



Library

IIAS, Shimla

TMP 050.954 52 PET



00016386

157.05.52  
150.95.7  
P E 7

## THE KABUL CAMP IN CENTRAL AFGHANISTAN

By H.R.H. PRINCE PETER OF GREECE AND DENMARK,  
LL.D., G.C.R., R.E., C.B.(MIL.)

ON June 16 last, the Danish Scientific Mission to Afghanistan (Henning-Haslund-Christensen Memorial Mission) 1953-54, of which I had been appointed leader, arrived at Kandahar in Afghanistan, having motored up from Karachi, over Quetta and Chaman. It consisted of two ethnologists, L. Edelberg and K. Ferdinand from the Ethnographical Collection of the Danish National Museum, of a moving-picture operator and photographer, P. A. Rasmussen, and of myself, deputed from the Third Danish Expedition to Central Asia, the headquarters of which are still in Kalimpong, West Bengal, India.

We went on almost immediately to Kabul over Gazni, arriving in the capital city of the country two days later. The Government was contacted shortly afterwards, and within a few days we had all the necessary permissions required to travel to where we intended.

The object of the Mission—which is still in Afghanistan until the middle of 1954—is purely ethnographical. It has been commissioned to study the people of Nuristan, of the Central Hazarajat, the Chahar Aimak tribes in the west and the Pashtoo-speaking nomads of the south and south-west. I am happy to say that the Afghan Government did not put any serious hindrances in our way, and told us that we might go wherever we pleased, provided we did not visit the strategically important town of Sar-i-Pul.

During the time we were awaiting our permits in Kabul we came into contact with many people, both Afghan and foreign, the latter mainly of other scientific missions in the capital, of the United Nations Technical Mission, and of the accredited diplomatic corps. From them we heard about a mysterious camp in central Afghanistan.

To begin with it was only a rumour. It was said that in the heart of the country, in an inaccessible part of the high mountains, there existed a nomad meeting-place, where tribes from all parts gathered once a year to elect a government of their own, a king, and to transact business both civil and commercial between themselves. One Afghan told us that he had a friend who had managed to reach the camp, not without incredible difficulty, but that unfortunately he had arrived too late, just after it had broken up. It was situated, he said, "somewhere in the neighbourhood of Daulat Yar."

Should such a camp really exist, we felt, it would be essential for us to visit it. Its importance for a study of tribal nomadism in Afghanistan seemed beyond question, and so we decided that we would make an attempt to find it. Unfortunately, nobody in an official position was able to help us. Those from whom we asked information in various government offices professed total ignorance of the matter.



When we requested that we be given permission to reach Daulat Yar over Panjao, we were not encouraged to attempt it. The road had become impracticable since the spring rains, we were told—something that proved not quite correct, for when we did eventually reach Panjao by another way, we found that three lorries a day, on an average, had been plying on the direct road from Kabul for some three months already.

Undaunted by these attempts at discouraging us, we started off on July 5, travelling to Daulat Yar by the more usual route of Charikar, Ghorband, Bamyān, Band-i-Amir and Panjao.

Our first stop was at the foot of the nearly 11,000 ft. Shibar pass, where we put up a camp and went visiting the Sheikh Ali Hazara-wa-Turkoman tribes in the neighbouring valleys. We spent some time in the Urdugalli area, living with these semi-nomadic people, in their summer camps, at over 13,000 ft.

Then, by way of Bamyān and its intriguing Buddhas, the entrancing blue lakes of Band-i-Amir, where we stayed for some time in a large camp of Mohmands from Afghan Turkestan, we reached Panjao, headquarters of the Dei Zanghi Hazara district, by one of the most difficult roads upon which I have ever been in Afghanistan. In many places the Chevrolet station wagon, which we had hired from the Kabul bus *sherkat* (company), was unable to drive up the steep gradients, and we were obliged to unload and take our luggage up to the top of the pass on pack animals.

The military commandant received us in Panjao's red mud fort. He told us that the governor was away in Beisud, and very kindly, as everywhere in Afghanistan—which is surely one of the most hospitable countries in the world—invited us to stay with him. In subsequent conversation we heard that two hundred *kotchis* (*gutchis*—that is, Pathan nomads) were expected to arrive the next day, on their way to the camps of Garmao and Abul.

Immediately on the alert, we enquired what these camps were. He said that they were meeting-places for Pathan tradesmen, large fairs held every year during the summer, where goods from the plains were sold and bartered in exchange for products of the local population. Asked if it were true that a government and even a king were elected in these camps, the commandant said Yes, that it was so, "for how otherwise would it be possible to keep the peace when so great a number of people come together?" "How many tribesmen would you say go there?" we enquired eagerly. "Some twenty thousand roughly, I think," he answered. Thrilled, we felt that we were definitely getting "warmer" in our search for the camp.

Next morning, very early, at 3.30 a.m., before sunrise, the Pathans started arriving. I was awakened by the commotion they made—the ringing of camel bells, the cries of drivers and followers, the barking of dogs, the neighing of horses and the sound of many hooves beating on the dry earthen paths. I got up and stood watching the long lines of animals and men coming along the two roads, the old and the new, from Kabul, in the growing light of the rising sun.

Very quickly I saw that these were not *kotchis* but traders. Heavily armed, with cartridge belts over their chests and round their waists, with rifles slung over their shoulders and pistols dangling from their hips, fierce-looking bearded and turbaned men, *and men alone*, rode up in batches to a level place above the river from the north and started putting up their white Indian Army tents. The horses they rode were unsaddled and tethered, the camels were made to kneel, unloaded by their drivers, and led off into the surrounding hills to graze, arms were stacked and fires were lit, so that blue curls of smoke soon began to rise above the two hundred or so tents. Later the commandant, escorted by two uniformed Afghan soldiers carrying antiquated Russian rifles, issued from the fort and went over to the camp to parley with its leaders. On his return he invited us to visit it too.

This we did in the afternoon, being well received by the travelling tribal salesmen. In an incredible confusion of cloth bales, green fodder for the animals, camel and horse droppings, arms, saddles and kitchen utensils, bags of rice, tea and grain, in and out of crowded tents, where Pathans and Hazaras were already bargaining for goods in loud Persian and guttural Pashtoo, dodging kicking horses, cud-chewing slobbering camels and aggressive loudly barking mastiffs, we gathered from an interpreter whom we had with us that the camp we sought and to which these men were proceeding was at Abul, and that the latter was in the neighbourhood of Daulat Yar.

The next day, over Lal, we got as far as Garmao, where a camp had also been reported. The quaint Hazara village, made up of windowless mud houses, with dried cow-dung cakes stacked on all the roofs as a winter supply of fuel, knew however nothing of Pathans gathering there. Had we been misinformed? We drove on the following morning, somewhat anxious again of not succeeding in our quest.

But it need not have been so. At Daulat Yar, where we arrived in the afternoon, we found a huge brick building standing in a beautiful green wide part of the Hari Rud valley. Some Chahar Aimak tribesmen who were camping there in round, gaily decorated, *yurt*-type tents told us that this was a hotel built by Herat's former governor, Abdullah Khan, and that the headquarters of the district were some thirty miles further at Kala Kausi. We enquired about Abul, and they assured us that it was not far from the next stop, where we would have no difficulty in finding out all about it.

We crossed the Lal Rud at Shinya over an old brick bridge. The road then went inland for quite some distance before we came out again into the Hari Rud valley only a few miles before Kala Kausi. This place consisted also of a three-storied brick building, presumably an hotel like the other, but used at the moment by the local Hakim as the administrative offices. We drove past an ancient kala, from which white-turbaned bearded Afghans in striped *alachas* (coats) stared at us at the beginning of the road that led to the modern building. Here the *mudir* (chief clerk), representing the Hakim, and the local commandant received us.

These officers told us that their superior was away—at Abul. He had gone there, as was usual every year, to accompany the *Hakim-i-ala* of Ghor,

both men having always to be present at the huge Pathan gathering. Asked where the camp was, our informants waved vaguely in the direction of the southern hills, saying that it was somewhere beyond them.

We were thoroughly aroused now. "Could we go on to Abul the next day?" we enquired. It all seemed too good to be true. We could, we were told, if horses were available. It took eight hours to get there, they said, and we would need nine animals. They promised to try and get them for us by the following afternoon at 3 p.m.

We camped that evening on the banks of the Hari Rud, and eagerly awaited the appointed hour to leave. But when the time came the horses did not, and only two miserable ponies turned up. Imagining that "technical impediments" were being put in our way, we waxed impatient and threatened to leave on foot if mounts were not immediately forthcoming. Discussion followed in which tempers were frayed, but eventually seven animals arrived and we set out at about 5 p.m.

The distance being too great for us to reach Abul that evening, we stayed the night in a Chahar Aimak camp, somewhere high up in the row of hills to the south, at a place called Tilak. The people were Sultan Yar tribesmen, a subdivision of the Firozkohi, and their Khan invited us to dine and to sleep in his very clean and comfortable felt-lined tent. In the morning, crossing an 11,000 ft. pass to the south, we descended into a long valley which, branching into another broader one running from west to east, led us eventually by narrow stony paths—although far from deserted and upon which we met many travellers and flocks of sheep—to the eagerly sought-for Abul camp.

Edelberg and I arrived first. It was about 11 a.m. and we had been riding from Tilak since 6 o'clock. As we approached we could see long lines of white Indian Army tents exactly as in Panjao, although much more numerous, set up to the right and to the left of the now larger track which we were following, on a level piece of ground, below which a broad but shallow river flowed. The ample supply of water appeared to me the reason for which the site had been chosen.

There were literally thousands of Pathans standing about here and there among their animals, which, as when we had met them before, presented a wide variety of species. We had ridden over a low ridge and were now approaching the first tents. Men came forward and started beckoning to us. They spoke in Persian and in Pashtoo and, waving in the direction of a white tent which stood alone, about a quarter of a mile below on a patch of grass to the left of the river, made us understand that we should proceed there.

We rode through the camp. Right and left, heavily armed fierce-looking tribesmen emerged from beneath the canvas under which they were sitting and started escorting us down to our destination. Of course, we were not yet quite aware of what was expected of us, and wondered, although without any apprehension because everybody seemed smiling and well-disposed, what exactly was going to happen.

After crossing the stream, through which our horses waded while the men who were following us jumped from stone to stone, the latter disposed

for that purpose at regular intervals, we had only a couple of hundred yards to cover. As we advanced over them, two individuals in imitation European clothes came out of the tent and walked towards us. Pathans in national dress followed behind. One of the foreign-clad gentlemen, elderly, with a white beard, had on a grey woollen suit with knee-breeches and stockings; he wore brown leather boots, while on his head was an Indian Army sun-helmet worn back to front, with the broad, sweeping brim over his eyes like a peak. His companion was attired in a dark check suit the trousers of which had buckles at the ankles as if he had been bicycling; on his head was the usual *karakul* cap which seems to be the mark of the Afghan government servant.

The older of the two came forward, and, after we had dismounted, shook hands with us, welcomed us and presented himself and the other official as respectively Kwadja Mohammed Khan, Hakim-i-ala of Ghor (headquarters, Kala-i-Ghor or Taiwara), and Abdul Aziz, Hakim-i-Kalan of Chak Charan (headquarters, Kala Kausi), the latter being subordinate to the former. We followed them into the tent which had, we discovered, been prepared specially for our reception. Two seats made of empty boxes covered over with carpets were offered us, but we preferred to join the rest of the party and to sit on the floor with them.

On my right, pouring out tea into a bowl for me, was a lean, elegant man with a curled-up moustache and lively eyes in national dress, a bandolier of revolver cartridges across his chest. When I asked the old governor who he was, I was told that he was one of the two *mirs* of the camp: Mir Ahmed, a Tagar tribesman of the Ahmedzai division of the Soliman khel. Then the other *mir* of the camp stood up, on the Hakim-i-ala's invitation, a big, burly fellow with completely European features and colouring, incongruously dressed in an Indian chaprassi's blue coat. His name, we were told, was Mir Shah Gul Khan, and he was of the Ala-ed-din Khel of the same Ahmedzai.

It was true after all, then, that there were kings of the Abul camp—there were two, however, instead of one. Asked how they were appointed, we heard that they were elected, but as it was added that the same men had been *mirs* for the last twenty-five years, we presumed that once put into office thus they must remain there until removed by general consent. Mir Ahmed told us later that he was a land-owner in Panjao and Gardez, while Mir Shah Gul Khan modestly admitted to being an "arms merchant." Asked where he had got the extraordinary coat he was wearing, he enigmatically answered "*Kashmir*"—a laconic explanation rich in possible interpretations.

A big show now began. Thousands of Pathans—all Jenubi, or southerners, as we were told—collected in a wide circle outside the tent, and lifting their rifles in the air, let off an ear-splitting volley in our honour. Wild cries followed, and an old drummer having started to beat a most effective tattoo on a huge instrument which he held strung over his body, a long string of dancers, without turbans, their bobbed hair flying round their heads as they twirled, advanced rhythmically towards us. This was the *Atan* dance, it was explained to us, and a most strenuous exercise it appeared to be. Turning and twisting in time with the drumming, which

was the sole accompaniment, they kept this up for three solid hours, without ever showing any signs of fatigue or of giddiness.

*Atan*, the venerable old governor said, came from Athens. It was originally a Greek dance which the Macedonians had brought to Pakhtoonistan. And this was the overture for a patriotic and complimentary speech. Freely mixing Greece and Denmark in his mind (for which I cannot blame him, considering more enlightened people do the same on first meeting me), he spoke at length about the similarity of our "two" countries; how the Pakhtoons, like the Greeks, had always fought for their freedom and independence, and if Denmark was free today it was because its people had always opposed enslavement by force of arms; how he, like us assuredly, had killed many "foreign invaders from overseas," personally, with his own hand; how he had suffered, as we had he was sure, for the freedom of his country, having been imprisoned by Batcha-i-Sakao in 1928 for his loyalty to the reigning royal family.

I answered appropriately, I think, stressing such points of similarity as he had left out. He seemed pleased and thanked me effusively. We then rose, and on receiving permission to do so, took photographs and cine camera shots of the whirling dancers and the sprawling, armed spectators behind. Everybody endeavoured to look as fierce as he could, and many a rifle was brandished before our lenses in a warlike gesture.

In the afternoon, after an excellent lunch of roast mutton and rice, we were invited to take part in a shooting competition: we four against a selected team of Pathans. We naturally accepted, although rather dubious as to our own ability. Targets made of two stones one upon the other were put up some two hundred yards away against the side of the mountain, and surrounded by nearly every inmate of the camp, we lay down in turn on a piece of felt carpet to lean our rifles over a camel saddle. We were beaten, of course, by our opponents, who, all except one, dislodged the upper stone with every one of the three shots they fired. Rasmussen, however, hit the target with his first shot, and immediately became the hero of the afternoon.

We were taken to tea afterwards in the tent of Mir Ahmed. There, seated on the floor, facing the entrance where the rest of the company squatted, we were entertained with a political talk. We were told of the tribesmen's undying loyalty to King Zaher Shah of Afghanistan (whom they all called "our king"); of their desire to start hostilities with Pakistan, which they would have begun long ago, they said, but for the restraining influence of the Afghan Government; of their experiences in the Kashmir fighting, where they complained that they had been tricked; of Sheikh Abdullah, whom they looked upon as a good man and whom they would treat as a guest if he came over to them; of Bakshi Gulam Mohammed, for whom they did not profess the same liking. In the light of later happenings in Kashmir this conversation was most enlightening.

We spent the night in the Hakim-i-ala's camp. There being a curfew after 8 p.m. in the main one, and everyone seen approaching it being shot at on sight, the old man prudently had his tents fully two miles further downstream. Dinner was served at the very late hour of 11.30 p.m., but

we were entertained while we waited by our host with a most interesting amount of information, to which I shall return later.

The next day they had arranged a cavalry display for us. I rode back to the camp on a big grey horse I had been given, side by side with Kwadja Mohammed Khan, riding the little black pony upon which he had come from Taiwara over a month ago. As we entered the camp a significant enough incident occurred. At the first tents we came upon a Pathan sleeping on the side of the road. The governor went straight up to him and struck him a sharp blow with his riding whip. The man sprang up, half groggy, whereupon we rode on, but the escort coming behind unfurled long, nasty-looking leather thongs and chased the unfortunate fellow right into his tent with them. He should not be sleeping when authority went past, they shouted at him with a lot of abuse, but should be standing up respectfully.

The cavalry show consisted of rides past, counter parades, mock attacks of one lot on the other, trick riding exhibitions and the display of the best horses. We were most impressed by the quality of the animals used, as well as by the horsemanship. We were encouraged to film and photograph to our hearts' content.

One more meal was taken by us at midday in the governor's tent, and then we prepared to leave. As we were about to thank our host for his kindness and hospitality, before passing through the camp to do the same with the two *mirs*, a group of prisoners, heavily chained together three at a time, were brought before the old magistrate. They were murderers and thieves, we heard. The first lot, who were *kotchis*, had killed a man with knives in a brawl, while the others, local Chahar Aimaks, had attempted (incredible folly) to raid the Abul camp. Both were remanded for transport, still in chains, to Taiwara, where they would be judged.

We returned to Tilak for the night, that evening, although we were greatly encouraged to go by another way further east. As none of the routes is marked on the map, I am unable to say in which direction the latter lay.

While we sat cross-legged on the floor and waited for dinner in his tent, Kwadja Mohammed Khan, Hakim-i-ala of Ghor, in answer to our questions, told us many interesting things about the Abul camp. It was open from the beginning of May to the end of July, he said, during which time 60,000 Pathans went through it. There were, however, never more than from 5,000 to 6,000 at a time, which was approximately the number which we estimated the attendance to be when we were there. All, like the two *mirs*, came exclusively from the southern provinces and belonged only to the Soliman khel.

The camp used to be at Kerman, a village of Lal in the central Hazarajat. It had, however, been moved some thirty years ago to this place, as being a better one. There was another minor camp close by at *Gumao* (Hidden Water), and not at *Garmao* (Hot Water) as we had heard (which accounted for our disappointment at the latter place). Abul being in the Ghor division of Herat province, he, the governor, always attended the

meeting. He had been doing so for the last ten years. Pointing to his two guards, unarmed Afghan soldiers in uniform, he proudly stated that that was all he needed to keep order. "The Pakhtoons know and respect me," he said, "and I have never had any trouble with them," a pronouncement which, despite the lack of force at his disposal, we were inclined, on its face value at least, to believe.

The governor did not come alone. With him were six elders from Ghor, whom he solemnly presented to us as being the representatives of the inhabitants of his administrative division, all Chahar Aimaks, 32,000 strong. There was also a subordinate *Ala Kalar* (District Commissioner) in attendance on him, who spoke Osmanli Turkish (he was very proud of it), having been educated in Istanbul.

The function of the camp was mainly economic. It was a bazaar, and it was called that. It was established primarily for the benefit of *kotchis* from Kandahar and Herat provinces, who never went near large urban centres in their wanderings, but were always in the neighbourhood of Abul during the summer. The Pathans purchased goods in Pakistan and Kabul and brought them here for sale, obtaining in exchange such goods as live sheep, sheep's fat, wool and agricultural produce which they took away with them on their return journey. A certain amount of trade also took place with the Hazaras on the way (we had been witnesses to this in Panjao) and with the Chahar Aimaks when their country was reached. They too bought manufactured goods which they could not obtain otherwise.

When we asked them what the Pathan traders did the rest of the year, one of them was taken as an example who was present because he had accompanied us to the governor's camp. He had, he said, some property in Panjao. His wife and children were there now while he was away at Abul. There were seven other people travelling with him, five of his brothers and two nephews; business, with him, was a family affair. He came to Abul with his goods on camels, himself riding horses with some of his brothers, while the other younger ones and the nephews acted as pack animal drivers. He did not stay there more than three weeks, after which he would return to Panjao in stages by another route than the one by which he had come, in order to sell to other villages.

There the party would break up. Leaving his white Indian Army tent behind, he would take out his black *kotchi* one, and with his wife and children travel to Gazni, where he owned some more land. He would remain there another twenty days or so, collecting the rent from his tenants, paying his servants who grew crops for him, and taking delivery of the harvest. Then he would go on down into Pakistan (he first said "Hindustan," but corrected himself with an apology), where he would gather supplies for the summer business. For those things which he bought (he winked at us when we asked him if everything he had had been acquired thus legitimately) he paid in Afghan notes, the Peshawar banks readily exchanging these for Pakistan rupees. He did not have to show a passport, and on the whole he had little trouble to cross the frontier, although he said (on what justification we did not find out) that "in olden days it was better."

In the spring he travelled back, this time over Kabul. There he would purchase further goods, cotton cloth from India being available in the capital, and at cheaper prices than that manufactured in Pakistan. He would also buy second-hand clothes, which, as we could see from the labels on them, all came from the United States of America. He would go as far as Panjao with his family, leave them there on his property, and taking with him the hallmark of a trader, his white Indian Army tent, move up to Abul as he had done the year before.

There seems little doubt that the principal reason for the existence of the camp is economic. But there appears to me to be other, complementary motives too. Thus, the fun and games to which we were treated were not, I gather, exceptional pleasures indulged in only for our benefit. They are regular occurrences during the summer months, mainly sports in which these warlike tribesmen delight to exert themselves. The martial atmosphere of the camp was very noticeable, and women are not as a rule admitted. Although we did see one, an old decrepit hag who did not veil herself or run away at our approach as is usual in Afghanistan, even with nomads, she was, we were assured, the exception that proves the rule. On the other hand, there were a lot of quite young boys about, whose effeminate gestures and passive submission to all kinds of rough treatment by their elders made us wonder. Besides this, Abul is a nice cool place (it was even quite cold at night) where it is pleasant to be when the temperature is so high lower down. It is ideal for these wild tribes to come together in complete seclusion to exchange views and make plans once a year for their winter operations.

Quarrels between them, which are bound to spring up when so many people come together, are settled by either of the *mir*s. Their authority is accepted unquestionably, and considering their "reign" has already lasted a quarter of a century; they are apparently very experienced persons. We saw two such quarrels. One was about some banknotes which a trader accused another of having passed on to him when they were bad; the other, between a buyer and a seller of bags of sheep's fat, the latter having defaulted on the date fixed for the delivery of the goods. Mir Ahmed settled both cases by favouring the complainant, and the other party submitted to the judgment without a murmur. Kwadja Mohammed Khan told us that all matters were thus decided by the Pathans themselves, and that he had never to interfere.

We were assured that no Europeans had ever visited the camp at Abul before. This is probably true, because at Kabul, where I enquired from various embassies if anyone knew about it, I was told no. For this reason I have thought it well worth giving a full description of our experiences, even at the risk of it being somewhat lengthy, as is the case here.

We were extremely well received and hospitably treated by both the Afghan and the Pathan authorities in the camp, for which we are very grateful. On returning to the capital we were told of all sorts of wild rumours that had been circulating about our arrest and removal from Abul, probably coming from those who objected to us visiting the place, and to which it was easy for us to give the lie.

Those of my readers who would like to obtain more information than is contained in this article are referred to the coming publication on the Abul camp, to be issued in time as part of the work of the Danish Mission to Afghanistan (Henning-Haslund-Christensen Memorial Mission) 1953-54, National Museum, Copenhagen, Denmark.

