

## “TATARS IN BROOKLYN”

## FOR LESSON

Migration  
Stories**NARRATOR** Alyssa Haughwout

**HAUGHWOUT** So we are of Tatar heritage, so and that's both of my — both sides of my family, my mom and my dad's side. My mom's parents came from Poland and Russia. My dad's parents, well, my dad's dad was born in Bayonne, but before that, his family came from Belarus, and my dad's mom came from Belarus, I believe, or what's now Lithuania. These places, I think the borders have moved a little bit here and there, but that's what they would say, they would say, "I'm from Russia," pretty much.

RUN TIME **7:45**

So they each independently kind of immigrated in the early 1900s, yeah. My mom's mom, I know came over in, I think 1910, thereabouts, yeah, thereabouts. And I know that she in particular came over with her mother and her siblings and one of her cousins. Like so many people, they sent her — her father, my great-grandfather, came over to America by himself to try and establish himself and get some money, and he would send money home to his wife and kids so they could gather up enough to come join him in America. And I think they — that he had to do that for something like seven to ten years, something like that. It took, it took a long time to be able to, you know, bring the rest of the family over. And yeah, they — I know they had to travel quite a ways, they were quite inland, so finding a ship was — took — was a long trek. I don't really know much about that journey, but I know they finally, you know, finally found a ship that they were able to get out on and they came over around, I think it was around 1910, I could be wrong. Maybe that was the year she was born, I should probably check these things.

**STRONG** How old was she when she came over?

**HAUGHWOUT** She was nine ... she was also, she had a younger cousin with her. So she wasn't even the youngest one on that journey. She had two older siblings and her mom, and I know that when they did come, they came through Ellis Island and there was, there was a bit of a scare there because her sister was sick, she got sick on the boat and there was like a moment of like, oh God, they're not going to accept her. And I don't know what, what moved them, but they, they kind of like either she snuck off the line [laughter] or somebody just, you know, smiled on her, but they were, they were held there for a little while and there was like a panic of like whether or not they were all just going to be sent home on account of, you know? But they, they let them in and they joined some friends and some family.

I think around here, in Williamsburg, there was a very small community of Tatars, like establishing themselves. It was a primarily, I believe, Jewish neighborhood. It was not a great neighborhood at the time, it was like a poor Jewish neighborhood, very like *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* kind of a scene, and that's where they — this is, this was like their, like, touchstone. So they knew when they came here, they had other people, they spoke the language and, you know, ate the same foods, and they probably knew somebody who knew somebody who knew them, you know? But this is where they, they connected to and, and also found jobs from, because my great-grandfather was a furrier, so he would work in a fur coat factory, that's what he did back in the old country.

**STRONG** How did they get connected with this religious community?

**HAUGHWOUT** Well, it's all the same people who came from that — from those little towns, you know, in, in Eastern Europe. There's a couple of towns that are like major, known for their Tatar roots, heritage, so, and they're not terribly large cities, you know? Iwye and Navahrudak are like really small places, with tight-

knit communities, because even, even back then, they were minorities, so they kind of, like, stuck together. So when they came here, it would be like, oh, I know that last name, you know there's only like two dozen last names that people recycle, you know, cycle through, and they're like, oh yeah, yeah, yeah, I know your aunt knows my mom, that kind of thing. So they knew that this was the place to be, and I think, I believe at the time, they were, they were meeting for religious prayers and celebrations, like just in people's houses, you know, in, in backyards, in basements, wherever they could find space, before they were able to save up, as a community, to buy this building. There's nowhere on the front does it say mosque, nowhere does it say the oldest mosque in America certainly, you know nowhere does it say we've been here since 19 — in this building since 1927, or something like that, and we've been established since 1907.

I think there's always been this mentality of keep your head down and no one will bother you. Especially for, for like my grandparents' generation, there was a lot of, like, pressure to assimilate as quickly as possible, to be accepted as American as quickly as possible, and I think that they wanted to identify as American as quickly as possible, as a community, because even without, you know, the modern kind of view of, you know, this Islamophobia, like even before there was even a word for it, I think they were very cautious of the fact that we're kind of different and people don't like different stuff, and we should, you know, not necessarily pretend we're not who we are, but not advertise, that we could be a target for something.

You know, if someone is in the mood to be hateful, or someone needs an excuse for something, that's an easy, that's an easy one, you know, pick on the different guy. So I think that they wanted to showcase how similar we are, so there's that similarity, I guess, you know there's that, that thing that we have in common

with the people who founded the, the organization, but it grew into such a fear, it grew into such an inhibiting factor, that it really came to our detriment, because when people stopped immigrating, like, when the big rush of Eastern European immigrants kind of slowed down and the people who came here were established and started like moving away, like, okay, they got on their feet, they don't need this crutch of being in this community anymore, you know, they moved to Massachusetts or Jersey or wherever, it really hurt us, because we're not reaching out to anybody new, we're not reaching out to anybody at all, except for those people who came from the same little towns, and once those same little towns stopped sending people, there's nobody new coming at all and the, the next generation of people are living all across America, you know?

So that, that fear really stuck with them.

**BIO** Alyssa Haughwout was born in 1984 in Queens and raised in Long Island. Her family visited Williamsburg throughout her childhood to attend their Tatar community's Brooklyn Moslem mosque, which had been founded following the group's emigration from Eastern Europe during the early 1900s. Haughwout first served on the mosque's board with her aunt, Marion Sedorowitz (interviewed for this collection on April 11, 2018), while working toward a master's degree in art and design education from Pratt Institute. She eventually became the board's vice president as well as the mosque's caretaker.

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