

Muizenberg by Gail Lustig



Sunday was Muizenberg day. My mother would pile us into her car and we would go the 'back way' down Modderdam Road from Bellville all the way to Muizenberg in one stretch. Most people went there from Cape Town, but we lived in the Northern Suburbs and because it was usually quite abandoned, I had a sense of our route being really special.

It took us, through Bellville South and the Cape Flats, where the Coloureds lived, and through Langa where the Blacks lived; we zig-zagged back and forth like the needle on my mother's Singer sewing machine until we arrived at the part where we saw the sea for the first time. There, beyond the sand we would notice the waves at low-tide, ruffled into delicate creases like cotton cloth. They never seemed to change and it was as if they had travelled from far away, possibly from India, I thought, with the smells of spices tucked in the folds.



We passed the long, ruler-straight beach to the east of the town, where we never sat, passed Arlington Court at the corner, its lime-green walls looking distinctly out of place, passed the Pavilion and then slowly, quite hoarse after all the singing in the car, we arrived in Melrose Road where my grandmother and grandfather, Yetta and Isadore Cohen, lived. (Left are Gail right and sister Rozzi in Muizenberg in c1960)

My grandparents had moved to Muizenberg in the fifties from Cape Town, though my grandfather continued working in his printing-press in the city for many years after. I'm not sure why they moved from their home under Table Mountain where they raised their four daughters. I think it was the magnificent Indian Ocean and the possibility of swimming in the sea that did it.

I remember they had two successive flats in Melrose Road. The first, they lived in when I was really small. One day when we left Muizenberg for home, coming out of the flat, I asked my mother if she thought it would be OK to call her parents *Bobbe* and *Zeide*. She looked down at me, told me she had forgotten something in the flat, turned and went in to fetch it. I looked up at the pale cream curtain blowing in the breeze and imagined my grandmother sitting on her couch, her legs too short to touch the floor, reading the newspaper, turning the pages after licking her second finger each time. She had taught herself English and it was a special treat after her chores, to sit and read the daily events. I was quite bucked with myself for thinking about the Yiddish words for grandma and grandpa, which I had picked up from some friends. Before long, I heard hearty laughter from the flat. That didn't happen too often because both of them were pretty serious most of the time, but it seemed that I had made them laugh by my request. I never did call them *Bobbe* and *Zeide* although I fantasized about that.



The second flat they lived in was further down the road, right at the end near the railway line. It had 'Clarendon Court' written on the front of the building. My grandparents lived on the ground floor opposite a hair-dressing salon called Vanity Fair. I loved the smell of hairspray that wafted across the hall to our flat and the sight of the women leaving with their hair teased up on their heads and their nails painted red.

Sundays in Muizenberg varied with the season. When we arrived, my grandfather would be finishing the Jackpot Crossword in the Cape Times. He would take great pains filling it out and even made several facsimiles by hand which gave him an extra chance. My grandmother would give us tea and I would watch her drink hers from a glass she held in a silver glass holder, sucking a lump of sugar in her mouth.

In winter, we would wait for the rain to stop and then all of us would go out for a walk, the three of us running ahead to reach the Promenade first. We would run all the way down, looking at the grey sea on our right, imagining how we could ever swim in that massive expanse of cold water. My mother and her parents would trail behind and then they would sit down on a bench waiting for us to return.



My grandmother had two friends; Mrs Benjamin and Mrs Yankelowitz. They were just like her, dressed in their neat skirts, blouses

and cardigans and speaking in thick Eastern European accents. I could never understand why they asked the same questions each time they saw me and how every time they needed to tell my grandmother that I was a *sheine meidel*. My grandmother would pinch her nose repeatedly, smiling to herself when they complimented her on me. I did not really mind because I had a sense that small things made her happy. (In the picture above, I revisited the promenade in 2019. The pavilion is in the background)



We would walk back a different way, past the Empire cinema (left) and back up a little street at the side of their flat where the wind howled up our clothes no matter the season. Often, we would stop in at a café and order a plate of hot chips and ketchup which was a special treat on a cold day.

Summers in Muizenberg were different altogether. Sometimes we stayed there for the full six weeks' holiday at the end of the year, the tree of us piling into my grandparents flat. My father never joined us. He hated the beach, the sand, the taste of it in his food and when he did visit us on occasion in the course of the summer, it felt like he didn't really belong.

He would bring his sketchpad with him and sketch scenes that caught his eye while we crowded onto the beach. He would soon fill it with drawings of children swinging on the swings while their parents *schmoozed* (chatted) on the sand eating from their stuffed picnic hampers. I think it was the ghetto feeling of Muizenberg that bothered him. There are some people who are picnic people and there are others who hate them. My father had chosen to live in a place far from most of the Jewish community (Belville) and being forced to sit back-to-back with them in a cordoned off area of beach, was not his idea of pleasure.



My father was not a 'believer'. He had been raised in a secular family in Johannesburg where he was influenced by his cousin Arnie who introduced him to Jazz, liberal ideas and free-thinking. His dream for South Africa was not fostering the ghetto mentality which my mother's side of the family seemed to relish. I learnt very quickly not to expect the impossible; he wasn't going to change and we accepted that.

Summers were simply heavenly. We would slip into our grandparents' flat which was a second home to us as easily as the train rushed past, moving effortlessly along the track from Cape Town to Simon's Town. My grandmother prepared us wonderful meals of chicken soup and challa bread and stewed apples and prunes with cinnamon sticks to suck on. At the end of the meal, she would gently wipe the crumbs towards her, cleaning off the tablecloth while she chanted the blessing in

Hebrew, her slim body moving backwards and forwards. At the time, I didn't really appreciate her cooking; it was too bland for my South African tongue, but over time, the sight of the silver serving-spoon tasting of fruit and spices from a different land, connected me to my Eastern European roots.

In the mornings, when it was not beach weather, she would send me to Sacks` Delicatessen to buy some bagels which were the most perfect I have ever tasted, slightly burnt and crispy on the outside and chewy on the inside. I would come back with them only to be sent out again, this time to a different shop a little further away to buy some salty white cheese.

After supper we would go to the Pavilion to a concert or show. Max Collie, the hypnotist would entertain the holiday makers by inviting volunteers onto the stage and hypnotizing them in front of hundreds of spectators. There was something eerie watching grown-up women acting like four-year-olds mesmerized by a magician with a thick Yiddish accent.

The summer holidays when my cousins joined us from overseas were wonderful. There were two lots, one from Cyprus and one from America, or later, England. Their arrival in Muizenberg seemed to bring a special flavour to the place. They had different clothes, spoke in different accents and I was really proud to have relatives who came from far away, much further than Johannesburg where most of the holiday-makers were from.

My cousin Barbie, from America was an instant hit at the talent show. She loved performing and we would sit on the wooden stand outside the Snake-pit, waiting for her to be called up onto the stage. Vic Davis ran the show; he was English, had greased hair perfectly combed back on his head, a charming smile and always wore a white jacket and tie. He would play the clarinet and before long there would not be a seat left on the stand. When it was Barbie`s turn, I would feel my heart skip a beat, and she would render her songs in a voice which came straight out of New Orleans, lapping the applause up as she sang her last note.



One year, to my great excitement, my cousin Michael, had his Barmitzvah in the Muizenberg synagogue (left) where my grandfather was one of the senior members of the congregation.

Michael's family, lived in Cyprus where his father was a geologist for the United Nations. Their children went to boarding school in England. My aunt, Riva, decided to have the barmitzvah in Cape Town where her family lived. Muizenberg was a natural choice.

Over the months beforehand, my mother, on the spot, working at long distance with my aunt, arranged the event, hiring the hall, sending out the invitations, organizing the *Brocha* refreshments. Helped by her cousin Miriam who had a flair for flower arrangements she filled the hall with an abundance of floral colour, the like of which has never been seen there since. My mother and her three sisters with the girl cousins sat in the Ladies' Gallery looking down through the metal bars and feeling very proud of Michael leading the service and singing his portion from the *Torah*. My grandfather was especially delighted because this was the first time a grandson of his, had honoured him in his own *Shul* on *Shabbos*.

Grandfather Isadore was very observant and, as I learnt, also deeply Zionist. He did not seem to make a fuss of religion as his wife my grandmother Yetta tended to do, and I suspect, he was more ideological about Israel as the homeland of the Jews than she was. In the late thirties, he even travelled there by ship from Cape Town to visit his mother who had settled there.

For me, Muizenberg was all about discovering who I was. In the summers I would cover myself in tanning lotion and lie on my towel with my friends and visitors from all over, quietly observing them and imagining what made them happy and sad. I would listen to the stories, the jokes and wonder where the rich repertoires were from. Often, I would spot someone I would be particularly interested in, never quite summoning up the courage to start connecting. It felt as if I was excluded from their lives by some strange force which defined the 'haves' from the 'have nots'.

You see, one of the most impressive features of the beach were the colourful wooden 'bathing boxes' that had been erected and were used as changing rooms and storage cabins for an annual fee. Owning a box was a privilege that placed you on a different level. It was here you could escape the sun, change out of your bathing-costume, meet with friends. Climbing the three sandy steps, opening the door with the heavy key that almost never fitted easily, opened up vistas of possibilities. No-one in our family ever owned one.



Instead, we seemed to spend most of our time in the water with which I developed a connection that no other natural physical experience has ever matched. By the sound of the waves, I could judge their mood which varied from playful and humorous to angry and forceful. Leaving my family and the 'scene' on the beach, I learnt the tides and over time, knew just how to manage them. When the waves were low and tickled my feet, my 'best' was holding my breath and running in as fast as I could and then breathlessly collapsing in a pool of water, hitting my chest and abdomen as I did so.

High tide seemed to happen all at once. Suddenly, I would notice the force of the waves which



dragged towels from where they had lapping up the sun, angrily wrapping them around the poles of the boxes. The sandy shore would disappear as the waves lashed out growing in size within minutes. It was when my feet stopped touching the sandy floor, that I experienced fear for the first time. The salty water would fill my nose and mouth and the currents drag me out to the sea. I would use my special dolphin stroke to make my way back to shore, excited by the adventure of it all and happy that I had performed well, surviving the ordeal just to start all over again.

It was getting knocked about by the tide and pummelled by the waves that I felt most free and challenged at once. No stretch of sea anywhere in the world has excited me and evoked my emotions to the heights as did the beach of Muizenberg of my youth.

Gail Lustig Date?