

REMARKS AT A POETRY READING

In Commemoration of Walt Whitman's Birthday  
May 20, 1978, Camden, New Jersey

It's a privilege to be in Camden, to celebrate Whitman's anniversary. I wanted at first to read some of his poems, but then I realized the evening would run too long, and it occurred to me perhaps there was something I could say that would evoke the image of the world--the American world--at the time that Whitman was living here in Camden. I remembered that my mother had come to this country at the age of twenty-four, knowing not a word of English, and arrived on these shores to find a new life and with the promise of a great world of which rumor had spread all over Europe.

When my mother died at the age of eighty-six, she left a memoir of her childhood and of her early years in this country, which I plan eventually to edit for publication. It's so fresh and immediate that I think it communicates as few documents do what America meant to an immigrant from Eastern Europe in 1890. Whitman said, you will recall, that we were not a nation, but a nation of nations. And that thought has always struck me as being central to this whole American experiment through all its adventures and misadventures.

Here are a few passages from my mother's memoirs. Perhaps they provide a setting for some of the poems I've written about my background, my origins. This opening paragraph seems to me a little masterpiece:

*Without my consent, I was brought into the world in the year 1866, much too early if I had my choice, and also in the wrong place, a God-*



drawing by Robert DiStefano

forsaken village of 300 families in Lithuania, in the province of Kovno. My father was a grain merchant. I was the fourth of six children....My great-great grandfather on my mother's side was reputed to be the wisest man of his time. People came from miles around to get his blessing. He was extremely pious, and could perform miracles, so my mother said. But the only miracle ever to convince me was that he lived to the age of a hundred and one....

It was a time of discontent with the old ways; of turning from ignorance and slavery to freedom and knowledge. The young left the small towns and went to the cities in search of something, they themselves did not know what. Books and poems suddenly appeared, calling to the new generation to wake up. The heaven promised by religion no longer seemed enough.

Then she goes on to tell how at the age of fourteen she left home to work in the capital city of Kovno as a clerk in a little neighborhood store. There she began to dream of taking the great plunge and crossing the sea. When her father died a few years later, she returned to her native village, Yashven, but she knew it would not be for long.

I hated small town life, with all its inconveniences, unsanitary conditions, mud more than a foot deep in rainy weather, the dust of the dry summers, ignorant and narrow minds around you, everyone watching everything you did. I decided to go by myself to America....I scraped together the money needed for the voyage. My mother packed my trousseau into two large wicker baskets with brass locks. As was the custom then, she had started my trousseau when I was

no more than three years old. It consisted of a featherbed and three large pillows, perhaps seventy pounds of goosefeathers mixed with down, all pure white, and the quills removed by hand, the work of many years. Also dozens of hand-knitted stockings of cotton or linen that I could never wear in this country; all sorts of pure linen sheets and pillowcases and towels and hand-embroidered underwear; stacks of copper and silver household utensils, handed down for generations; a few charms for good luck; and hundreds of other things I never had any use for--all stuffed into the two wicker baskets, and weighing some three hundred pounds.

I left in August of 1890. I had no passport, so I crossed the German border at night and took a train for Bremen. Hundreds of immigrants were passing through Germany in that period. No one troubled you as long as you could pay your fare. In Bremen I purchased my ticket to New York, and stayed four days in a charity hotel called Emigranten Haus. On the fifth day we were put on a train bound for Antwerp, where we stayed ten more days at another Emigranten Haus. There agents approached us, with offers of jobs on our arrival in New York. People with families were even given tickets for the boat to Fall River, where jobs awaited them in the cotton mills. Men, mostly Slavs from Eastern Europe, were offered jobs in the Pennsylvania coal mines, and told of the prosperity awaiting them. We were instructed not to say anything about these jobs, because a law had just been passed in the United States forbidding the import of contract labor. On the Red Star liner, Rhineland, we travelled steerage, four bunks to a windowless cubicle below the waterline. Our main meal consisted of potatoes

cooked in their skins and herring served with bread and tea. But who cared about food, on our way to the Golden Land? I felt good, and spent most of my time on deck, where I came to know every passenger, and listened to their plans. No one had any money left after paying for passage, but they all had dreams of making a fortune, and some of them were already worried what they would do with it. Single girls hoped to marry rich men, of whom there were plenty in America.

At nine-thirty a.m., on September 22, 1890, we passed the Statue of Liberty and neared Castle Garden. Finally, the ship docked. I had been born twenty-four years before, on that same date, but the day I landed in America was the day of my rebirth and my real birthday. I regret that my first twenty-four years, which ought to be the best part of a life, were wasted.

I took my two heavy wicker baskets and my bundle and went out into the streets of New York in search of a new life.