

PREFACE

The time is right for sharing thoughts about “my people”—Americans of Arab ancestry—the Lebanese, a few Syrians, and fewer Palestinians, predominantly Christian, but a few Druze (a sect in Islam named after Ismail al-Darazi, a religious leader who died in 1019) and fewer Muslim. From 1880 to 1915 they emigrated in small numbers from the Ottoman Empire provinces of Syria and Palestine at the eastern Mediterranean Sea area. Many migrated to North and South America, and the majority settled in New England. Nearly 200 immigrants and a few members of immigrant families told their stories to the author in taped, face-to-face interviews; pre-1920 photographs, most of them from the homes of those interviewed, and documents contemporaneous with their stories give a profile of the daily lives of the immigrants.

This research developed into a study of the origins and history of Arab-American communities in North and South America that had roots or links to New England and in particular to Worcester, Massachusetts, a major city in the Northeast where large Arab-American communities were established. Their affinities and patterns of migration and integration into American society usually paralleled those of their counterparts in other Arabic-speaking communities in both North America and South America. Generally, they maintained their Arab culture through food and its presentation, the Arabic language, religion (Christianity and Islam), dance, music, literature, philosophy, poetry, and storytelling. Some enterprising individuals lived and conducted businesses in South America and maintained their New England addresses and businesses that often were operated by the wives.

This book is an effort to document the history of the early immigrants before they die, taking with them firsthand knowledge of their immigrant experience, and to use primary sources before they are lost. The immigrants’ anecdotes, told by their eyes as well as their voices, are heartwarming and entertaining and make for enlightened reading. Documenting their

history is both a tribute to their resourcefulness, determination, and courage and an attempt to bring into clearer focus the multicultural history of the Americas. Their story provides a long-needed addition to what is known or not known, uncovered themes that have not been addressed in the inadequate material that is available about the Arabs and especially about Arab Americans. It makes an important and significant contribution to a little-understood and underreported subject.

Their experiences as related in this book challenge numerous long-held myths and stereotypes about Arabs, Arab Americans, the economic success of Arab women, and the entrepreneurship of Arab men. While most Arab migrants were males, the adventurous Arab woman—a widow accompanied by a child or children, or a single woman—was often first in the family to emigrate. Her initial occupation was frequently as a cook or door-to-door saleswoman (peddler) of dry goods to different ethnic groups who lived in nearby towns and out of state. Arabs referred to in this text generally emigrated for adventure and wealth.

Additionally, the research points to a support system that came about as a result of the interdependency of ethnic minorities and the advocacy of concerned members of the majority group.

Chapters 1 through 4 describe events in the everyday life of the immigrant who arrived from 1880 to 1915. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 cover the years 1880 to 1989. Included are contributions to their adopted country, a legacy to their descendants, and the achievements of some of these immigrants and their descendants. The customs described generally followed the same traditional pattern for both the Christian Arab American and Muslim Arab American. For example, in chapter 5 the type of cordiality described under “Gracious Living and Hospitality” was still experienced in Arab-American homes as late as the early 1980s. However, one custom that differed was the religious marriage ceremony celebrated by Christian Arab Americans. Historical dramas in Arabic were performed until the mid-1930s, when Arabic films rented from New York replaced them. These films were shown in the downtown Little Theatre adjoining the Worcester Memorial Auditorium (now Worcester AUD) until the early 1950s.

Growing up as an American in a community of immigrants gave me firsthand insight and knowledge of traditions that I might not have gained otherwise. Although I was born and raised in an immigrant Arabic-speaking community, I took for granted the many ways its members integrated into mainstream America. With age and experience, however, I realize how difficult, painful, and awe inspiring the process of integration was. I

am amazed at the abundance of resources and survival skills of these visionaries as they coped with their new environment. I am proud of my birth as an American and of my cultural Arab heritage. The experiences of these immigrants is a reminder to us and those who come after us, of people, places, and events that helped shape this great country of ours at a special time in history. The importance and timeliness of this book is accentuated by the Middle East situation. I would like this study to be an offering to my people, the Arab Americans, to all immigrants, and scholars interested in migration and adaptation to American life. May it serve as a living library of memories and traditions and encourage the reader to study Arab history more deeply.