

HANDOUT # 1

A LITTLE PIECE OF HOME: LIFE IN "LITTE SYRIA"

As some 100,000 Syrians immigrated between 1880 and 1914, they formed their own ethnic communities in major cities across the United States. The largest “Little Syria” was in New York City. This was in the lower part of Manhattan, a short distance from Ellis Island where the immigrants landed. Much as the Jewish immigrants in New York gravitated to the Lower East Side, Arab immigrants went to Little Syria. Here they could find family members and friends who had immigrated earlier. They could also locate the institutions that were an important part of their lives in the old country.

The Arabic-speaking community in Little Syria helped newcomers ease the transition from a familiar world to a new and strange environment. The sounds and smells of New York’s Washington Street reminded them of their native towns and villages. Shops, cafes, businesses, small factories, schools, and churches lined the streets of this quarter. There were also groups that lent money to the immigrants for rent, food and other expenses. And in the case of untimely death, burial societies helped pay for funerals. As was the case with other immigrants in New York, those coming from Syria crowded into poorly built tenements. Sometimes several families lived in one apartment. These tenements had been home to Irish immigrants who had arrived in New York a few decades before the Syrians.

Many of the inhabitants of Little Syria owned shops and markets. The stores sold imports from the Middle East; anyone entering would be overwhelmed with the floor-to-ceiling displays of rugs, bolts of fabric, and religious articles. Markets smelled of spices and foods that were not available in other parts of the city. Besides shops, there were small factories that made sweaters and silk goods. Both owners and employees worked long hours and continually saved money for the future. Many saved for a comfortable life back in Syria, others needed money for education. But entrepreneurs, and especially peddlers, put aside part of their income to buy merchandise to continue their business activities.

Children in Little Syria were involved in the daily life of their community. Many earned a little money delivering goods from warehouse to stores and from stores to customers. When they could afford it, families sent their children to school. Some children went to schools run by Syrian religious organizations, others went to public school. Private schools emphasized the importance of Syrian traditions. Both types of schools taught English and Citizenship. Such training are examples of efforts to assimilate the immigrants to become more “American.” Immigrants who worked in factories and other “American” businesses were often forced to learn English and American customs quickly. Henry Ford insisted that those who worked at his plant in Flint, Michigan take “Americanization” classes. He believed that as the children of the immigrants become more assimilated, they will more likely move into high positions in the business and intellectual life of the country. However, immigrants who lived and worked in their own communities were under less pressure to become “Americanized.”

Restaurants and cafes were at the heart of social life in Little Syria. In the evening, the cafes would be packed with people longing for familiar food, music and dance. They ate “baklava” (sweet pastry made with nuts) and drank “arak” (an alcoholic beverage). Those who worked outside of the community shared stories of their experiences getting around New York, working in sweatshops, and dealing with difficult bosses. Often a group of Syrian intellectuals would meet and discuss their latest ideas and projects. Many wrote for Arabic newspapers and journals. Three of the major Arabic language newspapers were published in New York. Some of those in the cafes were revolutionaries who dreamed of liberating Syria from the yoke of the Ottoman Empire. Others were poets and playwrights whose works reflected a longing for the lives they had left in the Middle East and the difficulties they faced in the new country.

Religion was an important part of immigrant life, including the Syrians. The earliest immigrants were Christian. They followed the Eastern Rite tradition in their beliefs and rituals, similar to the Greek Orthodox Church. However, there were many different versions of Syrian churches. Whether someone went to one type of church or another depended on what type of church an immigrant attended before coming to America. At first, there were not enough immigrants to create their own parish. Since the Maronite and Melike Churches were affiliated with the Vatican, immigrants following these congregations attended nearby Catholic churches. Later they all formed their own congregations.

The ways non-Arab New Yorkers reacted to the new immigrants varied. Some viewed them as bright, industrious, and exotic. Reporters came from all over the city to write about the sights and sounds of Little Syria. While some of these articles painted a positive picture of the neighborhood, many were full of stereotypes and romanticized notions of life in this ethnic quarter. Those who had already had anti-immigrant views began to see danger in the arrival of Arab immigrants. They criticized their living conditions, mocked their clothing, and lobbied for laws to limit further immigration.

Such xenophobia finally led to the National Origins Act of 1924 that set severe limitations on further immigration from Eastern Europe and the Middle East. However, by this time there was a Little Syria in Chicago, Detroit, Boston and other cities. Much later, the grandchildren of the pioneers remember (e.g., Greg Orfalea, see Grandma Nazera in Videos/Retrospectives) hearing stories about what life was like in these little pieces of home in the United States.