



Adventist Health Education Foundation

Photo courtesy of Ranya Maha.

Adventist Health Education Foundation (AHEF)

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The Adventist Health Education Foundation (AHEF) is a vegetarian food factory operated by the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Matariah, the heart of Cairo, Egypt. Founded in 1976, it continues to function as of this writing (2019).

During the early 1970s, Robert Darnell, Middle East Union president at the time, realized that the Adventist health message could serve as a bridge between Seventh-day Adventists and the indigenous population of Egypt. He urged members to promote a special health message to influence their friends outside the church and suggested an Adventist food factory that could manufacture healthy food to serve the community. The General Conference agreed to provide the funds to purchase the land, build the factory, equip it, and pay the employees.¹

Darnell bought a piece of land in 1972. In 1974, AHEF incorporated in Beirut, Lebanon, the site of the Union headquarters.² The objectives of AHEF were:

1. To provide health education on a private enterprise basis for countries of the Middle East.
2. The manufacture and trade in food products through the establishment of health food factories to supply low-cost, high protein foods and beverages from locally available sources, acceptable to local customs and palates.³

Even though AHEF incorporated in Beirut, leaders decided to establish the factory in Cairo, Egypt. Two major challenges presented themselves before the institution could open its doors. The first was to find experienced management personnel, as the church in the Middle East did not have anyone qualified for this responsibility. The union leadership ultimately asked Habib Banna to serve as general manager and Mokhtar Nashed as production manager.⁴ The factory planned to commence production at the end of July 1977.⁵

The second major challenge presented itself a short while later. The Meals for Millions Foundation, based in Santa Monica, California, had been closely involved with the project during its first three years, and had committed to funding all the machinery necessary for establishing a full liquid soymilk line. However, early in 1977, the Meals for Millions Foundation informed the Middle East Union that they were unable to pay for the machinery.⁶ However, the Afro-Mideast Division averted the crisis when it stepped in to provide funds for the equipment of the new food factory. By May 1, 1977, the factory became operational. In order to supplement the finances of the factory, management had hundreds of rose bushes and various vegetable crops planted outside the building. They were then harvested and sold to the community.⁷ By April of 1978, after having encountered and surmounted many difficulties, the factory began production in Matariah, Cairo.⁸ Writes Jack Mahon:

Secondary products of the factory, such as spreads made from home-grown peanuts and soybeans, are being absorbed by an eager market as fast as they can be produced... In particular the soymilk will benefit the schoolchildren, who thus will receive a high-protein diet supplement in a land that has to import much of its animal protein at comparatively high cost... Another product will be added to the factory line... an infant formula.⁹

Gradually the work began to grow.¹⁰ Management reports indicated that “success in production and marketing gave early indication that Matariah was realizing its role as an Adventist ambassador-at-large, first to the Egyptian nation, and later, on the wings of its export program, to the whole of the Middle East.”¹¹

In early 1979 the factory launched the Liquid Soymilk line. However, many technical difficulties arose shortly afterward, putting production temporarily on hold. Management made every effort to overcome the difficulties. A. C. Cree from Loma Linda spent two months struggling with the problem, but eventually the company had to withdraw the product from the market.¹²

By mid-1981 the Afro-Mideast Division wanted to sell the factory to an independent party. The officers of the Middle East Union (MEU), however, did not agree, as they felt the food factory had an important role to play in the Middle East in regard to health.¹³ Nashed and the other personnel also strongly supported the continuation of the factory and convinced church leaders to allow one year to develop an operating plan.¹⁴ They decided that they would spend 1982 testing and rethinking goals, then revisit their objectives at the end of the year.

Nashed received authorization to develop other products. He bought fifty kilograms of peanuts and began to make peanut butter. When he had completely sold it, he would buy more peanuts until that stock was depleted.¹⁵ Other products that emerged during the next few months included chips, honey, tahini, mayonnaise, and sunup (powder juice).¹⁶ Special efforts focused on developing soymilk in powder form. The product eventually formulated came in three flavors: chocolate, strawberry, and banana, and was sold as a milkshake in the summer and a hot drink in the winter.¹⁷

In January 1982 the factory began with 17 employees. By the end of the year, the workforce shrank to 12. As the operation acquired additional machinery, the smaller workforce not only saved on costs, but also improved the efficiency in the use of labor resources. Because the factory was now making a small net profit, the officers at MEU believed that it had “Come of Age.”¹⁸ At this time it stopped receiving any financial assistance from the MEU. With the small profits they were making, management continued until they were completely self-supporting. Eventually, they bought more new machines, paid the remaining cost of the land, and constructed a new factory building.¹⁹

Years later, with the profits from the AHEF, the church was able to remodel the first floor of the Field office building in Roxy, and currently (2019) operates a Healthy Lifestyle Center (HLC). The HLC is based on the philosophy of Weimar and the Oklahoma Lifestyle Center, offering exercise classes, massage, health lectures

and healthy cooking classes.²⁰

Prominent names and entities connected with AHEF over the years include:

1. Robert Darnell, MEU president who began the project.
2. Manoug Nazirian, MEU president who supported Mokhtar Nashed during the time the division sought to close the facility.
3. Gerald Karst and Sven Jensen who later encouraged the continuation of AHEF.
4. The Egypt Field executive committee members who were very supportive.
5. Mokhtar Nashed, production manager for the first three years and then general manager from around 1978 until the present (2020).

In 2019 AHEF had 104 items in regular production. The main ones are: various flavored peanut kinds of butter, a variety of soya milk flavors, mayonnaise designed for special dietary needs, flavored mustards, salad dressings, sauces, vegetarian meat analogue products, flavored cheese sauces, and powdered juice.

Since the products are unique and meet the special dietary needs of the Christian community in Egypt, AHEF has developed an excellent working relationship with its leaders. AHEF products are available at monasteries, churches, and other Christian institutions throughout Egypt. They also have developed a good working relationship with the Egyptian Health Ministry.

In addition to distributing their products to a large number of supermarket chains throughout Egypt, retailers sometimes purchase products from AHEF and export them to a variety of Arab countries. The factory employs approximately 44 employees. During peak seasons, they routinely volunteer to work overtime to meet production needs.

Since 2011 the currency exchange rate has fluctuated significantly in Egypt. Yet, even with the dramatic monetary swings, AHEF has been able to remain self-supporting with an increase in profits. Despite the rising costs of importing and processing soybeans for the soymilk, the quality of the product has not lessened. AHEF is continuing to reach out to the surrounding community, showing them a better way to live.

SOURCES

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Mahon, Jack. "Cairo Factory Starts Production." *ARH* April 27, 1978, 31.

Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia. Second rev. ed. Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1996. S.v. "Adventist Health Education Foundation."

NOTES

1. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, rev. ed., (1996), s.v. "Adventist Health Education Foundation."
2. AHEF became a branch of the corporation already established and licensed in Lebanon, probably to simplify legal proceedings.
3. Middle East Union of Seventh-day Adventists (MEU), "Adventist Health Education Foundation Annual Board Meeting Minutes," (Report, "A Brief History"), (Beirut, Lebanon: Middle East Union, December 8, 1982), 13.
4. *Ibid.*, 14.
5. Alf Lohne, "Cairo Factory to Open Soon," *ARH*, July 14, 1977, 4.
6. Middle East Union, 14.
7. Habib Banna, "Setback Fails to Stop Progress on Cairo Factory," *ARH*, March 3, 1977, 31.
8. Jack Mahon, "Cairo Factory Starts Production," *ARH*, April 27, 1978, 31.
9. *Ibid.*, 31.
10. Mokhtar Nashed, interviewed by Ranya Maher and Jihan Abdel Said, Cairo, Egypt, February 2019.
11. Habib Banna, 31.
12. Middle East Union, 13.
13. *Ibid.*, 13.
14. Mokhtar Nashed, interviewed by Ranya Maher and Jihan Abdel Said, Cairo, Egypt, February 2019.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Middle East Union, 14.

17. Ibid., 14.

18. Ibid., 14.

19. Mokhtar Nashed, interviewed by Ranya Maher and Jihan Abdel Said, Cairo, Egypt, February 2019.

20. Ibid.

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