The History of Photography in Lebanon from its Beginnings
Extracts of the book "Sarrafian - Liban 1900 - 1930"

In 1799 the study of Egyptology took a great leap forward thanks to a discovery of great importance. A French officer came across the famous Rosetta Stone, which made possible the deciphering of the hieroglyphics. Although the stone was taken by the British and Thomas Young had begun to decipher it, it was the French historian Jean François Champollion who finally completed the study, in 1822.

The first photograph taken of Beirut, by Horace Vernet and Goupil-Fesquet in 1840. In the foreground is the Al Saraya Mosque

In 1812, Petra and Abu Simbel were effectively explored by the Swiss Johan Ludwig Buckhardt. The first regular shipping line between Marseille and Alexandria started operation in 1835.

In 1859, Ferdinand de Lesseps (1805-1894) began the piercing of the Suez Canal, which entered into service ten years later following an official international ceremony under the patronage of the Empress of France, the Emperor of Austria and the Crown Princes of Prussia and Denmark. So the lines of communication, transport and commerce were greatly shortened.

Jerusalem, which up till then had aroused little interest apart from its Holy Places, developed as an international center. The British were the first to open a consular office there, in 1833, followed by the Prussians in 1842, the French in 1843, the Americans in 1844, the Austrians in 1845, and the Russians in 1858. In 1837 the Turkish postal services began to operate from Palestine and the first telegraphic service in the region was installed in Jerusalem in 1865.

In 1881, the first wave of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe arrived in Palestine, among them photographers.

During the 19th century, there were two ways of corresponding in the Ottoman Empire. There was the Turkish Post Office, slow and not very reliable, and there were the various post offices opened by the foreign powers. The most efficient ones were that of Austria, backed by Lloyd's maritime Austriaco, and that of France. It was in this way that the French postal service established itself in the Ottoman Empire from 1830 on. This implantation was basically meant to make up for the shortcomings of the Turkish postal service and to improve the postal communications necessary for the smooth functioning of the French and other European enterprises and commercial operations set up in the main ports around the Mediterranean. Among the first five post offices installed between 1830 and 1849 was that of Beirut, in 1845. The stamps affixed on the letters were those of the countries running the post offices, and the stamped mail was carried regularly by the frigates anchoring off the Grand

Hôtel d'Orient (hôtel Bassoul) near the present Hotel Phoenicia.

In the 19th century Britain and France had little difficulty extending their influence over the Levant, for although the Ottomans had been ruling there for three centuries, they had imposed neither their language nor their civilization, and had never imposed their culture over the Near East. What was more, they openly despised the local populations. Consequently, the rule of the countries of Western Europe had much more influence than that of the Ottomans. France spread its influence over Egypt, Lebanon and Syria through its commercial and cultural activities and through its social and cultural services. Great Britain was more concerned with the work of its missionaries and the extension of Protestant influence. One of the principal aims of these missionaries was the conversion of the local populations, the Jews in the Holy Land, particularly in Jerusalem, the Druze in Mount Lebanon, and the Greek Orthodox in Beirut, with financial aid for those who were converted. The limited success they met with in their mission seems today to be a proof of the difficult conditions of survival in the region.

At first, France was more successful in spreading its influence over the area. Britain, being preoccupied by its colonial efforts in India, was less concerned with the Near East. Further, the attitude of the French towards the local peoples proved more agreeable to them than that of the British.

During the second half of the 19th century, the Ottoman Empire, called by the Europeans the Sick Man of Europe, was crumbling on every front. This weakening of the Empire was due to several factors.

-As a result of the participation of France together with Great Britain during the Crimean War (1851-1853), Sultan Abdel-Magid was obliged to grant certain privileges to the non-Muslim inhabitants of his empire and to strengthen the reformist current in conformity with European conceptions.

-During the 1870s, the internal situation in Egypt deteriorated. The country was bankrupt and the Panislamic nationalist movements opposed to westernization became more numerous and violent. The condominium established by Paris and London over the finances of the Khedive provoked strong nationalist agitation which led up to the military revolt led by Arabi Pasha in 1882 and on June 11th to the massacre of some sixty Europeans in Alexandria. One month later, the British Navy bombarded Alexandria and then made landings there. In September, the British forces finally sent an expeditionary corps to occupy the whole of Egypt.

-From 1881, in view of the increasing vulnerability of its finances, the Ottoman Empire was obliged to hand over financial control to foreign powers, in particular France and Britain. At this time the European nations began to concern themselves seriously with what was called "the oriental question" when referring to the chaos.

Imperial Ottoman Bank in Beirut - 1906

It was during this time that, despite the grave financial crisis affecting the Ottoman Empire, the Imperial Ottoman Bank was set up on February 4th, 1863. A contract was concluded between the shareholders of the Ottoman Bank, founded in 1856, the Ottoman government, and the British and French investors. Acting both as the State bank and as public treasury, the Imperial Ottoman Bank presented itself as a commercial bank, so consolidating its relations with the market thanks to its network of branches, the most important of which was the one in Beirut. The 18th February, 1875 was a key date for the future of the Bank, since it was then that by an agreement ratified by an imperial firman the government extended its prerogatives by confiding to it control of the State budget and the improvement of the financial situation of the Empire. The function of State Bank for the Imperial Ottoman Bank was thus clearly reaffirmed. The Bank was entrusted with the indirect taxation and with the salt and tobacco monopolies, so increasing its commercial activity and developing a twofold activity of financing the Turkish economy and encouraging enterprises. It was in this way that in 1888 the Bank was behind the creation of the Port of Beirut. In association with partners it was concerned in the Beirut-Damascus Railway (1892), later in 1900 extended to Homs, Hamah and Aleppo. It supported several railway projects and also shared in several mining undertakings.

Inauguration in 1903 of the railway station at the
Port of Beirut, decorated with Ottoman flags

So, during the 19th century, a period of torment, just when photography was spreading over Europe, this part of the world was undergoing radical change.

Joseph Nicéphore Niépce (1765-1833), an inventor of Chalon-sur-Saône, was in 1826 or 1827 the first to fix images of acceptable quality on tin plates covered with Judea bitumen, a sort of tar that had the property of hardening when exposed to light.. Joseph Nicéphore Niépce died in 1833 and Louis-Jacques Mandé Daguerre (1787-1851) carried on with the improvement of the procedure. By discovering the principle of the latent image, Daguerre found a way of shortening the time of exposure to a few dozen minutes. In 1839 he took his invention to the learned parliamentary deputy François, who lent him his support. Thus the invention of photography dates officially from 1839, the year when Arago officially presented to the Academy of Sciences the “invention” of Daguerre, Daguerrotype. By this means of producing an image on a plate of silvered copper, it was possible to produce a photograph after an exposure of “only” half an hour. William Henry Fox Talbot (1800-1877) was at that time conducting research parallel to that of Niépce and Daguerre, begun in 1833. In 1860 he invented the “caloatype” or “collodion”, a process of negative and positive allowing a number of copies of images to be produced.

From then on, drawings lost much of their use for documenting information, being replaced by this printed image. The well organized bodies of painters, lithographers and engravers who came to the sites to make illustrations of places and landscapes were overwhelmed and immediately realized the important consequences implication of this discovery.

While in Europe the development of photography was opposed by no doubts about it, in the Ottoman

Empire it ran up against the hostility of conservative religious circles who rejected any pictorial representation, considering it contrary to the principles of Islam. In point of fact, when the Turks took Constantinople, the Koran has fiercely condemned idolatry in Surat 16, “Serve God and abandon idols.” Consequently in regions under Islamic influence one found no portraits, no outlines of animals or of whatever possessed an immortal soul. Everything dating from the Byzantine period had to disappear. Fortunately, something has remained, such as the mosaics in the mosque formerly the Holy Wisdom church in Istanbul, which were simply covered with plaster rather than being destroyed once and for all.

But as the Empire gradually became modernized under the pressure of the European powers, photography became generally accepted. This modernization of the Empire had already started thanks to Sultan Mahmoud II (1808-1839), who showed a lively interest in European technical inventions. He turned to European experts to reorganize his administration and his army and even authorized the creation of theatrical groups and orchestras. This ability to break with tradition was shown clearly in 1837 by the showing to the public of his portrait executed in oils. In the same years medals were struck with his effigy to be offered to distinguished guests and to various dignitaries. So it was that in1847 the musician Franz Liszt received one of these medals on the occasion of a concert given in the Palace. It then became usual to put up portraits of important people and members of one’s family in the offices of government buildings, following the example of the Sultan, without provoking the least reaction from the public. The art of making family portraits spread over all the provinces of the Ottoman Empire, particularly Mount Lebanon, these becoming current among the important personalities and what was then the bourgeoisie. The art of portraiture became established in the 19th century and it became common for notables to have their portraits painted by Italian or Russian artists. Portraits of ancestors and later of younger family members were often hung up in the reception rooms of large houses.

The Ottoman court was by no means indifferent to the advantages for illustration and propaganda offered by photography. Early after the invention of photography the sultans surrounded themselves with photographers chosen from among the best, generally Christians, but above all members of the Armenian community. The latter really made a great contribution to the development of the arts, crafts and new techniques in the Ottoman Empire. Being unprejudiced against the representation of individuals, members of the Armenian community were widely chosen to be the portraitists of the Empire and they had a near-monopoly of studio photography. Armenian photographers had students in all the principal towns of the Ottoman Empire, the most reputed being Garabedian and Krikorian at Jerusalem, Guiragossian and Sarrafian at Beirut, Berberian at Amman, Halladjian at Haifa and the three brothers Horsep, Viken and Kevork Abdallah at Istanbul. The last-named stood out as among the most illustrious photographers of the first generation. Turks of Armenian origin, the young brothers were early on introduced into the artistic milieu. Kevork (1839-1918) studied art at the Murad Ruphaellian School at Venice, where the children of upper class Armenian families were traditionally sent. Vichen (1820-1920), a painter noted for his miniatures on ivory and mother-of-pearl, worked at the court of the Sultan. After being assistants of the German photographer and chemist Rabagh in the Pera district of Istanbul, the three Atallah brothers decided to purchase his studio in 1858, when Rabagh expressed a desire to go back to Germany.

Thanks to the rapid evolution of the techniques of photography, particularly that of the collodion negative, which allowed negatives to be obtained on glass plates and several copies to be printed from one negative, the picture industry developed rapidly during the eighteen-sixties. The Abdallah brothers made no bones about dropping daguerrotype in favor of the new technique. As even this did not give them entire satisfaction, they decided to go to the Centre Mondial de la Photographie in Paris in order to learn about the latest innovations from such eminent photographers as Count Agnado and Baron Taylor.

Once back in Istanbul, they were introduced to Sultan Abdul Aziz by the intermediary of the Ambassador of France, Marquess Moustier. The brothers very soon gained the favor of the Sultan and became his official photographers. They were then charged with various missions, including a photographic campaign covering all the provinces of the Ottoman Empire, and they also took part in different exhibitions in Europe, among them the Exposition universelle in Paris in 1878.

The photographs taken by the brothers Abdallah allowed the Sultan to send to Western countries a modern image of the Ottoman Empire. Thus it was that European monarchs visiting Istanbul received

portraits painted on ivory and also photographs showing buildings, the sumptuous life at the Imperial Court, and modern achievements such as schools, hospitals, weapons, the Ottoman Navy and streets that were paved and lit up at night. Further, these photographs allowed the Sultan to be known throughout the four corners of his immense empire, although he himself left his palace only on the rarest occasions.

The Abdallah brothers were also called on by members of the European royal families, such as Prince Albert Edward of Great Britain and his wife, Emperor Napoleon III of France, and even Emperor Franz-Joseph of Austria, who wished to have his portrait taken when he was visiting Istanbul.

In 1886, the Abdallah brothers settled in Cairo, where they opened a branch which prospered until 1895, thanks to the support of the khedive Tawfiq.

The Abdallah brothers were the official photographers of the Sultan for the portraits of the most important personalities of the time. They were called on to immortalize for posterity official and family events and important occasion in the history of the Ottoman Empire. The abundance of their output in public and private collections bears witness to their commercial success.

The technical progress in photography, especially the reduction of the time needed for the exposure and the appearance of snapshots, allowed from 1880 onwards the reduction of the weight of the equipment and the widening of the activities of photographers with more and more scenes taken outside the studios. With the discovery of how to make celluloid, the first artificial plastic material, and the marketing of the Kodak cameras with the slogan at that time famous of “You press the button, we do the rest”, the art of the photographer was greatly speeded up. Used in the place of the sensitive glass plates, which were difficult to prepare and especially to carry about, the flat dry rolls henceforth allowed a large number of photographs to be taken in only a little time.

The Sarrafian brothers were the first to make full use of this great technological advance. They were particularly interested in subjects taken from daily life, ones that they preserved for the future, the crafts, the coffee shops and musicians, with scenes from town and country which today constitute a unique documentation.

The Armenians therefore were the pioneers and principal actors in the history of photography in the Orient. Following the translation of the book of Daguerre into Turkish in 1841, the Armenian photographs played a constructive role in the Middle East and transmitted a chronicle of Ottoman society in the 19th century. While the Western roving photographers took photographs mostly of the archeological remains and biblical sites, the resident photographers took views in their studios or in the populated districts of the big towns. The intense dynamism of the Armenian photographers continued after the break-up of the Empire in 1918. But their worsened political situation and the massacres of which they had been victims led many of them to go elsewhere, and to take the photographic and technical experience to countries of the Near East such as Lebanon, Syria, Palestine and even Iran, where they found safety.

Lebanon is closely bound up with the history of photography. In fact the first daguerrotype known in the world, showing Roman ruins, was made at the Baalbek site during a photographic expedition led by Joly de Lobnière in 1839. At the same time, that is to say a few months after the discovery of the daguerrotype procedure, another expedition led by Horace Vernet and Goupil-Fesquet took the road to Egypt and Jerusalem and took daguerrotypes of the countries. Among these views there is the first one ever taken of Beirut. The album of this expedition, the Excursion daguerrienne, showing some of the most remarkable views and monuments to be seen in the world, was the project of the optician Le Rebours, and was published in 1842.