

“THE VIC”



The Dutch movie *Publieke Werken* (public works), based on a book by Dutch author Thomas Rosenboom, stirred up a fair few memories of my time at the Victoria Hotel in Amsterdam.

Before the days of ADHD, guys like me were just plain "stupid" -- condemned to a life of manual labour and a consequent probable existence at the lowest rungs. By the age of 17, my big mouth and uncontrollable behaviour had already gotten me expelled from the Waiter/Cook trade school and fired from a job as a Junior Waiter at the *Carlton Hotel* and restaurant *Het Lido*. So it was then, when I was lacking a job and most likely a



Carlton Hotel



Restaurant Het Lido

chance for an advanced education that my mother showed me an add she'd found in the classified section of our local newspaper; "Junior Office Clerk" wanted, salary: Dfl. 17,50 p/6-day ww. Apply to Mr. E. Verwaal, Hotel Victoria, Amsterdam. I figured, why not give it a shot? Lo and behold--I was hired. It was a chance for a

new start, a chance I could hardly afford to screw up.

It was early 1961 and I was an eighteen years old stubborn little shit. The job wasn't much; closing out and resetting the registers, checking the receipts, keeping track of print supplies, fetching coffee, and the like. I was Junior Office Clerk and like the Admiral in the HMS Pinafore, I did ever menial task possible, including -in a manner of speaking- polishing the handles of the big front door. But my eyes and ears were open and something clicked in that stubborn head of mine -- it was all about happy guests leaving their money.

Messrs Vermeij, Verwaal and Nachbahr formed the management. These gentlemen were always smartly dressed, articulate and respected. It was what I wanted, a goal to shoot for. It didn't take long before I knew everybody, and, more importantly, everybody knew me. But it wasn't the old stupid, stubborn me, it was a new, focused me. For the first time in my life, I wanted to- and was making a good impression.

The work was fulfilling and interesting. I gradually understood what it was all about. During weekends, I was allowed to work the American Bar, along with two -Fred & Ted- of the most seasoned bartenders of that time. One night of bartending equalled more than a week's worth of salary! The money was getting good -- the training better.

The most compelling department for me was the hotel reception. The men that ran it, the officers, they were the saints, Mr. Cor Drost, Mr. Joop van Toorn, uniformed in tuxedo coats, pinstriped trousers and grey ties--they spoke multiple languages. Their job was to see that the hotel was fully booked and they made it an art form. It was the next wrung and I wanted up.



In 1962, I was drafted, two years compulsory military service. Through my bosses, Mr. Verwaal and Vermeij, I got a part-time job whenever I had furlough, as a barman/waiter on the terrace facing the Damrak-avenue. "Coffee? Coming right up, ladies and gentlemen, a delicious pastry to go with it??"

Don't get me wrong, my transformation from loud mouth kid was far from over. After repeatedly asking Mr. Cor Drost, head of reception, whether I could be a receptionist one day, he exasperatedly replied: "Why don't you start by shutting your big mouth and opening your ears? You were born with two ears and one mouth for a reason... And, learn some decent English. Does that, you think, lie within the limits of your capabilities?!" "Deal!" I immediately signed up for a free course -soldiers 1st class were paid Dfl 1.10 (\$0.30) a day- which was offered by the air force and the Katholiek Militair Tehuis, a home away from home for draftees.

In 1964, I arrived. I finally became one of the gods—Junior Assistant Receptionist.

My first day I strut into the hotel, resplendent in my Tuxedo coat and pinstriped trousers. The entire hotel staff burst into applause.

There, behind the front desk, I was taught that a good hotel is a full hotel, and how to make this happen. First by Joop van Toorn, but also Ted Derenberg, who was a master as well! With the daily

arrival of more than thirty different nationalities, I developed a hunger for languages. Boy, did I have a good time...

After a year, the owner of the hotel - who had bought the "Vic" with the money he had made in South Africa - managed to secure me a summer-season job with a colleague in hotel *The Edward* in Durban, South Africa. The General Manager was Fred Gottgens, who, at thirty-two, was already general manager of one of the most luxurious hotels - back then - in Durban. I wrote down everything that 'deadly efficient' Swiss said and did.



Hotel The Edward

I realized that language should be learned where spoken. I read my first English novel that summer: *Mr. Midshipman Hornblower* by C.S. Forester. I now know the whole series by heart. Famous guests: Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery, Foster Dulles, Dean Rusk, Charles, Prince of Wales, Etc.

My English wasn't yet good enough, however, so off to London I went. The sister of my new found South African colleague Tony Grandhaie found me a job in Hotel *The Connaught*, right in the middle of Mayfair. Nine pounds sterling, fifteen shillings and six pence a week. The manager was a formidable gentleman, a/that famous Mr. Henri Gustave. Once an American guest complained to him



Hotel The Connaught

about my "attitude", that devil still played me (and indeed, still does) Mr Gustave explained, "Mister Houniet, if you wish to make your apprentice year full with us, whenever a guest is "controversial", you are to lay flat down on the ground and let him trod all over you. If you can't do that, out you go!" I learned to lay flat and he kept me on! It was quite the scene, regular guests included such celebrities as David Niven, Rex Harrison, Peter Ustinov, Laurence Harvey, Dirk Bogarde, John Wayne, Maestro's Laurin Maazel & Bernard Haitink, Truman Capote. No end to the passage there of the most famous from that period.



Hotel Vier Jahreszeiten

English 'mastered', it was on to Germany. Hotel *Vier Jahreszeiten* in Munich. That hotel was highly popular with the "brown shirts" in 30s and 40s. During the time surrounding his niece's - Geli Raubal - death, Herr Adolf H hid there, so the story goes, for several days. However, thankfully, he and his brown shirts were long gone by the time I arrived.

Other more genteel guests had taken their place, the likes of Bernhard von Lippe Biesterfeld, Prince consort to Queen Juliana ("You're learning German here? Sehr gut!"). Maestro Herbert von Karajan, "Durchlaucht" King of Bavaria, Kanzler Ludwig Ehrhard, Summerset Maugham, Gross Admiral Schniewind, to name a few. (Deutsch lernen? Sehr wichtig, machts du gut!)

On to French. Maybe Spanish? But first a stop to refill the coffer and repay some debt. "Mister Vermeij, still the boss of the Vic; sir, may I please have my receptionist job back for a season? I would like to get my driver's licence and pay off the 3000 guilders debt I have outstanding with my father. Only one season though, for I still have to go to Paris and Madrid!"

GETUIGSCHRIFT
Certificat

Hotel _____ te _____
Restaurant VICTORIA HOTEL te AMSTERDAM
Café _____ à _____

verklaart dat houder dezes
déclare, que porteur du présent Certificat

P.O.P. HOUNIET

geboren te Amsterdam de 3 april 1943
né à _____ le _____

is werkzaam geweest van 5 april 1967 tot 1 april 1968
a été employé du _____ au _____

in bovengenoemd bedrijf als RECEPTIE - KASSIER
dans cet établissement en qualité de _____

Over zijn werkzaamheden waren wij zeer tevreden.

Ook zijn omgang met chefs en kollega's was zeer goed.

Wij wensen hem veel sukses in zijn verdere leven.

Ontslag werd verleend op eigen verzoek.

Datum 31 maart 1968
Date _____

Stempel van het bedrijf:
Estampille de l'établissement

Handtekening van de werkgever:
Signature de l'employeur

N^o 056157

Bij afschriften van dit getuigschrift wordt men verzocht het nummer te vermelden.
Avis au porteur: Prière d'indiquer toujours aux copies le numéro du Certificat.

“Well, as luck would have it boy, we’re in need of a cashier.” he replied. Which is how I ended up working at the Victoria Hotel a fourth time along with Frans Schatborn and Jan Coster, behind that colossal cash register.

Having paid off my dad and managed to save a few guilders for myself to buy my first car, a rickety 12-year-old Simca 1000 (Chrysler), I set my sights on Paris. I wound up at the

Hotel De Crillon on the Place de la Concorde. Someone else had written my application letter, in French and I got busted straight away. I was given a choice, fired on the spot or wash dishes in the hotel's dungeons with the Algerians for three months. I chose to serve my term in



Hôtel de Crillon

purgatory and eventually, when my French had improved enough, I was “promoted” to night receptionist. Since the hotel was next to the US embassy, when the Vietnam peace talks started, we are talking 1968, Averell Harriman, Henri Cabot Lodge and Cyrus Vance were accommodated there. There was a permanent police presence 24/7. Of course, everybody was screened including me and it did not take a Hercule Poirot to find that an uppity Dutch guy was there to learn French; I had 7 teachers – policemen- every shift. Amis, did I learn Français in the fast lane...



The Ritz

I moved on with my Simca over the Pyrenees all the way to The Ritz in Madrid across from the Prado museum. There I worked the kitchen, sweating next to an old-time coal furnace and learning the trade and... how to curse in Spanish. I remain pretty

damn proficient to this day.

Leaving the Ritz, I became head of reception at the *Golf Hotel Guadalmina* in Marbella, a seaside resort Hotel in the south of Spain. I was 26 years old. Juan Malleu was the General Manager and the sharpest Catalan (pleonasm) I had ever met. He took me under his wing and taught me ever so smartly, cunningly, to overbook and fill the hotel to capacity every day and giving me hell when I had some free rooms left and could not explain why. When I left, he paid me the best compliment possible; "You could pass for a Catalan."



Golf Hotel Guadalmina



Hotel Central

Two years later, in 1972, I returned to the Netherlands and landed for a job as Executive Assistant at the *Hotel Central* - now *de Tweede Kamer* Dutch Parliament- in The Hague. Within three months I was promoted to General Manager, wriggling -with the help of the financial controller, now my lifelong friend, Ton Raaijmakers- my predecessor, being an incompetent lazy bum, out of that chair.

Another two years had passed when I received a call from Pieter Vermeij, he had become regional manager for *Grand Metropolitan* Hotels. The 'Vic' was now part of that organization.

Peter, first name terms now, I have a job opening for General Manager of the *Victoria* Hotel. Perhaps, you have an interest in the position?"

Did I? I was returning home. If I lived in America, you would say it was the American Dream. Between 1961 and 1975 I had gone from dumb, loudmouth kid, Junior Office Clerk to General Manager of

that very same hotel, *The Vic*.

Maybe not the American Dream, but

definitely the

Dutch Dream. The Vic, what a place!



Victoria Hotel

All these years later, I can still be stubborn, but not so much that I'm stupid. My mouth is still big and these two characteristic made me realize, perhaps better to run my own business in the industry. but that was only after years of studying at the feet of the masters. That, my friends, perhaps is a story for another day.

These days, I'm kind of taking it easy. I've sold the stocks I had in hotels to my business partner, his daughter is running the show and she is doing a great job. I continue to help colleagues in need when I can, sometimes with money, but always with advice and assistance. I owe that to those who saw something in a stupid kid with a big mouth and had the goodness to kick his ass and share with him their knowledge and wisdom.

Isn't that something?



GRAND METROPOLITAN HOTELS

Peter O. P. Houniet
General Manager

VICTORIA HOTEL
DAMRAK 1-5

Amsterdam, Phone 23 42 55
Telex 16625 Vic nl



Anna 1975

Anna 2017