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Ecuador

LOJA PROVINCE

Peru

Larger-Than-Life Dwarfs

Learn about fascinating episodes and facts involving dwarfs, including:

- The region in Ecuador that is home to dwarfs who are apparently descendants of Jewish exiles from Spain, and who do not suffer from cancer or diabetes
- An empire of dwarfs in China
- A British officer who was only 18 inches high
- General Tom Thumb
- A family of Jewish dwarfs who survived Auschwitz due to their size



In times past, when kings were believed to rule by divine right and their subjects were considered property of the crown, it was common for the royal court to include “short people” to entertain the royal family and guests with their singing, dancing and tricks. Often, it was their size alone that was the source of the entertainment. They were laughed at because they were extremely short.

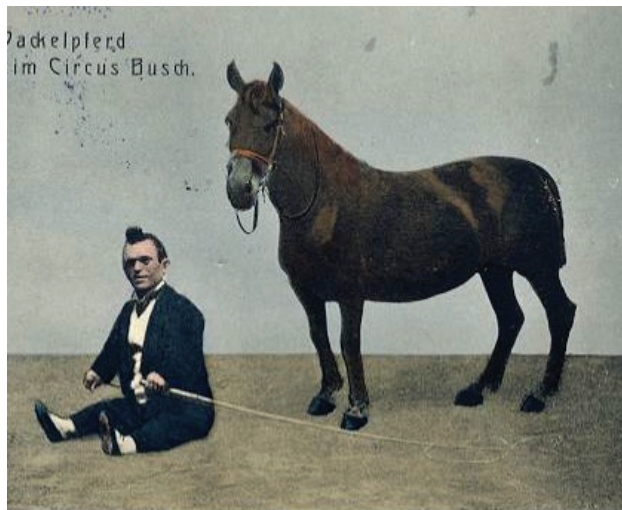
Today, in our politically correct world, such derision is considered uncouth—indeed, the English language has undergone recent changes to reflect this new viewpoint. Although the word “midget,” referring to a person who is very short, was common until the end of the twentieth century, it is now rarely used and can be considered offensive. It has given way to “short person” or “little person.”

The word “dwarf,” on the other hand, is still in common use and is generally not considered offensive. The term can refer to a person with one of several varieties of a specific genetic condition called dwarfism, but technically, a dwarf is any extremely short adult (less than 58 inches tall). While “midget” traditionally referred to a little person of normal proportions, “dwarf” often meant someone of disproportionate features resulting from some genetic or nutritional deficiency. Nevertheless, “dwarf” today is often used to refer to either case.

Whatever the term, even today, it is no easy task to be undersized. These people may find it difficult to get around unaided, tend to tire more readily than others and suffer from the disagreeable stigma related to their height.

In a classroom setting, where no law can completely prevent discrimination, they often suffer. That is despite the fact that their mental and emotional development lags in no way behind those of others.

There is no single explanation for why certain people do not achieve



A little person with his pygmy horse.

normal height. Doctors have identified some 200 different medical issues that can retard a person’s growth. In some cases, only part of the body fails to grow; for example, the head may be of normal size, while the rest of the body is not.

Since the causes for reduced height vary, no single treatment has been developed. In some cases, the issue is failure of the bone structure to grow properly. When that is the case, an operation may correct the problem. Others suffer from a deficiency in growth hormones, which can be treated with artificial hormone therapy. Such therapy is only effective, however, during the formative years.

Let us now delve into some of the most fascinating cases, facts and trivia regarding people who never grow to be within the normal range of height.

Dwarf Descendants of the Spanish Exiles

In a remote area of Ecuador, a mysterious phenomenon continues to puzzle doctors and scientists. Because of a genetic disorder known as Laron syndrome, the locals are all extremely short. The average height of adults in the remote southern villages of the Loja Province is just four feet.

What is far stranger, though, is the fact that cancer and diabetes are totally absent from this population. For the past 25 years, researchers have studied them in an attempt to discover why they are so healthy, despite the fact that many of them are obese. Now, researchers are trying to develop a drug that would mimic in people of average height the same health benefits enjoyed by the Ecuadoran dwarfs.

This community was first discovered 25 years ago by Dr. Jaime Guevara-Aguirre, an Ecuadoran doctor who specializes in the treatment of diabetes. While on vacation, he rode horseback among the isolated villages that dot the mountainsides. Most of the residents of the area were indigenous peoples, but then he chanced upon several villages that were inhabited by descendants of Europeans. These white men used surnames that are known historically to have belonged to families of conversos (Marranos), Jews from Spain and Portugal who were forced to convert to Christianity in the 1490s but were nonetheless persecuted in the Inquisition for secretly practicing Jewish rituals. Dr. Guevara was shocked to discover that the vast majority of them were unusually short.

Dr. Guevara was fascinated by this unexpected phenomenon, and he decided to investigate further. After studying the residents for a while, he discovered an even more surprising fact: they seemed to enjoy some unseemly protection from cancer and diabetes.

Working together with other experts, Dr. Guevara identified the cause of the reduced height as Laron syndrome. This disorder takes its name from Dr. Zvi Laron, an Israeli researcher. During the 1950s, he conducted a study of some little people in *Eretz Yisrael*, and he was surprised to find that they had normal levels of growth hormones. If their growth hormones were normal, there must have been some other reason why they did not grow as others, and eventually, he identified the problem as a lack of growth hormone receptors. This is the mechanism by which the body cells are stimulated to divide and reproduce to allow the person



A dwarf panhandles in Iran.



Royal courts often kept dwarfs to entertain the king and his courtiers.