

The Man in the Trench Coat  
By Hans Knight

In the lives of most of us, there is one person who points a path to our future. Sometimes that person is favorite teacher. Sometimes that person is a favorite teacher, sometimes a great ball player, singer, painter, or scientist. It all depends on what your dream is.

My own dream was to be a writer. I always loved words. For as long as I can remember, I've had the urge to put my words on paper so they so they wouldn't get lost. But my inspiration was not a famous poet or novelist. He was just a man in a trench coat. Strictly speaking, he didn't even exist. Yet I owe so much.

I thought of this man not long ago when my newspaper sent out to interview Harold Wilson, the former prime minister of Great Britain. He had come to a small college in Pennsylvania to give a talk on world affairs. After his formal speech, we sat down at a wooden table on the campus lawn. A student brought him a bottle of lemonade, and Mr. Wilson poured me a glass, too. In his rumpled tweed jacket, this burly white-haired man with friendly blue eyes hardly looked like a captain who had once steered a ship of state. He patiently answered my questions. I finally said, "Thank you, Mr. Prime Minister," and prepared to leave.

Then something strange happened. He gently put his hand on my arm. "Just a moment," the former prime minister said. "You've asked me many questions. Now it's my turn. Tell me how did you become a writer?"

I was stunned. Over the years, people had often asked me that question, but none of them had been a prime minister of England. "Sir", I stammered, "why would you be interested in my career?"

Mr. Wilson raised one bushy eyebrow. "Well", he chuckled, "one never learns anything unless ne asks, does one? Beside, I noticed your accent. I'm a Yorkshireman, and you talk a bit like me..."

"Mr. Prime Minister," I said, "you have a keen ear. I di live in Yorkshire, during the war. But I wasn't born in England. I came to your country from Austria, as a refugee."

"Aye," Mr. Wilson said, "Hitler and his gang. A bad lot, weren't they? A very bad lot."

My mind flashed back to my boyhood in a small town near Vienna. It was close to paradise for a boy: swimming in a pine-framed lake in summer; playing hockey on its frozen surface in winter; listening to great music on scratchy records in my father's tiny radio store; floating down a narrow brook in washtub, like Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn braving terrible dangers on the Mississippi. I wasn't what anyone would call a good student, but one day I won an essay competition. My teacher wrote on the paper, "Promising, keep writing." I went home and told everyone I was going to be a famous author. Very soon.

On March 12, 1938, the Nazis took over Austria. They hated many people. Most of all they hated Jews. They blamed then for everything that happened in the world. I had two Jewish grandparents that died before I was born. It made no difference to the Nazis. The Nazis took my father's store. They threatened us and

chased us in the streets. Even some of our friends turned against us. That hurt the most.

So it happened on that blustery winter night, I became a refugee. I found myself on a boat crossing the English Channel, clutching my little sister Lilly's hand. There were some 40 kids, huddled together under damp blankets. We could smell the heavy, salty air that seemed to press down upon us in our makeshift cabins. Few of us would ever see our parents again, but we didn't know that at the time. As children will, we thought of our escape as a great adventure. I imagined I was Long John Silver sailing to Treasure Island. Perhaps, too, I sensed that there was indeed a treasure awaiting us in England: our freedom.

The Second World War broke out six months later. I was now fifteen years old, too old to become an English schoolchild as Lilly had done. I found work as a laborer on a textile mill in Hailifax, a foggy industrial town. Often, we heard the drone of the Nazi bombers in the clouds. The air raid sirens would wail, and we'd go to our shelters. (These were merely holes dug in the back yard, covered with corrugated iron sheets.) Since few bombs actually fell on Hailifax, everybody soon ignored the murmuring planes and just carried on with their jobs.

The work in the mill was hard and monotonous. The people around me had more important things on their minds than my lost chance at a writing career. My grand visions began to feel pretty foolish to me, too. Remember, my native language was German. I'd picked up enough English to get by in a textile mill, but how could I ever hope to write for a living in this strange, new tongue?

It would take a miracle to unseal my fate, and suddenly one night, a kind of miracle occurred. I had gone to see a movie at the Odeon Theater in Hailifax. It was called *This Man is News*. The hero was a writer, a newspaper reporter, played by a little-known actor. His name was Barry K. Barnes. He was rather thin and not terribly handsome, but watching him in the darkness I was entranced. There on the screen unfolded a life of high adventure. One moment, Mr. Barnes was covering a big story in London. The next he was chasing Nazi spies in Paris. He dodged bullets in dark alleys with the greatest of ease. And always, always, he wore that magnificent trench coat, its belt not buckled but tied in a casual knot. When I walked out at the end of that movie, groping my way home through the pitch-black streets, I knew my destiny. I wanted to be like Barry K. Barnes, a newspaper reporter.

From that night on, my course was set. With the dashing image of Mr. Barnes in my mind, I stopped feeling sorry for myself. Instead, I started to turn my dream into substance. After a weary day at the mill, I haunted the public library, a German English dictionary in hand. I carefully read about Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn—this time in English. I even read some Shakespeare. I didn't understand much of that, what little I did understand was enough to show me the true beauty and power of words— words that make you feel the deepest sadness, and the highest happiness, and everything in between. After a while, magically, I found I didn't need the dictionary anymore.

When Barry K. Barnes and his trench coat returned to the Odeon in the sequel, *This Man in Paris*, I was waiting for him. No longer was a poor mill boy with no hope of escape. I watched him this time with my shattered dream back in one piece. Yes, I would be a writer, in whatever language I had to use.

Soon after the war ended I moved to the United States. One joyous day, I was hired by the great *New York Times* as a copy boy. Was it trench coat time at last? No, not quite. A copy boy lugs pate pots, gets coffee, and runs errands for the editors. He does not act at all like Barry K. Barnes. There is a difference between real life and the movies.

But . . . so what? I did learn to string words together—not as well as I had dreamed, I doubt that any writer ever does, but not so badly as to cause nightmares either. And along the way, I was lucky to taste some of the writer’s sweet rewards. I have met people from all walks of life, from the unsung heroes who seldom make the headlines to celebrities who make them too often. On a very good day— who knows?—the words I write might form bridges where there were none before. They might touch someone the way a little-known actor in a forgotten movie once touched me.

That was why, on a sunny afternoon, when a former prime minister of England sat down with me and shared a lemonade and some talk, I couldn’t help thinking, “You may never reach the top of the ladder, but maybe you have hold of the bottom rung.” And that was also why, as Mr. Wilson waved a cheery goodbye from his car, I sent a silent message to a man in a trench coat.

Thank you, Barry K. Barnes, wherever you are.