

EMMA LAZARUS: POET AND ACTIVIST

Emma Lazarus Nathan was born in New York City on July 22, 1849. According to Esther Schor, “Her Sephardic family had lived in the United States for four, if not five, generations, but she knew she was the descendant of immigrants, and she explored what it meant to her ancestors to be expelled from Spain during the Inquisition” (Page x). For most people familiar with her name now, she is the author of the sonnet “The New Colossus,” inscribed in 1903 on a plaque on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty. This poem was written originally in 1883 for an auction to benefit the Statue of Liberty Pedestal Fund. Besides being a published and recognized poet, after 1881, Lazarus became involved in several activities and aid societies focused on helping the Russian Jewish refugees. After her second trip to Europe, she died in New York City on November 19, 1887. She was only thirty-eight years old.

Thanks to the visitor’s log of the Touro Synagogue, we know Emma visited the place on July 25, 1867 (Schor, Pages 15-16). The poem you are about to read, was then born out of the impressions this visit caused on the soul and mind of a 19 year old poet. On the other hand, the idea to translate into Spanish poems by Emma Lazarus began three years ago as an effort to read more poems by her besides “The New Colossus,” and to make them available to a Spanish speaking audience as part of the Sephardic heritage in the United States. I would like to thank Hershel Weiss and Demetria Martinez for being such wonderful friends and readers on this journey.

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Work Cited

Schor, Esther. Emma Lazarus. New York: Schocken, 2017.