

Memories from Granny Nini's century – a talk at the funeral & the reception Julien Garran

When I was small, Granny Nini Van Gesseler Verschuur James was just a great granny. Her boterkoek was behold all passing. And in her memory, Mary has cooked some boterkoek, which we can have later.

Early childhood

Granny Nini was born in Java in 1916, just over 100 years ago to Oma, a half English/half Armenian mother and Opa, her Dutch father, who was to become governor of Jakarta. She told us that when she was six she was bicycling to school when a volcano erupted, so that when she arrived she was covered in volcanic ash.

The Van Gesseler Verschuirs had many famous guests pass through, en-route through Asia on the way to Australia. Dwight Davis of the Davis cup taught her tennis, and said that she had the most vicious underarm serve he'd ever seen. We know this is true, because 70 years later my daughter Georgia challenged Ganny Nini, then in her early 90s, to a game of Nintendo wii video game tennis, and Granny Nini served an underarm ace, which we didn't even know was possible.

When Prince Leopold and Princess Astrid of the Belgians came to stay and Princess Astrid played with Granny's dolls. Granny Nini was so enchanted that she declared that, if she had a daughter, she would call her Astrid. 14 years later, Astrid, my mother, was born.

The grand tour

Opa Van Gesseler Verschuur retired early, in part because of an exceptionally well timed purchase of Shell shares. And Granny Nini, Oma and Opa embarked on a two year grand tour of the world in the early 1930s. They travelled through Egypt, Iran and Iraq. Finding the accommodations at a railway hotel in France not to their liking, Opa hailed down the Orient Express and had another family removed from a first class sleeping cabin, so they could take their place.

They spent six months living in the US, and in New York, they took up residence in the Algonquin hotel, at the time of Dorothy Parker and the vicious circle. 30 years later, in 1963, Astrid had drinks there, and when I when I was in New York for work three weeks ago, I went to have a glass of rosé, granny's recent favourite tippie, in her memory.

Married life

Granny Nini met Grampa James at a dinner dance in Sussex back in 1936 and my sister Olivia will read Grampa's poem about their first meeting. They met four times in England, always with a chaperone, and the only time they were alone was in the lift. From that day for the rest of their 64 year marriage, Grampa and Granny would always kiss whenever they got into an elevator.

Soon after that, Grampa was posted to the Northern Frontier in India, and in the two years that followed, they wrote regularly, which did not stop Granny Nini receiving nine proposals of marriage. But she only accepted the tenth proposal, from Grampa James by telegram.

Granny travelled from Holland, through occupied France, to fly to India, where they wed, later giving birth to Astrid in the hilltop fort of Simla.

They travelled widely, stationed in Alabama and Paris, where they cut a fashionable dash, Granny Nini made and wore 36 hats, and bought just as many pairs of gloves. They became caretakers at the Rothschild's estate, Waddeston Manner, preparing it to open up to the public, where Granny guided visitors around the house and the 18th Century art collection. They finally settled in Flat 7, 124 Harley St, where my mother would meet my father, and where I would take my first steps in search of peanuts.

Granny became one of the first intake blue badge guides, helping to design the badge, and she carried on guiding until her 82nd birthday.

When I was 14, she asked me to explain cricket to the son of one of her American tourists during one of her London tours.

Then, as we approached Hyde Park Corner in the bus, she hushed the crowd just like she just shushed me. As the bus drove up Knightsbridge, she said, we are about to drive up to the most important monument in London, on the right, if you could look up to the top corner window, of the top left bulging Before Hyde Park Corner, & 32 Americans craned their necks, that is where my two grandchildren ' Julien & Olivia were born.

Later life

Granny Nini adored her great grandchildren, Thomas, Josie & Georgia. She adored them almost as much as she adored prawns. When Georgia was little we used to drive to Harley Street on Sunday's to take Granny Nini out to lunch. At Ping Pong - a dim sum restaurant - granny Nini somehow managed to spear her prawns before the waitress even put the plate down on the table.

I adored Granny Nini.

Her generosity was like a pebble thrown in a lake, it would just spread.

So we're here to celebrate a great mother, a great grandmother and a great great grandmother.

And when I sat at her deathbed just a few weeks ago, when she wasn't talking much, I just wanted to talk about our life and what we were doing; Georgia's GCSEs, Mary's tennis, my trip round Asia and Australia. And she asked me if I was going to Indonesia where she was born.

Now I wasn't planning to go to Indonesia, but now I think I just might go.