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***Taking Root: Immigrant Stories of the Hudson Valley***  
**Reher Center for Immigrant Culture and History**  
**Kingston, New York**

Sarah Gordon

April 16, 2024

# The Reher Center for Immigrant Culture and History

The Reher Center is a museum located in a historic bakery in Kingston, New York. We offer weekend, in-season tours of our partially interpreted retail shop and oven room and built a gallery for mission-related exhibits and programs.

# Our Mission

The Reher Center fosters belonging by engaging all people through culture, community, work, and bread. Together, we preserve and explore our historic bakery site and honor its legacy by amplifying Kingston and Hudson Valley immigrant voices and contributions, past and present.

# Our Historic Spaces - Bakery Retail Shop



# Our Historic Spaces - Oven Room





# Kingston's Rondout Neighborhood



# Origins of the Immigrant Oral History Project

- Part of the Reher Center's mission is to share immigrant stories of the Hudson Valley.
- However, very few primary or secondary sources about those stories have been collected.
- When an American Rescue Plan Act grant came available for museums and libraries to partner to create a project in late 2021, the Reher Center and the Kingston Public Library decided to create a Kingston Immigrant Oral History Project.
- The interviews would become part of the Reher Center's collection and be made accessible to the public.
- We later decided to create a gallery exhibit about these stories.



# Organizing the Project

- We started by creating a community advisory committee to consider what questions would be important for us to ask immigrants to the Hudson Valley.
- We reached out to representatives from a variety of groups, including contemporary immigrant communities, such as the pastor of a Salvadoran church, and communities with long routes in the community, including the Italian-American Foundation.
- We also recruited a professor from Bard College to help us. His students would be the interviewers.



# Finding Storytellers

- Our advisory committee helped us find participants. For example, several storytellers were members of the Salvadoran church.
- We also hosted a couple of informational fairs just before or just after other public programs hosted at the Kingston Library and the Reher Center and had sign-up sheets for the oral history recording days.
- We had 19 participants participate in the Kingston Library portion of the project.



# Tintype Portraits

- A board member and the current chair of our Exhibitions committee, Judit German-Heins, had the idea that she wanted to take tintype portraits of each narrator.
- At this point, we didn't know that the collection would become an exhibition, but we believed that offering participants this experience to sit for a special 19th century-style portrait might incentivize participation.
- These portraits would become a valuable component of the exhibition.



# Grant Proposal

We had grand plans for this project!

- In April, 2022, Sarah Litvin approached the Ulster Literacy Association to discuss the possibility of working together to expand the project.
- She was inspired by the opportunity to apply for a \$50k Ulster County ARPA grant and worked with Amy Lenard of Ulster Literacy to develop a 4-part project, that included expanding the oral history collection to include the Ukrainian community and agricultural farm workers, as well as creating an exhibition at Reher and an English language-learning curriculum based on the oral histories for Ulster Literacy Association to use for their classes.
- Unfortunately, we did not get the grant. That's how it goes!

# Partnership with Ulster Literacy

- Despite this disappointment, Ulster Literacy still partnered with us to conduct interviews at Holy Trinity Ukrainian Catholic Church in Kerhonkson in the fall of 2022. We also hosted a training with Ulster Literacy tutors so that they could interview their English language learners.
- All together, we conducted 17 more interviews in partnership with Ulster Literacy Association in fall/winter 2022.



# Permanent Access to Interviews

<https://www.kingstonlibrary.org/kingston-immigrant-oral-history-collection/>

<https://nyheritage.org/collections/udson-valley-immigrant-oral-history-collection>





# Creating an Exhibition from Interviews

At some point during the spring of 2021, we decided to create a gallery show based on the interviews.

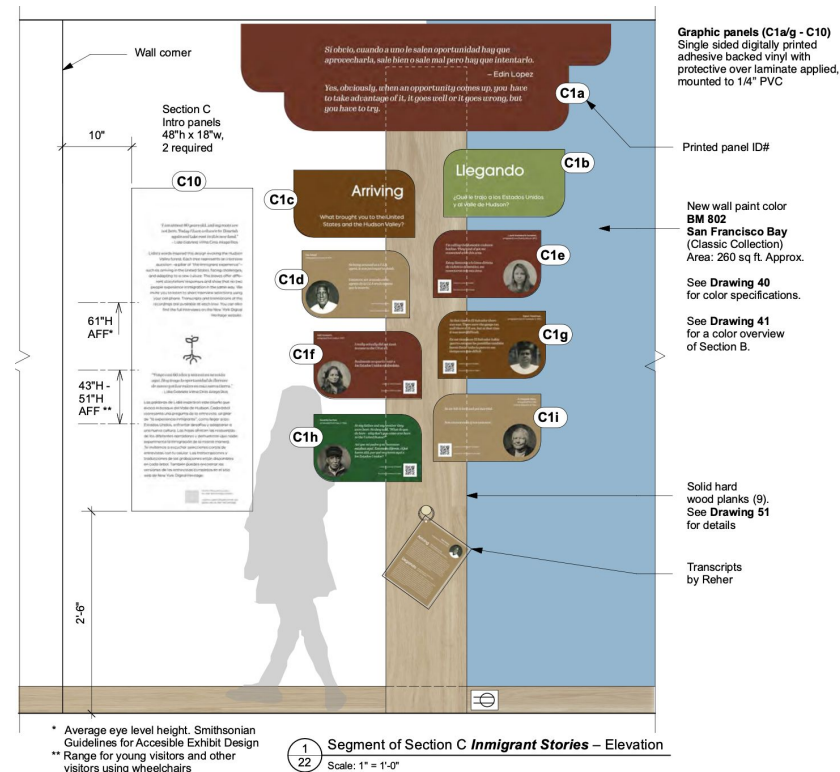
- One big challenge would be that the oral history project is recordings and words... how do you turn that into an engaging gallery exhibition?
- After her interview, one of the storytellers wrote Sarah Litvin a note saying: “I am almost 60 years old, and my roots are not here. Today I have a chance to flourish again and take root in this new land.”
- We embraced her metaphor of “taking root” for our exhibition design as well as the title.



# Creating a Meaningful Exhibition Design

How do you create an intriguing design that connects to the topic?

- One of the storytellers wrote Sarah Litvin a note saying: “I am almost 60 years old, and my roots are not here. Today I have a chance to flourish again and take root in this new land.”
- We embraced her metaphor of “taking root” for our exhibition design as well as the title. Exhibition designer César Zapata, himself an immigrant from Colombia, suggested an abstracted forest.
- Each “tree” represents an interview question as a shared experience, while the “leaves” represent are individuals responding to those questions with their own stories.



# The “Forest”



# The Great Object Debate!

One of the challenges of creating the exhibition was an internal debate about using objects.

- We planned to borrow objects from the storytellers, and some people offered to lend us things.
- But we realized that these would be from the more established and economically stable storytellers.
- Instead of privileging the more secure storytellers, we decided to focus on the stories as our “treasures” as well as the tintype portraits, such as this portrait of Essi Zahedi, who left Iran in 1979.



# Hong Farina, emigrated from Vietnam in 2020

**Was there anything that was a challenge for you when you came to the U.S.?**



Uh, yes. Like first, the different language, you know. So, so we speak English all the time. I don't really feel difficult about that too much. But sometimes when, you know, like make a phone call or something like that, sometime I, I wasn't able to do it by myself and I need my husband help, you know.

# Ruben Mazariego, emigrated from El Salvador in 1992



**Cómo fue tu experiencia en middle school?** Difícil. Porque cuando yo empecé, como usted dice yo no sabía inglés. Difícil porque me, de tiempo en la, en la escuela... Bueno, al menos en la que yo estaba no había niños hispanos, niños latinos, eran más americanos o de otros países. En la en la middle school a mi me costo, porque no hablaba inglés, me costaba comunicarme con ellos y todo. Pero ya la en la High School fue un poco más, más diferente porque yo ya sabía un poco.

**How was your experience in middle school?** Difficult. Because when I started, as you say, I didn't know English. Difficult because from time to time, at school... Well, at least where I was there were no Hispanic children, Latino children, they were more American or from other countries. In middle school it cost me, because I didn't speak English, I had a hard time communicating with them and everything. but already in high school it was a little more, more different because I already knew a little.



# Personal Photo Slideshow

- In response to the object debate, we created a slideshow of storytellers' personal photos and photos of objects.
- This was an attempt to level the playing field but unfortunately we still have fewer photos than we'd hoped.
- This photo was from Bolivian storyteller Carlos Torrico, along with the caption "The mother I left to come here."



# Choosing a bilingual exhibition

How do you embrace language equality in a small gallery?

- Fairly early on, we decided we wanted the exhibition to be bilingual, in part because many of the interviews were in Spanish, and in part as a gesture of welcome for Kingston's large Spanish-speaking community.
- This created design and translation challenges, as everything took twice as much room, and everything had to be translated. We couldn't re-record interviews, of course, but all the text is in both languages.



# Food Stories

Many of the storytellers discussed food, which we saw as way to build empathy and interaction.

- We built a “picnic table” in the center of the gallery and created laminated “placemats” with quotes from different storytellers, a photo of the dish being discussed, and a QR code link to the recording.
- There are baskets of spices and kitchen tools related to the dishes the storytellers describe.



# Tintypes by Judit German-Hines





# Installation of Tintypes



# Collaborating with the storytellers

It was important that the storytellers feel at ease with their stories being part of an exhibition.

- We held an event in the winter of 2023 to discuss the exhibition with the storytellers
- I sat down with each storyteller to be sure they were comfortable with the selections I chose, and made edits as requested.
- Several storytellers spoke at the exhibition's opening in May of 2023 and were assured that they could visit the gallery at any open time, free of charge, along with any guests.





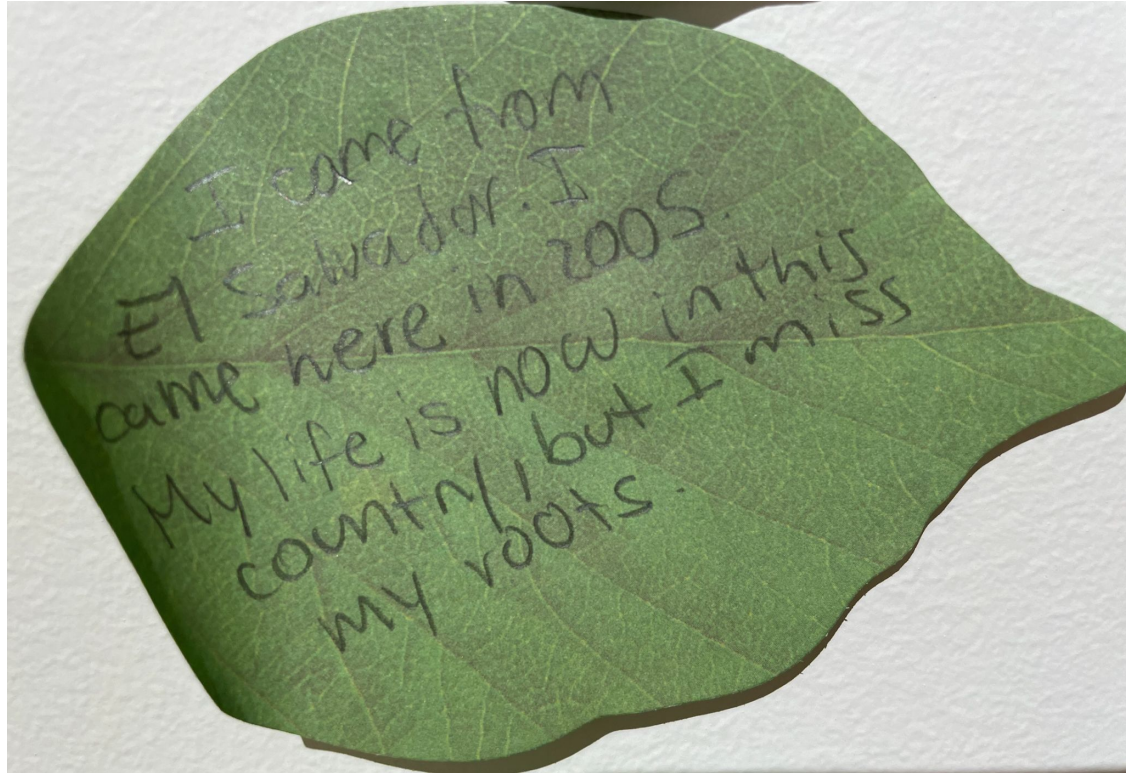
# Visitor Engagement

We planned multiple ways to encourage visitor participation.

- Visitors can listen to the storytellers' audio clips on each “leaf” and on the placemats. They can also read transcripts in English and Spanish.
- We provide a “draw your own favorite dish” coloring activity and a notebook for describing any memories that the spices stimulate.
- Visitors can write their own immigration stories on leaf-shaped post-it notes and stick them to a wall, or send us their own personal photos to be included in the slideshow.



Ask me anything!



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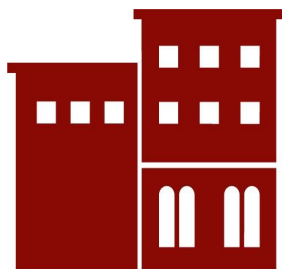
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