



My Syrian Diary



Soumen Ray

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The Last Chapter

CHAPTER 1

The lamb chops were very succulent at the Beit Wakil restaurant in Aleppo. We were sitting in the courtyard of a 400-year's old Turkish building. It was renovated a few years back to set up a boutique hotel-cum-restaurant. This Aleppine mansion was built in 1603, with unique wooden decorations. In Arabic, the word 'Beit' means a residence and 'Wakil' is a deputy to the regal authority. Considering the period when it was built, it could rightly be said that Beit Wakil was the residence of a very senior Turkish official of the Ottoman Empire posted in Aleppo. Syria was then a part of that Turkish empire. The restaurant was a magnificent piece of Turkish architecture. The ambiance in the late evening was very romantic. All around the compound were lemon trees and at the centre, there was a beautiful water fountain of the bygone era. The food was tasting better with the fragrance of lemon flowers which were in their blooming season.

Dinner was an elaborate affair in Aleppo. Before the main course, they served us Arabic "mezze"—appetisers. A huge plate containing chickpea dips (*hummus*), eggplant and yoghurt dips (*baba ganoush*), fresh olives with cherry tomatoes, grape leaves stuffed with rice and minced meat, a variety of chopped vegetables and edible green leaves. We were eating leisurely. No waiter came near our table either to give us a nudge to finish or to clear the empty plates. That was the custom. I relished those 'healthy' starters, so much so that my stomach was almost filled by the time we ordered the main course—lamb chops delicately seasoned with cumin, paprika, garlic, lemon juice and fresh parsley.

Mr. Mooradian (RIP), our Honorary Consul in Aleppo, suggested that I should also try some *Kebab Halabi* ('Halab' is 'Aleppo' in Arabic), which has more than 25 varieties and, one of those was called *Kebab Hindi* (in Arabic 'Hindi' means Indian). It was rolled meat with tomato paste, onion, capsicum and pomegranate molasses. I asked the chef whether this particular kebab had anything to do with India and, promptly the answer came—this dish was introduced in Aleppo long ago for the Indian travellers on the Silk route passing by or staying in Aleppo.

While our taste buds were savouring the culinary delight, the soul was touched by live music. Aleppo was ruled by the Assyrians, Persians and Ottomans in different times. Interacting with different musical traditions over a long period of time, the city developed a musical heritage, influenced by its Sufi traditions. A local orchestra was performing at the restaurant. They were playing a famous courtly song genre popularly known as *Muwasshshah*—a mix of Arabic, Jewish, Christian and Berber tunes. It was very soothing, as if we were passing through a desert on camel back. Some tunes were fast, meant mainly for the young boys and girls who were also there. Besides the traditional Arab singers, Aleppo was also home to the Armenian musicians. After the Armenian massacre in Turkey during the First World War, a large number of Armenians crossed over to Syria and, Aleppo being closest to the Turkish-Syrian border town of Gaziantep, a two-hour's drive, they settled there. Around 70,000 Armenians were living in and around this city, engaged mainly in trading and commercial activities and, some of them formed Armenian musical bands. These bands are very popular among the local populace.

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On the Egyptian National Day reception in Four Seasons Hotel in Damascus, I was chatting with the British Ambassador. During the informal conversation, he had told me that whenever he visited Aleppo, he stayed at Hotel Baron. He suggested that I should go there once. The hotel has a very rich history, he said but did not elaborate. When I visited the city next time, I asked Mr. Mooradian if he had heard of that hotel. He said that “I am an Armenian and Hotel Baron is an Armenian hotel.” So, accompanied by him, I went there and met Mr. Armen Mazioumian, the present owner. He had a nice story for me.

In the last decade of 19th century his grandmother living in Anatolia, Turkey had stopped in Aleppo for a night's stay. She was on her way to Jerusalem for pilgrimage. The old lady was rich. And as such, scouted all over the city in search of a comfortable hotel so that she could have proper rest and continue her further journey. But the lady did not find a suitable place and had to endure a very uncomfortable night there. Returning home, she decided to build a decent hotel in Aleppo. That was how Hotel Baron was set up before the First World War. The hotel hosted a number of notable dignitaries. On the one hand, there were political leaders like Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt and Kamal Ataturk of Turkey, on the other, Mr. Mazioumiam proudly stated that Agatha Christie had written a few chapters of her famous crime thriller ‘Murder on the Orient

Express' while she was staying in their hotel. Smilingly, he showed me the original bill from his hotel bar which Peter O'Toole did not pay while leaving the hotel after shooting the famous film 'Lawrence of Arabia'. To smell and feel the history, I spent some time in room numbers 201, 202 and 203 which were once occupied by Kemal Ataturk, Peter O'Toole and Agatha Christie respectively. The British Ambassador used to stay in 202 of Hotel Baron whenever he visited Aleppo.

*

During my three-year's stay in Syria, Aleppo was my favourite destination whenever there was a long weekend. Like most of the ancient cities, Aleppo also has two distinctive sections. There are residential condominiums, European and Arab boutique shops, departmental stores, an International School where the medium of instruction was English and other amenities of modern life in the new section of the city. But what charmed me was the old city of Aleppo.

Since the sixth century Before Common Era (BCE), Aleppo has been a continuously inhabited place, initially as an important trading post which, subsequently morphed into a metropolitan city. During the Ottoman Empire, its importance was only after Istanbul and Cairo. In ancient times, traders from India, China and other far eastern countries, Mesopotamia, Egypt as well as Europe had settled in Aleppo for its location at the crossroad of Asia, Europe and the North Africa. It was on the most important international commercial trade route at that time—the Silk Road. Aleppo's fame was so widespread that it found mention in William Shakespeare's Macbeth, which he wrote during the Elizabethan period when English merchants had extensive trading relations with Aleppo. In the scene three of Act 1 of this famous play, the First witch in her meeting with Macbeth on the heath said that her husband had sailed to Aleppo as a master of ship Tiger.

I was touched by the hustle and bustle of the Aleppo market. For generations, the traders have been doing business there. Porters are carrying goods on their shoulders, heads, backs, donkeys, pushcarts and motorcycles from the warehouses to the retailers. None could avoid bumping with them during a sojourn in this market. And, it is not an issue. If you collide with a person carrying some goods, you are expected to help him to collect those scattered on the ground and, he, instead of expressing his anger for causing him the misery (of picking up his valuable goods he was 'transporting' and the resultant delay in 'supply'), would definitely express his heartfelt thanks to you for your act of

kindness.

The City also proudly exhibits its amalgamated architectural heritage. It reflects the tastes and cultures of the Romans, Byzantines, the Mamluks, the Ottomans and other rulers who held suzerainty over this city in different times. The entire old city is full of ancient and medieval buildings. Each with a history of its own. I was amazed to see a huge fortress, the Aleppo Citadel, located at the centre of the old city. It is believed to have been built in the first century BCE. Moreover, being an ancient trading post, it is dotted with caravanserais which used to provide shelter to the visiting traders. Then, with a sizeable Christian population, Aleppo has a Church built in the 12th century. The Church could be seen from the windows of the office of our Honorary Consul in Aleppo.

* * *

Aleppo is approximately 400 kilometres north of Damascus. The expressway was excellent and the drive used to be very enjoyable. Once I crossed Damascus city, the barren landscape of the Qalamoon Mountain range continued till I reached Homs. All of a sudden, my eyes were soothed by the dusty green olive groves. As far as I could see, there were olive trees. Those have been cultivated in Syria for thousands of years. It is said that from Syria, olive culture went to Greece and other Mediterranean countries in about 2500 BCE and, from there to Italy during the period 700–200 BCE.

I noticed that the Syrians are very healthy and trim. I was told by a doctor friend of mine that one of the reasons for their good health is their food habit. They eat lots of raw olives and use olive oil as their cooking medium. Unlike our preference for “Extra Virgin” olive oil, I saw thick olive oil, pressed manually, being sold in the local vegetable markets. The customers usually bring 5-litre jerry cans to pick up their cooking oil. The price was pretty cheap—little over three US Dollars for five litres. There are many farmers in Syria, whose main occupation is pressing olive fruits to extract oil. No preservatives were added but the oil stayed fresh for months. Initially, we were skeptical about the hygienic condition of raw olive oil. But after leaving Syria, I miss the taste of food cooked with that oil. Olives soaked in brine were also available in plenty. Whenever I accompanied my wife to purchase fresh vegetables from local bazars, I noticed that almost everyone bought good quantities of raw olives for their salad.

After crossing the city of Hama (some 50 km from Homs), the skyline changes. It is now pink or brown with almonds. Syria produces very good

quality of almonds. During the early summer, the young fruits are pinkish, turning brownish during the fall when those are ready for harvest. Almond consumption starts when those are very tender. It tastes sourish and sold on the roadsides. I saw young boys and girls eating pink almonds with pinches of salt and pepper. Watching them, my childhood memories in our village would come back. We used to collect green mangos after the nor'westers during the early summer months and devoured those with salt, grounded red chilly and mustard sauce.

Pistachio trees also line up the expressway. But the Syrian nuts are not as good as the Iranian pistachios. Those grown here are small. One of the reasons for this could be that these trees unlike olive, are relatively new here. Most of the trees in this country are pretty young, not reached the economic fruit yielding stage. The farmers generally plant pistachio saplings along with their olive trees. However, their production has been increasing as the trees are maturing. Because of their low quality, these nuts do not have good export potential. As such, a large amount of the pistachios is consumed green in Syria and the rest are used in making sweets (pistachio is an important ingredient of Arabic sweets like *Baklava*, *Kunafie*, *Znoud el Sit*, Pastries, *Barazek* cookies, to name a few). The Syrian sweets are really delicious.

My younger son has a sweet tooth. Gathering information from his Syrian classmates in the Damascus Community School, within a short period of our arrival there, he found out the best sweet shops in the city. He used to go to particular shops for particular sweets. Though all varieties of Syrian sweets were available in big shops in every neighbourhood, there were old shops famous for their specialities. Those were invariably located inside small lanes, mostly not motorable. On many occasions, when my son insisted that I must taste a new sweet that he had recently discovered at such a shop, I accompanied him. Parking our car on the main road, we walked down the lane for a considerable distance. But whenever I had gone to those places, after consuming plates full of mouth watering Syrian sweets, I considered the arduous walks really worthy.

* * *

CHAPTER 2

Sometime early in the 1980s, I was on an Alia flight (formerly Royal Jordanian Airlines) from Amman to Baghdad. It was a hopping flight with a stopover in Damascus. Around 30 passengers alighted at the Damascus International Airport. All the adult females were draped in an *abaya* (a black overall dress covering from head to ankle). Their faces were also covered, with two slits for eyes. The male adults were with a long beard. With that sight, I thought of Syria as a country frozen in the medieval period. I would not know then that one day I have to deplane at this very airport on a tour of duty to reside there for more than three long years. In April 2006, while serving at our High Commission in London, I received a posting order at our Embassy in Damascus. The memory of the abaya-clad women and bearded men flashed in my mind. I felt dejected.

*

The Syrian National Day was on the 7th of April. On that day in 1946, the French troops were withdrawn from Syria after more than 25-year's of occupation sanctioned by the League of Nations' mandate. The country celebrates its National Day every year on this date. The date is also known as Evacuation Day and Independence Day. My High Commissioner suggested that I should attend a reception arranged by their Ambassador at the Syrian Embassy to celebrate their National Day. Half-heartedly, I went to Belgrave Square on that day and located the Syrian Mission in London. At the function, I told the Syrian Ambassador that I was under order of transfer to join our Embassy in Damascus and considering whether to accept that or approach our headquarters for a review of my movement. The veteran diplomat stated that if I wanted to work in a country which was the cradle of world civilisations, I should not vacillate. "A journey through Syria is a journey through time", he said.



View of Damascus city from top of the Qasiyoun mountain

Three ‘religions of Book’—Judaism, Christianity and Islam were revealed in the Levant region, which corresponds to the ancient Greater Syria. Until a few decades ago, visitors to this country could actually see a Church where a Christian priest preached to the faithful, had a Jewish grocer to supply provisions and some muslims to perform its daily chores! Though things have changed a lot due to political differences among the countries in the region, the religious outlook of the people living there remained the same. While the Jewish people had left Syria (read thrown out), the Muslims participate in the Christians’ religious celebrations and vice versa. They live in Syria harmoniously (I later found out that the Christians live in separate quarters in Damascus, Aleppo and other cities and towns of Syria. However, I did not notice any animosity between them).



The Spiral road around the Qasiyoun mountain

I had another meeting with him before I finally decided to proceed to Syria and arrived in Damascus in a late-summer morning of the same year. The airport was renovated giving a modern look. The immigration officials were cordial and to my utter surprise, my baggage was on the conveyor belt before I reached there. Coming from Delhi via Dubai, I felt the temperature outside the airport quite pleasing. But the Embassy chauffeur, who along with an official from our mission, came to receive me at the airport was sweating profusely. He told me that it was the worst period of the year in Syria, very hot. For me, it was like late spring (March-April) in Delhi.



A restaurant on the mountain top

The drive from the airport to the city, around 25 kilometres was interesting. There were quite a few villages en-route. I saw some traditional old buildings there. Most of them were double storied with small windows. Almost all the houses had a cantilevered balcony, locally called ‘*Mashrafiyya*’, where the family members could sit and watch what was going on in the street below. I was lodged at my predecessor’s residence in Abu-Rumanya—an elite neighbourhood in Damascus. (The flat was very old. I stayed there for a few weeks and then shifted to East Mezzeh near the Al-Akram mosque.)

*

It was a Thursday, the weekend. I decided to take a stroll in the evening to get a feel of the place. Expensive boutiques dotted along the central arterial road, Autostrada, exhibiting latest European and Arab fashion designs. With my memories of Syria’s Islamic dress code, I was a little puzzled. But soon my confusion was cleared. I saw young boys and girls gossiping at the street corners—very smartly dressed like their counterparts in any other Western city. Of course, some of the boys were sporting beard, but it was smartly trimmed. The

bright coloured head-scarfs of the girls covering their head, matched with their skirts/frocks (not all the girls had head-scarfs). In fact, those colourful scarfs were their fashion symbols. Furthermore, there was no dearth of young girls wearing jeans trousers and silk tops. While passing by them, I heard the youngsters conversing in a language which was a mixture of Arabic and English. Instantly, I was freed from my disillusion about Syria.

After wandering around for an hour or so, I decided to have some food. But all the restaurants were filled to their capacity on the Thursday evening. The Syrian families, which included men, women, children, even grand parents, were having dinner. I was a bit impatient as they were not at all seemed to finish their food quickly and leave. After visiting some restaurants and finding no room there, I thought that instead of searching restaurants one after the other for an empty table, it was better to wait at one place. So I entered into one. Noticing that a family had finished their dinner, my hunger increased. But still I had to wait for quite sometime for my turn to come. After food, there was the '*nargila*' or as we call it 'Hookah' or '*Shisha*', session. They ordered tobacco with different flavours. While the men preferred strong raw tobacco, the ladies went for Rose and Jasmine flavoured tobacco which were mild. They continued puffing '*nargila*' and chatting. There was no hurry. As for myself, when I found an empty table, I had a chicken sandwich and returned home.



Christmas celebrations in Damascus

On my way back, I saw the Qasiyoun Mountain range overlooking the city of Damascus. Lights of the settlements on the elevation of the mountain made a glittering backdrop to the city.

Though one can reach the flat plateau on the top of the Qasiyoun Mountain by car (the circular road is motor-worthy), for the residents on the mountain elevation, steps built over the centuries, are the only means to get to their houses. I had visited one of our local Syrian employees, who had met with an accident and was bedridden at his residence located there. I counted 750 steps. Then I was out of breath and stopped counting. Reaching my destination, I asked our man how they managed to climb up there every day. His reply was simple—“Sir, if you climb every day, you will not find it hard at all. Our children go up and down the hill many times every day.” They have to go to their schools (elementary and primary) on the mountain slope. Moreover, small grocery stores, vegetable and meat shops have been set up there to meet the local requirements. For an outsider, it is very inconvenient to do shopping in that slant mountain wall. While their merchandises were placed at one level, the shop owners often sit at another level. In some of those, the person selling the goods are not in a position to see all those which are displayed for sale. The buyers select the items, go up or down a few steps and pay for their purchases. The residents on the mountain depend on these shops and small markets for their daily needs.

There are many cafes and restaurants decorated with multi-coloured florescent lights on top of the Qasiyoun Mountain. Though a bit expensive, sitting there one can see the whole Damascus city and the mountain road, a clear line of green, red and yellow lights. There are excellent sitting arrangements outside the restaurants. To get a suitable place there, you have to come early. People remain seated for hours enjoying the cool breeze together with the view of Damascus at night. I had taken my Indian friends and my brother who visited us, to those restaurants. Everyone was charmed by the view of the city from the mountain top. With a powerful lens, I had taken some beautiful snaps from there of the various sections of Damascus. Those are my precious collections.



Elderly persons playing Dominos on the roadside—a favourite pastime for them

Damascus, being an old Islamic city, there are innumerable mosques with tall minarets. Green fluorescent tube lights on those minarets could be seen from far distance. One evening while I was at a restaurant on the Qasyioun Mountain top with some Syrian friends, I noticed one of such glowing minarets on the slope. Initially I thought that it was built by the settlers there. On enquiry, I was told that the place where the mosque was built had a special significance for the Semitic people. It is believed that Abraham was born in the cave beneath that mosque and their prophets after praying there climbed the mountain further to the top to make their ascent to the heaven.

* * *

I used to go for a long evening walk along the *Beyrouth* (Beirut) Street passing by the side of my residence. As the street's name suggests, it connects Damascus with Beirut. There were houses of wealthy Syrians on one side of the road and on the other side, as far as one could see, there were thorny cactus plants. Like other houses in Damascus, there were Jasmine creepers forming an arch at the

main entrance of all the houses on this street as well. During the summer, I never missed the fragrance of Jasmine flowers while on an evening walk. Before it faded from one house, I would be nearing to the other. It was such a pleasant walk. This flower gave its name to the city. Damascus is known as the city of Jasmine.

The large cactus fields on the road side seemed to me as wild desert plants during the autumn and winter months. Being curious of these thorny plants, I always glanced at those whenever I was on this road. One day in the spring, I noticed small buds with thorns on their outer cover had come out of the cactus pads. As the days passed by and with the approach of summer, the area turned light-red coloured with cactus fruits. I did not even know that those fruits had a formal name—Prickly Pears, in Arabic they call it *Sabara*. The most expensive fruit in Syria. On the *Beyrouth* Street, small street vendors, with their stalls decorated with green and red tube lights, connected with their car batteries, could be seen at every 100–150 meters. They sold Prickly Pears nicely packed in small cartons. Cars with Lebanese number plates were their main customers. On their return journey, Lebanese visitors to Damascus purchased those fruits in large quantities for their family and friends back home (Prickly Pears cactus does not grow in Lebanon).

On the streets of Damascus, pushcarts selling only Prickly Pears are abundant in summer. Once out of their thorny shells, these fruits are pulpy and slightly sweet in taste with dusty desert smell. And they say, it has various nutritional benefits. The *Damascenes* (the original inhabitants of Damascus) wait for this season to enjoy these fruits. I was invited at an evening *Sabara* session. It was amazing to watch the Syrians eating those fruits for the whole night. Some *Damascenes* will wake up in the wee hours and go to the *sabara* sellers, who would wait for such customers, and end the night eating cold cactus fruits. I had tried but could not develop any fascination for these colourful fruits.

I had mentioned earlier that the Syrians are very healthy and rarely one finds an obese person on the street. Besides the Olive and its derivatives, they also eat lots of other fresh fruits. All of those are grown locally. There were grape vines, sweet orange and pear trees at the garden of my residence. The grapes more than one inch long, very sweet but had seeds. In fact, the Syrians do not like the seedless grapes. They say the seeds are good for heart and add taste to the fruit. We often plucked the fruits for our own consumption. The rest were distributed among the members of our Embassy.

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