



40th Levantine Heritage Foundation hybrid presentation in London with guest speaker Steven Richmond, 5 January 2026, 6 pm (UK time)

venue: Royal Anthropological Institute, 50 Fitzroy St, Fitzrovia, London W1T 5BT

The Last of the Dragomans: Ferdinand Schirza of Galata (1924-2012)

Ferdinand Schirza was born and raised in the now-lost Croatian railroad community at Yedi Kule in Istanbul. Wielding native Italian, French, Turkish, fluent English, plus much Greek and some Ladino (the latter from his mother neé Medici who was a native of Thessaloniki), Schirza served as interpreter and general factotum at the British Consulate General in Istanbul from 1944 to 1953; and then opened the first Istanbul office of British Overseas Airways Corporation (BOAC), later British Airways, directing it for over twenty years. During his colourful, eventful and highly international life and career as a modern dragoman, interpreting both languages and cultures and managing all sorts of practical undertakings, Schirza observed great changes in Turkish society and across the Turkish Republic throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty first. He also witnessed dramatic events such as the 6-7 September 1955 riots in Beyoğlu. Schirza's position as an interpreter at the great mix of worlds that is Istanbul made him (or required him to be) a profound sociologist, a great expert and even impresario of how people engaged linguistically and culturally and politically across the profound divides of the city. A resident at the apartment building of the Peter and Paul Church for over seventy years, from the 1940s and his last days in 2012, Schirza was a major fixture of the life of Galata. Over that time he kept the beautiful garden of the Peter and Paul courtyard and populated it with plantings (which continue to bloom to this day) that he brought back from his travels to the four corners of the earth as an airline official and then during his second career as a guide for Turkish tourist groups. Schirza was a humble but prominent member of the Catholic community of Istanbul. He was confirmed into the church in the 1930s by the Vatican nuncio at Istanbul, Angelo Roncalli, the later Pope John XXIII. And right through the 2000s the long-time Vatican spokesman in Istanbul, Georges Marovitch, always saluted Schirza upon meeting him on the street or at functions, "Vous êtes le doyen de la communauté catholique d'Istanbul". Whenever asked by one of the endless global visitors to his Galata garden what he nationality he considered himself to be, Schirza's response was "I am inter-national" and "I am a Levantine".

Booking is essential: <https://steven-richmond-presentation.eventbrite.co.uk>



View from Galata to Stamboul by Warwick Goble (London: A. & C. Black, 1906)

Steven Richmond received his doctorate in Russian and Soviet history from the University of Chicago in 1996. He taught history, literature, geography, international relations, and the art and architecture of Byzantine and Ottoman monuments, at multiple Istanbul universities from 1997 until 2011. He has been a research fellow and an associate of two research centres at The University of Chicago; and a visiting scholar at The School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) of The University of London. From 2017 to 2019 he gave courses on the Cold War, the fall of the Soviet Union, the American electoral college, the demise of the American middle class, and on the Chesapeake Bay, in the adult education program at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland. Since 2019 he has been executive assistant to the American writer and historian Thomas Frank, and he is research fellow history at The Netherlands Institute in Turkey. Richmond is the author of 'The Voice of England In the East: Stratford Canning and Diplomacy With the Ottoman Empire' (London: IB Tauris/Bloomsbury, 2014, 2017), which has been published in Turkish translation (Istanbul: Runik Kitap, 2022). His study of the creation and development of Soviet censorship in the 1920s and 1930s is forthcoming from Bloomsbury.

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