

1d- Living the American Dream

In lower Manhattan, he found work in an elegant French restaurant, where he peeled vegetables and washed dishes with the same eagerness that he would, years later, bring to his own restaurant. Only the owner was French; the rest of the staff were foreigners from other parts of Europe, who gesticulated and shouted scraps of Italian, Yiddish, Hungarian, German, and fractured English across the three long stoves in the center of the well-stocked kitchen. Not all had come to America as willingly as Stefan: some had fled from religion; others from family or war; but what kept each of them here was hope.

Being part of his new country would never be quite as total for Stefan as when he first arrived and wanted to be American in every way possible. How he loved the lack of convention, the instant familiarity. Here, respect had nothing to do with age but was earned with success. Class differences—that complicated ladder of human worth he'd grown up with—did not exist in America, he believed, and it would take him years to grasp the many subtle shadings of prejudice.

One day as he walked to work along West Street past vendors' carts and people on bicycles and horses pulling delivery wagons, he felt protected from the raw wind in his American coat and bowler hat, and it struck him that no one could tell he was a foreigner. As long as he did not speak and reveal his accent, he blended in like everyone else. He breathed it in, that certainty of belonging, held it in his body with deep exhilaration. From the head chef, Tibor Szilagi, a Hungarian with a slight limp and a contagious laugh, Stefan learned about passion for food and its preparation. He enjoyed the work, the effort of it, the results. Liked the scents of grilled meats and sautéed vegetables. His eagerness soon earned him the job of kitchen assistant, as well as an invitation to the poker games that the Hungarian organized in his apartment on Gansevoort Street in the early morning hours. (...)

Tibor Szilagi crushed half a cinnamon stick, mixed the tiny splinters into a handful of tobacco, and began to roll his special cigarettes.(...) "Use your money. Travel. There's a lake you would like, I swear. I've only seen it once, but it reminded me of Germany. Trees and mountains and so much water that you can never see all of the lake at one time." "Where is it?" "New Hampshire. I took the train there my second summer in America. To a town with the same name as the lake. Winnepesaukee." But Stefan didn't have time to travel. And he was far more interested in studying French recipes and checking the newspaper for yet another success story of immigrants. His new language was filling in around him, and he liked being able to read some sentences without looking up one single word.

Stefan liked hearing the story of how the Hungarian had come to America. Lame with polio since he was eight, he'd been unable to help on the family farm. His parents approved when he worked in the kitchens of married women, but when he was hired as cook in a bordello, his mother and her three unmarried sisters conspired to save his soul by hauling him to the priest for absolution and then bribing him with passage to America. After Tibor said farewell to his father, his mother and the aunts traveled with him on the train to Rijeka, where they hired a carriage and took him to the ship that would carry him south around the heel of Italy, west through the Strait of Gibraltar where monkeys lived in the crevices of high rocks, and then further west toward America.

From *The vision of Emma Blau*, Ursula Hegi, 2000