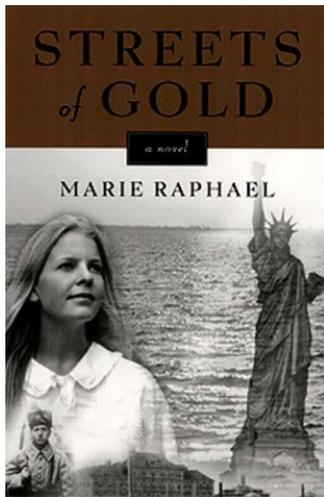

Streets of Gold by Marie Raphael (2001), 215 pages.



One may classify this book as an inspirational novel about Polish immigrants who were the great-grandparents of the author. Marie Raphael is a teacher living in California, and it seems that for a long time she has wanted to depict the trials and tribulations of her relatives a century ago. Parts of the story appear based on actual events; other elements are surely lifted from the family's lore. The action takes place during Theodore Roosevelt's presidency, the period 1901-1908, which included the height of immigration from Eastern Europe. The Bolinski family makes a dramatic decision to leave their farm for America, taking along their four children. The oldest son Stefan has been drafted into the Russian army a few years earlier, in spite of strong protestations. At that time such a draft could mean twenty years of compulsory service, then an economic disaster for the older Bolinski. Stefan detests this hateful bondage, escapes, and soon the family leaves the native village in the middle of the night. They climb into a cart drawn by an old black horse, driven by a professional smuggler of people heading for the Russian-Prussian border en route to the port of Hamburg. They succeed, for this crossing is in no way as difficult as similar crossings would be in the 1940s. In fact, hundreds of thousands of people used this method to

travel to America.

The trans-Atlantic journey aboard a large German ship is uneventful, except for the stormy seas. The family travels in steerage, the cheapest accommodations, as the saying went, "with the fish." The reader gets well acquainted with the heroine of this novel, young Marisia, about fifteen years of age. Possibly she is based on the author's grandmother.

Upon arrival at Ellis Island, grim news awaits Mr. Bolinski: his little daughter fails to pass the medical inspection. Consequently, the parents, who refuse to part with her, sail back to Hamburg, taking the youngest child Adam along. The immigration policies of that period are described a bit hazily, but the adult Stefan and his sister Marisia are allowed to disembark. The struggle of these two youngsters on the lower East Side of Manhattan is the main theme, and they deserve admiration for coping with problems and surviving. Casual contacts made aboard the ship prove to be invaluable, and some New York addresses given to them by their parents are, of course, lifesavers. Yet they begin at the bottom of the ladder: Marisia is a junior maid and Stefan by working for a building contractor and is soon involved in an accident. Both begin to learn English; their determination is exemplary, and their talents are soon recognized. The girl has a definite talent for drawing, while Stefan finds gainful employment with the vastly expanding subway system.

Soon there are additional good news. After the unfortunate death of the sick girl in Hamburg, the parents and little Adam sail again to America where they're two Americanized children proudly await them at the pier. The legendary America does not have any sidewalks paved with gold, but it is equally untrue that it offers only misery and a betrayal of the young people's dreams. They demonstrate how much depends on one's own efforts and some luck. It would not be surprising if the author in her role of teacher tells her students about the Bolinski experience that took place four generations ago. Similarly, the young people of today would benefit from a story, which, in different versions, has been repeated in millions of American homes.

George E. Suboczewski
