent in twelve languages (she's still good at five), accumulated more frequent flyer miles than a corporate executive and, at 100, slowed down only a bit. Meet Indra Devi in this special report by Mukunda Stiles of Boston.

A petite white-haired woman, doing the headstand wearing a traditional Indian sari, that's how I remember her. Indra Devi--Mataji as she is known--was remarkably inventive in every class I had with her. Just like her teacher, Prof. T. Krishnamacharya, no matter what the difficulty was in someone's life, she found a way to bring the practice of yoga to where the student was.

She was born Eugenie Peterson in Latvia on May 12, 1899, to a Russian noblewoman and a Swedish bank director. After the Russian revolution, when Latvia was annexed to the USSR, she fled with her mother to Berlin. There she became an actress and dancer. In 1927 she moved to India and was asked to act in an Indian film. For the role she was given the name "Indra Devi," which she used for the rest of her life.

Her own life of yoga began in an unexpected manner. While in India she married an attachÃ© to the Czechoslovakian diplomat in Bombay. Later, as the guest of the Maharaja and Maharani of Mysore, Mataji discovered that a portion of the palace was dedicated as a yoga school under the direction of master teacher Professor T. Krishnamacharya. Krishnamacharya is the guru of other famous yogis, notably Pattabhi Jois and BKS Iyengar. After committing to a two-year practice, she was accepted in 1929 by her teacher as the first non-Indian woman to learn yoga. Her life was transformed when she was healed of a serious heart condition through yoga. She had found her life-long passion. When her husband was reassigned to Shanghai in 1939, Krishnamacharya told her to begin teaching. She opened China's first yoga school in the home of Madame Chiang Kai-shek, wife of the country's military ruler. After World War II, she went back to India on retreat and wrote her first book, Yoga. She was the first Western woman to teach yoga in its country of origin. While there she met Gandhi, Tagore and Nehru.

Following the death of her first husband in 1946, she moved to Southern California where she became a hit with many Hollywood celebrities, including Greta Garbo and Gloria Swanson (to whom her book, Yoga for Americans, is

dedicated). The book and its sequel Forever Young Forever Healthy went on to become bestsellers, translated into ten languages and sold in 29 countries. Learning yoga was no fad for those actors and actresses. Methods of breath control, pranayama, learned from Indra Devi greatly improved their acting, and stars since then overtly or covertly have made use of yoga.

In 1953, Mataji married a physician, Dr. Sigrid Knauer, who bought her a beautiful 80-acre ranch in Tecate, Baja Mexico, that was to serve as home and yoga retreat center for the next 24 years. In 1960 she introduced yoga to the leaders of the Kremlin through a lecture arranged by the Indian Ambassador, K.P.S. Menon. Through her explanations to the leaders of the Communist Party--including Aleksei Kosygin, the Soviet premier; Andrei Gromyko, the foreign minister; and Anasta Mikoyan, chairman of the Supreme Soviet--about the real benefits of yoga, Mataji secured the raising of the prohibition that affected this ancient Indian science.

Her own spiritual life took a profound turn upward when she met Satya Sai Baba in 1966. She made 24 trips over the ensuing decade and developed "Sai Yoga." "You do the asanas with a spiritual consciousness," she now taught. "Asanas are not purely physical. If they are, they are not yoga, they are gymnastics." She moved back to India to be near Sai Baba in 1977.

In 1983 Mataji met an Argentine rock star, Piero, who was tremendously inspired by her and yoga. He asked Mataji to be his spiritual godmother and she in turn made him agree to give

something positive to all his fans. Piero formed an organization called "Buenos Ondas" ("Good Vibrations") to perform community service--going to prisons or hospitals, helping the suffering--and practice regular meditation. Indra Devi felt that she must move to Argentina and teach them all how to do yoga. So in 1985 she settled in the South American country.

I met Mataji again at the invitation of my friend Rama Jyoti Vernon (founder of Yoga Journal) during a Unity in Yoga conference in Jerusalem in 1996. She was wonderfully child-like, teaching two classes a day at age 97. Following this reconnection I was invited by David Lifar to attend Mataji's centennial birthday in Buenos Aires. David serves as the director to her six yoga centers in the city with 30 teachers and 2,000 weekly students. He and his Russian wife, Iana, and their daughter, Paulo, who is a physician specializing in Ayurvedic medicine, are completely devoted to Mataji. Over 3,000 people attended the Buenos Aires birthday party of the forever young, forever healthy Mataji, with well wishes sent by the President of Argentina, Carlos Saul Menem, a friend. Mataji has touched the lives of millions around the globe. "Yoga is the only science," she said, "which can help the human being in the next millennium, because it has a profound influence on our physical, mental emotional and spiritual aspects." 1â□□2 1â□□4

By Mukunda Stiles, Yoga Therapy Center, Boston.
yogimuk@banet.net

CONTACT: INDRA DEVI FOUNDATION, AZCUENAGA 762, BUENOS AIRES 1029 ARGENTINA. PHONE: (54)1.4962.3112 / 4774.1031. WEBSITE: WWW.FUNDACION-INDRA DEVI.ORG/ENGLISH.HTM. E-MAIL: INFO@FUNDACION-INDRA-DEVI.ORG