

## Handout #1

### The Broken Thread: The End of an Industry and the Beginning of a New Life

Many of the Middle Eastern immigrants who came to the United States between 1870 and 1920 came from an area called Lebanon in Greater Syria. At the time, Greater Syria was ruled by the Ottoman Empire. After World War I, with the collapse of the Empire, Lebanon came under French “Mandate” until 1943 when the Republic of Lebanon was established.

Between the 1870s and 1890s, Mount Lebanon, the western mountain range, was the most important exporter of silk thread in the region. The hillsides along this chain were dotted with mulberry trees. The leaves of this tree were the preferred food of silk worms that look like caterpillars. The leaves were harvested and fed to silkworms on “farms” throughout Mount Lebanon. As a silkworm grows, it secretes a protein-like substance that it encloses itself. This coat of raw silk is called *cocoon*. After spinning its cocoon, the silkworm makes a hole and emerges as a moth. After laying eggs, the moth dies. The hole in a cocoon ruins the silk for merchants whose goal is to sell long threads. Therefore, the majority of cocoons in a “farm” are boiled in water. This process kills the silkworm and unravels the cocoon easily. Skilled workers, called *reelers*, pick up the threads from the cocoon and turn the strands into silk thread; then they roll the raw silk on bobbins. The product is sold to textile factories that make silk fabric. Raw silk produced in Mount Lebanon in the nineteenth century was shipped to factories in Lyon, France, and elsewhere in Europe.

Silk production was very labor intensive. Many workers were involved in harvesting the mulberry leaves, boiling the worms, and extracting silk thread from the cocoons. The daughters of the peasant class supplied the bulk of the labor in the silk factories in Mount Lebanon. This is because the parents and the young men were engaged in subsistence farming. They tended the fields, the animals and the household chores. Girls as young as seven would start apprenticing in the factory. They remained employed until their marriage some ten or more years after. Even though peasants in Mount Lebanon grew grapes, olives and other agricultural produce for cash, silk was more lucrative.

The silk industry in Lebanon in the nineteenth century revolutionized the countryside and the overall economy. Silk made some families rich and improved the status of women in the countryside. These women’s contributions were a large portion of the family’s income. The silk trade was also a source of taxes for the government. According to historian Akram Khater, silk sent to Europe in 1873 made up 82.5 percent of all Lebanese export. The income from the silk business was instrumental in the establishment of the first bank in Lebanon, and the development of the port of Beirut. Furthermore, trade with France was responsible for the establishment of schools by French Catholic orders, most significantly, the Saint Joseph University in Beirut by the Jesuits. Consequently, French language became popular in Greater Syria.

After the 1890s, European factories were able to buy cheaper silk from Japan and China who also guaranteed large and steady supplies. No doubt, the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 cut the time of travel significantly. Steamships were becoming faster and cheaper as well. These changes were disastrous for the peasants in Mount Lebanon. Syrian silk prices dropped drastically because of reduced demand for export. Consequently, Greater Syria experienced a severe economic crisis. Additionally, the Ottoman regime's revenues were shrinking with the independence of the Balkan countries. The Sultan decided to increase the taxes of the Arab lands (including Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt) that were still under his power. This made life unbearable for the Syrians. Understandably, this produced anger and resentment against the Ottomans. In summary, the economic, social and political situation was unstable, but most importantly, families in Mount Lebanon were experiencing dire hardships.

Having supported their families with their labor in the silk factories, the young women in Mount Lebanon now had higher expectations for their lives. Many people, especially the young women, wanted fashionable clothes, a modern house, an education; they had developed a taste for a more comfortable, modern life style. Many American and European missionaries had established schools, hospitals, printing presses in Lebanon in the nineteenth century. They also spoke about job opportunities and religious freedom in the United States. Immigration became a logical choice for many the Lebanese to end their misery. After the decline of the silk industry, many young adults from Mount Lebanon, including large percentages of women, went to the Americas in search of new opportunities and a better life. In conclusion, the demise of the silkworm led to the growth of Middle Eastern immigrant communities in the United States.