

The Red Star: A Voyage to Hope

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Red Star Museum

What a proud moment it is to sail on such a beautiful vessel into the great port of Antwerp.

Back here in 1923, people on this ship believe we are merely transporting passengers. But they are wrong. We instead are building a nation.

The United States of America was actually comprised largely of the United States of immigrants. Often they fled from prejudice. Often from famine or disease. Always in the hope that the better tomorrow for their children lay on the other end of a Red Star journey to America.

They started their journey on this boat. But they did not end it there. They built new lives. They built American industry and American cities. They had suffered in the past, and learned the present on the Red Star line. But in their hearts, they carried the future.

So the Red Star Line, the Belgenland, was not a ship of iron – it was a ship of hope. To so many.

The Red Star Line was not a ship – it was a bridge. From Belgium yes. But from all of Europe and particularly Eastern Europe.

It brought Albert Einstein to America. But it also brought millions of regular Joe and Tom and Harry who restarted their life on the Red Star Line and ultimately created a nation of Einsteins.

It brought Golda Meir to America but also brought many regular Golda's who too would create a nation that would reach out to others and spawn new nations on our planet.

It brought art and music – Irving Berlin – but many plain Irvings whose children and their children have spawn the American culture.

My predecessor in this job, Ambassador Sam Fox is a good man, who loved his time in Belgium. The Red Star brought Sam's mother and it brought mothers of generations of diplomats who have worked for a better world.

My dad too boarded a boat without a penny in his pocket or an English word in his vocabulary. In his case, it wasn't the Red Star but the story remained the same. Like so many others, he brought with him on that boat from Europe a belief that with education and hard work, his children could achieve far more than the sweat labor that awaited him at the end of the journey. So three years ago, my family and I returned to Europe, not cowering on a boat, not sweating in a factory, but proudly representing our country.

The Red Star Line does not represent the best of our joint past, but rather the best of our joint future. Today is not about memories of yesterday, but about the always continuing hope for tomorrow.

The Red Star represents that bridge that enabled a nation to be built that would always remember its origins. Indeed the 2 million people who came to America on the Red Star not only built America, but created Europe's largest trading partner. Its strongest partner.

Indeed, back then in 1923, people in Belgium were grateful for the efforts of American boys to liberate occupied Belgium at the close of World War I. Belgians had recently stared starvation in the face, with the destruction of all Belgium civil institutions and the British blockade, but were again rescued when Herbert Hoover started the Commission for Relief in Belgium. They thought they had built a boat. They were wrong again. They had built an enduring partnership.

Ya know, when I took this voyage in 1923, I feared our hosts might forget the links that bound us. I too was wrong. Belgium never forgets. Antwerp never forgets. My children and their children and generations of Belgians, Europeans and Americans will always learn about the roots of our partnership, the building of a nation, the expansion of hope, right here in Antwerp at a beautiful Red Star museum.

But the voyage for today is almost over. Yes Antwerp here in 1923 sure looks beautiful.

Wait a minute. What are Bart de Wever, Patrick Jansens and Annemie Turtelboom doing here in 1923?