

## **Jan S Marais Hospital by Stanley Loon**

In the 1950's, my father, Donny Loon, was a GP in Bellville, a town in the Northern Suburbs some 20 km from Cape Town. His surgery was attached to our house in an area that was to become the central business district of Bellville. In 1964, we moved to a house in a Bellville suburb to be closer to schools and lead a more suburban life.

The concept of private hospitals in the area had just started. In 1964, Medi Park, which was the first private hospital in Cape Town, started a day hospital on its premises. A day hospital being a facility where doctors perform minor surgery with the patient going home the same day.

Donny understood there was a great need for a similar day hospital outside of Cape Town and so planned the conversion of our old house into exactly that. This became 'The Bellville Surgical Centre'. Our lounge was converted into a reception room, the dining room and kitchen became operating theatres, my folks' bedroom and my bedroom which I had shared with my sister, Rosalind, became two 4- bed wards. My elder sister, Gail's bedroom had access to the back yard and so was an ideal doctors' changing room. The doctors were impressed, it had fulfilled a great need of theirs and saved travelling and precious time. He was then asked to convert a house in Goodwood into a day hospital which he willingly did. This became the Libertas hospital.

At that time, plans were afoot to build a private hospital and a hotel next to it – the Holiday Inn - in Bellville. Donny accepted the offer of designing the hospital. Intensive research went into the planning. The basic idea was to centralize all private medical services for the benefit and convenience of not only doctors, specialists and nurses, but the patient himself. In 1971, it opened at which time he gave up his GP practice to become the superintendent. The financing of the hospital was through the Trust Bank and so the facility was named after their CEO, Jan S Marais.

The hospital had 2 wings. One wing was the hospital and the second wing became doctors' consulting rooms. The first floor of the hospital was a female ward, the second floor a male ward, the third floor a children's ward, while the fourth floor was a maternity ward. The operating theatres were on the fifth floor. In addition, on this floor was an eight-bed intensive care unit.

Time for an anecdote:

A friend of ours was admitted to the ICU after a heart attack. Sidney was a boxing fanatic and that same night an important fight was going to be shown live on TV. He wanted to watch it and being the only

patient there, he wouldn't be disturbing anyone. When his doctor and the nurses showed opposition to his request, Sidney became very agitated. His wife was distraught, fearing that he might have another attack and deteriorate and phoned Donny in a panic. My dad was known for being very calm in such situations and for having an outstanding bedside manner. He went to the ICU and made a deal with Sidney, his family and staff, that he would tape the fight and show it to him afterwards, on condition that he be told the result before watching it. This was done and worked perfectly. Indeed there was a happy ending with Sidney recovering well.

On the roof there were rooms for sterilizing and technicians workshop and next to it, a helicopter pad! The first floor of the second wing included a pharmacy, kitchen and staff dining room. An X-ray department was on another floor. There were some ultramodern features. Each ward on the maternity section had its own nursery room attached to it, so mothers could see their babies. The wards for male, female and children were all designed with 2 sides being rows of wards and a middle island of rooms which included the nurses' station in the middle.

There were 2 private wards on the male and female floors. Each of these rooms had an en-suite bathroom and there was also a TV camera so that the nurses at the nurses' station could monitor these patients, usually after an operation. They used a board with electrical lights representing each bed so that when a patient rang the bell, the light for that bed would light up showing the nurse which patient had rung.

In that station, there was also a machine for writing prescriptions which automatically appeared on a machine – a forerunner to a FAX - in the pharmacy.

Unfortunately for my father, Bellville was the wrong choice of place to run such a hospital. The reason being that the Broederbond, where several Afrikaans physicians were members, was very strong in the town at the time. The Broederbond was an exclusive male Afrikaner Calvinist secret society in South Africa dedicated to the advancement of the Afrikaner people. Their saying was "Hoe kan ons saam met die Jode werk?". (how can we work with the Jews?). They built a second private hospital, The Louis Leipoldt in Bellville. The Jan S Marais couldn't compete and went bankrupt in 1977.

This was not the first and only time that Donny had been confronted by antisemitism. He was brought up in Doornfontein, Johannesburg. He had many uncles not much older than him and they all lived in the same house. They taught him to stand up for his principles. If anyone called you a 'bloody Jew', you hit first and asked questions later. One day, in 1933, at the age of 9, he was sitting on the pavement

watching his uncles playing cricket in the road. A boy about his age came and sat next to him and told him that his parents had just returned from Germany and said that Hitler 'would kill all you Jews'. He did as he was taught and punched the boy in his face. The boy ran home crying. His two older brothers came out, saw the cricket game and presumed it was one of the uncles that had hit their brother and a huge fight began. This story always brought a smile to my dad's face, not because of the fight, but the sight of another uncle who was walking home from work reading his newspaper, saw the fight, folded his newspaper neatly, put it in his jacket pocket, removed his glasses, put them in a glasses case then into his pocket and within a split second went flying into the fight, fists first.

Once, I think it was in 1965, I was sitting with my father in the doctor's changing room of the day hospital. He was waiting to remove a pellet from the tip of a boy's finger. A doctor who had just finished an op, came into the room to change into his street clothes. My dad provoked him mercilessly, asking him how he liked working in a place run by a Jew. The doctor couldn't get dressed fast enough and left. I was shocked.

Donny said that that doctor was a member of the Broederbond, but had no option other than returning to operate in the clinic as this was the only one of its kind in the area. A few days later he told me that the doctor had done another op that day.

My parents were once invited to a dinner party of a prominent Afrikaans businessman in Bellville. After dinner, the men went into one room and the women into another. The men took turns in telling jokes. They were all derogatory regarding Jews. My father was quiet throughout until he couldn't take it any longer. He asked for his turn. The others were pleased. They didn't consider him a threat. This is the story he told.

Van der Merwe worked in a zoo. In the zoo there were two gorillas, a male and female. The male gorilla died and the female went into mourning and refused to eat. She was getting weaker and weaker. The zookeeper told Van that he had asked other zoos if they had a male gorilla that they could have but none had. He said that he consulted an expert who said that there was a chance of saving her if she was made love to. Van was asked to do it and he said that this was most unusual and he needed to 'clear it first with the wife'. The next day, he told the zookeeper that his wife had at first flatly refused, but when shown a picture of the poor gorilla she relented and gave her consent, but only on three provisos. The first proviso was that the gorilla's nails must be cut. No problem. The second proviso- she had to be given a sedative so she wouldn't be violent. Of course. The third proviso, and the most important: any

offspring would attend an Afrikaans Medium school. There was silence. My parents left soon after and were never invited again....

After the failure of the Jan Maria's Clinic financially, Donny was jobless and had to resort to doing locums again at the age of close to 55. As an aside, one job he did take on was being the doctor on set of the film "Zulu Dawn". Here, he befriended Burt Lancaster. Later, in the 1980s he worked in the Emergency Room at Groote Schuur Hospital. It was at this time that his knowledge of computers, self-taught, enabled him to set up a Medical Informatics system for the hospital. In 1989, when my folks came on Aliya, his experience in the field, was immediately recognized and he worked for about 10 years, creating the medical informatics department for the Maccabi Health Organization.

Donny passed away in 2011.

The hospital continued under new ownership and was a "hospital for colour", the first in the Cape. It is now run by the University of the Western Cape as a teaching hospital.

~~~~~

**Written in September 2023 by Stanley Loon**

**Posted on the CHOL Share Your Stories Site in November, 2023**