GLORIOUS ARMENIAN ALEPPO

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Levon Sharoyan, Translated and abridged by **Vahe H. Apelian**

Հայերէն բնագրին համար խփել

Ո՞ւր Կը Կայանայ Հալէպահայ Գաղութին Արժէքը

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The unprecedented turn of events in the last three years due to the Syrian Civil War and especially the deliberate destruction of Kessab and of the Aleppo Armenian neighborhood of Nor Kyugh, focused the attention of the Diaspora on the “Mother Diaspora Community”, the “Dreamy Haleb”[1,2]. Armenians began lamenting the possible loss of the community. Armenian Diaspora was mobilized to save its Haleb community and to safeguard its values, but alas …”after breakage”[3]…

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What were the characteristics of this community that the Diaspora is intent on safeguarding? It is one of life’s unmistakable orders to appreciate the value of something after its loss. But let us, for a moment, ponder about the values of the Haleb community. What were its characteristics? What did

the Haleb Armenian community offer that the others do not as well? I will present a cursory listing of these characteristics and let readers do the critical and in-depth evaluation.

Let us begin the with community's religious and church life.

1. Haleb hosts eleven Christian denominations, among them the three mainstream Armenian denominations: Apostolic, Catholic and Evangelical. Each denomination is organized and active. The religious and church lives of the Haleb Armenian community has always been exemplary. The Holy Forty Martyrs Church of the Armenian Apostolic denomination dates more than five hundred years. Our churches have always been filled to capacity on Sundays and on holidays. Should you ever have attended the early mass during the holidays you would have remained mesmerized by our all-volunteer large choirs. I would like to emphasize "volunteer" because in Europe and in the United States even the scribes (դպիրներ) are paid. Weddings and baptisms had to be booked months in advance because there were so many them. I insist that the Haleb Armenian community's rich and traditional church life may have come second only to Istanbul's. We had a very rich church life here. No wonder that the seminarians in Antelias liked to come to Aleppo to perform mass. No other Armenian community could possibly have matched the regal reception the community extended to the visiting catholicos during his pontifical visit.

2. The Organizational Structure of the Community.

The organizational structure of the Aleppo Armenian community has passed on from one generation to the next unchanged for almost 150 years. It is based on the fundamental tenants of the Armenian National Constitution adopted in Istanbul in 1863. Accordingly, the Armenian Apostolic Church National Prelacy is the official body that represents the Armenian community to the government and is its nerve center and trigger. The prelate, in addition to being the spiritual head of the community, acts as its temporal leader and thus shoulders dual responsibilities. This is a unique form of representation that has been inherited from the Ottoman days. It has advantages because it centralizes the administration of the community and its dealing as well as it establishes bilateral relations with the government. If you were to look carefully at the administration of the National Prelacy of Aleppo you would find that it is a veritable government within a government. It's interesting to note that at one time Sultan Abdul Hamid II suspended the Armenian National Constitution for this very same reason... that it acted much like a government within a government.

The legislative body of the National Prelacy is the National Representative Assembly. As the name indicates, the community elects its members. This body appoints and oversees executive boards in matters of education and administration of schools under its jurisdiction, religious education, judicial, financial, social services, real estate holdings and others. The effectiveness by which the

Haleb community is governed can stir the envy of not only the other Armenian communities but also local Christian and Muslim communities: Compare the functioning of the Armenian community of Aleppo with those in North America, Latin America, France, Britain and Australia... and you will find that the Aleppo Armenian community is more effectively organized and administered.

The National Prelacy is the backbone of the community. Our elders speak of a time when the community was even more vibrant. I remember reading an interesting article by Antranig Dzarougian in his "Nayiri" weekly where he reminisced, as a young reporter in '40s, about attending the open-door deliberations of the National Representative Assembly where opposing viewpoints would form a consensus on how to run the community.

With the passing decades much water has flown under the proverbial bridge. The picture nowadays may not be the same but the organizational structure of the Armenian community in Aleppo is one of its distinguishing characteristics and is worth preserving and emulating.

3. Our Unmatched Schools

Can Haleb breathe, let alone survive, without its schools? Such a scenario is impossible to imagine. Haleb loses its glitter without its schools and its vivifying graduates. We would not be mistaken in stating that the Armenian schools are the Aleppo community's very lungs. Without them we would suffocate. And what glorious schools we have: the Karen Yeppe Armenian College (Քարէն Եփփէ Ազգ. Ճեմարան), the historical Haigazian (Հայկազեան) and Sahagian (Սահակեան) schools, the more recently built Gulbenkian (Կիւլպէնկեան) and Grtasirats High School (Կրթասիրաց-Չէմպէրճեան) school, the A.G.B.U. Lazar Nadjarian-Calouste Gulbenkian Armenian Central High School (Լազար Նաճարեան), the Cilician (Giligian) (Կիլիկեան) Armenian High School, the Mekhatarian (Մխիթարեան) school and others.

For Haleb Armenians their homely and lovely community life is best illustrated through the unfolding of the academic year. We witness the buses of the Armenian schools, each bearing in large Armenian characters the name of the school, crisscross the city from one neighborhood to next, traversing the thoroughfares of the city collecting the students to bring them to school.

Throughout that season I remain overwhelmed by burst of emotions at the scene. Our schools are much like beehives, where every morning bees enter and work diligently to produce honey. The Haleb honey is just that, authentic and unadulterated. We have always shared our honey generously with our blood relatives overseas. Our honey is sufficient for all. Diaspora communities, big or small, have their schools, in Istanbul, Beirut, Tehran, Cairo, Athens, Marseilles, Paris, Los Angeles, Montreal, Sydney, and Buenos Aires. I will muster the courage and state that the Armenian schools in these cities cannot possibly compete with ours in imparting to their students an Armenian education. Can

you possibly name an Armenian Diaspora high school that can equal the Karen Yeppe Jemaran? Could you point to any other Armenian Diaspora high school that had the same pre-Civil War enrollment of 1,400 students we had at the A.G.B.U. Nazarian-Gulbenkain Central High School?

Speaking Armenian in schools, however changed these days, is still predominant among our students even out of school. Some may claim that the Education Ministry of Syria has curtailed the number of classes in Armenian language. In my modest opinion that allegation is not devoid of lapses in judgment. The Armenian language and literature have always maintained their rightful place in the overcrowded curriculum of our schools. These subjects are properly taught with much care. We have some schools that have voluntarily abrogated the educational privileges granted to them and have curtailed the number of such classes or have completely eliminated some. It would be unproductive to dwell on this phenomenon now.

The raging destructive war in Syria is testing the Armenian schools in ways they have not been tested before. Their very existence is at stake, especially due to the economic collapse. The situation is alarming and its consequences dire. It is vital to assist the Haleb Armenian schools financially so that they, as the beehives of the community, continue to produce honey.

4. An Armenian Diaspora Treasure Chest.

Let us take a rapid trip through the Armenian neighborhoods of Aleppo and visit our social clubs. We will find the names of these clubs in a bilingual inscription at their entrances: Aram Manougian People's Home, A.G.B.U. Tekeyan Cultural Association, Kermanig-Vasbouragan Cultural Association, Ourfa Compatriotic Cultural Association, and tens of others such associations and social clubs.

All of these associations have extended an open arm to embrace our Armenian compatriots who, having graduated from the local Armenian schools, come to socialize under their roofs to maintain their umbilical cord with their nation. The denominational affiliation and the political partisan leaning of the person do not matter, neither do the types of interest a person has for there is an Armenian association and a social club for the person.

Do you like to sing? Then come and join the Hamzakayin's "Zvartnots" choir.

Do you have acting talents? Then A.G.B.U.'s "Atamian" theatrical group or "Zavarian" will be welcoming you.

Are you interested in dancing? There are two to three dance groups for you.

Is your interest to serve the Armenian literature? Then you may join the Syrian-Armenian Writers'

group monthly meetings.

Are you interested in or do you want to hone your skills in painting or photography? You may join “Arshile Gorky” or “Sarian” art academies.

Are you athletic? Knock H.M.E.M’s door and it will be open for you.

Are you a scout or do you like to bring your child as one? You have the options of having your children to tough it out with excursions and camps organized by H.M.M’s or H.M.E.M’s athletic clubs.

Do you want to contribute to the current youth movements? Syrian Youth Association, and *Dkhrouny* clubs are there for you.

Are you interested in preserving your grandparents’ heritage? Among many you have the option to join, Marash, Kilis, Dikranagerd, Zeytoun, Daron, Ourfa compatriotic organizations.

Are you interested to render social services? Then Syrian Armenian Relief Organization might be the place for you.

Haleb Armenians often have to choose from the many concurrently ongoing events. All these events take place in splendid social halls that we, as a community own, the likes of which other local organizations do not have. Our halls get filled to capacity.

In a city of 4-million residents, we as Armenians, present a unique communal picture. The non-Armenian communities with whom we co-habit have not been able to build what we have built and hence do not have the means to offer to their community what we can. That is why Haleb has become the ideal community to preserve the Armenian heritage where an Armenian is born as one and is interred as one.

No wonder the Haleb communal life stirred the imagination of Dzarougian who penned his recollection in “Dreamy Haleb”. The newly-appointed director of the AMAA (Armenian Missionary Association of America) Zaven Khanjian was born and raised in Haleb. He also penned his memoirs in the recent "Aleppo, First Station" about growing up in the city. Undoubtedly, the Aleppo Armenian community is the “Little Armenia” of the Diaspora, even though it has not been named so in an official capacity.

Indeed, the Armenian Diaspora has all the reasons to be alarmed by the ongoing war in Syria whose consequences may be disastrous to the once-thriving Armenian community of Aleppo and by extension to the beehive it was that provided bees and honey to the other Diaspora communities.

1. Armenians refer to the city of Aleppo in Syria as Haleb.
2. In reference to the title of a popular book of short stories by **Antanig Zarougian** depicting the Armenian communal life in Aleppo of yesteryears.
3. Refers to the title of a story by eminent Armenian writer **Krikor Zohrab** (1861–1915).