Through the Looking Glass in Kabul
By
Pat Nyhan RPCV 1970-1971

Chris and I were the first people ever to choose Afghanistan for a Peace Corps assignment, due to its reputation as a hardship post. Just the thing for us! The most different place on earth from our own country, which we couldn't wait to escape.

The U.S. was at a peak of disillusionment with the Vietnam War, undergoing the largest antiwar protests in history. We didn't trust our leaders, who lied to us. So, we were not stereotypical Peace Corps volunteers in 1970-71. Idealists, yes, but cynical.

Now here we were far away, marveling at Kabul.

"I can't believe this is a capital of a country," I wrote to friends. It looked like something out of the Old Testament or Arabian Nights: kids running with colorful kites through the mud-walled streets; Koochis passing through town on camels with bold, spangled women riding high; the sweet scent of mulberry wood smoke and corner nan shops filling the air; stars twinkling brightly in the winter sky over snowy mountains.

We were enchanted.

But even in training, we couldn't escape the U.S. entirely. When Vice-President Spiro Agnew visited Kabul, in January 1970, we wanted to mount a protest, but demurred in deference to our hosts. We voted to have a few volunteers make a quiet statement by handing over a batch of our letters to Agnew. Meanwhile, some 1,000 Afghan students angrily marched through the streets.

"An AP reporter on the scene blew up what happened into a wild story about PC instigating an Afghan demonstration. Agnew got mad and threatened to do away with PC here," I wrote my folks.

Although Chris and I wanted to be assigned either to Kabul University, or the opposite – a "real Peace Corps experience" in the atroff -- we were posted to Habibia High School, an American-built school in Kabul with boys of elite families who had never had a female teacher.

It was wonderful, at first. Although the mullah teachers disapproved of me, lowering their heads if they passed me in the hall, I was protected by the principal and fellow English teachers, who welcomed us warmly in the teacher's room. The men were eager for modern ways and knowledge about America.

We chatted amiably each day at break time, when they sometimes consulted us on matters of grammar. "What's the difference between 'over' and 'above'?" one repeatedly asked. They quietly consulted Chris about birth control methods. We chuckled together during Ramazan when they mischievously sent out the baba for watermelons and we ate the forbidden treat behind a locked door so the students wouldn't know.

Our department chair, Abdul Rahman Seljuki, set a gracious tone. An elegant, goateed scholar, he was descended from the Seljuk dynasty in Herat. When we visited his home one day, he showed us samples of his brother's famous calligraphy and enlightened us about the dynasty's flowering of the arts. Young fellows slipped quietly in and out, serving us a feast. To complete our happiness, Seljuki put on a record to listen to as we sat cross-legged on the carpet: "She'll Be Comin' Round the Mountain When She Comes

We were charmed. Even when I had to teach for a few weeks without our textbook, "Afghans Learn English," because the old baba who guarded the book room thought books were too valuable to be given out. I dreamed up dialogs to practice the kids' spoken English, which they found a hilarious change from their former rote memorization.

They kindly let me know that the silly get-up I had been wearing to school to be culturally correct (a pant-suit, raincoat and headscarf) could be ditched. When I arrived each day, they shot to their feet with, "Good morning, Mister Teacher!" We just loved each other, or so it seemed.

The giggly but respectful boys were sweet 10th graders, well-dressed pairs sitting side-by-side, sometimes holding hands or smelling a flower picked on the way to school. Always helping each other. Always obey-ing the class captain, who set a studious example and kept order.

The best captain was Abdul Ahad, a gentle giant worshiped by the boys. But one day, he laid his head on his desk and fainted. The boys rose up as one and carried him home, where he died that day of hepatitis. He had never let on that

he was sick.

“Don’t cry, teacher. It was his time,” said the boys.

Yunos was another born leader, eager to ask and answer questions and encourage the others to follow. When he fell silent after a few months, I was mystified. He wouldn’t tell me what was wrong. At the end of term, I caught up with him on his way home and begged him to tell me.

“One day, two bad boys in our class threatened me with a knife at my throat. They told me they would kill me if I supported the teacher by speaking,” he said, with tears in his eyes.

The bad boys were two “gigolos” who were slick older fellows in sharp suits at the back of the class, fomenting trouble. In fact, they had done time in the notorious Kabul Jail. They had gone to the principal to protest having a female teacher, but he came to class and made an impressive speech about respecting “our guest” and scolded the class. It later turned out the issue wasn’t having a female teacher; it was that I discouraged cheating, and since the gigolos never studied, they perceived their ambitions to win academic scholarships thwarted.

Our enchantment began to wear off during semester exams, when wholesale cheating broke out.

“The boys who didn’t buy the exam from Ministry officials beforehand, talked and copied openly all during the exam,” I wrote friends back home. “They told Chris and me they would demonstrate against us because we didn’t give out answers in the exam like the Afghan teachers.

“This is Afghanistan – not America. We help each other here,’ they told me.

“Just one English teacher was tough – a Pakistani who helped me proctor my worst class. The boys were so frustrated during the test that they almost walked out when I tore up two papers, and physically attacked the Pakistani at the end of the exam.

“Students regularly beat up on teachers at Habibia, and last week one hit the principal. What happens? A few pay-offs, then nothing. In the case of the Pakistani, the administration was embarrassed because it was in a foreigner’s (my) class, so they made a big show of efficient punishment. In the end, a few boys kissed the Pakistani’s hands and feet in apology, paid off someone, and went free.”

A few years ago, I visited Seljuki during a lovely afternoon at his home in Falls Church, Va., where he had built a successful new life after fleeing Afghanistan's wars. As a school inspector after Habibia days, he had seen the same corrupt system everywhere in the country, he said.

"At least our principal was honest," I offered.

"He was the biggest bribe-taker of all," Seljuki laughed.

By April 1970, Chris and I were becoming more and more disenchanted with our jobs, and we hadn't found a way into the culture to make friends, to balance our growing negativity. Our solace was our times with close Peace Corps friends, whom we saw when they came into Kabul or on glorious, hair-raising road trips around the country together. We thought we might have been happier in the atroff, away from Kabul's politically heated atmosphere.

The next month, the mullahs went on the rampage. My reports home grew more worrisome to my folks:

"For the past 10 days they've been demonstrating against the government and the forces of change in general. The original cause was an article in a government newspaper praising Lenin on his birthday. The mullahs thought it a poor idea to honor an atheist. This turned into a widespread campaign to do away with certain liberalizations of women's rights and erupted into a tragic incident: a gang of boys from our high school, urged on by the mullahs, attacked 20 or 30 female teachers near here and threw acid in their faces – allegedly because they were wearing short skirts and no veils. One woman has died."

Other Habibia students stormed out of school to protest the mullahs, shouting to us to hurry home until the trouble was over as a mob surged through the streets. We could only vaguely make out the reasons for Kabul's unrest.

"Last year school only met for four months due to sympathy strikes with the university, which follows many conflicting political winds. University students profess Maoism and Soviet socialism by turns, but nonetheless baksheesh their way to American scholarships like crazy," I wrote.

“We’re convinced the Peace Corps and all American aid here is a waste. Afghans don’t like or respect us much. The Minister of Education told some Volunteers recently, ‘Forget about being good teachers. It doesn’t matter. You’re only here to balance the Russian presence.”

Cynicism was in the air in Kabul, compounding our disillusionment about our own country. “We listen to Voice of America and BBC with horror at the reports of Nixon’s push into Cambodia and the resulting violence at home,” I wrote.

“Maybe cumulatively over many, many years the combined efforts of foreigners here will make a difference, but it looks recently as if Afghanistan will end up in the hands of the Russians. They’ve been putting more pressure on the king, and there are hundreds of Russians walking around town.”

That spring, I began volunteering at the Kabul Times, the English-language (non-news) paper that published under censorship by the royal palace. As I did some copy-editing and wrote a few stories, I kept an ear out as the two Afghan gents sitting near me discussed their communist views in low voices. It felt ominous.

The paper ran only light stories written almost entirely by the editor under various made-up bylines. I enjoyed this comical example of a “Through the Looking Glass” side of Afghanistan, where things often turned out not to be what they seemed.

On Thanksgiving Eve, we hosted a feast, with turkey and trimmings, for our Volunteer friends. We exchanged stories of disillusionment, with our jobs and/or Peace Corps itself. Those in isolated postings wanted more support from our local office. We felt impatient with some aspects of the program that seemed pointless. It always felt good to let off steam with our pals, and to admit that we hadn’t had as much luck as we wanted with our jobs, or socializing with Afghans, or dealing with setbacks in what was, no question, a “hardship post” in terms of physical and mental health.

That night, hash was smoked, as it always was when we got together. This time, Chris and I didn’t participate, be-because we were busy with hosting. But one poor fellow who had been out in an isolated place for too long ate some hash brownies and had a dangerously bad trip. That dealt with, the party ended. We didn’t know how bad it had been.

The next day, Chris and I headed for a month-long vacation in India. Throughout that time, we wrestled with quitting the Peace Corps. We loved the country, the people, the adventure. We just felt stymied in our jobs by the systemic corruption. Were we projecting the disillusionment with our own country that we had trailed with us?

In the end, we decided to quit the Peace Corps, but remain in Afghanistan and find other jobs. We felt elated.

"You're about to be busted," warned our great friend Fritz on the tarmac of Kabul Airport when our flight landed in December 1970. Off we went to meet with our country director, Lou Mitchell, who was firing us for hosting the party, and – as we learned – had sent home everyone at the party, precipitating baffled, angry responses from the Volunteers' colleagues in the schools they taught in.

"What? A little hashish smoking? And we have to lose our best teachers?" was the furious response.

"We're resigning," we told Mitchell, explaining our reasons, which had nothing to do with the incident at our place, so much worse than we knew when we left for India: our friend's medical evacuation and wholesale firing of all those other friends of ours.

This was the final disconnect between Peace Corps and us, but not between Afghanistan and us. Chris and I found other jobs, he running an English language program at USIS, I in an office of an AID program at the Afghan Institute of Technology. We worked happily on until September 1971, when we exited the country "ba taklif," after a wild misadventure with our pals to Nuristan [see Chris's account].

What remains most vivid is not the job struggles and general disillusionment of the times, but the bonds we forged with our Peace Corps friends to deal with them. And affection for the Afghans, the most welcoming of people, even if we didn't always get them, through the looking glass.

Pat Nyhan mentored Afghan refugees in Maine in the 1980s and does so currently in Washington, D. C., where she writes for the Peace Corps Community for the Support of Refugees: www.pcc4refugees.org.