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KAYSERI CARPETS: TRADITION KEPT ALIVE

by

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Some 50 years ago, a woman from the central Anatolian city of Kayseri sat down at her loom and put the finishing touches to her creation. Into the dark red and black geometry of her wool carpet, she had woven a portrait -- herself in a chair holding a baby girl named Gül ("Rose," in Turkish). Along the border, she had added the inscription, Yasa çok Gül sen, "Gul, may you live a long time."

The art of this anonymous woman now hangs in a Kayseri carpet shop. You won't find many carpets like it, no matter how hard you look. Old carpets are scarce, being in great demand, and the new ones are mass produced according to standardized designs, leaving no room for individual expression.

Surely, something has been lost. But in other respects, modern Kayseri (pop. 315,000) continues to maintain Turkey's 700-year-old tradition of producing fine, hand-made carpets. Of the 500,000 looms estimated to be active in the country, 40 percent are located in villages of the Kayseri region, making it Turkey's largest carpet-producing center. These looms produce wool, silk, and artificial silk carpets, all of them hand-knotted, utilizing a technique the Turkish peoples developed sometime before the 13th century (historians argue about exactly when and where the so-called "pile rug," or carpet, was invented -- the evidence is unclear).

The Turks had certainly perfected carpet manufacturing by the 13th century. After Marco Polo journeyed through Anatolia in 1271, he testified that "the best and handsomest carpets in the world are made there." The Turks taught the skill of carpet-making to the Iranians, who did not develop original designs until the 16th century; by the 19th century, however, the Iranian industry had surpassed the Turkish manufacturers.

Today, hand-made carpets are still big business in Turkey, providing employment for about 1 million people. Turkish carpet exports, which go mostly to Europe and to the rich Arab states, reached \$220 million in the first 10 months of 1984, an all-time high. But is that good enough? Political problems in Iran and

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Afghanistan should have given Turkey a chance to increase its share of the market during the 1980s. But in 1983, Turkey exported \$158 million worth of hand-made carpets, \$42 million less than in 1980; it was still fourth in the list of exporting countries, behind India (\$575 million), Iran (\$550 million), and Pakistan (\$250 million). Only China (\$150 million), Afghanistan (\$100 million) and Russia (\$40 million) did worse. Why can't the Turks, the people who supposedly invented carpets, sell more of them?

Dealers in Istanbul's Covered Bazaar, the country's largest carpet center, point to marketing problems, the familiar gremlin of Turkish industry.

"At the moment, marketing is a bottleneck," says dealer Halit Kamaşak, a Kayseri native. The Iranians have been more successful in Europe, Turkey's biggest market, he says. Dealers also blame the current economic slowdown in Europe. "Carpets are luxury items," says wholesaler Ibrahim Turan in Kayseri. "A German man will buy food, service his automobile, or go to Spain on holiday before he decides to put a silk carpet on his wall."

A closer look at the Turkish carpet industry suggests the malaise goes deeper. As Kamaşak says, "Quality must improve." Because of Kayseri's huge role in the industry, a detailed look at how carpets are made there will reveal much that is right and much that is wrong with Turkey's hand-made carpet business.

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The city of Kayseri is situated in a fertile, well-watered plain bounded on the north by the Kizilirmak River and to the south by the towering, twin snow-capped peaks of Mt. Erciyes (11,305 ft.). Since ancient times, a prosperous agriculture based on wheat and barley has supported a large settlement here; the city became an important commercial center because it is located at the center of intersecting trade routes. The Romans named the city Caesarea, which later became "Kayseri" in Turkish.

After Marco Polo had praised Anatolian carpets, he went on to list Kayseri, Konya, and Sivas as major cities of the



The work of patience. Women from a village near Kayseri work on a wool carpet that requires about 225,000 knots per square meter; an average weaver can tie 900 knots an hour.

region. Some art historians take this as evidence Kayseri was a major carpet center by the 13th century. It is probably true that Turkish women in the area have been continually producing carpets since the Turks settled there in the 12th century. In traditional Turkish village life, an unmarried girl would lavish great care on the products of her loom because she knew that a suitor's parents would inspect her handicrafts and judge her value as a wife accordingly. When she moved into her new household as a married woman, the carpets and kilims she had made became an important part of her trousseau.

But most historians do not identify Kayseri as a major carpet manufacturing center during either Seljuk or Ottoman times. Kayseri actually rose to prominence in this field after World War II under the leadership of some talented entrepreneurs. These men set the local women to work making carpets whose designs copied the mihrab (prayer niche) motifs of classical Iranian rugs. Unlike some other well-known Turkish carpet centers -- Konya, Bergama, and Ladik -- Kayseri never developed a unique design of its own.

Mustafa Inanir, 51, is one of the men who made Kayseri a great power in the carpet industry. He is known in the trade as a "manufacturer," a man who supplies the carpet women with looms, materials, and designs in return for the right to purchase their finished products. A short man with a round face and brown mustache, he emanates furious energy; this energy led him from humble beginnings to the control of 1,000 looms. He estimates that his weavers produce each year about 1,500 square meters of pure silk carpets, 1,500 of artificial silk, and 2,000 of wool.

Many smaller manufacturers negotiate with their weavers directly, but Inanir has 50 "chiefs" to do this work for him. He himself directs his empire from a new five-story office complex in Kayseri. The building's exterior frontage is the nicest on the street -- stylish red brick with varnished wood trim, unusual in a city as drab as Kayseri.

As Inanir tells the story, his family lived in the small village of Akmescit, 40 km from Kayseri. His father, a farmer, was the first person in the village to take an interest in carpets. At that time in the mid-1950s, most carpet manufacturing in the Kayseri area centered on the village of Bünyan, 40 km northeast of Kayseri. In fact, to this day, Kayseri carpets are often called "Bünyan carpets" because of the popular designs originating there.

"Carpet-making spread from Bünyan to other villages," says Inanir. "My father took my sister to a village near Bünyan to discover how to do it. She learned, but not completely. My father wasn't very successful with this business. When I came back from the army in 1956, he was almost bankrupt as a result of buying materials for the girls in our family."

Fortunately, Inanir had learned a valuable skill in the army -- carpentry. With his own hands, he built some looms superior to those his father had bought and set the women of the family to work. "There is an old Turkish saying, 'One hand is nothing, but clapping two together gives a sound.' Working together with my father brought success to our business."

Gradually, Inanir expanded the number of looms under



Left, the Kayseri bazaar, a maze of narrow lanes lined with small specialty shops. In one store, you buy your shoes; in another, your shoelaces. The more prosperous carpet traders operate from the Bedesten, at right, a restored 18th century Ottoman han, or market. The Bedesten is located on the northern edge of the bazaar. Because it is known as the carpet center of the bazaar, rents are high.

his control until he became one of the four or five biggest carpet manufacturers in Kayseri. He credits his success to careful study of the business methods of rival manufacturers and his ability to improve upon those methods. "I watched what they did, but never copied them," he says. Indeed, Inanir was the first Kayseri manufacturer to produce silk carpets. Many others followed and today Kayseri rivals Hereke, a famous carpet center near Istanbul, in the production of silk carpets.

Waxing philosophical, Inanir describes the carpet business as "just like a circle" because it always changes. "For a time, silk is in favor, then wool. It's supply and demand. We can wait months to sell one carpet; at other times, we can't keep up with the demand."

To protect himself from these fluctuations, Inanir opened a stationery store in Kayseri 15 years ago and purchased shares in a construction firm. Not bad for a man with only a

primary school education.

For the women who actually make the carpets, the business is far less lucrative. For them, it is grueling work requiring infinite patience. The women customarily put in 10-hour days at their looms. The work is hard on the eyes and finger joints; a typical Kayseri wool carpet requires about 225,000 knots per square meter and a weaver of average skill can tie 900 knots an hour.

'Don't think this is easy work!' exclaims Hatice Hayva, 50, to a visitor as she sits with her three daughters in front of her loom in the village of Hisarçik (pop. 4,000), a half hour's drive from Kayseri. The three girls range in age from 18 to 12. Sitting on cushions while they work in a room attached to their house, the girls smile as their mother makes a little joke. 'The girls want to sleep in the morning and play about like the birds -- it's their natural right -- but they have to make carpets instead.'

Mrs. Hayva, a large woman with a ready laugh, insists that 'we don't like this work.' Be that as it may, it is also true that carpet weaving provides Turkish village women with good supplemental income during the winter, when they are not needed in the fields. A good weaver can make \$125 a month, good money in a country where the average government paycheck is \$75 a month.

Mrs. Hayva's husband Mehmet is a truck driver and member of the Hisarçik City Council. Carpet production is increasing in Hisarçik 'because there are no other handicrafts here anymore,' he says, adding that women in neighboring villages are taking up the craft too.

Carpet manufacturing may be increasing in the villages, but the expansion has come among those looms producing second- or third-quality work. According to Ibrahim Turan, the number of looms doing top quality work, the upper 10 percent, has actually been decreasing. Turan should know, since his business deals with new, rather than antique carpets. He says the demand for lower quality, and less expensive, carpets is greater than that for top-of-the-line masterpieces. Also, 'people receive money from Germany and don't want to work hard anymore,' he says, referring to the 1.2 million Turkish workers in West Germany who send home \$1.5 billion to their families each year.

Even Turan, who makes a living selling new carpets, admits that their quality cannot compare with that of carpets made before World War I. The problem is not so much workmanship as materials, the use of machine- rather than hand-spun wool, for example, but particularly the colors. Until synthetic dyes were introduced a century ago, Middle Eastern villagers extracted natural colors from roots and leaves by various boiling processes, using the wild madder plant for red and indigo for blue. All carpet connoisseurs agree that synthetic dyes have never equalled the beauty of natural ones; because they impregnate the wool fibers so deeply and color them so evenly, the surface appears hard and lifeless in comparison to the soft and varied tones produced by natural dyes.

Producers in all countries find synthetic dyes more convenient, and few still use the natural colors. Producers in Yahyalı, a village 80 km south of Kayseri do, but they cut corners; their natural dyes are not up to the old standards. Two Marmara University-supported cooperatives in the villages of Ayvacık and Yuntdağ in western Turkey have begun using



Although only 26, Muammer Özrendeci has his own shop in the Bedesten, where he deals in antique carpets. "It takes a long time to learn this business -- not everyone understands the value of these things," he says. Özrendeci has had his shop for only two years, but he learned the business from an uncle. He is holding a 170-year-old carpet made by yürük (nomadic) people of the Taurus Mountains. The design is traditional mihrab (prayer niche) with the old Turkish (Arabic letters) inscription, "Here is the vase, here is the towel, which is hung on the line, and here is the direction of Mecca in which you pray."

old-style natural dyes after years of careful research, but production is still small, about 1,000 carpets a year, which are exported and not sold inside Turkey.

Vegetable-dye carpets made before the widespread use of chemical dyes are valued highly by collectors and have been disappearing from Turkey. "It's really difficult now to find old vegetable-dye carpets," says Muammer Özrendeci, 26, a casual, friendly man with a nasal twang to his heavily accented English who specializes in selling antique carpets. "A piece that cost \$12 as recently as 15 years ago will fetch \$500 today."

Özrendeci and traders like him spend the winters scouring the villages of eastern Turkey, the country's poorest region, looking for old carpets. The villagers sometimes do not appreciate the value of their old carpets and will trade them in for new machine-made ones. "If you can buy an old natural-dye carpet cheap, you can make a lot of profit," says Özrendeci.

Like most traders specializing in old carpets, Özrendeci has a shop in the Bedesten, a restored 18th century Ottoman han, or market. Located in the heart of the old city, on the edge of the modern bazaar and near the 13th century Seljuk fortress, the Bedesten is an ideal place to meet the wandering tourist.

"This Bedesten is the carpet section of the bazaar," says Özrendeci. "If I had a shop outside the Bedesten, nobody would be able to find it." Finding space in the Bedesten is not easy or cheap. Özrendeci had to spend \$15,000, borrowed from his father, to take over another man's lease. On top of that, he pays \$600 a month in rent. But having a shop underneath these dark, stone-vaulted ceilings is worth it, he says.

Both Mahir Kaplan, 34, and Şahin Yağcıoğlu, 42, have small shops outside the Bedesten and find that it hurts their business. "I'm not wealthy enough to have a Bedesten shop," says Kaplan, a lean man with a gentle, cultured face. "Although selling carpets is a good business, it requires a lot of capital -- which I don't have right now."

Yağcıoğlu, a large, craggy-faced man with thick glasses, moved to Kayseri from the Cappadecian tourist town of Ürgüp three years ago (he was tired of paying high commissions to tour guides) and hasn't yet found a suitable location for his shop, which is presently crammed into a nondescript cubbyhole of the bazaar.

Yağcıoğlu is typical of those carpet business people who followed other family members into the business. Kamaşak, Turan, and Özrendeci fit into this category; İnanır and Kaplan got into the business on their own. Yağcıoğlu knows his ancestors dealt in carpets, but doesn't know how many generations the tradition goes back because of the absence of written records. In the time-honored fashion, his 12-year-old son Orhan will follow him.

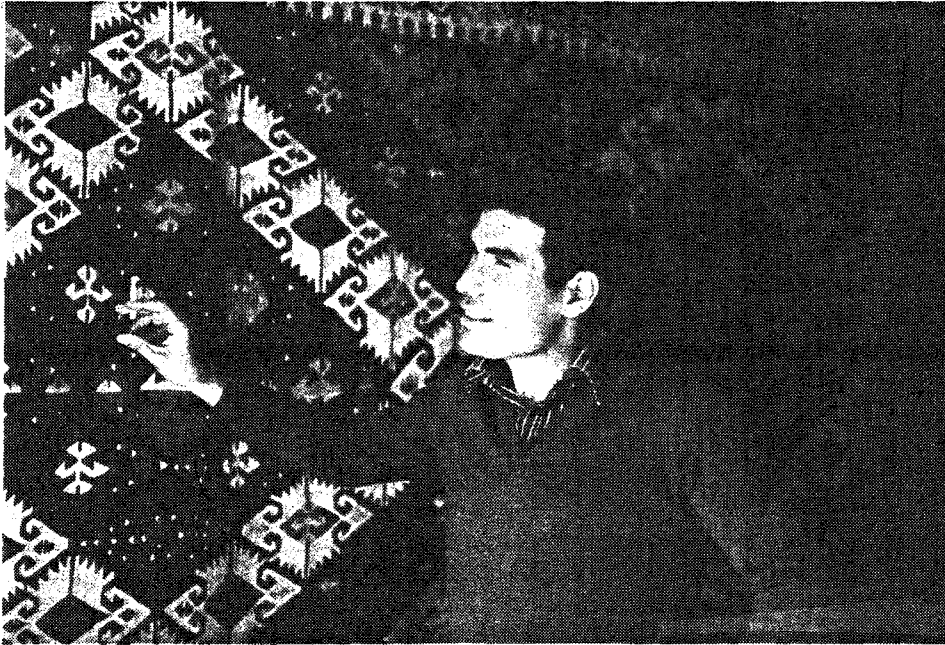
"A man with 50 years' experience in the business is not as good as Orhan is now," says Yağcıoğlu, visibly swelling with pride. "The boy knows that it's all about researching and loving carpets."

"I was like Orhan," he adds. "My father taught me when I was 11 or 12." Already Orhan, a quiet and mature boy, helps his father in the shop and is studying English at a private language school in order to communicate better with the tourists.

Özrendeci's father was a government employee, but an uncle sold carpets in Kayseri before the high inflation of the late 1970s drove him out of business (he had overextended himself by buying too much on credit). While attending school in Kayseri, Özrendeci had helped out in his uncle's shop. Later, he went to university in Eskişehir to major in economics. After finishing in 1982, he looked for a way to combine his business and language skills -- he speaks good English and German -- and decided to return to Kayseri and sell carpets.

Kaplan's family never had anything to do with carpets. He graduated from the University of Ankara with a degree in French and taught that subject in the public schools for many years, his last appointment being Kayseri. "After my military service, I did not resume teaching because the salary was not enough to support me and my wife," he says. Borrowing some money from relatives, Kaplan established a carpet expert business with a Belgian friend. "I expert mainly to Belgium and Spain," he says.

Like most carpet traders, Kaplan has developed a deep love for the products he sells. "When you train yourself in this business, you sometimes find pieces that you love and cannot sell," he says. "I prefer dowery pieces because the girls have done their best. In Turkey, it's an old custom that when a boy's parents look for a wife for their son, they first see the carpets she has made."



Carpet dealer Mahir Kaplan discussing a vegetable dye kilim from eastern Turkey. Kaplan finds that many westerners do not understand the Turkish way of bargaining over a cup of hot tea or coffee. "A European enters a shop and is scared," he says. "People sometimes see us as businessmen without human qualities. But bargaining brings an atmosphere of friendliness, and I like that way of treating people. Offering a customer something to drink is a traditional custom. We know that business is business and friendship is quite different."

These are totally her own inspiration.

"There is an old Turkish proverb, 'The one who works in the jeweler's shop knows the value of the gold,'" he adds. "You have to have an idea about the value of these things. If you consider a carpet just as something to put on the floor, it doesn't seem so valuable. You have to understand the tradition of the people."

"For us Turks, carpets represent love," says Yağcıoğlu. "The desire to possess these objects is like an illness for us."

Yağcıoğlu is touched by that illness. He is known in Kayseri carpet circles as a collector as much as a trader, someone who saves his best pieces for his personal collection at home. He says he would never sell the antique carpets in his personal collection no matter what price he was offered. To illustrate the point, he shows a visitor an Ottoman court rug with floral motifs and patches of authentic gold thread, which he has displayed inside a glass case in his home.

"An Italian couple saw that one in Kuşadası, but argued with each other and didn't buy it and returned to Italy," he says. "Later, the man came back to Kuşadası to buy the carpet,



but the dealer told him he had sold it to a trader in Istanbul. The Italian went to Istanbul and found that I had purchased it.

"The Italian came to see me. 'How much do you want for it?' he asked. I told him I wouldn't sell, for any price. 'Why not?' he asked. 'Because if I sell my love, my art will be nothing,' I told him. 'You want to buy this carpet for your pleasure, but this is my art and my love.' The Italian began to cry when he understood that I would never sell the carpet."

Yağcıoğlu doesn't think much of today's carpets. The old masterpieces were "the business of patience," he says. "It's nearly impossible for today's women."

Some observers think the lack of distinction in today's Turkish carpets goes beyond marketing problems, quality control, or inferior materials. "The people who originally made the carpets knew why they were using certain designs next to other designs -- there was a philosophy behind it," says Mrs. Nezihe Araz, a prominent Turkish journalist (she writes for the daily Milliyet) and amateur ethnographer. "But the modern carpet designers are just like photographers. They take pictures of the old designs, but don't get down deep into the philosophy."

This is certainly true in Kayseri, where carpet design seems to involve nothing more than the indiscriminate copying of published designs. "The most important factor in this business is to find carpet books and copy designs from them," says Uğar Unal, 27, who runs a designing business with his younger brother Şükrü, 25.

The 125 carpet designers in Kayseri, some working for manufacturers and some independent, like the Unal brothers, perform a vital role in the industry. With colored pencils, they sketch on graph paper the patterns the weavers will execute. They take their designs either from book illustrations or from the finished carpets themselves.

Unfortunately for the designers, most scholarly works on Turkish carpets are published in foreign languages they can't read. Carpet designing is a rather routine and mechanical work and rarely attracts people educated in foreign languages. As a result, the designers tend to have only a superficial knowledge of Turkish carpets.

For example, Ismail Balli, 26, has only a primary school education. Working out of a cramped, dingy office belonging to his manufacturer employer, his major reference work is in the (to him) mysterious Russian language. Some tourist left the book with the father of Balli's employer 25 years before. Published sometime in the late 1930s, this work on Turkish and Iranian carpets is slowly disintegrating; the pages are yellow and torn, the binding gone, but Balli carefully preserves the color plates to copy from.

With all this haphazard copying, Turkish carpet centers are losing their distinctiveness. Formerly, certain areas were known for certain designs. But what does it mean today to buy a Konya- or Laflık-design carpet if it was actually made in Kayseri? When Kamaşak was chairman of a carpet exporters festival held in Istanbul last October, he told the press that "there is some concern that people are producing the designs of one area in another area, and it is likely that attempts will be made to control such efforts."

Perhaps what the government really needs to do is encourage the publication of carpet research in Turkish and then disseminate the materials to those in the industry. Turkish scholars such as Şerare Yetkin and Belkıs Acar have contributed some valuable work, but more is needed.

One government program that seems to be getting results is designed to spread carpet-weaving skills to villages that never made carpets before. Dark-haired Fatma Kara, 22, enrolled in an 8-month weaving course in the southern city of Adana and now works in the village of Eskiömerler (pop. 750) near Kayseri teaching 31 adolescent girls how to make carpets. "Nobody here was interested in carpets before, so this is the first time it's been done," she says.

The government pays Miss Kara's room and board in Eskiömerler, as well as a salary of \$75 a month, and provides her with looms and weaving materials to teach the girls. Carpets produced at the school will be sold by a government company in Isparta with the profits returned to the school.

Sitting shyly at a loom with four other small girls, raven-haired Yasemin Süngü, 14, explains that she wants to make carpets "as a financial service to my family." When asked if she enjoys the work, she replies, "When you get used to it, it's so easy, but when you start, it's difficult."

Yasemin has completed primary school in Eskiömerler and hopes to attend secondary school in a neighboring village "if my father will let me." This is in stark contrast to the life experience of Mrs. Hayva in Hisarçik. "I was seven when my mother taught me to make carpets," says Mrs. Hayva. "I couldn't read or write and had no chance to get to school, so I had to make carpets."

With weaving skills spreading to an increasing number of villages, at least in the Kayseri area, there is hope this flood of new talent may boost the Turkish carpet industry to the high standards set in the 16th and 17th centuries, and never equalled since. Aided by government export subsidies, the industry has certainly come a long way since its near collapse following World War I (see Appendix). After a long hiatus, Turkish rugs became a significant force on international markets again by the 1970s.

In Kayseri, at least, most of the signs are positive for future growth.

## APPENDIX: THE ETHNIC DISPUTE

Like most economic enterprises in Turkey, the carpet industry found itself in sad shape by the early 1920s. Anatolia had been ravaged by warfare, banditry, and economic dislocation more or less continually from 1914 to 1923. That this affected the carpet industry is not in dispute.

What is in dispute is whether the departure of Anatolia's Armenian and Greek populations by 1923 played a major role in the carpet industry's collapse.

All Turkish accounts I have read (Yetkin, Şerare. Historical Turkish Carpets. Istanbul: Turkiye İş Bankası Cultural Publications, 1981; Acar, Belkis. "'Turkey's Carpet and Rug Treasures'" in Turkish Daily News, October 8, 1984) discuss the development of the pile rug, or carpet, as if it was a purely Turkish invention and no Anatolian minority group had anything to do with it.

"Carpet handweaving is a purely Turkish art, let no one make any mistake about this!" thundered State Minister Mesut Yılmaz on the eve of the carpet exhibition held in Istanbul last October. Yılmaz warned darkly that "there are international efforts to distort historical facts and try to claim that traditional Turkish weaving techniques and designs belong to other ethnic groups.

"We will never tolerate such attempts," he declared, as if mere assertion, rather than a well-documented argument, would suffice.

The Turks have some reason to be paranoid. Greek and Armenian writers have made extravagant claims, which seem to have had some effect on western popular opinion. The carpet is arguably the major artistic achievement of the Turkish people; they cannot bear for this glory to be taken away from them.

The Turks should relax a bit. Most of the evidence points to Turkish invention of the carpet. But it also seems clear that Greeks and Armenians did contribute to the industry's development, particularly in later Ottoman times. Greek merchants, for example, were instrumental in exporting Turkish rugs to the west through the port of Smyrna (now Izmir); for a long time, western buyers used the term "'Smyrna rugs'" for carpets that were actually made elsewhere in Anatolia.

The Armenians contributed to both the design and marketing of carpets. "... it is possible that Turkey might not have reached the artistic heights which she did without the Armenian influence," wrote British authority Stanley Reed (Oriental Rugs and Carpets. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1967). "'Some of the early pieces now attributed to Turkey most probably came either from the Caucasus or from Armenian looms in Turkey.'" (p. 14)

The Turks really hate to hear that. But those actually involved in the carpet business concede the Armenian role.

Mustafa Inanir said that Armenians in the Kayseri region were working with the Turks in the carpet industry before World War I. "I cannot say they taught this craft to our citizens, but I can say they helped us very much," he said.

"Especially the Armenians," Halit Kamaşak replied when I asked him about Greek and Armenian contributions. "The

## APPENDIX 2

Armenians were both making and selling carpets. There was no discrimination between Turks and Armenians in this business."

But when I went on to inquire whether Armenians had contributed to the designs, Kamaşak became a bit defensive. "These are traditional Turkish carpets," he said, referring to the mihrab (prayer niche) design. "You don't see any crosses, do you?"

Later in Cairo, I talked with retired Armenian jeweler Valian Kezelian, 79, whose father had been a large carpet manufacturer in Kayseri before 1915, controlling 60 looms. Mr. Kezelian said the Armenians were involved in the carpet industry as manufacturers and designers and that Armenian and Greek women worked the looms. Although my research had indicated that Kayseri's manufacture of silk carpets dates from about the 1960s, Mr. Kezelian insisted that Armenians were making silk carpets in Kayseri before World War I. The Armenian carpet manufacturers of Kayseri were so wealthy, he said, that they banded together to donate money to build one of the city's three Armenian churches (the pastirma, or sausage, merchants and the cloth merchants built the other two).

It seems clear, then, that both Armenians and Greeks were heavily involved in the carpet industry before World War I. When all these people left Anatolia, it took the Turks awhile to fill the vacuum. But they finally did, and that's an achievement they can be proud of.

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