

ALEPPO STUDENTS IN WARTIME

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By Arda Der Hagopian, March 2014

Translated by Vahe H. Apelian

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It is war. Rockets and bullets, fear and anxiety, increase in cost of living and in unemployment, interruption in electricity and running water, danger, and unusual encounters are all daily realities. But in spite of these, students hurry to school in the morning.

Like other institutions, the Armenian schools bear the brunt of the war to the detriment of the students.

I, as well as many others, often wonder how do students carry on their scholastic work in war conditions. Concerned over the welfare of Aleppo students, I headed to Karen Jeppe Armenian Secondary School and met its Principal Hagop Kilejian.

"The 2013-2014 scholastic year resumed on schedule, unlike last year," said the principal. "Taking into consideration the prevailing conditions and the social and financial adverse situations the families are experiencing, we find the students orderly. We do not face undue disciplinary issues," said Mr. Kilejian. "The major issue we face is catching up on materials that were to be taught last year but were not because of the disruption of the academic year that contributed to the students not doing as well in their exams," the principal added.

The boys and girls of the grade 11 seconded the principal's observations. "There were instructional materials in Arabic and in math that should have been given to us last year," said one of the students.

"At the beginning of this academic year the teachers explained to us the materials that we should have covered in these subjects last year, when we were in grade 10. We felt that we needed more time and instruction to cover the materials we had lost," she said. To make up for the lost instructional material, the administration and the teaching staff instituted additional classes. These take place after hours for a token fee.

Along with security concerns, the major issue facing Aleppo students is the frequent interruption of electricity. This has become unbearable, the students say. The situation has a profound and adverse effect on the students. It was interesting to note the way students coped with the situation. "It's true that we do meet such difficulties, but we are able to overcome them. It is not much of an issue to prepare for our exams by studying in candlelight," said a student. Anna Maria Barsoumian and Kevork Yeghayan said that they take the daylight time into consideration and strive to finish their assignments before darkness sets. Nina Mouradian, a grade 8 student, had a different opinion. She said: "The majority of the students in class have no inclination to study. The disruption of the electricity is a major concern for all. Every morning the students ask each other whether they had electricity the previous day."

Nina and the rest of the students in grades 7 and 8 dream of attending the famed Karen Jeppe Armenian College. However, the campus remains closed because of security concerns. The students of Karen Jeppe hold their classes at the Gulbenkian School.

Student councilor Alice Melkonian emphasizes that change adversely affects the psychological well-being of students. "Changing the location of the school, the departure of some of the classmates, changes in the class hours and recess times, all have serious adverse impact on the psychological well-being of the students," she said.

Along with issues related to their teenage years, the students face challenges that pertain to meeting necessities of every day life such as obtaining bread, organizing household chores around  the availability of electricity, storing water for daily needs and other necessities. Ani Mouradian,

Nina's mother, is aware of the changes in her children's internal life and outlook. She never stops telling them to be patient. "The children do the best they can. I am satisfied with their behavior. It goes without saying that when a student lives in comfort and leaves the cozy home to go to school in the morning he or she would do better in exams," she observes. She tells her children that since they live in Aleppo they have to be patient and bear with the rest the adverse situation and make the best of it.

Overcoming the difficulties brought about by the war is now engrained in the grade 11 students. They said that during psychology classes they discuss, with their teacher, the impact of the war on their psyche and reach out, help and encourage one other. "Every city can experience such things. Therefore we should not hate this city," says Garo Avakian. Araz Chakrian said that she and her friends often organize social events to distract themselves from the war atmosphere.

Takouhie Melkonian related the panic that prevailed in the school during the very first explosions. "All the students were in shock, but nowadays myriad battle sounds have become routine for us," she said. "If some students get scared in the class, we immediately try to change the atmosphere. The sounds of gunshot during the burial of the martyrs often disrupt our classes. We have all become accustomed to these sounds," she explained.

Miss Melkonian added that safety precautionary measures have been instituted in the school and that the students are instructed what to do when the alarm sounds in the school premises.

Despite adverse conditions, the students looked to the future with hope and faith for better times. What is noticeable to an observer is the change from the usual behavior of teenagers. They have acquired maturity and wisdom well beyond their years. They have all understood that in war young and old face difficulties.

One student summarized the thoughts and feeling of his fellow students. "We do not have the groupings we had once. Instead we have become one big group. The bad conditions became reasons for us to know each other better and to trust each other. Our character has changed. We find ourselves grown up ten years. We understand our parents much better now. We have become more cognizant and appreciative of the efforts our parents make to keep the families going. Nowadays we give thank to God for everything," he said.

I reflected about Principal Kilejian's words that one of the fundamental characters of Armenians is to do better than expected under adverse conditions. It became apparent to me that our instinctive ability to adapt to the times and to overcome adversity is the ultimate winner of the war. It also became obvious to me that along with the customary classroom instructional materials, the students have learned many facts about life that could only be taught in a city called *Haleb*.

