

SHEBOYGAN'S IMMIGRANTS KNOW LADY LIBERTY

To immigrants who battled hunger, political turmoil, religious persecution and rough seas, Liberty Enlightening the World, aka the Statue of Liberty, was a welcoming beacon on the shores of a new life.

For many, the sight of it as they entered New York Harbor, allowed them, for the first time, to hope for freedom and a chance at something great.

Yet, in truth, the statue wasn't created to provide solace for immigrants; it was created to pay tribute to the United States of America and the concept of democracy.

A gift from the French, construction faced delays from the beginning – political unrest in France and apathy in America. It took nearly two decades build. Work lasted from 1875-1885.

Joseph Pulitzer, editor of the New York World newspaper, finally took charge here in the States in 1884 and raised the needed funds to build the base.

Bedloe's Island, later Liberty Island, at the entrance to New York's inner harbor, was chosen as the site for the statue because all vessels entering the port passed by. What an impact it would have! What a view!

Frederic Bartholdi, the man hired to produce the colossus in France, created a sculpture of a woman holding a torch in her raised right hand and a tablet engraved with July 4, 1776, in her left.

Bartholdi and crew hammered large copper sheets to create the statue's "skin", a technique called repousse. A miracle of both art and engineering, the skin was mounted on a frame built by Alexandre Eiffel, of Eiffel Tower fame. He built the skeleton out of iron pylon and steel with a system that allowed the copper skin to move independently from the skeleton, a design feature necessary to deal with the strong winds it would face in the wide open expanse of New York Harbor.

Once complete, the statue was disassembled, packed in crates and shipped to New York. Arriving in June 1885, it took four months to reassemble and mount on the pedestal. Finally, on October 28, 1886, President Grover Cleveland dedicated the 305 foot Statue of Liberty in front of thousands of spectators.

The statue may have been designed to shine a light on democracy, but America's immigrants claimed her as their own. By 1914, she welcomed some 22,000,000 refugees.

Those famous words written in 1883 by Emma Lazarus grace the base. "Give me your tired, your poor/Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." Her simple sonnet captured the spirit of the monument.

That very spirit is evident in words written by two of our own immigrants.

Robert Matzner, a refugee from Poland and a resident of Sheboygan, remembered the first glimpse of his adopted country in 1949.

"We approached New York harbor in early December. It was a dark night, around two o'clock in the morning. The docks were quiet and not in operation at that time. The Statue of Liberty came into view. The giant lady was wrapped in complete darkness, but her face was illuminated by the bright electric torch, which she held in her right hand.

The upper decks (of the ship) were crowded with a mass of people who came to see the statue. The ship was slowly gliding past, and everyone gazed upwards at her face in complete silence. It was a magic

moment, which we DP's (displaced persons) savored, while coming face to face with Lady Liberty. This lady up there, she looked really nice. It was like a dream."

Dr. Arved Ashby, longtime physician at the Sheboygan Clinic, himself an immigrant from Estonia, wrote about his first encounter with Lady Liberty.

"I remember that morning in August of 1951 when our old military transport ship, the General Blatchford, reached New York harbor. I was pressed against the ship's railing by the crowd of immigrants behind me. My eyes were fixed on the blurred horizon when suddenly the morning fog lifted, and the Statue of Liberty appeared majestically out of the mist. The harbor was bustling with ships. Their horns filled the air like a cacophonous symphony for the skyscrapers, their windows ablaze in the morning sun.

. . . It was an unforgettable moment! After years of intermittent hope and disappointment, it had become reality. I was full of high hope and exhilaration."

So on this Independence Day 2015, it is fitting to remember a quote from the July 4, 1986 edition of the New York Times at the time of the statue's restoration, "Architects and engineers created her form, but millions of immigrants and their children and grandchildren who heard their stories created her spirit."