

PUBLIC HISTORY

MP3 TOUR OF THE MAIN: NEW PUBLIC HISTORY PROGRAM AT CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY

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Introducing Project 55

In September 2006, the Department of History at Concordia University in Montréal launched its Public History program for undergraduate students. Undergraduate and graduate students now have a variety of courses focusing on oral history, digital storytelling, and public memory and commemoration from which to choose. Professor Steven High, Canada Research Chair in Public History, offered a “Working-Class Public History” seminar in which he encouraged students to undertake creative public history projects. From the onset of the semester, he set up the class as a collaborative environment where students shared ideas and challenges about their projects, while engaging in a conversation about public history issues. It was in this context that we created *Project 55: A Historical Audio Tour of Ethnic Communities on Saint-Laurent Boulevard Aboard Bus 55*. This is a 36-minute mp3 audio tour showcasing immigrant life experiences on St-Laurent Boulevard, which can be downloaded through the Concordia Public History website and listened to aboard bus 55 running north along the boulevard. (See: <http://storytelling.concordia.ca/workingclass>)

The history of Montréal’s Saint-Laurent Boulevard, also commonly referred to as the Main, is tied to the experience of immigrants from a multitude of places who here carved out new lives in a foreign land. Our project employs St-Laurent’s bus 55 line as a vehicle through which to share some of the histories of immigrant communities that settled along the Main. While many ethnic communities have come and gone and others begin to take shape, the Chinese, Portuguese, Jewish, and Italian communities currently occupy a visible place in the culture of the Main. While we chose to focus on these four communities, we realize that many other immigrant communities, such as the Polish, Greek and Hungarian at one time also settled there. Furthermore, the Main is currently home to more recent immigrant communities who do not have the perceived legitimacy or fame that come with special gates or neighbourhood designations assigned by promoters of the tourism industry.

As geographer Doreen Massey has illustrated, the identity of a place is never fixed.¹ Instead it is always a hybrid of ongoing social constructions and relationships. The Main is full of such constructions and one should therefore remember that the ethnic neighbourhoods witnessed while aboard bus 55 have been, and continue to be, in constant movement. While our tour moves north along this corridor of immigrants, it is

neither a chronological nor a detailed study of where the immigrants have settled. Talja Blockland summed up our feelings about the geographic boundaries of the Main’s ethnic neighbourhoods when she wrote: “the memory of a dominant settled community with specific borders may well be inaccurate as a historical description. However, what people say about the past reveals as much about how people today construct a meaningful social reality.”² Stories are remembered and told in a way that communicates the individual’s subjective reality. As such, our interviewees each recounted their truths.

The objective of *Project 55* is to communicate the history of immigrant communities along the Main, but this is a history that goes beyond recounting important dates, places or changes. We sought to showcase the voices and the experiences of immigrants themselves. During the journey north up the Main, the listener is introduced to Michel Ferland who has been driving the 55 bus route since the early 1990s, Roddy Chung who emigrated from China in 1968, Palmira Lima Ferreira who arrived in Montreal from Portugal with her



*Trolley Bus on Saint-Laurent, circa 1952.
Archives de la Société de transport de Montréal
Un tramway sur la rue Saint-Laurent, vers 1952*



Palmira Lima Ferreira and Victor Emmanuel Ferreira, during the 1960s. Private Collection.

Palmira Lima Ferreira et Victor Emmanuel Ferreira dans les années 1960

husband and daughter in 1964, Steve Schreter whose family originated from Romania and who operates the family business founded in 1928, Sid Stevens, one of the founders of Sun Youth, who grew up hearing and speaking Yiddish on St-Laurent, and Biagio Maiorano whose family settled in Little Italy in 1957. Whereas Michel Ferland shared his interactions with and perceptions of the various ethnic communities, the other interviewees recounted their experiences and memories as members of ethnic communities along the Main.

Because we sought to emphasize the voices of the interviewees, no narration is provided. Instead, Michel Ferland's voice begins and ends the tour by giving his current impressions and childhood memories of the street. Furthermore, his personal anecdotes of driving bus 55 through the ethnic communities introduce the different communities and the corresponding interviewees.

We created an accompanying pamphlet and booklet to enhance the tour experience. The pamphlet provides an oral history passage, key vocabulary words, and a synopsis of each interviewee's stories. As well, archival and personal photographs offer snapshots of life in the four communities. For those desiring a more in-depth historical understanding of Saint-Laurent Boulevard, the 55 bus route, and the context surrounding the immigration of the four ethnic groups and interviewees, the *Accompanying Booklet for History Geeks, their Teachers, and their Tour Guides* may be of help. This booklet includes a high school project lesson plan about the

immigrant experience to be used in concert with the *Project 55* audio tour, pamphlet and booklet. By incorporating different levels of interest and interaction we sought to make *Project 55* accessible to a wide audience.

Ultimately we believe that what distinguishes *Project 55* from other tours of the Main is that it is not an interpretation of immigrant experiences at a distance. Rather, it offers a unique opportunity for deep listening to stories told by those who experienced life as members of the ethnic communities, those who possess a personal connection to this corridor of immigrants. We are aware of our role in shaping and framing the final version of the audio tour, by selecting certain stories and editing others, but we believe the final product remains true to the life stories explicitly communicated by the interviewees. Beyond this, we hope that a reflection on past experiences of immigrants and their ethnic communities will promote awareness of the current struggles of arriving immigrants.

Project 55 served as an immense learning experience. While delineating our methodology, we overcame a number of hurdles previously not encountered in our academic work. *Apprentissage en Histoire Appliquée*, the following piece, offers an inside look at some of these intellectual and technical challenges.

If you happen to find yourself in Montréal we invite you to take the *Project 55* audio tour and listen to the voices of our interviewees as they share their stories with you. We also invite you to take a look at the other public history projects created by our peers and available through the Concordia Public History website:

<http://storytelling.concordia.ca/workingclass>.



Joe Schreter's fist store on Saint-Laurent and de Maisonneuve.

Private Collection

Premier magasin de Joe Schreter, coin Saint-Laurent et de Maisonneuve.

Collection privée

¹ See Doreen Massey, "Places and their Pasts," *History Workshop Journal* (Issue 39, 1995): 182-192.

² Talja Blockland, "Bricks, Mortar, Memories: Neighbourhood and Network in Collective Acts of Remembering," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, Vol.25, 2, (June 2001), 271.