

Syrian Immigrants and Debates on Racial Belonging in Los Angeles, 1875-1945

By Sarah Gualtieri

For historians, what is written on the edge of the document—tucked in the margins, scribbled *inter alia*, or added at the bottom – can be as interesting as the main contents of the document itself. Such is the case with the Oath of Allegiance of George Shishim, a Syrian immigrant to Los Angeles whose petition to become an American citizen was heard in the Los Angeles Superior Court in 1909. At the bottom of the document are several hand-written notations that reveal George Shishim’s request to become an American citizen had caused a fair amount of judicial conflict. On September 22, 1909, the Naturalization Examiner filed a motion to deny Shishim’s petition on the grounds that he was not white. On November 4, after several continuances and a presentation given by Shishim’s lawyer, the presiding judge denied the motion and admitted him to citizenship.¹ Shishim’s case hit the pages of the *Los Angeles Times* which covered the “race crisis” with salacious interest. When the court finally determined Shishim to be a “white person,” thus allowing for his acquisition of citizenship, the paper exclaimed that “it made every feature of his dark, swarthy countenance radiate with pleasure and hope.”²



George Shishim: when a Los Angeles court determined he was a white man, the LA Times reported, “it made every feature of his dark, swarthy countenance radiate with pleasure and hope.” Photo courtesy of the Arab-American Historical Foundation.

The Shishim case marks an important moment in the history of racialization of Syrian immigrants in the United States. It established a legal precedent that facilitated their acquisition of the privileges of citizenship—privileges that were denied to other immigrants from Asia; it demonstrated that local interpretations of federal law were nuanced and sometimes at loggerheads with dictates from Washington; and it shifts the lens of interpretation of the Syrian experience in the U.S. to the West, that is, away from the East coast bias that dominates the historiography of Arab Americans. This short essay sketches

¹ Oath of Allegiance for George Sulayman Shishim, Nov. 4 1909, Naturalization Records of the Superior Court of Los Angeles, 1876-1915, NARA M1614. The language of the motion was that he “did not come under the provisions of Section 2169 of the Revised States of the Unites States.” [These provisions extended citizenship to “aliens being free white persons and to aliens of African nativity and persons of African descent.”]

² “Syrians Admitted,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 5, 1909.

out the main lines of the argument in a larger work-in-progress which focuses on debates around citizenship and what they reveal about Syrian community-formation and inter-ethnic alliances in Los Angeles in the first half of the twentieth century.

Shifting the Lens West

As is the case for many other immigrant groups, scholarship on pre-WW II Syrian Americans has focused on their experiences of migration and settlement on the East coast and in the Midwest. New York City is affectionately known as “the mother colony,” the nucleus of the first major settlement of Syrians in the United States and the staging ground for the spreading out of immigrants to other hubs, notably Boston, Detroit, and various cities in Pennsylvania. To be sure, the numerical concentration in these areas is impressive, but the 1920 U.S. Census shows that Syrians lived in every state in the nation. There were sizeable communities in the South and in the West yet scholarship on them is scant to non-existent. Missing are not only focused local studies that contribute to the field of Arab-American studies, but also projects that demonstrate the theoretical significance of Arab Americans to understanding patterns of racial formation and ethnic alliance building in the United States. A study of the Los Angeles Syrian community can make a contribution on both fronts. Even preliminary research indicates that those who came to the city do not fit neatly into the peddler to proprietor paradigm that characterizes the literature on early Arab immigrants in the U.S., and that their patterns of settlement and work in Los Angeles in the pre-WW II period point to significant interaction with non-white populations.

Most Syrian immigrants to Los Angeles were in fact “step migrants.” Los Angeles represented the second or third migration for them and they came to the city to pursue a variety of trades and professions. While New York was a common point of entry to the United States for these immigrants, the records of the Superior Court of Los Angeles indicate that many came from Mexico and other parts of the Americas. Nissim Hoha, for example, originally from Aleppo, Syria, lived in Alexandria, Egypt, and Buenos Aires, Argentina, before arriving in New York City in 1920. He declared his intention to become a U.S. citizen in Los Angeles in 1937 at the age of 51. He and his wife Victoria, from Antakia, Turkey, had nine children. One was born in Egypt, three in Buenos Aires, four in New York City, and one in Los Angeles. Nessim Hoha’s family was thus a transnational family, having lived in three of the principal nodes of the Syrian diaspora, acquiring knowledge of different languages and experience of highly cosmopolitan environments. Moreover, a barber by trade, Hoha’s petition reveals the complex layers of Syrian identity as seen through the prism of U.S. naturalization law. His color is listed as “white,” his complexion “medium,” his nationality “Turkey” and his race “Hebrew” [A Syrian Jew in today’s parlance]. In contrast, Antoine Vitar [Bitar?] came into the United States at Laredo, Texas, having lived first in Monterey and then Nuevo Leon, Mexico. He declared his intention to become an American citizen in 1938 at the age of 25 and listed his occupation as “furniture springer, his color “white,” his complexion “dark,” his race “Syrian” and his nationality “Syrian.”³

³ Declaration of Intention of Antoine Vitar, Naturalization Records of the Superior Court of Los Angeles, 1876-1915, NARA M1614.

Antoine Vitar's declaration of intention reflects the dominant pattern in the documents (in terms of responses to the race question) in which clerks assigned to Syrian applicants the color "white" and "complexion" dark. Based on this data, Syrians would seem to fit into historian Thomas Guglielmo's argument of a variegation, but ultimate security within whiteness, an argument he develops in great detail for Italians in Chicago for the pre-WW II period.⁴ There are, however, important reasons to argue for the specificity of Syrian processes of racialization, reasons that make them different from the Irish, Italians, Jews or Slavs who were able to consolidate their whiteness through various institutional, psychological, and material measures.⁵ First, while the canonical works on whiteness focus on the above named European immigrants, the Syrians were from Asia. Here again, the naturalization records are instructive. When George Shishim filed his "Declaration of Intention" to become an American citizen in 1907 he listed his "last foreign residence" as Beirut, Syria, and renounced forever his allegiance to "Abdul Hamid II, Sultan of Turkey." It was very much his link to Asia that was an issue for the naturalization examiner.⁶ And it is worth remembering that the back story to the Shishim case involved the accusation that even though he was a policeman, he could not give testimony in a court of law because he was not a "white man." The legal precedent used to support this claim was *People v Hall*, a mid-19th century California ruling that barred the Chinese from testifying against whites in court.⁷ Moreover, complicating the matter was the fact that the "Asianness" of Syrians was undergoing redefinition because their place of origin's relationship to Asia and their nationality was not entirely clear. When Syrians first started arriving in the United States, immigration officials classified them not as Syrians, but as immigrants from "Turkey in Asia." By the early 20th century they had become "Syrians" and by 1917 Syria was excluded from the Asiatic Barred Zone (the regions of Asia from which persons could not immigrate to the United States). The story of how Syrians claimed whiteness—at times successfully at time not—should thus be connected to a larger story of the construction of a new Asian space, a space from which Syria (and Southwest Asia more generally) was disassociated and a new category of belonging was created: the Middle East.

A second factor that pulls the Syrian story away from much of the whiteness literature is the step migration already mentioned above. Many Syrians who came to Los Angeles were Latin American before they were *U.S. American* and as historians we need to account for the ways that prior experience in Mexico, and the familiarity with the "Latinness" of significant portion of the community, shaped the kinds of interethnic solidarities that developed between

⁴ Thomas Guglielmo, *White on Arrival: Italians, Race, Color, and Power in Chicago, 1890-1945* (New York: Oxford, 2003), 6.

⁵ In this regard, I am drawn to the useful category of "inbetweenness" employed by David Roediger (drawing on the work of John Higham and Robert Orsi) to get at the messiness of new immigrants' journey toward whiteness. They are thus "inbetween" the hard racism experienced by people of color and full inclusion as whites. See his *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 12-13.

⁶ See "That Syrian Case," *Los Angeles Times*, 3 Nov. 1909.

⁷ Sarah Gualtieri, *Becoming White: Race and Ethnicity in the Early Syrian American Diaspora* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 58.

Syrians and communities of color in places like Boyle Heights, Watts, Inglewood and Downtown, Los Angeles. For example, the “petitions of citizenship” of Syrians in Los Angeles reveal that those who served as witnesses (testifying that they knew the applicant and that she or he was in good standing) very often had Spanish surnames.⁸ That Syrians developed trusted friendships with people of Mexican origin and their children is hardly surprising given the patterns of residential segregation in pre-WW II LA—patterns that drew non-Anglos into close contact with each other. However, these solidarities should also be connected to the specificities of the Syrian diaspora and to histories of community building, language acquisition and identification that occurred prior to migration to Los Angeles. Doing so shifts the critical whiteness studies field out of a U.S.-centric framework, and demonstrates the fruitful intersections Latin American, Middle Eastern, Latino, African and Asian American studies.

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⁸ Joseph Haiek, *Arab American Almanac*, 4th. Ed. (Glendale, CA: 1992)