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Hood Rubber Proved Refuge for Immigrants

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WATERTOWN, Mass.—Former Bentley College president Gregory Adamian worked there. So did Tufts University guru John Baronian and prominent artist Arshile Gorky, until he overstepped his boundaries and got dismissed.

The Hood Rubber Company proved an ideal sanctuary for many an Armenian immigrant who survived the genocide as well as prominent Armenian Americans throughout the early 20th century.

"Where else could we go?" reflected Areka (Janikian) Der Kazarian, who recalls earning $18 a week doing piecework as a cementer. "I would turn the money over to my parents and get a quarter back for spending purposes. Hood Rubber opened its doors to immigrants from many foreign lands who had no language or working skills. We learned it on the job."

Eyewitness accounts of their heyday inside the sweat shop is the subject of an hour-long film documented by noted videographer Roger Hagopian called "Destination Watertown: The Armenians of Hood Rubber."

The project, which began in 2003 as a short highlight film, reached fruition after six years of research and interviews, delving into the lives of Armenian refugees looking to establish a decent lifestyle in America, in this case Watertown.

The film contains stories and reflections of former Armenian employees and East Watertown residents, interspersed with historical photographs, maps, documents, artifacts, and images of the old factory, once the largest of its kind in the world.

It represents a story that had to be told, considering it was very much the fabric of Armenian life at the time. Workers recount life on the conveyer belt and exposure to

toxic chemicals, yet considered themselves fortunate to have a job. Hood Rubber was their neighborhood.

“More importantly, this factory was the reason for the establishment of the Armenian community in Watertown,” Hagopian brought out. “It intrigues me that so many Armenians were connected to this massive complex of 65 buildings once located in East Watertown. For those who may never know a genocide survivor, it is essential their stories be told and their history shared.”

The emotions he shared with immigrants ran the gamut from sadness and outrage to pride and joy. The more Hagopian researched, the more he discovered. Armenians arrived here following the genocide of 1896 during the Sultan Abdul Hamid II regime.

“For many, the work was hazardous,” he discovered. “Employees were coated with rubber after a long shift in which they were paid to do piecework. When they were eventually able to turn out products in less than a full day, their pay was reduced. That was the reward they got for being so efficient.”

Despite the hardships, Hagopian realizes that without Hood Rubber, there would be no Armenian community in Watertown such as we have today.

He dedicated the work to his grandmother, Hranoush Hagopian, and Baronian, a prominent Tufts graduate, both of whom worked there. Baronian passed on before the film was completed. He was a foreman in charge of six conveyer belts and 65 employees in his heyday.

“As a result of my conversations with Baronian, I was able to conduct a series of interviews with former Armenian employees of the plant,” said the 60-year-old filmmaker, whose father Hurire, a genocide survivor, also worked there. “No doubt, this turned into a most gratifying piece of historical preservation, considering nothing had been done about this subject relative to the establishment of the Armenian community in Watertown.”

Hagopian, who debuted his film at the Watertown Free Library on Dec. 19, found Armenians and non-Armenians who grew up in East Watertown, adjacent to Hood Rubber, and recorded their impressions. One resident, George Mooza, provided 30 photographs of the neighborhood and factory around Bigelow Avenue. They met through a mutual friend, the late Mary Balyosian, aunt of jazz guitarist John Baboian.

A stabilizing image of the plant with its domineering smoke stack serves as an icon in the production. By the turn of the 19th century, Armenians had found gainful employment there, helping to manufacture 3,000 shoes a day to supply an international market.

Chain migration was a stabilizing factor in the plant’s success. By 1920, one-fifth of America’s footwear came from Hood Rubber. The company was absorbed by BF

Goodwich in 1929 and added tires to footgear before closing in 1969, drawing an end to the Armenian workforce there.

“Armenians represented five to seven percent of the workforce,” indicated historian-author Dr. Robert Mirak, who supplied the narration. “If it wasn’t for Hood, Armenians would have migrated to the outlying regions. They were overachievers. Many sacrificed their school and family life for the factory.”

Mirak is the author of Torn Between Two Lands and provided knowledge of the early migration period. Other narrators are Marc Mamigonian of NAASR and Hagopian’s wife Lynda.

Work proved debilitating and exhausting at times. Many fell prey to the fumes and became ill. Women were becoming the breadwinners for their families and outnumbered men on the assembly line, especially during World War II. It was not uncommon to hear Armenian folk music emanating from the loud speaker in an effort to get workers further motivated.

Gorky’s artwork wound up costing him a job, according to documentation. Seems he was fired for drawing on the soles of shoes and painting on the roof of the building. At the time, he was living in his Dad’s home at 86 Dexter Ave. and had yet to establish a niche as an artist. No doubt, it was Hood that provided him the rudiments of fame.

Der Kazarian, a 97-year-old, is the aunt of noted musician and assistant professor Leon Janikian, who also appears in the film and details the woman’s history.

Other testimonies are rendered by Bob Sanasarian, Steve Tashjian, John Airasian, and Kevin Magharian, another musician whose mother Rose worked there, as did Betty Gulezian, mother to Rev. Joanne Hartunian.

Hovannes Shamgochian worked there through the 1920’s and gathered with other Armenians to eat at the town diner. Another Armenian recalls the smell of rubber in the air whenever the wind blew in a certain direction. Being Depression years, there was a need for footwear, drawing Armenians such as these to the production line Wednesday afternoons for a “test day.”

Through the Watertown library, Hagopian was contacted by Hood descendents who provided valuable insight for the film. What started out as a curiosity turned into a labor of love for the videographer.

“Like a giant puzzle, the film was edited over the four months prior to completion, taking up every moment of my time at home, including meals being eaten at the computer,” said Hagopian, a rug/upholstery cleaner by trade. “For me, video is a way of telling history that is educational, multidimensional, and compelling.”

A history lover since his youth, Hagopian is a 1972 graduate of Umass Boston where he received a music degree. He has a background in piano and trumpet, teaching music in his spare time as a form of therapy.

His first film on an Armenian subject, “The Journey of an Armenian Family,” is about his family’s survival in Van during the 1915 genocide. Hagopian has presented his films in high schools, universities, libraries, community centers, and private homes.

The Lexington resident was among the recipients of the Watertown Historical Commission’s 2009 Community Service Award for his work.