



25th Levantine Heritage Foundation Zoom lecture gathering with guest speaker Uri M. Kupferschmidt
21 March 2023, 6pm (UK time)

Department Stores and Luxuries in the Levant: The Spread of Western Consumption Goods in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

The latter part of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century coincided with the first modern era of globalization and a significant trade expansion in the Middle East. The urban upper classes acquired new consumption durables from Europe and the United States, be it for practical use, or for reasons of personal status. In the course of time most of these diffused also to other segments of the population.

One channel of new consumerism were western outlets, and specialized luxury stores, which appeared in the larger cities of the entire Middle East. One of the best known and long-lasting was Orosdi-Back (the names of two Central European families), initially a trading firm which gradually turned into a chain of full-fledged department stores. It was certainly the longest existing.

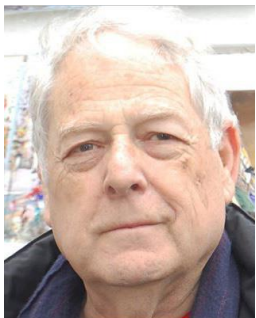
Business had begun with ready-to-wear clothing, but Orosdi-Back also acted as a depot for Singer sewing machines. Unlike railways, telegraph systems, electricity grids, or steam shipping introduced by the Big Powers, these were “small” western technologies, which people could acquire on their own initiative. Such consumer goods were hardly opposed, but my further case studies reveal differences in local demand and diffusion. While sewing machines proved a success, and proved beneficial for women, the acceptance of typewriters (a so-called “younger sister” technology), since the early 1900s adapted to local scripts, were delayed owing to a different local office culture. Only fairly recently, typewriters would be “leapfrogged” by personal computers. A third example are eyeglasses, which since the Renaissance had been a quite common consumer item in Europe, but also slow to spread in the region, supposedly owing to lower rates of literacy. However, pianos, a popular musical instrument in western countries, remained stuck in the Europe-oriented upper classes and failed to trickle down. Affordability was one factor, but being less suitable to the musical modes and tastes of the region, even attempts to develop quartertone pianos failed in the region.

Booking essential: <https://uri-kupferschmidt-presentation.eventbrite.co.uk>



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

Poster of the the Orosdi-Back building in Istanbul, early 1920s with the articles sold in Ottoman script (partly French) and features of modernity (building still exists, but serving government cultural purposes)



Uri M. Kupferschmidt is professor emeritus in the Department of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies of the University of Haifa. He was born in Montreux, grew up in the Netherlands, studied in Leiden, London, and Jerusalem, taught modern social history of the Middle East, and also served as a correspondent of Dutch and Belgian radio corporations. Besides studies on 20th century Islamic movements and on the social history of Egypt, he wrote a book entitled *Henri Naus Bey: Retrieving the Biography of a Belgian Industrialist in Egypt* (Brussels 1999) and another *The Orosdi-Back Saga, European Department Stores and Middle Eastern Consumers* (Istanbul 2007). His book *The Diffusion of “Small” Western Tehnologies in the Middle East: About Invention, Use, and Need in the 19th and 20th Centuries* is forthcoming.

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