

THE EKMEKJI INDUSTRIAL INITIATIVE (Aleppo-Beirut, 1920-2016)¹

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The first factory in Aleppo, Syria

In the early 1920s, Yervant Ekmekji (Diarbekir, Turkey 1901-1991, Vienna, Va., USA) son of Hagop Ekmekji² (Aintab, Turkey 1872-1958, Aleppo, married to Marroum Deukmejian) and father of Garabed (1898-1928, Yervant, Eugene, Georges, Nora and William) was appointed by his maternal uncle, Zahny Deukmeji, who was a prominent attorney in Aleppo and owner of an oriental rug weaving facility, to run his business.

¹ **Editorial Note:** For many reasons (not the least the Lebanese civil war, the ensuing unstable years, emigration of a large number of industrialists) it has become almost impossible to draw a broad picture of the Lebanese Armenian industrial contribution and output as of the mid-1960s. Perhaps a collection of separate, individual articles on industrialists and their oral history can help at least partly to reconstruct their contribution. This article, based on the owners' archives, oral history and collective memory, reconstructs a century-old industrial endeavor of the Ekmekji family. Furthermore, this article is both a template and a call for all Armenian industrialists of the Middle East to put into words and document the oral history, memories, documents, and data of their industrial endeavors in the region. The Haigazian Armenological Review welcomes such well documented articles, which may eventually provide the researcher tangible and reliable materials to trace the industrial, artisanal, etc. output and contribution of the Diaspora Armenians in general and the Middle East Armenians in particular.

² Hagop Ekmekji (1872-1958) was the son of Garabed Ekmekji, who, with a group of a handful of believers, started in 1856 the Armenian Evangelical Emmanuel Church in Aleppo.



On the left Comotek Building, far right Usine Ekmekji

Yervant became familiar with textile weaving and an expert in dyeing woolen and cotton yarns, which were the main asset of a weaver, who needed the flexibility of having a wide range of dyed yarns at a low cost.

Slowly he converted the plant into a yarn dye house to serve the textile weaving industry, which was booming in Aleppo. The business grew, and he had to ask his brother Eugene (Aleppo, 1903-Beirut, 1988) to join him. Eugene worked in Baghdad as a mechanic with the British Red Cross from 1922 till 1932, when he moved to Aleppo and started a partnership with Yervant in his new venture. They renamed the company of Yervant's dye house YEE, standing for Yervant & Eugene Ekmekji. Their expertise in textile dyeing made them known in the Near East as the number one custom dye house with the trademark YEE.



They kept the plant up to date by continually investing in new machinery. The business grew, and sales extended to neighboring Lebanon and Iraq. A sales branch was opened in Baghdad to cater to the Iraqi clients (because Baghdad was an important stop on the Silk Road). Also note that Yervant's paternal uncle was a prominent political figure in British colonial Iraq and

continued serving the newly independent kingdom of Iraq as an advisor to the government until his death in 1952 in Beirut, Lebanon).³

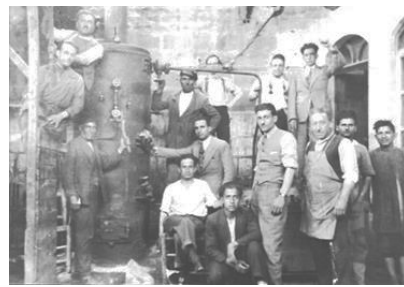
Eventually, a new improved and up-to-date plant was erected in Lebanon in 1943 in Warwar in the region of Hadath/Beirut. Yervant bought the land in Warwar on the outskirts of Hadath because it was zoned for heavy industry and also not far from the textile weaving hub that had been established around the *Lainiere Nationale* in Hadath. The building consisted of a one-story facility of around 4000 sq. meters and expanded to over 7000 sq. meters. Yervant rented an apartment in Hamra Street, in Beirut, where he lived.

The Aleppo branch was managed by Eugene while the Beirut plant was managed by Yervant.

Since the Baghdad office at AlAroussa was merely a sales and retail store, it was managed by their friend Georges Touma, who was a Christian free-lance textile salesman from Aleppo and dealt only with the Iraqi market. He introduced Iraqi clients to YEE, and he later bought the Ekmekji's share in AlAroussa and continued independently.



Open-air conventional dyeing machine



The new boiler in Aleppo



First open-air German fabric drying line and a calendar press giving a shine to fabrics

³ Arda Arsenian-Ekmekji, "Dikran Garabed Ekmekjian (1879–1952) A Man for All Seasons," *Armenians of Iraq: Proceedings of the Conference (29-31 May 2017)*, ed. Antranik Dakessian, HU Press, Beirut, 2021, pp. 539-46.



Yordan Obegi and Yervant Ekmekji experimenting with a new chemical



View of the conventional wool dyeing machine

Under the management of Eugene, the business in Aleppo thrived, and soon enough, the youngest brother, William (Aleppo, 1912-Beirut, 1978), freshly graduated from high school and being trained by his elder brothers, was in his turn invited to join forces and to manage the dyeing and finishing section. The Aleppo plant, with 5000 sq. meters of land bought by the brother, had a 3000 sq. meter building divided into four sections, one for administration, the second for dyeing and washing the fabrics, the third for drying-finishing and packing the production. YEE employed around 40 employees, mainly men, in the washing, dyeing and drying section; the few women employed were generally employed in sewing, packing and quality control.

The Aleppo branch was now catering to almost all the famous weavers in the region, and the YEE trademark was in great demand among all the fabric wholesalers. The main product dyed by the Beirut plant, named **Usine Ekmekji**, was to be used for the black veil and black *abaya*, which was the main female garment in the Arab world.



Noseda Salvadore Italian fibers dyeing machine and the Swiss "Jigger" dyeing machine

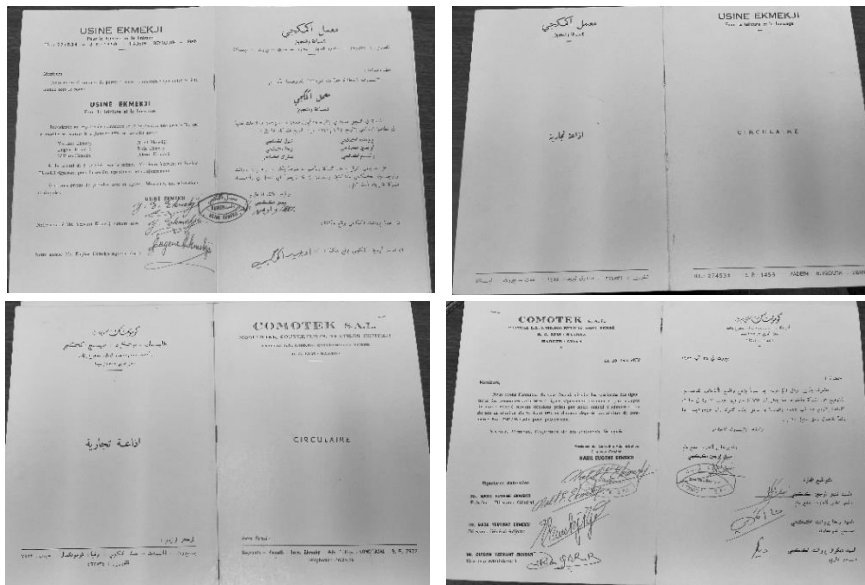
Aleppo was mainly catering to Iraq and beyond. Beirut was more focused on Palestine and the southern Arab world. Usine Ekmekji employed as a start 30 men and women workers.

The color black signed by YEE was exceptionally black and did not fade after many washes; the two brothers held its secret formula.

Gradually, new synthetic fibers and fabrics were introduced to the market and Usine Ekmekji became the first to handle their dyeing and finishing based on the latest techniques and the most modern methods. The peak of production was from 1967 till 1975, when Usine Ekmekji employed over 70 workers, Christians and Muslims equally, around 60% men and 40% women. The workers were treated like family by the Ekmekjis who even knew their family members.

Yervant's best friend, Yordan Obegi, with whom he had graduated from the German school in Aleppo around 1914, was a supplier of textile chemicals and dyestuffs. They helped each other to grow their businesses and their friendship lasted till the end of their days.

Yordan Obegi was, in the 1930s, the representative of several textile mills and textile chemical companies in both Syria and Lebanon. Since the Obegi Chemicals offices were located in Aleppo and had no branch in Beirut, in the mid-1950s, Yervant partnered with Yordan to launch an Obegi Chemicals branch in Beirut.



They started with a small office in Souk Al Kazaz and afterwards moved to the Asseily Building, also known as the Cinema Capitol building, in Ryad el Solh square. The business was run by Henry Yordan Obegi but under the

supervision of Yervant until 1961, when the Obegis approached Yervant to partner with them in opening a financial institution, namely the **Credit Libanais Bank**.

Yervant used all his shares in Obegi Chemicals and, with his brothers Eugene, William and Georges,⁴ raised enough money to invest in substantial stocks in the new bank. Yervant eventually became the Chairman of the bank's board for almost ten years.

However, the early 1960s witnessed an unstable political situation in Syria and a wave of nationalizations of all industries, especially of textile factories. Besides this, a very big decline was registered in the business sector as Syria united with Egypt to form the United Arab Republic. Both countries nationalized all industries and banking systems and established a socialist economy. YEE was neither nationalized nor confiscated, but all their clients' plants were confiscated, and they had to deal only with nationalized companies. YEE could not survive this situation and had to be sold as land and building, not as a business. Eugene left Aleppo and joined forces with his brother in Beirut. Shortly after, their brother William left also, and joined the brothers' business in Beirut.

Eugene invested with his brother Georges in a 3-story apartment building in Hamra Street, where he occupied one apartment and Georges the next one while the 3rd was rented. As for William, he rented an apartment in the Badaro area to be near his Aleppo friends.

The Aleppo chapter was thus closed.

The Ekmekji brothers' love of the textile industry, which ran in their blood, made them look forward to new investments, and soon enough they built a new factory in 1973 in the same location as **Usine Ekmekji**. It was the first plant in the Near East for nonwoven material which used a new technique in the manufacturing of felt, compressing it by the needle punch method. The plant, named **Comotek SAL**, manufactured blankets and wall-to-wall carpets. The machinery was mainly purchased from West Germany and Switzerland, because those two countries were very advanced in dyeing and finishing equipment, and also West Germany was the pioneer in nonwoven techniques. The raw material was mainly imported from Italy and Austria while the USA was the best for good deals. Yervant and Nabil were good negotiators for machinery; as for the raw materials, Raja was in charge until he handed over to Dikran.

In the late 1960s, the second generation of the Ekmekji family started taking over, and the two brothers, Yervant and Eugene, started delegating the

⁴ Georges was a dentist and the only Ekmekji brother who was not involved in the Usine Ekmekji.

management of the business to their sons, first Nabil and later, in the early 1970s, to Raja and Dikran.

Nabil, the son of Eugene, after finishing his studies in business administration at the American University of Beirut (AUB), left for Germany to study textile dyeing and finishing. A few years later, Yervant's sons, Raja and Dikran, after finishing their textile studies in France, moved back to Beirut armed with a strong knowledge in textile spinning and weaving.

Nabil and Dikran were entrusted with managing the **Usine Ekmekji**. Nabil, in addition to using his dyeing skills, introduced many new dyeing techniques which lowered production costs. Furthermore, his mechanical competency allowed him to introduce a few changes in the machinery in order to improve its production and speed up processes while maintaining the same Ekmekji quality.

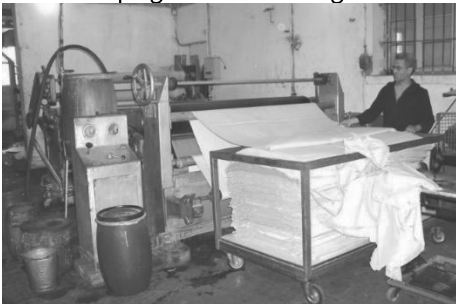
As for Raja, due to his weaving and spinning expertise, he was entrusted with managing **Comotek SAL** and maintaining the production of blankets and wall-to-wall carpets in a professional manner. He also introduced wadding, which is used in the quilting process.



Fabric scraping and fiber raising machine



Continuous terry towel sewing machine



Chemical impregnating machine



Fong 500kg. of terry towel dyeing machine

Comotek ran two shifts usually, but when the book of orders was full, the two shifts totaled 22 hours; the two remaining hours were dedicated to cleaning

the machines and doing some minor maintenance as the major maintenance was done for both factories every Monday morning. Usine Ekmekji ran mainly on a 10-hour shift daily.

Dikran was assisting both Nabil and Raja, but his sales talents and his contacts in the Arab world led him to explore the needs of the neighboring countries and start catering to them with the Ekmekji Group production. He added an import-export company, “BURICO SARL”, which he started with textile products mainly, to become a supplier for the textile industry in Baghdad and act as a buyer for the private sector as Iraqis were banned from travelling outside Iraq.

By now, the plant had started looking more like a modern establishment with modern innovations and new machinery. The expertise of the new generation, who had studied the textile industry in Europe, raised the local business to international standards and the export of fabrics, blankets and wall-to-wall carpeting spread to the neighboring Arab countries. The Ekmekji group was awarded several contracts such as supplying blankets to Iraqi government stores (alias Orosdi-back), geotextiles to the Dijla erosion control project (Iraqi government contracting Co.), blankets to The King Faysal hospital in Ryad, Saudi Arabia and blankets to UNRWA for the refugees in Lebanon, just to name few. They also worked with Sukleen in Nahme, Lebanon on a solid waste management project.



Krantz Stenter fabric dryer and the jersey drying machine



High temperature Noseda Salvatore fabric and the Krupp Spinbaw spinning machine dyeing machine

Though they had no local retail outlets, the factory itself had a retail sales point for blankets and wall-to-wall carpets to serve walk-in customers. However,

in 1975 the Lebanese civil war started, and all the dreams and hopes started fading. The policy of the cousins was to preserve and protect the business they were entrusted with. Despite all the difficulties that this civil war created, they went to work daily, crossing dangerous demarcation lines, even under fierce shelling, road closures or kidnappings. In addition, they had to deal with daily hardships, such as power cuts and fuel/diesel scarcity. This was aggravated when the Lebanese army entered the factory and converted it into a kind of military barracks, as the factory was facing the no man's land on the southwest outskirts of Beirut, namely the "dahya" (suburbs) and the southern no man's land near Choueifat, "Durzylnd."

In spite of all this turmoil, the cousins were able to continue operating the businesses and supplying their foreign clients, but on a much lower scale. In 1983 the **Comotek SAL** plant burnt down due to the civil war. Following that, Raja had to emigrate to Canada for personal reasons.

Dikran and Nabil were stuck with a burnt **Comotek** and a huge debt to the banks. In 1983, the two cousins made a vow to each other to rebuild the family business and bring it back to full operation.

The dyehouse, **Usine Ekmekji**, was intact and fully operating; as for the fire that damaged Comotek,⁵ the process of renovating the machinery started gradually. Since the sampling machine was intact, a new business of throw pillows was started on a small scale, but enough to generate income to slowly renovate and rebuild the factory. Once **Comotek** was fully operational in mid-1985, the cousins started on new ventures to cut their losses and re-establish their industrial position in Lebanon.

Usine Ekmekji partnered with a terry towel business, **Weaveprint SAL**, and invested in new machinery to cater to that industry. **Comotek SAL** added to its production line the geotextile, "a kind of fabric used in the construction business" and the recycled felt which is used in the manufacturing of mattresses and flooring pads in homes and automobiles. Both businesses started exporting to neighboring countries, and their products also reached Europe and even the USA.

Lebanese Armenian industry was booming until the Israeli aggression against Lebanon in 2006. Both factories, with all their production and exports, stopped.

Though the factories were not damaged, after the 2006 hostilities all foreign customers lost interest in Lebanon and found new suppliers elsewhere. Reassuring the export clients was a hopeless task since no one wanted to rely

⁵ Note that the Comotek building's structure was not damaged by the fire. There was damage to the walls and the floors from smoke, ash and heavy tar, while the machines were mostly affected by the heat and tar.

on Lebanese goods as the losses they had incurred during the aggressions was enormous.

The cousins started thinking seriously of stopping all business and manufacturing activities. Liquidation started and by 2016 both companies were dissolved and their machinery sold. The Ekmekji Manufacturing Era was terminated.

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(Ամփոփում)

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Հիմնուելով Էքմէքճի ընտանիքին երկրորդ եւ երրորդ սերունդի յուշերուն, վկայութիւններուն, փաստաթուղթերուն, լուսանկարներուն վրայ, այս յօդուածով կը վերակառուցուի Էքմէքճի ընտանիքին ճարտարարութեստական հարիւրամեայ ընթացքը Հալէպի եւ Պէյրութի մէջ:

Ընտանիքը ճարտարարութեստական իր առաջին քայլերը կ'առնէ Հալէպի մէջ, 1920ականներուն, երբ Երուանդ Էքմէքճի կը նշանակուի Հալէպի նշանաւոր իրաւաբան Զահի Տօքմէճիի Հալէպի մէջ գործող արեւելեան գորգի գործարանին տնօրէն:

Կարճ ժամանակ ետք, Երուանդ կը խորացնէ իր գիտելիքն ու փորձառութիւնը կտաւի ներկումի ասպարէզին, ու գորգագործութեան գործարանը տակաւ կը վերածէ կտաւաներկումի գործարանի, որ ծաւալելով կ'ունենայ վաճառման գրասենակ մը Պաղատի մէջ, եւ գործարան մը՝ Պէյրութի: Այս յաջողութեանց մէջ կարեւոր դեր կը խաղան եւրոպական նորագոյն մեքենաներու գնումն ու գործարաններուն արդիականացումը:

Յօդուածը կը նկարագրէ այս ճարտարարութեստականներուն անցած ուղին, տնտեսական այլ մարզերու մէջ անոնց ներդրումներ կատարումը, դիմագրաւած մարտահրաւերները, նախաձեռնած ծրագրերը եւ կ'աւարտի գործարանին փակումով՝ 2016ին, երբ այլեւս անկարելի կը դառնայ անոր գոյատեւումը, հակառակ բազմիցս կատարուած ճիգերու եւ զոհողութիւններու:

Ծ.Խ. - Նկատի առնելով որ կարելի չէ համապատկեր մը յառաջացնել լիբանահայ ճարտարարութեստականներուն՝ Լիբանանի ճարտարարութեան ունեցած նպաստին, նման առանձին պատումներու մէկտեղումը կրնայ օգնել յառաջիկայ ուսումնասէրին՝ գէթ մասամբ վերականգնել պատմութիւնը՝ հայօճախին ճարտարարութեստական նպաստին՝ Լիբանանի: