

"The texture of society evolves, erodes...and I find myself as an adult constantly mourning the loss of social and cultural capital in the city of Damascus, a city which has been continuously inhabited by the most diverse of religious and cultural communities for eight thousand years.

As rockets fall and the threat of the latest crazy maniacs from the ISIS presses ever closer through the suburbs into the heart of Damascus, it dawns on you how fragile your mortality is."

The following interview with Rania Kinge was conducted via email and Skype in August 2015 as Rania lived under constant rocket attacks in Damascus, Syria determined to continue her social enterprise – I LOVE SYRIA which offers refuge, income and sanity for displaced women living in shelters. Our video Skype was interrupted many times - with choppy Internet connection and bomb blasts in a distance - but Rania pressed on.

What Rania expresses – in written words and in the video interview – articulately captures the very essence of her life under the ongoing war in Syria. In fact she predicted the refugee crisis about to hit Europe and the world. Since the war in Syria began in 2011, more than 300,000 Syrians have been killed, more than 12 million are in need of emergency aid, seven million had to flee their homeland and still millions are refugees in neighboring countries and throughout Europe.

Read about a chronology of Syria's history [here](#).

Tell me where you were born - about your family and early childhood.

I was born in Syria into a family of diplomats; my father was a proud nationalist and wanted to make sure that his children had roots engrained in the land of his forefathers. It was very important for him that we be born in Syria, so my mother travelled back expressly to give birth for both me and my younger sister. We moved around quite a lot as young kids; for a time we lived in Beirut, where I had my first early experiences of war in the late 70s. My father tells me of a time when he grabbed us as toddlers and ran out of a building that was being fired upon. We were lucky enough to be able to leave that place, thanks to my father's job as a high ranking United Nations official. We grew up for a part of our childhood in New York City. There we lived a brief patch of relative normalcy until my parents had a disastrous divorce, during which time we were brought back to stay mostly at my grandmother's house in Syria for several years.

As divorced women were (and still are) regarded as possibly the worst thing in society next to prostitutes, the situation was untenable for my mother. She simply had to leave the country at some point, and she had to do so initially without us to forge her path ahead. And so we were left largely to our own devices, me at 8 years old with the task of having to learn Arabic in a period of 3 months before starting school. Nonetheless, we did have the benefit of living with my grandmother for the two most stable, protected years of our lives. As Shar'ia law would have stipulated that I and my sister would have been returned without question to the full custody of my father at age 11 (thereby removing us permanently from my mother), we knew that my younger sister and I would need to leave the country before my eleventh birthday.

We were smuggled out of Syria and through the border, and we joined my mother in Switzerland, who did not yet at that time have a passport, a job or any kind of stability. It was a difficult and stressful time, and it became clear that my mother did not have the wherewithal to support us. After incidents that red-flagged emotional and physical abuse to Swiss social services, we were placed in child protection (a “home”) for 2 years. From that time during which we lived in a children’s home, we saw our parents about twice a year thereafter. Fortunately, we ended up in the stability of boarding school in Switzerland supported by my father from the age of about 12 through the end of high school; the contrast between this kind of upbringing in a Swiss boarding school, the “squat” conditions in which we were living with my mother before that, and the protected environment we had while living with my grandmother in Syria prior ... could not have been starker.

Many children go through difficult family situations and for us it felt particularly exacerbated by the social and political dynamics of the Middle East; when you are in it as a kid, it feels like something of a spiral of darkness that is never going to end. I did not have an easy childhood but I did and do have many other blessings. When you grow up and look back at periods of trauma or strife, it’s like an enrichment and validation that you have survived. It’s been a unique trajectory that has brought me to where I am today.

What’s your first memory of war?

My first memory of war was when I was in Beirut in 1978, when we had to flee from the building we lived in because it was being shot at. More recently, in Damascus, we started to see rockets flying over our heads in 2012.

How did war change your world – as a child – as an adult?

I was a toddler when we had to leave our home in Beirut and move to New York City. I have no real tangible memories of this, to be frank; they are mostly rather constructed from the fragments and family stories that I have been told since that time. That said, I can’t say it is completely a blank for me either. Though I am consciously able to put things in perspective as an adult, I have a totally irrational fear of loud noises. This does not provide me much alleviation to the stress of everyday life in Damascus today.

Emanating from a context of war and conflict, both as a child and now as an adult you begin to perceive exactly how malleable the fabric of social interactions can be. Your relationship with people simply changes, everything adjusts to an ever-changing normal; friendships with neighbors transform, people you once trusted can no longer be, and it becomes clear that anyone can be out to betray anyone else. This has implications on absolutely everything, from entrusting your children to a neighbor while you run out to the store, to receiving a line of credit to fill the shelves of your shop, to calculating the probability of being robbed, kidnapped or held at ransom on any given street corner. The texture of society evolves, erodes...and I find myself as an adult constantly mourning the loss of social and cultural capital in the city of Damascus, a city which has been continuously inhabited by the most diverse of religious and cultural communities for eight thousand years.

As rockets fall and the threat of the latest crazy maniacs from the ISIS presses ever closer through the suburbs into the heart of Damascus, it dawns on you how fragile your mortality is. You can be at school, walking in the street, or at the souk... and at any moment it is possible that you die. I have no idea how to convey that feeling to a European or Western audience who will have had no exposure whatsoever to such a reality. So this changes your world because you have two choices: either you stay home cowering in fear every single day, or you go out and get on with your life. I choose the latter because and not despite the fact there are rockets falling and people dying around us. Millions of people around me are facing the same exact choice every day; is my blood more expensive than theirs? I choose this also with full awareness that I am a Swiss citizen and can come and live a comfortable life in Geneva any time. My mindset began to shift as I now see my own decisions as a source of strength; perhaps it is a delusion of self-empowerment, but I know that no matter what I am not going to stop living my life. It's a matter of intent; every day, one needs to weigh their intent.

Despite being a kid who has grown up in cities like New York and Geneva, for nearly fifteen years now I have made Damascus my home and I have been passionate about both reviving the ancient artisanal wisdoms of its people and the local manufacturing capability of its economy. I cannot live with watching Syria fall to pieces, marginalized and relegated to the realm of 3rd world country, its women living on charity, and its people eternal victims of war. I am going to go on. I and anyone in my city can get blown to pieces at any moment, but I have what is perhaps a bit of that New Yorker attitude in me, and I am intentionally, willfully defiant. My lifestyle has changed a bit because it's harder to walk around my town with my shorts and t-shirts on while walking my dog, but I still do it.

In my work, despite living in a city where the veil of negative energy sits heavily over the very granular statistic of death, and where this is palpable not only in the smell of the air but in the sheer feeling of being I have been fortunate enough to create a tiny haven where women gather, put on the music, make coffee and work together with bright colored materials to create beautiful – and if I do say so myself, pretty hip and trendy items. These women are very different from me. I walk around with shorts and a t-shirt often in the company of my dog; they come largely from conservative Muslim families in suburbs where the conflict has created massive swathes of displaced persons. They are often widowed young, live in shelters, have children to feed and no sources of income. They have belief systems and levels of religious indoctrination that I do not share. Yet, together we have created a little sparkle of happiness and light in a city darkened with war. It feels sometimes like we're not even there, sitting in our little bubble and laughing...at least until the electricity goes out.

What triggered your artistic endeavors?

The idea to begin working with design and jewelry came to me when I was in New York, and about 25 years old. I saw the sparkle of Swarovski beads on a storefront and thought – “it's so shiny, I LOVE it.” My next thought was, “I can do this, and I can make this in Syria.”

Previously, I had done a business degree and was working as a computer specialist in

Switzerland. I was earning piles of money each month and living my Geneva life, enjoying outings and dinners and parties and buying beautiful La Prairie skin creams that I never even used. After this small revelation in New York, I opened a boutique in Switzerland and began collecting and cultivating unique products for sale at retail; some of these were my own production, and some came from artisans in Syria. That's when it dawned on me that I would have to work on improving the capacity and skills of those from whom I was sourcing. It was a competitive market and I saw the cheap productions from various parts of Asia; I knew that in Syria I could probably find a way to compete on both price and quality. And that I would have to go there.

Why did you select jewelry design? What was your inspiration -- your muse?

Jewelry and accessories are simply something I love. I knew that I had a talent, an eye for this, and that I could design and handcraft great pieces that were on trend. If one is into conveying a style, you can wear a \$10 pair of jeans and a \$2 shirt, and with killer shoes, handbag and jewelry, pull off a great look. Accessorizing matters.

The idea for me was to start producing my own collections. I visited Turkey, India and Syria looking to understand and compare the varieties and breadth of both product and production capacity. I was also thinking about social impact; what could I do with my intention that would positively impact the lives of others? I saw quickly that whether I did something there or not in Turkey, it wouldn't fundamentally move the needle there because so many industries there were already so well capitalized. In India, the saturation and growth rate of artisanal business was already galloping; product was rampant and fundamentally of a different design and production context. Coming back to Syria, I re-confirmed my instinct that it would be worth developing this underutilized and underdeveloped artisanal market. I decided to invest my time, energy and money there.

"I want to create a market of conscious consumers who ultimately appreciate great colors, quality and design, who love wearing our items, and who also subsequently care that their purchases directly help someone in Syria who has absolutely no other options or alternatives to make a living and feed her children."

Where do you currently sell?

We sell in small quantities in a variety of places, including the UK, Switzerland, Spain, Greece, Lebanon, Dubai, the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

Do you remember how war started to infiltrate your art?

The war began to infiltrate my "art" in ways that were not visible on the surface. What I did not let infiltrate on the surface of my colorful, happy designs and pieces is reflected in the nature and configuration of my production unit. When I saw that an entire population was thrown into the shelters, and that these people have absolutely no prospect of actually getting out, getting their homes back, or normalizing their lives, I knew I had to act. I started to find ways to identify

a different kind of worker in my workshop; it was a slow process to find the first girls and as I trained them I realized both how much untapped skill and talent there was, even in a population that has been through the trauma of displacement and violence. I also now have deeper insight into just how limiting and disempowering their native societal, cultural and religious paradigm is. When this conflict began and I saw there was a threat to the nation of Syria, I wanted to do something symbolic to protect it. This is why I use the flag in some designs, the thing that represents our broadest Syrian identity. My company has evolved into a social enterprise, and it is called I LOVE SYRIA.

This war has stoked a love for this country I didn't really even know I had growing up; I love our flag, and I love the displaced people I work with. Syria is a 10,000 year old civilization, and one that was diverse and thriving. Damascus is an 8,000 year old continuously inhabited city, which pre-dated Christianity, Judaism and Islam. In parts, I belong to this place and I know that the historical narrative of Syria - for those who care - is not about extremism and destroyed cities and ISIS. Damascus is not some one-horse town in the middle of a desert with a couple of camels tied to a bunch of huts. It is about the treasures of humanity, the enlightenment of female leaders like Zanoobia who two millennia ago proclaimed treaties of religious tolerance; it is about villages which up until recently contained the remnants of the last living speakers of ancient Aramaic, the language of Jesus Christ. ISIS, the "revolution", and this conflict being played out by the government is destroying all of this now, while the rest of the world watches.

Instead of embargoing us, such that only the average population suffers – why don't we see social finance empowering tens of dozens or hundreds of enterprises like mine? There is no better weapon against narrow-minded ideological and religious tyranny than the prospect of livelihood, dignity and the hope it brings people.

Was it a conscious act of channeling the pains and terror of war through your art? Or did it kind of happen spontaneously?

My jewelry and accessories are about youth, light, art, creation, colors and happiness. It is everything that can stand in purposeful, diametric opposition to the religious fanaticism, death and extremism that has pervaded our society. I am not sure it has happened spontaneously, as it feels like it has been a long journey. But I can tell you it is 100% intentional. The work we do together in my atelier is like a sort of group therapy.

I have a small example to share about this benefit of "group therapy". One of the young women who was particularly traumatized in the conflict who started working with us seemed to have a propensity to work with the color purple. Every time she'd ask to work with this same color, and when I looked on the internet to find out the benefits of working with colors – and in particular, purple - I found out that the purple color has healing properties. From that point on, we always gave her the orders that used purple.

It sounds like your art is empowering you?

Yes. When I empower the women (and their children) of my country, I too stand taller.

Is there a message in your designs - in your art?

The message is "We're still here". We are an entire population that is still here; about 6,000,000 of us in Damascus (25M in total) living through every day and hoping for a better future for our children. The Islamists of ISIS are like a plague that has come ... but will also go with time. Even under the ridiculous embargo conditions we have to live under, and the routine cuts in electricity and water that leaves us anxiously awaiting respite, we have our lives to get on with. And we absolutely can play a role in the contribution of our rich and ancient Damascene (Ishani, etc.) design traditions to the world of art, artisanship and trend. I'm one small bridge to that participation.

Do you think your art disturbs or awakens the audiences that are buying your jewelry? Was that the purpose of your art?

Inside the country, it is considered that I am helping displaced people coming out of areas where the Islamists are. This naturally makes me appear as a sympathizer to those communities. Outside the country, I am considered as a pro-government person because I prominently feature the Syrian National flag in the pieces I design and produce. I am neither. My job is to work with people, women specifically ... and my feeling is that our flag is much bigger than one leader or one institution at one moment in time. I am hearkening back in my art to an identity that once united us all as a people capable of creativity, skill, and beauty in diversity.

I know full well that I am a member of the international "tribe" of "privileged kids" who has lived well, though I am unlikely to have the means to send my future kids to Eton or Le Rosey. But I know that my upbringing has imparted me with both an international and open outlook, and fundamentally today with an ethic to help others. Some of the wealthiest kids with whom I studied who had the privilege of Swiss private education went back home to their countries to live out their lives in the lap of luxury with little social conscience or sense of social justice. I'm simply conscious of the importance of the fusion, creativity and prosperity that our "tribe" of citizens of the world can bring to our home communities.

For all these reasons and more, I am pushing the idea of social enterprise in Syria, of doing good through a small business that creates jobs and plays on an international arena, albeit in small ways. I operate on a shoestring budget and I'm not yet breakeven, but no matter. I was wondering there whether there is the possibility of ever seeing investment happening with a conscience, and I am so heartened to see a movement in this direction happening in the rest of the world. Even though I happen to live in an environment where conscience seems to exist in only the rarest of quantities, it still gives me hope. I hope one day our enterprise may be invested in and given the guidance we need to operate at scale and create better livelihoods; I'll keep doing what I am doing. Because it makes more sense than getting angry. Because that's the path of least resistance. It's not easy.

Do you remember how life was in Syria before the war? What's one thing you miss most?

I miss the peace of mind and happiness I had. In a state of war, you're just sad all the time.

How has war changed you as a person?

I now put things into perspective and anything can happen at any time. It got me closer to my friends, to my family, the importance of love, patience, forgiveness, and above all faith. Everything is going to be ok, I have to believe this every day. Anything less would mean jumping on the first flight out.

Do you think you're a better, more mature person now as a result?

Hugely. I had an anger issue ... and now it's totally transformed. I am dealing with a population that has minimum skills and education... and I have to be understanding and empathic.

What have you lost in you as a person – what part of your has been robbed by the war?

I am a richer person for having lived through this, and I will continue to be as this conflict evolves and eventually draws to a close... and this is how I see it.

What have you lost as an artist because of the war?

In practical terms, as a startup designer, I've simply put a lot of money into this. From a production standpoint, I've lost elements of business viability that could have been a great stabilizer. When you are running a small business and working in an environment where core elements of infrastructure are not dependable, you never even know what you can deliver with certitude for a prospective client, and by when. It's difficult to commit to volumes of a beautiful Ishani bracelet when the electricity is out for a few days, we can't use my casting

machines, and nobody is delivering or sending commercial goods (or even money) into and out of Syria. I think many peer entrepreneurs would smile at exactly how resourceful we have to become to continue doing what we do.

Explain a little about how war robs the native citizens and civilians? Beyond the economic implications....

War robs citizens of their basic dignity; civilians simply lose access to their culture and identity. The conflict, particularly of the variety we see in Syria, robs the population of their artisanal knowledge passed down from generation to generation. It's our heritage that is under attack. Methods, designs, use of color and techniques cultivated over millennia will get lost if we do not make an active effort toward preservation.

"Syrians are really not a bloody people, despite the coverage we are getting these days. We are not people who like to see heads cut off and livers eaten. We simply can't believe this is happening to the treasures of our civilization, on the sacred land, in places where the language of Christ is still spoken. It's unreal. And then you get used to it."

How do you reason the purpose of war, oppression, discrimination?

My reasoning of the purposes is tied to my current view of what Islamization brings with it; we all see growing dominance in the Arab world in general and even gradually in Europe, where there appears a general trend in this direction. The Islamists were actually voted into power in Egypt, for example, before people realized what they were in for and got rid of them. In Tunisia where you could go topless on the beaches in the 1970s, today you can get blown up for

wearing shorts. Islamists are asking for Shari'a law to be put in place in parts of the United Kingdom, Al Qaeda is all over Libya, Boko Haram is committing the most horrendous crimes imaginable. It's unbelievable.

The deal in Syria vis-à-vis this trend was "folks, do whatever you want", but don't come close the seat of power/"the chair". Building mosque after mosque on one street - or Koranic schools one after another - it's amazing anyone was surprised that suddenly what we see burgeoning are Islamists who care only about their religion. People say that mosques are not related to Islamism and yet, the call for Jihad every Friday in Damascus...this comes squarely out of mosques. When you have four mosques on one street, zero schools, zero hospitals, zero museums, zero cinemas, it is important that we be clear on the expectation or outcome of such policies and decisions. We have created a population that values religious views over basic humanistic views. One example of this is that there exists no "civil" marriage; no inter-religious marriages are possible any longer unless one spouse converts to the others' religion.

Naturally, at the same time, one can't very well tell a Muslim not to build a mosque, as you get the same kind of backlash you would from appearing anti-Semitic in any other part of the world. It's a fine balance. In any case, now it matters little because the nature of the crisis we have on our hands is real, pervasive and crippling our chances of productivity and prosperity.

How do you explain to the next generation? Is your art your testimony for the next gen?

I don't know if I have explanations for the next generation. What I do is perhaps a symbol I can convey to younger people ... of resilience. My message to them is that no matter what happens to you, you are always going to be ok. The ancient Damascene craftwork on mosaics and Ishani in the deep archives of our national history is being used to give the women and girls I work with a new life. Based on the old, the new will thrive.

How do you make sense of it all -- how do you find the strength to pick up the pieces and continue on?

Everybody has their cross to bear, and at the same time I am keenly aware of my blessings. I may live in Damascus, but I am a Swiss citizen and have the vast good fortune of having many friends and family who live abroad. Who can come out of Syria right now and come to Switzerland for 5 weeks to take a mental health break, to revive and re-balance myself so I can continue to face the challenges of this battle as a social entrepreneur? I am one of the lucky ones and I know it.

What are your hopes for the future – your own personal and that for the humanity?

My personal hope for the future is happiness. I also could use a little investment to help me buy a generator for my workshop and expand my space so I can bring in more girls.

For humanity, my only hope is for peace.

August 2015