

CVR-16

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Quetta, Pakistan
August 1, 1991

BEHIND THE VEIL

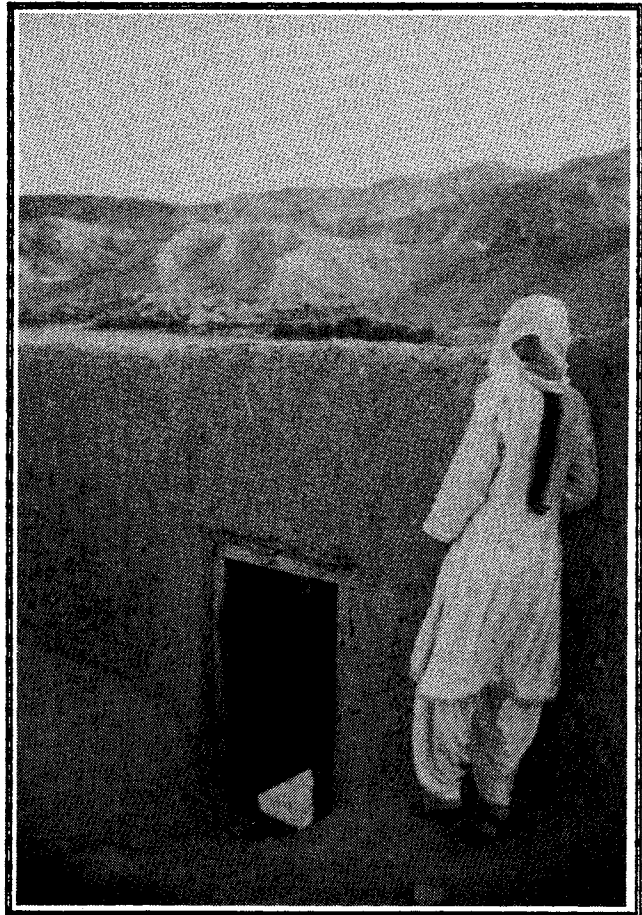
by Carol Rose

A dilapidated taxi careened down an Allah-forsaken highway in the desert of Baluchistan. I sat mutely in the back seat, dressed as a typical Afghan village woman, sweating profusely beneath a dark blue nylon cape and veil.

I was headed toward the Surkhaps refugee camp to spend three days and two nights living in purdah -- seclusion -- with a group of Afghan women. At that moment, however, I was using my veil to hide from the Pakistani police; not exactly what I had in mind when I said I wanted to experience what it meant to live like an Afghan refugee woman. Then again, I had no idea of what it meant.

It occurred to me that I might be making a terrible mistake. I pictured myself in a Pakistani prison cell; reading by a single shaft of light letters from bereaved relatives telling me that I had been crazy to leave home in the first place.

I peered through two layers of blue gauze at my pretend Afghan husband sitting in the front seat next to the driver. I had met him just 20 minutes earlier. He looked about 25 years



An Afghan refugee woman peers over the back wall of her family's compound to the hills of Baluchistan.

Carol Rose is an ICWA fellow writing about South and Central Asia.

old, had a beard and was wearing a peach-colored pajama-style outfit with a matching turban. He spoke no English and stared straight ahead, evidently as nervous as I about our ruse. I pondered a moment whether he was plotting to kidnap me, then decided I would think about it only if it happened.

The taxi sped past pale sandstone buttes that reminded me of the canyon lands of the western United States. Hundreds of nomad tents formed temporary cities along the road. These black fabric dwellings look flimsy, but are built to withstand the dust storms and deadly heat of the desert. I wondered if this was how the United States looked when the Native Americans lived in moveable tent villages. Just then, I noticed two nomad women sauntering down the road. They were unveiled, wearing pink, green and yellow dresses, water jugs perched coyly on their swaying hips. The sight of them made me sigh and I gagged accidentally on my nylon veil. I suppressed an urge to escape the taxi and walk unmasked with these nomad women.

The taxi driver, unaware of the identity of his cloaked passenger, interrupted my daydreams by switching on the radio. The sound of a wailing voice accompanied by a relentless disco beat filled the car: a Pushtun movie soundtrack. The Surkhaps refugee camp was two hours and four police checkpoints away. Little did I know, it was to be worlds away from the life I lead as a western woman.

It's Curtains for You... or Life in Purdah

Trying to meet "average" Afghan refugee woman is no easy task. Most rarely are allowed out of their houses. This seclusion is known as purdah, which translates as "curtain." If a woman must go out, for a family crisis or wedding, she usually dons a burqa -- the all-enveloping robe accurately described by P.J. O'Rourke in the Rolling Stone magazine as a "one-woman pup-tent."



Two Afghan women pose for a portrait.

It is not only taboo to see Afghan women, it is also forbidden to mention them. Ask an Afghan man "How's the wife?" and you may find yourself conversing with the wrong end of a Kalashnikov. It's safer to ask about his sons.

Some of these restrictions can be traced to the Koran, which, according to some scholars, suggests that women are separate from men, but equal. Of course, the Koran also states: "Righteous women are therefore obedient...And those you fear may be rebellious admonish; banish them to their couches and beat them."¹

Koran-inspired beatings I could avoid. But there was no escape from the code of honor that rules the Pushtun tribes who live along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. This is *Pushtunwali*, the rules of life for a Pushtun, including hospitality for guests, revenge against enemies, and defense of honor -- embodied in the protection and sequestering of women.

Getting around the double-density wall of Islam and *Pushtunwali* to the world of Afghan/Pushtun refugee women is impossible for a western man. It is possible for a western woman, but not easy. My key advantage is the murkiness of my position in Pushtun society. Often I am treated as an "honorary" man, invited to eat meals with Pushtun men and even offered the seat of honor facing the door. Sometimes Pushtun men shake my hand in greeting, but usually not. Some men will treat me with respect, others act as though I am invisible.

Despite this status as a pseudo-man, often I also am asked to meet the women of a household. In most instances, I am ushered to a back room where a group of women welcomes me, serves tea, and then we try communicate. On these occasions the problem, more than *purdah*, is one of language. I speak Urdu, the official language of Pakistan, and a smattering of Dari, the language of Afghanistan. But uneducated Pushtun women -- meaning 95 percent of them -- speak only Pushtu, a regional language with



Veiling for young Afghan girls often begins in childhood.

¹ The Koran, translated by A.J.Arberry, MacMillan Publishing Co., N.Y., 1955, pp. 105-6.

notoriously difficult grammar and guttural utterances that sound to me as if the speaker is clearing her throat.

It was during one of these frustrating smiling-but-not-really-talking sessions in an Afghan refugee camp in Baluchistan last July that I suddenly blurted out, in Urdu, "I how wish we could speak together!"

To my surprise, one of the women present suddenly grinned at me and said, in Urdu, "You speak Urdu!"

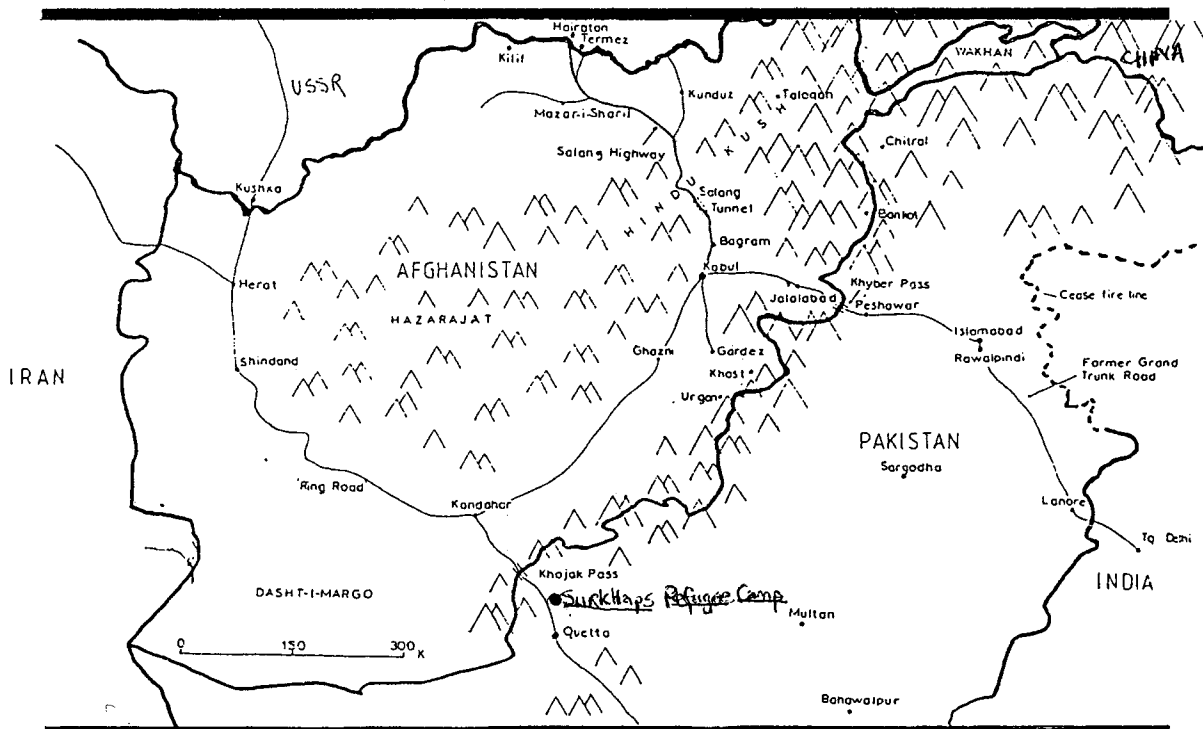
Thus began my friendship with Somargul.

The Meeting

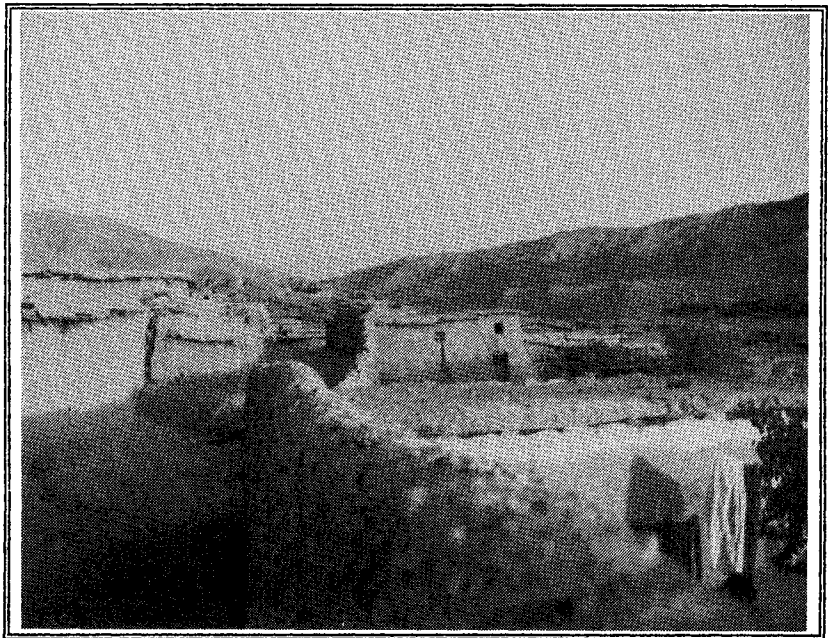
Our discovery that we shared a common language was met by mutual cries of joy, followed by two hours of talking about Somargul's life in the camp, the problem of finding clean water, the absence of a school for girls, the big house with a garden she had left behind in Afghanistan.

Bit by bit, I pieced together a picture of this 28-year-old woman. She is the unmarried, eldest daughter in a family with 12 children from the city of Kandahar, in southeastern Afghanistan.

MAP I: Surkhaps Camp and the Pakistan-Afghan border Region



Like most Afghans, she has no surname. She graduated from the 11th grade, and spent two years teaching science, math, and Koranic studies in Kandahar. Four years ago the family's house was bombed and they were forced to flee to Pakistan, where Somargul taught herself Urdu from books and listening to the radio. As Somargul told me of her life, I noted her dark eyes, high cheekbones, wide smile and thick black braid.



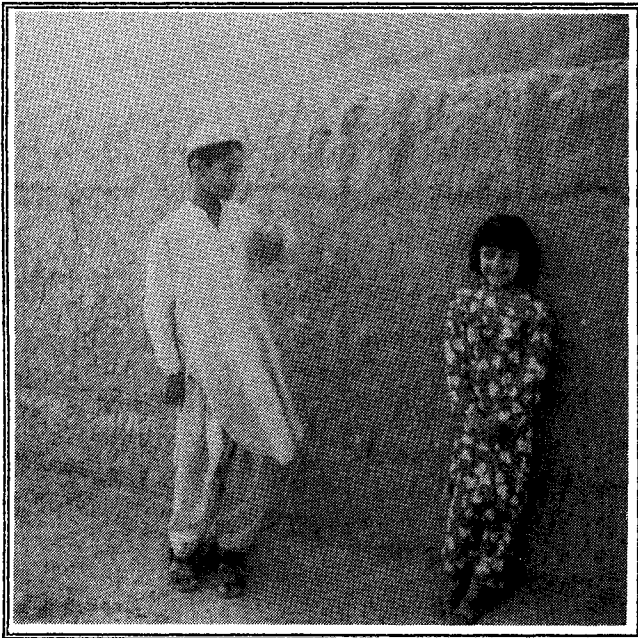
Secret alleys in the Surkhaps camp allow women to visit one another without being seen by men.

During that first meeting we sat on pillows in a room constructed of a mixture of mud-and-straw, set within an enclosed courtyard. The walls inside the room were white-washed and a woven rug covered the dirt floor. Somargul translated for the five women who were there, saying that the biggest problem in the camp is the lack of clean water.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) office had constructed a tube well to bring drinking water via private taps into many family compounds in the camp, she said. But when practical camp residents used the water to irrigate their gardens, UNHCR decided that was inappropriate and shut off the water supply.

Somargul described the U.N. officials as *bayokoofs* -- idiots -- and said she now had to walk a long way each day to fetch drinking water from a local well. This walk compromises her sense of honor, since wearing a *burqa* to leave the compound does not lessen the shame of being forced to go outside among strangers each day.

I longed to continue our discussion, but my guide -- an Afghan friend of Somargul's family -- was waiting outside. I bade farewell, promising to return but thinking that it would never happen.



Afghan boys and girls play together as children. Here, seven-year-old Rahenna teases her older brother, Aminullah, age 12.

"We'll Find a Way"

The idea of spending a few days living with Somargul's family began to take shape in my mind during the ride back to Quetta, the provincial capital of Baluchistan, about 2 hours from the Surkhaps camp.

It seemed a perfect opportunity. Somargul and I could converse without an interpreter. Moreover, I had contact with this family through my guide, Mohammed Daoud. Daoud was a soft-spoken man, with a hawk-nose and blue eyes characteristic of the Pushtuns of Afghanistan. He also spoke perfect English, thanks to a Peace Corps volunteer who taught in Afghanistan in the 1970s.

Because of his work building latrines in the camp schools, Daoud seemed to know and be trusted by many of the 45,000 refugee families -- more than 300,000 individuals -- living at Surkhaps. More important, I trusted him. Earlier in the day, he had shown humor and ingenuity at a Pakistani police check post. These check posts are set up to keep foreigners out of refugee camps. A scarf over my head and nose didn't fool anyone. A policeman took one look at my blue eyes and asked Daoud why the foreign woman was wearing the scarf over her head. Daoud, perhaps sensing the futility of our situation, seized the opportunity for a dig: "Perhaps she finds you ugly, sir."

Not surprisingly, this little demonstration of Pak-Afghan goodwill did not improve our chances of passing through the check post. Daoud dutifully turned the car around when the guard ordered us back to Quetta. But at the next intersection he turned and followed a dirt road around the check post to the camp. I liked his style: question authority and then go around it.

Still, a two-hour secret visit to a camp had been a relatively minor risk for Daoud to take on my behalf. Could he arrange a longer stay?

During the next month, I learned more about the prohibitions

on the movement of foreigners outside of Quetta, and especially the bar on foreign entry into the refugee camps. There are multiple reasons for the ban: tribal wars, blood feuds, banditry and kidnapping are rampant throughout Pakistan. Desperados aren't the only danger. Afghan refugees, angry over western aid cut-offs, have been hijacking foreign assistance trucks in recent weeks and demanding ransom for the return of the passengers. A clear picture of the risks emerged: If local tribes and angry Afghans didn't detain me, then the Pakistani police just might.

Official permission for my escapade was out of the question. Even unofficial recommendations were hard to come by. "Don't try it," friends advised. "You'll be deported." "You'll be detained." "What if you are kidnapped?"

Despite these warnings, I knew there would never be a better opportunity to get a glimpse into the world of Afghan refugee women. I wrote to Daoud asking him to see if Somargul's family would grant permission for a visit, half hoping they would turn me down.

A few days later, Daoud called me in Peshawar from his office in Quetta. "I have some news," he said...a pause...then the line went dead. An hour later, I got an open line back to Daoud. This time he spoke quickly. "The family said yes to your visit," he said. "But you must get permission from the authorities."

"You know there is no way I can get permission for this," I said.

"Come anyway. We'll find a way."

Prove Your Identity

That's how I ended up sweating it out in the back seat of a taxi in the Baluchi desert. Acting the poser is no simple thing. Anyone can put a sheet over her head, but a costume alone doesn't make a westerner stand, walk or sit like an Afghan woman. Surely, the Pakistani police would spot me as a fake.

Friends had coached me for the dramatic role I was about to attempt. "Act more subservient," they suggested. "Move more slowly." "Hunch your shoulders." Finally, a Pakistani friend hit upon the perfect advice: "Walk like you've just had six children." It worked.

Daoud picked me up at my hotel in Quetta and drove to his house in an Afghan neighborhood. There, he introduced me to Somargul's younger brother, Rahmahtullah, who was to act as my pretend Afghan husband during the ride to the camp. Daoud also

loaned me a used burqa. It was Pakistani style -- a floor-length cape that tied beneath my chin with two gauzy flaps that draped over my face.

"Keep the veil down, follow Rahmahtullah and do what he says," said Daoud.

"Does he speak English?" I asked, trying to mask the fear in my voice.

"No, but you won't need to talk," said Daoud, as he pushed me out the door behind Rahmahtullah. "Just act normal."

I followed four steps behind Rahmahtullah through the busy streets of Quetta, repeating to myself: "Act normal, act subservient, act normal, act like you've just had six children..."

At the end of the street, Rahmahtullah motioned for me to wait while he searched for a rickshaw to take us to the taxi stand. As I peered through the veil, I felt virtually invisible. Pushtun men are trained to avert their eyes from all women and I usually look away from Afghan and Pakistani men. But from behind the veil I felt as though I could stare at everyone without them realizing it. As I enjoyed my new-found anonymity, Rahmatullah returned with a rickshaw.

Ten minutes later, we were climbing into a taxi for the trip to Surkhaps. My only fear now was the police checkpoints. As we approached the first one, my earlier feeling of invisibility vanished. It occurred to me that if I could see the policemen through two layers of gauzy veil, then they must be able to see me as well. Turning my face away from them, I stared out the opposite window in time to read a gigantic sign:

PROVE YOUR IDENTITY

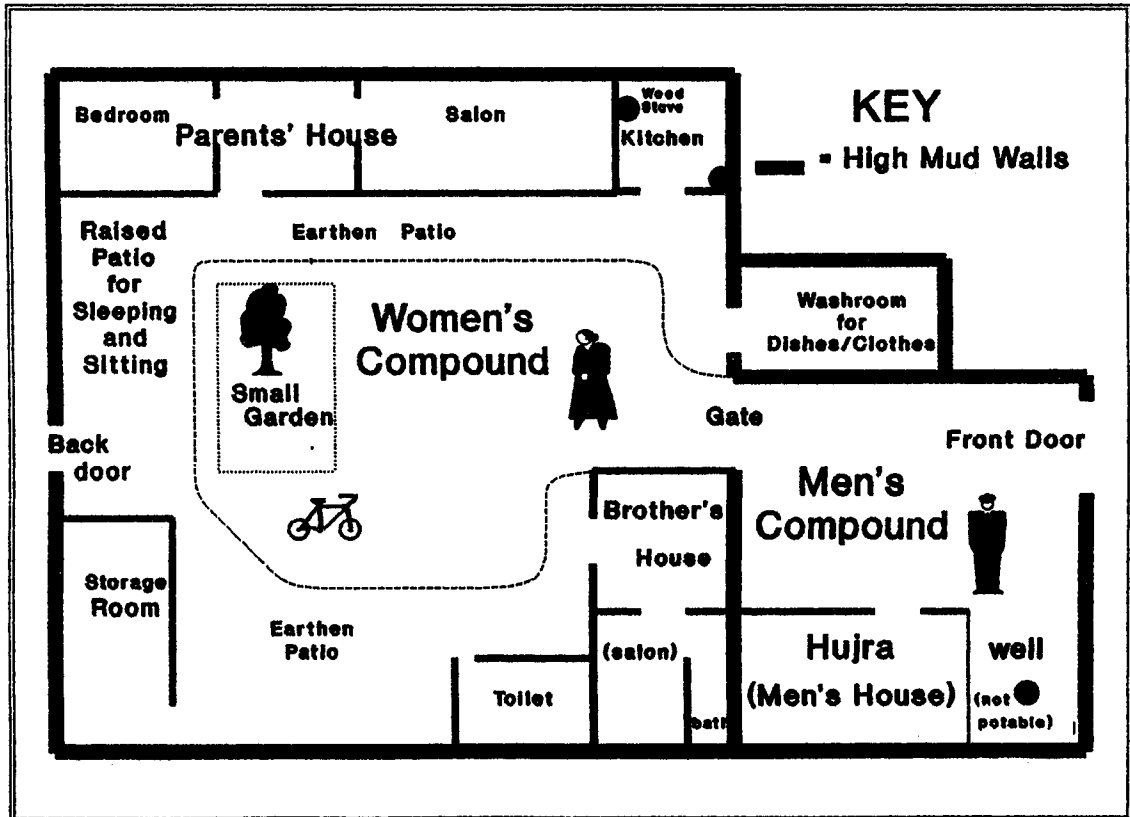
To my relief, the burqa was proof enough. The guards waved us through with hardly a glance. Only once did Rahmahtullah peek back at me, a hint of a smile on his lips. Little did he know how much his single look helped me survive the long, strange trip to Somargul's house.

A World Apart

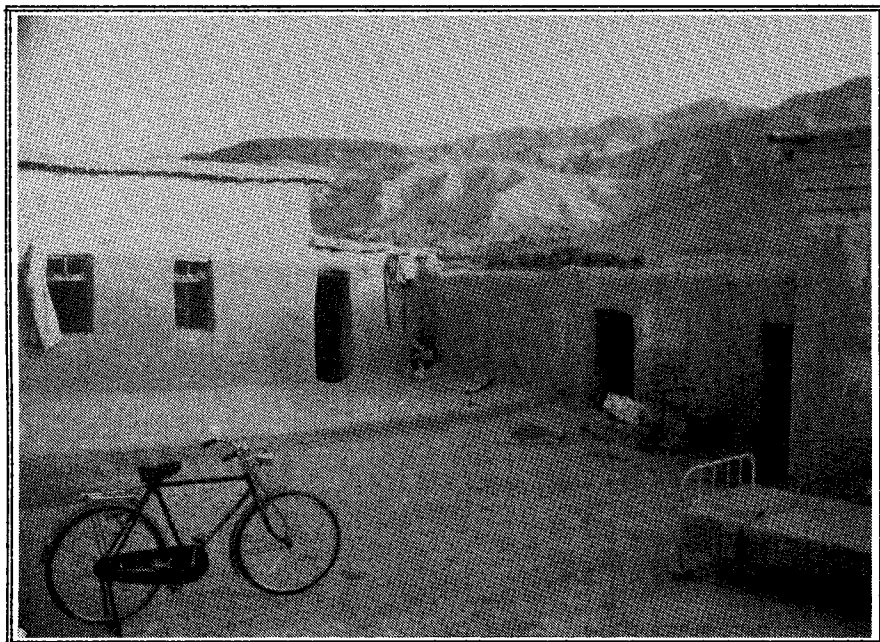
It was evening when we arrived at Surkhaps refugee camp, an enormous maze of mud-wall compounds stretching for miles on either side of a dry river valley. All eyes were on our taxi as we maneuvered through the five-mile long camp bazaar around flocks of sheep and mule carts, past tea shops and general stores. Daoud later told me the men probably were checking me out as a new woman in town, although such an assessment seemed nigh impossible considering the hood over my face and body.

At Somargul's house I followed Rahmahtullah into an outer courtyard enclosed by mud walls. A single room in this part of the compound served as a hujra or room for meetings between men. Rahmahtullah stopped there and pointed toward a small blue door that led to the inner compound. There would be no man to accompany me as I entered the exclusive world of Afghan women.

The inner compound was surrounded on all sides by six-foot high mud walls. There were two houses in the compound, one for Somargul's mother and father and one for her eldest brother and his wife. There also was a kitchen, a cleaning room and a



Floorplan of Somargul's family compound.



The women's compound at Somargul's house, showing doorways to kitchen and dish-washing room, and partial view of doorway to men's compound.

storage room. There were two "bathrooms," one for showering from a bucket and one for defecating. Urine was washed down a sloping floor and out a hole in the wall. There was no electricity or running water.

Somargul and her four unmarried sisters, ranging from age seven to 28, slept outside on a raised earthen

patio in the middle of the compound. The men also slept outside, but in the outer compound next to the hujra. Sleeping in the open is not without risk: Somargul's father, mother and two brothers were sick with malaria while I was there. Mosquitos had a feast each night in the refugee camp.

One of my first discoveries was that women used secret alleyways to visit neighboring compounds without being seen by men. At Somargul's house, there was a small door built into the back wall of the compound that led to five other family compounds.

One of Somargul's pastimes was trying to catch glimpses of the outside world from secret perches. Two or three times a day, she and I would wrap shawls over our heads and faces then sneak along these passageways to places where stones were piled against the wall. Taking turns, we would stand tip-toe on the stones and peer out across the rooftops to the sun-baked and empty desert beyond the refugee camp. "Do you see that tree?" she would ask. "Look, water!" she once said, pointing in the direction of dry stream bed in the valley below.

One morning Somargul promised to take me to see her garden, which she said was larger than the vegetable patch inside the compound. We put on burgas for what I thought would be a walk out the front door of the compound. Instead, we walked into the

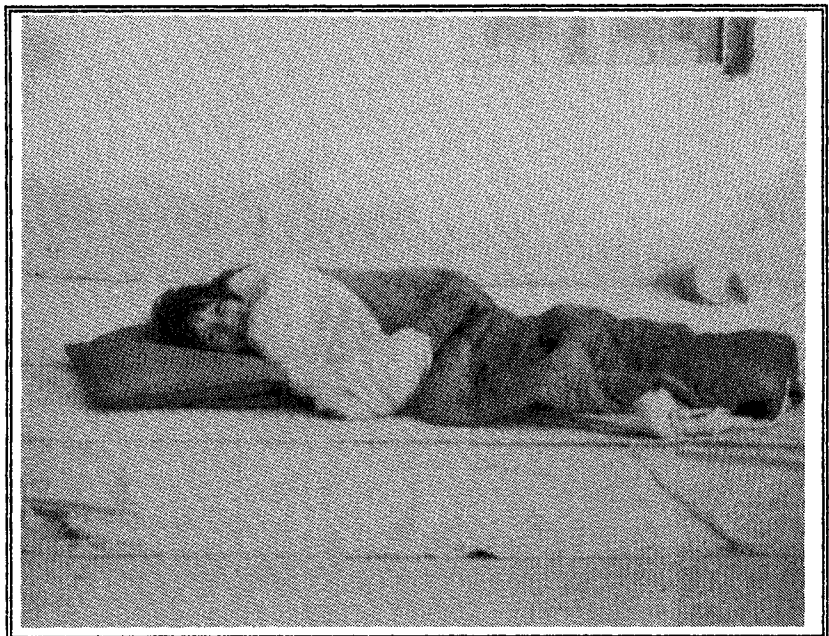
men's outer compound and then, still veiled, peeked over the wall at a garden. "Don't let anyone see you looking out," warned Somargul. "Why not?" I asked. "People will say bad things," she replied.

When we were not peering wistfully over the wall, Somargul and I used the secret pathways to visit other women. Before these trips we would send Somargul's 12-year-old brother or seven-year-old sister ahead to see if the path was clear. If there were no men from neighboring families at home, we would scurry out the back door to a neighboring compound.

During these visits, I would sit on pillows among dozens of women and their children, sipping green tea and munching stale store-bought cookies as the women exchanged gossip and stories. Older women dominated the conversations; the main topic was illness. Everyone asked about Somargul's father, who had been taken to the hospital with malaria fever the morning after I arrived. We discussed a neighbor woman who had had malaria in her final term of pregnancy. The baby had died in the woman's uterus on the previous night and everyone was predicting that the woman herself would die that day. They said she was too poor to afford a doctor. A delegation of elderly women agreed to visit her house.

They invited me to join them, but I declined thinking that the arrival of a westerner at someone's sickbed would raise false expectations. More than once, Afghans and Pakistanis have assumed that, as a foreigner, I can perform miracle cures and provide expensive American medicine. Failure to do so can lead to great disappointment and even resentment.

Women also talked about Afghanistan during these visits. Once I asked them when they planned to return to



Seven-year-old Rahenna sleeps with the rest of the women on an earthen patio in the middle of the compound.



Somargul shakes out the family's bed linen each morning at sunrise.

Afghanistan. "How can we return when our houses are bombed, when our fields are mined?" asked one toothless woman. The group then launched into a general discussion of life in Afghanistan, describing their previous homes as mansions decorated with carpets and surrounded by gardens filled with grape vines and fruit trees. Somargul said she had a telephone, electricity and servants in her house in Kandahar.

The romanticization of Afghanistan contrasted sharply with their description of life in the camp. "Here we have nothing," said the toothless woman, rubbing my hands, arms and legs in a traditional Afghan gesture of friendship.

"Tell the people outside that we need water." At that, all the women joined in a chorus about the lack of clean drinking water.

To my surprise, none of the women complained about the absence of a girl's school in the camp. Even Somargul, who had been a teacher in Afghanistan, dismissed my question about it. "It will never happen in the camp," she said. "The malik [religious men] won't let it."

Children also dominated many discussions, probably because they were so abundant. "I want 20 children," announced a handsome auburn-haired woman, who at age 25 has six children. Her reasons for wanting a big family could have been taken from a population-control textbook: "We need many children because many will die."

Asked why I have no children after three years of marriage, I merely looked at the ceiling and said, "If Allah wills it, perhaps this year..." At that, the toothless woman began to rub my tummy as everyone laughed.

During a private discussion with Somargul later that night, I asked her why she wasn't married. "One man asked my father if he could marry me, but he was a villager and I am from a city so

I refused," she said. "My sister married him instead."

Money is another obstacle to marriage. By custom, Afghan men pay a bride price to the woman's father. The rate in the refugee camps is between \$4,000 and \$32,000; the higher rates are paid for women who can weave rugs or otherwise earn money. It is shameful for a father to "give away" his daughter for less than expected, since it suggests he cannot afford to support her.

As we spoke, Somargul became increasingly despondent over the prospect of remaining unmarried. I tried to comfort her by translating into Urdu the line by Alice Walker: "A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle."

"I'd prefer a husband," she said and turned over to go to sleep.

A Slice of Life

Of course, not all of our day was taken up with visits and gossip. Somargul and her sisters awoke at sunrise each day to perform their morning prayers and clean the compound. They would sweep the packed dirt "floor" of the compound, hang bed linens over clotheslines, and make tea for the entire family. Each sister had a task: One did laundry, another swept and washed dishes, two others alternated days cooking meals and making tea. The two youngest children, a boy and a girl, hauled water from a well in the mens' compound to irrigate the vegetable patch. This water is not potable, however, so Somargul each morning walked about ten minutes on the secret footpath behind the compound to a neighbor's house to fetch water from a deep well.

Somargul and her sisters cooked each morning, squatting next to the three small stoves in the cramped and dark kitchen. One stove had a single gas burner like a camp stove. The other two were constructed of mud and fueled by burning wood or scrap paper, filling the kitchen with acrid white smoke that stung the eyes. Somargul called this smoke "kitchen milk."

As the eldest daughter, Somargul also was responsible for making the daily bread. Each evening she prepared a dough of flour, water, yeast and salt in a large bowl and let it sit overnight. In the morning, she kneaded the dough and separated it into small balls. She then flipped each dough ball from one forearm to the other, stretching it into a giant pancake about a foot in diameter and a quarter-inch thick. At exactly the right moment, she tossed the dough onto a dome-shaped plate set over a mud hearth that was fueled by burning wood and trash. She made 20 of these soft, flat, delicious pieces of bread each day.

It was a great source of hilarity when I tried to make

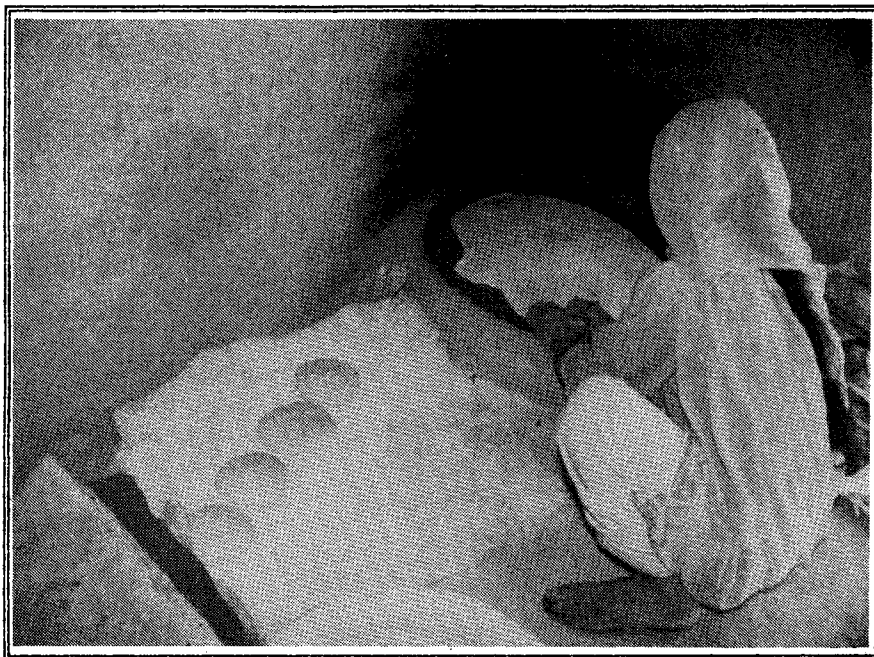
bread. It looked easy enough when Somargul did it. But as soon as I started flipping the dough on my forearms it tore and folded over on itself. The final product was a burned blob of bread that sent Somargul's sister, seven-year-old Rahenna, into a fit of giggles. To my chagrin, my bread was hung on the kitchen wall as a joke.

At mealtimes, we sat on the floor while eating, using the fingers of our right hands and pieces of bread to scoop up the food in traditional Afghan style. To my delight, all the women in the family were fanatical hand-washers, soaping up before they handled food as well as after each meal.

Somargul told me the family eats meat about twice a week, but they served it twice a day during my stay. A typical meal consisted of chicken or lamb stew, eggplant or okra fried in oil, rice cooked in oil, bread, yoghurt and a salad of fresh tomatoes, cucumbers, green onions and chilies, all followed by green tea. I noticed that the cooking oil can was labeled: "European Community/World Food Programme."

It was a point of honor with the family that every meal was a feast. I suspect it was part of the Pushtun code that stakes a family's reputation on the ability to be a grand host. Nonetheless, I often felt pushed to the point of over-eating by Somargul. No matter how much I ate, she would end the meal by apologizing that the food was not delicious, hence my small

appetite. She would continue with this routine until I had eaten another helping of everything, and then would begin the apologies all over again. By the end, I learned to eat slowly at the beginning of the meal, so as to make a great show of my appetite when everyone else was finished eating.



Somargul prepares flat "nan" bread each morning on the wood-and-paper fueled stove in her kitchen.

Somargul told me that

the men and women of the family normally eat together. But I observed that the women ate separately, making do with whatever food was left behind by the men. One day my friend Daoud showed up with about eight other men for lunch. When I saw them approach, I fled into the house where I found the rest of the women hiding as they secretly eyed the sudden arrival of men. "You can eat with the men if you want to," said Somargul, pointing to the room where the men sat. "We put food out there for you."

"But I want to stay with the women," I protested, my pride slightly injured. At that, Somargul sent her 12-year-old brother, Aminullah, to fetch food away from the men and bring it to me. Meanwhile, the rest of the women waited for leftovers. Clearly, I was going to be treated as a guest whether I wanted to be or not.

There also were moments when I felt accepted as one of the family. One such moment was when Somargul, another woman and I dressed up in Baluchi-style dresses, adorned with mirrors and embroidery, and danced a sort of gypsy-step in front of a group of about 15 neighbor women. I hesitated to do this, but finally succumbed to the group insistence that I join. We danced in a circle, flicking our wrists over our heads and then clapping our hands together at waist-height as we twirled around the room. What made it strange was the total silence. There were no radios to play music and no one sang or clapped in accompaniment.

After the Afghan dance, I attempted to demonstrate a waltz step with Somargul. The women looked at me with polite smiles that suggested they thought I was quite bizarre.

By the end of three days, the barrier between me and the men of the family also started to break down. Throughout my stay, I

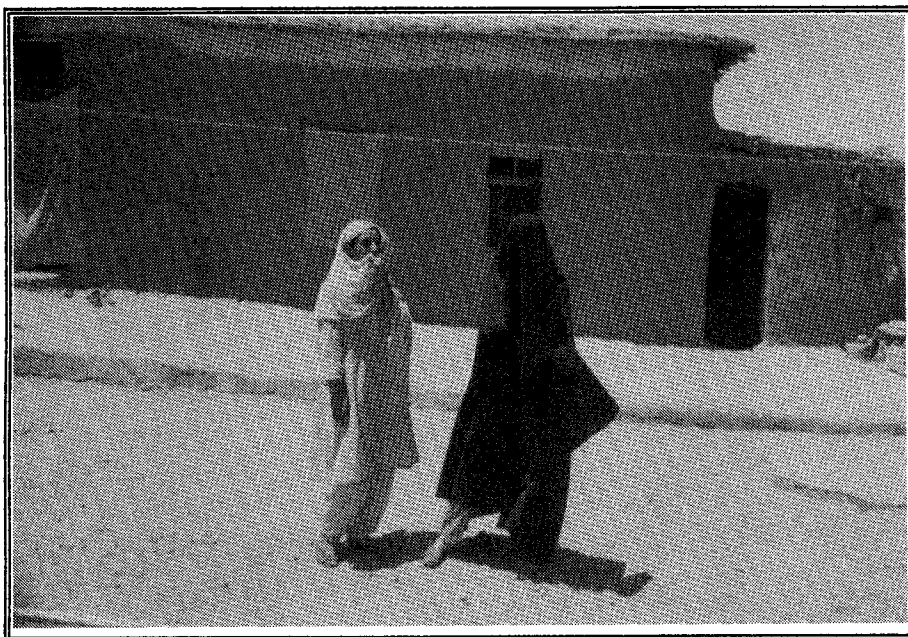


Rahenna giggles over my failed attempts to make Afghan bread. On the left, Somargul's bread. On the right, my disaster.

was free to talk with 12-year-old Aminullah, who roamed freely between the world of women and men. Somargul explained that the parents decide when a little girl must put on the veil, usually around the onset of puberty. Young boys decide for themselves when they want to leave the women's compound. Considering the affection lavished on Aminullah by the women of the family, I suspect he may never want to leave the sanctuary of the inner courtyard. Rahmahtullah also sat in the women's area in the early morning or late at night when there were no visitors around.

One of my most pleasant memories is of my last evening in Surkhaps, when I joined the entire family sitting on pillows in the courtyard. The sisters painted in some coloring books I had brought as gifts. Aminullah flew a kite in the warm breeze. Somargul, Rahmahtullah and I chatted quietly, teaching one another the English and Pushtu words for things like "sunset" and "cloud."

As the sky turned from amber to inky blue, thousands of stars came out. I remembered a recent news report that British scientists had discovered a planet in some distant galaxy. It amazed me to think that there could be another planet out there when so many worlds exist here on Earth.



Somargul, in white, and I pose for a final portrait together after I don a burqa for the return trip to Quetta.