



The Helping Hand

by Lesley Dawson

My father and I are on the train travelling to Brooklyn. He cannot see anything except his own grief but I notice a woman sitting opposite looking at us and wondering at the cause of our sadness. For her sake I will tell our story.

Four of us left Vilnius two years ago to travel to the New World. We were a happy family, my parents, my younger sister Olga and I. We were not persecuted or discriminated against there but my father was finding it increasingly hard to find work as a carpenter. My uncle Sasha kept writing to us about the wonders of life in New York. Eventually my father managed to save, beg and borrow the money needed for our passage on a cargo ship to America.

The journey was terrible with such winds and waves never seen before. We felt as though we had been turned inside out and upside down. It was when we were half way across the ocean that my sister became ill with a fever. Of course, there were no doctors on board and the sailors dealt with us like pieces of merchandise, not people. One old lady, who had been a traditional healer in her home village tried to help with infusions and poultices to no avail. My sister was one of the younger more vulnerable ones who died and their bodies were thrown overboard with very little ceremony and no holy words spoken over them. Soon our healer friend also went with many of her generation, too old to deal with the lack of food and limited water.

We were just beginning to come to terms with this tragedy when we arrived at Ellis Island where the men and boys were separated from the women and girls. In vain my father pleaded that my mother had just lost her daughter, could speak no English and would be lost without her husband. When we emerged from the gruelling process of being examined, questioned and labelled we waited for my mother to exit through the women's door. It must have been two hours later when we thought to question why she had not arrived. Where we came from people like us didn't ask questions of officials as you might end up in prison and time was not an issue to people who had spent their lives rising and sleeping with the sun.

My father had some command of English and I had studied the language in school with an eye to emigration to America. We tried to ask where she was but found the accent of the American officials too difficult to understand. Eventually we managed to corner a tired doctor who informed us that my mother had been found to have tuberculosis and therefore could not enter the USA. He explained that she would have to go back home until she was free of the disease. I thought the despair on my father's face would break my heart. By this time he was a gibbering wreck and I had to take over the conversation. To give my father some hope the doctor smiled and said "There are many like your wife and they all manage to come back and get through immigration the second time. My advice is to go to where you are staying and wait for a letter from her"

So, lady with your frown and pursed lips, this is why my father looks so beaten down, because he is. He clutches our documents as he is afraid we will be sent back by some railway official. As his son I have to help him until he can function normally. We go to my Uncle Sasha's house where I hope the rest of the family can comfort him. Leave us alone. You must have felt like this once.