AFGHANISTAN 1986

Ravished country
- a personal narrative

by C-J Charpentier

All over Kabul: the portrait of Babrak Karmal.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The Swedish writer and anthropologist Doctor C-J Charpentier (born 1948) has been engaged in Afghan studies since 1969. He lived and undertook research in Afghanistan during the monarchy (1970-73) and revisited the country several times during the regimes of Daoud (1975-6) and of Taraki and Amin (Spring 1979). He has travelled extensively in the country and made numerous friends, in fields and bazaars as well as in homes of the ruling classes.

In April and May 1986 he visited Afghanistan as a neutral with an official visa from the communist regime. He was the first western observer who was allowed to be an "independent traveller ", and thus able to talk to ordinary people and compare the present situation with the past.

Formerly an associate professor at the Royal University of Uppsala and a Humboldt fellow at the University of Heidelberg he is now a full-timewriter living in the south of Sweden.

This book was first published in Swedish in 1986 with the title ”Våldtaget land”.


DUSHANBE
CHINA
SOVIET UNION
Oxus R.
Shibarghan
Kunduz
Taskhurghan
MAZAR-I SHARIF
MESHAD
PANDSHIR
Charikar
HERAT
Hari R.
Bamian
KABUL
Kabul R.
HAZARA JAT
IRAN
PESHAWAR
Farah R.
Khost
Helmand R.
KANDAHAR
Zhob R.
PAKISTAN
QUETTA
100
200
MILES

TO THE HEART OF ASIA

I might as well start from the beginning. I love Afghanistan and I love Kabul. It is a great love. I have been to Afghanistan often, and I have lived there a total of several years: during royal rule, the Daoud dictatorship and the dawn of the "revolutionary" state.

In the spring of 1980 I visited the border area between Afghanistan and Pakistan for a few weeks. Since then I have waited. I have hoped and wept, mostly wept.

Like many I tried to be optimistic about the revolution in April of 1978 because I had anticipated change after five years of Daoud's dictatorship. I had an initial experience of the "new" Afghanistan one year after the revolution. I wrote of this in my book *Between Mecca and Moscow* (Mellan Mecca och Moskva) presenting the positive aspects of the change of government.

Then came the set-backs: Hafizullah Amin's bloody autumn in 1979 and the Soviet arrival on the scene that December of which I at first expressed a certain understanding. Hindsight is easy to exercise. I do not want to defend my mistaken judgment merely to make an open admission of it in order to show that I am playing with an open hand. I once believed in the Soviet Union. That is all. As a European I felt a certain

debt of gratitude towards the Soviets for their struggle against Nazism.

So the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. My attitude towards the Soviet state gradually changed. I waited and studied Afghanistan from the outside. I waited for six and a half years. I wrote a few books and articles and met with Afghans in exile, mostly in western Europe. Afghanistan was always there within me. And the love grew stronger.

In the spring of 1985 President Karmal's confidante, former Minister for Social Affairs, Anahita Ratebzad, visited Sweden. We talked for a few hours in Malmoe. She was charming and false. She was a single great lie.

"There are no refugees", she said, "but there are only nomads, kuchis".

Or: "The Russians have not killed a single Afghan".

Her pronouncements nauseated me. Not even the executioner Hafizullah Amin, with whom I had met seven times in 1979, lied so unrestrainedly. Amin would say, for instance, "Of course there are opponents to our regime but there are not so many of them".

Or: "I will admit that there are political prisoners, but only a limited number".

Hafizullah Amin at least tried to make himself seem credible by constantly making small "admissions".

Anahita Ratebzad did precisely the opposite.

In the middle of a political conversation she suddenly became an Afghan, and gazed at me with large dreamy eyes.

"Do you remember the pears in Tashqurghan, the ones with thin skins that hung from the trees like drops of water?"

"I remember," I answered her. "I remember and I want to go back".

"Apply for a visa", she admonished me.

That was how it began - my return.

In the late autumn of 1985 I contacted the Afghan Embassy in Bonn. Forms, photographs, letters and waiting. Months of waiting. Uncertainty.Will I be allowed to go, or not?

My visa arrived in early April of 1986. It was a special visa, not for a member of a group or delegation. I had asked to be allowed to visit Afghanistan as a private individual and this had been granted against all odds. I could scarcely believe it when the papers arrived.

"At last", cried my heart."I am going to Kabul, to the occupied city that was once my home".

My bag was already packed; everything was ready.

Then the fear came. And the questions. Television reports and newspaper headlines danced before me. "Afghanistan at war". Dare I go at all?

A number of westerners have visited Afghanistan "legally" since the Soviet invasion but none with my background, only group travelers, propagandists and journalists under guard. No one who had previously lived in the capital, a kabuli — this makes my visit unique. I say this not in order to boast, but merely because it is so. I have experienced life in Kabul and Afghanistan under all regimes. I speak Dari , their form of Persian, and know my way around. No one like that had ever before reported on what is currently going on in the country. I am not a journalist passing through; I am a former resident of Kabul on my way back. Back to the city I love in the heart of Asia. Back to the city dressed in harsh mountains whose black nights are like the hair of the most beautiful woman.

And then I went. First through the German Democratic Republic down to Prague which is the only link between Afghanistan and Europe, nervous and scared, curious and longing. The road back to Kabul.

"Everything is calm and peaceful in Afghanistan", the Afghan diplomat assures me repeatedly at Prague's international airport as I am to board the Bakhtar

aircraft, formerly Ariana Afghan Airlines, loaded with India-bound Sikh budget travellers carrying bundles and brand new Japanese tape recorders en masse making the plane's interior resemble an electronic spring sale.

"Everything is calm and peaceful", is a statement I am going to hear hundreds of times during my weeks in Afghanistan, a monstrous lie with no foundation in reality.

Seated in the greasy dilapidated aircraft I survey my fellowpassengers: Sikh majority, a few British youngsters and half a dozen Afghan party officials, hezbis, returning from Czech holidays with trunkloads of consumer goods including a large number of toy MIG planes. Having asked me my nationality, one of them wants to know if Sweden is an imperialist country thus revealing his total lack of knowledge, another feature of contemporary Afghanistan which later on I am to meet daily.

At three o'clock in the morning the plane takes off. Scared and curious, I am going to the heart of Asia. It is the end of April 1986 and I am on my way to the country I love, the country where I once lived and worked for years from the royal era to Taraki's "dawn of socialism".

At noon the plane approaches Kabul International Airport receiving an escort of MIG fighters and attack

helicopters in case of guerilla presence and simultaneously firing flares in order to divert "hostile" heat-seeking missiles.

"Everything is peaceful", I mutter to myself.

And the wheels of the Bakhtar aircraft touch down.

INDEPENDENT TRAVELLER

Last time was seven years ago. It's twenty-two centigrade (seventy-two fahrenheit) and the sky is light blue.

"Kabul", I whisper and I feel a lump in my throat. The tears are near.

An armed soldier takes me to the arrival hall. I notice a new bunker, a radar station and dozens of Soviet MI6-23's but apart fram this the airport looks the same. The first steps on Afghan soil, no problems. Passport and customs and then the eye of the needle right at the exit.

"Who are you?", a young official asks me when I am almost out.

Everything has gone too well. Now it starts, I say to myself.

"I am Dr. Charpentier", I answer him curtly.

"What"s your mission?"

"I am a traveller and I wish to revisit Kabul. I have a permit from your government".

Our conversation is conducted in Dari.

"Are you a diplomat?"

"No".

"Are you going to work in Afghanistan?"

I shake my head.

"What then is the purpose of your visit?"

"I am an independent traveller".

"That's not possible".

"Your government has allowed me to be an independent traveller".

"Group?"

"No, I am travelling all by myself. I have lived in Kabul and I just want to revisit the city".

On purpose I don't tell them that I am a writer.

"Independent traveller?"

"Yes, independent traveller".

The official is puzzled. Independent travellers have not existed since 1979.

"Independent traveller? What's an independent traveller?"

"I want to visit Afghanistan. That's all".

"Group?"

"No".

"Delegation?"

"No".

"Have you got an invitation?"

"No".

"You must have an invitation".

"I have your government's permission and that is stamped in my passport".

"Has the government invited you?"

"No, I am paying for myself".

He scratches his head full of thoughts.

Tourist? Are you a tourist?"

"Yes," I answer to avoid further discussion. "I am a tourist".

"Have you got any references?"

"Call the president if you have any doubts". I am sick and tired of the a useless interrogation. "I have a visa and that's that".

A crowd of officials encircle me.

"We haven't seen a tourist for years".

"Well I'm the first. I suppose this is a free and democratic country?"

"Of course, of course", everybody assures me. "How much money have you got?"

"Are you a businessman?"

"I have a thousand dollars and I am not a businessman".

"Well, what are you?"

"I am an independent traveller".

And the whole charade starts again but finally they let me in.

C-J. Charpentier, Independent traveller. Back in Kabul.

Change money? The bank is closed but an understanding airport official sees my dilemna and lets me change twenty dollars privately. The banknotes are fresh. The King's notes were printed in Great Britain; today's are made in the USSR.

Then out in the heat. It is a quarter past one.

Taxis? Earlier there were always at least twenty cars waiting outside the airport. Now there are none. (A few weeks later I found out why: it is forbidden for taxis and private cars to drive into the airport.)

I find a military jeep with an Afghan driver; in uniform.

"How much for taking me into town?"

"Intercontinental?"

"Definitely not. Mohammad Jan Khan Street".

"Three hundred".

It's too much but there's no alternative.

On my way to the city. To the besieged town on a bumpy road. My eyes remember but suddenly I catch sight of something new: High-rise apartment blocks, 40-50 of them, Soviet style, close to the airport. The city is grouting in front of me. My beloved, occupied Kabul.

I was afraid on the flight. I have written several anti-Soviet articles during the last few years. Some Eastern European countries have refused me a visa. Nobody arrested me at Kabul airport. My fear has vanished. Thousands of thoughts whirl through my head, thousands of questions. Are there any friends left? Who is alive? Who is killed?

"Where to?" the soldier interrupts me.

"Plaza Hotel".

Plaza Hotel, memories coming back. The large house on the corner facing the Zarnegar Park and the tomb of Amir Abdur Rahman. The Plaza where I lived in periods when I didn't have a house. It was a good middle-class hotel with mostly non-western guests. Clean and simple, expensive for an Afghan but cheap for a westerner Just a few bucks a day. Plaza. I wonder what it looks like today.

My eyes scan the road accumulating the first impressions. More people than before, ten times more cars, the same dusty houses of sunburnt mud-brick adobe, the mosque at Wazir Akbar Khan now finished, thousands of red flags and red banners, large portraits of Babrak Karmal, soldiers everywhere...

After fifteen minutes' drive the jeep stops in front of the Plaza Hotel where I pay and get off.

The friends!

Chaman Shah from Mulq in Ghazni province comes running towards me. Chaman Shah, the Hazara who made his way from nothing to hotel manager during the seventeen years we have known each other, the thin man who once wanted me to buy a dictionary with pictures for him - so he could learn English. He is about my age.

"Doctor sahib! Welcome back!"

Everybody is still there at the Plaza. The cleaners, the waiters, the men at the samovar, the sour-tempered owner; at least ten people from the old times.

I embrace Chaman Shah. The waiters and cleaners kiss my hands. The news is all over the hotel.

"The doctor from Sweden is back again!

"My dear Chaman Shah, please give me a room".

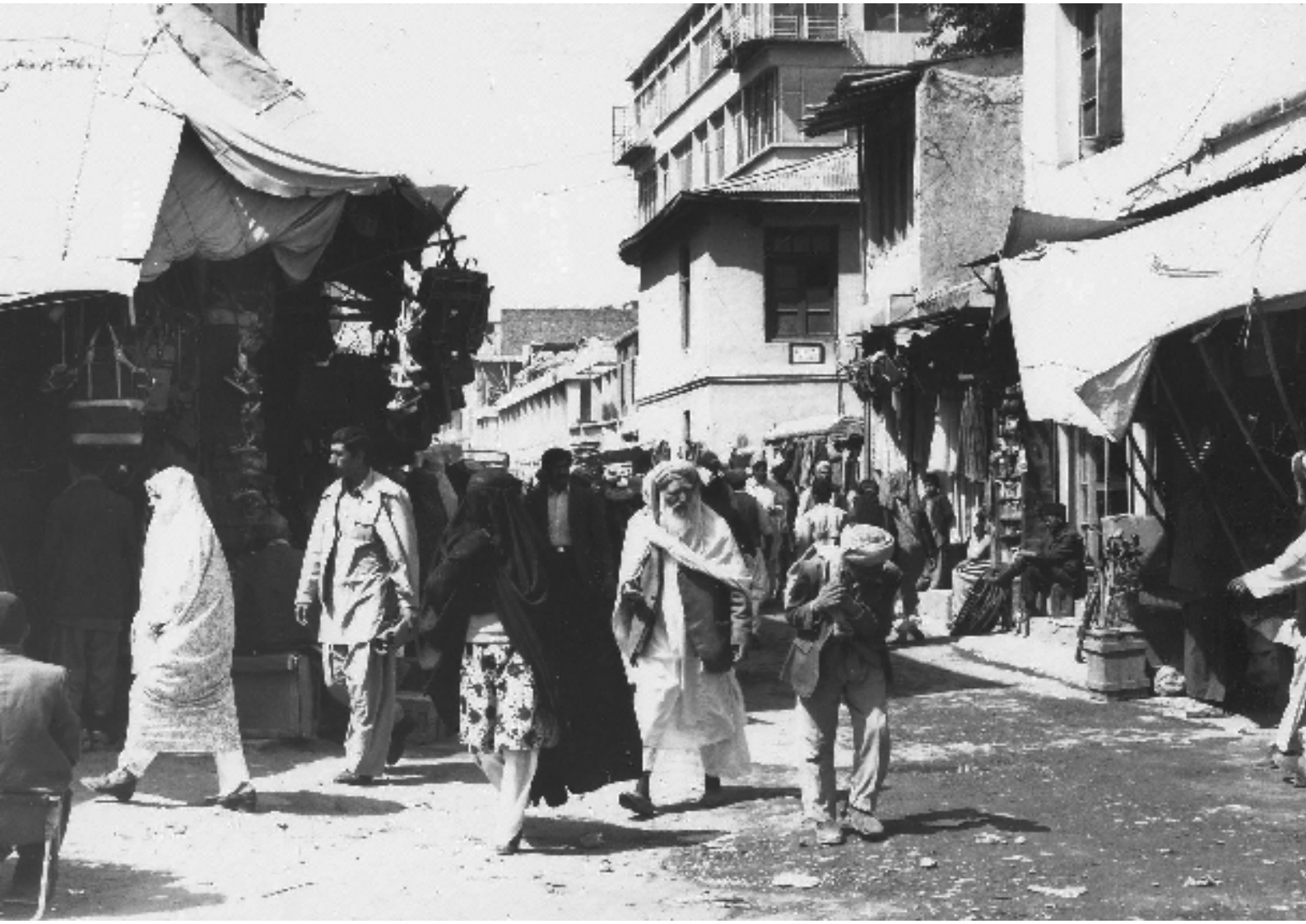
"It"s not as before my friend. You ought to stay at the Intercontinental."

"No".

"Why not?"

"The Intercontinental is too far away. I want to stay here among friends and people I know".

"Praised be to God. But it is not as before. I only have one room free".



Street scene, old Kabul.

All the hotels in Kabul are full. Everybody has been celebrating Jasheen, the traditional Independence holiday.

"Just give me a room please".

Chaman Shah is right. It is not as it used to be. The hotel is a pile of debris. Most of the furniture is broken. The walls are speckled with dried feces. Chaman Shah gives me a room but it couldn't have been cleaned since I stayed here last time, in 1979. The bedclothes are stiff with dirt. Rubbish and empty boxes are all over. The easychairs are cracked, cobwebs large as fishing nets decorate the walls.

"It is not as before", repeats Chaman Shah and grabs my hand. "Everything is, how shall I say it, extremely difficult. But everything is good".

I am taken aback. This last remark startles me.

"Everything is good I assure you. By the way, do you remember when we went hunting for wolves that winter at Mulq?"

I nod. Here we are in the middle of occupied Kabul exchanging memories like two elderly gentlemen...

"I'lI take a walk now. Please clean up while I am out".

"Bale sahib, yes sir".

"I want clean sheets. The floor must be washed, and

somebody has to remove all the soil from the toilet, and then I want two towels".

"One towel is enough".

"I said two".

"What are you going to do with two towels?"

"One for my face and one for my body".

"I still think one is enough".

"I can't face God dirty".

"OK. I'll give you two".

People are listening all the time. Curious glances peep down the corridor. For a second I drag Chaman Shah aside.

"How is everything, my friend?"

"Everything is good in Kabul".

I don't believe him. I think he is afraid. Too many people have already said that everything is fine as if they wanted to convince themselves – out of fear, out of duty. Perhaps because it is a dream.

I'lI have the room cleaned for you. Where are you going?"

"To Pul-e Khisti mosque".

I wash my hands and leave the room. I go out into the

occupied city. Of course I don't intend to go to the mosque. That can wait, I want to see if my friend Uncle Anwar is alive, the only one of my old companions who might still be living. I know he hasn´t escaped but he might well be dead. Like hundreds I once knew, like thousands.

Roaming the streets of Kabul after seven years. What do I see? What has changed?

But first a digression - a brief picture of the capital of the Afghans.

Kabul is surrounded by high mountains. The color is dirt-brown topped with snow-clad peaks. Small adobe houses climb the slopes. Strictly speaking Kabul is several cities: the old residential areas on the mountainsides and the town center on both sides of the river with old and new, mainly commercial, buildings around the Pashtoonestan Square and along the busy Nadir Pashtoon and Mohammad Jan Khan streets. Close to the bridge on Nadir Pashtoon Street lies the Pul-e Khisti mosque and further on one finds the broad Jad-e Maiwand Avenue lined with shops and small factories. At the end of the Jad-e Maiwand are the Shor Bazaar and Chendaul districts where the first popular and spontaneous protests against the Soviets took place in April 1980. All over town there are clusters of bazaars, narrow alleys and stands selling a large variety of food-stuffs and different commodities.

Bordering Mohammad Jan Khan Street is Zarnegar Park and on the far side of the park the worn out shanty sector of Deh Afghanan. Farther north one encounters Shahr-e Nau, the "new city" of the 1940's and 50's with shops and houses resembling Southern Europe, and in the opposite direction the residential areas Kart-e Seh and Kart-e Char with small one-family houses.

It is a city with a different atmosphere in every section, where today is gently blended with the middle ages, all cast in the mold of history. That is Kabul, the city of the Afghans, now ruled by Pax Sovietica.

Besieged. Ravished. Some call it "liberated"!

The first impression which forever will be engraved on my retinae is the huge presence of the army. Soldiers, soldiers and more soldiers, patrolling two and two or four and four with Kalashnikovs or pahpashah, Russian machine-pistols with a drum magazine stamped 1944 - machine pistols which possibly took part in the liberation of Berlin. But here the soldiers are Afghans, not Russians. There is one patrol at almost every ten yards all over the city. One grasps immediately that the country is at war. The mobilization is total. Several of the conscript soldiers are just schoolboys, with shaven heads and baggy coarse uniforms in the country's own

dust color.

The patrols uninterruptedly stop every male pedestrian with the exception of old folks. There are constant checks of ID documents. Every man must be able to show that he has completed his four year military service or has a deferral stamped into the red booklet which all are compelled to carry. Otherwise it is straight to the barracks. Without pardon. All the time and everywhere. The situation suggests Algiers during the late fifties. Changes from last time are visible in every street.

First the population pressure. Kabul's population has roughly tripled since the Soviet invasion, a circumstance which is highly noticeable - streets which once were sparsely used are jammed today. The whole city is overcrowded by the exodus from provincial cities. It resembles an Indian metropolis. I have never seen that many people in Kabul before.

The next observation concerns the traffic. It is dense, immensely dense to somebody who remembers royal Kabul. Dense but very smoothly running with guard-rails and traffic lights, not like Istanbul or Cairo. Some kind of Russian discipline is maintained in the streets. To avoid chaos at the very busy Mohammad Jan Khan Street a pedestrian underpass has been constructed, very needed and very neat and all in black and white marble like a Muscovite subway station.

The number of taxis has multiplied. Earlier there were only Volgas, in every conceivable color. Today every taxi is yellow and white and Toyota has gained a new market in competition with the Volgas.

Between the Spinzar Hotel and the small post office - especially in the sector called Bazaar-e Khiaban - lots of old houses have been torn down. New stalls have been erected for the small-scale petty merchants and a couple of high rises are under construction. At Shahrara Street below Deh Afghanan, smart local craftsmen - predominantly silversmiths - have converted giant metal Russian shipping containers into workshops.

The mosque at the opening of Bazaar-e Khiaban, Ziarat-e Baba Kaidani, has been given a visible facelift with concrete, otherwise it looks just the way it did.

The khonaforosh, sellers of Western second hand clothes, who operated by the hundreds with Afghan style cots, charpoi, for counters in the open area between Ziarat-e Baba Kaidani and the Spinzar are all gone, the large space today being covered with small wooden stalls.

At Pashtoonestan Square I note hundreds of red flags as well as the unavoidable propaganda placards showing old men with rifles and Holy Qurans posing outside mosques and huge portraits of Babrak Karmal in glaring colors. And just above the small post office near

Newly coloured veils hanging to dry.

the Spinzar are the first public telephone boxes in all Kabul, perhaps ten of them, erected on the sidewalk. This is something absolutely new and a giant example of revolutionary progress. In the old days people could make phone calls only from post offices and major hotels.

All over town things are sold. It is the same seeming chaos as last Time, possibly bigger, possibly more people selling something from nylon stockings to odd shoes, fruit, pads and pencils, onions, eggs, penicillin tablets, bread, cigarettes, candy ..., virtually everything. The first still small melons from Shibargan have just arrived. They are being sold direct from overloaded donkeys, melons once praised by Marco Polo, melons once sent as tribute in large lead cases to the distant caliph of Baghdad.

I am on my way to look for Uncle Anwar. We met clandestinely several times during the spring of 1979. I had to change half a dozen times between taxis and buses in order to reach his hideout unseen. It is about the same procedure this time. I walk zigzag to avoid being shadowed. I stop for a glass of tea somewhere, eat an orange on a corner, have a chat with a street-vendor, etcetera to deflect suspicion. And all the time I keep asking myself: is he still there, is he alive?

Uncle Anwar used to supply the resistance with information, an elderly cripple sitting on an old crate in

a cubby hole somewhere in Kabul hiding himself from the Taraki regime. One of many fighting for Afghanistan's freedom. Uncle Anwar whom I love.

I find his hideout. Curtains cover the windows. My heart is beating. I give the window a knock. Nothing happens. One more knock and suddenly I see a shadow moving behind the white curtains. Who is it? Anwar or somebody else?

A key is rattling in the lock. The door is opened silently and in front of me is Uncle Anwar, the truly kindhearted, short cripple with his deformed back, Uncle Anwar who cried during the three years of drought and refused to eat properly because his neighbors were starving, Uncle Anwar who gave away food in the alleys and who gave me the first inside information on what was going on when Taraki came to power. In those days I was skeptical of some of his stories. Today I know he was right.

"Thank God that you are alive", I whisper sliding through the door slit. Anwar quickly locks the door behind me.

"Carl", he says. "It cant be true. Praised be God".

We kiss each other, embracing each other, hugging our bodies heartily and long. I can feel his hump under my right hand. Uncle Anwar in worn trousers and a soiled light blue shirt. But alive. Tears come rushing. We are

standing motionless in the middle of the room crying uncontrollably.

"Well, I have been sitting here for seven years", he says between the tears. "Just been sitting and doing my things".

I don't want to give the reader any details. The political police are too alert. I don't say where the hideout is situated or what it has been. On purpose I omit every solid detail about Uncle Anwar. He is too dear to me.His life means too much. He is a small part of that future which God must have meant for Afghanistan. A small part of the struggle. As long as men like him are alive there is a ray of hope.

I enjoyed the company of roughly one hundred families in Kabul during the royal years. Uncle Anwar is all that is left.

"Did anybody see you?" he whispers suddenly.

"No, I am absolutely sure that nobody followed me".

Uncle Anwar looks relieved. "Please tell me", he urges, and I tell him about my journey back to Kabul.

Uncle Anwar thanks God. "Do you want some tea?"

"Please".

He makes tea on the hotplate standing in a corner on the earthen floor and takes out a piece of fresh nan their

tasty bread, from his cloth bag.

"Just like in the old days", he laughs. "We are drinking tea and eating bread".

Then his face turns dark and he gets a gloomy expression in his eyes.

"Water and bread. Just like in prison".

Uncle Anwar tells me that he is doing the usual and I know what he means. In the besieged city of Kabul most people are making do in everyday ways, but when darkness falls they give aid and comfort to the resistance fighters.

Uncle Anwar is living in meager circumstances and in constant fear, a fate he is sharing with hundreds of thousands of Kabulis. A cripple against a superpower.

"I love you, Uncle Anwar, and I thank God for having let me find you alive. Praise be Heaven".

"I have been praying for you every day", he answers.

At the second glass of tea it is time for the inevitable protocol.

First he wants to know which of the friends I have met abroad in exile and I give him a handful of names of families living in France and West Germany. He smiles when he hears that they are in good health. Then he starts to tell me the names of those who have escaped to

Pakistan followed by a list of people dear to me killed by the regime or by the Soviets. I interrupt him all, the time with questions.

"Do you know anything about Mir Ahmad at Mazar-e Sharif?"

"He was beaten to death during the winter of 1980".

"Why?"

"He started to believe in socialism and the unity of all men but was attacked by a rival revolutionary group who killed him in his office".

"Did Mir Ahmad really turn socialist?"

"Yes, he did but he was beaten to death nevertheless".

"And Qillich, the Uzbek blacksmith?"

"Shot in his workshop for having praised God".

And so on. We cry again.

"Why don't you escape to Pakistan?"

"What shall I do in Pakistan?" he answers, overcome with fatigue. "I am an old man and I can't get a job. I'll stay in Afghanistan because it's my country and because I want to die here. I have things to do as you know, and meanwhile - as long as I live - we'll give the intruders a hell of a time".

I nod. An Afghan's domicile is Afghanistan.

Uncle Anwar keeps talking for hours. He gives me the fate of Kabul and everything is death and destruction.

"Karmal is no better than Amin", he says shaking with anger, and then we start talking about the Soviets.

"Haven't they done anything positive at all?" I ask. Uncle Anwar shakes his head.

"Nothing, nothing", he repeats. "You'll see it for yourself when you walk in Kabul ...absolutely nothing". He sips his tea and continues. "If they at least had done something for the ordinary people — they could have used their entire army and had the soldiers build houses and roads, they could have constructed schools and clinics, and they could have had battalions and battalions working in the fields ...if they had done anything at all that shows people that they really want to help us. If so, even I could have tolerated their presence. But they came to us with guns instead of shovels and the only thing they have given us is death".

"Do you really mean that you would have accepted them?"

"Yes, I would have accepted them if they had helped us".

Uncle Anwar is an old religious man who loves his country. People have been suffering for years. Changes are necessary. The Soviets could have had a small chance if the invasion had brought people the things

they need. If the soldiers had come with development instead of destruction. If their gigantic machinery had been put to service in improving ordinary daily life. Instead they are killing the whole population. It is genocide. It is Pax Sovietica. The Soviets can never improve their standing in Afghanistan despite the fact that there was a some good feeling for them during the King's time. Today it's only hatred, burningly massive hatred. Soviet activities must be fought with all means in Afghan power. The bleeding people of Afghanistan have the moral right to resist.

"Do you know which day was the happiest in all my life?" Uncle Anwar asks after some silence.

"Please,tell me".

"It was some time ago when I was strolling in the streets and suddenly I saw the resistance hit two Russian airplanes over Kabul. They were burning like torches and I have never enjoyed a sight that much. I was so happy I thanked God for hours".

The situation has deteriorated that much! I know that Uncle Anwar visited Tashkent a few times during the royal regime and I know that he, like most Afghans, had no real hostility towards the Russians. They constructed quite a few useful projects in Afghanistan, things which were good for ordinary people. Of course they were considered atheists and some people thought

badly of them, but it was a strained relationship rather than one of pure hatred. Today it is totally reversed. Out of a somewhat strange friendship came the opposite. The Soviet Union has lost every iota of good will and credibility.

At dusk I leave Uncle Anwar.

"Please come back when you can, but be careful".

We embrace each other and I leave with speedy feet.

And now my time in Kabul as an independent traveler starts, Uncle Anwar is alive and that makes me happy. Everything else is painted in black.In the vanishing daylight I walk towards Pul-e Khisti mosque. The streets are jammed, people everywhere. Veiled women flutter by like formless birds but I also see young women with bare faces. Not only girls but also middle aged women in western apparel. On the whole there are fewer veils than before.

In the early seventies veils dominated in the streets of Kabul. Only the European minded upper middle class showed their faces. Classy ladies and university girls; and kochis, nomad women. Proud nomad women from Ghazni and Kalat, Paktia and Nangarhar, poor and worn out but with heads erect, tattooed brown faces and

jingling silver, black trousers and dark red shirts. Free women in a country still free.

In 1979 it was quite different. Thousands of young women had thrown away their veils. It was the fragile dawn of "socialism" and female students showed their faces while their mothers kept the chaderi.

Today I note ordinary women without veil, not women from the higher ranks of society but plain everyday women, torn and tired. That is a great change, something which wouldn't have been possible fifteen years ago. I am suddenly stopped by a military patrol, tanned faces and shaven heads.

"Papers", they demand harshly.

I show them my passport and give them a detailed explanation. At first they doubt me as if they don't understand and gradually I comprehend that I am the only westerner alone in Kabul coming and going as he pleases, which puzzles the soldiers. I explain and explain. I tell them that I love Afghanistan and receive smiles and then they let me go.

I see men in western suits and men in perhan-tomban, the baggy trousers and loose shirt of their own tradition. Officials are recognized by their immaculate dark suits, well combed hair and highly polished shoes. They are extremely well dressed.

Young boys swarm among the cars peddling everything

possible to sell,cigarettes and fruit, second hand U.S clothes, combs, snuff boxes and freshly harvested onions. Their compulsory schooling only exists in the official documents.

Old men with bundles. Beggars.

Kabul will never change, I say to myself. They can do whatever they want but Kabul will one way or another remain Kabul, a static but nevertheless frantically pulsating town.

The oblong charcoal grills are lit. Wicker, hand-held fans carry the smell of roasting meat into the streets, Sheepfat sizzles on the burning coals, fragrance, spices diffused in the air.

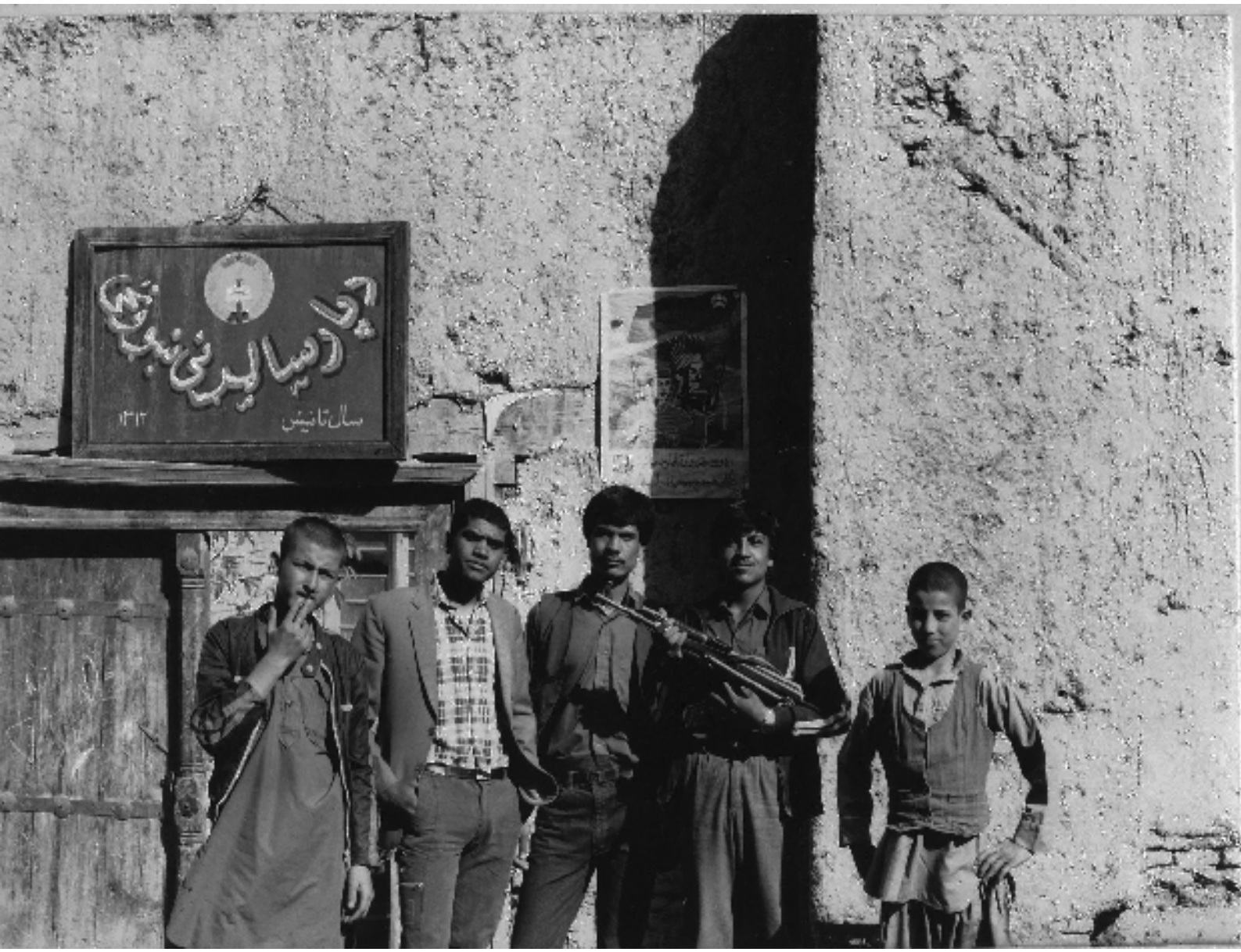
I see dozens of ice cream vendors. They were not here before. Ice cream used to be something quite rare. Now it is made all over downtown. And close to the ice cream stands, mountains of Coca-Cola and Fanta made on license since 1972. And beside the coke, stacks of British beer cans, which also is something new. In the old days it was difficult to find even a bottle of Pakistani beer. Now there is British ale. With a smile I remember my longing for a cold beer during those long hot summers ten to fifteen years ago.

A large brightly painted placard startles and surprises me. It shows a wrecked car, a cranium and a bottle of alcohol. The text says roughly that it is dangerous to

drive after drinking. Such a sign wouldn't have been seen in the old Kabul when Afghanistan was almost a dry country. The consumption of alcohol increased slightly during Daoud's regime and noticeably after the April revolution. Today the sign must have a reason. It can't be there just for fun. However Afghan communists are known for their love of vodka as a sign of their anti-religious and pro-Russian beliefs. They encourage others to booze, Times are different. I conclude they've succeeded too well.

The river. Deep running water. During the years of the drought the river was dry throughout the summers. Today after a good spring there is plenty of water. Men urinate under the bridges, children are playing in the infected water where the latrines are emptied, boys and women clean vegetables. Nothing has been done to meet the sanitation needs of these people. In the streets along the river old men from the north sell their knotted carpets with the traditional design called elephant's footprint in black on red.

Beside the river commerce is brisk. Many stalls are recently built but the character of the merchandise is as it used to be: old spirit-stoves, metal cases in every size, clothes and household utensils. And from everywhere, like an Orwellian big brother, Comrade Karmal is watching his citizens from huge portraits covering whole facades. Karmal kissing an old man. Karmal



Kalashnikov-children outside a secular school in Deh Afghanan.

shaking hands with a soldier. Karmal embracing a worker. Karmal visiting a school. Karmal comforting a sick child. Everywhere. The Soviet-installed father of the people.

Around the Pul-e Khisti mosque there are numerous carts displaying rope, thread, towels, tools, moslem rosaries, and notebooks. The knife- and scissor-vendors from Charikar have, however, disappeared. Along the wall enclosing the mosque writers, barbers and beggars cluster. Starved women lie like bundles on the sidewalk covered by their dirty chaderis. Small coins are thrown at them. Streets are thronged with people, commodities, soldiers and cars

I haven't been inside Pul-e Khisti for seven years, I slip off my shoes and wash my face, arms and` feet in the basin. Some old men look at me with great curiosity. Then I enter the mosque.

The name of God from hundreds of lips. I remember that Uncle Anwar told me that the mosques of Kabul are more frequented today than before, and from what I can see it is true. Pul-e Khisti is crowded. People seek power and consolation. Islam is in danger and people pray for Islam.

Alone amidst hundreds with the irrevocable knowledge that - "There is no God but God !" There is only man and God - between God and man nothing. No

government, no occupying forces.

"Come to prayer, come to prosperity", rasps the minaret's loudspeaker and people rush to the mosque from the adjacent streets. Strength is in Islam. But the officially appointed mullahs: their lips praise Karmal and the new order. These mullahs are the menials of the regime, at least outwardly to all appearances. I wonder what ordinary people think. Ordinary people who don't praise Karmal but hear their mullahs eulogize the Russian dogs.

I am thinking about Abdul Khan my friend and teacher, the man who once taught me to understand Afghanistan. Once, during the royal era he was one of the country's most influential men. Today he is in safety. I remember our week-long talks in a European capital, remember him telling me about bought mullahs.

"But what kind of mullahs are they?" I asked him repeatedly. "What kind of men are they to receive money from the enemy for praising Karmal in the mosques?"

"They are the lowest of the low, ignorant and greedy. These so-called mullahs, often illiterate, can only rattle off passages from our Holy Quran, texts of which they hardly understand the true meaning. Just imagine it yourself. They are nobodies coming from the remotest

villages and they arebrought to Kabul and given rank and dignity. They thank the authorities and accept their favors but the people have seen through them".

Abdul Khan is a man of religion. But he is also a man with a solid western education, a man with knowledge and weight.

"What about the ulema, the religious leadership councils?"

"It is the same thing. Smiling dogs, ignorant mullahs without any deep knowledge, and it is the same with the recently inaugurated Ministry of Islamic Affairs. It's just window dressing".

Now I am in Pul-e Khisti remembering my conversations with Abdul Khan. I try to speak to some representatives of the clergy but Abdul Khan was right. They only rattle. A theological discussion is impossible.

"Protect Islam", I mumble,

A whitebeard hears my words and smiles, and suddenly I can feel his bony hand in mine. Quickly he kisses my ring-finger and his furrowed face is lighted up with happiness.

In the early evening people abandon the streets. Some already head for home at six o'clock despite the fact that curfew only starts at ten. In the falling darkness I walk to my hotel.

My very first evening in Kabul.

When I am actually in the hotel entrance I am body-searched by a civil guard. This is standard procedure in the country where officially "everything is calm". One is always body-searched before one is allowed to enter an office, a hotel, a restaurant or a cinema. Once more I realize that I am in a country at war.

In the dining room there is a wedding party. Men in suits dance with each other, the women are spectators. The music is loud and live. Trays with sweets are passed around. It is 'just like in the old times.

My room has been partly cleaned. Chaman Shah has bought two brand new sheets in the bazaar. The room is habitable if you don't have any standards what so ever.

I dine on green tea, bread and a bowl of stew with Chaman Shah. The hotel really is full, mostly old villagers.

"They took part in the revolutionary anniversary a few days ago", Chaman Shah explains, "and now they are going to stay a while in Kabul, every hotel is full".

"What about Karmal?" I ask.

"He is in Moscow".

I am surprised. The head of the revolutionary state not present at the revolution's anniversary! "That's strange indeed!" Chaman Shah doesn't want to discuss the matter any further.

"Everything is good." he assures me..

Of course I don't believe him. The phrase is heard too often.

Through the window I see a dark street almost empty, a street which was bustling with people and activities just an hour ago, A few men hail a taxi, cars signal, everybody seems to be in a hurry.

When darkness has fallen the great searchlights at the Arg, at the presidential, formerly royal, palace and on top of the Kabul mountain are lit. It must, be acknowledged, however, that both the searchlights and the curfew were instituted by Daoud when he was ruler.

The giant whitish rays sweep over the city and they will sweep until dawn revealing everything, efficient lights making everything visible to those who watch for presumably subversive nightly activities.

Chaman Shah and I sit silently, deep down in our own thoughts. It is as though we don't have anything more to say. I know what Chaman Shah is thinking under his Everything-is-good-facade, and I know that he knows

that I know.

It's nine o'clock and the Kalashnikov children are arriving, pubescent boys with loaded machine guns, indoctrinated and trigger-happy. They are from all kinds of families. They are seen day and night with militiamen and conscripts, on guard in hotels, schools, and public buildings as well as in the dark street corners. Boys who ought to be asleep at this time, or rather playing with toys. Now they are sitting hard and super-macho with king size cigarettes playing with their machine pistols. Kids without a childhood, kids who can hardly remember anything but the war, manipulated and bought by the good state. Future gun-fodder.

I think I know how it was achieved. Teachers, officials and older companions have fed them with propaganda. They are too young to have been able to form their own opinions. They just follow the stream, a very small but loud stream. Just like Hitler Jugend during Europe's dark years. And which young boy in a country like Afghanistan wouldn't like to have his own machine gun? I take some tea with them and smoke a couple of cigarettes but they can only give me propaganda phrases, mechanically learned by heart. "Imperialists no good", and so on.

When the curfew starts I move upstairs to the television room, crowded mostly with tea-drinking elders. They

show an Indian, rather scantily clothed, dancing movie and the old men gruntingly lick their lips. Now and then there are propaganda news flashes, preachy and loud. A young Tudeh man from Iran, a refugee from Khomeini, brought to help the communists with radio and TV-production, wants to go to bed with me, He gets very angry a when I refuse his offer.

Fed up I return to my room, locking the door properly. Then I try to wash myself under an almost waterless tap. I have to be very careful not to touch the walls, still decorated with partly digested dinners. From the television room I hear something resembling a pop tune. The melody is quite spirited and the text consists of roughly two words. "Our revolution, our revolution", sung in different tones. "Enquelab-e ma". It is heard all over the hotel. "Enquelab-e ma".

In the late evening I open the door to the balcony where I sit in only my jeans looking out into the darkness. I have done this dozens of nights before, here at the Plaza Hotel where I always occupied a corner room with a view over Zarnegar Park.

A glass of rum and a Danish cigar. My first Kabulese night in seven years.

In front of me, on the other side of Zarnegar Park, lies the Arg with its huge rotating searchlight. Every time it hits my eyes during its tour over Kabul my eyes are

dazzled. It is a strange sensation. A dark night with only a few normal lights and then - bang - the forceful beam like a spear's head making full daylight in a small sector of the darkness.

"Drezh! stop!" I hear the soldiers shouting from the street below as soon as a car approaches. Stop! Every night has its password. If you know the password you are allowed to be out during curfew and that seems to be the situation with every car I hear from the balcony. Just "drezh!" followed by screaming brakes and then away.

At twenty past eleven on my first night in Kabul, the mujahidin attack.I can clearly hear the first machine gun rounds from somewhere behind the mountain that is called Sher Darwaza, perhaps thirty bursts and then complete silence.

During the night Kabul awakes. During the night there is resistance and hope. And the great knowledge that the super power doesn't yet, after seven years, control the ravished land of the Afghans. Still, after almost a decade of toil and hardship there are men who raise their arms towards the oppressor, attacking government buildings and militia quarters, men fighting for their freedom. For Afghanistan's right to govern herself.

It is an eerie experience seated on the balcony listening to the sounds of war.

Shots, explosions. The humming of the devastating gunships. More explosions.

"Honorable men are killed", I say to myself.
"Honorable men but also dogs".

Then everything suddenly gets quiet. Only the noise from airplanes and occasional military lorries perforate the night.

At dawn curfew is lifted and Kabul awakens; five o'clock and it's like turning a switch. Suddenly people and cars turn up from nowhere and again the streets are jammed. The sun cuts the mountain tops, glittering silver reflecting in the snowclad peaks. It is unearthly beautiful. Then reality comes, the gunships humming like dragonflies at the horizon. Constant patrol, constant watching for the men they call bandits, dushman, the enemy. high-tech against villagers from nearby Logar and far off Badakshan. The naked resistance against a superpower. Whitebeards and blowing turbans fighting academy-trained, professional officers.

This serene morning Chernobyl is briefly announced.

Later on, in Sweden, I was told that for many Afghans the Chernobyl disaster coinciding with the anniversary of the 1978 communist coup was regarded as a highly symbolic punishment by God. In coming years to celebrate the Afghan "Glorious Revolution" will be to

celebrate Chernobyl.

I get the news from Radio Afghanistan, one of the oldest broadcasting stations in the world. Extremely brief, no details.

Three Mile Island, Harrisburg. At that time also I was staying in Kabul. Chernobyl gives me the same shiver. But Chernobyl is closer, making the feeling different.

The Afghans at the Plaza Hotel hardly react.

"It's just a burning factory. What's the worry?"

Later: nothing in the papers. Three Mile Island was front page news in Kabul. BBC reports about 2,000 dead and 50,000 evacuated but Radio Afghanistan remains silent as do the papers. My head is full of questions. I want to know what happened. But my questions remain unanswered.

Just across the street the neighborhood of Deh Afghanan climbs the hillside. Deh Afghanan, the most dilapidated part of Kabul.

I leave the hotel and head for the underground passage in Mohammed Jan Khan Street, the only really new and useful thing I have seen so far in Kabul. Black and white marble. Subterranean shops, a constant stream of

people. It is very nice and tidy. If you're a cynic it's a credit for the Soviet record. But between the shops, I catch a glimpse of soldiers'.quarters. Eight iron beds and heavily armed militiamen. The idyll is broken. It's war.

And again an ID check point and fresh explanations. The soldiers are polite and correct. And curious. Where do I come from? What am I doing in Kabul? What's my opinion? Quick noncommittal answers and on up the otherside of the street.

At the corner there used to be a good hotel called the Park. Today it's gone. Further up is a Russian bookstore. Everywhere pictures of Karmal. Into Deh Afghanan. Into the dirt because it is dirty. Worse than ever before. Huge piles of garbage, dead rats and a dead dog. I can hardly stand the smell of dung and excrement. And in the middle of the dirt half naked, tangle-haired children are playing. Some of them shout at me in Russian. I answer in Dari.

Whenever I was in Kabul I used to stroll through the winding alleys of Deh Afghanan, but I have never before seen it in this state. It was always a poor part of Kabul but today it is desperate. For a while I am followed by talkative children. Then they give up and I am left alone.

Outside a Kabul cinema.

I muse that in this part of Kabul the Soviets could really have done something useful. A government working for the betterment of the people would have acted. A huge street sweeper would have roamed Deh Afghanan, The alleys would have been cleaned. But after six years of "liberation" I can only see hopeless slums.

A man approaches me from between a line of tired houses. The dust floats like a veil in the air.

"Shuravi, Soviet?", he asks.

I shake my head vigorously to say "No".

"I am from Sweden".

And he gives me a smile. A big toothless smile illuminating his old face. It is a smile that I will meet dozens of times every day when ordinary people learn my nationality, learn that I am not a Russian.

"Leave him alone, he is no shuravi", goes the word from gateways.

Not a Russian. Walk in Peace,

Everytime when meeting that special smile, I become aware of the hatred against the Russians. It's a massive, glowing hate. Hatred waiting with a knife. If I were a Russian I wouldn't dare to walk here, a notion which later on is confirmed. No Russian dares to walk in bazaars and residential areas and definitely not alone He can't walk now where everyone walked freely

before the summer of 1979. All foreigners, men, women and children.

My lunch is green tea, bread and an orange. People gather around me full of questions. I don't know how much I may say and that bothers me. I know the language but I haven't mastered the nuances. There are so many things I would like to discuss with these people but I simply don't dare.

One question is repeated always.

"What do you think about the Russians?"

What can I say? Spies are everywhere.

I have to make a compromise.

"Afghanistan ought to be able to manage by herself", I say. "Afghanistan can do without the Russians".

Some of the men get my hint and nod. A couple of boys try to press me.

"Russians. Good or bad? Come on, answer!"

"Bad", I answer after some thinking. "Bad, kharab".

A subdued jubilation makes the dust dance. The man at the samovar bursts out laughing.

"Dogs". And then he gives me a handful of sweets. "Dogs!"

I am warm because I love these people. I love Kabul

and I love Afghanistan. Old men attempt to kiss my hands. I take out a pack of cigarettes and they begin to tell me stories. One old gentleman recounts how Soviet officers ordered their soldiers to destroy a whole village just to give them some practice. Others talk about the low morale the use of drugs and the merciless killings. I stay an hour in the shadow of the teahouse and then out again I go into the hot dusty alleys.

By chance I catch sight of a school. Above the door I see the emblem of the Democratic Republic and the word maktab, school, A secular school in Deh Afghanan. I can't resist it.

The crude wooden door is guarded by a group of Kalashnikov-children, young boys with shaven heads and baby-clean cheeks, boys, who haven't yet passed puberty, equipped with machine-pistols. They search my body before letting me enter.

It's a boys' school; the pupils are between twelve and thirteen The girls' school is in the next building they tell me.

"Do you want to make a speech to our students?" the teacher asks me The teacher, one of those nicely dressed young civil servants with well-combed hair.

I feel that I have to make the speech. There is a certain invisible pressure. Everybody is looking at me full of curiosity. I cough and take a stab at it .

I tell them that the Holy Quran says that it is man's duty to acquire knowledge, and that schools are of vital importance for developing a country. "Without schools no progress". I conclude my improvised speech and the teacher smiles happily.

Meanwhile a couple of boys have prepared tea and we sit down in the courtyard. The teacher returns to his classes and I am left alone with the Kalashnikov-boys and their mates. We keep talking. I have to watch my tongue.

"Everything is fine in Afghanistan", they say. "The Soviets are friends who help us". Then one of the boys pulls out his wallet and shows me his idols: Bruce Lee and a half naked Rambo with his torso smeared with grease.

"Muscles", the boy says full of envy and longing and his mates agree. Gorbachev's Afghan children. Rambo in the wallet. That's enough. And I retreat to the hotel to remove the dirt from my hands.

Sometime I will have to change money so I might as well do it at once. The dollars I changed at the airport are soon finished.

I always dislike black market banking, but what is there to do when the Da Afghanistan Bank City Branch doesn't want to change and the queue at the Pashtany

Tejaraty Bank seems endless? You have to go to the money bazaar down by the river. Or rather: you go and see if it is still there.

During royal and Daoudian times there were no particular laws regulating the transactions in the money bazaar. Today Afghanistan, like the eastern European countries, has introduced a compulsory currency declaration upon arrival. One has to change at the banks which is OK provided that the banks will change without unnecessary bureaucratic red tape. The money bazaar in Kabul is an ancient institution from the time when Hindus dominated Afghan banking, the national bank being founded as recently as 1939. Before that time banking was somewhat haphazard. The first notes were introduced by Amanullah, earlier there were silver coins.

Full of curiosity I make my way to the river. Will the money bazaar still be there?

Through the crowds, carts with fruit, Turcomen selling carpets,

In the infected river vegetables are washed, children bathe and play, laundry is done, household utensils are cleaned, the way it has been as long as I can remember.

The life at the river reminds me of the poster-campaign which impressed me highly in 1979. It was a kind of revolutionary graphic, simple messages accompanied

by strong pictures. All posters in the first year of the revolution were exhortations informing people about the perils of noxious insects and rats; they spoke of toilet hygiene and why it is dangerous to wash vegetables in the contaminated river. Thus a large part of the revolution was nothing but a vast sanitation campaign and the posters were to be seen everywhere.

Today Kabul is still littered with posters but their character is different; they have progressed from useful information to indoctrination and propaganda. I don't see one single poster warning about polluted water but only of world imperialism: a woman stabbing the imperialist snake, an American bayonet pointing at a mother and her child, caricatures depicting former king Zaher, Khomeini and the leaders of the mujahidin, libelous cartoons of Reagan, as well as pictures of cheerful soldiers and merry children, jubilant workers and whitebeards with the Holy Quran and rifles defending the motherland and so on. And then there are billboards by the thousands with similar themes: old people, workers and soldiers. And everywhere Karmal. But strangely enough there are no pictures of Amanullah who is considered, with due respect, the Ataturk or modernizer of Afghanistan. And even more strange, not a single portrait of Noor Mohammad Taraki who according to official rhetoric is the country's Great Son. His novels, so much praised by the Soviet press in 1978 and 1979, are not to be found.

Constant and gigantic contradictions.

The money bazaar is still there, a somewhat peculiar institution for a communist country. Peculiar but very Afghan and a part of the tremendous contradiction.

I enter through a narrow gateway into an open courtyard, surrounded by two and three storey houses; the courtyard contains stalls with safes and metal desks.

Commerce already starts in the gateway, "Change money, very good rate today". It is just like fifteen years ago.

The money bazaar is dominated by Hindus and Sikhs, most of them Afghan citizens, but there are also a few Moslem money changers. The courtyard is a true capitalist microcosmos where millions change hands, mainly dollars, afghanis, Pakistani and Indian rupees and rubles just as it was before. In stall after stall I catch a glimpse of meter high piles of banknotes. Russians or no Russians, the money bazaar remains the heart of Kabul. From this courtyard all small trade is run, controlled by an Indo-Afghan mafia which has run the bazaar for decades, even centuries. How remains a secret but I know that all of the commercial houses supplying the bazaars are financed through the money bazaar. And in spite of the war, merchandise is plentiful. Everything is obtainable and it is privately imported. A rumor which I never will be able to

confirm says that K.H.A.D., the secret police, is involved in the transactions.

I start looking for the stall where I used to change and find it while dozens of money-changers attack me with their offers. Nowadays a foreigner with dollars is a rare species in Kabul.

Pars Ram remembers me. He shakes my hand politely, a far cry from Afghan cheek-kisses. He is very correct and manages to hide his curiosity quite well.

Dollar trade in Kabul is a story in itself. During most of the seventies dollars were floating between 70 and 60 afghanis, but during the so-called dollar crisis in the summer of 1971 when the dollar decreased some 25% all over the west, it increased to an incredible 90.35 afghanis in Kabul and remained there for several weeks, the money-changers having probably misjudged the situation.

In 1979, possibly as a result of the "revolution", it went down to 42 afghanis. In 1978 and 1979 many Afghan workers returned from jobs in Iran with their rials changed into dollars. U.S. currency became cheaper but this was a temporary course of events.

In this connection it is also important to mention that the difference between the official rate and the bazaar rate was very small then, just one or two afghanis per dollar. Rupees and rubles, however, were sold at a very

low rate.

Today there has been a drastic change resembling that in the countries of eastern Europe. The official rate for dollars is 52-55: the bazaar rate is 132-140. I am paid 138.

I try to make Pars Ram talk because I am curious but he won't open up except for one small concession.

"Times are difficult in Kabul".

Shor Bazaar. A classic place of resistance, a fact preoccupying me as I turn off from the Jad-e Maiwand into the congested quarters of Shor Bazar. My pants and shoes are already gray with dust.

In these curved alleys, dirty and dilapidated, the Afghan people's desire for independence once coalesced.. Here the very first struggle for freedom in modern Afghanistan took place, and that was the struggle against the British. The year was 1841.

In 1839 Alexander Burnes, advisor to Sir William Macnaughten, British envoy to Shah Shuja, had returned to Kabul. Shah Shuja was installed by the British, replacing Amir Dost Mohammad. The British aimed at total control,an extension of the Empire from India. On November second 1841 Burnes' house was attacked by an enflamed mob and soon war was at

hand., The men of religion declared jihad on the infidel British dogs and in January the following year 16,500 Indian and British soldiers were slaughtered, or killed by the winter on their retreat to India. The British were defeated and Amir Dost Mohammad was reinstalled in Kabul. Afghanistan had shown its will, its hatred towards foreign invaders.

The inner city district called Shor Bazaar, today as well as yesterday,houses a mixture of common people, Sunnite and Shiite traders with a marginal portion of Hindus and Sikhs. With a small exaggeration one can say that it is only the presence of electricity which makes Shor Bazaar look contemporary. Unaffected by time Shor Bazaar reflects old Afghanistan with its mud-brick houses, stalls and workshops, where spice and cloth-selling Hindus mingle with Muslim petty-traders. Half naked children play in thebylanes. It's very dirty, filthy. Few Europeans would come here. A Russian wouldn't dare to take a walk here if he were sober.

After the Soviet invasion here were two large spontaneous demonstrations in Kabul. The first came as early as February 1980 when thousands of Kabulis broke the curfew and went up on the roofs at nighttime shouting "Allah-u akbar" for hours. The second one, which ended in a massacre of civilians, started in Shor Bazaar in April the same year. After that - according to the government - everything has been peaceful in Kabul

with the exception of a few attempted mutinies and an attack by so-called bandits on Kabul Airport in August 1984.

The popular rising in Shor Bazaar and Chendaul. I remember the words of my friend Abdul Khan when we spoke about it.

"It is important to remember that it started in Shor Bazaar", he said. "It's highly important to us because it shows an uninterrupted historic chain of resistance. And it is equally important to know that it was the Shiites who lit the torch because that demonstrates that all the diverse groups of our country take part in the struggle for freedom. It is not only rural Pashtoons fighting in the eastern provinces or Tajiks to the north of Kabul but also ordinary people in towns and villages.They all want to throw out the Soviets and their accomplices. Always remember that it was Shiite small traders and merchants who took to arms in Shor Bazaar in April 1980". .

The uprising in Shor Bazaar spread and grew to demonstrations all over Kabul. At the monument of Jamaluddin al-Afghani a young girl bared her breast to the communist militiamen, shouting "shoot if you dare" and the militiamen shot her. A few minutes later a hundred boys and girls were slaughtered, their crime was shouting "Marg bar Babrak Karmal". Meaning

The women's revolutionary commiittee in cemtral Kabul.

"death to Babrak Karmal", the Soviet puppet president.

The government instructed the families to bury their dead only at nighttime and without ceremony.

Afterwards: Everything is calm in Kabul. The traffic is running a smoothly. Genocide is on - all over the country I walk in the dust of the soil of resistance, taking it all in, nodding at people, receiving a salaam, a greeting.

"Russian?"

"Na, mossafer az Suidan, traveler from Sweden".

Everywhere there is a smile. The same kind of smile, that very particular smile meaning you are friend not foe.

It strikes me that I am not afraid. I might well be a partysympathizer, deserving only the knife, But I am not scared although it may sound odd. Instead I experience a strange sense of serenity when the men smile at me.

"Come and have tea with me, traveler from Sweden", a craftsman calls.

Word travels rapidly. Just like the legendary emperor, the bazaar has many eyes and ears.

He is a carpenter in gray perhan-tomban, planing a board. His beard is black and bushy. He might be

around fifty. From somewhere a boy brings tea and two cigarettes. The hospitality is outstanding. The same remarkable hospitality mentioned by Elphinstone way back in the early 19th century. Even the poorest of the poor treat a guest. That's just the way it is. It is very Afghan.

Carpenter. Najjar. He laughs when I tell him that my French family name actually means "carpenter".

"Then we are brothers", he chuckles with screwed-up eyes. "My brother from Sweden!"

"My brother from Kabul", I answer him and we embrace each other.

"Let's hear if you are a true believer", the carpenter says and I quote the kalyma, "there is no god but God..."

"And what does the Holy Book say about today?" He continues his examination.

"Fight in the way of Allah against those who fight against you and slay them wherever we find them, and drive them out of the places whence they drove you out".

That's enough. "My brother", the carpenter says lighting my cigarette.

The carpenter is not afraid. He dares to talk and his stories are black. It is the same kind of story which I will hear every day. The story of war, murder and

genocide. The confirmation that nothing good has come since the Soviets "liberated" Afghanistan in order to protect the non-existent progress of the April revolution.

"Pedar-sag, son of a dog", I curse Karmal .

"Pedar-sag", the carpenter repeats, his eyes full of rage.

Then it happens. An old man approaches the workshop. He looks at me and at his friend, the carpenter.

"Friend", the carpenter says nodding at me.

The old man takes out a dirty handkerchief from his pocket. He opens it in front of me. In the soiled cloth there are three freshly cut Russian ears.

"We caught them this morning and slaughtered them", he says pointing at a house a block away.

Then his face erupts in a smile making the saliva tinted green by snuff run down his chin and then he hurries along.

The carpenter just nods. "We kill them as often as we can".

He tells me the story of a young woman who enticed two Russians into her house by insinuating to them that they could have sex with her. She took them straight up to the bedrooms where they undressed. But behind the curtain her father waited with a loaded rifle. Two

seconds later the Russians were dead.

I thank the carpenter for the tea and continue my walk. The three ears remain on my retina. I will never be able to forget them. And I think about the hatred. A lot of things had to have happened before ordinary people would catch Soviet soldiers and kill them; they must have suffered a lot before grabbing the axe.

Afghanistan was the first country in the world to recognize the Soviet Union after the October revolution of 1917. There were neighborly relations and a kind of friendship up to 1978. Today all that is ruined. Hate is all there is. A massive, justified hate.

There are two types of slaughter, Soviet slaughter and hezbi slaughter. Hezbi is the word for Afghan party members derived from the party's official name: hezb-e demokratik-e khalq-e Afghanistan, the people's democratic party of Afghanistan, PDPA. Soviet slaughter is a rather prosaic matter. For example, a Soviet soldier is captured drunk or stoned with hashish when trying to do business with the local people. In captivity various parts of the body are removed, mainly tongue, ears and penis, and then he is beaten to death and there is nothing strange about it. Afghan enemies have often met this fate. Hezbi slaughter, however, is something quite consummate and it is based on the supposition that there is a special vein, a "rag-e hurrah", inside the body and this vein has to be found, a

treatment only given to party officials.

The "hurrah" needs an explanation. Actually the Dari-Persian word for "hurrah" is "aferin". After the April revolution in 1978 a number of Russian and Soviet-Tajiki words were incorporated in Dari, and the use of these words served to identify party people. An ordinary Afghan for example says "mamlakat" when talking about a country whereas a party man would use the word "keshvar". There are hundreds of such words; hurrah is just one of them. At all ceremonial occasions when the government is praised, party people shout "hurrah" and the use of this particular word has become synonymous with communists and traitors. That's why people look for the "hurrah" vein.

In practice it means that the official's body is cut piece by piece in order to find out if there is a "hurrah" inside and this continues until the official is dead.

Hatred has grown like a mountain avalanche. And the people take care of their tormenters as often as they get a chance.

Shahr-e Nau is the new city with right angles, broad streets, white-washed houses and shops with big show-windows. It is fifteen minutes´ walk from the Plaza Hotel.

Shahr-e Nau was also once the hippie haven of Kabul. Up to the April revolution there were hundreds of

hotels and small restaurants scattered all over Shahr-e Nau and hashish dealers were twenty to a dozen. Shops specialized in hippie-articles such as embroidered shirts and waistcoats, pendants, sandals, leatherbags and claypipes for smoking hashish. Chicken Street was famous.

Back in Shahr-e Nau again,

My first impressions: Nobody whispers words like hashish, amphetamin or heroin any longer, the hippies being more or less thrown out of the country after the coup of April 1978. AlI hotels and most of the restaurants are closed down. The former best night-spots like Marco Polo and Club 25 have disappeared together with the discoteques. Antique dealers and fur shops are, however, still here in abundance. The supply of antiques is enormous. Previously mostly local antiques were sold: household utensils, tinned copper, jewelry, etc. Now one clearly sees that people have left the country because Chinese porcelain, Meissen-ware, crystal chandelliers, British plated silver teasets and Bohemian glass are exhibited for sale. Prices are still low compared with Europe but nevertheless much higher than before.

Aziz Supermarket where I sometimes, overwhelmed with desire, used to buy a piece of expensive Swiss cheese and Cadbury´s chocolate during the royal years no longer exists. The building has been turned into

something official, the facades being covered with red banners. Across the street sits the Pakistan embassy completely surrounded with iron fences and gates and plainclothes police.

Western style shops are more plentiful today as are their stock. Literally everything is available: shirts, Swiss underwear, nylons, French perfumes, imported soap, toys, cassettes, videotapes, etc. But the dominating article is blue jeans. In my old Kabul a pair of new blue jeans could not be found over the counter; used ones were sold by broke hippies. Now there are a dozen jeans-shops and I will soon find out why. In window after window hundreds of jeans and sports-jackets are displayed. The jeans surely look like regular blue denims but some brands are improbable: how about Leni's and Wranler, possibly made by the mafia in Naples. Not Lee or Levi's but Montana, Britannia and US Top. Montana is the most popular because of the heavily embroidered backpockets somebody tells me...

In a shop I buy myself soap, Cussons Imperial Leather, in the original wrapping. The price is one-third the price in Britain and don't ask me why.

A handful of restaurants, some of them new, in stalls on the sidewalk, coke and ice cream, oranges and beer, peddlers with carts, only Soviet and Indian films shown at the state-run cinema, people and cars everywhere.

And soldiers.

In Shahr-e Nau there used to be blocks of rental flats, three storeys and rather solid, pretty much up to South European standards. Today many of them are empty and partly broken down. Once again one is struck by the fact that people have fled or just disappeared. Empty houses all over Kabul; yetan another paradox. Empty houses when even the government admits that there is a big housing problem in the expanding capital.

With a tear in my eye I catch sight of my old home at the corner facing the Haji Yaqub mosque, a building which had a good reputation in those days apartments, florist, Mercedes dealer and Lufthansa office. People called it the Shansab building after its owner, an Afghan engineer with a German education. Today Lufthansa and Mercedes are gone and the building is almost deserted. The windows are broken and everything looks shabby.

I look at my totally decayed old balcony and remember with sadness all the hours I have stood there looking out over Shahr-e Nau, some of the happiest moments in my life. My daughter babbling in her bassinet under the fan; my wife and I falling asleep listening to the tender tones from a single shepherd's flute in the park. Or when we woke up in the middle of the night at the sound of nomads bringing their sheep and goats through the city, thousands of bleating animals like a

dancing river of wool on the asphalt. Silent men from the mountains carrying old rifles, proud women covered with silver jewelry, horses and camels, riders from the north in kneehigh boots and fluttering striped silk chapans from Jawzjan.

A Kabul gone forever. No animals in the streets. Heartbreaking memories from moments of great joy. Gone. Passé.

Holes in the streets, big hunks of concrete-block between sidewalk and roadway, desolate houses, and houses still alive. It is indeed a strange feeling to walk here after seven years. In a city transformed.

Roaring Motors. The Russians are coming. The Muscovite shoppers. And what I see is repeated all the time, even on Fridays, the traditional Moslem holiday.

Two covered trucks enter Shar-e Nau escorted by armed Russian jeeps and motorcycle police. Only one street of buildings with their adjacent arcaded courtyards is safe for the Russians to enter and that is where the "western shops" are situated, a total length of a few hundred yards.

The trucks carry about twenty Russians in civilian clothes, men and women, as well as an armed escort in uniform. When the vehicles have been parked and necessary security measures taken, the Russians are let loose, divided into three or four small groups. And then

it starts.

They walk from shop to shop buying like maniacs. Many of the men are dressed in Montana jeans and sports-jackets, the women in blue jeans, or skirts. Western footware and sunglasses, briefcases and cowboy shirts. They carry empty plastic bags which are filled up within an hour, filled with jeans, underwear, cosmetics, American cigarettes, tapes and fruit. Kabul has become a Mecca for Russian "military tourism" because here they find everything they lack in Moscow.They act like children in a toy shop or the proverbial ladies at a bargain sale, pawing through and touching everything. But mostly buying. Jeans cost 1,600 Afghanis, roughly twelve dollars at the bazaar rate of exchange. (Afghan students studying in the Soviet Union on return from summer vacation smuggle these jeans to Russia where they find even more avid customers).

Afghans and Sikhs prosper from the brisk trade, everything being financed one way or another from the money bazaar by the river. These shopping sprees are an incentive and reward provided for Soviet families who are working in Afghanistan.

It is a great and rather ironic paradox: after the country is invaded,previously unknown merchandise appears. Earlier there was hardly any market for jeans and perfume. Today there is: the occupying forces. Those

who can, make a good profit and play along. But behind the Russians' backs there are no servile businessmen's smiles. Only hatred.

"We have to make a living", a Sikh merchant says with a trace of sorrow in his voice.

In all eras the bazaars have adapted to circumstances.

In the interval between customers, stories are told. Many Russian officers peddle canned meat, clothes, weapons and munitions in Shar-e Nau in order to get cash for the sought—after luxuries. Many of them buy hashish and, if I am to believe what I hear they act just like the U.S.troops in Vietnam - a constant haze of cannabis between barracks and battleground.

In the early days of the invasion there were great numbers of Asian Soviet citizens in Kabul: Uzbeks and Tajiks, some of them trading kalashnikovs for Holy Qurans. After a while the military authorities didn't dare to send Asians to Afghanistan any longer as fratricide, the killing of kindred peoples, became too apparent and today one rarely sees non-European Soviet soldiers.

"If we meet a stoned Russian we try to kill him", a cloth merchant explains. "If possible we invite him to one of the inner rooms for a smoke and then it is over and done with".

I don't have any reason to doubt his statement.

At dusk I walk for dinner to the Spinzar Hotel obliquely across from the Plaza at the edge of Zarnegar Park. The Spinzar is one of the few tall older buildings in Kabul.

I remember the Spinzar as a very good hotel, better than the Kabul Hotel and less expensive than the Intercontinental. It was a fine hotel by any standards. They even had an elevator.

The Spinzar in 1986.

"What do I want? To eat of course!"

I am body-searched in the entry together with a group of incoming Afghans. I chat a moment with the receptionist who tells me that the entire hotel is full.

"Chaman Shah was right", I mumble. Every hotel in Kabul seems to be full after the anniversary of the revolution.

The receptionist informs me that the restaurant still is there but that the elevator doesn't work. I'll have to walk. Six floors.

On my way up I meet some of today's guests at the Spinzar and they surprise me because they are ordinary Afghans, men in worn perhan-tomban, patched waistcoats and large turbans, men who cannot possibly afford to stay at a place like this.

"What are they doing here?" I ask myself. "How do they manage when just one night costs at least one

week's wages?"

By their clothes I know that they are villagers, Pashtoons from fields and bazaars, not urban middle class. My mind is full of questions.

Two waiters remember me from years back; embraces and friendly warmth.

"What are you doing in Kabul?" one of them asks bursting with curiosity.

The Spinzar is also shabby though not as much so as the Plaza. The white tablecloths carry the leftovers from earlier guests; dried gravy and pieces of fried eggs. The print curtains depicting a mounted Kafiristani idol are unchanged, but apparently unwashed since my last visit seven years ago, I am served water and qabli pilao, rice with raisins and carrots and dripping with sheeptail fat called roghan. It is quite tasty but they bring me white European bread from the Russian bakery instead of the traditional Afghan unleavened nan.

The need for the notice telling people not to drive under the influence of alcohol is confirmed because the men around me drink heavily. Personally I am used to ordering alcohol by the drinking-glass but these fellows order it by the pint. Per capita.

No beer anymore but three brands of alcohol: the local Brandy Nerone originally made by Italians at the Pul-e

Charkhi distillery, not far from the ill-reputed prison, Russian vodka and Johnnie Walker Red Label. Brandy and vodka cost roughly fivehundred afghanis for a pint; a bottle of Scotch two thousand. I order a glass of whisky to find out if it really is whisky or not and it is. The price is 120. The same amount of vodka is twenty.

Two kinds of people booze. The young civil servants in their eternally immaculate suits, men around thirty - and this doesn't surprise me at all; they boozed in 1979 as well. The second kind of drinkers really make me raise an eyebrow, because they're the men from the villages, the whitebeards and the turbaned. Previously such a sight was impossible.

"How can they afford it?"

Later on I am told that it is almost Soviet policy to degrade Afghanistan with cheap liquor just as they did in the Central Asian Soviet Republics to speed up assimilation and encourage irreligious acts. At home the government of Gorbachev is facing a severe problem of alcoholism – in Afghanistan the same government wants the consumption to increase, and with some Afghans it is considered trendy to get drunk... Alcohol is cheaper and easier to obtain than ever before.

Around me at the tables the heavy drinking goes on, the whitebeards guzzling alcohol as if it was water. Had I

heard this before coming to Kabul I would have refused to believe it. It is incredible. Drunken elders from the villages in one of the traditionally most sober countries in the world! But I see it with my own eyes.

On the radio workers are praised. Kargar. Worker, The new title of distinction. Worker and comrade, kargar wa rafiq.

The waiter I know best tells me that he thinks that this worker business is a bloody nonsense.

"I am also a worker", he whispers, "I earn 4,000 afghanis per month and when rent and electricity are paid there is only 2,000 left for me and my family. It is hardly possible to live on that, and then the government all the time says that the workers prosper..." He is interrupted by a couple of whitebeards, ordering more brandy and a few cans of Sisi to mix it with. Sisi, a canned Dutch orange soft drink. Sisi and brandy; it tastes terrible.

At the window an old man sits alone having just emptied a pint of vodka. He is drunk as hell, staring into his glass, playing with a matchbox, Then he turns his head towards the mountains and it looks as if he is becoming one with them. I catch melancholy in his eyes. For two hours he just sits there without moving in silent adoration of the snow-clad peaks.

His face is full of longing; the mountains, the purity.

Longing for the Afghanistan that once was. I think I know how he is feeling and what is going on inside him. The time before all this. The time before the flood of alcohol. His distant village on the other side of the mountains. The time before the rape of Afghanistan.

Curfew forces me to return to my hotel. When I go to bed I can hear shots in the night.

The following morning I am out in the streets again, talking to hezbis and ordinary townsmen.

"Do not, I repeat, do not walk any further". The words come firm but most polite.

It is like that all the time. I constantly try to leave Kabul. First with taxis. I haggle for rides to Paghman and Maidanshahr twenty to thirty kilometers away but nobody wants to drive me. Then I put on a turban and climb a local bus. Unshaven, closely cropped and with a slight tan I mix quite well with my short stature and black hair. But I fail all the time. In all directions.

Just to take a bus is no problem in itself but after some ten or twenty kilometers we hit the iron ring and the inevitable check post. Only Afghans with the right kind of documents are allowed to continue. For me it is a complete stop. I am deadlocked. The control posts are manned by Afghans but in the background I can scent the peace-angels.

I turn to poetry, telling them lyrically how beautiful I

once found Paghman and that I would like to go there again to sit under the big trees by the cool river enjoying a melon.

The answer remains "No". Friendly but without encouragement. It is the same with Istalif and Charikar and after some time it becomes obvious to me that it is not possible to leave Kabul by road. Resigned and disappointed I return to the city center.

Chats with those daring to speak tell me that a similar situation a prevails in other towns under Soviet control, the country today being just a handful of controlled enclaves and between them "nothing".

No roads are safe, freedom-fighters everywhere. When officials go to Mazar-e Sharif in the north and Jalalabad in the east - both cities in Russian hands - they have to fly and around these cities there is an iron ring just like the one around Kabul

In Herat, on the western border, the situation is even worse. Part of the city, specifically the great principal mosque and the old town are controlled by the government, and if one wants to enter these sectors one has to pass roadblocks and checkpoints. In the alleys surrounding the controlled zones 775,000 mines have been spread out in order to prevent illicit passage. Meanwhile other parts of Herat remain "free", meaning that the iron ring cuts through the city itself, 15,000

people are estimated to be living in the controlled sector.

About Qandahar in the south I heard only that it is tense with daily clashes between government and mujahidin, and that Soviet control is probably quite ineffective.

Apparently control is best in the northern district of Mazar-e Sharif where large scale agricultural projects are operating, probably the only noteworthy one's in the whole country despite the constant bulletins proclaiming uninterrupted progress. Progress defended by quiet bayonets. And the natural gas pipelines of the north take their precious fuel to the Soviet union, not to Afghan consumers.

A friend of mine in Sweden asked me to write an article on film in Afghanistan for a Swedish magazine thus giving me a reason to stroll about for a few hours checking what's playing in the various cinemas.

There are at least one dozen in the city center, some of them quite new. Films are generally shown in the afternoons and early evenings as curfew makes the usual hours impossible, and the cinemas are well attended.Every spectator is searched before being allowed to go in, just as in all public places. Tickets are priced between fifteen and twenty afghanis. All theaters are guarded by armed soldiers.

During the monarchy Indian melodramas predominated. Today there is a mixture of low quality Indian offerings and Soviet movies from Sovexport, together with some East German and Bulgarian films, Somebody tries to convince me that there are also "French artistic films" but I see no evidence of that.

The Soviet films are named "Return from Orbit", "An Autumn Marathon", "The End of the Emperor from Taiga', "Who Will Pay for Good Luck", "The Savage Hunt of king Starkh", "La Bataille pour Berlin", "Hostage", "Capture" and "To Seek and Apprehend". I refrain from comment. Soviet cultural propaganda here is as overwhelming in films as it is on T.V., which has always been government run.

Afghanistan has a film institute - Afghan Films - founded in 1977. I visited it without any difficulty in 1979 - just walked in with my questions. Today I am not allowed to enter as I don't have a government permit to visit Afghan Films. Everywhere a permit is necessary to be allowed to ask questions. I call the institute on the telephone but nobody dares to answer me because I lack that formal permission. And I don't have time to get it.

Off the record somebody furnishes me with a few details.Afghan Films produce five to six movies per year plus some productions for television, using both film and video, The films are often documentaries on

topics such as terrorism, bandits, and the buzkashi horsegame; other films focus on history, revolution and love.

Raw film is imported from the Soviet Union. Color film is developed in Tashkent, black and white in Kabul. The equipment is European, the staff was trained in Italy, Germany and the Soviet Union. And that's all I am able to find out.

But on my way back to the hotel I have a film-like experience. In the fur-sellers' street, Jad-e Wilayat, connecting Shahr-e Nau with the Zarnegar Park, close to the highly guarded and banner-decorated headquarters of the governor of Kabul, I catch sight of a fine elderly gentleman.

He is between seventy and eighty, a thin Pashtoon with a chiseled face and a short well-trimmed beard. In keeping with his age somewhat jerky but it is his face and dress which make me notice him. He is wearing a large-checkered woolen coat, a pink shirt with green tie, light trousers with cuffs, sturdy brogues and a felt hat. The clothes are European and probably from the twenties. At home a man dressed like that would be considered a clown out of a Chaplin film. But here in Afghanistan he is a noble and old man with his head erect and his dignified but tired walk.There is an air of nobility surrounding him as he glides down the street like the king of Kabul. I follow him at some distance.

He is an old Amanullah era gentleman, I think, one who followed the king's orders and changed to western dress, a dress he has probably worn since Amanullah's time, threadbare but clean.

I wonder who he is and what he thinks about the present and in my imagination he is transformed by fantasy and speculations which fill me with tenderness and warmth.

He stops at the beginning of Zarnegar Park where he has just caught sight of some revolutionary placards new to him. He is standing there almost motionless reading them, lost in reflection. Then he raises his fist into the air so that his coat flutters from his thin body. Anger shines from his face and he shakes his head vigorously. Then he continues to walk towards Pashtoonestan Square.

Once again I visit Uncle Anwar in his hiding place, and we talk about the villagers at the Spinzar Hotel.

"Yes, they are ordinary Afghans. They were invited by Karmal's regime to take part in the ´anniversary of the revolution´ and as a thank you they are entitled to stay and eat at no cost at either the Spinzar or Kabul Hotel. Some of them even get as much as 20,000 afghanis per month just to collaborate. All the time the government buys people who can talk well about them and they are

mostly village elders. Believe me or not, even some mullahs are on the payroll nowadays, getting something like 3,000 afghanis a month. That's how Moscow operates in the country of the Aryans. Buying every ass-licker they can find. That's what they have to do. Purchase loyalty or they'd get none".

"By the way, it's your birthday today", Uncle Anwar says after a pause.

"So you remember".

"Sure. I have prepared a small lunch for you at home".

"That's wonderful of you".

"But I have moved since your last visit and you can't walk there in my company. You will have to wait in the street and then follow me discretely at a distance. Lunch will be ready in a half hour".

A quarter of an hour elapses with cigarettes and small talk.

"Now", he says and I leave his cabby hole for a stroll in the street. A few minutes later he comes out and I follow him cautiously up street and down, around corners and around again, until he disappears through a gateway.

His quarters are two poor but very tidy rooms, one for himself and one for the family as a whole.

In his room there are an iron bedstead, a writing table, two chairs, a cupboard and a mousetrap. On the walls there are framed caligraphic quotations from the Holy Quran and a small pencil drawing made by a mutual friend. That's about it.

I note that the floor is covered with cheap foreign factory-made carpets, suggesting that he has had to sell his valuable handmade ones in order to survive.

His wife enters with a tray. A dish of steaming hot rice and meat, some pickles and two oranges. On a separate plate: a little sponge cake with a single candle.

"Happy birthday!" Uncle Anwar is shining with happiness.

I cry and hug him for a long time because I know how much he must have sacrificed in order to arrange the tray. It is grand and touching as well as very Afghan. A poor and good-hearted old man buying a cake from his meager savings. He takes out the Holy Quran from a wrapping of green cloth and prays. His wife has already withdrawn to the other room.

"Bismillah. Please eat my friend! My wife has prepared the food with the greatest care".

I appreciate his comment and relax. A European stomach can prove very delicate in Afghanistan. This is my fifth birthday in Kabul and also the most memorable.Once we finish the meal, his wife arrives

with tea and I cut the cake.One piece for me and one piece for Uncle Anwar. Then he cuts the rest into small chunks which he immediately takes out into the street where they are distributed to the children.

"Children must have cakes", he explains with a magnificent gesture.

"Cakes belong to childhood".

"What childhood?" I say to myself. Children hardly having experienced peace. Children whose image of Afghanistan is just war and uncertainty Children who unlike me and other adults never have flown kites on the slopes of Qala Fathullah Khan or played by the river at Paghman in a country without violence.

"Is Massoud, the guerilla leader of Panjshir, still alive?" I ask him after a while. "Have you heard anything?" I know that Uncle Anwar knows him; somebody told me that once during a night-time discussion in Wiesbaden.

Uncle Anwar smiles roguishly.

"The struggle goes on. Massoud will never give up and he has managed so far".

Later I am told a story - I don't know if it's true or not that Massoud has arranged for five or six doubles in order to confuse the enemy and that once one of them was shot which made the government think they had killed the leader himself.

On May Day it is raining in Kabul. There are no festivities, which greatly surprises me. I had expected large parades and cheering youth but Kabul remains silent. The only things that tell me this is the International Workers' day are some sequences on television and a radio recital of "revolutionary poetry".

A week later I discuss this with an official at the Foreign Office.

"We couldnt have a parade-because of the rain", came the transparent answer.

The same official also gives me the official line on Massoud.

"At his very peak of power he had one hundred men. Today he has just three or four supporters".

So it goes every time one speaks with official Kabul. Everything is a monstrous lie. They don't even try to make their statements credible. It's just lies, big, obvious lies. Significantly the leading newspaper nowadays, the mouthpiece of the party, is called Haqiqat, meaning "The Truth", Pravda.

Between lies and reality my own picture of Kabul and ravished Afghanistan is being shaped and what I see around me is genocide at the same time that the puppet government is trying to create a local class of bought and manipulated people. The policy aims at depopulating large parts of the countryside, trying to

establish concentrated enclaves which can be controlled.

It all strikes me as a gruesome contradiction. On the surface many things look unaffected in spite of the actual changes. It's a paradox; dusty streets and busy bazaars do look the same, but they aren't. There is a kind of tranquility at the same time that hatred is simmering. The sleepy residential districts remind me of peaceful yesterday but, if given the chance, people do slaughter Russians. The idyll and calm which life now and then presents just strengthen the peculiar feeling of unreality which is growing within me.Afghanistan at war is two things: Lies and Contradictions.

POWER AT THE TOP

A brief background review

For thousands of years Afghanistan has been invaded and pillaged but never crushed. Conquering generals from Alexander the Great to Genghis Khan, Tamerlane and Nadir Shah of Iran came and went. Cultures flourished and died. The Silk Route crossed the country connecting the Mediterranean with China. In the past century British and Czarist Russian interests collided. Afghanistan was proverbially a crossroad of cultures, thoroughfare and crucible - or rather a mosaic. Afghanistan has been a multi-ethnic society with Pashtoons at the helm of the state; there are also Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, Turcomans, Kirghiz anda few others. Settled people and nomads. And everything in between.

In 1747 Ahmad Shah united the tribes at Qandahar and the embryo of a national state was born, the undertaking being continued by Amir Abdur Rahman in the late 19th century.

In the 1920's Afghanistan was ruled by the progressive and west-oriented King Amanullah who - like Atatürk, his Turkish contemporary – tried to reform and modernize his country. But Amanullah was overthrown in 1929 by the robber captain Bacha Saqqao who for

almost a year ruled the country with terror and in darkness. He was tracked down and hanged by General Nadir who then ascended the throne of Kabul.

In 1933 Nadir was assassinated and his nineteen year old son Zaher was chosen as successor. During his first decades, Afghanistan was ruled by his uncles. Then from 1953-63 the country's strongman was Zaher's brother-in law and cousin, Prince Daoud, who during his ten years as Prime Minister modernized the police and the armed forces among other accomplishments.

In 1963 the king seized power and Daoud stepped. down. There was a noticeable period of careful liberalization, At the same time the country adopted a new constitution partly drafted by a French advisor. For a few years at the end of the sixties Afghanistan had considerable freedom of the press and the Afghan political left prospered. In Kabul, for example, the communist papers Khalq and Parcham were published.

Between 1970 and 1973 a severe drought struck, resulting in famine and a rapidly deteriorating economy. All over the country people from all walks of life longed for a change.

In a coup d´état in July 1973 Prince Daoud seized power, receiving help from the left and his "Republic" was given a jubilant welcome. Many Afghans believe that the Afghan communist military officers who

helped Daoud were in daily secret contact with Soviet agents and that the K.G.B. masterminded the stages of the coup. A program of reforms was announced but after some time the regime gradually turned to the right. Daoud sought to get rid of his communist political allies, sacked his leftist ministers and moved closer to the Shah of Iran and the "moderate" Arab regimes. Significant development assistance began to come from Moslem states. But the net result was a brutal, repressive, reactionary dictatorship and a situation even worse thanduring the final years of the monarchy; it was a time of extensive corruption and total incompetence. Stalemate. Disaster.

In April 1978 the leftist groups, evolved during the sixties, seized power in what is called the April Revolution. The two factions, Khalq and Parcham, were temporarily united as the P.D.P.A. with retired journalist cum writer Noor Mohammad Taraki as head of state. This coup d'état was greeted jubilantly by people who had suffered severely during Daoud's dictatorship. And once again an ambitious program of reforms was presented.

After a few weeks, old differences between Khalq and Parcham became visible; many top Parchamis including their leader, Babrak Karmal, were sent abroad as ambassadors to get them out of the way. later on they were sacked and branded as traitors. Taraki remained as

President. The Soviet Union chose to support the Khalqis, most probably because of their influence in the army.

A large number of reforms were initiated and their implementation was pursued with ardor and enthusiasm: agrarian reform, cultural reforms, laws against usury, decree on marriages, schooling campaigns, etc. Alas the planning was bad, the speed of change too great and implementation by force. The government soon faced opposition from the tradition-bound population which declared the new leaders heretics. Internal unrest broke out and the regime was decried by the west. In February 1979 the American ambassador, an astute soviet expert, was kidnapped and killed under very ambiguous circumstances in Kabul. Thousands of people fled to Pakistan, and inside Afghanistan the lack of a democratic political tradition led to a growing central and state-run brutality. At the same time more and more power came into the hands of Khalq's number two man, Hafizullah Amin.

In September 1979 Amin had Taraki killed to forestall his own removal.Three months of extreme brutality followed. People were killed by the thousands in the Pul-e Charkhi prison. The number of refugees grew into millions and war raged in all provinces. Babrak Karmal was waiting in storage in an Eastern European sanctuary.

On the 27th of December 1979 Soviet troops invaded Afghanistan, planeloads descending on Kabul. Using as excuse a Soviet-Afghan treaty signed in November the previous year, the Soviet government announced they were invited by the Afghan government. Part of the Afghan armed forces were disarmed. Of course the Soviets were not invited by the government but possibly by a faction of the Afghan communist party I believe.

The Russians brought Karmal back to Kabul where almost immediately as a gesture of good will he released more than 8,000 prisoners from Pul-e Charkhi. Furthermore he appealed for negotiations with his opponents and announced freedom of religious practice but the resistance remained unconvinced. Armed opposition, some sheltered in Pakistan, grew and several countries gave the mujahidin moral or direct support.

I don't intend to analyze Soviet motives for the invasion - that would be a separate book as they include everything: a cynical wish for power, to give assistance to the Afghan revolution as well as safeguarding the Soviet ideology of a "friendly" country, a longing for warm seas in the vicinity ofthe Gulf oil-fields, the creation of a loyal partisan on their border next town Iran in turmoil that could threaten the Soviet Muslim republics, and so on.

My own and very subjective opinion is that things in a way started well with Taraki - Afghanistan needed a change - but then went straight to hell .I knew them all from the leaders of the monarchy to Daoud, Taraki and Amin. I conversed with them extensively both before and after the revolution.Today I have the sad facts, I dreamt of a positive change for the people of Afghanistan. I believed in Taraki's simple vision of tractors, doctors and teachers in every village and I still think that he meant well. I knew him from back in his days with the Bakhtar news agency, and having seen Afghanistan suffer for years, I was filled with hope by his program. His simple dreams were easy to accept for a man like me with western education and social goals.

Amin, once the head of a teacher training school, was a shrewd and cunning devil. I learned from friends that at an early stage he had already planned his take-over, among other techniques by making Taraki look ridiculous. For example he said Taraki was born in 1917, the year of the Russian revolution - and explicitly on the 14th of July, the day when the Bastille was captured in the French revolution. He led him to make a fool of himself on television cutting his birthday cake dressed in a lavender outfit and so on but that is another story which I have written about in my novel Miqozarad.

Enough. There are lots of books and articles for those

who want to know more of what has passed. These pages are just a brief personal summary of events.

IN THE CLAWS OF THE STATE

A knock on the door. The echo of Stalin. Everybody knows what it means.That knock at the door.

After a few weeks as an independent traveller in Kabul I am deprived of my freedom. My inquisitive talking to common people and my many efforts to leave town must have irritated the authorities. Eyes and ears are everywhere. Sooner or later things appear in the daylight. I'm surprised it didn't happen earlier.

At five past eight theres a knock on my door, room 205 at the Plaza Hotel. I am breakfasting on green tea and nan. The knock at the door. I don't even have time to think before opening.

In the corridor there is a young, well—dressed man in a grey suit. A true hezbi I think immediately.

He introduces himself as Farid, mentioning a department at the Foreign Office as well as the name of his superior. I recognize the name. It is an official working at the bureau for foreign relations and publicity. I then ask Farid for his ID card and he shows me a press card issued by Bakhtar news.

I have to let him in.

"You can't live like this, sir", he says.He speaks good English and looks around nodding meaningly at the dilapidation. I have to admit that he is right.

"This used to be a good hotel," I explain. "Now it's a pig sty. But the staff is very nice", I add quickly.

"You have to live properly. A man of your standing must stay at the Kabul Hotel".

"It's full", I answer him.

"Our government has already procured a room for you. You might as well pack your things at once".

He sits down in a broken easychair looking at me imperiously. I start to pack my bag and collect my toilet articles. It's done in a couple of minutes. When I am standing in the so-called bathroom putting down my toothbrush I think for a moment that it will be fine to stay in a decent hotel. I am longing for a proper toilet and a working shower. Longing for the Kabul Hotel. I have not yet understood what it means to stay there.

"Now you'll have a decent room", Farid says. "Let's go".

He takes my bag and we start the five minutes' walk to the Kabul Hotel. (Which today is called Serena, bloodstained after several taliban attacks).

Before registering I am body searched by the guard at the front door; it was, by the way, here in the Kabul Hotel, that U.S. Ambassador Adolph Dubs was killed. Then I am brought to my room. It is simpler and more worn compared with the last time I stayed here back in 1970 but it's much better than the Plaza. And after being installed I'm served tea, carrot jam and bread in the dining room whose table cloths are as decorated with leftovers from the previous guests as those at the Spinzar, served by waiters in totally worn-out tuxedos, the fitting uniform for a hotel that used to be classy. Once upon a time the Kabul Hotel was the finest in all Afghanistan, its style being slightly colonial.

In the dining room I am given the rules I have to follow, and now I fully understand what that knock on the door really meant. Given rules, kind but firm.

The main rule is very simple. It says that from now on I am not allowed to walk one single yard by myself in Kabul and that I am definitely not supposed to talk to people. I am only allowed to do things in the company of Farid and with him I may visit only a limited number of selected streets; no more bazaars and alleys. Furthermore, he says that I have to have a program; every foreigner must have a program otherwise there is no reason to be in Afghanistan. Independent travellers are not allowed. There is no use arguing or referring to the permission I received before leaving Sweden which

ought to be valid still. Farid makes it very clear to me that I will be guarded day and night, making me a prisoner at the Kabul Hotel like every other western journalist who has visited the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan in recent years.

"Now we'll make the program", Farid says when I have been given the rules. "What do you want to see? Whom do you want to meet?"

"Well, I want to have a meeting with the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Minister of Finance", I answer without any hesitation.

Farid makes a note.

"And then I want to see somebody in charge of the food coupon system; I want to visit a literacy project for elders, as well as an ordinary school and a farm".

"Now, we almost have a program". Farid smiles happily making me see how very important this is. "Anything else?"

"Yes. I want to go outside Kabul, at least to Charikar, Istalif, Paghman or Maidanshahr. I'll naturally be glad to pay for it myself."

"No. That's not possible. We have no program for those places".

"Doesn't matter. I don't need a program. I have been to these places several times before and I just want to see

what they look like today, walk in the bazaars and have tea. That's all. We can take a taxi from Kabul at my expense and we'll be able to make it in one day".

"Not possible", he repeats at the same time as he makes a notation.

"Are there any bandits at those places?", I ask with feigned ignorance as I know only too well what the situation is in the provincial towns just mentioned.

"Of course not. You don't have to be afraid of bandits in Afghanistan", he assures me. "Everything is calm in our country".

"O.K.", I say sighing with relief, "then lets take a taxi to Paghman".

After some further discussion he admits that the government can't guarantee my security outside Kabul - not totally.

I laugh at him harshly.

"But you just said everything is calm in your country!"

My answer makes Farid very annoyed.

"You haven't a leg to stand on", he answers excitedly, trembling with anger."Your government couldn't even take care of the security of your own prime minister. Didn't he get shot in the middle of Stockholm? And if your government can't control your capital how do you

think we should be able to make every inch of Afghanistan secure?"

To a certain extent he is right. And we change the subject.

"Anything else?", he asks me after another pot of tea.

"Yes", I answer. "I would like to know if my old friend Mohammad Nasim Argandiwal, former sub-governor of Tashqurghan during the monarchy, is still alive, escaped or dead?"

"Was he a communist?"

"I don't know", I answer most sincerely. "All I can say about him is that at least he was no reactionary".

"We can't find out things about people from the old regimes".

"Of course you can", I insist. "The sub-governors were appointed by the Minister of Interior and I know for sure that Mr. Argandiwal was in official service till at least the spring of 1978. He might well have joined the revolution - that's not impossible. You must have official records and the number of uluswals, sub-governors like him, was quite limited throughout the country".

"We have no records from those days".

"Come on, i t was just a few years ago. There must be

somebody at the ministry who knew him, and if he was in favor of the revolution it shouldn't be hard to trace him".

"Why do you want to see this Mr. Argandiwal?"

"I just want to talk to him, that´s all. He gave me a lot of help when I wrote my dissertation on Tashqurghan".

Farid looks at me skeptically and concludes that it is not possible. Later on I put the same question to his superiors but I always got the same answer: "not possible".

The difficulty in obtaining information about Mr. Argandiwal irritates me highly. In Europe he would have been something between a mayor and a director general and such a man does not just disappear from the records. He might of course be on the black list but if so it would have been quite easy for the government to denounce him as a "bandit", a freedom fighter; likewise if he has escaped. But he might well be sitting somewhere taking part in the game...

All the time nothing but complete silence. Like banging ones head against a concrete wall.

Before lunch I want to take a walk in Shahr-e Nau, so I ask Farid to accompany me to buy a present for my father. It's an old dagger which I had bargained for a few days earlier

We walk down to the antique shop in Chicken Street. The owner with whom I had haggled for hours pretends not to know me. Farid doesn't know that I have visited this shop. The shopkeeper is very curt. I know that his attitude stems from my being accompanied by a hezbi. When Farid looks away I give the shopkeeper a wink and receive that special smile. We bargain just to coverup and then I purchase the dagger, the whole transaction being performed impersonally with no signs of the friendliness I enjoyed a few days ago. And it is the same in three other shops.

When I walk back to the hotel with Farid - he is a bit angry because I don't want to take a taxi - he is exhausting me with questions.

Farid is about thirty with a university education from Kabul and Tashkent and he is a government press official but his questions are extremely naive. For example he wants to know if there are many beggars in the streets of Sweden, if we have the same kind of houses as in Kabul, if our bazaars are large, and if there are many donkeys in Stockholm. And so on.

Then he asks if Sweden is an imperialist country. When I shake my head, he says that I am wrong - that Sweden is a monarchy and thus ultra-imperialist. I explain to him that the king of Sweden is just a powerless symbol but he can't understand. We touch on financial matters and I try to explain as clearly and simply as possible

that in Sweden most of the basic institutions such as schools, hospitals, pharmacies, kindergardens, and some of the industries are run by the state but that there also is a private sector controlled by the laws of society. Even this he finds incomprehensable. To him Sweden is a super-capitalist and therefore an imperialist country. I say a few words about social democracy but receive the answer that all non-communist states are dictatorial.

"Does Sweden support the United States?" he asks suddenly.

I am astounded. Farid is not just anybody but an official from the Foreign Office, an educated civil servant, yet he seems totally bereit of elementary knowledge. Everything leaving his mouth is either profound ignorance or crude propaganda. And as soon as I ask him about his personal opinion he answers that "Comrade Karmal has said..." or, "our government means that..."

And that's the kind of men who, at least nominally, govern Afghanistan, I say to myself. Ignorant hezbis without any trace of basic information. Farid is no exception. I meet his colleagues daily, dozens of them. Young and well dressed, and - mostly - idiots.

One wants to know if hospital care is free in Sweden, and I answer that everything is free but financed

through taxes.

"Really, is everything free?"

"Yes, everything. Surgery, beds, medication...."

"Just like in Afghanistan", he maintains. "If you get a headache at the Kabul Hotel the receptionist will gladly give you an aspirin without charge".

Further discussion is impossible. They, the hezbis, are hopeless.

When Farid offers me a Coca-Cola at a stand in the street I try to get a small revenge.

"I don't drink Coke" I say to him, "because it is the archsymbol of U.S. imperialism".

He glares at me, confused, filled with doubt.

"For every bottle of Coke made in Afghanistan your government pays a certain percentage to U.S. businessmen and indirectly to the Reagan administration".

"That's not true", comes the wrathful answer.

"Of course it is. You manufacture Coke on a license and you have a financial agreement with the Americans and with every bottle you drink you are indirectly supporting the bandits!"

He is very thoughtful and I don't know whether he

believes me or not. But he drinks his Coke and urges me to do the same.

"Never. If you want to support U.S. imperialism that's up to you. I don't".

With any luck he has got something to think about.

Lunchtime. Observing the guests at the Kabul Hotel. The foreign guests are one Japanese selling tires and cigarettes, a Taiwanese dealer in ready-made clothes (officially registered as Japanese since Taiwan is considered a hostile capitalist country - thus has no relations with Afghanistan). There are further two Japanese TV reporters with official interpreter-escorts, politruks, who are actually from the secret police. Also two Italian TV-men (one of them dressed in trendy green silk combat pants) and their politruk, a group of young Russian athletes, and a Belgian drunk who is supposed to build a textile plant; during his 160 days at the Kabul Hotel he has had 450 bottles of vodka.

The great majority of guests - perhaps 200 men - are, however, Afghans, exclusively villagers in turbans and perhan-tomban, the same kind of men staying at the Spinzar. Men who can hardly afford to pay their ownbills and I remember once again what Uncle Anwar

Revolutionary progress: Kabul's first public telephones.

said about bought villagers. Pashtoons predominate but there are also a few Hazaras and at least one village mullah, a rural parson. Unlike the guests at the Spinzar this group drinks very little alcohol.

I am served a rather bad palaw, rice and chicken, at the same time being told that I am supposed to pay for all my guardian's meals and expenditures. I have never experienced anything like this. First you are more or less imprisoned, and then you have to pay for your jailer. It's very Afghan indeed.

Deep inside I am of course both angry and sad. I don't have any wish at all to be in leading-strings but I am forced to acquiesce. Anyway I am glad that I got the chance to walk around all by myself for two weeks, something no westerner has done before. Now the government can feed me with it's propaganda. I have seen what I have seen. And it could well be interesting to watch the official version of the country of peace and progress.

"I don't want to go out any more today", I tell Farid. "I'll just stay in the hotel and talk to the other foreigners".

"I'll be here all the time", he responds.

I do believe him.

The tire-selling Japanese is just smiling and always nodding and doesn't say a single word worth recalling.

With the Taiwanese, however, I manage to establish a certain rapport. He tells me without any trace of hesitation that the Afghan government buys millions from Taiwan, something they officially deny, calling the Taiwanese articles "Japanese". It's a valuable piece of information, something to remember. Like the thirst for Coke.

The Belgian is too drunk to talk, just standing at the bar all the time.

The two Japanese TV reporters seem quite decent: a young cameraman and a senior journalist with a critical attitude. He doesn't dare say much but I can sense that we are on the same wavelength.

With the two Italians it's the other way around. They only speak Italian and some French, not a single word of English and naturally no Dari or Pashto. Both are a few years younger than I, the one in silk combat pants being very talkative, his colleague mostly silent. We can call silk combat pants "Sandro" just to identify him. Actually I should publish his correct name, photo and personal history because politically he is a swine.

Sandro, being quite well-educated, represents the type of intellectual suffering from a verbal diarrhea which one often meets in Italy and France.To go with his silk combat pants he wears an expensive tie and a Cardin shirt. They have already been a couple of months in

Kabul - it is their first visit - and so far have seen only progress.

"Everything is progress", they assure me in chorus. Not one single detail is bad and of course there are no Afghan refugees abroad, only nomads. Russians and Afghans haven't killed one single human being with the exception of bandits. Bandits are the cause of everything evil, bandits supported by the U.S.A., Pakistan, China and Iran. Poverty is dismissed as something of minor interest as are the slums of Kabul.

Sandro and sidekick have been in leading-strings all the time, unable to address one single question directly to the people they've met. For me it would be impossible to work on Afghan matters without some knowledge of Dari and previous experience in the country and for that reason I often doubt western journalists' reports as they generally are devoid of background or superficial, even if their intentions are good. These two gentlemen from Florence accept all the propaganda which to them is the gospel truth. And when I ask them to name some of the improvements they answer like true hezbi that the government has established various committees and organizations.

I talk to Sandro in French so that his Italian and English speaking politruk won't be able to understand, but later on when I chat with him it strikes me that he is a very nice and jolly man. So why shouldn't foreign journalists

fall in the trap? They come to Afghanistan without having been there before and without any knowledge of the languages; thus, how should they be able to know for example if a hospital was built in 1978 and not in the summer of 1980 which is claimed by the politruk. He makes it look like a revolutionary achievement from "phase two", which is the official term for the time after the Soviet invasion. They are not allowed to walk by themselves and are fed all the time by congenial jailers men who smoke Marlboro and drink whisky and can tell a sexy joke when necessary; men almost good guys. But these Italians' ignorance is a bit too much.

In the evening I stay sourly in my room, irritated at being unable to go where I want and angry because I know what the Italians' TV report will look like. Farid is sitting in the lobby in order to prevent me from leaving the hotel.

And once again I hear shots although the hotel tries to drown the mujahidin's activities with loud music. And the great transport aircraft coming from the north on their way to the Soviet base at Bagram are more numerous than any previous night.

I meet a lot of government officials in Kabul but few of our conversations are worth printing. Everything is a grotesque lie. I know the answer I'll get even before

raising the question: Everything is calm. Only bandits. The undeclared war. World imperialism. Only a limited Soviet contingent. Only improvements.

I am offered interviews with top officials and even cabinet ministers but they won't allow me to talk to ordinary civil servants.

And the whole litany: Party congress, plenary sessions, central committee decision - everything is proclaimed synonymous with progress.

During all meals at the Kabul Hotel (I am forbidden to eat elsewhere) the Italians keep praising the Afghan revolution. I wonder what they are made of and if they don't have eyes. Naive Stalinists for whom ideology and fantasy mean more than reality.

I keep nagging all the time at the politruks, pestering them to be allowed to go to the provinces. They constantly refuse saying at the same time that - of course - everything is calm.

However, I will recount one of my numerous interviews because it concerned an interesting topic and I was given details, being possibly the only foreigner who wanted to meet the "coupon-president".

At all levels men are bought, paid for their political loyalty. The whitebeards at the Kabul and Spinzar

hotels are just one of several examples; salaries paid to village elders and some mullahs are another. There are benefits for civil servants such as newly built houses and grants for study in Eastern Europe, etc. But let's have a look at the coupon system!

Even during the monarchy prices were fixed for some daily necessities such as bread, and these fixed prices were low due to subsidies. Government employees were entitled to buy monthly quantities of certain foods at reduced prices. This system continued during Daoud's regime and was further developed after the April 1978 coup. That's my reason for wanting to see the "coupon-president", rais Saleh Mohammad Saleh, who receives me in his office in the western outskirts of Kabul, close to the silo and huge bakery the Russians built some 30 years ago in their original assistance program.

Saleh Mohammad Saleh is about fifty years old, dressed in a striped blue suit, white shirt and tie. When his coat gaps open I can read the name HOECHST on his tie. (How strange to be advertizing a western pharmaceutical firm even though it does have a factory in Kabul!) His English is rusty for lack of practice so the conversation is held in Dari.

His department, the bureau for food procurement, is governed by the Ministry of Finance. It was founded 30

years ago, administering the subsidies from the very beginning. At that time career civil servants received twice the ration of an ordinary employee.

"Now we have equality", he smiles contentedly.

There are three different sections working with different types of activities and he handles riyasat-e tamin-e ehtyajat which deals with coupons and various price-regulating measures. The other sections are called Afghan Kart, selling capital goods, and ta'awoni dusti, running the "friendship stores".

Twelve different items fall under the coupon system and everyone employed by the state annually receives a booklet with one coupon for each item and month.

Flour rations are the most important ones. A married employee is allowed to buy 56 kilograms of flour per month at the price of 50 Afghanis per ser (a ser is about 7 kg.); the bazaar price per ser is about 120 Afghanis thus making a very substantial reduction.

Other items included in the coupon system are (bazaar price in brackets) roqhan/ghee, cooking oils, 45 afghanis/kg (120-130), Indian tea 250 afghanis/kg (450-600), powdered milk 140 afghanis/kg (400-500), sugar 30 afghanis/kg (same), 5 razorblades for 10 afghanis (20), as well as shaving cream, Russian toilet and washing soap, some cosmetics, matches, ballpoint pens, Bulgarian cloth, shoes, some household utensils

and Indian sewing machines.

The subsidized items are available in special shops - 130 in the whole country, 66 of them in the city of Kabul.

To regulate prices the department now and then sells large quantities of goods directly to merchants in private enterprise who make up "the bazaar". This is done in expectation of reducing the prices. Some time ago 3,000 sewing machines were sold this way, and the department is now negotiating for 26 million Russian notebooks which will be brought to the bazaar. When commodities are sold to the bazaar the department is only allowed to make 8 percent profit which later on is used to finance all their coupon items with the exception of flour. I am told flour is directly subsidized by the state with 1,000 million afghanis yearly. All other subsidies are paid for by the department's financial transactions with the bazaar.

When I enquire about the budget I cannot get any figures, the rais stating that he doesn't know his own budget, an ignorance he shares with all other officials I ask for financial information.

"How many people are embraced in the coupon system?"

"290,000".

You don't bite that proverbial hand which feeds you

and that's a truism in Kabul also where coupons are one of several political means used by the government to obtain loyalty as well as a certain degree of stability. And many participate in the game - at least in broad daylight; during the night loyalty cannot always be taken for granted.

Without Farid it would not have been possible for me to talk to the coupon president. In the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan one is not allowed to visit an office without permission and that goes even for simple questions and interviews. Should you think that it is like the West where almost anybody can obtain public information you are extremely mistaken. Oh yes, Afghanistan is a "democratic country". It's so "democratic" that it's got to be spelled out in the name of the country!

When I arrived in Afghanistan the president cum secretary general of the P.D.P.A, Babrak Karmal, had been in Moscow for a couple of weeks. According to western sources he was criticized by the Soviet leaders for the slowness of the Afghan revolution, the critique being delivered at the same time that Soviet Afghan troops had won indisputable victories over the resistance.

On the third of May, a Saturday, something very

strange happens, Karmal having returned from the Soviet Union the evening before.

Around eight-thirty in the morning I hear the sound of some hundred demonstrating girls shouting in chorus from the street and I make a dash for it. I am so fast that Farid hardly has a chance to say anything before I am out of the hotel. From the last years of the monarchy to the first year of therevolution there were large weekly demonstrations in central Kabul, the later ones being pro-Taraki and anti-Pakistan. This is the very first demonstration during my current stay in Kabul and it fills me with curiosity as did their previous absence.

I manage to catch a brief glimpse of the demonstration but the police and riot squads have already turned up, forcing the demonstrators away from the street that leads to the palace. (For a few years this street has been forbidden territory). One minute later the demonstration is dissolved by the police and I witness a confrontation, the distance making it impossible for me to pick out any details, alas! At the same time I am ordered to return to the Kabul Hotel. And Kabul is shut down. The whole central city is emptied of people and the militiamen multiplied by ten. From my window I can see only streets void of civilians. All shops are rapidly shuttered and locked up. Every normal activity ceases.

Farid quickly calls the Foreign Office but the operator tells him only that all ministries are closed.

The radio is silent. Nobody knows anything. From the window I see a ghost town. The sun is shining and heaven is light blue. The snow sparkles on the mountains ringing the valley. No people. I feel a creepy sensation. Sometimes I see closed limousines hurrying towards the palace. That's all.

I conjecture two possibilities. There must be a high level emergency meeting. Either the president is ill or there has been a Pakistani attack. Nerves.

At three o'clock the temporary curfew is abandoned and people run out from their houses. No explanations are given, neither now, nor during the evening. I take a walk with Farid around the block. Everything is as before.

Next morning we are informed by the radio that Babrak Karmal has resigned as secretary general of the party due to his failing health and in order to be able to concentrate on something called "international activities"; he, however, remains the country's president.Karmal is replaced by Mohammed Najibullah, 39, an ex-medical student, a partyman and chief of the secret police, K.H.A.D, who holds the rank of turan-general. The radio praises him. Around me there are few comments.

The following day praises and congratulations dominate the newspapers, all of course government run.

"Najib is even worse than Karmal", whispers a brave soul.

I have no reason to doubt him. The secret police has a very bad reputation; it offers nothing but evil. Najib is a pro-Moscow hardliner lacking Karmal's at least microscopic vein of conciliation and dialogue. And there are further whispers of a rift in the P.D.P.A, which is denied, between the officially non-existent factions of Khalq and Parcham. The party might very well split and there are those who think that the Khalqis want to get rid of the Parchamis. Several earlier strongmen like Airforce General Abdul Qadir are in house arrest while others are stored in Pul-e Charkhi prison.

In Paris some of my Afghan friends told me that the hardline, totally devoted group around Karmal and the regime consists of about a thousand people. The rest are just playing along for a while in order to profit or just to make a living, just to survive. This also seems very likely.

The immediate reports in the western press on Karmal's dethronement are very inaccurate. Der Spiegel, (20th of May 1986), for example, writes about three days of constant and turbulent fighting between different communist groups in Kabul proper, and Newsweek

(19th of May 1986) shows a fake picture where a large portrait of Karmal is being removed from a building. As I was in Kabul these very days I definitely know that there were no three days of fighting or removal of portraits; the two papers furthermore had no correspondents in Kabul.

As a special favor I am permitted to visit the National Archives together with Farid, where we are shown beautifully illuminated manuscripts, old photographs, letters and documents. One document is particularly interesting and it makes me recall my meeting with Anahita Ratebzad in Sweden.

The personal early history of Mrs. Ratebzad: from my friends, I know for instance that her father was a newsman who died when she was quite young. He was killed in obscure political circumstances. He had opposed Amanullah, the progressive king; he may have been on Bacha Saqqao's side. Anahita's mother was a nurse in the royal family and the fatherless girl was raised in the court close to Shah Mahmud, uncle of King Zaher, where she got an almost royal upbringing paid for by the royal family.

When my conversation with her in Malmoe, Sweden, touched on her background she vigorously denied all this. Oh no, she was a proletarian with a very simple

upbringing. She had never had anything to do with the royal family and her father was a progressive, etcetera. Apart from this she further claimed that the Soviets had never killed one single person in Afghanistan and that there were no Afghan refugees.

Why do I tell you this? Simple: the document which attracts me in the National Archives happens to be the bull of impeachment for Amanullah's progressive reign which - signed-by about fifty "intellectuals", mullahs, etcetera was sent to Bacha Saqqao when he had overthrown the king and brought darkness to Afghanistan. The document was written in 1929 and it clearly states that Amanullah is an infidel who destroyed the country with his heretical ideas, while it at the same time praises Bacha Saqqao. One of the men signing it was the publisher of Nazim-e sahar, Ahmad Rateb, the father of Anahita! Even such a fact - so simple to verify – she denies with no justification.

I also tell this story because it shows the true character of the present elite - liars, or dogs as the majority of the Afghan people would say.

One more detail, another well-known name on the same bull of impeachment, a Mojjadedi of the same family as Sebgatullah Mojjadedi in Peshawar. That Mojjadedi, the Hazrat of Shor Bazaar, was against Amanullah's reforms as were most of the old religious hierarchy. He and his clan effectively supported General Nadir Khan

who overthrew the Bacha and established the new monarchy and constitution in 1931.

Before leaving the National Archives I happen to mention the name of Mahmud Beg Tarzi, who was the teacher and father in law of Amanullah, a publisher and clear-sighted philosopher. He died in exile, in 1933 in Istanbul.

"Tarzi! He lives in Shahr-e Nau", somebody says.

"That's impossible".

"Of course not. Tarzi is living in Shahr-e Nau. He is the president of the Pedar-watan (a communist front organization founded by Babrak in 1980 in an attempt to create wide popular support for his government).

No! If Tarzi is still alive he must be more than one hundred years old".

"Yes, yes. He is very old and weak so a car has to pick himup every day and take him to his office".

Everybody around me agrees. Mahmud Tarzi is still alive and an active communist at the age of a hundred. They apparently don't know that he died long ago in 1933. Actually I discovered later that a cousin, Siddiq Tarzi,who studied in the twenties in the U.S.S.R, was appointed by Karmal to head the Pedar-watan (Fatherland Front). But even he had died in 1985, a year before this conversation.

I feel an urge to see Uncle Anwar and tell him about my imprisonment but that must of course be done without Farid.

In the early afternoon I go for a walk with my jailer. First we stroll around Pul-e Khisti and then further on to the Jad-e Maiwand. When we pass Shor Bazaar I say to Farid that I have to go into Chendaul for a few minutes to take some pictures. The answer is "No!" and the reason given is that it is too dusty in the alleys.

"Your shoes will get dirty".

"It doesn't matter. I can have them polished at the hotel".

"No".

"Then I'll go there alone. You just wait here for five or ten minutes and then I'll be back. I'll find my way".

But when I start to cross the street I am restrained forcibly. All I can do is walk back to the hotel trying to hide my anger.

I dwell on this when we are at the hotel again and even more I feel that urge to meet Uncle Anwar and I want, among other things, to tell him that I am no longer allowed to go, around on my own.

It is four o'clock and a plan is born.

I tell Farid that I have to go to my bathroom, (the only place where I can enjoy any privacy), and also that I need to pick up a bottle of drinking water from the kitchen. I know that the staff is taking their siesta at this time of day. Farid has no objections. He sits down in the lobby.

In the kitchen as well as the bottle of water I collect a cup full of roghan, fat, which I eat as soon as I get to my room. It tastes terrible. Back downstairs in the lobby I inform Farid that my grandfather was Belgian and that I want to have a word with my drunken countryman who almost lives in the bar.

"We'll get drunk together. I feel like getting really drunk today".

No objections. Farid has commented earlier on how much the foreigners, i.e. western journalists, drink in Kabul in their boredom and with constant access to cheap alcohol. He almost looks pleased when I go into the bar. He can't drink anything himself because he is on duty so he just settles himself down in the room in front of the bar and watches me. The Belgian is leaning on the bar and he's pretty drunk. I order a pint of vodka and a pack of Marlboro and try to start a conversation but the Belgian is mostly grunting; he's already unable to talk.

I drink quickly and after about half a pint I start to feel

some effect. Farid watches my bottle for a while and when he thinks that I must be good and drunk he goes home. I wait for about fifteen minutes. Then tell the bartender that I need some fresh air. He smiles back at me. By this time the whole hotel knows that I am drinking at the bar.

"Keep an eye on my bottle and cigarettes", I ask the bartender and then I rush to the men's room, put two fingers down my throat and vomit.

The guard at the door nods at me when I splutter that I have to walk around the block; his only duty is to search people coming in and keep unauthorized people off the premises.

I am out in the street, alone, somewhat tipsy but thanks to the fat, not drunk.

At the back of the hotel I hail a taxi which drops me a block before Uncle Anwar's refuge. From there I walk the last yards.

A knock and the door is opened.

"Where have you been?" His voice is worried.

I give him the whole story including my roghan and vodka session which makes him laugh and after five-ten minutes I take another taxi back to the hotel.

"At least he knows", I reassure myself. At least he understands what has happened.

Nobody has noticed anything at the hotel. The Belgian is drunker than ever.

The night blackens Kabul, and I know that I will never see Uncle Anwar again.

For social reasons I talk to Farid about his family; he has a son who is a year old.

While chatting, the decree on marriage springs unbidden to my mind. It was one of the decrees which caused much dissension in Taraki's time. In Afghanistan following deeply rooted traditions parents arrange marriages. Marriage also involves a bride price which can be very high, thus making it impossible for many men to ever get married and raise a family. Partly as a result of this, homosexuality is widespread, as is sodomy in rural areas. Prostitution is very rare. During the monarchy many of my male unmarried contemporaries said that they were "burning and waiting" which is quite a good metaphor. Sexual need was and is prevalent and the possibilities for western style ordinary social contacts between the sexes are rare. Virginity is a must and pre-marital sexual relations are unusual.

The decree on marriage should be seen in this particular context. It set the bride price at a symbolic maximum of 300 afghanis and, among other regulations, fixed the

age of marriage. I personally think that the decree was established in good faith to help young people, however, its implementation was, like most of the reforms, too clumsy and too speedy.All over the country people turned against the decree mainly because they thought that the government had no business interfering in private lives.

After the April revolution two things really aroused opposition: the decree on marriage and the changing of the flag from a green-red-black tricolor to an entirely red one which immediately was considered to be Soviet and atheist.

This was an extremely unwise move - so stupid that the regime of Karmal had to bring back the tricolor while the red flag was kept only as the party flag.

Farid tells me that his marriage cost 300,000 afghanis including bride price and marriage festivities which is a lot of money in Afghanistan. It is something like five years salary for a certified school teacher.

"There are merchants in Kabul who spend as much as a million on their son's weddings", he continues.

I am surprised. This is unexpected information.

"But you have a government decree..."

Farid squirms uneasily. After a while he says that the government has decided to postpone it.

"Of course people did not oppose the decree", he adds evasively. "It just isn't suitable for the moment so it must wait".

"People didn't oppose it!" That's the understatement of the year.

The eve before the Muslim fasting month of Ramazan, Sandro suggests that we should take a short walk before dinner and I immediately agree thinking that it won't matter if I go out for half an hour in the company of a full-fledged Moscow-sympathizer. Besides I hope to be able to show him things in the streets which might shake up his Stalinist attitude on Afghanistan, to cause it to crack a bit. Luckily Farid has just gone home in order to join a family gathering preceding Ramazan.

Out in the streets, out in Kabul. My feet shout for joy at the freedom from Farid.

I make a point of giving some small coins to every beggar we pass, telling Sandro that I have never seen so many beggars before in Kabul and that the government just lets them die in the streets.

This sad state of affairs is true as the government only helps the loyal ones. Ordinary people - the so-called "masses" - are not worth a damn. Sandro does not react.

I point out slums and grave destitution and tell him

about common people's hostile feelings towards the superpower but Sandro can't see what I mean; he is locked up in his own pro-Moscow view of Afghanistan as an ideal state. I can't figure out how his mind works - especially as we have only to look around to see the lack of progress.

Having crossed the river we reach the tomb of Timur Shah, today a smoker's haven. The smell of hashish is thick and sweet. Sandro sniffs with devotion. For a moment I guess that he thinks that Afghanistan's rather liberal attitude on local, modest consumption of hashish has got something to do with freedom,

"Can we enter?" he asks me pointing at the tomb.

"Sure".

Timur Shah's tomb is just a large empty room under a high cupola. It's chilly inside and we listen to the echo of silence.

Suddenly a man limps towards us, his shawl, patou, folded around his right hand giving us the impression that he is holding a gun.

He is about twenty-five years old, stoned and wants to sell hashish.

When I refuse emphatically the man recoils out of sheer surprise, dropping his patou, and then we see that it wasn't a gun but a prothesis.

Sandro gets excited. "Ask him what happened".

And the man tells us his story.

As a conscript he lost his hand as well as his left thumb when he touched a mine fighting Massoud and the so-called bandits in Panjshir. He further claims that his brothers were killed by "bandits" near Maimana and that his prosthesis was manufactured in the German Democratic Republic. He also says, mixing his Dari with odd Russian words, that he has been in the Soviet Union. At the same time he keeps changing his version slightly due to his heavy intoxication.

"A real war-hero!" Sandro exclaims happily offering him a Winston.

Sandro has a lot of questions and I have to translate but most of the questions are unanswerable like "What's your opinion about the last decision of the Central Committee?". The man constantly answers "khub", good. I remind Sandro that we must go back to the hotel and the man, understanding the word "hotel", asks if he can keep us company.

"Of course". I don't mind talking to him and on our way to the Kabul Hotel he tells me that he took a real heavy smoke this evening before Ramazan starts. His speech is somewhat incoherent but Sandro thinks it's fantastic to talk to a war-hero who has been fighting bloodthirsty bandits, especially since the man keeps praising the

government.

Outside the hotel we embrace and say good-by. Despite his views and intoxication he is quite a nice guy and of course his situation is sad. Sandro gives him 100 Afghanis and asks me to tell him that it is a token of friendship from an Italian comrade. The man takes the note reluctantly.

As Sandro and I are entering the hotel I see the soldiers in front of the main entrance grab the crippled man brusquely and start to question him.

I immediately walk back to them and start to explain.

"Why did the Italian man give him money? Has he been harrassing you?"

"Definitely not. He is just a young man who kept us company and told us how he lost his hand when fighting the bandits and the Italian gave him some money for tea and cigarettes as a token of friendship".

The soldiers hold the war-injured man very tightly. Their voices are loud and brutal.

Finally when I have explained everything once more in detail they send him away with a kick in the ass and swear-words.

I go back into the hotel for supper, remembering that only yesterday I was told about the enormous official respect shown to disabled war veterans in Afghanistan,

respect and material benefits such as bonuses, pensions and of course medals. From what I saw this inval id only received a kick in the ass, and once again the string of constant contradictions and lies becomes apparent.

At dawn Ramazan begins and at breakfast there is trouble. Somebody from the hotel phoned Farid as well as the foreign office informing them that I took a walk before supper. Mine is the worst offence since Sandro has no basis for comparison with other times nor the language ability to question people in the streets. My slip is considered very grave but I try to get away with it.

"Just around the block and furthermore with a war-hero who fought bandits in the Panjshir".

After a few hours the matter is resolved.

I have experienced several Ramazans in Afghanistan but this is the first after the April Revolution. Apparently Taraki and Amin continued official support for this traditional religious observance as a matter of political strategy as have their successors. Good public relations. Islam and Ramazan dominate TV and radio and most of the whitebeards seem to be observing the fast from dawn to dusk as prescribed in the Holy

Quran. A short, daytime walk with Farid reveals that all restaurants and teahouses are closed. The politruks are not concerned with the fast but they don't dare to drink tea and smoke publicly in the lobby so they gather in the dining room, the only one open in all Kabul. I join them and we start to talk about Islam and its effect on society.

"Religion is something obsolete which is of no concern to the modern generation", is the general opinion.

"Islam is only for old folks. All young people are atheists".

"I go to the mosque sometimes because my father wants me to".

"Islam prevents every form of development. Just look at Ramazan.Because people fast they cannot work properly. Islam is anti-progressive".

"But you must admit", I put in, "that your government in its eagerness to change the country has faced some opposition from religious people because you went too far and collided with Islamic values".

"Definitely not! That's all misunderstandings".

"How do you mean? Misunderstandings?"

"Let me tell you about that. For example when the government declared war on illiteracy, people thought they said be-savad,, illiterates, instead of be-savadi,

illiteracy and some people got very worried and rushed into the mosques screaming that 'the government is going to kill us' but later on the mistake was cleared up and everything was calm again".

I laugh. It is indeed a very typical story.

Very carefully I question the government's progress by asking the politruks if they can give examples of what the government really has achieved. So far I haven't seen anything aside from some new apartment houses close to the airport, the underpass at Mohammad Jan Khan Street, the telephone boxes, the traffic dividers and a few other small things.

The answer is nothing but a row of abstract words. They just can't point out anything real. When I say that the formation of various committees has nothing to do with progress, one of the politruks interrupts me abruptly in a typically Afghan way with a parable.

"Once upon a time a man came to Mullah Nasreddin wishing to borrow his donkey but, as Mullah didn't want to let him have the animal, he said that the donkey was out for a walk, already borrowed by someone else. Then the donkey suddenly started to bray in the stable and the man said that the donkey evidently was there.

"Who do you believe?" Mullah Nasreddin replied, "my learned beard or a stupid donkey".

"Everything is propaganda", one of the politruks

groans. "It is world-imperialism that has started this undeclared war".

"How can people say that Islam is in danger? You saw with your own eyes that our government is building a mosque in Wazir Akbar Khan".

Somebody calls Farid to the telephone. He leaves and returns a few minutes later with a message.

"We are going to Khost tomorrow, you and I, the Italians and the Japanese".

To Khost, a major town in a "liberated" province.

"LIBERATED PROVINCE"

After breakfast we are transported by taxis to the military section of the airport, the two Italians, the two Japanese, I and four politruks.

Before entering the area we pass several check points.

The first thing I notice when we arrive at the airport is that the ground is covered with empty shells, each roughly 15 centimeters in length, shells from heat-generating flares which are shot whenever a plane lands or takes off in order to divert guerilla rockets. My second observation is a downed civilian Bakhtar Airlines plane.

A Russian military aircraft is waiting on the tarmac.

I remember Paktia as a province of agriculture, forests and mountains, granaries and timberlands. The province is located southeast of Kabul and borders on Pakistan. The town of Khost, just a few kilometers from the border, is the administrative district capital in a very fertile region.

The area of Paktia is 16,000 square kilometers and during the monarchy it was inhabited by some 750,000 people. That is 46 per square kilometer, dense

population for rural Afghanistan. Of these 30,000 lived in the town of Khost. In the entire province there were 103 schools with more than 30,000 students, again above average for the country

Fighting has been going on in Paktia since early 1979. After the Soviet invasion the province became a true battleground. According to the resistance all farms have been destroyed. The government has just announced that they have recently concluded the most successful offensive ever against the guerillas.

We board the plane. Most of the domestic flights are flown in Russian military aircrafts. This one carries a stack of newspapers and a handfull of Afghan passengers: some men, a kochi woman, two veiled rural women and three children. The crew is very nervous. It is extremely hot inside the plane since we are sitting directly under its uninsulated metal roof.

The aircraft receives clearance. The engines start but suddenly when already on the runway the plane is called back. This procedure is repeated for almost four hours. The heat is steaming as is the nervousness of the crew. I am sweating copiously and feel near suffocation from lack of oxygen as does everybody. The women are crying, one of them screams hysterically. An Afghan man sprinkles her with water from a metal cup.

The explanation for the numerous aborted take-offs is highly embarrassing to my hosts; personally I enjoy it although I am scared to death. Everything is, as already said several times, "calm". But for several hours there is constant bombing on two fronts in the vicinity of the airport,northeast and east. The explosions are loud and easily recognized but the politruks won't comment on them.

Of course I am afraid being locked up in a Russian military aircraft while the "Afghan" airforce is bombing just a few kilometers away. I have had similar experiences only in Lebanon. And I do recall that Kabul Airport was attacked on August 31, 1984 by the Mujahiddin: 13 dead, 207 wounded.

At last we receive the final clearance. The kochi woman thrashes about, crying. The man pours water aver her face.

For about thirty minutes the plane circles above Kabul to reach the right altitude before it can continue over the mountains to Paktia. The Italians and the politruks relax playfully and smoke. The Japanese stare out fixedly.

Ninety minutes later we land at Khost where the heat makes the distant houses vibrate in the air. Two jeeps collect us and we leave the airstrip. At the barracks by the entrance to the airfield I note two veritable

mountains: one is made up of empty dark green Russian ammunition boxes, the other of huge brass shells. A few minutes later we are on our way.

The visit is to last for two days and we have a heavy schedule: touring the province and the city of Khost, visiting the military headquarters as well as the fort, small villages, schools, educational programs and local party officials.

I am the only one in our group who has visited Khost before; not even the politruks have ever been in this part of the country. They are typical modern Kabulis and they don't leave Kabul if it can be helped. It has been like that as long as I can remember. To be assigned work in the provinces was almost considered a punishment - necessary for the career but nevertheless a punishment.

Jeeping through Khost, through Paktia. It is a single gigantic contradiction. Around me the idyllic countryside is blooming in the sun; the tranquility is ghostlike. We drive through sleepy, tidy villages. Grain is growing everywhere and the rice fields are in good condition. Trees bud and the fields are humidly green on both sides of the road. It is very calm and very beautiful. The guerillas' statement that all agriculture is waste - burnt, bombed and ravaged - does not apply to

the areas I visit. I had expected a battleground under Soviet control but I see some prosperity; yet another contradiction. But I miss something; people. During my entire tour in Khost and Paktia I only see about a hundred people, mainly old men and children. And during the whole time I only count three sheep, three cows and a poor camel. From earlier times I remember multitudes of people and animals. Camels and sheep in abundance.

"Where is everybody?" I ask.

"They are working in the fields".

Of course I don't see any people in the fields but the Italians swallow it. There just might be fields further away ...

Silently I wonder who has been taking care of the fields but I don't ask. Perhaps the army?

The district is sunshine and silence. Nothing seems right. There has been war for years. At the same time I know that it takes years to get the fields in their present condition. One party - the government or the guerillas - is lying and that puzzles me. Who?

After a few hours of driving around we enter the city of Khost and are allowed to walk in the bazaar which is the town's center. It is the same story. Neat and tidy, cleaner than Kabul but, compared with the way it was before, almost abandoned. I see no craftsmen, only one

or two dozen merchants, and in the streets old men together with soldiers. I talk to some of shopkeepers but receive only vague answers.

”Everything is calm".

"There are no problems here in Khost".

I note a rather new watertap in the main street.

"Good plumbing", says the politruk glad that I at last have seen a bit of revolutionary progress. Actually the watersystem was originally installed with West German technical assistance in the mid 1970's.

After this we inspect the home guard which will be a mandatory routine at every place we stop. Old men with rifles and kalashnikovs praising the government. I guess that they are quite well paid. Some of them look slightly senile. And we are told that "in this province we take care of the 'bandits' ourselves".

Next item on the agenda is a visit to the garrison where Brigadier General Mohammad Asef Shur is waiting. He is going to inform us about the recent large-scale offensive against the "bandits".

The garrison is heavily guarded. I see a handfull of Russian soldiers - roughly around twenty years old - otherwise only Afghans.

The general expounds; the Japanese and Italians film.

General Asef Shur in the garrison of Khost.

During the offensive in Zhawar district of the Khost area and close to the Pakistani border the government troops a few weeks before attacked forty so-called "depots", large room-like caves reinforced with concrete and girders. Some of the caves were large enough to provide space for one or more trucks.

The "depots" contained everything from large supplies of weapons and munitions to a complete field-hospital. Several thousand "bandits" were killed, among them also three western advisors who preferred to blow themselves into pieces after being chased into a cave and asked to surrender. The "depots", according to this official version, were so well constructed that they could hardly have been built by ordinary Afghan peasants. Help had been received from elsewhere. (This annoyed me when I thought of the sophisticated engineering graduate students and faculty in Kabul when I first came years ago. And some of the Mujahiddin commanders and leaders were civilian or army engineers.) Besides a vast amount of munitions destroyed in situ the government troops were able to confiscate seventy truckloads of weapons, ammunition and shells.

"You will soon see what we've captured", the general assures me when I raise a slight doubt. "Furthermore, we have videotaped all the 'depots' as a proof of foreign involvement in the undeclared war".

The general makes a nice impression. He is around forty and dressed in a green field uniform.

"At one place an entire mountain collapsed when we attacked it because it was so full of caves and tunnels".- Caves similar to those who later on were to be the hiding-place of Usama bin Laden.

I would like to press the general but I don't dare, because I will need an exit permit from the Foreign Office when I want to go back to Europe, and this permission cannot be obtained in advance - a simple, subtle and efficient way for the government to reduce curiosity.

After the military discourse and a short break for food and tea we are driven to the fort on a mountain outside Khost.

General Shur's predictions come true. I see mountains of confiscated military equipment, most of all Chinese shells. I can't quote the number but there must be thousands. Furthermore there are Egyptian shells, and some British, American and German materiel. When I break open a wooden box containing German Mauser Ammunition the cartridges turn out to be from the Third Reich, possibly having been stored in bazaars since that time and purchased by the guerillas. Once I myself bought useable ammunition from the second

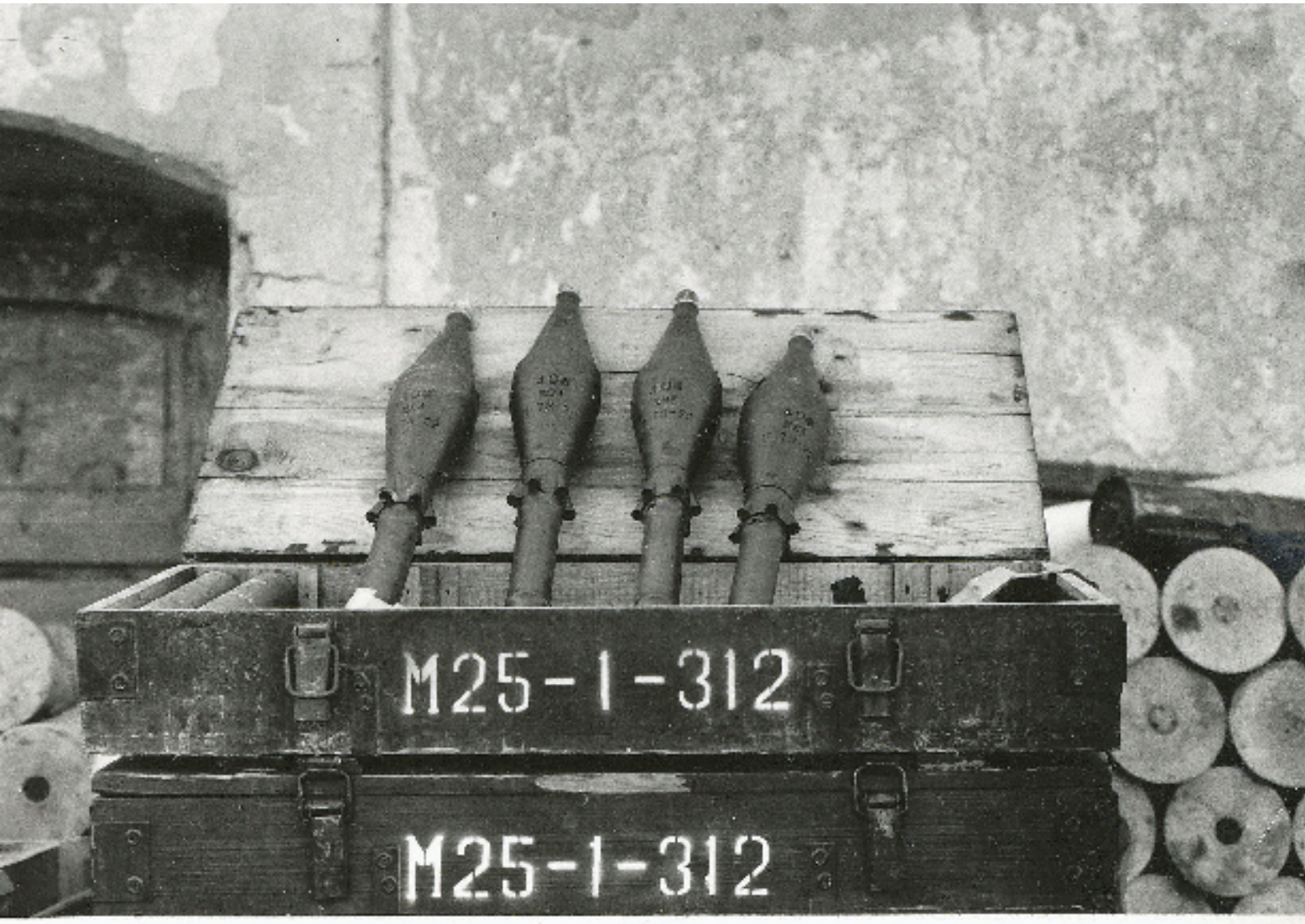
and third Anglo-Afghan wars (1878 and 1919) in Kabul.

After walking us through mountains of ammunition they show us "American Stinger rockets", Chinese and British machine guns and light artillery.. Each Stinger being packed in grey ”boxes” resembelling large bass-viols.

We are allowed to poke around as we please and nobody stops us from really checking out if all the boxes contain arms and munitions. Having seen all the confiscated materiel we are taken to the television station (there is local TV in all the provinces nowadays) where we are shown the video mentioned by General Shur, a video on every "depot" taken and destroyed by the government.

The proofs are solid and above suspicion. It is very clear that foreign "interference" exists and that the resistance receives arms from a number of different countries, this being the only point on which the government doesn't lie.

But one thing surprises me. Most of the confiscated equipment comes from China. Despite this fact the government continually claims that the true enemies are the U.S. and Pakistan. One very seldom hears China condemned although there are sufficient proofs. It is as



Confiscated Chinese rockets at Khost.

if they don't dare to, as if the geographic proximity inhibits and frightens them.

The evening is spent in the officers' quarters after inspecting yet another home guard where the men are so shaky that they can't keep their guns still. That, however, makes no difference to the Italians. They film happily, arranging nice poses, bringing out the exotically pictorial side of armed whitebeards.

At the officers' quarters conscripts had prepared dinner for us and the officers, and I must admit that the evening is quite cosy. The officers tell us more about the battle of Zhawar and their answers to my questions seem quite honest. The only thing they don't want to tell me is the number of soldiers involved in the operation.

Early in the morning we are driven to the Haidar Khel village school and yet another contradiction. We have been told that Paktia has been calm and liberated for four years; the school of Haidar Khel was, however, burnt down three years ago.

While the two TV teams are filming I talk to the headmaster who claims that the school has some 400 students of all ages but I can see only a couple of dozen ranging from ages seven to ten. There are 18 teachers. Nine percent of the students are party members and

twenty-nine percent participate in one of the youth organizations. I visit boys' and girls' classes where basic alefba, ABC, is taught. The school has hardly any equipment, not even a proper map, just a piece of cloth where the outlines a of the continents are embroidered. (That is typically Afghan ingenuity, making do resourcefully).

From Haidar Khel to Ismael Khel where we are going to see an educational program for illiterate adults as well as meet farmers and local militia.

Literacy programs are the real success stories in the eyes of both Afghans and Russians. Propaganda everywhere mentions them, eloquently claiming that the government is helping the older generation learn how to read and write. Now we will actually see it; in Kabul it wasn't possible to arrange.

At the main road passing through Ismael Khel, hezbis, soldiers, children, peasants and home guard are waiting for us. We inspect the militia, receive embraces and hand shakes. Then I chat for a while with some children until we are told that it is time to see the literacy campaign in action.

The big hit show - teaching adults to read and write - is a macabre act but the Italians film it jubilantly. Before our eyes the officials gather a dozen of the elders, appropriately photogenic, and furnish them with

weapons and ABC books, whereupon a class is faked at the roadside. The Italians tell me that these scenes will be broadcast in Italy although they know that the whole performance is just staged and has no relation to reality. A few minutes later the same charade is repeated indoors where the men are ordered to be seated in the desks while the hezbis make sure that there is a Kalashnikov in front of each one. When I talk to these elders it becomes apparent that they can't read or write - it's not possible for obvious reasons for me to establish further contact. A couple of old men stand up reeling off their lessons about "the glorious revolution" by heart and once the TV teams are through the books are collected and the men dismissed.

When I ask Sandro if he as a journalist doesn't have any scruples about filming such faked situations he replies that the Afghan revolution must be supported at any price.

"This will be shown in a major European country as truth and progress, possibly also exported and that's very serious".

I am burning with rage. The Japanese grunt and I can sense that they are not too happy.

This incident with the false literacy class seems extremely strange to me and leads me to a question which I don't dare to raise: if everything in

revolutionary Afghanistan is good, fine and progressive why then do they have to fake a simple thing like an educational program? And why don't they show us any of their progressive improvements?

From the scene of the crime we walk to the local militia barracks situated in an ordinary farmhouse. During the short walk I count a couple of dozen empty cartridges on the road.

"Everything is calm", the militia captain assures us smilingly. But in his courtyard there is a shell launcher ready to fire directly towards Pakistan.

The militia captain informs us about his operations and offers us slightly dirty water from a communal cup. Everyone is thirsty.

In his discourse he tells us that forty volunteers from Ismael Khel took part at Zhawar. Then he informs us that the agrarian reform has been carried out completely in the village. (According to the decree a farmer is allowed to own 30 jerib of first class soil; 1 jerib, equals 44 x 44 meters).

"Has the land in your village been distributed to local villagers or to people from elsewhere?" I ask. The Italians knowing no details just glow happily when they hear me mention the word "reform".

"The land has been distributed to our own villagers", the militia captain replies.

"That's very odd," I respond, "because as far as I know your government has preferred to give land to people from outside in order to reduce tensions".

"There has been an exception in our village", the militia captain answers curtly. The politruks stare at me which reminds me that I have not yet obtained my exit permit.

The next place to visit is a sarandoy post. Sarandoy is the revolutionary word for "police". It comes from a Pashtu word meaning "taking care of" and before 1978 it was used for "boy scout".

The police serve us nan, water, vegetables and pilau on the cloth-covered floor and we are allowed to raise questions. I am the only inquisitive one.

The Japanese have been quiet all the time and the Italians have so far only had theoretical and abstract questions. I want some information about the situation along the border but I only get the standard answer that everything is calm. They bring out an old man with relatives in Pakistan and he tells me that he just walked across the border unarmed and that finishes the session.

The next item on the agenda is a fatty party secretary with an old 9 mm Soviet Makarov-pistol tucked into his trousers. Outside his house there is a playground, its only equipment being a shot-down Ariana civil aircraft which has been cut open and slightly refinished. Children are, however, not to be seen.

"They probably died in the crash", is my cynical remark.

The party secretary assures me that everything is calm and that the province has been cleared of "bandits". It's that very calm that he, like every other civil servant, has to be armed for day and night.

When the Italians ask him about revolutionary progress he tells them that a women's committee has been formed. However we can't find out a specifically what the women's committee is doing. When asked, the party secretary just answers that "it handles female affairs".

To Sandro this is fantastic. A women's committee in a remote place like Khost! Wah, that's progress!

Once more we are served slightly dirty water.

"Beer and soda fountains", one of the politruks sighs. "That was the most fantastic thing I ever saw in the Soviet Union. Just imagine - all you had to do was to press a button - and out came the beverage!"

In the evening we are flown to Kabul. This time I can actually hear that the pilot is Russian. According to government propaganda, spread abroad by Mrs. Ratebzad, there is not one single Russian pilot in the entire country; every single plane is flown by an Afghan.

I remain in Kabul for a few days with a running stomach as a result of the polluted water at Khost. I don't dare make any detailed notes because I am afraid that I might be forced to translate them; I make only very rough ones. Farid has already told me that he can have my films developed, I am scared by what I have seen during these weeks. I want to get home as fast as possible and write my book.

Now and then I am struck by deep dread.

"Think if I get killed before leaving or detained...before I can publish my book".

But something within me says that I will not die in Kabul and that I will leave the country safe and sound. Somebody has to tell the truth about what's happening in Afghanistan eight years after the communist coup.

RAVISHED COUNTRY

Departure. Furnished with my exit permit from the Foreign Office. There are numerous check posts on the road to the airport; the taxi is not allowed to bring me the whole way. The Bakhtar plane is almost full when it touches down in Kabul coming from India and bound for Prague. Budget travelers going to England. Sikhs and young Europeans. It's just the way my journey started but in reverse.

In the sky above Afghanistan I summarize. I have seen what I have seen and I am in a position to compare. And I was the only westerner who - at least for sometime - was allowed to walk around freely. Of course I missed a lot of things and it is sad that I couldn't visit more places. But I have seen enough. My judgment is firmly founded. Afghanistan is a ravished country.

Before I left home I had an inkling of what it would look like; reality was worse. Ten times worse than I could have imagined.

I thought for example that the Russians had done something which could be shown, at least for reasons of propaganda. But no. Not one single progressive acomplishment which could justify the present

occupation. Not even a showcase project.

Genocide. They will kill every single Afghan who wants to breathe in freedom, and the rest, the faithful believers and the opportunists, are already being assimilated to a Soviet-style society. Children are already sent sent to Soviet indoctrination camps. Provinces are emptied forcibly and people are concentrated in controlable zones. Five to six million people have so far fled abroad; one million is on the run in their own country and at least one million has been killed.

With Najibullah in Karmal's place it won't be better and internal fighting within the P.D.P.A. will most likely mark the coming months.

Afghanistan's future is black. An eventual independent socialist state is no longer achievable; the only alternatives are war or a Soviet republic. On the other hand a dramatic change in world politics could force the Soviets to withdraw their troops, followed by a number of different and unavoidable internal wars between various groups, just as was the case when the states of Europe were formed a few hundred years ago.

Regrettably the resistance still lacks the necessary unity. Many of the organizations based in Pakistan are hardly trustworthy, with the possible exception of Burhanuddin Rabbani's Jamiat-e Islami which in my

subjective opinion seems to be a reliable group.

The Democratic Republic of Afghanistan can be characterized in two words - lies and contradictions. Every word from the government about the situation in the country is nothing but a grotesque lie and wherever one looks there are contradictions - especially in the appearance of tranquility in the middle of the war.

The sporadic news from Afghanistan in the western media does not mean that the situation is less tense. Just compare with South Africa from whence journalists' reports, quite frequent and uncensored, have created a world opinion. When the South African government closes down all free journalism we still know that violence is everywhere. There is the same violence in Afghanistan where censorship has been massive all along. One thing has been engraved in my soul and that is the knowledge that the people of Afghanistan must form their own destiny, even if their wars, values, and attitudes may be somewhat strange to westerners. For that reason the struggle of the Afghan people must be supported unconditionally. Soviet policy must be stripped naked in front of the world. At the same time we must analyze what other countries are doing as we don't know how friendly their motives for helping Afghanistan today will turn out to be in the future.

The discussion on Afghanistan must never cease - our solidarity is essential.

In the late afternoon we land in Prague. I have a few hours to spend before it is time for me to catch the train to Sweden, so I take a bus to the city in order to enjoy the red wine and cheese I always miss when traveling in Asia.

I start to write at the marble-topped table sipping my wine under a huge old crystal chandelier. in the dining-room of Hotel Europe at Vaclav Square; classy and art déco.

The orchestra gently plays Smetana and I am transferred to a state of complete tranquility. Writing, listening to music...

Suddenly a military patrol enters the restaurant requesting every man to show his ID card. It is just like in the streets of Kabul. But this is not a dusty alley in Deh Afghanan but an elegant restaurant in Prague. And I become aware of what is going on. The Soviets in the middle of Europe. Pax Sovietica.

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Kabul-Eslöv, April-May 1986; adapted for the internet April 2014.

Translated from Swedish by the author and Leila Poullada.