ASIAN HERITAGE MONTH

REFUGE: Snapshots in Asian Canadian History

May is Asian Heritage Month, a time to recognize Asian Canadians as full participants in Canadian history, society, and culture. This year, we focus on refugees, people who are forced to flee persecution and who are located outside of their country of origin.

From the ethnic Indians who were expelled from Uganda to the so-called Vietnamese "boat people", Bhutanese-Nepalis, and our growing Syrian community, refugee history is an important part of our collective history as Asian Canadians in New Brunswick.

For hundreds of years, Canada and New Brunswick has been a place of refuge for those fleeing violence, persecution, hunger, and economic Insecurity. Asian Canadians have been an important part of this long and complicated history . In 1914, the *Komagata Maru* ship carrying 376 Indians was deemed a “Hindoo invasion” and forced to return to India,where 19 passengers were killed in a clash with British police. Canada has since acknowledged this historical wrong and will formally apologize for the incident in Parliament on May 18.

With the more than 1500 Syrian refugees who have already and are expected to arrive in New Brunswick by the end of 2016, refugee resettlement looms large in the public consciousness. But did you know that “Syrians” first began settling here almost 140 years ago?

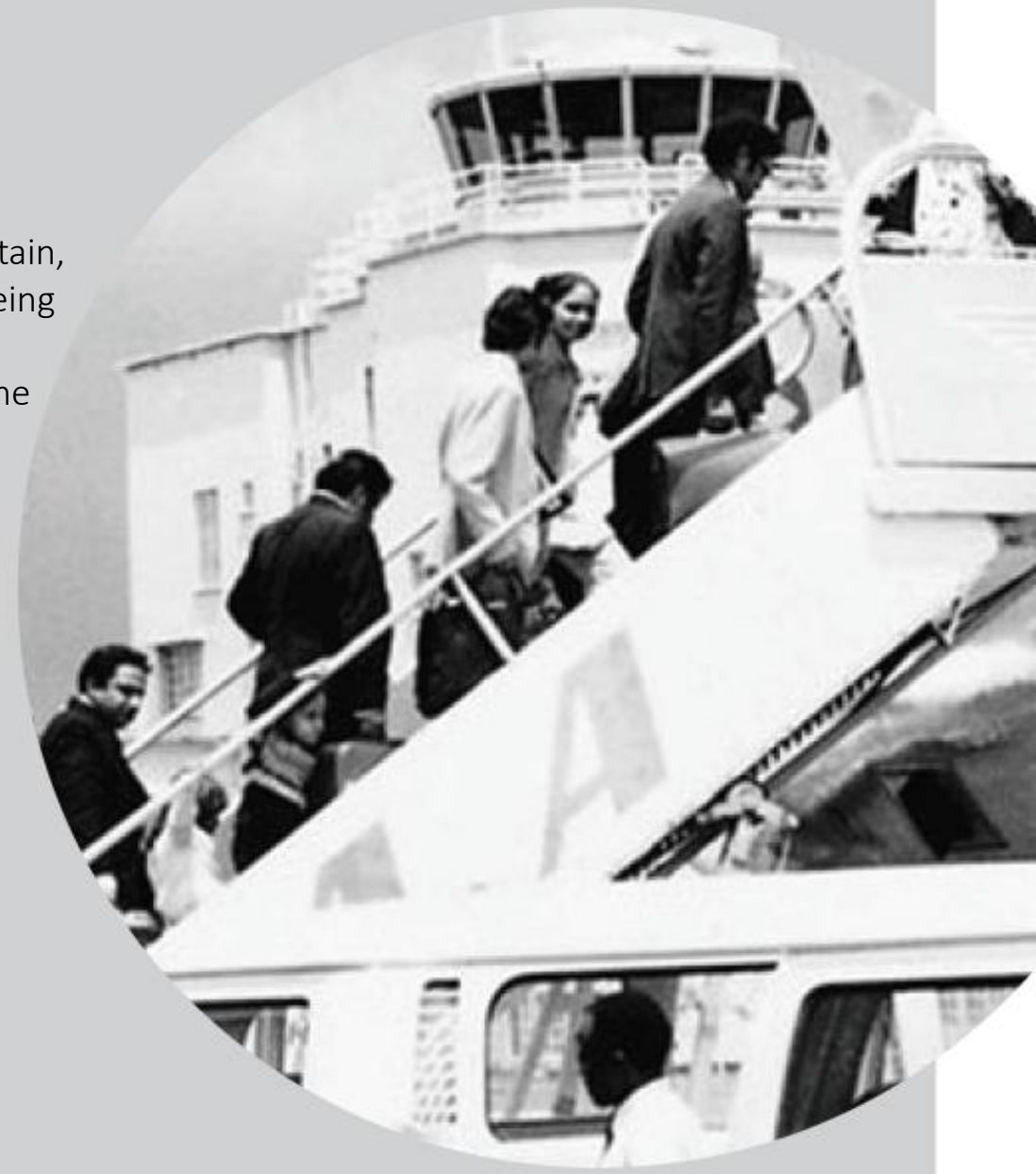
In 1879, Arabic-speaking people began arriving in New Brunswick. They were from the Mount Lebanon region of what was then part of Greater Syria. Now called the Lebanese, locals knew them as “Syrians”. These immigrants were part of a mass movement out of Lebanon called The Great Migration, which resulted from religious violence and famine. Hundreds stayed in New Brunswick and created new lives here.

Asian Heritage Month reminds us that no matter where we’re from or when we came, we are all connected through shared histories and experiences.

Asian Heritage Society of New Brunswick

The Expulsion of Asians from Uganda

In 1972, Ugandan President Idi Amin dreamed that he was ordered by God to expel all the Asians from Uganda. On August 4 he decreed it, giving the country's Asian population 90 days to leave. Of the 80 000 Asians who lived in Uganda, most were Indians whose ancestors had arrived under British colonialism. Forming the country's professional and business class, Asians were accused of controlling the economy and refusing to integrate with ethnic Africans. Amin had seized power in a coup d'état, and his decree exploited existing social tensions between African and Asian Ugandans. But his reign was most devastating to the African majority, hundreds of thousands of whom were murdered as perceived enemies of the state.



Some of the expelled Asians were British citizens and went to Britain, which took in 27 000 refugees. Others were left stateless after being stripped of Ugandan citizenship. In response to an urgent appeal from the British government, Canada agreed to accept 3000 of the Ugandan Asians. At the time, Canada had no official refugee policy and assessed applicants through its regular immigration stream, in which potential immigrants had to meet a list of requirements. As the situation grew more critical with the approach of the deportation deadline, Canada relaxed its criteria and accepted almost 6000 people, the second largest number after Britain. It was the first time Canada had ever admitted a substantial number of non-European refugees.

Bena Patel

Several Ugandan Asian families were resettled to New Brunswick. Many had been business owners in Uganda, and injected new life into the community by opening up corner stores in Fredericton, Saint John, Moncton, and Oromocto. Bena and Manu Patel opened the iconic Patel's Samosas at the Fredericton Farmer's Market, introducing samosas to Atlantic Canada for the first time. Some of the new arrivals spoke only Swahili and Hindi, but at the time no settlement agencies existed to give language training and other support. In their absence, government, churches, the Indo-Canadian community, and ordinary citizens took the lead in helping the Ugandans adapt to their new lives.

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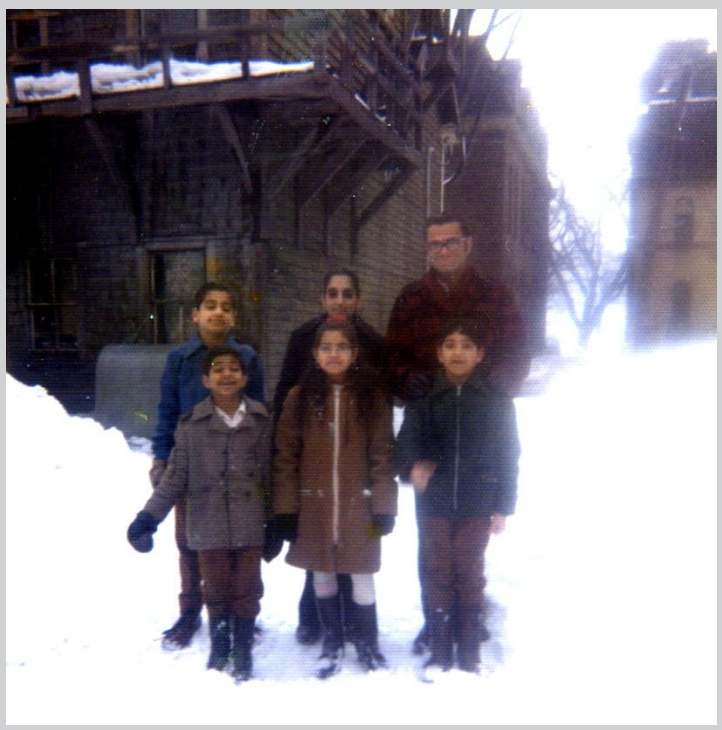
Ketan Hathi manages Interactive Computer Systems in Fredericton. Originally from Bugiri, Uganda, he and his family fled to Canada in 1972 during the regime of Idi Amin, when Ketan was 10 years old.

In Uganda, the Hathis had owned a supply business which distributed cigarettes, pop, beer, and other sundries. In Canada, Mr. Hathi's first job was at the Chestnut Canoe factory on York Street, which paid $1.88 an hour. Both of Ketan's parents often worked overtime to support their four children, sometimes working up to 14 hours a day. The family had limited resources, and heavy rains in April of 1973 forced them out of their home. While staying at a temporary shelter, the flooding in their house caused electrical problems, which led to a fire. Fire fighters managed to salvage a few of their belongings, but still the fire was a great shock to the newly settled family.



In the beginning it was very difficult for the Hathis to adjust financially and support the family, but Ketan recalls the move to Fredericton as a positive experience. The people of Fredericton were very helpful and friendly to them. Local churches rallied around the family to provide household items, a local furniture company donated mattresses, and ex-Premier Hugh John Flemming and his wife visited the family at Christmas with gifts for the children.

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Fredericton in the 1970s was a much different place. When Bena Patel first introduced samosas to the Boyce Farmer's Market in 1975, they were so unappealingly foreign that she couldn't even give them away for free. The rest is history – you'd be hard pressed to find anyone in Fredericton who hasn't lined up for a samosa on a Saturday morning, and who can forget the famous "Samosa War" of 2007? But did you know that this iconic snack was introduced to Atlantic Canada by a former refugee?

Bena and her husband ran a farming business in Uganda. Born and raised in Africa, the couple planned to visit family in India in July, 1972. Idi Amin had come to power, and life in their hometown of Masaka had suddenly become scary. En route to the capital to get visas for their trip, they were stopped by the military with guns pointed and told they would be killed. The couple made it safely to India with their two children, but planned to return home in a few weeks.

Then came the great shock of the expulsion orders. Despite being rooted to Uganda by generations, no one of Indian descent was to live in the country. The Patels' business and property were confiscated by the government. They stayed in India until 1974, when they moved to Canada to join Bena's sister-in-law, who was living in Oromocto.

Bena opened her samosa business at the market in 1975, on the suggestion of a neighbor who had tried them at a tupperware party. It was the first time "ethnic" food was sold at the market, and she recalls crying at the end of each Saturday because of the poor reception. For the first five weeks, Bena gave her samosas away for free. It took almost 7 years for samosas to become popular, but she was encouraged by repeat customers and growing interest through word of mouth.

In 2007, the Patels became victims of their own success as complaints of long lineups from other vendors forced them to relocate four times. The strain was too much, and the Patels chose to close their business. Bena says her old customers still ask her when her samosas are coming back, and that makes her very happy.

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The Vietnamese ‘Boat People’

In 1975, South Vietnam lost its territory to the Viet Cong, marking the end of the Vietnam War and the beginning of a humanitarian crisis resulting from the mass exodus of over 1 million Vietnamese. The crisis reached a fever pitch in 1978 when hundreds of thousands fled Vietnam on small, overcrowded vessels. It was a perilous journey to often undetermined locations. Many lives were lost to starvation, disease or drowning, while others faced rape, abduction and murder at the hands of pirates. The United Nations estimates that up to 400 000 Vietnamese refugees died at sea.

As images of desperate Vietnamese fleeing the Communist regime flooded the media, Canada was moved to act. It created the Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program, which empowered individual Canadians and organizations to sponsor refugees, which were then matched by the government. To this day, no other country has such a program. Dubbed “The Boat People”, some 60 000 Vietnamese refugees were resettled in Canada between 1979 and 1981, 30 000 by private sponsors. For its compassionate and collaborative response to the crisis, the people of Canada were awarded the United Nations’ Nansen Refugee Award, the only time it has ever been given to a country.

refugees

Between 1979 and 1980, New Brunswick resettled hundreds of Vietnamese and agreed to assist with difficult cases such as unaccompanied minors and refugees with inactive tuberculosis. The Chinese Cultural Association of New Brunswick fundraised to sponsor two Vietnamese families to Fredericton, and by the end of 1980 approximately 30 families had resettled in the city. Most came without or English and French skills and had no family in New Brunswick. CCANB, the Multicultural Association of Fredericton, and several local churches worked together to form a Committee for Refugees, providing language training and orientation programs to help the new arrivals adjust. Many had difficulty finding jobs and eventually moved on, but the kindness and assistance of ordinary New Brunswickers was vital to helping them begin their new lives in Canada.

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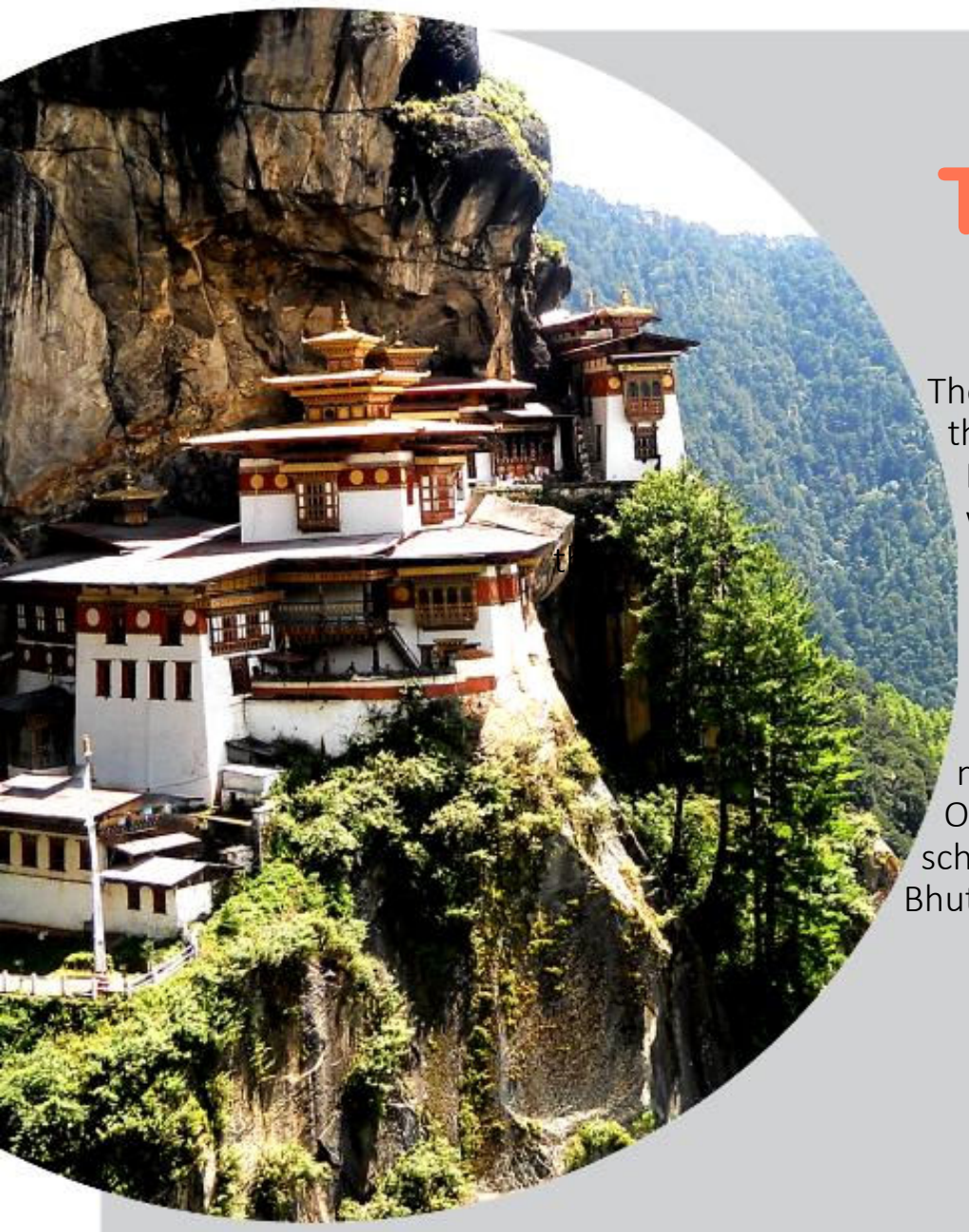

The Bhutanese-Nepalis

The kingdom of Bhutan sits nestled between India and China in the eastern Himalayas and is primarily inhabited by the Ngalops, a Buddhist people of Tibetan origin. In the 1890s, Hindu migrant workers from nearby Nepal began arriving to clear the forests. Called Lhotsampas (“People from the South”), over time they rose in number and status, reaching more than a third of the population and becoming high-ranking officials and educators. Concerned over their growing influence, the government introduced a series of nationalist incentives to assimilate the Lhotsampas with the majority Bhutanese. In 1991, it went further with a “One Bhutan, One People” policy, which removed the Nepali language from schools and forced all residents to wear the national dress of Bhutan.

The new law was protested vehemently and became the source of much conflict between the Bhutanese government and the Lhotsampas. Some were made to sign ‘Voluntary Migration’ forms and forced out of the country, while others fled in response to arbitrary arrests, detention and violence in the early 1990s. In 1992, some 80,000 people left the country and lived in the refugee camps built by UNHCR in the Eastern parts of Nepal as refugees. The number grew to over 100,000 within a decade. In 2007, Canada joined eight other countries in a third party resettlement plan to help deal with the longstanding crisis.

Since the 2008 resettlement plan, 7442 Bhutanese-Nepalis have settled in over 20 communities across Canada. In New Brunswick, Bhutanese-Nepali refugees have been resettled in Fredericton, Saint John and Moncton, with about 30 families living in Fredericton alone. In 2014, the community formally established the Bhutanese-Nepali Association of New Brunswick, which serves to protect and share Bhutanese-Nepali culture and language, facilitate the integration of Bhutanese immigrants into the community, and encourage civic participation. BNANB also proudly runs the New Brunswick Thunder Football Club with its 23 registered players in Fredericton and Saint John, and has participated in soccer tournaments across Atlantic Canada and Quebec.

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The Syrian Refugee Crisis

The Syrian refugee crisis began in 2011, with what started as peaceful anti-government protests during the Arab Spring uprisings. The conflict quickly escalated to civil war layered with sectarian tones. It's estimated that by 2015, 250 000 Syrians had been killed in the war, and 13.5 million were in need of humanitarian assistance. At least 6.6 million people are currently internally displaced within Syria, and over 4.8 have fled to other countries, mostly the surrounding nations of Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq. Others have declared asylum in the European Union.

As the numbers fleeing continued to balloon, Syria's neighbours and European Union nations began to feel the pressure of the refugee crisis. The United Nations called on other countries to step up their resettlement commitments. Many refugees lost their lives at sea in their desperation to reach safety in Europe. The drowning death of three year old Alan Kurdi in 2015 galvanized the public to demand More action from their governments.

After Alan Kurdi's death, Canada pledged to bring 10 000 Syrian refugees to Canada, a figure that was criticized as being far too low and much below Canada's capacity. The newly elected Liberal government raised this figure to 25 000. As of May 2016, 27,005 Syrian refugees have arrived in Canada as Government Assisted Refugees and Privately Sponsored Refugees. The newcomers have been resettled in over 260 communities across Canada, and nearly half are under the age of 25. New Brunswick has expects to have resettled at least 1500 refugees by the end of 2016, and currently has welcomed the highest number of Syrian refugees per capita than any province in Canada.

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ASIAN HERITAGE MONTH

May 2016

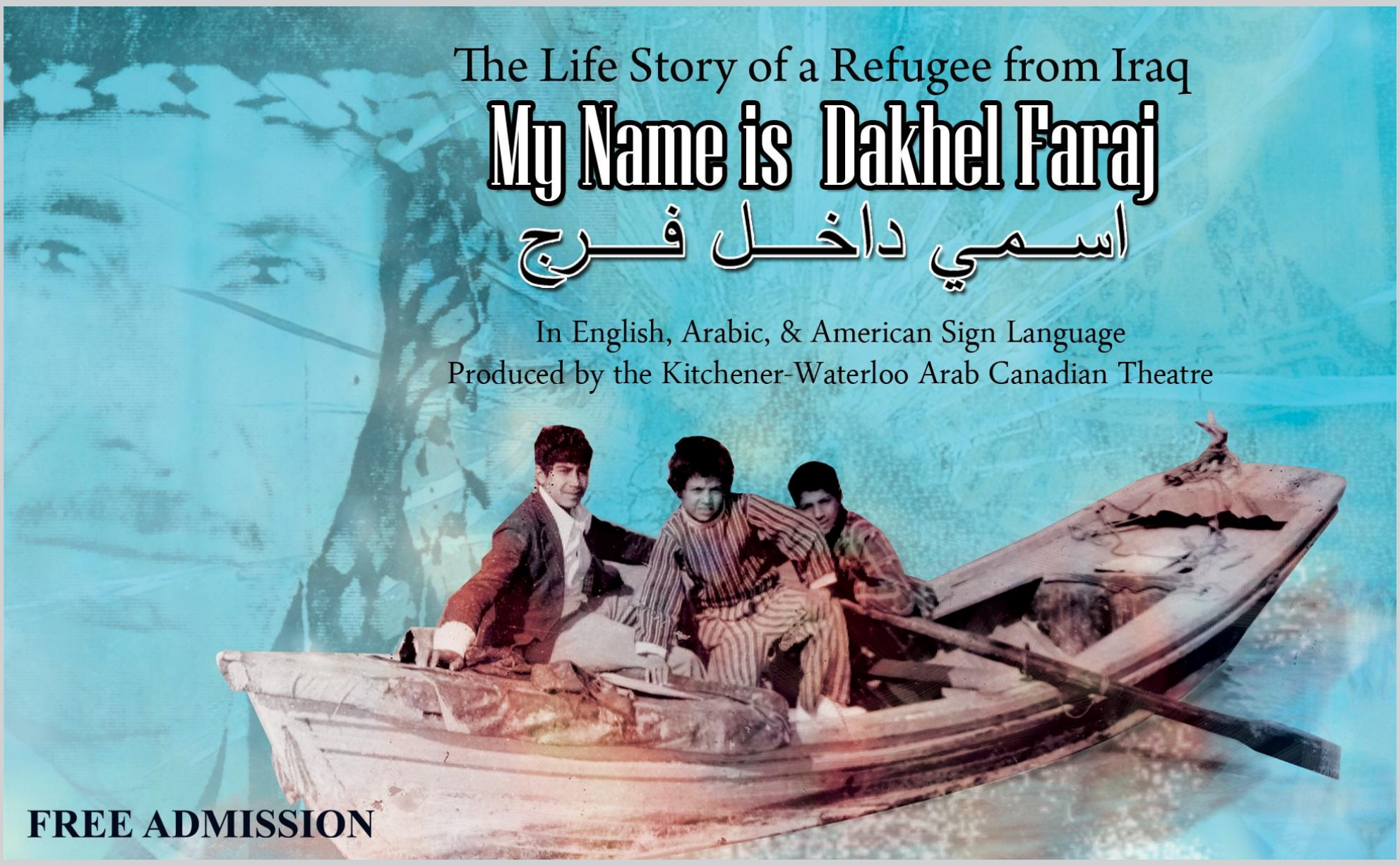
This May, **save the date** for an unforgettable performance of the play My Name is Dakhel Faraj, produced by Kitchener-Waterloo Arab-Canadian Theatre / KW-ACT and presented by AHSNB as part of Asian Heritage Month. FREE ADMISSION

My Name is Dakhel Faraj is the true story of an Iraqi refugee now living in Kitchener, who lived under Saddam Hussein's regime and witnessed the killing of some of his own children and father by US soldiers during the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The play celebrates life, love, family, art, and condemns war.

Dakhel's story reflects the lives of many Arab refugees who came to Canada and other countries during the war on Iraq. This unique production is told polyphonically in English, Arabic, and American Sign Language by three actors each representing Dakhel Faraj. The three Dakhels tell the narrative in collaboration and cooperation, and tell most of the story in each language – but certain things are left out, and nuances are unique to each voice. The element of challenge in this presentation is partially about not getting the whole story when people 'think' they understand a situation, a distant conflict, or what it is like to be a refugee or an immigrant.

My Name is Dakhel Faraj was written and directed by Syrian-Canadian theatre artist Nada Humsi, based on interviews with Dakhel Faraj.

KW-ACT is a collective of immigrant and refugee artists, which has been active since 2012 with support from the Kitchener-based multicultural theatre company MT Space.



SATURDAY, MAY 28

7-9 PM

FREDERICTON PLAYHOUSE, 686 QUEEN STREET

Canada New Nouveau Brunswick CANADA Fredericton

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