ALEPPO B.C. (BEFORE THE CONFLICT)

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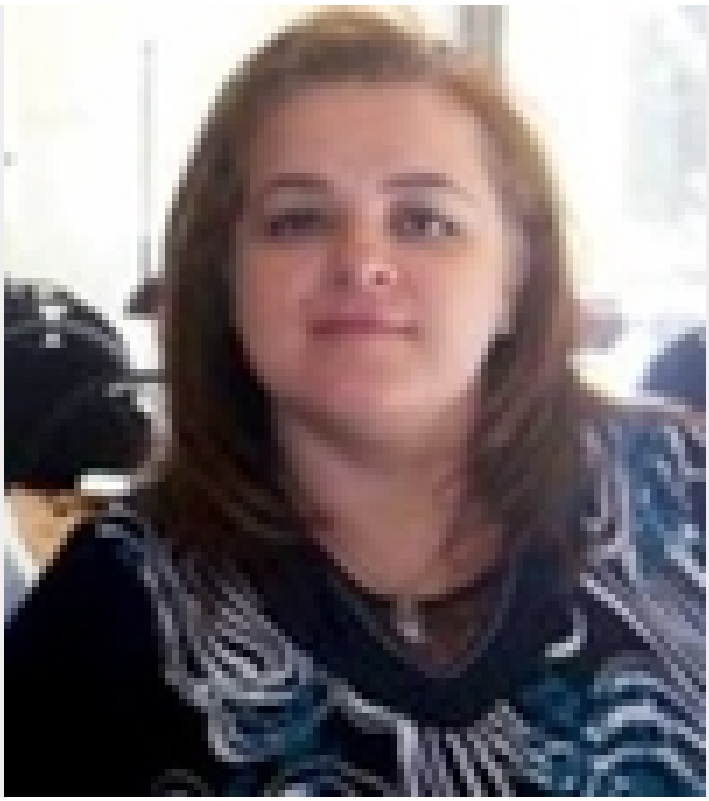

Category: Opinions

by Tamar Kasparian-Arslanian, Kantsasar, Aleppo
Translated by Vahe H. Apelian, 14 July 2014

The commotion from a neighboring apartment puzzled us all. Given the warring situation in Aleppo our immediate assumption was that it was an explosion. But it turned out that workers were dismantling the inner walls of the apartment. The residence had been vacant for many years. Before the conflict such a noise wouldn't have given rise to our curiosity, but nowadays, driven by myriad considerations, we hurried to inquire about the unexpected occurrence. I got in touch with neighbors, called people here and there until I learned the cause of the noise. It turned out that the apartment was sold and was simply being renovated. Before the conflict that information would have been sufficient, but not now.

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Nowadays it's very important to know who are the new owners who will be our neighbors, what kind of people are they, from which neighborhood are they moving in and why are they moving to our neighborhood. The financial health of people is also questioned these days. Who after all, under the prevailing conditions, could afford to invest so much money to purchase a house? The dust and debris resulting from the renovation would have raised the ire of the neighbors before the conflict but instead they have become a source of inspiration to us all. Newlyweds were to move there. News of weddings and their festivities these days are reminders to us that we also had dreams and aspirations for a brighter future before the conflict.

The conflict has become a watershed for the residents of Aleppo and “before the conflict” has become an inevitable everyday conversational term. Without being conscious of it, we speak of a prosperous past and a present in ruins without realizing that a mere three years span the two. “That was before the conflict. Nowadays those prices don't exist anymore," says the seller. "Before the war, yogurt was yogurt but nowadays you are selling us taan, water-diluted yogurt drink, instead,” complains the shopper. “Before the war we knew what kind of meat we were eating. They were

certified by the health department. Nowadays, we do not know the source of the meat," says a shopper at the butcher's shop.

Before the conflict medications for anxiety and tension were prescribed only to those who needed them. Nowadays, they are inseparable companions to most. "Take a Lexotan pill and you will hear no noise or bombs and you will continue sleeping soundly," residents advise each other.

Before the conflict I had not been able to figure out why pedestrians walked in the middle of the street, ignoring the traffic. Were they, I had thought, trying to avoid the uneven sidewalks or were keen on displaying their fashionable dresses? Nowadays, all of us walk along the walls, if we find a wall that is still standing, simply to protect ourselves from unexpected bombs. "Always walk looking in front of you," used to be the counsel. Nowadays, we have to remain alert to bombs, bullets and even bricks falling from the sky.

Before the conflict, we organized events to keep the next generation abreast of our culture and to promote our millennia-old culture to the non-Armenian residents of the city. Nowadays, they serve as proof to us that we are still treading along and to help boost the realization in us that we remain steadfast. These cultural events also serve as much needed medicine to distract us from our bitter reality and transport us to the warm and soothing embrace of the Aleppo of yesteryear. "This was a much needed change," we say as we leave the hall.

Before the conflict a school day-off was a time of joy. Nowadays, it's an omen for possible hazards that cause for further worry. When we used to read the "Ծիլեր" (Blossoms) periodical of the elementary classes of the Karen Yeppe Jemaran (school), we used to see innocent mischief, jokes, humor, and always a depiction of future dreams. Nowadays, we read of fear, bombs, conflict, distress, martyrs, immigration, and a longing for the return to the former building of the school. Before the conflict, we used to encourage our youth to assemble and would take pride in seeing them come together to discuss issues pertaining to the Armenian nation. We used to even allow them hold meetings well into the late night. Nowadays, mothers invariably say: "We pray for and thank God when all the family members are home in the evening…"

The pre-conflict merchants and shop-owners have become vendors on sidewalks and accomplished artisans and craftsmen will do any job these days to earn a living.

Before the conflict people skipped physical exercise or could not find time for it. Nowadays, our daily life is one long exercise. We have to hurry to the bakery early in the morning and after waiting there for few hours to get bread. We need to hurry to the nearby schoolyard to collect water in containers and carry them to our homes, all the way exercising our shoulders and arms. We also need to carry to and from the gas canisters we need for cooking, just as we carry all other daily necessities. No wonder the exercise gyms are hurting.

Before the conflict the residents of Aleppo, like people everywhere, thought that security and happiness rested in the acquisition of luxurious houses, beautiful cars and exquisite furnishing…and the coveting of even more. Nowadays, a small room for a shelter has acquired similar status. The exquisite pieces of home furnishing we once selected with meticulous scrutiny have now become cause of concern… of being looted when the homeowner is away briefly. They also have become unforgettable memories for those who have left the city. And for those who continue to live in their houses, they remain unused and reminders of happier times.

We had not critically evaluated ourselves before the conflict. We had followed the news of conflicts in the other Middle Eastern countries and expressed our amazement as to the resilience of their citizens. “Should that happen here, we would not last….” we would say to ourselves. Now that it has happened here as well, the instinct to cling on to life has proven to be supreme.

We did not know how patient, how steadfast and how tolerant we were. We had no inkling that Aleppo residents would become living legends…