



Memories of Afghanistan



By Eleanor Rodgerson, MD

Why should one bother repeating the past? For an ego trip? A mystery solved? A philosophy to live by? None of those.

Just simply enjoyment.

One day, resting on the couch in the living room, drowsy, conscious only of aching sinuses, I became aware of the objects on the coffee table in front of me - Rodin's "Hand of God" that a friend had given me, a Swedish glass owl, a rickety wooden model of a Loatian temple. My attention wandered to another table and the Yoga figure of a Yugoslavian woman and farther, over the fireplace, to an Afghan flint rifle.

Yugoslavia and Afghanistan are no more. Not as we had known them. There was change, maybe disintegration, maybe transformation.

Afghanistan had been an ageless place to visit and a discouraging place to practice obstetrics and teach the women residents, who were usually second-class citizens. We were assigned to the Zoishgeh Maternity Hospital, in Kabul, behind high, green, wooden walls where women patients could shed their encompassing chadors.

We were, outside of the hospital, more or less isolated in the AID (Agency for International Development) house and I recall the manager with little pleasure. She was a small Filipina woman with a family of several children. I never saw the husband.

She seemed to resent American doctors. She had her rules, like, "no washing clothes in the bathroom," "no reserving rooms," "appear for meals on time or no food."

We drove up to the Hindu Kush one weekend to see the ancient Buddhas carved in the sides of the mountain. When we returned, someone else occupied our room. The Filipina seemed to enjoy the commotion and the rearranging.

On Saturday nights, her young son put together a jazz band for foreigners and US Embassy people, and that band played on into the early morning hours, obliterating sleep.

The food she served was not good, but we ate it because we believed the amoebae and other parasites that infected the Peace Corps volunteers, who lived with the natives, must have been cooked out of it. Our water was considered safe because it came from a well at the US Embassy.

Afghanistan was then governed by a king and the Russians were at the door. They had their own walled compound and avoided Americans. They had built a scientific institution and opened a University. On the day we left Kabul, after a month of treating and trying to teach, red flags decorated a few lamp posts and I asked an AID official their meaning. "Shh," he said, "there's a Russian bigwig coming and you mustn't embarrass the Afghans by asking questions."

One day we walked up a mountain to the Noon Gun, guarded jealously by an Afghan who

lived beside it. He wore the typical dress - off-white turban, loose pants brought in at the ankles, long, loose shirt overall. He beamed for a picture and a tip. Not far from the gun, which would be shot off at noon, was a small pot over a fire in front of a mud hut shelter. A group of Russians had preceded us up the narrow path to the flat top. There was much picture taking and no tips, so the guard concentrated on us.

On the way down, ambling along the dirt road to the AID house, I was startled by little rocks falling next to me. It turned out that a mullah in a white turban was urging a small boy to "stone" me. I was not wearing a chador and the sleeves of my cotton dress were short, the season being Spring and warm. We hurried on to the seclusion of the AID house.

However, the patients appreciated us and begged that we be there for their deliveries. There were 18 young women in training to be doctors and a couple of them were pregnant. We were never invited to give them lectures as we were for the young men at the general hospital.

They had no real understanding of what constituted "sterile" technique. A baby's rubber nipple dropped to the dusty floor was picked up and popped back into the baby's mouth. The nurse who helped me with pelvic examinations in the clinic swished the gloves I had used, and contaminated, in some kind of "antiseptic" solution and then placed them in supposedly sterile bags for my further examinations.

The lab technician carried his monocular microscope wherever he went and balked at seeing anything I saw on a patient's slide. His joy and importance in carrying around that microscope was pitiful and sad.

For two years before, an American Peace Corps doctor had helped organize the hospital and teach. Then he was withdrawn, in spite of a threat from the Afghan government that, if he left, a Russian would replace him.

Sure enough, a Russian woman was sent in and we found her knowledge of obstetrics and medicine in general terrible. She viewed us Americans with suspicion and kept her distance. We were warned not to offend her and not to question her advice. She had no more fear of infection than the Afghans.

And the flies buzzed around and around. They could smell an infected wound. Was it possible to force a culture to skip years of development and jump right in to mastery? Can foreign experts pull a people into modern knowledge?

I gave a lecture to a group of male medical students on vaginal infections with illustrative slides. I pointed out the causative organisms and one of the students stood up and told me my words and slides were false, simply not so. What could I say? I could only repeat the facts.

Although enamored of Russia's Communism for awhile, eventually Afghanistan's ancient factions took over and fought among themselves. What happened to their medical care?

The Afghans simply tolerated us but we enlarged our view of the world.

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