



Houseparents of Onderstepoort residence: 1976 to 1985

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A tribute to the most recent houseparents was published in VetNews in April this year, all of them still alive and kicking having survived their respective terms: Alischa and Tiaan Henning, the incumbents who took up their posts in 2018; Jan and Susan Myburgh (2004 – 2017), Japie and Estelle Venter (1988-2004) and Marius Hornsveld (1985 – 1988). In this edition, we pay tribute to the late Dr Eddie Genis and his wife, Christa, who were the houseparents from December 1975 to 1985.

The Austrian connection

Eduard Christiaan Genis was born on 7 September 1939 and grew up on Gilead, a tobacco farm in the Potgietersrus district. His father was a farmer and his mother a teacher with a heart of gold who helped children from impoverished families. The family was rooted in their deeply held Christian beliefs. Eddie, as he was known, was one of four siblings who were raised to appreciate art, music and books. However, his love of horses inspired him to study veterinary science at Onderstepoort.

In 1959, when Eddie was in his third year at Onderstepoort, he was helped by Prof CFB Hofmeyr to continue his studies in Vienna, Austria so that he could also study opera in the evenings. He set sail in 1960 and spent nearly three months on a merchant ship heading to Europe, working in the galley while learning German. This enabled him to commence his studies comfortably and to qualify as a veterinarian at the Veterinary School in Vienna (Tierärztliche Hochschule Wien, the oldest German-speaking Veterinary School, founded in 1765 by Maria Theresia, Empress of the Holy Roman Empire, Archduchess of Austria).

To pay for his way as a student in Austria, he worked on an apple farm, as a dog washer and a tele-messenger. In Vienna, he also rubbed shoulders with Mimi Coertze, Gé Korsten, Gert Potgieter, George Fourie and many others. Eddie studied opera at the *Wiener Staatsoper* and in Milan Italy, where the other students thought he was a Russian because of his deep bass voice. He was a polyglot and could speak German and Italian, as well as Afrikaans, Setswana and English, the languages he learnt growing up.

In Vienna Eddie met his future wife, Christa von Steinschaden, an Austrian born on 12 February 1941. They met on the steps of the *Volksgarten* on 14 July 1962. Christa and a female friend were writing postcards when Eddie and a classmate stopped beside the two girls on the steps. Eddie wore black trousers with brown shoes which struck Christa as odd, but she was soon won over by the very outgoing and charming young man from South Africa. Christa and her younger sister were raised in a family of book lovers. Christa qualified as a book publisher at the *Bundeshandelsakademie Wien*.

Wedding bells and return to South Africa

Eddie and Christa got married in Vienna. Christa typed Eddie's DrMedVet thesis and on occasion fell asleep over the typewriter doing so. His thesis was on antibiotics for piglets. After he qualified in 1965, Eddie joined by his wife, worked as a veterinarian in Switzerland.

This is where their eldest son, Christoph, was born in 1967. The young family had a fully equipped VM kombi and intended to travel to South Africa with it but decided against it when they reached Portugal. They advertised the opportunity of driving the VW kombi to South Africa in a newspaper and three young men from Zürich took up the challenge. However, *en route*, they had an accident in Pakistan. Two of them chose to return to Zürich by bus, but the third, Arnold, chose to hitchhike to South Africa and make this country his home. He became a lifelong friend.

Eddie brought Christa and Christoph to South Africa in 1968. Rainhardt was born in 1969. Eddie joined MSD in Johannesburg and they lived in the neighbourhood of Blairgowrie. From 1972 to 1975, Eddie worked for Kanhym Estates, a feedlot and meat production enterprise in Middelburg. Here, Eddie and other musicians of the town held musical performances and made many friends, amongst other Jakkie Botha, who subsequently accompanied Eddie for many years on the piano at the OPCC/OPKK.

Christa got to know Eddie's family and friends very well. She had met them twice before when they came to visit them in Europe. Christa was welcomed with open arms and grew very fond of Eddie's family. Christa's parents came to visit them from Austria several times. During these visits, a traditional German Christmas or Easter with all the trimmings would be celebrated in the house at Onderstepoort. Eddie and Christa spoke German to each other – Eddie spoke Afrikaans to the two boys and Christa taught them her mother tongue.

Senior lecturer at the Faculty

Dr DR (Dieter) Osterhoff invited Eddie to join the Faculty of Veterinary Science at Onderstepoort. Prof Osterhoff was originally from Germany but came to South Africa in 1956 to set up the South African Blood Group Laboratory at the Onderstepoort Veterinary Research Institute. He later took up a permanent post as a Research Officer at the Institute. In 1963, Osterhoff was appointed as Head of the Department of Zootechnology at the Faculty of Veterinary Science. The Genis family of four arrived at Onderstepoort in December 1975.

Eddie took up the post as Lecturer at Zootechnology. One of the research projects that he was involved with, was to establish whether the nose prints of cattle were unique like the fingerprints of humans. This was done to assist with the positive identification of stolen cattle. Christa accompanied Eddie on his field trips to take the nose prints of cattle. She also assisted with PDs and AI procedures!

Eddie on occasion was invited to give lectures in Mozambique where he learnt to speak Portuguese for the visits – the sixth language for this multitalented man.

Houseparents in the good old days

Eddie was also appointed as the housefather of Huis Onderstepoort. In January 1976, Rainhardt started Grade 1 and Christoph started Standard 1 at the Deutsche Schule in Die Wilgers, Pretoria. The boys travelled with the other German-speaking children of Onderstepoort and Pretoria North on a school bus to Die Wilgers where the school is situated to this day. The Genis family stayed at Onderstepoort for ten enjoyable years.

The Onderstepoort hostel was mostly run by the matron, Ms van Rooyen, with Eddie supporting her where needed. Students, mostly men, who needed help or who overstepped the mark, were supported or disciplined by Eddie as the case required. The Genis family were encouraged to dine with the students. The house committee and members of the OPCC/OPKK sometimes joined the family for a braai in the garden of the houseparents.

As housefather, Eddie reported to the dean, Prof Hofmeyr until 1981 and then to Prof JMW le Roux, the new dean. The management of the Onderstepoort hostel followed a hands-off approach before TuksRes at the main campus took charge. When the students left for the holidays, Christa took over the care of the students' cats – almost 25 cats kept against the rules, of course, but they trusted her enough to leave their 'illegal' pets with her. The Genis family had their own pet, a dog called Wollie, a Toy Pom.



In a letter in the *Experto crede* of October 1976, Dr Eddie Genis encouraged the students to “be good examples and proud diplomats of the good old OP spirit.” He warned the students, as would all houseparents during the past century no doubt, that:

The O.P. spirit must be balanced and does not mean pride of a destructive nature, against property and establishment, or the sole object to abuse the good human intentions of old Bacchus. To study at O.P. always was and is particularly now a tremendous stress. This should be balanced by participating in something constructive, like sport or cultural events. Just to go wild also means to be unbalanced, but a good party at its time can provide balance. An intelligent person with intelligent wit is much more appreciated at a good party than a vandal who tries to draw attention by means of various barbaric acts. The fundamental principle for living together peacefully is perhaps the genuine respect for views, way of life, religion, politics and origin. Rules and regulations (in the case of O.P., determined by U.P.) have the sole objective of facilitating sound living together of a "multiple-orientated population" as we have at O.P. In this regard, we were also successful this year. Another record can be noted: the lowest account in years from the U.P. technical department for repairs!

Christa's main occupation was as the chauffeur for the two boys who excelled in sport, culture and schoolwork. She also kept a very neat garden with a grapevine and a large fig tree but had to compete with the garden birds for the ripe fruit. Believe it or not, they also kept goats and horses.

Later they moved to a family farm near Roedtan, where Christa became an expert at cheese making and farming. When Eddie went on a study tour to Canada and the USA, Christa went with him and the two boys stayed at the hostel of the Deutsche Schule.

Onderstepoort Cultural Club/ Kulturele Klub

Eddie and Christa started the Onderstepoort Cultural Club / Kulturele Klub in 1976, “to clear out the ancient culturally stagnant atmosphere of OP”. The members of the OPCC/OPKK organised the attendance of plays, ballets and operas, as well as visits to art exhibitions and museums, symposia on topics such as abortion and also wine tasting events arranged by the **Veterinary Wives**.

Performing artists like Cut Glass and Laurinda Hofmeyr were invited to perform in the auditorium of the Faculty. Eddie also encouraged the students to perform at Zillertal, a German restaurant in Pretoria. Bi-weekly film nights at 20c entrance fee were organised in the large auditorium on the OP campus, within walking distance from the residence. The Genis children also attended the film nights and Christa still remembers the first spectacular movie, Ben Hur, with Charlton Heston, that shaped and moulded the children's future love for movies.

A new tradition was established, namely an annual variety concert held at the Aula on the main campus where OP students displayed their cultural talents. This included items such as plays, piano recitals, bouzouki playing and singing by Eddie Genis and the OP choral and folk groups. Patrick Mynhardt delivered a guest performance at the second annual concert in 1977. The chair of the OPCC/OPKK was Prof Jan le Roux. At this point, the annual event in the Aula became known as the Dean's Cultural Evening – a highlight on the OP calendar. Eddie organised a cultural tour to Europe during Christmas in 1978, for a group of ten students.

Were you a member of the OPCC/OPKK? Did you join the cultural tour to Europe? Please share your stories with us at OldRes100years@gmail.com

I was born under a wandering star

Eddie continued to sing when he came to Onderstepoort. He was a valued member of the choir at the State Theatre and always invited musicians from abroad to braai at Onderstepoort. The most cherished song in his repertoire was *Wand'rin Star*.

The students always requested Eddie to sing the song in his deep, low voice at the start of performances. It did not take them long to return the favour: the students spontaneously started to sing *I was born under a wandering star* when the Genis family entered the dining hall in the evenings, to great laughter and hand clapping from all.

- *Wand'rin Star* was originally written by Alan J Lerner (lyrics) and Frederick Loewe (music) for the stage musical *Paint your wagon* in 1951 – reaching Nr. 1 in the 1970's with Lee Marvin as a vocalist.

End of a decade at Onderstepoort

The Genis family left Onderstepoort in 1984. Eddie was a diabetic and had to slow down. When the boys were older, Christa worked at the CNA bookstore in Menlyn. Mr Raubenheimer, the CEO of Van Schaik convinced her to join the bookstore in Hatfield where she worked for 18 years until retirement in 2006. However, Christa was not ready to leave her beloved books yet. Dr Nicol Stassen asked her to join Protea Boekhuis (now Aristata) in Hatfield and this is where Christa is still working at 83 years of age.

Eddie passed away in 2012. Their two sons and their families now live in Austria.

- *experto crede* means “trust the expert”. To read the full copies of the OP student magazine of the 1970s, see:

<https://repository.up.ac.za/handle/2263/85>

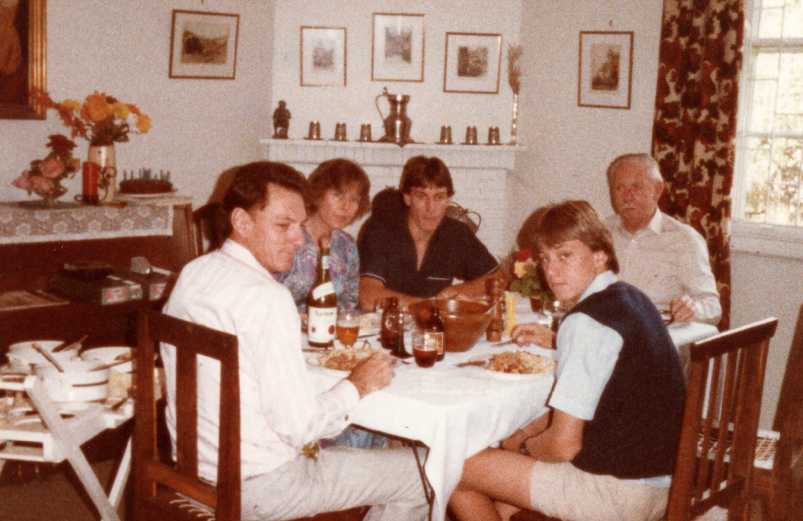
Any information or photographs on the houseparents before 1976, would be greatly valued.



Eddie and Christa Genis at Onderstepoort, Christmas 1979



The Anatomy Building, Faculty Veterinary Science, Onderstepoort during the 1970s



The Genis family, Eddie, Margit (Christa's sister), Christoph, Joseph (Christa's father) and Rainhardt at Onderstepoort on Mother's Day, May 1983



The Onderstepoort Houseparents' house, 1970s



The Genis family and Christa's mother enjoying tea in their garden at Onderstepoort 1977



Eddie Genis during an Onderstepoort Cultural Club / Kulturele Klub outing at the Zillertal in 1976



Christa and Eddie with 'Ein Prosit der Gemütlichkeit' in the Zwölf-Apostel-Keller, Vienna 1987

Christa and her granddaughters: Emilie, Lara and Isabelle 2020



Christa and her son Rainhardt and his daughter, Lara 2017



Christoph, with his wife Agathe and daughters, Isabelle and Emilie, 2023



Christa with her son Rainhardt and his two children, Lara and Christiaan 2017