

25 de Março, the Most Arab of Brazilian Streets

Contributed by Isaura Daniel
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Rose Koraicho, a businesswoman from the southeastern Brazilian state of São Paulo, a descendant of Syrian immigrants, spent many afternoons during her adolescence in the 1970s wandering about the shops that belonged to her family or friends' families on 25 de Março Street, in downtown São Paulo.

Today, at 43, she decided to transform the memories of the Arab families who formed the trade business in the street into a publication.

The book, "25 de Março: Memória da Rua dos Árabes" (25 de Março: Memories of the Arab Street) was launched yesterday in the Brazilian Museum of Sculpture (Mube) in São Paulo.

Rose works in the real estate sector and saw up close the everyday life in the street at the time when the place was practically an open home of the Arab families.

Rose's father, Fuad Koraicho had a dry goods store, called Koraicho Mercantil, together with an uncle, José Koraicho on 25 de Março street between the years of 1951 and 1972.

"Everybody knew each other in the street, the merchants would call each other for coffee in the stores, it was one big family," says Rose.

Stories such as these make up the 160-page book, with about 100 accounts from Arabs who have, or have had, stores in the street.

There are stories such as that of Vitória Feres, Lebanese, who would always take food made from Arab recipes to her husband in the store he had at the 25 de Março, and ended up opening a restaurant, also in the famous street.

"We found out that this is how Arab food became well known. The women would take the meals to their husbands in the stores, which they would end up sharing with clients and suppliers, who would then order the food," explained Rose.

The research led Rose to some peculiar discoveries, such as the reasons why the Arab immigrants chose to work with trade when they landed in Brazil, at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century.

"Some of them already had experience with trade in their countries, but others chose to open shops because they did not speak the Portuguese language. Since they put price labels on the products, it was easier to sell," says the businesswoman.

Rose says that in the beginning the Arabs did not set up stores, but houses in the region of the 25 de Março street.

According to the author, in the beginning the families would work at home making clothes for the head of the family to sell in the city neighborhoods.

"They used to work as street peddlers, in horse-pulled carts. Only after some time, when they managed to save some money, did they open the stores."

The street was chosen, according to the writer, because of its proximity with the 'Porto Geral', the region's port at the time.

At that port, imported goods would arrive on the Tamanduateí River, which later was sidetracked.

The goods came from Europe and from the East, but mostly from the south of the country, from the city of Blumenau, where there was a strong textile industry.

Research

The book brings some stories about the street, but the highlights are the merchants' accounts.

The research took about three years and counted with collaborations from historian Soraya Moura and editor Laís de Castro.

Rose started thinking about the book after her father passed away in 1996.

"My father left three or four boxes with documents and old newspapers with registries of happenings in his life and also of the 25 de Março," she says.

Up until the 1970s, 90% of the local traders were Arab descendants, according to the author.

When organising the material, Rose was curious to find out more about the topic.

The author's family history is, in fact, tied to the history of the traders of the street.

The author's grandparents, Farjalla and Anissa Koraicho, came to Brazil from Syria in 1928.

The couple set up a suspenders factory, which the sons closed down to dedicate themselves to the dry goods trade when Farjalla passed away in the 1930s. To this day Rose's cousins take care of the business.

Rose's father, who later on went into the real estate business, was born in Brazil.

"I started working in the sector with my father when I was 28 years old." Rose was already married, had three children, and said it was not easy to convince her family to let her work.

"I was the only woman amongst my brothers, I was educated to get married and have children. People thought I would not make it, but I really wanted to work," she says.

The businesswoman worked at Marverick, a real estate manager, next to her father until he passed away, and then opened her own company, Koema, in the same business.

The cover of the book about trade on the 25 de Março Street, one of the greatest trade hubs in the country, is based on a street sign.

Service

25 de Março: Memória da Rua dos Árabes

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