Michael Foot and Victor Sassie

‘He is a police commissar; psychiatrist; master chef; master salesman (which includes master liar); master schmooze; politician; negotiator; spy. But always a lot of tolerance of silly people and, above all, he loves the trade, for you to give up everything – your holidays, your dreams, your hobbies, your sex life, your family. There is nothing left except for work. That’s why so few stick to it. You have to be crazy about it, otherwise restaurateurs retire after fifteen years, worn out. But this has been Victor’s life since he was twenty – half a century! Victor is the great exception!

Former employee describing Victor’s role in the restaurant.

VICTOR SASSIE, Restaurateur 1915-1999

Victor Sassie was the proprietor of the Gay Hussar restaurant for 34 years; He is a one-off character and not surprisingly considering his origins. He is the son of a ship joiner who supported his wife and 10 children on 15 shillings a week.

His farther (a Swiss) came ashore in Cardiff to marry a Welsh girl. They moved to the shipyards of Barrow-in-Furness where Victor was born in 1915, making him probably the only northerner to become virtually an honorary Hungarian on account of his cooking.

There are two theories as to how Victor established himself as Soho’s infamous restaurateur.

The first: As a teenager Victor joined the British and Restaurant Association, which sent him to Budapest in 1932 where he “became Hungarian”, under the tutelage of a famous restaurateur, Karoly Gundel, who died while Victor was working for him. He later returned to England in 1939 to open his first restaurant called Budapest in Dean Street. `During the Second World War he served with British intelligence, later joining the Military Mission in Budapest, where he met and married his wife Elizabeth. On demobilisation, Victor went to work for A Mr. Robert Maxwell, who instructed him to rent an office in Trafalgar Square to post German newspapers to PoWs in Britain. Victor was not enthusiastic with this idea; He didn’t want to send these papers to the Germans, who had been “right bastards” to him in the war. Moreover, he never got the money for stamps. He was on his own surrounded by piles of these papers until there were complaints of a fire risk. Eventually, he had to call the waste disposal people to take them away.

Victor managed to open a second Budapest in Frith Street, Soho and then in 1953, the **Gay Hussar**. The restaurant was named *(at a time when the word ”gay” had no sexual connotations)* in honour of the elite of the Hungarian army. According to Victor they were renowned for their high spirits, and were liable to ride into taverns calling for buckets of wine for their horses.

The second: Victor worked in the Budapest Restaurant in Dean Street after war. He had apparently learnt about Hungarian cuisine in Budapest and Vienna before the Second World War, most notably at the famous Three Hussars restaurant. After his army service, he started up his own establishment, naming it the Gay Hussar in acknowledgement of his old academy.

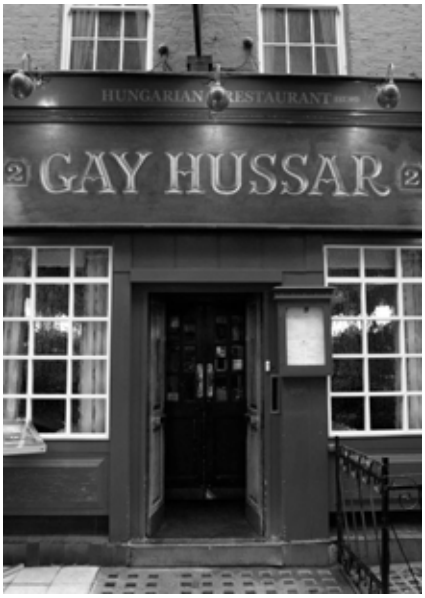
Although different theories, the root of Victor’s success as the proprietor of London’s favourite political restaurant is purely HIS unique character!

Victor was known to talk about everything, particularly the decline of the Labour party in 1980’s, which he attributed to the extremism and the emergence of politicians who did not eat in The Gay Hussar. He is also noted for his unique customer handling skills: “he would greet you, sit you down, fillet your mind of everything repeatable, and then trundle off to regurgitate it at all the other tables. By teatime your tittle-tattle would have reached every Fleet Street newsroom, Transport House and Tory Central Office”*(newspaper article by Ian Aitken, 1999).*

It was told that when Victor finally retired in 1988, he walked out of the place he had created and never returned. It appears that, his wife Elizabeth, who for years had felt herself to be a “restaurant widow”, was delighted, and they enjoyed a quiet, happy retirement in Kentish Town. His other interest seems to be horseracing, and he actually owned a racehorse. We assumed he had gone to indulge his fancy, and perhaps he did. However, we learnt that his ill-health eventually put a stop to it.

To the profound regrets of his friends and admirers, we never saw him again. But his wonderful creation still flourishes, the clientele is still much the same, the chef is the same, and the menu is the same….

Taken from The Obituaries, 9th June 1999 of The Daily Telegraph (journalist unknown) and The Guardian (Ian Aitkens). Also by Victor Sassie, The Sunday Telegraph, April 22 1990 and SOHO in the Fifties by Daniel Farson, 1987



THE GAY HUSSAR, 1953 - Present

‘In 1989, it was widely reported that the day before her 89th birthday, the Queen Mother talking with guests expressed her particular interest in the Gay Hussar and its ‘going-on’s’ whilst hosting tea in the gardens of Clarence House.

Opened in 1953, trade was originally slow, however the restaurant was soon picked up by publishers such as Jonathan Cape and Rupert Hart-Davis located in the area. They quickly introduce the likes of T.S. Elliot who himself became a regular diner along with the archaeologist, Mortimer Wheeler.

During the 50’s, the Socialist MP Aneurin Bevan become one of the devotees of the large, rich, meals served, and the restaurant quickly attracted a devoted following amongst the left. The Bevanites conspired there earning the Gay Hussar its long-established status as the unofficial command centre of the Bevanite movement.

Labour MP’s such as Barbara Castle, Ian Mikardo and Michael Foot all became regulars.

It was in the 1960’s when the Tribune declared the Gay Hussar as their canteen. Before long the Fleet Street political and industrial correspondents got wind of the fact that the Gay Hussar was where it was all happening. They in turn brought new guests, including top trade unionists and even the odd Tory MP. The 14th Earl of Home was among them.

Owner, Victor Sassie had the further claim to fame when he ordered George Brown, the British Foreign Secretary out of the restaurant for groping a female customer at the next table. Brown was often the cause of trouble including a widely published incident where he left the restaurant swearing for not having his prefer Jamaican cigars.

In 1962 the building dating from 1680, was declared a dangerous structure by the council. Victor’s solicitor advised him to put up supporting pillars, from the basement kitchen to the attic, as a “temporary measure”. For the next four years, waiters and customers weaved their way in and out of these cumbersome structures. However, in 1966 the restaurant was finally closed for six months for a complete rebuilding. While the works were being done Victor went to Hungary with his three chefs for a refresher course in Hungarian cooking, and returned with a clutch of established recipes. Soon after reopening, he installed an aquarium in the restaurant, in which he was able to keep live carp to be cooked to order for his clients. He claims (in Hungarian) “nobody ever buys dead fish.”

The Gay Hussar was often noted during the 60’s for there were also many beautiful women among it’s clients; Angela Lambert, Penny Perrick, Jill Craigie, the fashion journalist Serena Sinclair, literary agent Jacqueline Korn and Sharmini Turichelvem, the ravishing medical student painted by Annigoni and who was known to hold court in the room upstairs.

Princess Alexandra would come often before she was married in 1963. She would always attend with a tall and dashing French-Hungarian millionaire who had a beautiful tenor voice. Victor once said he believed he must be a professional singer, because sometimes, when there were not many people in, he would burst into song.

In the early 1970’s success brought its problems. When the Shop Workers’ Unions entertained a Soviet distributive workers’ delegation, the Daily Mail managed to get hold of the bill. They put it on the front page, and it was very large indeed. Instantly, most of the political diners vanished, judging that the place is no longer secure. Victor had to build up a new clientele, and he was reduced to getting in a gypsy fiddler. However, the restaurant did not suffer for long as the yearning for Gay Hussar’s unique mix of goulash and gossip proved too strong. Soon the usual crowd were back, browsing and sluicing as before. But if goulash and gossip was the draw, the greatest of this was gossip. It remained common place that if you wanted to spread something round all your friends quickly, the surest way to do it was to tell Victor.

The left-wing MP (chairman of Labour Party), newspaper columnist and notoriously promiscuous homosexual Tom Driberg tried to tempt Mick Jagger into standing for the Labour Party in the private room on the second floor. By contemporary accounts, however, the young, rubber-lipped Rolling Stone was put off by Driberg’s less than innocent advances and fled from the restaurant. The 2nd floor room is now informally known as the Tom Driberg Memorial Suite.

THE GAY HUSSAR, Continued.....

‘ It is still said that there’s a concealed video camera in a window opposite the front door. It is claimed to be beamed directly to Alastair Campbell’s No 10 office.

The Guardian used it more than once in the 1970’s to thrash out its leader line in successive general elections. Perhaps the ambiance helped them to ensure they usually ended up recommending their readers to vote Labour. The Daily Mirror was also often celebrating in the rooms upstairs.

Sightings of Roy Hattersely at the restaurant in the early 80’s would earn Private Eye readers a £5 prize, a project that proved expensive for the magazine. Hattersely was later quoted saying ‘He (Victor) made his restaurant famous without being flash because the food was good and the owner absolutely unique’.

In 1983 it’s reported that Tony Blair was first persuaded to run for PM on one of the plush banquettes (coincidentally table N0.10) on the ground floor by Lord Tom Pendry.

Victor Sassie sold the Gay Hussar to The Restaurant Partnership Plc in 1988 to retire. The restaurant was left in the capable hands of Manager John Wrobel to carry on nearly half a century’s tradition.

In 1989, it was widely reported that the day before her 89th birthday, the Queen Mother talking with guests expressed her particular interest in the Gay Hussar and its ‘going-on’s’ whilst hosting tea in the gardens of Clarence House.

In the early 90’s, a time when the IRA embarked on a campaign that was targeting restaurants, Greek Street became one of the most guarded streets in London. According to Manager John Wrobel; “We had people like Malcolm Rifkind and Sir Patrick Mayhew (who was the Attorney General) coming. There were always so many BT engineers but they never did any work. We knew they were the SAS or MI6.”

In 1999 renowned political cartoonist, now the President of the British Cartoonist, Martin Rowson drew the Tribune dinner. Rowson says that this inspired him “to draw the famous and infamous patrons, as an enduring record of the Gay Hussar’s place in the history of the second half of the twentieth century, with the intentions that these portraits of the eminence figures of past, present and future importance should end-up, hanging and drawn, on the restaurants wall. Martin sat in the corner, wheezing consumptively and scribbling away over his supper till he completed”.

Victory Sassie passed away on June 7th that year. Journalist Ian Aitken writes ‘He was equally tyrannical to his regulars, not least about what you ate. If you ordered before he could get at you, he would dash over to your table and demand to be told what you were having. “Don’t have that muck, that’s tourist stuff”, he would snort. Then he would summon a waiter and order you something entirely different’.

2003 The Gay Hussar celebrated its 50th Birthday. Michael Foot, probably the longest living regular celebrated his 90th Birthday bash at the restaurant in a blaze of publicity.

2004 saw the launch of the ‘drawn from life at the Gay Hussar’ gallery by Martin Rowson. 60 caricatures were completed in total.

Over the years, the Gay Hussar has become a place for gossip, celebrating the incestuous relationships between politicians and journalists. Nowadays, there is a little less plotting and conspiring, and fewer ‘long boozy’ lunches. Although, it is still said that there’s a concealed video camera in a window opposite the front door. It is claimed to be beamed directly to Alastair Campbell’s No 10 office. If so, poor Alastair must be green with envy as he watches his old pals trooping in for a fish terrine, a dollop of that divine at his expanse**.**

Head Chef Carlos Mendonca and Manager John Wrobel