

On the threshold of a new world



In the galleries above, I was taken from room to room and looked over rather carelessly. After lifting my eyelids with a **button hook**, a young man with a military bearing saw that I had no **trachoma**. Someone else made me cough and breathe. I had to take off my clothes and turn around several times. In another room, a big fat man asked if I could bend over. "Why?" I asked in turn, thinking that the only reason he wanted to know was because he himself would never be able to do such a thing. "Is it that everyone who comes to America has to be able to bend over?"

"Yes," he said.

"What for?"

"Because when we sing our national anthem, we bend over. Now do it or I'll send you back to Serbia."

"I don't come from Serbia," I protested.

"Exactly," he said. "But if I want to, I can ship you there, so you'd better do as I tell you."

I bent over and was passed on to the next room. There, a pretty woman with cold eyes asked me if I knew how to read and write.

"Of course," I said.

"What languages?" she asked.

When I replied, "Hebrew, Yiddish, Russian, German, and French- and English, as you can see," she got very suspicious and asked me what I did for a living.

"I write books," I said. Little did I know that in America no one ever believes this. She looked at me the way one looks at a madman.

"What kind of books?" she asked sharply, closing one eye and squinting with the other.

"Stories," I replied pompously, "essays, dissertations on Biblical poetry, political science, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera."

"How can you make a living by doing this?" she inquired, with evident disgust.

"That's very perceptive of you," I said with a broad smile. "I can't."

"Turn around," she commanded. She made a letter on my back with a piece of chalk and motioned for me to leave. "Next!" she shouted.

"What's that for?" I asked, trying to see what she had written.

"Nothing," she said, and pushed me into the hall.

By this time I was elated. I imagined myself in a dressing gown, living in a palace overlooking the forests of Manhattan (which I thought would look like a cross between the Tyrol and the **Berner Oberland**), married to the Norwegian woman, after whom I was chasing as best I could. We would be on the same ferry, I thought. The ferry would burst through the fog, and there, in front of us, would be a magnificent island of fjords, meadows, and castles...

Mark HELPRIN, *Ellis Island and Other Stories* (1976) of Delacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence, a division of Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc.

1. button hook: tire- bouton

2. trachoma: trachome (maladie des yeux)

3. Berner Oberland Oberland bernois (région montagneuse de Suisse)