

INTERVIEW

With Doctor Shlomo Livni - in his 90th year



ELLIS: Dr Livni, to what do you attribute your longevity?

SHLOMO LIVNI: I'd say I was born under a lucky star. I'm one of the very few to have seen Haley's Comet twice, and it was magnificent. In 1910 people ran into the streets and threw their belongings into the streets, thinking it was the end of the world.

My family are long livers but there are other reasons. I had a very happy childhood. They say "look after your first childhood then your second childhood looks after itself."

I was also an exception in that I loved school.

ELLIS: What other attributes would you say are necessary for a long and happy life?

SHLOMO LIVNI: A good wife! and also humour is essential to see the funny parts of life. If you cannot contain your rage, they say, you will die young. You've got to be optimistic and motivated. Optimism, in the dictionary, is defined as a doctrine that believes that the existing world is the best of all possible worlds.

ELLIS: You have travelled a long way since you were born?

SHLOMO LIVNI: Yes, I was born in Lithuania and when I was two years old we went to Palestine. Did you know I have four nationalities? I then became a Turk - a young Turk! I can still sing "God preserve the Sultan", then General Allenby defeated the Turks in 1917 and we became British Palestine. When Allenby's army arrived we lived in Tel Aviv. For four days we saw the Turks, with their German officers, fleeing right across the land and coming to us and begging for bread. I remember then seeing the Australians arriving on horseback. The cavalry was the equivalent of the tanks of today. They had two horses each and the whole street watched as they came down, about eight across. The Australians and New Zealanders had been in the desert for 12 months living on those hard biscuits and they also wanted bread!

Yet it was great fun in those days. I am a true Palestinian but there were no universities or anything like that in those days so when I was 20, in 1924, I left and came down, on my own, to stay with a sister in South Africa.

ELLIS: Did you come down by ship?

SHLOMO LIVNI: Yes, I took the Holland/Africa Line cargo ship from Port Said to Durban in 1924. It was a journey like Joseph Conrad would have described. We came down the East African Coast stopping everywhere – Port Suez, Port St Anne, Dar es Salaam, Beira and Lourenzo Marques. The first I heard of South Africa was over the ship's radio, we could hear "JB calling" which was Johannesburg and then I heard music playing – "Ain't she sweet" and "Yes, we have no bananas!"

ELLIS: You then enrolled at Wits Medical School, was that in 1925?

SHLOMO LIVNI: Yes, Wits University was only 2 or 3 years old. Professor Dart taught us and all our teachers were young. From where I lived you could walk to the University but we took a tram from the City Hall and got off at Wits. It cost a penny a week. From Wits the tram went on for another 2 or 3 miles to the terminus, which was a farm called Rosebank. I saw the rest of Johannesburg being built around us.



I did my first years at Wits and then went to England and spent the next 4 to 5 years at the London Hospital, where I qualified with the conjoint diploma.

ELLIS: What did you do after qualifying?

SHLOMO LIVNI: I did two or three locums in London on a bicycle and then returned to Jerusalem where I worked for 3 years for the government of Palestine. It was all British territory then. 350 doctors applied for the job I got. I got the job because I was the only one who knew the three official languages – English, Hebrew and Arabic.

The government hospital in Jerusalem had one Englishman and three or four Arabs so they needed a Jew for the balance, so I got the job!

ELLIS: When did you return to South Africa?

SHLOMO LIVNI: I came back here in 1936 with an 18 month baby. My wife and I were married in Jerusalem and we have had six children. I have a daughter who is a pathologist in London. She was the only one who took medicine. I always said I would not have liked a son to do medicine so my daughter did it and did it very well.

When we arrived back in South Africa it was in the Depression. I tried for every job and did a few locums. I had no money but eventually I got a job at Thabazimbi in the bushveld as District Surgeon. I spent fifteen years there but was also in the South African Medical Corps for three years in the war. I was then stationed in Durban on Snell Parade. They gave me an ambulance and a hospital of 120 beds to run. Every month or two a whole convoy of British ships came zig-zagging down the coast. It took about a month to get from England to South Africa and often the first time they saw the lights was in Durban. 20 to 30 000 troops came to Durban and we entertained them.

I was then transferred to South West Africa in the Wits Rifles. In Windhoek, there were three of us who stayed together – the Hygiene Officer, the Padre and myself. We used to say “What the Hygiene Officer can’t prevent and the doctor can’t cure, the padre will bury!”

ELLIS: After the war, did you return to Thabazimbi?

SHLOMO LIVNI: Yes, I was here until 1952. It was then that I became interested in neurosis and I wanted to come back to Johannesburg to open a hospital for mental cases – not a mental hospital as

such – but a hospital like Tara for neurosis. I didn’t want to practice psychiatry but I did a two year course in psychiatry, which came in very useful.

I became involved in a new disease they called Alcoholism – until then we only had drunks! I discovered that you can’t treat these patients without a hospital as you have to dry them out and

so on. I used to dry them out for three days. The DT cases got two to three weeks and would then go to the AA. We bought a place not far from here in Windsor Park and started the school called “Serenity”. I then began to admit old people as well. We had “senile psychosis” in those days, not Alzheimers, and we thought the majority of cases were due either to hypertension or minor strokes

but what we called senile psychosis or brain fever was, in fact, Alzheimer’s disease.

The alcoholics were the most difficult to manage. I formed a team of the patient, the wife, the church minister and the doctor and we all worked together. With alcoholics you are never cured even after you are dry for 10 to 12 years. They have a drink and they have started back again because they think it is over.

I had to go to their homes because they would not come to me. They never had any money. It was

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very hard work for me because an alcoholic doesn't call you out during the day, only in the evening about 8pm, when they need you desperately.

I once went to a conference in Oxford and told them I treated alcoholics and geriatrics under the same roof. I said it worked very well. You bring in the alcoholics at night when the old people have gone to bed!

ELLIS: Do you feel that the elderly are discriminated against?

SHLOMO LIVNI: Oh yes, when it concerns the black rhino the whole world is up in arms, when it's us – the elderly – who would lift a finger? One look at us and they short change us in shops and in the restaurants they give us stale food.

ELLIS: They take advantage of you, then?

SHLOMO LIVNI: Yes, the discrimination of the elderly is ingrained in the language. In English we are "Old crocks", right? German, French, Yiddish all have derogatory words for old people. In all the languages I know, there are only two languages that have compassion for old age: "Madala" and "Ya Oom!"



ELLIS: Do you have any regrets about your life?

SHLOMO LIVNI: Regrets – none, but I have people I envy. Not politicians or top doctors but I envy musicians. They must be the happiest people in the world. If I had my time over again I would still do the same. My greatest enjoyment has been people and good company.

ELLIS: When did you retire?

SHLOMO LIVNI: I never retired. I don't like that word.

ELLIS: When did you ease up, then?

SHLOMO LIVNI: Well, I decided to specialise in "lost causes". I was on the medical council for alcoholics, the council for

geriatric cases at Happiness House and then I was also asked to look after children with Downs Syndrome.

So you see, I keep very active and the year 2000 is barely 6 years away. I'll then be 96 not out and what cricketer would not aim at a century!

Interview by Dr Chris Ellis.

Portrait by Graham Abbott