

SR 166 Oral History Interview with Esther Azorr Rask

by Robert J. Gassner

Portland's Syrian/Lebanese-American Community

1988 September 10



THE OREGON
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY
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Compiled by Ellorashree Maitra, 2019

Tape 1, Side 1

1988 September 10

Time Stamp	Title	Synopsis	Keyword	Keyword	Keyword
00:00:06	Introduction of Tape's Content				
00:01:00	Esther Azor Rask Introduces herself	Born in Portland, Dec 17, 1928; born in family home and delivered by Mrs. Charles Isaac, community midwife at the time.	Isaac, Charles, Mrs.		
00:01:52	History of Family in Syria, arrival and livelihood in the US	Ancestors on father's side (Azorrs) moved from Lebanon to Syria 200 to 300 years ago, and settled in abandoned Syrian village of Amar al-hasn, where Rask's father born in 1888. Accompanied his father, Khalil Azorr, to the US in 1901. They earned their living by peddling needles, threads, and yardage to farm wives in the country. Khalil Azorr intended to earn enough money to return home to Syria, which he did, but for unknown reasons his son, Rask's father, decided to stay on.	Amar al-hasn, Syria	Door-to-door sales	Azorr, Khalil
00:04:02	Father's life after departure of Khalil Azorr	While his father's departure was a shock to the teenager, he adjusted and carried on peddling, picking up various languages from peddling to immigrant people, and learning English as well. Found support from other immigrant young men in similar situations. Describes their weekly work routine, including Bible reading groups on Saturday nights, to "give them strength....although they weren't particularly religious people."	Bible-- Reading	Immigrant youth	
00:05:27	Father's move to Oregon	Esther Azor Rask's father moved to the West Coast from Pennsylvania around 1906-09, after acquiring citizenship in 1905, perhaps to join other relatives. Worked briefly for George Atiyeh, but did not enjoy indoor work. Worked as laborer in Portland with his brother, Esther Azor Rask's "Uncle Sam," who arrived in 1909. Stayed briefly with Isaacs family. Father went back [to Syria?] but Uncle Sam stayed on in Portland during the war and went into business with other relatives.	Citizenship	Azorr, Sam	Atiyeh, George
00:06:47	Illegal entry into US of some relatives, including one brother, Uncle Brohin	Uncle Brohin entered the US through Mexico, liked to "cut corners," so did not wait for legal paperwork arranged by Esther Rask's father. He was deported, and at the time of the interview was married and living in Amar al-hasn. There were other relatives who entered illegally: some were found out and deported, while others stayed on.	Illegal aliens	Deportation	

00:07:57	Father's partnership with Sam Azorr	Sam Azorr's construction business: installing sewer and water lines. Rask's father initially worked for them after returning to Portland in 1920, but the company later disbanded. Eventually father went into business with Sam; partnership lasted for 20-30 years. When parents returned to Portland in 1920, they stayed with Uncle Sam in his house on SE 63rd near Powell for a while before moving to the house where Esther Rask and her siblings were born.	Construction industry	Small business	Azorr, Sam
00:11:08	Allentown's Arabic community	Significant Arabic community in Allentown Pennsylvania, where immigrants, especially from Amar al-hasn, gravitated. George Atiyeh was the first of the village people to move to Portland, having heard about opportunities in Portland from a schoolmate. Allentown popular with new arrivals, and there is still a large community there. Rask: "In Amar they know two places, Allentown and Portland." So when parents returned to the US in 1920, they stopped in Allentown to see relatives.	Allentown (Pa.)	Atiyeh, George	
00:12:51	Learning English	Mother knew English, and was able to help father with work. Brother Ike knew no English, initially teased about it at school, but picked it up soon.	English language-- Study and teaching	Azorr, Ike	
00:14:05	Father's return to US in 1920 with family	Describes boat trip, during which sister Azizi caught measles, and was quarantined with father. Recounts loan extended by George Atiyeh to father which allowed him to bring his wife and children with him.	Atiyeh, George	Measles	Azorr, Azizi
00:16:40	Relation between Azorr and Atiyeh families	Related on the maternal side. George Atiyeh was Esther Rask's mother's uncle.	Atiyeh, George	Azorr family	Atiyeh family
00:17:18	Peddling as Common Occupation for the early immigrant community	Vast majority of the older community earned their living peddling. Later generations went into other occupations and businesses. Peddling offered relatively easy source of income for new arrivals who did not know the language; there was also a system in place that facilitated new entrants into the occupation. However, after moving to Portland, father initially earned his living as a laborer, digging ditches, along with others in the community.	Door-to-door sales	Labor	
00:20:07	Size, composition, and nature of the community at time of father's arrival	Rask unsure about size of the community, refers interviewer to community photos taken in 1911. Prominent families included Atiyehs and Sam Kahl. Others moved away, or died out. Custom of established families helping out new immigrants. As new immigrants experienced difficulties securing loans from US banks due to language barriers and lack of collateral, George Atiyeh acted as a banker for the community, taking deposits from and providing loans to people from Amar al-hasn. This practice helped his own business while also helping finance immigrants' needs.	Kahl, Sam	Atiyeh, George	Lonas, Personal

00:24:05	Purpose of father's trip to Syria	Went to get married and to see his family. Describes how her father, while betrothed to another woman, ended up marrying her mother, a school teacher. Recounts difficulties due to outbreak of World War 1, father's compulsory enlistment into the Turkish work gangs, and loss of a child in the flu epidemic. Experience of being pressed into work gangs, illness, and hunger scarred her father so deeply that, once he returned to the US, vowed never to go back.	Influenza Epidemic, 1918-1919	World War, 1914-1918	
00:28:58	Popularity of Marriage Trips to Syria	A lot of people went back to "get wives," and continued to do so. There weren't very many young Arab women in Portland, so some people (like Joe Hanna and Sam Abrams) also went to Butte, Montana, where Esther Rask's husband was raised, to find wives "because there were a lot of girls there."	Brides	Butte (Mont.)	
00:30:16	Business partnership	Tape ends with question posed by interviewer.			

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00:00:08	Introduction of tape's content				
00:00:39	Success of Father's sewage and waterline business	Charles Azorr who married Rask's paternal aunt, went into the sewage and water-line business with Rask's father and her uncle Sam. They were joined by Albert Azorr, who married her aunt Rahmi, before he was deported for having entered the country illegally. Rask's father took care of the bidding for city contracts, joined later by her oldest brother. Their mother helped them with the English. Everyone in the family, except Rask because she was the youngest, helped with typing and paperwork. marvels at the business's success, given the challenges faced by her family (language barrier, stiff competition).	Azorr, Albert	Azorr, Charles	English language-- Study and teaching
00:03:59	Grocery and dry goods businesses popular with Syrian Immigrants	Many immigrants ran grocery stores and dry goods stores in North Portland and Foster Road, because "they all liked to be in business for themselves." This line of business was accessible to them, given their limited language and capital resources, and they could draw on the assistance of the whole family. Recalls an uncle, Mr. [Salom?], who had a dry goods store in Foster Road, and would periodically drive out into the country to sell goods to farm wives. On these occasions, his wife or Rask's older sisters stayed in the store. Rask: " It was kind of the last of the peddling thing, only by car."	Door-to-door sales	Grocery trade	North Portland (Portland, Or.)
00:06:34	The Social Club and social life	The only organization that the community developed was the social club, which drew members from all over Portland. The club was initially called the Syrian Club, because the distinction between Syrians and Lebanese came much later. Earliest recollections of the club are of accompanying parents to the club for dances. Recalls a male relative who used to play the music, and was the only one in town who played the Arabic instruments like mijwiz and the drum. Parents used to have a lot of parties at home: her mother and aunt would prepare kibbeh, there were drinks and dancing. However, the club was the center of the Syrian community.	Syrian-Lebanese Social Club (Portland, Or.)	Social life and customs	Arabs-- Music

00:09:49	Social makeup of the community and club membership	Community was a cross-section of "everybody," due to relative parity of economic means and educational backgrounds among the members of the community up until the 30s and 40s. Afterwards, with the arrival of more "educated classes," distinctions began to emerge. Earlier, it was mostly the peasant class, small town, limited education, small businessmen, laboring classes, and a few who were a little better off. After World War II, another wave of immigrants arrived, even as the children of the early immigrants became more educated, dated and married Americans, and moved to other more affluent neighborhoods. The club continued to be active through the 50s, but then it slowly dwindled away. Rask's generation didn't marry within the Syrian or Arab community, and differences of religion, education, career, and economic means within the community became more prominent. Rask: "There was really no need to be held together like the early immigrants who were really didn't know the language, strange land,...'coz everyone just became integrated."	Immigrants-- United States-- Economic conditions	Children of immigrants	
00:12:55	Effect of the Independence of Lebanon on the community and the club	As Lebanese members became more aware of their distinct identity, the club was renamed the Syrian-Lebanese club. Another moment of separation came with the founding of the Maronite Church, which became the focal point for a lot of the Lebanese. A lot of things separated the community, which is Rask describes as a "natural thing." Discusses the Maronite Church and its attendees.	Syrian- Lebanese Social Club (Portland, Or.)	St. Sharbel Maronite Catholic Church (Portland, Or.)	Lebanese-- Religion
00:15:20	Syrian Orthodox Church	Discusses the history of the Syrian Orthodox church in Portland. Many members of the community (like her father and her uncle Sam) did not attend to church, although sometimes they made donations. Community comprised a combination of regular attendees and others who went for special occasions (like baptisms and funerals). It was the largest religious community within the Syrian community, and a smaller group of Catholics and Protestants. At the time of the interview, the Orthodox Church is very active, with a permanent priest, and looking for another church to accomodate the growing membership (both Arabic and American).	Syrian Orthodox Church	Syrians-- Religion	
00:19:16	Difference between the original orthodox church and the new Syrian Orthodox Church, opened two weeks before the interview	The older Orthodox church is the Syrian Antiochian Church; the new church actually predates the Syrian Antiochian church; the mass and liturgy are still said in Aramaic. It is supposed to be the original, the first church. It's a small church; a family of Iraqis belong to it, along with some Syrians. Where people attended church partly a matter of convenience; Rask attended a Methodist church and its Sunday school because it was closest to the family home and her mother was Presbyterian. A lot of people went to the church that was closest to them, or they did not go at all. Rask: "I think, especially from Amar-al-hasn, they're kind of flexible where religion is concerned, casual [Laughs]".	Syrian Orthodox Church	Syrians-- Religion	

00:22:17	Rask's childhood and family	Parents entertained a lot of people (family, members of the community, Americans, out-of-town visitors, and people from the old country). Early on, leisure activities included picknicking and car rides. Recalls that the club had a lot of dances, for which her older sisters dressed formally (in the mid-30s). Father did very well before the Depression, which he later recalled as a "very bad time." However, she remembers that they had enough to eat, "we still had fun, the folks still entertained." Her father had a big garden and her mother sewed, so they always had clothes and food; her mother was innovative: "she could make things out of nothing, almost." Describes her upbringing and her parents' closeness to each other and care for their children.	Depressions--1929	Family	
00:27:40	Schooling and Community	Attended Arleta Grade School, popular with Arab community, Franklin High School, followed by 2 years of college. Graduated from Franklin in 47. Lot of acquaintances from the Syrian community in school; mentions Irene Saloom, who later became a successful businesswoman, as a good friend, although she is not currently in contact with her. Irene Saloom's father had a dry goods store, and was the community's source of local news and news from abroad. Recalls father saying after dinner that he would go over to Mr. Saloom's for the "news"; men of the community would also congregate in a pool hall or tavern after dinner for a glass of beer and exchange news.	Arleta Grade School (Portland, Or.)	Franklin High School (Portland, Or.)	Saloom, Irene