Teaching Immigrant Memoirs: Making History Personal

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One great challenge I find in teaching history is getting students to imagine themselves into the world of the past. Some have trouble connecting with the impact that past events might have had on ordinary people. Others have trouble dismantling their expectation that what is “normal” in their lives today should be the lens through which they view – and sometimes, judge – the past. Assigning memoirs for class readings and for essay assignments has for me proven a powerful way to engage my students’ imaginations and help them “think different”.

My interest in memoirs stems from personal experience: I found my dissertation topic while reading the memoir of a British man involved in the administration of Radio Cairo and Radio Jerusalem in the 1930s and 1940s. His experiences led me to ask questions about radio in the Middle East in those decades, unsettling my assumptions and leading my thoughts in new directions. But I would not have thought to teach with memoirs until I met Ellen Fleischmann, who regularly incorporates them into her courses at the University of Dayton.¹ Her methods include two key ideas: that memoirs can serve as a type of primary source for students without the language training to go further into period documents, and that the memoirs of ordinary people can offer more insight than those of public figures, since the former are less concerned with protecting or rehabilitating their image.

Thus far, I have used memoirs both as assigned readings and as the basis for essays in which students use a memoir to reflect on course themes. They have worked well both in a twentieth-century Middle Eastern history course, taught in the United States, and also in a course on Syrian and Lebanese migration to North and South America, taught at the American University of Beirut.

The assigned readings for the latter class included Ed Aryain’s *From Syria to Seminole: Memoir of a High Plains Merchant*, which shocked my students into a new awareness of what it means to immigrate: the language issues, the financial worries, the loneliness. His descriptions of life in the Hawran, his journey (on foot) to Beirut, the steamships to New York, the kindness of his first employer, the physical exhaustion of his days as a peddler, and his young age (fifteen) all resonated deeply. Ed Aryain became a touchstone for them: his decision to change his name from Mohammed to Ed framed a subsequent discussion on immigrant name changes, for example, and his return trip to Lebanon in the early 1960s sparked a later conversation about the ways in which emigration changes people. “This reminds me of Ed” was a phrase that not only bound various course themes together, but also bound students into a community.

¹ She has compiled a list of twentieth-century memoirs that can be found here: [http://homepages.udayton.edu/~fleiscel/493booklist.html](http://homepages.udayton.edu/~fleiscel/493booklist.html).
For the essays, students have been given a list of books, available on reserve, from which they may choose. The assignment is fairly loose: they are asked to read the memoir and to reflect upon how it illustrates (or complicates) two or three course themes. I am interested in seeing how they read, and how they relate the various “big themes” of Middle Eastern and/or immigration history to an individual’s life. Although students read different memoirs, they all read a memoir – so in subsequent class sessions, I have said to them: “We are talking today about education, war, religion, and economy or gender, language, and discrimination issues. Did the person who wrote your memoir say anything about this? Was it important to him/her?” I have found that my students tend to relate quite personally to “their” memoirist; and that regardless whether they agree with his/her life decisions, their connection with him/her makes them much more engaged in the historical issues. Even my shyer students are eager to present “their” memoirist’s experiences to the class, and their collective analyses have led to intellectually energetic – while still historicized - discussions.

Below is a small sampling of the memoirs available by Syrian and Lebanese immigrants. I include Lebanese immigrants if they left during the Ottoman or early Mandate period, for the sake of giving my students a broader array of choices. Others might prefer to limit available texts solely to those connected to modern Syria.


*Nabeha: Remembrances, An Autobiography* - Nabeha Merhige Haddad (1993, from an earlier manuscript)

*A Far Journey* – Abraham Mitrie Rihbany (1914)

*Syrian Yankee* – Salom Rizk (1943)

*Kisses from a Distance* – Raff Ellis*

*Children of the Roojme: a Family’s Journey from Lebanon* – Elmaz Abinader*

* indicates memoirs written primarily about the authors’ parents and other relatives.

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