Thought that you might enjoy this, sent on by Jonathan from the Atlantic Monthly, Jolyon

The Valley Of The King

Beyond a crack in the Afghan mountains lies a lost world, the hunting grounds of King Mohammed Zahir Shah

by Jonathan Ledgard

If you drive three days north and west out of Kabul, into the western range of the Hindu Kush, and pass beyond the district of Kahmard, you come upon a forgotten cut called the Ajar Valley. The peaks around Ajar are lower than those of the eastern Hindu Kush, but they appear to fall deeper. And they are redder and less visited, bespeaking Zarooraster more than Kipling. Soviet soldiers passed into Ajar for two or three days during their occupation. A score of them were killed, and others lost eyes or teeth to stones flicked from catapults by locals at night. Few foreigners have entered the valley since. No aid organization works there. I decided to make the trip while serving as a foreign correspondent in Kabul. A few of us went: a driver, Shahgar; one of my translators, Bahram; Roger, a friend from university days in Scotland, along for an adventure; and Doud, a sinewy former militia commander who served us as a kind of bodyguard-guide.

Ajar was the hunting reserve of King Mohammed Zahir Shah from 1952 until 1973, when he was deposed and went into exile in Italy. The valley was gaudy in its plenty in those days. Local memory holds it to have been the sort of Technicolor paradise depicted in some Renaissance paintings, or in the leaflets of more-determined Christian groups. There were abundant crops and windfall fruit for all. There were vines, flowers, songbirds of many colors, and fat-tailed sheep such as you find in the petting corners of European zoos. Ponies ran free, falcons fell, trout hovered in the river. Sloping down from a royal hunting lodge was a field where children played. Up above, on the star-swept mesa, was one of the largest populations of Siberian ibex in the Hindu Kush, and also good numbers of urial sheep, musk deer, wild boar, jackals, wolves, lynxes, common leopards, and snow leopards. To those the King had added, lower down, a number of yaks and a small herd of endangered Bactrian deer.

No one really knew what had happened to these animals in twenty-three years of war. The United Nations Environmental Programme, mandated to assess the wildlife situation in Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban in 2001, had not visited Ajar. Too dangerous, it said (hardly, although a few occasional Afghan visitors suggested that the land and the trees were in poor shape, and that some of the animals had fled across the mountaintops, even as far as China. The Bactrian deer had certainly been gunned down, and it was also known that Communist Party officials had butchered the yaks and distributed the meat among the people. More than that no one could say for sure.
When the valley finally came into view, and we hammered toward it in our crowded jeep across the rutted flats, Ajar seemed like a play on words. It looked as though Allah had left the valley ajar. There were two walls of soft red rock, each a half mile high, and they almost met and closed on each other; the entrance appeared wide enough for a river and a donkey to pass through, and no more.

The entering in was cast in shadow. This part of the valley was desert. Large lizards scuttled through talcum dust from boulder to boulder. We came upon an old man walking with the help of a stick. His wife sat on a donkey beside him. She covered herself as we pulled up. This is a reflex women have in rural Afghanistan. They pass into burkas and turn their backs on men (but also the world) the way hedgehogs roll into balls. They are impelled to do this. "Hey, grandfather!" we called. "Can you tell us how far it is to the home of Mir Abdul Shakari?" The old man thought for a moment. "Mir Abdul?" he said. "Five hours up the valley as I walk." Mir Abdul had been the King’s hunter (shakari means "great hunter"), and we’d heard he might still live in the valley.

We moved on. Ajar opened out into a garden of sunlit meadows, fields, and orchards, fenced off on either side by billion-ton rock faces that changed color as they rose, according to the strata and the play of light; the whole effect was of bright slices of something like mineralized Dundee marmalade.

The King’s Hunter

We continued up the valley past two hundred or so houses, some standing alone, others clustered into an impoverished village. The population of the valley amounted to perhaps 2,500. We stopped under a stand of pine trees. The few ruined houses beyond appeared on our Soviet military map as Deqan Qala, a settlement built by the King for his servants. We asked for Mir Abdul Shakari, and at length he appeared: a short man of about sixty-five with a snow-white beard and watery gray eyes like oysters, but also powerfully built and visibly hard, like a veteran legionnaire. So my first impression of him was unresolved. He was surprised and delighted to see us, and we him. We had not been certain he was still alive.

"I have served the King all my life," Mir Abdul said quietly. "I continue to serve him to the best of my ability and with dignity." He led us up the valley to an orchard, and rolled out a food mat on which we sat cross-legged, drinking green tea and eating dried apricots. He looked at Roger and me wonderingly. "You two are the first foreigners to be sitting here in the King’s garden since 1979," he said.

Mir Abdul had passed his childhood in Ajar. He had first climbed above the valley at age twelve. He went to work for the King at seventeen, and shot his first deer at eighteen. Hunting came easily to him.

"Like pulling a plant from the ground," he said.

He was a prince of sorts, but he had no title, no claim to the land, and could not read or write. He lived in a tent at the head of the orchard. But all that he could see came under his sway. The apricot trees had been planted by his grandfather. The stone walls, and the roses growing from the walls, were the results of his father’s labor. Hardly a person in the upper part of Ajar was not related to him. He had three living wives; another two had died from "pains in their chest and belly." Together they had borne him thirty children, twenty-four of whom were still living. The youngest, whom we could sometimes hear wailing in a nearby tent, was a teething baby girl.

It was a measure of the disaster visited on Afghanistan that a man like Mir Abdul was so close to defeat. It was not just that his eyesight was going and his hip scraped in its socket. He felt vulnerable. His
family arsenal—seventy machine guns, five grenade launchers—had been taken, along with his hunting rifle, in 1999, when the Taliban drove him and his family from the valley. He had returned in glory two years later, brandishing a letter from the King. But the buildings in the upper valley had all been torched or broken, which was why his family had taken to living in tents.

He spoke with urgency after lunch, as we walked around the ruins of the royal hunting lodge. "We have been beaten and killed! We have no home, no animals, no seed. There is not enough food. Winter is coming. Tell the King we are desperate." Nothing was left of the lodge itself but a single bay window. A little distance away I came upon a rusting swimming-pool ladder curling up from the soil. The pool was buried below, waiting to be dug out. I stood there for a long while, imagining the King emerging from the blue water, slick and cologne, to be waited on by his staff—climbing out into a different Afghanistan, one that was just as hard but not yet broken.

HUNTING

As day turned to night, we talked in one of Mir Abdul's tents, pitched under some apricot trees. A single lantern cast a viscous light on the proceedings. My questions sometimes appeared to confuse him, as if he were dazed by his own history, but this was not the case when he spoke of hunting. His happiest memories were of trailing snow leopards, working out where they had been and in what numbers. He had killed three of them, and three steppe eagles, with a rifle that the King had given him. The last leopard measured nine feet from tip to tail. "The King was first in hunting," Mir Abdul said. "He was strong. He was brave. He took risks. We had the best times together."

Mir Abdul thought that most of the animals would return to the heights above Ajar. Many had never left. To make his point, he showed us the head of a large male ibex, which he said had recently been killed by a snow leopard up on the mesa. He held it up. The cat had sprung from the side and up at the ibex's throat. It had taken off and buried a side of meat, but left the head. The horns of the ibex swirled grandly. The taxidermy was crude: the sockets gaped, and the neck was stuffed with grass. I regarded the pointy white beard and loose jaw, and as I looked from Mir Abdul to the animal, my first impression resolved itself: the hunter resembled the hunted.

When Mir Abdul tired, his eldest son spoke in his place. His name was Sultan Aziz. He had a sorry story to tell. "Because we had no dogs in Ajar, I was trained as a boy to take the place of a dog," he said. "I ran after the birds shot down by the princes. On one occasion I dived into the river and pulled out two wild ducks brought down by the crown prince, Ahmad Shah. The prince liked me for doing this. He promised to bring me to Kabul and pay for my schooling there. Maybe I would have had learning..."

But the year was 1973, the King was subsequently deposed, and Ahmad Shah never returned.

A SACRED CAVE

We walked up to the end of Ajar one hot afternoon. Eagles turned on the thermals above. The names of the peaks around us translated as "Bald Bird," "Covered Eyes," and "Noisy One." The valley ended as it began, in a towering wall of rock. The valley floor stood at 6,000 feet: the rock gave out at around 14,000 feet. Animals had attracted the King to Ajar, but perhaps it was the defined nature of the place—the way it pinched itself off from the outside at both ends, suggesting a lost world—that kept him coming back. It was the East, but the East as West, before the West was won.

A seventeen-year-old soldier named Heyruhddin walked beside us, shouldering a Kalashnikov. His job was to guard the upper part of Ajar against poachers. He was under orders to walk twice each day from Deqan Qala to the end of the valley and back again. He ate what he could forage. Often he went hungry. "I like Ajar," he said shyly. "I like the girls down here and the animals up there."

4/9/2004
Close to the end of the valley was a rise of boulders, down which a river tumbled. We climbed up and were amazed to see a lake, as dark as slate. It had been formed by an earthquake in 1956. Mir Abdul remembered that day well. The whole Hindu Kush shook, he said. Parts of a mountain fell down, damming the river. It ran dry for three days. The trout flapped on the river's exposed bottom and then died. Even though some of the rockfall was dynamited away, allowing the river to flow once more, the lake remained.

We edged around it on a narrow ledge that dipped into the water here and there, and found ourselves facing a cave called Chiltan, from which the river seemed to flow miraculously. The cave felt like the farthest point of our journey, and if it was not the source of the storied Oxus, it surely must have been the source of something yet more important—and if not that, then the very navel of the Hindu Kush. For years it had served as a shrine. The blind stumbled to it to find their sight, and the insane were brought from far away to recover their senses. Prayers were made manifest around the cave in little strips of colored cloth set in mud and cast onto the walls, like so much holy spittle. We looked respectfully into the darkness. Our guides told us that forty men of pure spirit were deep inside, wading through the waters. They had entered Chiltan centuries before, and remained alive still, sleeping and praying until Judgment Day.

EVENING

I went with my fly rod to the river at dusk. I was a poor fisherman, and the fishing was poor. The trout had long since been diminished by grenade fishing. Children materialized as I cast, dark-haired boys with high Tibetan cheekbones, descendants, one way or another, of Mir Abdul. They watched me, and then I let each of them have a try. After some time we set down the rod, and I taught them to count to ten in English. Before the boys appeared there had been a single moment of stillness. Two young swans, gray like city snow, flew low over the water, touching it before rising above the valley and out of sight. Some elders lay on the grass a little downstream. I went to sit with them. Only a few had ever climbed above Ajar. The valley floor had its own pull, of poverty and land disputes, and the gravity it exerted was extreme, especially for women. No woman, the elders agreed, had ever climbed above the valley of their birth and looked down upon it (just as there had been no girls fishing, or learning to count).

NIGHT

The nights were extraordinary. Endless stars wheeled in the cold, silvering the rock. There were no clouds. I had taken along Milton's Paradise Lost, and had been dimly reading it. I had no sense of Ajar as a lost paradise. There had been no falling, no fall. It had been better; it could be better again. The people and the animals had been smashed by war, as had so much else in Afghanistan. That was all. But it was true that when I looked up, as I brushed my teeth in the stream by the orchard, I better understood the architecture of the universe Milton imagined, in which the world hung from heaven by a golden chain.

LEAVING AJAR

We walked out of Ajar early one morning. Mir Abdul pressed me to deliver his message of distress to the King. We gave Heyruhddin a cap and a little money. Other men stepped forward, some for an embrace, others hoping for a gift. The air was still. It soon grew hot. Flies glittered on piles of dung. We walked down the valley, rather than going by jeep, and said our good-byes to the schoolteacher and the shopkeeper in the village. The shopkeeper was covered in blood, picking apart a sheep carcass and holding court under an ancient mulberry tree. We drank tea with him,
squatting in the dirt, and saw how the wasps swarmed over his meat, snipping off morsels of white fat and carrying them to their nest.

I hung back and walked on alone. I wanted to appreciate the leaving. As I passed a graveyard, a boy named Timur appeared from a grove and with great humility presented me with three walnuts as a parting gift. I sat down and cracked open the nuts against a rock. The graveyard was a beautiful place, whispering as graveyards do. The dead were marked at head and foot by slates. Their mounds were lanced with sticks of willow and poplar, each stick hung with brightly colored ribbons, like those spattered about the Chiltan cave. I watched how the light passed over the rock and listened, above the whispering, to the sound of a distant donkey braying and the sound of the river, passing new into the world, from darkness into light.

The place was worth saving—not just the heights but all of it. It had taken a generation to devastate the wild areas of Afghanistan. The pistachio woodlands of Badghis and Takhar were nearly gone. The mighty juniper forests of Kunar and Nuristan were going. Saving Ajar would not help those places. But saving it seemed possible in a country where so much was impossible: there were no land mines here; security was good. Everyone said that most of the trees had been cut down, that the twenty or so pines at Deqan Qala were the last in the whole valley; yet from where I sat in the graveyard I could see a good variety: mountain ash, hawthorn, mulberry, poplar, willow, tamarisk, walnut, apple, pear, and apricot. Some of them were turning. Winter was coming. But blue cornflowers and wild roses were all around still, and sweet-smelling white gorse in the ditches, and lavender in the fields.

The jeep stood where Ajar changed back to desert. We packed in, and for a moment, as we turned through the shadows and saw the narrow opening back into the world, the outside seemed unreal: the bright sash of it like a backdrop in an opera house, hanging from sky to stage.

THE KING IN KABUL

A few weeks after returning from Ajar I went to see the King. He was delicate-looking. There was a plaster on the back of his blotched left hand. His trembling fingers moved through prayer beads that met in the colors of the Afghan flag: red, black, and green. He was eighty-nine years old, and a widower. He was not loved as he might have been had he shown more solidarity with his people during his exile in Rome. He had been respectfully relegated from monarch to father of the nation. There was little in his chambers to suggest a kingship dating back to 1933. The furniture owed more to Knightsbridge than to Kabul. The trappings of monarchy had been thieved. The archive had been destroyed. There were no photos of Ajar. The only remaining archive was the King himself.

I related to him the condition of his lands and houses in Ajar. The King replied a little indistinctly in Dari and Pashto. He strongly supported the idea of turning Ajar into a national park. "There is yet another tragedy in Afghanistan," he said. "It is the tragedy of animals. Now is not the time for hunting. Now is the time for preservation." He spoke of the lodge, the orchards, and the Chiltan cave. He most clearly remembered his hunting trips with Mir Abdul. "There were four or five of us," he said. "We climbed to the top. We lit campfires at night on which we cooked our food. Everyone told a story, whether true or invented. The social distance between us disappeared. We were just friends sitting together. Afghans. Equals." He paused and looked at me directly, as though our conversation had awakened something in him. "You know," he said, "those were the happiest moments of my life."