



Col. Jack Vincent MBE  
*(Photograph: The Natal Witness)*



Hubert von Klemperer

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## *Hubert Ralph von Klemperer (1914–1999)*

A good meal to Hubert was as a symphony to a music lover. Many hours have his friends spent listening to Hubert describe his latest meal while damaging a bottle of Justerini and Brooks or a bottle of wine. But Hubert loved his family and friends more than food. He was a loving son, a loving brother and husband, a loving and

proud father and a loving and very proud grandfather. His love remained constant, but his pride expanded with each younger generation.

Hubert also loved being with people. He loved nothing better than to have family or friends — whether local or from overseas — visit or stay with him at ‘The Huts’. His family and vast range of friends will recall with pleasure their visits to his very special home high in the hills outside Pietermaritzburg.

Hubert’s life story is a remarkable one, and has the makings of a really good book. He was born at Wannsee, near Berlin, on 22nd September 1914. His parents were Austrian and his father was in the Austrian War Ministry, which meant that Hubert lived in Vienna during 1917 and 1918. Perhaps in that romantic city he first acquired the personal charm that was to be an endearing characteristic throughout his life!

After his schooling in Dresden he studied economics in Munich from 1933 until the end of 1935. During his youth he spent some holidays at an aunt’s country estate near Bärfelde, where he developed a love for riding and the lifestyle of the landed gentry.

Because of his dislike of the then German regime — which dislike was mutual — he left Germany in January 1936 and emigrated to South Africa. Through a connection of his father he joined Seligson & Clare, a firm of machinery importers, as a management trainee in Johannesburg. Hubert became aware that unrestricted emigration from Germany would cease on 1st February 1937, and so he telephoned his father, who soon realised that Hubert’s protestations of homesickness and his request for his father and brother to visit him in South Africa, had a greater significance. During his father’s visit he was able to persuade him to leave Germany and relocate the family to South Africa.

He was transferred to Port Elizabeth in 1937, shortly before his family arrived to settle in this country. Whilst in Port Elizabeth Hubert shared a house with Ludwig Abel, who later married his sister Mika.

In December 1938 the family bought the Standard Yoke and Timber Mills in Pietermaritzburg. This business had had 21 owners in the previous 20 years, and so this was quite a challenge. At the time the mill produced shooks for fruit boxes and yokes for oxen.

Hubert enlisted in the Union Defence Force at the outbreak of war, and was called up at the end of May 1940. He had a varied army career, which included periods when he was suspected of being a Nazi agent or a spy. Both these episodes are stories for another day — or perhaps another book!

In March 1941 Hubert met Marjorie Girdlestone at his brother Fritz’s wedding. A science graduate of the Natal University College, she was a radar operator monitoring shipping around the South African coast. He married Meg on 19 October 1943, and they were married for almost 53 years, until her death in September 1996. Their son Geoff was born on 13 October 1944, and Julian on 10 August 1946.

At the end of the war, Hubert was posted to Natal Command HQ to sort out the leases on privately-owned properties all over Natal which had been commandeered for military use early in the war. He completed this task in December 1947, at which time he held the rank of captain.

In January 1948 he joined Standard Yoke and Timber Mills, which his father had bought ten years earlier. After his father's death in 1956 he became chairman and joint managing director with his brother Fritz. He held this position until the end of August 1984, when his family sold the business and he retired. It was in this period that Hubert and Meg bought 'The Huts' at Claridge, and they moved there in December 1958.

During his years at Standard Yoke, Hubert was involved with many outside organisations. One might have expected that on his retirement at 70 years of age he would begin to take life a little easier. On the contrary — a Fordyce at the bottom of the Polly Shortts of his life, he looked up, shortened his stride and maintained his pace! The many business executives amongst his friends usually checked Hubert's diary first when setting up an appointment.

Hubert was a great believer in organised industry and commerce. He was active in the Pietermaritzburg Chamber of Industries from 1948 and became a member of the first post-war executive committee when it was established in 1953. He was president of the Chamber in 1957 and 1958, and was given its highest honour — Honorary Life Vice Presidency — in 1984. He continued as a member of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry's executive council and its city affairs committee, until his death. The Chamber staff said of him: 'Hubert was one of the Chamber people most popular with the staff because of his gracious and considerate manner, and his lovely sense of humour. He had the gift of making people feel good about themselves.'

Horses and the Royal Agricultural Society were both very close to his heart. He joined the Society in 1948 when the annual shows resumed after World War 2, and was actively involved ever since. He served on the committees for Commerce and Industry and Arena Displays, was the longest-serving member of the Horse Section committee, and chairman of the Show Jumping sub-committee. He was the longest-serving member of the Executive Committee, was vice president and elected Honorary Life Vice President on 16th October 1980. He visited the Society's offices the day before his accident, and the RAS staff said of him: 'He was probably the most caring and devoted of all the committee members. He was always ready to give assistance and support, in both business and personal matters. The affairs of the Society and the happiness of the staff were of equal importance to him.'

During all that period he himself took part in equestrian sport (where both his sons excelled, too) and was prepared to use his talents at all levels. He was an international show jumping judge, was past chairman and past president of the Natal Horse Society and the S.A. National Equestrian Federation respectively.

Hubert was involved with Cowan House prep school from its very early days when it was still situated at Mountain Rise, and was instrumental in finding the land at Mount Michael where the school moved in 1964. He succeeded Professor Burchell as chairman of the board of governors until 1983, remained an ordinary board member, and attended what turned out to be his last meeting on 9 March 1999.

Hubert was one of the prime movers in the founding of the Association of Private Schools, later to become the Independent Schools Council (ISC). At that

time private schools were under severe threat, fighting for their survival against a government antagonistic to them and wishing in fact to destroy them, or at least completely control them by draconian legislation. It was essential for the private schools in South Africa to form a united front against these threats, and Hubert was to champion this cause from 1973 for the next 26 years, seeing the Association grow from small beginnings into an influential body representing 290 schools, now a recognised and respected participant in national educational matters. In recognition of his outstanding service he was the first person to be made an Honorary Life Member of the ISC's national executive.

The Rotary Club of Pietermaritzburg nominated Hubert for its Vocational Service Award for his outstanding contribution to the community of the city; and on 4 October 1988 the City of Pietermaritzburg in its 150th anniversary year entered the name of Hubert Ralph von Klemperer in the Civic Honours Register '... for active and unselfish involvement in many community and public services aimed at benefiting the City and the community.'

His record is remarkable. What makes it perhaps unique is that much of it was achieved after Hubert's official retirement in 1984 at the age of 70. He is the perfect example of how to stay healthy and young in heart and mind.

Hubert once told me that he didn't excel in ball games because he had poor timing. We may consider that his timing let him down on Wednesday 16 March 1999 when he fell from his horse and sustained what turned out to be a fatal injury. At the time his health and mind were in excellent shape, he was happy, and he and his loving companion Bobby had just booked their flights for a trip to England and the United States later this year. Timing is one thing, but planning, organising ability and influence at the highest level were Hubert's bread and butter — and on this occasion he excelled himself. He did not ever want to leave Claridge, and he had a horror of becoming infirm or disabled. So what did he do? He left us on a glorious day, whilst riding his horse in the fields around Claridge, in the company of a lovely young lady. What more could a man of 84 wish for?

TONY HESP

(This is a modified version of the eulogy spoken at the memorial service for Hubert von Klemperer on 26th March 1999.)