



ELQĀNIĀN, ḤABIB

ELQĀNIĀN, ḤABIB (Habib Elghanian; b. Tehran, 23 Farvardin 1291/5 April 1912; executed Tehran, 19 Ordibehešt 1358/9 May 1979), Jewish merchant, industrialist, and philanthropist, who rose from modest beginnings to become one of Iran's leading entrepreneurs. He was born in the 'Udlājān quarter of Tehran, one of eight siblings (seven sons and one daughter). His father, Bābā'i, was a tailor by profession; his mother, known as Kānom Jān, was the daughter of Ḥaim Sāqi, the owner of a grocery store in the Jewish quarter of the capital. He attended the [Alliance Israelite Universelle](#) School, where instruction was in both Persian and French, but he appears to have quit school around the age of 15 to work at the Gilān-e Now Hotel, which was owned by a maternal uncle. After completing military service, he married a maternal first cousin, Māh Solṭān, nicknamed Nikkāh (d. 19 May 1978), in 1936. The marriage resulted in three sons (Kārmel, Sinā, and Fereyduṅ) and one daughter named Mahnāz (Shahrzad Elghanian, interview).

It is not clear when Ḥājj Ḥabib, as he came to be known, went into business on his own, but by 1936, he had his own business office (*hojra*) in the Sarā-ye Ḥājj Moḥammad-Esmā'il in the Tehran bazaar. He imported watches and, following the abolition of the veil (*kašf-e hejāb*) in January 1936, women's hats (Omidvar, interview). In 1936 he and his brothers formed a company, Šerkat-e Sehāmi Elga (Elga Limited Liability Company; abbr. Elga LLC), importing goods initially from Switzerland, then from the United States, where one brother, John, settled in 1943-44, to be joined by a second brother, Nur-Allāh, after World War II. Like many merchants at the time, Ḥājj Ḥabib and his



brothers imported a variety of goods, including watches, textiles, dishware and tableware, crystalware, radios, and sewing machines, for all of which demand existed in Iran (Elghanian, pp. 44-52, 55-57). By the end of World War II, the brothers had already made their first million (Abrahamian, p. 432).

In 1948, alongside the import business, the Elghanian brothers began to produce simple plastic articles, such as combs and buttons, with a single molding machine installed in premises located on Lālazār-e Now Avenue, one of the newer shopping districts in the capital, outside the traditional bazaar. The plastics business expanded rapidly, and by the early 1950s the company, Plāscokār, was operating twenty machines at the Lālazār-e Now site. The factory was moved to larger premises on the Karaj Road outside the capital, where other new factories were being established. By the mid-1960s, 270 machines were operating at the Karaj Road site, using 50-60 tons of PVC (polyvinyl chloride) and other plastics raw materials per day, and turning out a large variety of plastic and melamine goods (plates, dishes, bowls, water pitchers, containers of various kinds, shoes, sandals, toys) to meet the everyday needs of a growing urban class (Elghanian, pp. 72-74; Ataollah Elghanian, interview). Plāscokār went into partnership with a competing plastic goods manufacturer, Leon Sarhaddian and Partners, and set up an extensive distribution network, with a wholesale center in the bazaar and a chain of stores in Tehran. The PVC and other raw materials for the plant, initially imported, later could be secured from the National Iranian Petrochemical Company's Abadan petrochemical plant (Najmabadi, interview).

Like many merchant families, the Elghanians also invested in land, but Ḥājī Ḥabīb broke new ground when he built Iran's first private sector high-rise, the imposing 17-story Plasco building, located at the corner of Eslāmbol and Ferdowsi Avenues. It was an innovative adventure in combining office space and a shopping arcade and became a landmark, much commented on, in the heart of downtown Tehran. Later, Elghanian built a second multi-story office structure, the Aluminum Building on Shah Avenue, where he and his brother Davoud (Dāwud) also had offices.

Elghanian and his brothers also branched out into other manufacturing fields and enterprises. On the eve of the 1979 Revolution, in addition to Plāscokār, the Louleh Shomal Company, which they had established, was manufacturing PVC pipes; the General Steel Company was manufacturing refrigerators and cooking wares in one factory and aluminum profiles and door and window

frames for the booming building trade in another. The brothers acquired a 45-percent interest in Bama (now Bama Mining and Industrial Co.), a lead ore mine and major shares in a textile factory, the Šerkat-e Sehāmi-ye Pust, Pašm, wa Panba, and in the Gol Vegetable Oil Company (Šerkat-e Rowḡan-e Nabāti; Elghanian, pp. 69, 86).

Elghanian fell foul of the campaign that the government launched with much fanfare in 1975 to combat the rising cost of consumer goods. Inflation was then fueled in large part by rapidly increasing oil revenues, growing government spending and investments, rising demand, and the increasing cost of raw materials and labor. Seeking to make an example of a prominent businessman engaged in the manufacture and sale of widely used consumer products, the government arrested Elghanian on 27 July 1975, exiled him to Sanandaj, and then jailed him in Tehran (Levin p. 20; Milani, p. 619; Rahimiyan, p. 400).

Elghanian became a prominent figure in Iran’s Jewish community through his philanthropic work and leadership in community affairs. He was elected chairman of the Jewish Association of Iran ([Anjoman-e Kalimiān-e Irān](#)), the principal representative of the community, in 1959 and held the position for nearly two decades. Earlier, in 1949-50, Elghanian, his brother Dāvud, his maternal uncle, ‘Aziz, and six prominent businessmen and leaders of the community formed the Jewish Charitable and Cultural Association of Tehran ([Anjoman-e Kayriya-ye Farhangi-e Yahd-e Iran](#)). The association focused its attention on the health, welfare, and educational needs of less well-off members of the community. The founders raised funds and contributed their own money to build a large dining hall for the Alliance Israelite School in Tehran and to assist the Alliance schools in other ways. The association also worked closely with the American Joint Distribution Committee, which operated a large school-meal program and provided medical, sanitation, and health services to the community’s impoverished members. “In the mid-1970s, he contributed funds to prevent the closure of a small medical facility, the Kuroš-e Kabir Hospital, run by the Kānun-e Kayrkvāh charitable organization, and turn it into the well-equipped Dr. Sapir Hospital in Tehran. During the revolutionary turmoil, the hospital treated the wounded resulting from the violent clashes between protestors and security forces on Žāla Square on 8 September 1978, which became known as ‘Black Friday’” (Kamran Broukhim, interview; Christian Science Monitor, 27 April 27 2007). He donated his first home at 270 Rāzi Avenue in the Šayḡ Hādi neighborhood of Tehran to Qodsi



Bāher, who converted it into Bāher Hospital and Maternity Facility (Bimārestān wa Zāyešgāh-e Bāher; Elghanian, pp. 64, 74-78). Elghanian backed the Association of Iranian Jewish Women in their successful push in 1965 for reforms that allowed Iranian-Jewish widows and daughters to secure a substantial share of the estate of deceased husbands and fathers. These reforms became binding on all rabbis in Iran and paved the way for the establishment of a rabbinical council to deal with personal status affairs relating to marriage, divorce, and inheritance in the Jewish community (Ezri, p. 489).

Elghanian paid his first visit to Palestine just before or during World War II and then visited it frequently after the establishment of the state of Israel. In 1968, the Elghanian brothers completed construction on the 23-story Shimshon Tower—the first of four skyscrapers that make up the Diamond Exchange in Ramat Gan, outside Tel-Aviv, and Elghanian himself owned other properties and made other investments in Israel” (Interview with Karmel Elghanian; Milani, p. 619). Under Elghanian’s guidance, the Jewish Association arranged for the purchase of the home of former prime minister Aḥmad Qawām (Qawām-al-Saṭāna) on Kāk Avenue in Tehran, which was then leased to the Israeli government and became the office of the Israeli ambassador to Iran (Elghanian, p. 64; Rahimiyan, p. 400).

Elghanian was in the United States in the fall of 1978, as the opposition to the shah was gaining momentum. Against the advice of family and friends, he chose to return to Iran, stopping in Israel on the way. He had business affairs to attend to and, having stayed out of politics, he believed that he had nothing to fear. The men who seized power after the collapse of the monarchy, however, arrested him on 16 March 1979, held him in Qaṣr Prison, and brought him before a revolutionary court on 8 May 1979. In a brief show trial, he was charged with being “a Zionist spy,” “a corrupter on earth” “making war against God and his Prophet,” and being “a friend of God’s foes and a foe of God’s friends.” He was also charged with meeting with Israeli leaders, “the most merciless enemies of God and the Palestinian people” (*Barg-e bāzju’i*, pp. 1-2; Milani, p. 620; Rahimiyan, pp. 400-401). He was sentenced to death and executed before dawn on May 9. The court also ordered the confiscation of his property and that of his immediate family (Milani, pp. 620-21; Rahimiyan, pp. 401). His family was able to retrieve his body only several days later but was banned from holding a memorial service for him. Prevailing conditions made it impossible to bury him, as he had wished, in the family burial grounds in

Damāvand. He was buried in the Beheštia Jewish cemetery in Tehran in the middle of the night.

His execution, the first under the Islamic Republic of a prominent businessman and the first of a Jew, sent shock waves through the business and Jewish communities in Iran and contributed to the exodus from Iran of members of both communities (Mahfar, pp. 191-92). His execution also attracted much international comment. It was condemned by leading newspapers in the United States and Israel and was widely covered in the Swiss, French, and British media. In the United States, both the Senate and the House of Representatives passed resolutions condemning his execution. The Iranian government, calling it interference in Iran's internal affairs, retaliated by organizing demonstrations outside the U.S. embassy in Tehran, where crowds burned effigies of President Carter and Israeli Prime Minister Menachim Begin (*News World Daily*, 26 May 1979; Milani, p. 621). Iran's leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, described the relationship of the United States and Iran "as that of a tyrant with an innocent," and the government told Washington to put off sending an ambassador to Tehran (*New York Times*, 21 May 1979).

The arc of Elghanian's business career was in many ways unique; but it also mirrored the careers of a gifted group of men who emerged from the bazaar and grasped the significance of the transformations taking place in the Iranian economy. These men successfully made the switch from the import business and retail trade into manufacturing, and they rapidly expanded their businesses and sales as oil income created a growing middle and urban class and a market for durable consumer goods. It was typical of this generation of entrepreneurs that they crossed religious and ethnic lines in their business activities. Elghanian's partners in the production and sale of plastic goods were Armenians, and his partners in his vegetable oil and mining ventures were Muslims. He was deeply devoted to Iran and spoke highly of the country of his birth (Levin, p. 23), but that mattered little to the Islamic Republic, which executed him due to his prominence as a Jewish entrepreneur and a friend of Israel, as well as his success as an industrialist under the monarchy.



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