"Give us your tired, your poor": The story of Emma Lazarus

By Katie Mettler, Washington Post on 02.06.17
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The Statue of Liberty on Liberty Island, in between New Jersey and New York, is a major tourist landmark on the East Coast. The statue, also called Liberty Enlightening the World, is a colossal neoclassical sculpture on Liberty Island. The copper statue, designed by Frederic Auguste Bartholdi, a French sculptor, was built by Gustave Eiffel and dedicated on October 28, 1886. It was a gift to the United States from the people of France. Photo by: Roberto Machado Noa/LightRocket via Getty Images

The year was 1883, when Emma Lazarus, a young, high society New York poet and the descendant of Jewish immigrants, was asked for a favor.

Fundraising efforts were underway for a pedestal to hold the Statue of Liberty, an expensive gift from France that many Americans found especially uninspiring. The French had paid for construction of the monument, but its recipients were responsible for buying its base. This made out-of-towners scoff.

But elite writers and authors in New York went to work anyway, soliciting help from people like the 34-year-old Lazarus to reach their monetary goal. Would she compose, they asked, a sonnet to be sold at auction, alongside the writings of Mark Twain and Walt Whitman?

Lazarus agreed.
What she didn’t know at the time — as a woman whose work as a “poetess” had been the subject of condescension — was that it would be her words, lyrical and poignant, that decades later came to define the American vision of liberty.

More than a century later, in 2017, the words are rallying people against a controversial president and his policies and attitudes toward immigrants.

Though raised in privilege, Lazarus had spent her life writing about anti-Semitism and ethnic prejudice, and in the 1880s, became a fierce advocate for Jewish refugees fleeing massacre in Russia. The sonnet, called "The New Colossus," reflected that conviction.

"Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses," she imagined the Statue of Liberty saying, "yearning to breathe free."

At the time, her words were praised by other writers, who said they gave the cold and disconnected statue a spirited purpose. But the sonnet (and women in general) went unrecognized during the ceremony to dedicate Lady Liberty in 1886, and when Lazarus died a year later from cancer at age 38, it was not mentioned in her New York Times obituary, either.

It wasn’t until 1903, two years after a friend found "The New Colossus" in a New York bookstore and nearly two decades after Lazarus' untimely death, that the poet's stirring words were inscribed on a plaque and affixed to the inner wall of the statue’s pedestal.

In the century since, the final stanzas of "The New Colossus" have been quoted by presidents but also weaponized against them — much like protesters did nationwide in recent weeks at airports, the Supreme Court and the White House to protest President Donald Trump.

Last Friday, Trump signed an executive order limiting the admission of visitors from seven predominantly Muslim countries and temporarily banning the admittance of all refugees, creating chaos at airports worldwide and sparking another weekend of widespread protests that mirrored the Women’s March from just seven days prior that drew millions of global citizens into the streets.

Scrawled across signs and typed out in tweets, those opposing the Trump administration’s immigration and refugee policies have made Lazarus’ most famous words their rallying cry, proof, they say, that American liberty means welcoming those in need, not shunning them.

"Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free," House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., the daughter of an Italian immigrant mother, said outside the Supreme Court Monday night. "You know the rest. It’s a statement of values of our country. It’s a recognition that the strength of our country is in our diversity, that the revitalization constantly of America comes from our immigrant population."

This article is available at 5 reading levels at https://newsela.com.
The stanza Pelosi quoted is the most widely-recognized element of “The New Colossus,” likely because it’s the part that appears on a placard at the Statue of Liberty. But the entire poem is much longer, and according to historians, speaks to the work Lazarus did to be a spokeswoman for the Jewish community and welcome Russian refugees in the 1880s.

Lazarus grew up the fourth child of seven in a wealthy New York family that descended from America’s first Jewish settlers, according to the Jewish Women’s Archive. Her father found success as a sugar refiner and, recognizing his daughter’s talent early on, was prosperous enough to fund the publication of her first book of poems when she was just 17.

Much of her work explored her heritage as a Jew of Sephardic — or Spanish and Portuguese — descent. She was proud of that history, but her father tried to distance his family from it and assimilate into wealthy Christian society, giving Lazarus many Christian friends but also a distinct feeling of otherness.

She was called a "Jewess," according to the JWA, and years later wrote in a letter that she was "... perfectly conscious that this contempt and hatred underlies the general tone of the community towards us."

Still, her talents earned her great praise from the literary elite of her day. She befriended Ralph Waldo Emerson as a young woman, and he became a mentor and critic of her writing. By 1882, the year before she wrote "The New Colossus," more than 50 Lazarus poems and translations had been published in mainstream periodicals, according to the JWA, and she had penned a novel and a drama.

It was a wave of "particularly vicious" anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe in the 1880s that inspired her most powerful work, wrote the JWA. "Pogroms," a Russian word that means to "wreak havoc" and "demolish violently," were driving as many as 2,000 Russian Jewish refugees to New York monthly, Lazarus biographer Esther Schor wrote.

"Because her popularity enabled her to reach a broad audience, she became both a spokesperson for and a fiery prophet of the American Jewish community," according to the JWA.

In an annotated version of "The New Colossus," Schor explained that Lazarus plunged "recklessly and impulsively" into a written defense of the Russian Jewish immigrants in Century Magazine and began volunteering.

"She took the streetcar from her lavish home on 57th Street to work at the Hebrew Emigrant Aid Society at 105 East Broadway, where she helped train refugees and taught English," Schor wrote. "She visited them in their squalid quarters on Ward’s Island and wrote an exposé about dirty water, overflowing garbage, unemployment, and lack of training for adults and education for children."
It was during this time, according to the JWA, that Lazarus "became increasingly convinced that 'the time has come for actions rather than words.'" And, aware of her own privilege, she would sometimes joke: "What would my society friends say if they saw me here?"

In 1883, she formed the Society for the Improvement and Colonization of East European Jews, but it later collapsed in 1884. She also advocated voraciously for Zionism. A year after Lazarus died, her cousin founded the Emma Lazarus Club for Working Girls, "where young Jewish immigrants could learn to type or sew - or recite Shakespeare," Schor wrote. Her legacy was further cemented in the mid 20th century with the creation of the Emma Lazarus Federation of Jewish Women's Clubs, which offered "leadership to women in Jewish communities in our own time in the same spirit as Emma Lazarus did in hers."

Her own family, though, was perhaps not as proud of Lazarus' outspoken and brazen efforts as those in the Jewish sisterhood. After the poet died, her sisters worked to craft a narrative for Lazarus that ran counter to the way she lived, painting her as a "more demure and feminine" spinster, according to the JWA, and they even refused to grant permission to republish her Jewish poems.

In the decades since, Lazarus' works have been passionately resurrected — thanks, Schor argues, to the towering presence of her Mother of Exiles.

"The irony is that the statue goes on speaking, even when the tide turns against immigration — even against immigrants themselves, as they adjust to their American lives," Schor told the New York Times in 2011. "You can't think of the statue without hearing the words Emma Lazarus gave her."
Quiz

1. Which of these paragraphs BEST summarizes a central idea of the article?

(A) What she didn't know at the time — as a woman whose work as a "poetess" had been the subject of condescension — was that it would be her words, lyrical and poignant, that decades later came to define the American vision of liberty.

(B) At the time, her words were praised by other writers, who said they gave the cold and disconnected statue a spirited purpose. But the sonnet (and women in general) went unrecognized during the ceremony to dedicate Lady Liberty in 1886, and when Lazarus died a year later from cancer at age 38, it was not mentioned in her New York Times obituary, either.

(C) Lazarus grew up the fourth child of seven in a wealthy New York family that descended from America's first Jewish settlers, according to the Jewish Women's Archive. Her father found success as a sugar refiner and, recognizing his daughter's talent early on, was prosperous enough to fund the publication of her first book of poems when she was just 17.

(D) Her own family, though, was perhaps not as proud of Lazarus' outspoken and brazen efforts as those in the Jewish sisterhood. After the poet died, her sisters worked to craft a narrative for Lazarus that ran counter to the way she lived, painting her as a "more demure and feminine" spinster, according to the JWA, and they even refused to grant permission to republish her Jewish poems.
2 Which of these paragraphs BEST reflects the central idea that Lazarus believed America should be a safe and fulfilling haven for refugees?

(A) It wasn't until 1903, two years after a friend found "The New Colossus" in a New York bookstore and nearly two decades after Lazarus' untimely death, that the poet's stirring words were inscribed on a plaque and affixed to the inner wall of the statue's pedestal.

(B) Scrawled across signs and typed out in tweets, those opposing the Trump administration's immigration and refugee policies have made Lazarus' most famous words their rallying cry, proof, they say, that American liberty means welcoming those in need, not shunning them.

(C) "She took the streetcar from her lavish home on 57th Street to work at the Hebrew Emigrant Aid Society at 105 East Broadway, where she helped train refugees and taught English," Schor wrote. "She visited them in their squalid quarters on Ward's Island and wrote an exposé about dirty water, overflowing garbage, unemployment, and lack of training for adults and education for children."

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3 Read the excerpt from the article.

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Which option could replace the word "demure" without altering the meaning of the second sentence?

(A) reserved

(B) audacious

(C) confident

(D) intelligent
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Which word BEST conveys the meaning of the word "prosperous" in this context?

(A) impoverished  
(B) affluent  
(C) fortunate  
(D) elated
Answer Key

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