

1. Mark your confusion.
2. Show evidence of a close reading.
3. Write a 1+ page reflection.

From Aleppo, tales of hardship and bloodshed. 'Civilization is gone.'

Source: Molly Hennessy-Fiske, LATimes.com, October 23, 2016

Monther Etaky's wife was breast-feeding, and in desperate need of nutrition. He spent five days hunting for yogurt to give her — anything to keep her and their 2-month-old son alive — then gave up.

The streets outside their apartment were a 24-hour-a-day death zone of exploding bombs and whistling mortars.

“Warplanes with machine guns fly all the day, all the night, shooting just to say to people, ‘We are here, you can’t sleep because we are exploding all the day around you, you can’t move, any small light we can target,’” said Etaky, a graphic designer and photographer from Aleppo — a city that has become the dark emblem of Syria’s more than five-year-old civil war.

“I just watch him all the night and try to calm him,” he said of his son.

Aleppo is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities on Earth, an architectural treasure settled in the Bronze Age that endured the rule of Hittites and Romans, Mongols and Ottomans.

Once Syria’s most populous city, it is still home to about 1.5 million people in the west and 250,000 in the east.

But residents tell of water pipes gone dry, hospitals without blood-pressure medication, underfed schoolchildren too hungry to focus on their lessons. Schools and hospitals have moved into basements in hopes of escaping the shelling.

“We live in a state of terror all the time,” said Mohammed Abu Jihad, of eastern Aleppo. “Even when we sleep.”

The battle for the city pits Islamic extremists and anti-government rebels, entrenched in eastern Aleppo, against the forces of Syrian President Bashar Assad and his Russian allies in the western part of the city.

U.S. Secretary of State John F. Kerry has called for a war crimes investigation into the bombing campaign, and on Friday the United Nation’s human rights chief, Zeid Raad Hussein, said Aleppo has become “a slaughterhouse.” He told the U.N.’s Human Rights Council that attacks on eastern Aleppo “constitute crimes of historic proportions.”

Last week, Russia announced a pause in airstrikes on rebel-controlled parts of Aleppo, and on Friday the Syrian government opened a corridor for those wanting to leave the city. But fighting has been halted before. A cease-fire was declared in September. It lasted about a week.

What has it been like to live through a siege that has captured the world’s horrified attention? By telephone, Facebook messenger, WhatsApp and Skype, several of them told their stories. The first was Etaky:

Etaky and his wife, Walaa, 25, moved to an abandoned apartment in the Saif al-Dawla neighborhood three years ago after their own house was bombed. Now they’re stuck on the front line in the battle for Aleppo. He sent a map on WhatsApp shaded red in the west, green in the east. His apartment is smack in the middle.

They have no running water, and the well water, undrinkable, is for bathing and washing. Bottled water costs \$4.

They have electricity about two hours a day and rely on flashlights and candles at night. He has rigged chargers for his cellphone and other devices to a car battery and mounted a solar panel to his balcony.

Without power, their refrigerator has become a cupboard, and he asks his grandmother for survival tips from the olden days: how to use salt, for instance, to preserve meat.

If they survive until winter, he asked, what will they do for heat?

“Civilization is gone,” he said.

The center offered only a brief respite from the war. One day the children were playing with balloons. When one popped, the sound sent a girl into hysterics.

Many of the children are war orphans. They clamored for copies of photos Etaky took, so he ordered a Polaroid. It never arrived, and Etaky has been unable to reach the center for a month because of the airstrikes. His wife talks about decamping to the countryside. Just for a little while, if the roads ever open again. He worries about abandoning extended family and friends.

“I can’t leave this place. I lost more than 50 friends here. It’s a place I love,” Etaky said as the evening call to prayer sounded through a window.

One friend, 36-year-old Shamel Ahmad, was killed by a barrel bomb that struck his family's car just down the street from Etaky's apartment. Ahmad's pregnant wife, who was injured, gave birth to their daughter and died. Etaky worries about his own wife.

"I can't decide what I should do: Take her out of Aleppo and then back to Aleppo? Should we stay together?" he said, his dark eyes troubled behind boxy brown glasses. "A lot of my friends — they are talking about leaving. Most of them just need to take a breath. If it's possible to go out of Aleppo...."

Warplanes thundered overhead, and the baby bawled.

"There is the machine gun," he said.

He works as a pharmacist and surgical assistant at Hayat Hospital, the official sounding name for a makeshift medical facility tucked in the basement of an apartment building in east Aleppo. Mohammed Abu Jihad fears it could be attacked at any moment, especially since the cease-fire ended and Syrian forces began dropping "bunker buster" bombs capable of penetrating below-ground shelters.

Recently, one struck outside the building's door. "Two hospitals already have been hit by these kinds of bombs," he said. One person was killed and three injured. "But we can't do anything about it."

"We live in a state of terror all the time," he said, "Even when we are asleep."

Abu Jihad, 26, also works at two other hospitals — all of them short on staff, equipment and supplies. Hayat has about a month's supply of anesthesia left. Every day as he leaves for work, he worries about his month-old twin girls, Marwa and Mariam.

"If I go to work and I come back, I might find my house bombed, God forbid," he said. Still, "my wife doesn't stop me from going to work. She knows the house is no safer than the hospital."

Each day at Hayat, two doctors treat about 50 people. This year it has already been hit with a rocket, phosphorous gas and the bunker-buster bomb, he said.

One case that moved him deeply was that of a 9-year-old boy, Ahmed Ahmed, brought in after an airstrike.

"He was alive, but he didn't have his eyes. His family died under the rubble," Abu Jihad said. The boy, covered in ash, was silent as they anesthetized him and removed his damaged eyes. In the past the hospital sent such complicated cases to Turkey. That's not possible now.

"He will suffer a lot," Abu Jihad said.

The little girl's face was coated with blood and dust when Mohammed Seddaway lifted her from the rubble in her green T-shirt. A bomb blast had buried her parents.

"We didn't have any equipment. We didn't expect to pull anyone else alive. The last child was pulled out after eight minutes. It was almost a miracle," he said.

Seddaway is one of about 110 Syrian civil defense workers, or White Helmets, who are trained in basic first aid and respond to airstrikes and bombings. Some Aleppo residents praise them as heroes. Others accuse them of being opposition fighters. Seddaway disputes that.

"We are not soldiers. We just help people," he said.

On the day he pulled the little girl from the rubble, she gazed up at him and, using an honorific, said, "Uncle, I love you."

Seddaway, 25, who has a newborn at home, took stock of the girl and her two young brothers, who also survived, and the wreckage of their home — a red sofa, a shattered television, a doll. He started to cry.

"I felt like they were my own children, or my brother's children. And I felt, what fault did they have in this?" he said.

The White Helmets operate a fleet of battered ambulances, delivering the injured to a beleaguered hospital Seddaway described as overcrowded and dirty. "It smells like blood," he said.

Seddaway earns about \$100 to \$150 a month, not much given that the rice and eggplants his family subsists on cost \$5.50 a pound. He also works part time as a cashier to supply his infant son's formula and diapers. Formula costs \$40 a can and is in such short supply, he started feeding his son Faisal a gruel of watered-down cookies, leaving him thin and weak.

The family's five-bedroom stone home in Old Aleppo is an oasis, the interior courtyard filled with fragrant jasmine, grape and pomegranate trees. Cats roam the interior courtyard and lovebirds sing. "It's a different life," he said, "a normal family life."

But Seddaway can still smell the wood and leaves burning in the cookstove they use because they're down to one can of gas. And when he hears explosions, he must run to join his team.

His wife, Iman, understands his work.

"She always tells me keep going, keep doing it, because if our house was hit and I was alive under the rubble, wouldn't you want someone to help me?" he said.

At night, when airstrikes increase, they sleep with their son. "If we die, we die together."

When her students draw, they use a lot of red and gray. Red for blood, gray for rubble.

Some sketch the Russian flag they spy on passing warplanes, bombs dropping, headless and limbless stick figures being loaded into ambulances or floating into the clouds under the caption: "The souls of our martyrs ascend to heaven." Others draw fantasies: baskets of fruit they cannot eat, forests and streams they cannot see.

“The ones who worry me are not the ones who draw — express themselves and cry,” Afraa Hashem said. “Lots of people cry. That makes me feel at ease. The ones who are more introverted worry me.”

Hashem is a teacher who supervises three schools — kindergarten, elementary and middle — with 360 students. Dressed in a black abaya and flowered head scarves, she visits parents at home to persuade them to send their children to the basement campus partitioned into windowless, dim classrooms.

“It’s no safer in your house. It’s probably safer in the bunker,” she tells them.

Parents know Hashem brings her children to school with her — sons Sam, 12, and Zein, 11, and their 6-year-old sister, Nay. But the new bunker-buster bombs scare many away. Hashem and a few other teachers have volunteered to teach students at home.

In a city of orphans, school staffers often become surrogate parents. She remembers a pretty 7-year-old girl with hazel eyes and a wide smile who fell apart after her entire family died in airstrikes. One day, the girl arrived at school disheveled, her blond hair snarled, jeans and coat dirty. Hashem combed her hair and straightened her clothes. “I miss my mother,” she said as she embraced Hashem.

The war touches faculty and students alike. Two teachers at her schools, both young fathers, died in an airstrike this month. Hashem had grown up with one of them.

In May, a school near hers was hit by a missile. “I could see bodies everywhere. I could see children with crayons in their hands, dead,” she said. Among the dead: the principal’s two children.

Hashem recalled an airstrike that killed six students as they played in the street. The day after, classmates insisted on visiting the mother of one of those killed, 10-year-old Mohammed Zeitoun.

“They told her, ‘We are here in his place,’” Hashem said of the students, who surrounded the woman as she cried.

Hashem’s children recently joined classmates who painted the burned husk of a bus destroyed in fighting near the border of west Aleppo. The bright colors stood out against the backdrop of crushed concrete and twisted metal beams.

“It’s a message to the world,” Hashem said, “that despite the destruction, no matter how much [Assad] defaces Syria, we are going to keep living.”

There’s a misconception about east and west Aleppo, said Dr. Nabil Antaki.

“It’s not the good one on one side and the bad one on the other,” Antaki said. “We are suffering with them. They are people like us.”

A 66-year-old gastroenterologist, Antaki lives in government-controlled west Aleppo and resents that international interest has focused on eastern, rebel-held areas of the city. “The thing that people don’t know outside Syria is that west Aleppo is daily — daily — receiving mortars,” he said.

One of his colleagues was wounded recently in a mortar attack that killed 10 people in a busy commercial strip. The doctor’s legs were broken and he remains in intensive care on a respirator after shrapnel pierced his lungs. West Aleppo is down to two public hospitals and perhaps 10 to 15 private ones, Antaki said. The private hospital where he works, Saint-Louis, had 56 doctors at the start of the war, but many fled, along the nurses. Now just 15 doctors remain.

Antaki recalled a young man, Ara Aramian, brought in after a recent bombing at his apartment.

“He had a face that was completely burned, the two legs completely destroyed. We had to amputate both legs,” Antaki said. “We tried to give him some psychological support, but it’s not easy for a 20-year-old.” The prognosis was better for 6-year-old Pamela, who arrived with shrapnel lodged in her spine, paralyzed from the waist down. By the time she left, he said, she could move one of her legs.

Antaki does not distinguish between rebels in the east who oppose Assad and Islamic extremists. He considers them all terrorists and blames them for damaging the city’s water plants and power lines, depriving both sides of utilities. Many on the western side feel held hostage by forces in the east, he said, and support government attacks. He is among those distrustful of the White Helmets.

It was the terrorists, he said, who killed his 68-year-old brother three years ago, shooting him in the head on a bus.

Antaki sighed. “I was not like this before the war,” he said. “I was open-minded. I was democratic. I was criticizing our regime. I thought it needed reforms, more human rights.” Revolution brought not freedom, but Islamic State, and now he fears for his country.

He didn’t vote for Assad and doesn’t make excuses for his government. But he wants Syria to remain a secular state, and said the Syrian army is doing its job, fighting Islamic extremists.

“I don’t support the government,” he said. “I support Syria, the Syrian state, my country, which has been destroyed.”

Antaki trained in Canada, where he and his wife became citizens. They have children with families in the U.S. who have begged them to flee. “They don’t want us to be killed,” he said.

But Antaki says he can’t leave.

“Our duty, our human duty, is to stay here because people need us,” he said, “to share the suffering of our people and to try to help them.”



Photo: CNN.com

Map: Ontheworldmap.com

Possible Response Questions:

- What are your thoughts Aleppo? Should the U.S. intervene? If so, how?
- What is the proper global response to this situation? Explain.
- Pick a passage from the article and respond to it.