

DOOR TO DOOR SELLING

With the hostel empty of visitors we were free to come and go at will. The hostel's owners usually only visited in the morning, occasionally in the evening. Together Frederick and I would rehearse my sales banter.

I would knock on the door and then stand a short distance away so that I didn't appear assertive or threatening. The occupants would be able to see me through the door's small circular view-finder. When the door opened, Frederick prompted me with me in Swedish with a question. Without hesitation I had to reply: 'Excuse me, do you speak English?' and then, not waiting for a reply, I would offer my introduction card, letting it fall to the floor rather than retract it if the potential buyer hesitated. The idea of the card was to save time explaining and also to avoid having to repeat my rehearsed speech, at every door, as it would soon become mundane and irksome.

On being invited inside I should at all times remove my foot wear, as is the custom, then proceed towards the living-room and ask permission to display my paintings on the sofa. When asked how much, I would say 'Femton kronor each, tac så mycket,' then continue in English, fifteen kronor each please. Frederick explained that, attempting even a couple of words in Swedish, acted as a massive compliment. After our rehearsal, he commented that, with my boyish-looks and clipped British accent, I would go far, also advising me never to take rejection personally.

So, here I was on a Wednesday evening, in the middle of October, on the outskirts of town with a heavy snowfall starting. I was on my way with Frederick to blocks of three-storey flats. The plan was to split up; he would take the three

high-rise blocks of flats on the right, whilst I would tackle the ones on the left. I was disoriented, owing to the sheer uniformity of the buildings. They all looked the same; I hadn't told Frederick that I was a little deaf, had no sense of direction - and, worst of all, found myself at a loss as to how to proceed.

I stood there, a forlorn-looking figure, outside a door on the top floor, with my introduction card at the ready. I tapped quietly at first and then rang the bell. I stood two paces away to allow the occupier to use the spy view-finder that was now focused towards my face. The door opened and a middle-aged woman appeared. She looked at me. 'Excuse me, but do you speak English?' I asked in my clearest voice.

'A little,' she replied. I asked her if she would read my card. Frederick told me to offer the card and hold it outstretched, so the other person would proceed to take it and if necessary let it fall to the floor. She read the paragraph and all of a sudden, to my surprise, invited me into her home. I remembered my rehearsals, when Fredrick advised me to always offer to remove my shoes on entry, standard practice in Sweden, showing courtesy towards my host. Shoes removed, I was shown into the living room, to be met by, I assumed, her husband now asking his wife of my purpose. He then proceeded to ask me, in fluent English, about the latest music, the Beatles, Rolling Stones and other bands that he was interested in and questions about London. It later emerged he was a schoolteacher, the local head of music. I passed comment on how fluent his English was. With permission to lay my pictures on their sofa I spread the pictures out, after looking at them in earnest for a few minutes or so, they purchased two landscapes for thirty kroner, around three pounds. As I was about to leave the woman proceeded to go

into the kitchen, while he was talking to me, then returned and gave me a paper bag of food for which I was grateful. I thanked them both for their support; they wished me a safe onward journey, hoping my studies of Sweden's culture would help me in the future.

After an hour or so I had sold a further two paintings: I was now twenty Kroner better off. My cut would be five Kroner per picture. Also someone gave me a further five Kroner, for nothing, just to help me out. I felt like a beggar. A few asked me how old I was; I looked young for my years and I told them I was eighteen, coming on nineteen I lied because I didn't want sympathy or worse, the Swedish authorities on my case. Afterwards I met up with Frederick he was very happy with the outcome and remarked that we made a good team. I told him about the cash I had received separately for myself even though no paintings were sold.

He remarked, 'You have earned this because people like to practice English,' possibly I was the first English person they had encountered.

I was now better off, with forty Kroner in my pocket, equivalent to £4.00. (In today's terms £40),

A sense of euphoria came over me. I had food and lodging money for around three more days. Frederick stayed on for a few extra days then headed north, to an even colder climate with his pack on his back. I was sorry to see him go. He suggested that I should take up painting pictures for a living, stay under the radar and go to ground by trying to stay with someone.

'I have to say Zac, you are a nice person and a natural born doorstep salesman, Gävle is a good place to be in, nice people, a lucky place for you because you met me,' he said as he gave

his welcoming smile.

‘I know this as I have sold many pictures here over the years; it’s a lucky place for you also. Town of generosity this, be lucky my English friend, give me a hug,’ then he was gone, without giving me his home address.

Lying on the bed looking up at the ceiling, my nose running, a single tear fell down one cheek. I was so lonely and feeling sorry for myself, then I started doing push-ups on the floor, not a good idea, as I never quite got the knack of it, looking out of the window, gazing into the distance for a feeling of calm, the falling snow made me feel safe and warm indoors. Reciting out loud, ‘I am a survivor, I have luck on my side, get on with living today, right here and now, do as your told, that’s you Zachariah Cohen.’

Soon I had to leave the hostel, as the regulation of five nights in a row was now being enforced. So, with ninety kroner, £9.50, in hand, due to selling a further evening's pictures for Frederick, my security and future was looking stable. That Saturday afternoon I booked into an affordable bed and breakfast for the first time.

I showed my passport and informed the receptionist of my last address. When I told her I had been staying in a local Youth Hostel she looked on me rather suspiciously. She also handed me forms I had to complete in triplicate. The top copy was for the local constabulary, the second for the Swedish Inland Revenue while the third was for the owner, for their own accounts.

I understood now why Frederick had told me to go to ground as my footsteps could be traced. I was into my second week with thirteen weeks left before my tourist visa expired.

I purchased a small tin of watercolour paints and a few

brushes, an A4 block of cartridge paper, tracing paper, and a bottle of ink. I then went to the local library to find eight usable landscapes and seascapes to copy as Frederick had suggested.

I chose pictures to my liking and before long I was sitting, in an out-of-the-way corner of the local library. I traced various paintings, making sure no harm was done to the books. My task would have been simpler had I torn out the relevant pages but that would have been an act of vandalism which was against my nature. I had too much respect for books, drummed into me by Second-hand Antiquarian bookseller friends in Bohemia Road, Hastings. Returning to my room which I had paid in advance for two nights, after which I planned to return to the YMCA, a much cheaper option. I thought it better to pay for two nights in case I lost my cash.

A set of eight pictures ready for sale for the forthcoming Monday evening, I had a mammoth task before me to produce. My mind wandered back to my foster mother in Hastings. She was always sketching or doodling people, cats, dogs and landscapes. She had a free-flowing style of her own, an excellent artist in the making so I thought. Perhaps her artistic talent was wasted and she had a secret longing or a way of dealing with her insecurity which brought demons to the surface. It was such a travesty that I was not her natural child. Being able to draw like her may have been my salvation.

I began searching for answers as to where would I would like to be at this time in my life. Then my birth mother came into question, what good attributes did she have and why, within a few months of my fifteenth birthday did she request through my social worker who informed me, that I should

come and live with her in Govan, a suburb in Glasgow, and any income I was able to contribute would help towards her household bills. However I came to the conclusion that we owed each other nothing - as one member of The Romantic Roamers commented 'Zac, we can choose our friends but not our family' - he furthermore advised me to never pick up society's emotional rescue cases.

Frustrated and out of my depth by trying to produce a decent picture, I became aware that some are born gifted, artistically, having a natural flair, but this ability was something I definitely did not have. So, with cunning, I used a grid system to reproduce copies similar to painting by numbers as my original paintings. I finally completed a set of eight pictures, they were naive and childlike but I had to push forward; the hunger in me knew no bounds.

It was now Monday and the youth hostel was empty. I washed my clothes for the first time and left them on the radiator to dry. Then I headed off to the suburbs trying to remember where I had been on the last evening's selling with Frederick a few days earlier. Walking for what seemed like miles I found myself in an area that was mostly bungalows; for the life of me I could not remember the whereabouts of the area of the tenement buildings I was looking for.

As doors opened my confidence grew and, to my amazement, I sold my first picture. I was so ecstatic that for some unknown reason I took to my heels, running away from my first success. I knocked on a few more doors and was given some cash to help me on my way, without even a sale being made. My paintings clearly didn't have the Midas touch that Frederick had; I guess he was an accomplished artist of sorts.

My first outing was successful; I had earned the sum of

thirty-two kroner £3.20, which meant another two days refuge: food for the table, a bed to sleep in and shelter from the cold, harsh November, outdoors in Sweden. Still no other visitors at the youth hostel, which suited me just fine as my daily routine took shape.

This meant getting up about nine thirty, taking a long shower then breakfast of cornflakes and natural yoghurt. The latter was a silly mistake for I had bought yoghurt at the small supermarket mistaking it for pasteurised milk owing to the language barrier. Also, hard bread and cheese, some pâté and tins of Sild, the local Swedish fish. I didn't prepare any hot meals as I'd have been incapable of doing so, as in Hastings and at the children's home I was fed by others, so I'd never had any need to learn any basic cooking skills. Making tea, coffee and toast was all I was capable of doing.

My sub-conscious was playing havoc, as I knew I was deceiving customers, sales were down to at least half of the amount I'd have sold had I been selling Fredericks pictures. I was at a loss; I knew I was no good as an artist which was clear from the amount of time that was lost trying to paint and attempting to make sales to the general public. Many simply handed over go away small change saying that they had no need for the paintings. Although I had no reason to punish myself, given the time I spent talking to them in English. For most it was their first time to practice with a native English speaker, for them a subject close to their hearts and I was an English person, so novelty value on my part, no guilt on my side I rationalised to myself.

Knowing that both the youth-hostel and the 'bed and breakfast' I alternated between would by now have sent my visitor's immigration forms to the local police station for

inspection; I was now on the radar. Having been in the country three weeks or more I reckoned I should find alternative accommodation. It was a hard way of life but it suited me. Swedish people were kind and generous to me, a stranger at their door, so I wanted to stay here. I felt comfortable and planned to make my future here, at least for a few years. I wanted to work hard and learn Swedish, as best as I could, at least enough to be able to hold some sort of conversation. I needed to expand my sales area and start saving cash.