



ALEPPO COLLEGE

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Aleppo College was the direct descendent of the Central Turkey College of Aintab, Turkey which was established in 1876 by the American Board of Commissioners. The circumstance that led to its relocation in Aleppo was the Armenian Genocide which was

perpetrated by the Ottoman Empire at the beginning of the Twentieth Century. The Central College closed its doors in Aintab and reopened them in Aleppo, Syria in 1924 under the name of the Boys High School. A similar school, called the North Syrian School for Boys, was established in Aleppo in 1927 by the Presbyterian Mission. In 1937, the two schools merged and took the name of Aleppo College. In 1949, the College moved from the centre of Aleppo to a large campus on the western edge of the city. The Mission of the College, as adopted by the Board of Managers in 1928 and 1929, states that "The mission is the thorough education of young men for spiritual leadership and for service to society, continuing the work of Central Turkey College founded at Aintab, Turkey in 1876. A secondary but important purpose shall be the encouragement of true science and civilization generally."

The Armenian connection was preserved not only by the American administration which came from Turkey but also by such teachers as Mihran Baligian and Nishan Saatjian, who helped nurse the small school which was struggling in its rented quarters in the Baghdad Train Station district. These teachers were graduates of Central Turkey College, survived the genocide, and served Aleppo College for almost fifty years; they often reminded us of the genocide and the need to excel in our studies. I had the privilege of learning from both of them: Mr Saatjian taught Armenian language and literature to all Armenian students. Mr. Baligian taught geography and health science. Since I was both a student and then a faculty member at Aleppo College, I will divide my memoir into two parts: student days and faculty days.

I. STUDENT DAYS 1954-57

Most of my Armenian classmates were first generation descendants of genocide survivors, were raised under modest conditions and tended to be reserved and defensive. The Aleppo College environment offered these students the opportunity to be free, express themselves and grow not only

intellectually and morally but also emotionally and socially. Inside the classroom, the teachers were demanding but also supportive. There was a healthy mix of American, Arab, and Armenian teachers both young and old. All the classes were taught in English except the Armenian, Arabic, and French language classes. There was a science lab for chemistry and another for physics, both of which were well equipped.

To grow socially students had the opportunity to study, work, and play with students from various economic, religious and ethnic backgrounds. Some of us were able to break out of our own ethnic cocoons, mingle with others and make lasting friendships. There were many clubs which also contributed to the social growth and development of students' talents. For example, the glee club, which was led by Mr. Weaver, was a men's chorus whose repertoire included works by Bach, Hayden, and Brahms, just to mention a few. The glee club gave performances not only in Aleppo but also travelled to Lebanon and gave concerts in Tripoli, Beirut, and Sidon. During the Christmas Season the girls' choir joined the boys' choir and gave memorable performances at Emmanuel Armenian Evangelical Church. The drama club put on major productions such as the Mikado, South Pacific, and Agatha Christie's Mystery plays. I recall participating in an Arabic epic drama from the pre-Islamic period in which boys had to play the roles of females because the Ministry of Education did not allow mixed performances. In addition to these clubs, we had photography, science, chess, and archery for the girls, horse riding, stage craft, and the Student Christian Organization. Students who came from a Christian background attended chapel twice a week in the auditorium, which could seat over 200 people. On Sunday evenings, there was a chapel service on campus for the students, campus families, day students that were brought by the school bus and American families who resided in Aleppo.

The beautiful, large campus included the Girls High School and the Boys High School; the latter offered six years of high school work and the first two years of college, which was attended by both men and women. In addition to the boarding and academic facilities such as large, sunny classrooms and libraries, there were houses for some of the faculty and administration. The campus had its little forest of Aleppo pine trees in which grew wild tulips and anemones during spring time. The forest was home to native hamsters. Aleppo College had a full athletic program which included soccer, basketball, volleyball, baseball, and swimming. Since there was only one athletic director, students had to learn, prepare lesson plans from books in the library and teach other members of the team various rules and techniques of the games.

The academic program was totally in English, but as the Syrian Ministry of Education came to power, it stipulated that the Arabic speaking students had

to sit for the government exams in the ninth and twelfth grades. For a few years Armenian students, who were the largest minority, were exempt from these exams unless they chose to take the Arabic program; later on all had to sit for the Arabic exams. After the ninth grade students began to choose their areas of specialization; some became science majors while others choose the arts major. In my freshman year, girls were allowed to attend our classes; this was a break in the Syrian tradition of segregation.



Girls' basketball team



Theatre Group

The location of the College outside the city necessitated a long commute unless one was staying at the boarding department, which was only for boys. The College had buses which collected students from all districts. Those who could not afford paying for this privilege had to take public transportation which, for those coming from the Armenian districts of Nor Kiugh and Suleimanieh, meant taking two buses. To get to school by 8:00 a.m., students had to leave home at 6:30 a.m. This was a challenging endeavour because at that hour everybody was trying to get to work or to school. Some brave souls cycled up to the campus, which was at the end of a steep climb, and on the way they had to deal with pedestrians, carts driven by donkeys or cars.

Being a student in Aleppo College was not only a privilege but a transformative experience for every student who was open to learning from and interacting with others. Attending school was a pleasure and a place to experiment with new ideas and styles of life; indeed a place of discovering and becoming who you are today. I recall in my freshman year we took Introduction to Psychology from Mr. Miller, and at the beginning of the next semester we students, about eight of us, formed an informal club that met at noon to discuss Freud and Adler with our English teacher, Mr. Evrard. Aleppo College gave the students wings not only to fly but to soar to high levels of professionalism! Many of its alumni became doctors, lawyers, engineers, teachers, ministers, and businessmen.

II. FACULTY DAYS 1963-66

On the first weekend of January 1963, my mother and I moved to an apartment on campus with the expectation that Monday morning I would start

teaching religion courses to the boys' and girls' schools. My load included teaching 28 periods a week to over 500 Christian students. With a heavy sense of responsibility and some apprehension, I went to school but after a short time returned home because classes were cancelled due to political upheavals. Going to school and returning shortly after became a routine for two weeks! On the third Monday I went to school but did not return till noon. When I got home my mother asked, "Where were you?" She had assumed my work lasted an hour a day!

Teaching eighth to twelfth grade classes which had 25-30 students per class was a challenge that demanded all my knowledge, experience and creativity. In addition, many of the classes did not have textbooks, so we had to develop reading material, in addition to the Bible, by typing on stencils and running copies for the students. I was also in charge of the chapel at the Boys School and the Christian Students Association. The latter started a new tradition of putting on plays during the Easter Season both in Arabic and English for the students and for the parents.



Graduation ceremony



Receiving the High School diploma

In the summer of 1963, I got married to Pauline Alexanian (who worked as an English teacher from 1963 to 1965) and the three of us (including my mother) moved to the Staff House which was a two-storey building occupied by singles or couples with no children; all were missionaries from the USA. There was a warm comradery among us, and we celebrated many happy occasions together. For example to wish one of the faculty a happy birthday, a camel, with a "happy birthday" sign hanging on its neck was brought early in the morning to her bay window. Home economics students were brought into our homes to show them new concepts of home décor. One day a box of old cutlery was brought into the Staff House and we were told to help ourselves. Being newly married, we had our own new set of cutlery but out of curiosity when I looked into the box. I noticed some forks with the word "Seminary" engraved on them. I thought these must belong to one of our seminaries in Turkey; I collected them, not knowing what we would do with them. Years after, when I was at Haigazian University and we were establishing a heritage

display in the Derian Library, the forks were donated to this collection of memorabilia.

Lacking interactive media and audio-visual aids, teaching religion in those days depended on the teacher's ability to make the subject interesting and meaningful. In order to stimulate the tenth grade Church History class, I began to take them to archaeological sites; after all we were living in the "Bible Lands." The closest location with a Christian historical significance was the monastery complex of St Simeon the Stylites, which was about 30 kilometres away from Aleppo. Later on we expanded our visits to the surrounding villages, where we would encounter Byzantine Cathedrals without a roof but a lot of Christian symbolism and Greek writings. On one of these trips, I recall, one of the students discovered something that surprised him and he exclaimed, "So, this was a Christian land!"

With experience came confidence, so it was decided to go further east of Aleppo to the sites of Mari and Dura-Europos in Mesopotamia. The bus left the city before dawn and headed towards Der Zor, beyond which extended the Syrian Desert, empty except for some shepherds with their sheep. This being an educational trip, students were required to make a study of these sites and write small reports on each city. Mari had a Ziggurat which was like the tower of Babel and Dura-Europos housed the oldest synagogue in the world. A few hours from Der Zor our attention was focused on finding Mari, but we could not find it; we kept going till we arrived at a military checkpoint. It turned out to be the Iraqi-Syrian border; we were told to go back and look for the Tel Hariri sign, which was about 7 miles from the border. Upon finding the site, we poured out of the bus, exhausted to say the least, and after refreshing ourselves with the cold waters of the Euphrates River, we started looking for the Ziggurat. Finally, as we were about to leave feeling disappointed, we noticed that a large, flat elevated structure which we had seen as we came in was the base of the Ziggurat; erosion had taken most of its top.

To help the students get over their home sickness, the faculty families on campus took turn in hosting them on Friday nights for cookies and games. These were wonderful occasions for the students to have fun and games and to bond with the faculty and staff families, creating lasting friendships that were beyond the classroom experience. We all loved these days.

The Girls' School, being smaller in size and mostly Armenian, had its own activities which were unique to their campus. One activity was the May Day celebration, which included square dances and the Maypole dance; it culminated in the election of the year's Queen. During the Christmas Season, Santa would come and distribute gifts. One year he entered the school lobby riding on a donkey which was borrowed for the occasion from the

neighbouring shepherd family, which also provided us with fresh sheep's milk and eggs.

Although Aleppo College did not offer summer school, it did offer its famous, refreshing pool which was fed from a fresh water well. The pool provided a healthy recreational and social environment to those who could afford a small fee. It continued to be a community centre for the students, faculty, and alumni during the summer. The pool was not restricted but had separate times for the boys and girls.

The end of the school year after the graduation ceremonies, which were held outdoors, included a special celebration by the faculty and staff. They would gather in the yard of one of the campus families and have a closing party with food, singing, folk dancing, and acknowledgment and good wishes to those who were leaving or retiring. In the summer of 1966 it was my turn to say goodbye because I had decided to continue my graduate studies in the USA. We left with happy memories and lasting friendships.

The Alumni of both schools, although scattered around the world, continue to keep in touch with each other as individuals and as groups. For example, in Los Angeles the Alumni of the Girls' School continued for years to organize picnics in one of the public parks in Glendale. The food was donated by the participants, and the proceeds were sent to Aleppo to help needy students. On Facebook, there is an Aleppo College site where former students post pictures and communicate with each other. There are at least two informal groups in the USA which organize annual gatherings on the east and west coasts. In Los Angeles, there is a group of seven classmates who meet frequently at New Year celebrations, weddings, and regular social gatherings. Often I am included, and I always hear what a great impact Aleppo College had on their lives and what a wonderful school it was. The spark of friendship which was ignited in Aleppo College continues to glow in the memories and hearts of its alumni.

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Հեղինակը՝ իբրեւ աշակերտ, ապա նաեւ իբրեւ ուսուցիչ՝ Ալեքսիս Քոլեճի, իր անձնական յիշողութիւններուն հիմամբ կ'անդրադառնայ իր անցուցած տարիներուն եւ կը վերակերտէ քոլեճին ներքին կեանքը, կենցաղը, ուսումնական դրուածքը, առօրեան, փոխյարաբերութիւնները, լուսարձակի տակ կ'առնէ աշակերտութեան այլեայլ երեսակներ, ջանալով տալ իր պատում-վկայութիւնը նշանաւոր այս կրթարանին մասին: