

## Jim C. Wilson

### *from:* The Happy Land

*The events in this extract from The Happy Land date from the early 1920s. Howard Denton (then Hyman Zoltie) recalls a typical early morning at St. Leonard's Hill, Edinburgh.*

Our mornings were pandemonium. Everybody wanted to use the lavatory at the same time and the innocent occupier would be subjected to torrents of angry abuse. As the door had no lock, there was no chance of the smelly cubby-hole becoming a place of quiet contemplation. My brothers thought nothing of wrenching it open and revealing me to the world in all my indignity. I once got so tired of this that I tied my braces, still attached to the front of my trousers, to the door handle. I sat down in the vain hope of a few precious minutes of undisturbed tranquillity. However, one of my brothers yanked open the door with such sudden ferocity that I was all but catapulted across the lobby, through the bedroom and out the window. I loved my family but I couldn't help feeling at times that there was just no escape from the endless proximity of people in that house.

The one person who missed most of the chaos of the mornings was Father. He rose at six on weekdays to go to work. Lying awake at the feet of Karl and Motty, I would listen to him, busy at the black range in the kitchen. I would hear him impatiently rattling the poker through the iron ribs at the front. I could picture the clouds of white ash dust rising, and imagine the hot, dry smell of it. Then would come the sharp cracking of the firewood as the flames caught, and our fire would be lit for another day.

I could imagine him straightening his back as he let out a cry of 'Oi-yoi-foof!' Then came the sound of the gushing tap and the groaning pipe as he splashed himself awake at the sink. He did this, as he did most of his daily tasks, with a kind of ferocious enthusiasm.

By the time he left he would be dressed in his thick Scottish tweeds, chosen for the protection they gave him against the Scottish climate. He wore signet rings and in his waistcoat pocket he carried his most prized possession, a gold watch – with a guarantee. A final touch of style was the decorous chain which hung, attached to the watch, in the fashion popularised by the late Prince Albert.

My father's life as a travelling man was tough, and we were lucky he was so strong. He had an inherent desire to be his own boss and provide for his own family. Having had the tobacconist's shop in Bialystok, I don't think he could have put up with working for someone else. And though the Scots were tolerant towards us, in hard times they would naturally employ a Scot before a Jew. So my father continued on his idiosyncratic way, devising all manner of schemes and projects to make a living. Free enterprise was his way of surviving and he seemed to thrive on it; he was a true entrepreneur. Almost from the moment he arrived in Edinburgh, he bought

wholesale anything he could and tramped the streets trying to sell his wares for a small profit. As his horizons broadened and he ventured further afield, he never missed a chance to try to sell something. Tram conductors and ticket collectors at railway stations were, to Father, all potential customers. Buying and selling occupied his whole working life in Scotland. He had no time for such time-wasting inconveniences as receipts, income-tax returns or any kind of paperwork, and inevitably his financial affairs would get into a terrible muddle. His approach to business was simple and straightforward and he never really came to terms with the more complex ways of the twentieth century.

Old Joe the Jew, as he came to be known, never faltered from the strict faith of his upbringing; the ancient faith seemed to lend him added strength. He was also a teetotaler. He expected high standards of behaviour from his sons and daughters and did his utmost to bring us up in strict conformity.

His life in Poland also seemed to have left him with a certain inner strength. Some of his business projects here were doomed to be failures but he never seemed to despair. He would be up again at dawn, preparing the fire, ready to start all over again.

*Note: A later episode tells how Hyman's father's business practices resulted in a stay in Edinburgh's Calton Jail.*