

Ep. 14 | Ottoman Boston: Discovering Little Syria

Transcript

[TOUR AUDIO: CHINATOWN]

Meryum Kazmi 00:07

Welcome to the *Harvard Islamica Podcast*, I'm Meryum Kazmi. On a Sunday afternoon in the fall, my colleague, Harry Bastermajian, and I gathered with a group at the gates of Boston's Chinatown to learn about the little-known history of that neighborhood, which was once called Little Syria, and occupied by immigrants from the former Ottoman Empire, who came to Boston in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. On the tour, led by Lydia Harrington, Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture at MIT, and Chloe Bordewich, Public History Postdoctoral Associate at the Boston University Center for Antiracist Research. We visited sites that were important to the Little Syria community and heard personal stories from some of its descendants who still live in the Boston area today.

Meryum Kazmi 01:15

So to get us started, why don't you tell us about your background and how you came to do this public history project on Boston's Little Syria.

Lydia Harrington 01:25

Okay, so I recently finished my PhD at BU, at Boston University, in Islamic art and architecture, researching something totally, like mostly unrelated to this topic, late Ottoman architecture, so actually the same time period as a lot of the Little Syria history. But Chloe and I actually met while we were doing research for our dissertations in Istanbul and we, somehow when we came back from research, we had heard there was this Little Syria neighborhood in Boston, and we were trying to find a book or some comprehensive narrative source about it and we could just find, you know, blogs, short blog posts about the religious aspect of the neighborhood or food, food blogs are very interested in the neighborhood, but there was very little secondary sources. So we just decided, "hey, we'll do some research on it" and it turned into a walking tour, that was the first iteration. And we actually had started the research on February 2020. So like, we didn't get much done before the pandemic started. But we were doing a little more research until 2022. And we had been busy trying to finish our dissertations. And then the over that year and a half or two-year span, and then we started giving the walking tours in, like May 2020

Chloe Bordewich 02:52

22

Lydia Harrington 02:53

two, 2022. And that morphed into writing an article about it and having this, curating this exhibition. So yeah, it's kind of snowballed in a good way into more projects. So I'll hand it over to you to talk more about it.

Chloe Bordewich 03:09

Yeah, I think for me, I also, my research focused primarily on modern Egypt, not on local history here in Boston, but having lived here now, for so many years, I think, I felt the desire to know more about how the places, I mostly study Egypt, but also the broader Ottoman Empire, were connected with the place that I had been living. And I think often, the universities can, a university campus can be kind of a thing unto itself. And it's wonderful to be able to connect with the communities that are outside the university walls. From our own interest, we started walking in the neighborhood in the South End and in Chinatown, and the only really remaining shop that still exists on Shawmut Avenue was actually open and we were able to talk with the proprietors there. And that sort of sparked our desire to get to know some more of the people who really belong to this community in the past and their descendants in the present. And so that's, as Lydia said, how the project began to evolve. And you know, I think we've seen, by exploring the history of Little Syria through different mediums, through the walking tour, through written articles, and then through an exhibition and soon public event and a digital humanities project, how you can reach different audiences and also take in more information about the neighborhood by connecting with different people.

[TOUR AUDIO: START OF TOUR]

Chloe Bordewich 04:38

Okay, I think we're going. So we would like to start out first actually by asking you all what brought you to the tour today, what kind of interest you have in Little Syria. And then we'll start the tour itself.

Richard Shibli 04:57

Well, this is where my family lived in the first part of the 20th century.

Arthur Abdelahad 05:03

Same with us.

Sharon (Abdelahad) Wall 05:04

Same with us. Our parents met, they fell in love, they got married. And you know, so much of their family history is tied to this part of Boston.

Chloe Bordewich 05:26

The Little Syria neighborhood and that we focus on here basically stretches from, well, it's located in what's now Chinatown and part of the South End. So, when we do walking tours we start at the Chinatown gate, that's a landmark people are familiar with. And the initial settlement of the area by Syrians, which was in the late 1880s, took place on both sides of the Chinatown gate. If you're standing in front of the gate, on one side is what's now, to your right, Ping On Alley, that was called Oliver Place. And then on the left-hand side, you turn towards Tyler-- Hudson Street and Tyler Street, and those really became the center of the neighborhood by the turn of the 20th century. So those two streets are really critical in terms of understanding the geography of the neighborhood. And then, over time, as more and more people came from Ottoman Syria to Boston, they moved beyond those streets and beyond that area that's now Chinatown into what's the South End. So from Chinatown, South Cove,

that's also what that area is called, across what's now part of the Central Artery, the highway, over to Shawmut Avenue and beyond the neighboring streets over there. So, the time period that we're talking about here, just to answer the second part of your question, we focus on the 1880s through the 1950s, but the end is less distinct than the beginning. I mean, we know that it was really the 1880s when people started coming, but there are still some people living in the neighborhood today. So the end is a little bit like more protracted.

Harry Bastermajian 07:20

That's important to know. I mean, the 1880s is about the time when Boston's really as a city is booming,

Chloe Bordewich 07:25

Totally.

Harry Bastermajian 07:25

Dorchester becomes larger part of the city, gets incorporated and,

Chloe Bordewich 07:29

and the demographics are changing in many ways, not only in terms of the Syrians, and Lydia can talk more about this, too, but this was a neighborhood that is now Chinatown and the South Cove had been and, well actually the South End too, had been inhabited by all kinds of different immigrant groups also, and Bostonians who had been there for generations as well. Many of the buildings on say, Hudson and Tyler were built in the 1840s. And many are still there now in those particular streets, but then there was some demographic change as more immigrants from more different places came. Of course, there was a shift too with Chinese coming increasingly, as time went on, and Syrians, again, moving somewhat southward towards the South End.

Lydia Harrington 08:24

Yeah, and just to talk about the demographics changing, there were, if you look at property maps, which I've been doing a lot of, specifically with this great tool called Atlas Scope through the Leventhal Map Center at the Boston Public Library, you can compare, like the current city map to any maps between, I think, the early 19th century to about 1938, that must be the latest one. So I'm looking at the 1880s through the last map on there, and you have pretty much just Irish, some Italian, some English names on those properties in what's now Chinatown, and then once you get to the 1890s there's more Arab names like Abdullah or Shibli. And I mean, there, there's never totally domination by the Syrians and Lebanese, it's always a mix. So you see more Arab names, and then a little bit after that Chinese names, also consistently Jewish names, from earlier, from the 1880s. So it's pretty diverse, although there was you know, it was distinctly known as a Syrian neighborhood, but always, there was always a mix.

Meryum Kazmi 9:48

Can you tell us a bit about what was going on in the Ottoman Empire at that time and what caused people to come from Greater Syria to Boston?

Lydia Harrington 9:58

So there were several different factors. I mean, one is economic: there was the decline of the silk industry, which was more in Lebanon. I think, would you agree?

Chloe Bordewich 10:11

Yeah, I mean, I think what we're actually one thing that we should maybe say like where they came from specifically, because that is relevant to why. It's this-- most came from the corridor border between Zahle, in what's now Lebanon, and Damascus. So you have there are people with from the Syrian side of the border--the border that now exists-- and the Lebanon side of the border. But you know, Jabal Lubnan, this mountainous part of Lebanon, plus sort of the Damascus city, the city and suburbs of Damascus. But then you do find people from other places too. There are other pockets, other certain villages that also ended up sending a number of people to Boston. You know, people follow their relatives, like in any, like any immigrant group, so and then we've also found people even who came from what's now southern Turkey, the very southernmost part of Turkey. One of the oral histories, for example, that we listened to, it was a family that--an Assyrian family from southern Turkey, what's now Turkey---that migrated because of the massacres in 1890s of Christians, migrated to Damascus, and then to Boston. And so there are these, the fabric is not all uniform, but I think the most, the largest number of people came from that corridor between Zahle and Damascus, which is not enormous, actually. And so that's why, as Lydia said, the decline of the silk industry was really significant in that area and had economic repercussions for a much wider swath of the region as well.

Lydia Harrington 11:48

And just to add to the diversity of people coming from that region here, there were also Armenians who had migrated to like Aleppo and Damascus, and Beirut, from the 1890s during the Hamidian Massacres, and Anatolia, and then through the Armenian Genocide and aftermath. So, I mean, I interviewed one woman who was of an Armenian family who'd come from Aleppo, and they spoke both Armenian and Turkish at home here, not Arabic, so it was-- so it's a diverse neighborhood and it's not just what we think of as Syrian today in that like nation-state sense. But to go back to why they came, I mean, there was also in the earlier period, a religious persecution, like there had been a civil war in Syria in 1860 that extended from Damascus to Mount Lebanon. And then once it hits World War One, you have the Ottoman conscription, and to the army that a lot of Syrian men were trying to flee, as well as just a large famine on Mount Lebanon. So I mean, basically reflecting, you know, the effects of World War One and many different places, so people were fleeing in waves from different places, including from Syria to places like the US. I would say one specific reason some of them wanted to come to the US, was because of American presence in Lebanon specifically, like Protestant missionaries.

Chloe Bordewich 13:33

And these were Christians. I mean, the thing that's important to emphasize, like the Christians who already had connections through the Protestant missionaries, some of them had been attending Protestant missionary schools. And so that was kind of how they connected with, I mean, if they didn't already have family members here, that comes up sometimes. It's not universal at all, but you do find mention of, "Oh, well, I attended this missionary school in Syria or in Lebanon."

Lydia Harrington 13:58

Yeah, so kind of makes that connection that people follow. And so once a few people come to Boston, more follow. So that's a pretty standard immigration path for US history. Otherwise, I mean, most people, almost everyone who settled in what's known as Little Syria were Christian and either Orthodox or Catholic. We haven't actually found anyone Protestant yet, even.

Chloe Bordewich 14:25

Maronite, Melkite, and Orthodox pretty much.

Lydia Harrington 14:27

Yeah, so some people came there, some went to the Merrimack Valley, so that's between Northeastern Massachusetts and Southern New Hampshire. Some people went to northern Rhode Island,

Chloe Bordewich 14:41

Lawrence

Lydia Harrington 14:42

Lawrence. Yeah, to work-- and so a lot of immigrants who are working in mills in Lawrence.

Harry Bastermajian 14:48

Wasn't there also a pretty vibrant textile industry in the northeast of Massachusetts? Was that part of the draw was, "Okay, I've worked in this sector of the economy, I understand how it works" kind of thing?

Lydia Harrington 15:01

Yeah, just lots of I mean, it was like, I think a lot of people are learning how to run a textile machine, repetitive movements, so

Chloe Bordewich 15:11

It was inside and outside of Boston. I mean in the Garment District in Little Syria, but also in the mills like in Lawrence and whatnot.

Lydia Harrington 15:18

Yeah. And they didn't need to know English or much English to work there. So you see, in Lawrence they had a very large, known as the Bread and Roses Strike and there were Armenians, Syrians, Irish, Jewish, many different ethnicities who were demanding more rights. And, you know, talking about it in their own languages, having people translate, so very much a vibrant part of the labor history of Massachusetts, too.

Harry Bastermajian 15:50

Related to where many of these immigrants were from, that sort of corridor between Beirut and Damascus, that Zahle road to the Shuf, they're, correct me if I'm wrong, but isn't that also sort of the location of a lot of monasteries? So I'm wondering if there was any connection between perhaps the church, the church in Lebanon, and its relationship with the Catholic Church, and also, New England

and Boston, Massachusetts is a pretty vibrant Catholic place. I wonder, did that have anything to do with the choice, the decision to come to Boston, as opposed to maybe some other area?

Chloe Bordewich 16:31

It's a really good question. There definitely were ties between churches in Lebanon and Syria, and the new churches that were being founded here, and still to this day the churches that were founded here and several of which still exist, in Boston in the larger Boston area, they're still connected with specific churches in Syria and Lebanon today, and are sending aid and whatnot, to churches that they're specifically connected to. So, you know, there were priests coming over as well and they helped to establish the first churches in Boston and in New York, and elsewhere in the Americas. I don't know that they thought, "oh, Boston, place of churches," but I think, as far as maintaining relationships, and that there was a kind of there were they're not only money, but also, money was actually really important. They were sending money back from here, but also priests. I mean, there was an exchange of priests.

Harry Bastermajian 17:33

Well, yeah, that relationship is pretty big. I mean, why would you go move around the world if there aren't others who share the same faith, as you? So it kind of makes sense that--

Chloe Bordewich 17:48

Looking at that from a different angle, it's no accident that most of the early immigrants from Syria were Christian and not Muslim. There's been fascinating scholarship on how Syrians, for example, were cast as white and therefore assimilable in a way that Muslim immigrants were not seen at this particular moment. It's a complicated story, but eventually, in the post-World War One period, not before that really... coming to be seen as "white immigrants," quote, unquote. When we think of Syrians today, that's not necessarily who we're thinking of. And that didn't, that wasn't really resolved until the-- really until the abolition of the immigration quotas in the 1960s. But there were a number of cases litigated in the 1940s and so forth, that tried to kind of resolve this changing demographic of immigrants from this place, which was not reflective of what the earliest waves' demographics, were. The fact that they were Christian was really significant in multiple different ways, both in the eyes of non-Syrian Americans and the US government actually, specifically, and presumably also in terms of these relationships that were forged between the churches here and communities back home.

Lydia Harrington 19:12

Oh, could I add something? I think it's worth also talking about immigration paths that don't go directly to Boston, first of people who ended up here. For example, some of the people we found, we found just in our research, we found just through looking at those square signs you see in intersections all over Cambridge, like every, there's like a sign dedicated at every intersection. Once I saw one in the past few months, near Harvard that was the last time looked like Sabit or Tabit and I was like, okay, this seems like an Arabic name. And maybe we'll talk more about this, but how they transliterated names into English was always not very straightforward, like it's an Arab name, and they changed the spelling to make it easier for English speakers to pronounce. I looked at the family's history, and this guy's grandfather, great grandfather had gone from Damascus to New York, decided it was too cold, and then went to Havana, and then eventually, the family ended up in Boston. So yeah, I would think maybe

New York was too cold in comparison to Damascus. Another family we've been talking to, one branch of the family came to Boston, and they were like, we're going to make try to make it work in Utah. They decided, okay, Utah's not working for us, they come back. So I think there's, some people just end up in Boston, incidentally, or they-- and that family also had a branch in Montreal, and they would go back and forth. So sometimes it's not always so clear what's drawing them to Boston, or they try one place and don't like it, and decide, "I'm going to try another place that I've heard of."

Chloe Bordewich 20:54

There was mobility, I mean,

Lydia Harrington 20:55

A lot of mobility, yeah.

Chloe Bordewich 20:57

Mobility also, I mean-- not just within the United States, but also in North America more broadly and Latin America. There definitely is plenty of documentation of ties between community organizations, at least here, and community organizations that were founded by Syrians in South America, as well. These families, especially those that were involved in commerce, often did establish ties through their commercial ventures with other cities and other Syrian communities that were being established in the diaspora.

Meryum Kazmi 21:34

Yeah, I was just wondering, going back to most of the population being Christians, is there evidence that Muslims were actually filtered out who are trying to come here? Or was it more of Christians having more ties and

Lydia Harrington 21:45

So there actually was a Muslim population in Quincy, I'm not sure if it's known as Quincy point still today, but we know Quincy, and they came to work at the docks and shipbuilding. So I think--

Chloe Bordewich 22:00

And the Turks in Peabody.

Lydia Harrington 22:02

Yeah, Turkish men went to Peabody, which is, for those of you who might not know, north of Boston, north of Salem, and they worked in leather, leather works in the street was known as Turkish street, because there were so many Turkish men, and most of them made some money, then went back to Ottoman Empire. Only I think one stayed who has a gravestone here. So there were Muslims coming. And I think it's just a matter of, a few people go and they build a community and more people from the same background or the same villages come. So I think it could also be village to village migration. And just going where there's a church or a mosque nearby. So I don't think Muslims were filtered out, per se, but there might have just been more Christians coming to Boston.

Chloe Bordewich 22:55

I think it's a little bit of both. This was not a welcoming place to immigrate to as a Muslim. I don't mean just Boston specifically. I mean the United States as a whole. As I said, in 1965, there was a huge demographic change in immigration and partly it was just the elimination of the quota system that had been in place, but even before, certainly that's not to say that there were none. I think it's really important to establish that presence. And as Lydia said, there were these specific communities. They were small, but they were there. And in my own research, I have come across examples of Muslim immigrants, who attempted to settle, to come to Boston and who were deported. And again, these are anecdotal examples. Statistics were collected about deportations, but it's hard to really be able to map out numbers. And for example, one document I read was an appeal of a deportation by the brother of a man and his friends who were in their early 20s, who were sent back to Syria, on the basis that they were polygamists, or would be polygamous, because, in fact, they were not married, but that they had been interrogated at the port of entry in Boston. Actually, potentially, I think they might have been interrogated in New York, but they were en route to Boston-- and had been asked, "What are your views on polygamy? Would you take more than one wife if you had the opportunity?" and they said, "Well, sure, I guess," and then that was documented, and they were deported. These kinds of documents are super interesting because the appeal then brings out a lot more complicated details. They said, "Well, they didn't speak English." So they actually didn't know even what the conversation was. So I think, there are definitely examples like that and we can see how the immigration authorities in the United States, federal authorities, worked quite hard to create racial and ethnic categories based on racial pseudoscience that did, were intended and did not always succeed, but sometimes succeeded, in excluding people whom they considered to be the least like themselves. And that often included Muslims from all around the world.

Meryum Kazmi 25:15

Great. So, we had started talking about some of the industries that Syrian Americans worked in. I think there was other work that was common like peddling, can you talk a bit more about how they earned a living, both men and women?

Lydia Harrington 25:29

Yeah, so actually, both men and women did engage in peddling, that was more men but there were women who peddled too. And peddling is where you sell dry goods, such as appliances for cooking, or bedsheets, scarves, different kinds of textiles or metalware, pajamas, things like that on the street, soap, anything that you might want for your house. And it was easy for them to get right into that because you don't just speak that much English, it can help you learn some English if you don't know it. And you'd have a small wagon or cart and push that down the street. And the places they got the goods from were Syrians who already owned-- basically, Syrians who had enough money would buy an apartment building and they would have a business on the first floor such as a grocery store, and they would have the goods to peddle in the basement, and then they would live above the store and rent out five or so other apartments to other families, most of whom were Syrian, but not always, sometimes it was very mixed. So the peddlers-- peddling was one way to earn a living right when you got here. One notable trade that women engaged in was lace weaving. And that was something that they had already learned in Syria, it's a well-known Middle Eastern craft. So they would-- we've seen photos of women sewing, or weaving, lace on their front steps. And that was something they could sell. That was definitely in demand. And other things that people did, we talked about working in textile mills. So that

was something pretty easy to just jump into right away. And then there were some individuals who came already trained as teachers, priests, kind of a little bit more white-collar work. But we should emphasize that people who were migrating weren't the poorest Syrians, so not usually farmers, but people who, you know, already had somebody here who could pay their way or they could pay their way themselves. So also, people involved in crafts, people who could run a grocery store or some kind of shop, things like that. Did you want to add anything, Chloe?

Chloe Bordewich 27:53

Maybe just one more thing on women. In some accounts we've heard or read, certain kinds of products and certain kinds of customers actually were especially suitable for women and for example selling like women's underwear, you know, if housewives for example, who aren't able to go or don't want to go into town and they live, you know, in the suburbs of Boston, I mean, peddlers covered pretty significant distances. I mean, they're, they would cross the entire country, but even within the Boston area, it was a way for people who didn't live close to the commercial center of the city to get stuff. And so you know, women could take women's underwear and scarves and lingerie, whatever out to these housewives who were at home and sell door to door. Women have a really big presence actually, in this neighborhood in terms of the social life and the commercial life of the place.

Lydia Harrington 28:47

And just a note on the garment district, that was, you know, like the mills were kind of where people would work in these big rooms. And in this case, doing piecework so sewing clothes, so could be ready made. Some people also made shoes, and that was more in the leather District, which is nearby. But a lot of those large textile making buildings are still there. They're other things today, like offices, restaurants in Chinatown, so some of them are still there. And what else I mean, you see, definitely, it's like majority people who are like Syrian, Russian, Jewish, Irish, Italian. And then it becomes more and more Chinese until you see more women immigrating in the mid-20th century from China with the changes and immigration laws, and it becomes like, the vast majority Chinese. And then the other thing I wanted to say something about yet there was actually child labor, which is, you know, not specific to that community, and the late 19th, early 20th century. So children, you know, working Yeah, maybe peddling, as well as working in the cranberry bogs outside of Boston to the west and in Rhode Island. And we have found photographs taken by Lewis Hine, who was a photographing child labor as a way to, you know, document it, so we could change labor laws. And so we see a lot of, you know, the photos, say, like these children, most of whom are Syrian, and they're working, picking the cranberries. So you know, a lot of those things are either suited to the local environment and the kinds of products that are naturally in Massachusetts, or brought from Syria, such as the lacemaking.

[TOUR AUDIO: SAINT JOHN OF DAMASCUS CHURCH]

Chloe Bordewich 30:51

If anybody I didn't hear, Richard just pointed out that that tree was once the site of the St. John of Damascus Church, which still exists, not in this neighborhood today. We have some parishioners here.

Richard Shibli 31:01

You remember the church?

Arthur Abdelahad 31:02

Oh I remember it.

Sharon (Abdelahad) Wall 31:02

I remember it too.

Harry Bastermajian 31:15

Yeah, to kind of move from what they did for a living to sort of how they lived, tell us a little bit about the cultural institutions, their social and religious institutions that made their way and established themselves in the community, thinking about, we talked a little bit about churches, but if we could expand on that. And also, I remember on the tour there being a settlement house, if you could tell us a little bit about what that is, was, and how that sort of built, helped build the community.

Lydia Harrington 31:52

Do you want to talk about—I feel like you know a lot about the settlement house.

Chloe Bordewich 31:55

Okay, we can start with that. Well, I think it's important that the churches and the settlement house that I'm going to talk about, were clustered together too, and also the school, which Lydia can talk about too, and when I say clustered together, I'm talking about these two streets, Tyler and Hudson, that run parallel to one another in South Cove. And so at the turn of the century, you have the establishment of the first dedicated Syrian churches, St. George's Syrian Orthodox Church, today it's in West Roxbury, then you have Our Lady of the Cedars Lebanese Maronite Church, which is in Jamaica Plain, JP, today, and then you had a couple of additional Orthodox churches that broke away from St. George's, you have St. John of Damascus and later St. Mary's. So anyways, there are a number of different churches there and they're all there together. Church is really significant, I think. And then, of course, the social organizations that cropped up from the churches, so the Lebanese and Syrian Ladies' Aid Association, for example, which is attached to one of the churches. Each of the churches had both male and female organizations that were focused particularly on, well, actually both aiding communities in the old country and also aiding new immigrants here. And those really coalesced around World War One too, so we can talk more about why that was such an important, catalyzing moment for activism. But the Denison House, which is a settlement house you alluded to, is a really important institution, not only for the Syrian history of Boston, but also of US history, urban history, or US history more broadly. Some people might be familiar with Hull House in Chicago, Denison House was the second and was a - by settlement house, we're talking about, as an organization, settlement houses that [were] both a physical place and also a community, basically a charitable organization, where middle class, primarily women, not only, workers would basically aid recently arrived immigrants and in multiple different ways. So they would offer, for example, classes. We've seen ESL classes, you know, English as a second language. We've seen, craft classes, we've seen public speaking, even math classes, whatever you might need to be successful, as well as courses for new mothers. Amelia Earhart actually-- some people may be familiar with the famous pilot-- worked at Denison House and ran the Syrian Mothers Club, for example, while she was training to fly out of what's now Logan Airport where she left on her transatlantic flight. So she was doing this simultaneously. So Denison house also offered opportunity,

was also an organization that would help connect people with employment opportunities, with housing-- really important-- locate housing. And as a philosophy, and this is what's most important, is that philosophically they believed in social mobility, that we're here to basically help recently arrived immigrants who may not have means get to the middle class, eventually. And so, in that sense, it's very much a product also of the philosophies of the late 19th century, but continued to exist and it actually was later merged with other community organizations in Boston and exists in kind of a transformed fashion today in Dorchester. So, that's really significant as far as the organizations and over the course of the entire period we're talking about.

Lydia Harrington 36:01

I could talk about the school also, which was right next to-- well across from the settlement house and adjacent to Our Lady of the Cedars Church, which Our Lady of the Cedars, I want to say Maronite church. Yeah, so it was founded about 1848, the Quincy Grammar School, and that was a really key institution in terms of the reformation of education in the US. So before that you had either one-room schoolhouses, where someone's teaching everybody at once, or private tutors, things like that. And this basically changes that and you have what's called a double-headed classroom where you have students divided into classes based on age and, you know, different teachers teaching those students at the same time in different classrooms. So the same system we have today. So it was really big and that was the first-- actually the first school in the US that did that. So very revolutionary. So you have these students going to school and this reform school and they were attending classes alongside Chinese, Jewish, Russian, Italian, Irish students. We encountered an oral history where the woman was saying, "We could swear in 10 different languages after having gone to the school." So not only Syrians, but we do have evidence of a lot of Syrians going there, including people we've interviewed or their family members have gotten there. And that actually closed and the school moved a few streets away and still exists now. It's still the Quincy School, and that's currently being used. The building is used as the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association of New England and it looks somewhat the same as it did before. Now it has a giant statue of Confucius in front of it. So it's changed a bit, but it is a registered historic site. And it has a plaque on it and there's lots of US Park Service info on the preservation of the building. So some of those things are preserved. I mean, the Denison house is now--

Chloe Bordewich 38:22

Not there anymore. Yeah, that was taken over by the Tufts Medical Center and reconfigured and everything but--

Lydia Harrington 38:29

and then the church next door, I mean, that church moved in the 60s to JP and now that's, I think, just closed. It became a-- it was taken over by a Chinese Christian mission. So there's a plaque in Chinese on it, no info about it being Our Lady of the Cedars, and then the church lives on in another neighborhood. So some of these things are still there. Some mention what they were, some don't. Some of the buildings are gone. So it's very, very, varied stages of use or disuse.

[TOUR AUDIO: 40 TYLER STREET – ARABIC NEWSPAPERS]

Chloe Bordewich 39:09

Here we are in another empty lot! Lots of empty lots over here. So, here we are on Tyler Street. And I'm here because at 40 Tyler Street were the offices of Boston's Arabic newspaper, beginning just after the turn of the century, in 1914. So a vibrant Arabic-language press emerged in several US cities at the turn of the 20th century. One of these new journals was *Fatat Boston*, the *Boston Girl*. Unfortunately, it's slightly cut off here, but I'm still going to pass around this image, you can see what the front page would have looked like.

Meryum Kazmi 39:54

Thank you. So something I thought was really fascinating from the tour was the Arabic language newspapers, which seem to be very impressive, and how, wide their circulation was across North America, I think and also in Central and South America. So can you talk a bit about those newspapers and how they were used to connect Syrian Americans here and also connecting them to Syria and Lebanon?

Chloe Bordewich 40:22

Sure, yeah. So the main newspaper that was established in Arabic, and in Boston, it's called *Fatat Boston*, founded, established right at the beginning of World War One. It didn't have the longest of runs, I have to say, it was mostly the war years. And there's some indication that it continued a bit just after, there was also an Arabic newspaper published in Lawrence, *al-Wafa'*, which actually lasted a bit longer, it was started a bit earlier and lasted a bit longer. But there were, of course, newspapers, also circulating in Boston, Arabic newspapers, that were published elsewhere. I mean, New York, in particular, where there were quite a few, which some listeners may be aware of. But in terms of *Fatat Boston*, that was established by a man named Wadie Shakir, who was a Christian from Lebanon, and who came around the turn of the century with his mother as a teenager, and he had in fact attended, from what I recall, a mission school, and was multilingual and an avid reader and came to Boston and apparently, according to his descendants, because he heard it was the literary capital of America. And so he thought, this is a place to do it. Anyways, he ran, in addition to the newspaper, he ran a publishing house or printer, you might say. He was an important figure in the neighborhood, he wanted to use this newspaper as an opportunity for the neighborhood, or the community, to articulate its patriotism, especially during World War One. World War One was such an important moment for Arab and Syrian communities across the United States. And, of course, the Ottoman Empire was on the other side of the war from the US and I think there was an anxiety somewhat that, for Americans who didn't understand that Arabs were not necessarily on the side of the Turks, despite being Ottoman Turkish subjects, that their patriotism could be called into question. And so it was a moment in which they could, that people really seized to loudly articulate how proud they were to be American and how much they wanted to be American and how much they were not Turkish. And part of that goes back to the fact that census records often listed Arabs as Turkish. There was a huge amount of support, basically, for the war effort here, despite many mixed feelings about participation in World War One across the country as a whole. And so we really see that in the newspaper. I think that's sort of one of the most one of the reasons that this paper is such a great resource, such a great source for studying the community. It's been digitized through the Khayrallah Center at NC State and it includes not only editorials in support, basically, of the war, but also a really important, I think, it conveys news of what's going on in Syria and Iraq and Lebanon, during the war for members of the diaspora, which is not-- you

imagine that most Americans who are non-Arab, reading the news from the war, were focused on the European front-- there wasn't a whole lot of reporting being done about the details of the destruction in the Middle East. From a different angle, it's interesting to look at these newspapers because of the ads. And so that's been a major source for us in trying to reconstruct what was where in the neighborhood, because local businesses, of course, advertise in the paper. So we were able to know, you know-- What was where? What was the address? What did they sell? And what did particular stores have? Who owned them? Etc.

Harry Bastermajian 44:35

I'm thinking about the important role newspapers played in the process of nationalism, right? This is not unique to Arabs in the Middle East, or anything, but we do know, though, that the Arabic press did play a very important role. The Lebanese Arabic press, in particular, played a very important role in Arab nationalism. So thinking about sort of the ads that kind of tells you about who they were, what they were, you know, selling, trading, what have you, but also the contents there around the First World War. Do you feel like they were maybe part of a growing international conversation about Arab identity? Or were they very much focused on perhaps just Arab American-ness, if you can call it that.

Lydia Harrington 45:24

I mean, I think the ads we saw were mainly about buying war bonds. And then also businesses in the area, such as one advertising, gramophone, and records, groceries, things like that.

Chloe Bordewich 45:37

The war bonds thing-- plenty of those were actually translated from English, right? They were ads that were being published in lots of different languages, and different papers around the US, or similar. But you'll see an image, well it'll be some dramatic, a woman wrapped in a flag or something, and there'll be a caption in Arabic, but the artist is, you know, it's not an Arab name. But I think, there's a sense of, I mean, a) that they're connecting with diaspora in other places. So I think that speaks somewhat to your point. The masthead indicates that this paper is available, at least for subscribers, how many subscribers were there in Havana or Buenos Aires, possibly not very many, it's hard to say, but that was aspirational, at least. They thought about themselves as being part of a conversation that was much broader than just Boston, New York, or even Boston, New York, Beirut or something like that. And so I think, it's not just about like our villages in Syria and Lebanon, it's also what's going on in Iraq, what's going on in Istanbul, Cairo. I wouldn't say that from what I've found there's a lot of what you might explicitly say is really Arab nationalist rhetoric, but I think as far as conveying a-- well certainly positioning themselves in contradistinction to the Turks. There's a sense of, "our brethren out there," and we need to aid our people, and our people are the people of Syria and Lebanon, and also the broader Arab world.

Lydia Harrington 47:04

And there are also people writing in English for an American audience, such as our friend, Frederick Shibli, who went by the name of "Iben Snoopin," which can also be read as, "I've been snooping" so it has a double meaning.

Chloe Bordewich 47:19

True. We forgot-- that's a very important newspaper, actually. Not in Arabic, but--

Lydia Harrington 47:23

Yeah, the *Midtown Journal*, and we have access to a lot of the issues through his son who's graciously shared them with us. And that was covering all the scandal in Boston, it was very interesting.

Chloe Bordewich 47:35

From the '30s onwards,

Lydia Harrington 47:36

Yeah, very entertaining paper. So I think you have a lot of different angles and people writing with different interests, in different languages.

Chloe Bordewich 47:44

And that's like, hyperlocal, in a way, right? So on the one hand, you have al-Fatat, or *Fatat Boston*. I mean, it's a couple-- it's 20 years later and more, but you have them looking to really articulate these connections with the wider Arab diaspora, Syrian diaspora. And then you have also, they're very embedded in the community that they're in too, which is what the *Midtown Journal* points to, is that they're really part of Boston. The son of Fred Shibley, who published and wrote every article in the *Midtown Journal*, told us it's never really been used as a source before for Arab history of Boston. In fact, it's mostly LGBT history because the neighborhood became, the South End became a kind of gay hub. Even though his pseudonym was explicitly an Arabic joke, that wasn't where, what it's been used for before. So I think that Boston history could really benefit from seeing these, this community or these communities as being a part of its history in a much more explicit way. And also, we can look at this neighborhood's history within the wider history of the Arab diaspora.

Lydia Harrington 48:55

And I just want to add, it's a fun point, he was a vaudeville acrobat before he was a journalist. So we've come across just really fascinating people.

Chloe Bordewich 49:07

Different professions people had in the neighborhood.

Lydia Harrington 49:11

There were also vaudeville acrobats, in addition to textile workers.

[TOUR AUDIO: SYRIAN GROCERY STORE - MUSIC]

Chloe Bordewich 49:28

Before we start walking again, I'll just point out two things which you can take note of as we move. One is just behind you over here at the intersection, you can see Thomas Karem Square, so that's a commemorative marker to a Syrian from the neighborhood. And the second thing I want to point out-- I want to say something about music. This is a place where you would have heard some, well, for non-Syrians probably new music, for Syrians some familiar old music, at 30 Kneeland Street. There was a

Syrian grocery, al-Samana al-Suriyya, so this was a Syrian grocery store owned by an Armenian, Michael Ajamian, who advertised as early as 1909 that he was selling the latest recordings from the Arab world. So imported, basically from Cairo and Syria.

Harry Bastermajian 50:35

So since we talked about language, now, we just could switch a little bit to sort of a discussion on art and music produced by this community. I mean, during the-- you get a chance to talk about that a lot, actually, during the tour. Can you share with us a little bit about sort of the culture around music that is brought from Syria and sort of replicated here?

Lydia Harrington 51:02

Yeah, so one person who is featured distinctly in our exhibition is Tony Abdelahad, or Anton Abdelahad, who was an oud player who was very famous in this community. And he toured across the US and Canada in the mid 20th century. And we actually have one of his records on display.

Chloe Bordewich 51:24

As well as his oud.

Lydia Harrington 51:26

As well as his oud, yeah. So he would play at *haflat* and other kinds of like distinctly Arab parties and events. And he was born in Boston, and he actually never even went to the Middle East. He did play for the king of Saudi Arabia, right?

Chloe Bordewich 51:43

Yeah, yeah. Dignitaries, visiting dignitaries.

Lydia Harrington 51:45

Visiting dignitaries, and we have a song book and it's very interesting because you can tell he might not have been able to write in Arabic that well, but he was singing in Arabic.

Chloe Bordewich 51:55

Beautifully.

Lydia Harrington 51:56

Yeah, very beautifully. So you do see, in some cases, you know, some people are fully fluent. And the second generation, some aren't so much. So the song book is written in—basically transliterated into Latin script. And then that has the Arabic script as well and no English. So people knew the lyrics, but they might not be able to read Arabic script. But yeah, so people playing oud or clarinet or—

Chloe Bordewich 52:24

Violin, yeah.

Lydia Harrington 52:25

Violin, different instruments. And then he would also play we have a photograph of him playing with the Syrian men, church men's choir,

Chloe Bordewich 52:35

St. John of Damascus.

Lydia Harrington 52:36

So playing songs that had already been established in the Middle East.

Chloe Bordewich 52:44

Actually even pre-World War One, 1909 I think, there was a shop owned by an Armenian, Michael Ajamian, right on Kneeland Street that sold all the latest records from the Middle East. And that's notable because that was really early. I mean, the first commercial records in Arabic are being produced in Cairo just after the turn of the century. So they were making it to Boston really soon, really quickly. And these were big names, like, Salama Hegazi, for example, from Egypt. They would-- people would know the names, they're advertised, you can get the latest record from so and so. So they-- unsurprisingly, food and music are really things that were preserved, perhaps more than anything else from one generation to the next, even as the language, as Lydia said, started to be lost. Also, Tony Abdelahad himself had a recording studio and was producing and selling records as well, right there in Little Syria. He's the most famous, but there these church choirs which performed, sometimes in costume. But also, the churches and community organizations would often host other famous Arab American musicians. And so we often see advertisements for some *mahrajan* at the St. George's or St. John's Church, with somebody from New York or California or Chicago. And they were big names. And Tony Abdelahad died in 1995, so this was until fairly recently.

Lydia Harrington 54:27

And he has a wonderful website his grandson made.

Chloe Bordewich 54:31

You can listen, hopefully, to some of the music. But as far as like art and literature, too, people know about Khalil-- Gibran Khalil Gibran. So he lived in Boston, has a plaque in front of the Public Library. And he was also connected with the neighborhood. He didn't live his whole life there, but he took art classes at the Denison House, which I spoke about earlier. And that was, by some accounts, at least, his entree into the arts scene in Boston and a bohemian spiritualist scene in Boston.

Meryum Kazmi 55:01

So how were Syrian Americans viewed by the broader society here in Boston?

Lydia Harrington 55:07

I would say, foreign yet assimilable. That's what we found in terms of like studies done by-- we looked at a study done by sociologists in the 1920s, saying, "They're good at trading. They're known for being traders, obviously, plus that they're Christian," but there's still this tinge of other kind of suspicious Orientals, something like that. In general he's saying, they're very patriotic, proud of their Syrian past. Yeah, so some things end up, he's trying to compliment them, but it's a bit of insults too. So it's

Orientalist cliches, but there are ultimately people who can become upstanding American citizens. And that intersecting with World War One and people, you know, buying war bonds or enlisting in the military, becoming veterans or being killed in action that really contributes to this idea that they can be Americans, especially through this sacrifice of war.

Chloe Bordewich 56:17

To come back to the kind of racial pseudoscience classification schemes-- there was a fixation and fascination with classifying peoples' character, a whole country's character traits. And in those ratings, like Lydia was saying, they actually, the Syrians tended to fare pretty well, as far as how the US government ranked different ethnic groups. But of course, what that means is they were always being positioned against some other group that was "less assimilable." We always have to say that, "We're not somebody else". And unfortunately, the federal government was very susceptible to that kind of rhetoric, or was advancing that kind of rhetoric, "Well, okay, we have, say, 10 major ethnic groups living in downtown Boston. Who are the groups that we sort of can work with? And who are the groups who are just sort of beyond repair? Like... these, they're doomed to poverty forever?" And I think we've seen that kind of language, and so while we see often, fairly—say things, language like, "Very few Syrians have committed crimes, therefore, they're very trustworthy"--you know, this kind of broad generalization--and also, do they speak English well? And in general, the level of English speaking was pretty high, and not necessarily among those who had just arrived. But by the 1910s and 20s, Syrians tended to, partly because of the work they were doing as peddlers, learn English fast when you're interacting with lots of different people. So I think it's hard to just say, they were seen positively or they were seen negatively. Some of the some of the families we've talked to had memories of school, for example, their food being seen as kind of different and weird, or the language. And so I think it's always a bit complicated. And I think there was definitely, as I said, especially around the war, concern or anxiety about being seen as a fifth column or something.

[TOUR AUDIO: DISCRIMINATION IN WEST ROXBURY]

Sharon (Abdelahad) Wall 58:24

We were called everything from dirty Arabs, you know, if we brought any of our ethnic foods as lunch to school, we were humiliated. Syrian bread-- it's like, what is that?

Arthur Abdelahad 58:36

It's the healthiest food around.

Sharon (Abdelahad) Wall 58:39

Right. Right. So it was, it was difficult. We were in-- West Roxbury was entirely Irish Catholic. So we were definitely odd man out.

Harry Bastermajian 59:02

Yeah, you know, just to get a little further into that last, last bit of sort of integration in you talked about some of the 1000s of little squares we have on each street corner here in Boston. You know, many of them were things like police officers, and in the veterans in the, in the US military. So do you have anything more to say about that, in terms of sort of integration into American life? Was that the path I

guess, is what I'm trying to say? If you wanted to become be viewed by Boston society, as someone who is no longer Syrian, but now an American? Do you go to university? Do you try to get into Harvard? Do you do you become a cop? Do you become, you know, what, what's the path for the Syrian immigrant?

Lydia Harrington 59:52

I mean, in terms of, I will focus a bit more on the second generation here, who have told us that, "Our parents wanted us to finish high school and go to college." A lot of women I've talked to became teachers. I think that's a popular, I mean, still, but especially earlier in American history, very popular profession for women. So, yeah, becoming fluent in English and having a career where you could make money and become successful was there, or just not have to rely on your family, become independent, that's also more of an American value. That was something that was held high. So I think just getting an education was important. And they eventually become professionals, and we see, move to the suburbs as people enter jobs, such as doctors, or teachers, or lawyers, coupled with the development of the Mass Pike at the Central Artery downtown. So that was partly, people wanting to move to the suburbs, which, you know, what's more American than moving to the suburbs, right? Once you're integrated, partly that and partly being forced out by that project.

Chloe Bordewich 1:01:17

Just to step back especially to get back to World War One, we do see hundreds of Syrian men in Massachusetts serving in World War One, and World War Two as well. And so, not all but some, as you pointed out, some of these squares are policemen and so forth, but many, many commemorate Syrians who were killed or served, usually killed, in World War One, primarily, because it was a big push to erect those squares, in the immediate post-war years. So several of those places, a couple of those that we point out on the tour, specifically fall into that category. Many died, and the city did commemorate them.

Lydia Harrington 1:02:04

To me, it sends me the message that you have to pay the ultimate sacrifice to be considered American, which is a little pessimistic to me. But yeah, I think there were different ways you could contribute, but that was seen as very loyal to this country, if you were willing to sacrifice your life.

Meryum Kazmi 1:02:30

I just have one follow up question about race, which we talked about earlier. Was there a point-- I know that there was the George Dow case that was in the early 20th. century. When was it?

Chloe Bordewich 1:02:42

1915.

Meryum Kazmi 1:02:43

1915. Okay, so was there a time before that, that Syrians might have identified with another racial category, I just-- looking at the draft card that you had in the article, it has, "white," "negro," "oriental," "Indian."

Chloe Bordewich 1:02:56

That's exactly kind of the problem with the these shifting, but yet still really pseudo-scientific categories that the government was working with. And it's true that, in the late 19th century, this was the first time that people were more, more and more people were starting to come from farther and a wider range of places. And you see this in the US archive, the National Archives, where, clearly there were just a lot of people who didn't fit the categories, the familiar categories. And so there was constant litigation over, is this person white or not white? And I think, important to know, is that it was, again, we're talking about this early period here at the turn of the 20th century. You either had to classify as white or of African ancestry, in other words, black, to be eligible for naturalization or citizenship. But it wasn't clearly defined in law what that meant. And you find people contesting whiteness from all kinds of different places and backgrounds. You have, for example, people from upper castes in India saying, "Well, I'm a Brahmin and so I'm white, but the other castes are non-white, they're oriental" or something. You see that, you see Syrians and saying, "I'm white. My civilization goes back 1000s of years. We're the birthplace of civilization, and we're Christians, so how can you say that if you are a Christian and you are considered white, how am I not white? What about my-- what about me is different from you?" Different courts even, in different parts of the country, often reached different conclusions about somebody's eligibility for naturalization. There's a set of cases right around that same moment in the 1910s where Syrians' eligibility for naturalization was contested in court, and ultimately, it was determined that they were. But previous to that, some won naturalization, others didn't. It sort of depended on where you lived and the judge who was presiding over your case. Hopefully, that--

Meryum Kazmi 1:05:06

Yeah, yeah, very interesting. So, we wanted to end by talking about what happened to Little Syria, where the community ended up, and what traces of it are left today in Chinatown and in the South End.

Lydia Harrington 1:05:23

I could take that one. Since our exhibition covers a lot of the aspect of ephemerality and just the transition from a neighborhood being there to change into something else totally. So, by the 1950s, you have, as I said earlier, people moving to the suburbs, once they make more money, get into a more professional class, churches moving there as well in the '50s, in the '60s, and the '70s and beyond, following the communities. And you can just have a bigger church further out. The ones in what's now Chinatown were pretty small, and now they're bigger, for example, in JP or West Roxbury. And that, in combination with the Central Artery project, which razed some buildings and forced people out, pushed people out. And I will also say there was a significant number of Syrians and Lebanese, also Greeks, Albanians, Armenians in the West End, and they had a similar experience with that neighborhood being essentially razed for what's now Government Center, and MGH. So people don't have a lot of-- what do I call it?-- they don't have a lot of choice in these really top-down decisions. So you unfortunately have to leave. And a lot of people had-- there was the body called the Boston Redevelopment Authority, who was in charge of that and trying to help people deal with this transition. And there was just like, a big lack of trust that people had in the BRA. And those archives are at the Boston City Archives, and we've looked at those, so that's pretty-- there's a lot of information there, if you want to look at that. So a lot of people have moved out, there's a few people still living there, but they're always you know, they're quite old or have moved to Winthrop, West Roxbury, Norwood, Dedham, places like that further out. So there are a lot of Syrian and Lebanese Americans still here, it's just very spread out and they come together

places, like churches, still today. And some of those churches now, with the more recent waves of people coming due to the Lebanese civil war in 1975 to 1990 and then the Syrian Civil War from 2011 till today, they've joined those congregations. So they're still very much connected to what was greater Syria. So there's a few businesses, sites that are still there, such as the Syrian import store, and that, you know, we talked to them in early 2020, but every time we go by it's closed. So I don't know what the-- I mean, they own it, the family owns it, but we don't know. What's going on with the business.

Chloe Bordewich 1:08:27

It's hard to go in and shop today. Yeah.

Lydia Harrington 1:08:29

I mean, the front window looks great. They have, it looks like they have a lot of nice stuff. And they own this, which we haven't mentioned yet in the interview, but the Syrian Sahara Restaurant, a few doors down from that, and those are on Shawmut Avenue.

[TOUR AUDIO: SAHARA SYRIAN RESTAURANT]

Lydia Harrington 1:08:44

A little bit further down is our final destination, the Sahara Syrian restaurant, named after the famous Sahara of Syria. It was only actually open between 1965 and 1970, unfortunately, but we do have an ad that talks about the delicious foods that they were serving. It mentions dishes like shish kebab, lamb delicacies, tempting pastries, hummus, grape leaves, kibbeh, as well as steak and chops fit for a sultan.

Lydia Harrington 1:09:20

And that was opened for a few years in the '70s and then has been shuttered since and it looks like it's being used for storage. And they have this very iconic, retro hip-looking sign that a lot of people are curious about. So no one really knows what's-- no one really knows what's going on with that business. But there's other locations too, like Peters Park, and that was named after family who were Syrian and they, their last name was Petros, as you know, that's another aspect of Anglophone-- Boutros, yeah, their last name was Boutros. And that's another example of the Anglophone assimilation, where, you just see her name--

Chloe Bordewich 1:10:07

No one will be-- you see Sadie Peters, and it's like, Sa'dia Boutros, you know--

Lydia Harrington 1:10:11

So people don't-- I mean there's a plaque dedicated to her, this large stone, but it's not apparent that she was Syrian. So some things are very, like, obvious, but not really until you get into—

Chloe Bordewich 1:10:26

Hiding in plain sight.

Lydia Harrington 1:10:27

Hiding in plain sight is a great way to put it. There's some plaques to Ernest Deeb, who was not-- it's not a killed in action one, but it's just dedicated to him since he was an important member of the community. There's one that's for Thomas Karam, one for John Lufty, and that was Lutfi, but it's changed so people can understand. So you have to really be-- but you have to be familiar with the Arab names to know. And you know, Khalil Gibran became Kalil Gibran. So there's all this and-- who was the, there was the restaurant owner too. He had a very interesting name transition. Who owned the-- he owned the cafe that was by the old Shibli place? Who was it?

Chloe Bordewich 1:11:18

Oh, yeah. I can't remember his name.

Lydia Harrington 1:11:19

There was Nicholas

Meryum Kazmi 1:11:22

There was John Nichols

Chloe Bordewich 1:11:23

Oh, there's Hanna Nicola.

Lydia Harrington 1:11:25

Yeah, Hannah Nicola became John Nichols. Yeah, so some of them changed a lot.

Chloe Bordewich 1:11:31

I mean, in that case he, in Arabic, advertised his name as Hanna Nicola. But in English, he advertised it as John Nichols, like in bilingual ads. So in some cases, people may have been using their original pronunciation within the community, but if they're doing business with the broader, commercial, broader business community, they're like, "All right, no one can say Nicola-- Nichols."

Lydia Harrington 1:11:56

Yeah, and I think-- just to briefly relate to that, you have the Sahara Syrian Restaurant, which-- the Sahara Desert is not in Syria-- and they're using the imagery of the Sphinx and the pyramids to advertise. And they're advertising, "We have both steak as well-- steak and chops, falafel," so they really are marketing, they're kind of showing, "Hey, we're Syrian and American." And we also saw that on Anton Abdelahad's records, he uses the Sphinx and pyramid imagery. So it's kind of using Orientalist imagery to promote themselves. So yeah, it's very there's a lot of layers.

Harry Bastermajian 1:12:39

Capitalizing on *I Dream of Genie*, or something like that.

Chloe Bordewich 1:12:44

If Americans have heard anything about Middle East like, they probably have heard of the pyramids, so let's just go with that. Yeah, but just to say one final thing about the transition, just to come back to that question and the BRA, to Sadie Peters, for example, she was quite active in organizing to at least

advocate for the community in the face of these projects, many of which never even came to fruition. The BRA acquired a huge amount of land, initially brought a lot of local community members on board, to consult and so forth, but the project-- the plans kept changing, and the projects transformed. And so there was a sort of long-term sense of insecurity about people's housing, like, "Will my house be the next one razed, or if it's razed, what will be built here?" And in the end, only some of the projects were actually implemented, but by that point, so many people had moved to the suburbs and, as a combination, as a result of both, as Lydia said, generational change, socio-economic mobility, and this sense that the community that the neighborhood was being razed and gutted.

Harry Bastermajian 1:13:51

Thank you. So this is a public history project, and very different than the kind of research and writing you do in a PhD. I'm curious though, how has this project sort have informed your other research in terms of how you think about communities, diasporas, how come-- any way that it sort of affects your thinking?

Lydia Harrington 1:14:17

Yeah, actually a lot of ways. I mean, for me, I noticed my family came from, around the same period as the Syrians were coming here, from Bavaria and from Ireland, and I just noticed so many similarities in our histories, like why we came, what our experience was when we got here. And those are also two groups were like, they were seen as sort of white, but like, the lower whites. So, you see that within whiteness, there's so much variation and infighting about that concept. And they were Catholics, so they were not the good kind of whites in Yankee America. So yeah, I think I just-- it made me draw a lot of connections to other immigrant groups and see the-- notice the patterns, and then the pattern towards the city, getting to the next socio-economic level so you can move to the suburbs. So yeah, for me, I felt like I had personal connections, but also, as someone who works on Ottoman and Middle Eastern history, and not American history, just like learning about our history as Americans and my own personal connections to migration and family history.

Chloe Bordewich 1:15:39

I think, for me, it's a couple of different things. One has been, well, my current postdoc actually is also public-history focused, and I'm working on a project through BU that is focused on the history of Americans of Middle Eastern descent. And so some of the research that I've done, in the National Archives, for example, has informed the way that I've looked at this project, and vice versa. I've been able to think more about Boston's specific history in the context of that project as well, which has been really great. Public historians often think much more broadly about, how do we reach different kinds of audiences? And so we started with the walking tour which, I will say, actually has also been a method for me in terms of my academic research. I like to spend a lot of time walking the streets of the places that I'm writing about and looking at the specific sites, whether or not they're still extant. And especially, when you're in the field for six months, or a year, or a year and a half, and then you have to go back and continue to write about these places, it's so important that they're really imprinted in your brain, and you can write about, you can invoke place effectively and meaningfully when you're no longer there. I think I understand this history of Little Syria so much better from having walked it so many times, to understand the relationships of people to place, especially walking the most-- I mean, when we walked with you all, with some of the members of this community, or their descendants, and have them be able

to comment on specific places we passed and have those places then evoke new memories, I think that was really powerful for me. But then, again, to come back to this idea of different mediums and different methodologies, from the walking tour, we then transitioned to writing an article and that article appeared in both English and in Arabic. And so we, through the Arabic article, which we published with the *Jumhuriyya* magazine online, that reached Arab readers, contemporary readers of Arabic, in the Syrian diaspora of today. And they have a whole other kind of perspective on this history and so it reinforced to me what's also the importance of a) publishing your work in the language of the place that you are studying. It's just as important that we reach people in Boston who don't know the history and people maybe who might be interested in it who are Arabic speakers around the world.

Lydia Harrington 1:18:07

Yeah, I agree. Same with me with the different mediums. And I do curating as part of my career. So, how do we turn a public history project into an exhibition and reach people, which we're doing through objects, material culture, which we're doing now at MIT, and then the exhibition will go to Massachusetts Historical Society in April. And we'll have a live event and reception accompanying that. And just how to get Bostonians to be informed about the history-- it's not just-- a lot of people know about the Chinese, Chinatown, Irish immigration, Italian, with the north end? And this is just not really in Boston's historiography that much, so we want to enrich that. And it has made me think about my own research in a different way since I'm researching Ottoman schools, and some of them are not there at all, I have to find them in the archives. So that's kind of a parallel. So I'm thinking, "What are different ways I can understand these buildings that aren't there anymore?" And also even comparing Ottoman schools to things like the Quincy Grammar School where, in this school, they're learning all about how to be American, and in those schools, they're learning all about how to be Ottoman. Although I will say in the Ottoman schools [they were] learning four languages, whereas I think the American schools are only learning one. So there is-- I did see-- are the Syrians, do they really have a better education here? Or is it just that it's in English? So yeah, I think that connects a bit to like this global history of education and craft education that I'm doing as a separate project, but I have seen some different links. So it's definitely made us think about our very many different projects.

Chloe Bordewich 1:19:56

We both work on the late 19th and early 20th century. And so I think, always thinking about what's going on in a different part of the world at the same time, and how these worlds are connected. I was doing research in the Ottoman archives in Istanbul and I came across lists of newspapers and books that were censored by Ottoman officials, by the Ottoman authorities, things that are published all over the world, but among other places, they were the things that were published in Boston, were being read and censored, or read and prohibited from entry into the Empire, by the censors in Istanbul. So, you find these kinds of peculiar connections. Another great one is the detective agencies that were hired by the Ottoman consul here in Boston to monitor and surveil Armenians in Watertown, local Boston detective agencies being hired to track people, but also just collect and read whatever was being written by Armenians. So this is part of-- that is, in a sense, part of this larger history of Ottoman Boston that we've been trying to contribute to, it's just that it's so rich, that there are many, many pieces to get into.

Harry Bastermajian 1:21:14

It kind of reinforces the idea that local history is global history and global history is local history.

Chloe Bordewich 1:21:20

Absolutely. Yeah.

Lydia Harrington 1:22:10

Going off of what you said before about connection, since we work on this period, I think something that's been a real joy for us is to actually talk to people who grew up in the neighborhood, because since we research-- I'm researching Ottoman architecture, you're researching earlier Egyptian history, everyone's dead. We can only talk to the documents and see what they're trying to say. And so it's like, a real pleasure to talk to these families and they are so excited that this history is finally being looked at and having a light shined on it. And the churches are living, we can go talk to people, priests who work there. So, it's just really nice to work on something that's a bit more contemporary and where you can see that people are really excited about it.

Chloe Bordewich 1:22:10

There's a sense of ownership of this history, too. And that our role is less to just research and put something out there, but also to connect the dots between people, families, who-- in many cases, we find all their parents, or grandparents, all knew each other well and had all these overlapping connections, but because they've spread out now into the different suburbs, if they go to different churches, for example, they're no longer connected with one another. And so one of the most satisfying roles we can play is reconnecting the dots and being able to situate that and this neighborhood within this much broader context.

Meryum Kazmi 1:22:56

To learn more about Boston's little Syria, visit BostonLittleSyria.org, where you can find information about walking tours, exhibits, and media coverage. You can also find links to pictures from the tour and Tony Abdelahad's website, where you can listen to more of his music, in the show notes for this episode. We hope you'll subscribe to the *Harvard Islamica Podcast* for more interviews on research related to Islam and Muslim societies past and present. I'm Meryum Kazmi, thanks as always for listening.