

Pop...A Very Rare Man

by Karen Read Wolfson

It must have been cold, bitterly cold for the thin clothing that hung on his slight arms and legs, but the times were hard. It must have seemed terrifying because of the push toward Russification deep into the Baltic countries by Czar Alexander III. Programs, eviction, abuse -- increased anti-Semitic behavior was a smoke screen for the smoldering revolutionary forces lying in wait in the Lithuanian heartland. Often, along with the fear, he must have felt exhaustion...because he was only nine.

Such an enormous sense of responsibility for Jennie and Lillian, his sisters, and his mother, Dora, and later, his step-brother Louis, must have followed him each day. Morris David Wolfson, now fatherless, worked as a cemetery watchman in his small Lithuanian village, Posville. In those days, the only birth and death records were the inscriptions on headstones, so the elders had them guarded. The year was 1888, and it would be another eight years before Morris, a conscript with the Russian army, would escape and find passage to the United States. The times were hard, but courage and hope were the mettle of this young immigrant.

Around July 15, 1896, a Jew who had faced the rigors of the five week steerage crossing stepped off the ship at Baltimore, Maryland. Morris, without money or possessions, was clothed in the pride of having come to this country. America was heaven; it was paradise to him, and in his heart, he never forgot this moment, this opportunity which forged the rest of his life.

Morris' older sister, Jennie Friedman, who lived in Baltimore, had managed to immigrate a few years earlier; thus she was the one who helped Morris leave Europe. In addition to peddling, he soon found work in a tailor's shop pressing clothes. By 1905, he had married Sarah Goldberg, and on September 9, 1907, they welcomed the birth of their first child, Irene (Renee), and on August 15, 1909, Samuel William.

Poverty stalked the young Wolfson family of four, so Morris worked at any odd jobs he could find. Physically, "Pop," as he was later called, was extremely powerful, though standing only 5'9". Going from one gym to another, earning a little money for his family, Pop was paid to wrestle with the great American Free-style Champion, Frank Gotch. He'd never wrestled before, but stories are that he held his own in the ring, and that was really something in those days.

Still grappling with a pauper's existence and wanting to escape the sweatshop, Morris took the advice of a friend, a landsman, and moved his family to St. Louis, Missouri, where he thought that peddling watermelons and ice would enable him to support his growing family, for on January 28, 1912, Louis Elwood was born. The success of selling seasonal fruits and ice was affected by the cold weather, so Morris, responding to the encouragement and financial assistance of another friend from the Old Country, moved to a warmer climate, to Jacksonville, Florida. Forced to leave Sarah and the three children behind until he had money for their travel, Morris, often starving himself, somehow saved the meager earnings from peddling and reunited his family around 1913.

Morris' struggle to make enough to feed his family continued in Jacksonville, especially with Edith's birth on September 9, 1914. Strong-minded and determined, Morris sought to expand his peddling business with his step-brother Louis, who had now come to America with Lillian and Dora. Edith Wolfson Edwards recalls the purchase of their first horse and flatbed wagon. "My dad examined the horse before they bought it. It was a healthy specimen; they even counted the teeth. The next day when they got up, the horse was dead. They had all their money in it."

For most Eastern European immigrants, hard labor and persistence were the keys to life, but one also had to have that elusive force...luck! Striking out with the flatbed wagon, Morris met his first taste of real fortune. In downtown Jacksonville, next to the YWCA, a lady in a large, two-story, red brick house sold Morris the

entire contents of her attic, which he promptly resold. Thus, each day was spent buying and reselling discards, a natural calling for a man with a sincere love for and interest in people. Gradually, other recyclable items worked their way onto his wagon, and eventually he opened a small business on Davis Street where large bins held the glass, rags, and newspaper that he resold to dealers.

Since Sarah had a basic elementary school education (quite unusual for a woman at that time), she would go down to the business every other day to do the bookkeeping. Morris, not unlike other immigrants, could neither read nor write English well and never had any formal education. Versed in Russian, German, and Yiddish, he kept abreast of the times by reading *The Jewish Daily Forward*, the news Bible of the immigrant, written in Yiddish and published in New York. The strength of his business acumen lay in his amazing retentive memory; he kept a full set of books in his head, often challenging the bookkeeper, Mr. Gavin. Later, his daughter Edith taught him to write his name so that he could participate in writing checks and signing business contracts with his sons. Learning the English language was a goal he pursued much of his life.

As the Davis Street business grew, so did the Wolfson family; Saul was born December 8, 1916, and Cecil on August 15, 1919. Sarah's management of the business accounts along with six children under the age of twelve was just as much a wonder as the building up of a rags and bottles business into a successful enterprise based on peddling in the early 1900s.

April 16, 1917, at age 38, Morris David Wolfson became a naturalized citizen of the United States. The impassioned respect and gratitude that he felt for this country, plus his innate belief that this was a place where ALL Americans were equal, were attitudes that dominated and influenced his life and the lives of his children. He was intolerant of prejudice. Louis Wolfson recalls, "He always developed a good relationship with any race or color of man, and that was unusual for a Jew coming from a foreign country. Later on in the business, Sam and I would be worried about the creditors at the bank, and Pop would be back talking to and concerned about a Black man who had some problems...Pop was a very rare man."

Times were changing in the country, and Morris eventually started picking up metals and scrap iron along with the rags, glass, and paper. In our nation, this was a time of burgeoning prosperity and spectacular growth with new businesses, so the opening of M. Wolfson & Co. on Myrtle Avenue was no exception. The United States government encouraged foreign trade relations following WWI (1914-1918), with petroleum, raw materials, and scrap iron being chief in demand in the Orient.

To Morris, honesty and fairness were paramount in his life. His word was his bond. By this time, many men were selling him scrap iron, which would be loaded on the huge ships in the Jacksonville port. To maintain this type of business, Morris would borrow money against his receipts, then repay the bank immediately as he was paid. "He had a wonderful reputation. He always had confidence in himself, and other people had confidence in him... He always did business on a handshake," Edith remembers.

The older boys, who were now in junior high or high school, helped with the business. "We all looked up to him, respected him, and loved him. In those days, there were no hours. You worked morning to night, Saturday, Sunday, until you got the job done," recalls Saul.

No matter how successful he later became, the image of Pop standing in the scrap iron and metal yard, wearing his overalls, is the image of the humble, unassuming man he was. He loved people and, according to Mrs. Monteen C. Tomberlin, who worked for Louis and Pop from the time she was sixteen, "Everybody who knew him, liked him, and most people loved him."

"He wasn't a person to flaunt anything," remembers Cecil. "He was a very modest individual. He would take care of just about anything that he was capable of doing for someone. It didn't make any difference who the

person was... He would be right there to give to the best of his ability. My father always instilled in us that if we were successful, to share our good fortune with others and to be tolerant of others... He conveyed to us the Golden Rule, to treat others the way we would like to be treated ourselves."

Along with modest business success in the 1920's, came three more children: Percy in 1922, Sylvia on June 19, 1924, and Nathan, the baby, June 20, 1929. There was a large, community swimming pool in Springfield. After going in the pool, Percy developed some type of bronchial illness; his death from pneumonia at age one left its tragic mark on Sarah and Morris.

The Great Depression slammed into Jacksonville around 1930 with M. Wolfson & Co. a victim along with everyone else. Huge supply ships filled with two or three thousand tons of scrap iron were idle, and the metal, once worth around \$30 a ton, now had lost 90 percent of its value. Irene was married, but with no money to attend college, Edith and Sam worked along side of Pop, while Louis, at Pop's insistence, attended the University of Georgia on a football scholarship sending home most of his money each month to help with the six children. Severe shoulder injuries ended Louis' athletic career, and he, turning down a job with Coca-Cola, returned to Jacksonville the end of the 1931 school year to help his struggling family.

The Depression was a time of anguish and despair; Morris lost everything and, following his usual practice of borrowing against receipts, faced a huge debt at Barnett Bank. Owing \$135,000, creditors and friends urged Morris to file bankruptcy. "I saw my father cry when Percy died, and the only other time was when the Barnett Bank wanted him to file bankruptcy," remembers Lou. For the immigrant who had struggled so hard and whose word and handshake were his bond, for the man who believed that if you owed another man money, you paid it back, for the man whose reputation and his family's reputation meant everything, bankruptcy was not an option. According to Saul, Morris said, "I will not walk away," and he vowed, as long as he had his health, to work until he and his sons had retired the debt, even if it took ten to fifteen years.

The mid-30s was a time of restructuring for the young Wolfson family, along with the rest of the nation. Again, in 1932, luck found her way to M. Wolfson & Co. when Sam and Lou paid \$275 to Penney Farms, a retirement community south of Jacksonville, to haul off all scrap and unused materials that were not attached to the buildings...railroad tracks, lead pipes, brass fittings, plumbing supplies. With a ready smile on his face, Lou still recalls Pop and Sam saying, "Where'd you get this? It can't be possible," when Lou and Jack Surasky, a friend, pulled into the yard with the first truck load. With a \$5,000 loan from Mr. Harold Hirsch, Sr. and \$5000 borrowed against the cash value of their father's insurance policy, Sam and Lou opened Florida Pipe and Supply in 1932 as an outlet to sell the new plumbing and mill supplies they'd bought at Penney Farms. The resale value of the \$275 purchase repaid the bank debt by 1937, and Morris was the happiest man in the world.

With the aggression of Japan in Southeast Asia and the rise of Hitler and Mussolini in the late 1930s, the world found itself in a second world war. Japan bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Only a few months later was Nathan's June 1942, bar mitzvah, and then Sam, Saul, and Cecil went off to war. Lou, with a steel plate in his shoulder, stayed at home with their many families to look after and a business to run with Pop.

Good fortune came again as all of Sarah and Morris' sons came home, but Edith's husband, Maurice, died fighting in the Battle of the Bulge. Nathan recalls his father's sensitivity to this loss, "He asked me to take a ride. We did, and Pop sobbed."

For Morris, family had always been the center of his existence. According to Saul, "The sun rose on his wife and children." Every Sunday the family would go on an outing with a picnic, perhaps to the beach, Green Cove Springs, Valdosta, or Avondale. On one Sunday ride, Cecil, a toddler, was bounced right out of the open Buick. Edith and Lou recall people hollering, "You've lost the baby! You've lost the baby!" Looking

back, they saw Cecil stunned but sitting in the middle of the road. Morris stopped the car, picked him up, checked him over, and then off they went.

Laughter-filled Sunday rides were like holidays; they framed the closeness that all the children felt growing up. Sam and Lou, Saul and Cecil, Sylvia and Nathan seemed to be the paired players, with Edith often being the care giver since Renee had married very young. The children experienced strong family ties, sharing with one another, and, as Lou expresses, "...making any sacrifice for each other." Cecil recalls that "there wasn't the selfishness that seems to exist today in a lot of families."

Being the youngest, Sylvia and Nathan enjoyed the days when Pop was at home more. "He took pride in his home and loved to piddle in the kitchen. When we'd come down for breakfast, Pop would have made oatmeal or cream of wheat, scrambled eggs, toast, and freshly squeezed orange juice," recalls Sylvia Wolfson Degen. After breakfast, Nate recalls Pop taking him to school in his Lincoln Zephyr. He remembers a man who loved all men, and who, perhaps, seemed most at home playing checkers with Henry and Adam in the scrap yard or fishing off the pier with his cronies. "You have to be taught to hate, and we never had any of that," reflects Nathan.

Although Edith feels that he really kept the children in line with love, Pop was strict, especially with Sam and Lou. "He was the patriarch of the family," recalls Monteen Tomberlin. "When Pop talked, they'd listen. He'd even reprimand his 'giant' sons. Most of the time, Pop was right; he had much wisdom. He was a figure that commanded respect. Underneath, he was the softest, sweetest man in the whole world. Those great big guys just loved him better than anything."

In his 60s, Morris looked back over the years of his life, from Lithuania to Florida, and felt that he was a man indebted to this country and its people. His natural love for all children, his need to help others as he had been helped, his belief in the importance of children's health care, and his desire to leave a legacy to his own family all contributed to his vision to build a children's clinic. In Lou's opinion, Percy's death also had a major effect on Pop's desire to do something for the children of Jacksonville.

These feelings and goals were expressed in Morris' 1946 letter to his sons, two years prior to his death. Since Morris was not fluent in English, Mrs. Tomberlin, still Lou's personal secretary, helped Pop express himself after he had thought for months and months about the contents of the message. Although his wife Sarah was very supportive of the idea of a children's clinic, the dream was purely Pop's vision and his effort to repay the country which had given him so much.

Morris had hoped to see the children's hospital in his lifetime; however, in 1947, he experienced renal and congestive heart problems, which caused his death a year later. While in Riverside Hospital, Cecil recalls how he and his brothers took shifts staying with their father, two at a time, around the clock. When his health didn't improve, Morris went by Pullman car to Johns Hopkins for further treatment. His health continued to deteriorate, and, since Pop wouldn't stay in bed, he was taken to Seton Hall, another hospital in Baltimore. He died September 27, 1948.

Always a fighter for the "little man," Morris, with some of his friends, helped establish Etz Chaim Orthodox Temple. Although Morris worshipped in the Conservative synagogue, he saw the need for the older Orthodox Jews to have a place to pray. It was the custom for the more affluent congregants to have the seats during worship; therefore, the poorer, older men, who lived each day just to pray, had no place to go.

After Pop's death, the four older boys went to Etz Chaim every day, morning and night, for eleven months to minyan services. "We couldn't read the prayer books," recalls Cecil, "but the congregation would put their arms around Sam, Lou, Saul, and me. The people took a loving to us, even though we were the only ones

there who were very young and very American looking. The older people accepted us because of the love they had for our father."

It would be until September 27, 1951, before the Wolfson Family Foundation was formed to carry out Morris' wishes. Through Mr. Bert Reid, a friend of Lou's from University of Georgia days, a client of Mr. Joe Glickstein, Sr. (who was the Wolfson family attorney and knew about Morris' letter), and a member of the Baptist Hospital Association (the body charged with raising funds for a new hospital), a contact was made to the Wolfson family. All of the right elements came together: the city had a need for a new hospital, the Southern Baptist Hospital Board desired a new hospital, and Morris Wolfson's children wanted to carry out the wishes of their father. The initial gift of the foundation, which was announced in December 1, 1951, was to help construct a pediatric wing, Wolfson Memorial Children's Hospital, at the Baptist Memorial Hospital, scheduled to open in 1955.

Morris Wolfson's inheritance to his children was the role model of a man who shared what he had; worked hard to do the best job he could, and saw all men and women as equal. It is from this legacy that a small family foundation was created to provide children's health care, as well as to recognize and affirm the needs and rights of all people. The new Wolfson Memorial Children's Hospital, which opened September 13, 1955, would be a place for all children to be admitted and treated without regard to creed, religion, race or financial position. Love and affection, devotion and respect, good fortune and opportunity have enabled Morris' children to honor their father's request - to fulfill his dream.

Information for this article is based on the recollections of Edith Wolfson Edwards, Sylvia Wolfson Degen, Cecil, Louis, Nathan, and Saul Wolfson, Mrs. Monteen C. Tomberlin, and Mr. Mack Crenshaw, Sr.
December, 1992