

A three generation woodworking dynasty

From crafting coffins to high-end furniture, the Rifs have survived wars, famine, feuds

By Maria Rada-Soto
The Daily Star

BEIRUT: Joseph Junior played in his father's factory, Boisseliers du Rif, shoveling sawdust into a small box that the workers made for him – like his father before him, and, perhaps, his grandfather before that.

At five years old, the child is not yet aware that he is the great-grandson of a Beirut carpenter called Hanna al-Rif and hence the heir to a family dynasty that has been crafting wood in Lebanon for more than 100 years.

It all started right before World War I. Hanna was just a child from Kesrouan's Qoleiaat village who had lost his father. Fleeing the oppression of the Ottoman army, the family moved to the Bekaa Valley and Hanna and his older brother Selman had to start working wood from an early age.

Hanna had a feisty character, his son, Joseph Senior, told The Daily Star. On one occasion, Hanna was stopped by Ottoman troops and didn't hesitate to swallow the two small gold coins he carried – his worldly goods – to prevent the occupying force from getting hold of them.

The war years were hard and, like many other families, Hanna's was starving. Between 1915 and 1918 the Mount Lebanon region suffered a devastating famine that claimed an estimated 200,000 lives as Ottoman forces appropriated wheat for the war effort. It was during this period of hardship that they started making wooden coffins.

The war finally came to an end and Hanna turned his attention to making wooden window frames, door frames and furniture. He was working at a convent when he met the woman who would become his wife and the mother of his five children. No small feat, given that this woman was not only a nun but the Mother Superior herself.

Hanna worked hard and, back in Beirut, became a "moallem," a master of the trade, and very much in demand. He was a typical Lebanese carpenter, Hanna's grandson and Joseph Senior's son, Jean-Marc, said. Hanna rented space in a big factory and accepted only one project at a time: He loved a thorough, well done job. When World War II came, the family had to fight poverty once again. But in the very year the war ended, 1945, Hanna's second child was born: Joseph Senior.

When Joseph was young, he began to help his father out, working the wood every Thursday after school and during vacations. He didn't like the work to begin with though – but was scared of disobeying his father.

Things soon changed and the boy started asking to be in the workshop. "I was attracted to the smell of the resin of the cedar pines," Joseph said.

But Joseph had dreams for the business that differed from Hanna's painstaking, well-worn model. His ambition to grow the business and his entrepreneurial skills led to a generational clash.

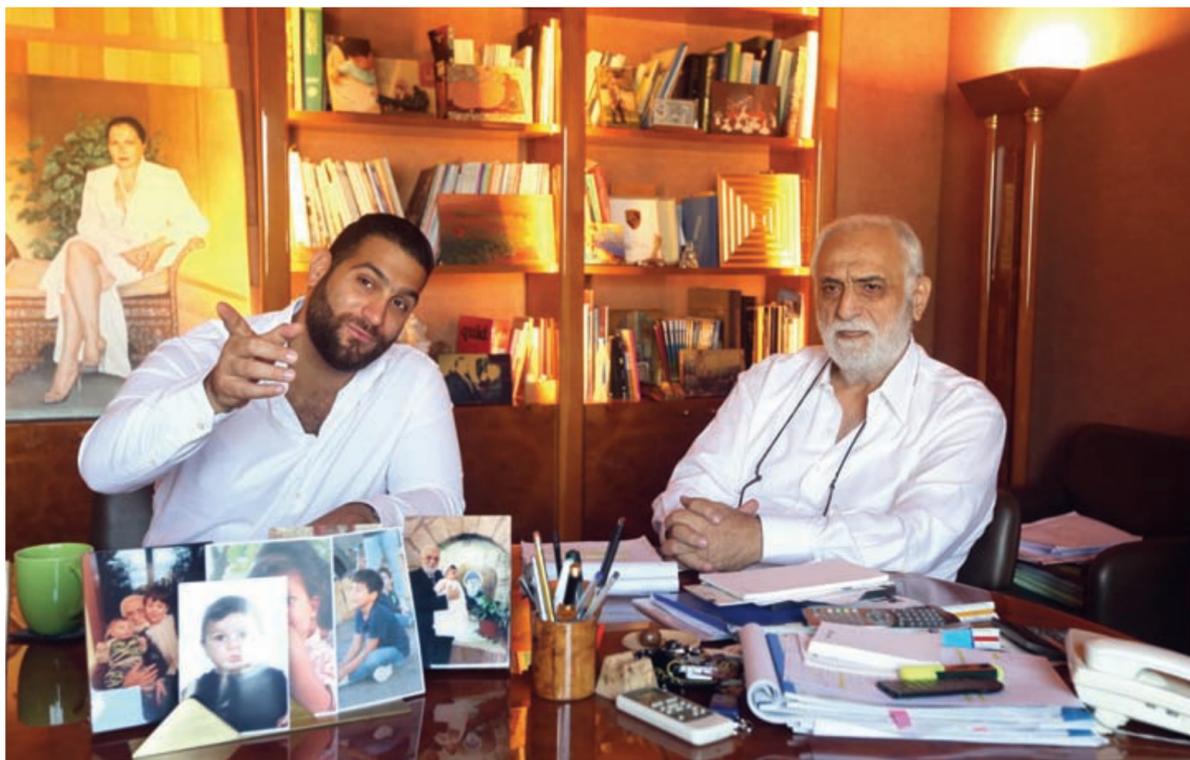
Having dropped out of the Academy of Fine Arts because he was "more advanced than what they were teaching," he used to bombard his father with business ideas that Hanna systematically dismissed.

Little by little, father and son grew apart, until Hanna started to accept and respect his son's independent spirit.

The family established their first shop and factory in 1958 after forming a partnership with a rich man who bet on Hanna's solid reputation. But with aluminum entering the Lebanese market, the carpentry business started to decline while Joseph's furniture-making business



The Rif wood-crafting business is more than 100 years old.



Father and son: Joseph, right, and Jean Marc.

began to rise.

By the time Joseph broke away from the family business, he was in debt financially but also had a big asset – the reputation that came with being the son of Hanna al-Rif. Joseph's impeccable finishes, his social networking and word of mouth did the rest.

When the Lebanese Civil War began in 1975, the furniture business ground to a halt. But in an unexpected turn, the looting of the Beirut Port brought an abundance of Cuban cigars into society and smoking became fashionable.

So Joseph, like his father before him, turned a problem into an opportunity. In 1976, he built four cigar boxes and, in the company of his friend, Pipo Malek, took a boat to Cyprus, a flight to Paris and a

train to Geneva, where he was received by the general manager of world famous cigar company Davidoff, who couldn't believe the humidors came from war-torn Lebanon. The tobacco company asked these Lebanese visitors to come back the next day, and so they did – after spending the night on a bench in a park.

Zino Davidoff himself, "all dressed up in white," welcomed the two Lebanese men. The company's founder remained skeptical of the cigar boxes' origin, Joseph said. But to his surprise, Davidoff placed an order for 5,000 boxes, as a trial.

Joseph refused then and there. "Sorry, but I can't," he said. They were working under difficult conditions in Beirut, by the light of oil lamps since electricity wasn't avail-

able. Simply living from one day to the next was not guaranteed.

Joseph finally agreed to provide Davidoff with 500 boxes in three months' time, and went back to Paris to buy the necessary hardware. Since he didn't have enough money, he asked Bashir Gemayel for assistance. Gemayel, then the head of the Kataeb militia, lent him \$25,000 and a generator for three and a half months. Although Joseph was nervous – Gemayel, after all, was not a man to cross – this was an exciting time. "It was like being in love," Joseph said.

This marked the turning point in his career and in the trajectory of the family business. Joseph even had to refuse some additional orders from Davidoff, so high was the demand for his work.

In 1978, the family took part, for the first time, in the Milanese fair. Joseph had never participated in such an event before, and didn't realize he had to take the goods from the port to the fair. To cover up his mistake, he planted a Lebanese flag in the empty stand where his goods should have been – claiming that he was staging a protest against the Civil War, making a dramatic impression and buying some time to retrieve his stock.

The rest is history. The family business, now called Boisseliers du Rif, kept expanding throughout the region and elsewhere, despite the family factory being bombed and reconstructed five times over the course of the Civil War.

Joseph said that he never once thought of leaving Lebanon. "God

has given us a beautiful country and it is our duty to preserve it," he said. "If everybody leaves the country, who is going to save it?"

"War became for me a work schedule," he explained, proudly displaying photographs of the day he was made a knight by President Elias Hrawi in 1998.

But despite its illustrious history, the family business cannot afford to rest on its laurels. Jean Marc, Joseph's only child and the fruit of his third marriage, has already picked up the baton. Thirty-nine years after that first Milanese fair, Jean Marc took Boisseliers du Rif this year to the first edition of the Beirut Design Fair – happy for a chance to increase the business's visibility in front of a young audience, and proud to show in his own country what "Lebanon is capable of doing."

With a history of clashes and reconciliations with his father that repeats a familiar pattern, Jean Marc certainly shares the family values. "Your nation is not a hotel," his father told him when he asked for a European passport from his Greek mother. "Family is company and company is family," Jean Marc said, explaining that the company's employees have direct access to their employers at all times.

Even with a factory of around 4,000 square meters, with 80 full time artisans and 20 administrative staff, the Rif family are not complacent.

"Maintaining our high standards of quality while keeping prices competitive with high-end mass produced European furniture and woodworks is a major challenge," Jean Marc explained. Finding young Lebanese artisans who are willing to learn and continue working in the trade might be an even a bigger challenge. This is why Joseph continues to go daily to the factory, to train workers and be at his son's side.

Lebanese never live on safe ground, Jean Marc said. But, he added, "I will be the last man standing – the plan is to stay alive."

It is yet to be seen whether little Joseph will one day take up the torch of the family business – a torch that has passed from generation to generation with its flames intact, even through the turmoil of two world wars and a devastating civil conflict.



Boisseliers du Rif employs 80 full-time artisans.



Jean Marc explains the wood-crafting process.