

## **Chapter 7: First Job in America**

“She’s very small. Are you sure she’s fourteen?”

“Yes, and she’s a very good worker.”

“It’s a lot of responsibility, taking care of a baby. We expected someone much bigger.”

“Kristina took care of my whole family in Slovakia.”

“Well, in any case, she can start at four dollars a month.”

“But you said six dollars when we spoke before.”

“That’s because we expected someone much bigger.”

“The work will be the same.”

“We’ll pay four dollars. Remember she’ll have a place to live, and we have to feed her, too.”

Mother spoke fluent Hungarian to the family where Kristina was to begin her work in America. They were Mr. and Mrs. Zlady, who owned a dry-cleaning and tailoring shop. Kristina would take care of the baby, wash the dishes, and do any small chores the Zladys needed done.

Kristina looked with fear and dismay at the home she would be living in—three small dreary rooms on the first floor. Was this to be her home in America? The front room was where the dry-cleaning customers came, where Mr. Zlady worked all day with harsh smelling chemicals and Mrs. Zlady sewed at a foot operated machine. The center room was the kitchen, dark and gloomy; the only window looked out at a wall just a few feet away. With buildings six stories tall, not much light got down to the first floor in the narrow center space that the buildings were built around. The back room was the bedroom for the Zladys, and their year-old child, Palko. At night a folding cot would be opened up for Kristina in the kitchen. There was a smelly toilet in the hall that the family shared with three other families on the first floor. It was a truly ugly and dirty place to live compared to her bright, sun-filled home in Slovakia.

The baby Palko, though, was beautiful, with dark curly hair and very large brown eyes. Mrs. Zlady showed him to Kristina, and offered him to her. He was sleepy and cranky and didn't want to sit on Kristina's lap. He clung nervously to his mother.



After the introductions and arrangements were made, Mother had to return to her job. Kristina was now on hers. "Just take Palko outside," said Mrs. Zlady. "Let him cry there, and get tired. Then when he naps, you can learn about the kitchen chores."

It was not long before Kristina won Palko over and she enjoyed the baby and his playful ways. She loved bathing him, feeding him, changing his diapers, keeping him amused and consoling him when he was upset or cranky or hurt. The day was busy and full, and when Palko took his nap, there was tidying and dishes to do.

Kristina was eager to learn English, but she saw little chance for it, working for this Hungarian family, since they did not speak English either. They managed their business through gestures and pointing if the customers were not also Hungarian. But most were.

When Kristina was out on the street, she carefully listened to the conversations of people, and

especially the children playing in the alleys. It was hard to catch on to whole sentences, but there were occasional words that she could isolate and practice to herself, even though she didn't know what they meant. She rehearsed them so she wouldn't forget them, and saved them to ask Mother when she saw her on her day off.

Palko was a fussy eater, and Kristina tried coaxing him to open his mouth for a spoonful of the cereal that she had prepared for his breakfast. She coaxed him first in Hungarian, then in Slovak, but he would not eat. Then she decided to use English. Maybe that magic language would open up the baby's lips.

"Shuh dup. Palko." she said as she offered him a spoonful. "Shuh dup. Shuh dup ..." she said sweetly.

Mrs. Zlady happened to come in at that moment from her work in the front. "What are you saying to my little Palko?"

"I thought I would speak to him in English," explained Kristina.

"Do you know what you are saying?"

"*Shuh dup*. I hear children saying it in the streets. I wanted to teach Palko English."

Mrs. Zlady glowered at Kristina. "*Shut up*' means to close your mouth and be quiet. It is a very fresh and rude thing to say."

“Oh.” Kristina was humiliated. She’d better not use words in English until she checked what they meant.

Although the Zladys were kind, they were not in the least rich. Not only did they pay her the lowest possible wage, but they had very little to give her to eat, and they had very little to eat themselves. Kristina was as hungry as she had been back in Slovakia, but now she had all the delicious food of America in front of her eyes everyday when she went outside, but with no money to buy it.

When Thursday came, Mother brought Kristina to Melceks, where she gobbled down the food she had hungered for all week. She told her about the small portions she received and Mother then supplied Kristina with extra bread and fruit, that she hid by day in her little folded cot. She was afraid that the Zlady’s would become angry that she had more to eat than they did. She was careful to keep it in a tin box, and to wipe up any crumbs, since there were cockroaches in the apartment and she and Mrs. Zlady were often busy killing them.

In a few weeks Mother brought good news. She had found a new job for Kristina.

“You’ll be working for a rich couple in a one apartment. The lady is French and can speak German as well. Her husband speaks German and Hungarian, and his English is very good. He has promised to teach you English,

and you will earn nine dollars a month."

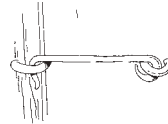
*More than double what she was getting now! And she would have her own room.* It sounded like heaven.

Mr. Neuman was much older than Father, and much better fed! He was tall and fat, with silvery hair and a round, soft, kindly face. He spoke in a soft voice and it seemed everything about him was soft and gentle.



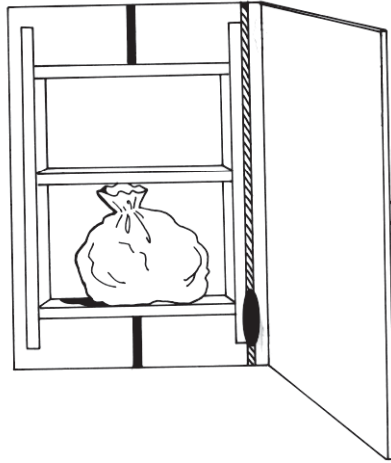
Mrs. Neuman, his wife, was also tall, but slender, and with long blond curls. She was the most beautiful woman Kristina had ever seen. She was much younger than her husband, and had a royal air about her. Kristina was proud to be working for such an elegant mistress.

The apartment was spacious; there was a dining room as well as a kitchen, and a huge parlor for entertaining guests. Kristina's jaw dropped when she saw her very own room, with a door and a lock on the inside. It was something she had never imagined in her life, a retreat where no one could enter unless she allowed them to. It contained a small bed, a little chest of drawers and a mirror. A mirror all her own. She wondered if some day she would ever have enough possessions to fill up the empty drawers.



In the evening, a buzzer rang in the kitchen. Where was it coming from? Mrs. Neuman opened a

little door in the wall and showed her the dumbwaiter. Mrs. Neuman put bags of garbage on the dumbwaiter shelf, then called something down the shaft, and the contraption lowered itself out of sight, showing a set of ropes, some moving up and some moving down. *What in the world was it? How was it moving?*



Mrs. Neuman spoke to her husband in German, and Mr. Neuman spoke to Kristina in Hungarian. Each morning he explained the various chores that his wife wanted done, so in this way communication of a sort went on, added to by Mrs. Neuman's use of gestures and demonstrations. Misunderstandings that couldn't be resolved in the daytime had to wait until evening to be straightened out. He also taught her a few sentences in English, but he didn't have time to really make sure she understood or could say them. She remembered only the first three numbers in English: *wun too tree*.

One day during the first week, Mrs. Neuman was out of the house when the dumbwaiter buzzer rang. Kristina opened the door, placed two bags of garbage on the shelf, and closed the door. She did

not remember that she must say something to the superintendent who was waiting below to know when she had finished so he could pull the ropes that moved the dumbwaiter down to the door below.

The buzzer rang again, long and loud. She opened the door. She could hear a man's voice downstairs yelling something up at her. What did he want? She closed the door again. The buzzer sounded and did not stop. She opened the door and yelled down the only English words she knew.

"Shut up stupid banana! Shut up!"

The yells from below became violently angry. Kristina slammed the door shut. *What if the owner of that angry voice should come upstairs to punish her! She was terrified. What had she done?* She ran to her room and locked the door behind her then slid herself under to bed to hide.

It was not long before the doorbell rang. Kristina hoped that, if she did not make a sound, he would think that she was not there and would go away. But the bell rang and rang, and Kristina's heart pounded in fear. *Would he break down the door? Could he really want to harm her for her rudeness? Oh why had she said those words, when Mrs. Zlady had told her that it was rude?*

Finally, the bell stopped, and Kristina held her breath fearing it would begin again. She did not move from under the bed. After about



①ve minutes, she heard a key in the lock, and the door opened. Of course, the super would have a key! Would he ①nd her?

“Kristina! Where are you?”

It was Mrs. Neuman.

Very cautiously Kristina wriggled out from under the bed, and came out. Mrs. Neuman’s eyes were blazing with anger, and there standing out in the hall was a dark, strong-looking man with a big ring of keys in his hand. Kristina dove back into her room and locked the door. She did not come out until she heard footsteps going to the door and the door close behind them.

It was up to Mr. Neuman to ①nd out why Kristina had refused to open the door when Mrs. Neuman had gone out without her key. He instructed Kristina in how to apologize in English, both to his wife and to the super. He explained that after putting the garbage on the dumbwaiter, she should have called down, “Ready.” Or “All right.”

Mr. Neuman told her that they were going to entertain some important friends the next evening, so Kristina would have a busy day. She was to wear a maid’s serving uniform, which he presented her with. It was left over from their last maid, and was far too large for Kristina’s small frame. He gave her a needle and thread, and she sewed it to a better size for herself. She tried it on



and was quite pleased with her appearance.

The next morning Kristina followed Mrs. Neuman to the pushcarts and the butcher shop, staying quietly in the background. A six-pound roast from the butcher's, four pounds of potatoes, a pound of string beans, and a quart of berries from the pushcarts. Bread, butter, sugar, milk, and cream from the grocer's. It was Kristina's job to carry the

bundles home. She was to walk three steps behind her mistress. As the bundles accumulated with each purchase, the load became heavier and heavier. Kristina had a hard time keeping up with the fast pace and was constantly shifting the bundles to redistribute the weight. Her back and neck muscles ached, and her fingers became numb. Men stared in their direction, and at first Kristina thought they were looking at her. Then she realized it was the tall, beautiful Mrs. Neuman who commanded their attention. Mrs. Neuman walked like a princess, with her blonde curly head held high and her long legs taking gentle strides, block after block.

Back at the apartment, Mrs. Neuman showed her, through gestures and some broken Hungarian, how to clean the house. Then she had Kristina peel potatoes, chop the vegetables, wash and trim a box full of luscious red strawberries, and set the table. She whipped a bowl of cream and watched as Mrs. Neuman created an artistic masterpiece of strawberries, cream, and cake. *Would there be any of this feast for her?*

In the evening when the guests arrived, she took their coats as Mr. Neuman had instructed her, and hung them up in the hall closet.

How her mouth watered as she served the juicy roast beef, baked potatoes, carrots and gravy to the Neumans and their guests in the dining room. Her



lunch of bread and cheese seemed to have been so long ago. She listened to the growling noises in her stomach with embarrassment. Back in the kitchen, she washed the pots and cooking pans while the guests were eating, and finally, Mrs. Neuman rang the little silver bell to signal Kristina to come in and clear the dishes from the table. She carefully reached around the left of each guest as she had been taught, quietly, so as not to interrupt their conversation.

Kristina saw with delight that a few of the guests had left slices of meat on their plates. She quickly picked them up with her fingers and popped them into her mouth without stopping in her trip back to the kitchen.

Mrs. Neuman jumped up, shouting sharp words and charged into the kitchen after her. What had she done wrong?

Her mistress' eyes blazed with fury. She slapped Kristina across the face, and grabbed the dishes from her hands. She scolded and screamed, but Kristina could not understand a word. Then Mrs. Neuman pointed first toward Kristina's room and then toward the front door. Kristina was being red! At her new job less than a week and she was being red!

Mr. Neuman came into the kitchen, calmly spoke to his wife in German, then spoke to Kristina in Hungarian.

"Why did you eat the meat on the dishes in front of all the guests?"

"Because I was hungry."

"You are supposed to wait until you have finished for the day before you eat your meal."

"I couldn't help myself. I was very hungry. I didn't know I wasn't supposed to eat it. They left it on their plates, so I knew they didn't want it."



“It was very rude. Mrs. Neuman is very embarrassed that you did that in front of our guests.”

Mrs. Neuman broke in again, still angry, pointing toward the door. Her husband calmed her, and spoke again with Kristina.

“Do you want to keep working here, Kristina?”

*What other choice was there? It had taken Mother weeks to get her this job. “Yes, sir.”*

“Then you must never do what you did again.”

“No, sir.”

“Now, dry your eyes and serve the dessert. You may eat your supper before you do the dishes,” said Mr. Neuman.

“Thank you, sir.”

Kristina had lost all hope about the strawberry cream cake and she served it as if she were totally oblivious to it. And the guests did what she would have done, cleaned the plates thoroughly, and she dared not even lick the few remaining smears of cream when she cleared the table.

She decided it would be better to have the

work done before she ate, now that the meat had taken the edge off her hunger. She dutifully cleared the kitchen and washed the dishes. Then at last she sat down at the kitchen table and, listening to the lively chatter in the dining room, she ate her supper of bread and cheese.