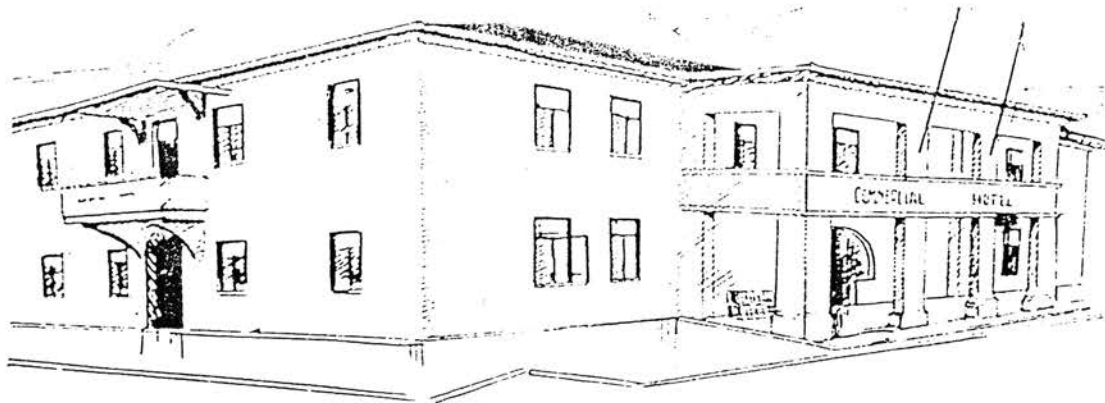




Exterior of the Commercial Hotel, Robertson

VIGNETTES OF A SOUTH AFRICAN COUNTRY HOTEL

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by

Sylvia (Blumberg) Ezer & Louis Blumberg

One of the many South African country hotels that were owned and run by Jews in the first half of the last century was the Commercial Hotel in Robertson in the South-Western Cape.

Proprietors were Meyer and Lenie Blumberg, who rebuilt the hotel during the 1930s. The following reminiscences of growing up in the hotel were written by their children, Sylvia (Blumberg) Ezer and Louis Blumberg.

SYLVIA EZER LOOKS BACK

I well recall the large Hotel kitchen - the heat of the huge hotel stove, the big, sharp knives for cutting and chopping and the enormous fridges housed in a courtyard behind the kitchen. From the courtyard there was also access to the Bar, the WHITE Bar, that is, and the WHITE bottle Store. There was a separate place for the black customers where cheap bottles were sold and they all had their "doppies".

Sylvia (Blumberg) Ezer was born and grew up in Robertson and studied drama at the University of Cape Town. After her marriage, she emigrated to London, where she still sings and maintains an active interest in Theatre for Youth.

Louis Blumberg is a retired surgeon who was born in Swellendam and studied Medicine at the university of Cape Town. He lives in Pretoria.

There was **Chef**. He was of medium height, slim as a reed and very black. His tall, white cook's hat and white apron could have featured in an advertisement for soap powder; it was a most amazing contrast to his polished black skin. Eva, his wife, was the complete opposite, being light-skinned, rather slovenly and very fat and large; everything about her wobbled. I loved eating the little chunks of raw meat, sprinkled with raw salt, that Chef would cut for me and the fishes heads that were fried in the hot, splattering oil.

I remember the seething crowds on Saturdays, the noise and drunkenness and fights that took place. Chef was often tipsy and at times beyond it all so that Eva had to take over. He and Eva had many disagreements and would hurl insults and curses at each other, making threatening gestures with knives. No-one was ever harmed, however. Kitty and Dora, both of whom waited at the dining room tables, I remember with great affection. Dora had come to the family many years earlier as a "mother's help" and

had looked after me from babyhood onwards. She had a hard life and an unhappy marriage.

The **Andre Huguenet & Johan Nel** touring theatre companies always stayed at our hotel. It was through seeing these marvellous actors from the tender age of six performing some of their many classical plays in the Robertson Town Hall that provided the seeds of a lifelong interest in the theatre. Then there were the Commercial Travellers who always gave me sweets and in particular Mr Albert, who was always known by his nickname "Angel Albert".

Footballers always stayed at the Commercial and would eat and drink endlessly after matches. One evening springs to mind when there was a special dinner for the footballers, for which occasion a very long table had been set up. They were all rather tipsy and one heavily-built player was enjoying plate after plate of my mother's Special Curried Fish (and it certainly was special. I recall the flavour to this day!). His companion suddenly rose, strode into the kitchen and picked up the gigantic metal bowl that housed all that pickled *kabeljou*. He then set it down with a flourish in front of his friend, making some appropriate remark in Afrikaans as he did so.

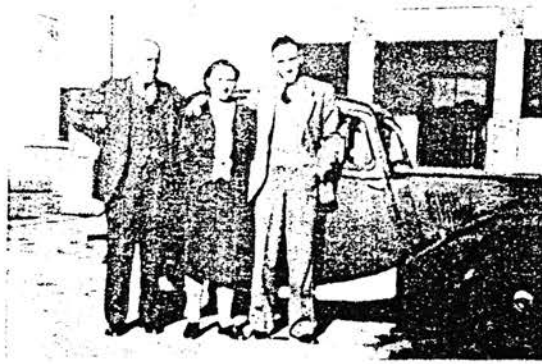
As a little girl, I adored all of the 15 to 20 cats that roamed in the grounds and the garden of our house next door and kept the mice in the storerooms at bay. I would feed them, play with them and even dress up the kittens and push them about in my doll's pram.

Antonie was the outside cleaner. A coloured man, he was ageless and could have been a hundred! He was always in the same tattered garments, including an old hat with a feather, and went barefoot no matter what the weather. He must have lived in one of the storerooms. I think he had only one seeing eye and permanently swept around the Hotel with an ancient broom. I have such a clear picture of this Antonie and think that Leipoldt could have been describing this very character in many a nostalgic poem.

How all these memories come so clearly to mind, not only the pleasurable and humorous ones, but also the problems and worries. It was not an easy, relaxed life for my parents, and as the baby of the family who grew up in their hotel period, I was very much aware of it. Still, I think they enjoyed great parts of it and could always see their caring sincerity and how they would give of their best service to all who came to stay.

LOUIS BLUMBERG'S REMINISCENCES

Those were the days when 'Bed and Breakfast' cost the princely sum of two shillings and sixpence; 'Dinner, Bed and Breakfast' must have been five shillings. Mondays and Thursdays, when the dining room was crowded with commercial travellers, were always the busiest evenings. Kitty and Dora served the tables at break-neck speed - Hors d'oeuvres, soup, entree, roasts, veges, sweets, fruit, coffee, cheese and biscuits. The menu was fit for a gourmet. Sunday midday dinners were very special; people came sometimes from as far away as Cape Town to



Meyer, Lenie and Louis outside the Commercial Hotel, late 1930's.

enjoy the delicious fare. Lenie, my mother, would type the menu and preside in the big kitchen during the dinner hour. Not only was she the virtuoso cook, but she also had to calm down Chef when he was tipsy and brandishing his big carving knife.

Dick, who came out from Zanzibar (or so he told me), did indoor and outdoor work. He was a great womaniser and held me spellbound with tales of his amorous exploits, always ending his story with "Chrise Massa Louis!". Every afternoon by about five the furnace had to be stoked up to provide hot water for the bathrooms. If both Antonie and Dick were drunk, there was a major crisis, especially in winter.

Visitors left their shoes outside their bedrooms and retrieved them the next morning brightly polished. They were never stolen and, miraculously, seldom got mixed up.

For **Rosh Hashana** and **Yom Kippur**, the hotel would bulge at the seams with Jewish people from the nearby towns of Montague, Bonnievale, Swellendam and Heidelberg and the Buffelsjagtsrivier Blumbergs. The young girls looked lovely in their new Yom Tov dresses. Everybody came into the kitchen to break the fast, my mother dispensing delicious buns, coffee, soda water and milk. In the bar and lounge, people enjoyed a schnapps before making their way to the dining room and a feast to remember. Later, everybody in town turned up for more jollity and the AGM of the Robertson Hebrew Congregation.

In those far-off days, **Music Examiners** from the Royal Academy and Trinity College were sent from England to examine candidates and survey the South African music scene. They stayed at the Commercial Hotel when visiting Robertson and were treated with awe and reverence by my mother, who regarded these 'professors' from across the seas as the elite of the music world, only slightly below Royalty in social status (besides, her's was a musical household and one or more of her children would be appearing as candidates). She made sure that there was chopped liver and gefilte fish on the menu for dinner, over and above the usual generous fare.

There was a large **store-room**, with groceries of every kind, the necessary items being brought into the kitchen and pantry as required. Stocks were replenished every month. The commercial traveller



The hotel lounge.

who took the order was a certain Mr Ball, a neat, brisk and efficient man. He and my mother would inspect the stocks together and decide what needed to be ordered. He also took orders on the side for his wife's home-made chutney, which was to become famous as "Mrs Ball's Chutney", and is a household name to this day.

My father, Meyer's, office opened off the entrance hall. He welcomed guests, had them sign the visitor's book and directed the porter to escort them to their room. He kept a careful finger on every aspect of the business and himself served in the bar and lounge-bar at busy times. My father was a very well-liked mine host and was fluent in English, Afrikaans, Yiddish, German and Swedish. He knew everyone on the road and was someone people 'liked to do business with'.

My sister Sylvia has referred to Andre Huguenet and his group of actors. They were pioneers of Afrikaans theatre. Stalwarts of the Huguenet group were Siegfried Mynhardt, Johan Nel, Wena Naude and Lydia Lindeque. These were very hard times for them and they could hardly make ends meet. They would travel from one *platteland dorp* to another, hiring the Town Halls to put on their shows, often to a meagre audience. They had good reason to be grateful to my father as he would allow them to use some pieces of furniture for props.

I have vivid recollections of the Salvation Army brass band playing at the corner of our street, the

thumping of the big drum and the tinkle of the tambourines. I would regularly be sent to put a shilling into the collection box.

There was a piano in the big **hotel lounge** and informal dances took place there some Saturday nights. One of the commercial travellers, who had a fine baritone voice and carried his sheet music with him, would always be happy to give a short recital when an accompanist could be found. Sometimes it might be my sister Naomi. In the far opposite corner stood a large radiogram of the cabinet sort with a fine collection of 78s - jazz records of the hits of the day. As a teenage boxing fan, I would from time to time pick up the Big Fight broadcast commentaries - Joe Louis vs Max Schmelling - from Madison Square Gardens at four in the morning, although the background static and crackle rather marred the reception.

My father liked to sit on the **stoep** at the entrance of the hotel during a quiet moment where passer-by would greet him with a cordial "Good day, Mr Blumberg". After the pub had closed at 10 o'clock and he had cashed up for the day, he would do a round of the premises and sit for a while, enjoying the '*frische luft*' before switching on the night bell and night light and retiring to bed.

I looked forward to **Friday evenings** when I walked to shul with my father, arm in arm (he was the *Gabbai* of the congregation for many years). It was a peaceful interlude for him and for me. I envied other families who could sit down together at mealtimes every day, whereas our parents were busiest at the dinner hour and would often have their evening meal quite late, when we children were doing our homework or practising our music.

Running a country hotel was a busy, demanding and at times hectic experience. A sense of humour and the ability to deal with all sorts of people, often in unusual and unexpected circumstances, was a great asset, but being at the beck and call of the public most of the time could be extremely trying. However, my mother and father accepted it as part of a day's work and soldiered on. They never lost their interest in people and both old friends and new were always assured of a warm welcome.

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