

London Road And The Geneva Hotel by Issy Nochomovitz

In my youth, my family—Mom, Dad, and sister Sandra, lived at the Geneva Hotel which was situated on London Road in Sea Point a suburb of Cape Town, from around 1952 to 1957. Over the years, we occupied various rooms, the last being a spacious single located right at the entrance to the annex.

The Geneva was a residential hotel and was owned by my mother's aunt Dora Idels. Our financial situation wasn't exactly "flush", my dad being a salesperson for SA Dried Fruit who did not bring home a ton of "bacon"! As a result and being a very kind lady, Auntie Dora helped our family by charging us a special rate.

London Road was a one-way street stretching from Main Road down to Beach Road. At the time of our residence there, the street was charming and tree-lined dotted with a hotel, boarding house, houses, and flats.

Whenever I think back to London Road—the memories and the colorful characters who lived there, made the street come alive. It was our own little world and one could say, "our version of Sesame Street" or Mr Rogers' Neighbourhood!!

At the top of the street, a bottle store stood on one side, while the Penguin Café occupied the opposite corner.

Walking past the Penguin Café was a small green grocer café. We never knew the name of the shop only that we called the small rotund owner "Gogga". This was where we purchased our supply of one cent frozen suckers. We had a choice of different flavours on a stick!

Every Friday evening, a lively crowd gathered outside the bottle store—people of all backgrounds came to stock up on their weekend supply of drinks.

The Penguin Café, a cozy local spot, was owned and operated by the Kalas family: mother, father, and their six children—Maria, Pari, Nicky, Janet, Helen and the son Nicholas.

The family lived in the apartment above the café, which gave the place a warm, lived-in feel. Inside, the café featured booths, each equipped with its own music box, added a charming touch to the atmosphere.

The Geneva, as it was known, consisted of three buildings—the main building with its two

annexes, nestled beside the Penguin Café. During our time living there, our fellow residents were an eclectic bunch, each adding their own unique flavor to the experience.

My memories of the hotel staff include Leech, the telephone operator, whose favourite pastime was eavesdropping on residents' phone calls. This titbit of gossip I learnt from Isobel, Auntie Dora's daughter. My memory of Leech was one of someone who always had a big smile on his face. Then there was Zambo, the cook, and George, the head waiter, who made the best mayonnaise salad I've ever tasted. I don't remember anything of Zambo, but besides the salad, I remember George and the red sash he wore with pride which showed that he was the head waiter and in charge of the large dining room.

The kitchen always catered to the school-going kids, preparing sandwiches of their choice, neatly packed in greaseproof paper.

And then there were the residents—where to begin?

There was the Goldman family, whose daughter Ilana took Greek dancing lessons with my sister Sandra.

The Shinotsky's were another memorable family. The father worked in construction, and the two siblings were Sammy, the older brother, and Rosalie the sister. Rosalie was a sleepwalker and once wandered all the way to the Penguin Café.

Then there were the Lubinsky's: Dave, Esther, and their children, Sylvia and Barry. They eventually moved to Bellville after purchasing a house on 9th Avenue. We used to visit them quite often in their new home.

Lastly, I remember Sally Klaas—a young single woman who grew up in Oudtshoorn.

Friday nights were often filled with entertainment for the annex residents. From impromptu concerts to lively games of hide and seek, those evenings created some of our fondest memories.

Stepping onto the sidewalk along London Road instantly awakened the senses. The hum of cars and buses coursing down Main Road filled the air, punctuated by the sharp blast of a horn from the fish vendor as he parked his horse-drawn cart, brimming with a fresh catch, outside our annex. Alongside him, another gentleman sold fresh fruit and vegetables from the back of his own horse and cart—a familiar rhythm of street commerce.

What of the residents of London Road? There were the Lurie's, with their two daughters Vivienne and Avrill, who lived in a house directly across from the hotel.

Next door stood a small block of flats, where the Millers occupied the top floor. I went to school with their daughter, Pat. Janet Cox, a dark-haired teenager, also lived nearby, as did Jill Kenyon, another resident of our “little world”!

On the ground floor of the adjacent flats lived the Kruyers. Their son Allan— nicknamed “Slats”— and daughter Sandra were part of our everyday landscape. We called her “Big Sandra” to distinguish her from my sister, also named Sandra. Allan was a close friend of my mother’s brother, Harry Barr.

Further down the road stood another block of flats, home to the Zacks: Milly, Julius, and their daughter Delene. They had moved there from the Geneva Hotel and were good friends of my parents.

It was always a treat to walk down London Road to the “beachfront” which was a sight for sore eyes. The never-ending green grass which stretched for miles along the length of Beach Road; the sea wall, the white sand covered with sea shells below it and finally the Atlantic Ocean washing up against the shore with seaweed bobbing up and down in the surf. But most of all there was “yamluft” or to use the English words the ‘sea air’ which was crisp, fresh and gave one the feeling of floating out there in the middle of the ocean.

Not far from the London and Beach road’s intersection was a local men’s only institution called Graaf’s Pool. The pool was the ocean and it was surrounded by a high concrete wall. The wall was there to conceal the full nakedness of the men who dipped and swam in the freezing cold waters of the Atlantic Ocean. In my twenties, a friend and I used to take our morning run along the beachfront and nothing was more satisfying after miles underfoot, then jumping into the refreshing water of Graaf’s Pool!

These, then, are some of the recollections I hold dear of that wonderful street and its colorful characters during the tender years of my youth.

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**Written by Issy Nochomovitz in 2025**

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