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“Give Me Your Tired, Your Poor”

By
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A few weeks ago a musical group to which I belong sang a song entitled, “Give Me Your Tired, Your Poor” by Irving Berlin. With immigration sensitivities at the highest levels in this country I thought I would research the source of Mr. Berlin’s lyrics.

Since many of these type subjects concerning our country’s history are taught very little in our public schools I thought it would be interesting to share what I found with you folks out there. Those of us over 50 years of age are quite familiar with the great influx of immigrants in the late 1800s, early 1900s and the way station named “Ellis Island” through which they had to come. This tiny scrap of land in New York Harbor was the gateway for over 25 Million people entering our country legally from 1892 to 1924.

As new refugees and immigrants from countries across the sea entered into New York Harbor, leading to Ellis Island, they looked over the railing of the ships that bore them into the eyes of the most famous symbol of freedom and democracy in the modern world, the Statue of Liberty, our very own Lady Liberty. Looking down from over 300 feet above the water, this 151 foot, 1 inch colossus has been likened to one of the Seven Wonders of the World in ancient times, the Colossus of Rhodes in Greece which stood at the gate of the Rhodes harbor some 300 years before Christ.

A gift from the people of France, Lady Liberty was formerly dedicated in October, 1886, after several years of frantic fundraising to pay for the base upon which she stands. People from all over America contributed to this effort to provide a home for the statue including a young Jewish poet, Emma Lazarus, who at age 34 wrote a poem to auction off to help raise funds. She wrote the poem three years before the raising and dedication of Lady Liberty and died, at the age of 38, one year after the statue was dedicated.

Because members of her family were Jewish immigrants from Portugal and her concern for the plight of many Jews of that day, she had an intense interest in the statue. Sixteen years after her death, in 1903, she was honored by having her poem, “The New Colossus”, engraved on a plaque in the base of Lady Liberty. The words of this poem became an inspiration to many foreigners who heard of it and sought their freedom on the shores of this great country.

Many who see the statue do not notice Lady Liberty’s ankles, around which is a broken chain... symbolizing the breaking free from a life of oppression and bondage, that so many of our new future citizens are leaving, and the ability now to enter into another life that offers freedoms which most of us recognize as God-given, and many times take for granted. That broken chain should also remind us why

many so fervently believe it is our country's place in this world to assist citizens of other countries who desire the same freedom that we enjoy.

It is purported that over 40% of our nation's citizens descended from families who immigrated legally to this country after Lady Liberty's dedication. To know this should assure any intelligent being that we, as a nation, are not against those seeking a new life in our country. But, as was expected of the immigrants of the last two centuries, so do we expect all new immigrants today to abide within the system that has been established. We also expect that those entering into our country legally, wanting to be citizens of this country, will seek to learn and abide by our laws and assimilate into the culture of this country, which includes learning to speak the native language of our country...English. We also expect our current citizens to welcome these new legal entries and encourage them to contribute their talents and energies to maintaining the cohesiveness and security of our country. Please, don't come with an agenda of getting us to change or adopt your culture or language.

How anyone can think that we should expect less of newcomers, or that it is perfectly acceptable to allow anyone to have a total disregard for the laws of our land, I'll never understand. To say that we, who expect those coming into our country to learn our culture and abide by our laws, are racist or intolerant shows a total disregard for the safety and future well-being for all of us, and is an insult to those who truly care for our country. What is the motivation and agenda of many in our society, who choose to molly-coddle individuals who've come into our country without going through the required legal procedures and insist we punish our own border security personnel who take strong measures to prevent illegal entries?

Those entering into our country in the 19th and 20th centuries came wanting to become an American... not an Irish-American; not a German-American; not any other Ethnic First-American... they just wanted to be an American and were willing to toe the line to make that happen. Oh, if only that were the case today. Allow me to end with Emma Lazarus' poem, from which Irving Berlin, himself a Jewish refugee from Russia, used the last five lines as his lyrics for the song mentioned above. Read it and recapture the spirit of our country in those times.

"The New Colossus" by Emma Lazarus

**Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name Mother of Exiles.
From her beacon-hand glows world-wide welcome;
her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.**

**Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"**

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