A life revealed: seventeen years after she started out from the cover of National Geographic, a former Afghan refugee comes face-to-face with the world once more

Photographs by

Steve McCurry

National Geographic Society

New York

2002
A LIFE

Seventeen years after she stared out a former Afghan refugee comes face-to-
REVEALED
from the cover of National Geographic, face with the world once more.
She remembers her anger. The man was a stranger. She had never been photographed before. Until they met again 17 years later, she had not been photographed since.

The photographer remembers the moment too. The light was soft. The refugee camp in Pakistan was a sea of tents. Inside the school tent he noticed her first. Sensing her shyness, he approached her last. She told him he could take her picture. “I didn’t think the photograph of the girl would be different from anything else I shot that day,” he recalls of that morning in 1984 spent documenting the ordeal of Afghanistan’s refugees.

The portrait by Steve McCurry turned out to be one of those images that sears the heart, and in June 1985 it ran on the cover of this magazine. Her eyes are sea green. They are haunted and haunting, and in them you can read the tragedy of a land drained by war. She became known around National Geographic as the “Afghan girl,” and for 17 years no one knew her name.

In January a team from National Geographic Television & Film’s EXPLORER brought McCurry to Pakistan to search for the girl with green eyes. They showed her picture around Nasir Bagh, the still standing refugee camp near Peshawar where the photograph had been made. A teacher from the school claimed to know her name. A young woman named Alam Bibi was located in a village nearby, but McCurry decided it wasn’t her.

No, said a man who got wind of the search.

By CATHY NEWMAN
NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SENIOR WRITER
Photographs by STEVE McCURRY
He knew the girl in the picture. They had lived at the camp together as children. She had returned to Afghanistan years ago, he said, and now lived in the mountains near Tora Bora. He would go get her.

It took three days for her to arrive. Her village is a six-hour drive and three-hour hike across a border that swallows lives. When McCurry saw her walk into the room, he thought to himself: This is her.

Names have power, so let us speak of hers. Her name is Sharbat Gula, and she is Pashtun, that most warlike of Afghan tribes. It is said of the Pashtun that they are only at peace when they are at war, and her eyes—then and now—burn with ferocity. She is 28, perhaps 29, or even 30. No one, not even she, knows for sure. Stories shift like sand in a place where no records exist.

Time and hardship have erased her youth. Her skin looks like leather. The geometry of her jaw has softened. The eyes still glare; that has not softened. “She’s had a hard life,” said McCurry. “So many here share her story.” Consider the numbers. Twenty-three years of war, 1.5 million killed, 3.5 million refugees: This is the story of Afghanistan in the past quarter century.

Now, consider this photograph of a young girl with sea green eyes. Her eyes challenge ours. Most of all, they disturb. We cannot turn away.

“THERE IS NOT ONE FAMILY that has not eaten the bitterness of war,” a young Afghan merchant said in the 1985 NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC story that appeared with Sharbat’s photograph on the cover. She was a child when her country was caught in the jaws of the Soviet invasion. A carpet of destruction smothered countless villages like hers. She was perhaps six when Soviet bombing killed her parents. By day the sky bled terror. At night the dead were buried. And always, the sound of planes, stabbing her with dread.
"We left Afghanistan because of the fighting," said her brother, Kashar Khan, filling in the narrative of her life. He is a straight line of a man with a raptor face and piercing eyes. "The Russians were everywhere. They were killing people. We had no choice."

Shepherded by their grandmother, he and his four sisters walked to Pakistan. For a week they moved through mountains covered in snow, begging for blankets to keep warm. "You never knew when the planes would come," he recalled. "We hid in caves."

The journey that began with the loss of their parents and a trek across mountains by foot ended in a refugee camp tent living with strangers.

"Rural people like Sharbat find it difficult to live in the cramped surroundings of a refugee camp," explained Rahimullah Yusufzai, a respected Pakistani journalist who acted as interpreter for McCurry and the television crew. "There is no privacy. You live at the mercy of other people." More than that, you live at the mercy of the politics of other countries. "The Russian invasion destroyed our lives," her brother said.

It is the ongoing tragedy of Afghanistan. Invasion. Resistance. Invasion. Will it ever end? "Each change of government brings hope," said Yusufzai. "Each time, the Afghan people have found themselves betrayed by their leaders and by outsiders professing to be their friends and saviors."

In the mid-1990s, during a lull in the fighting, Sharbat Gula went home to her village in the foothills of mountains veiled by snow. To live in this earthen-colored village at the end of a thread of path means to scratch out an existence, nothing more. There are terraces planted with corn, wheat, and rice, some walnut trees, a stream that spills down the mountain (except in times of drought), but no school, clinic, roads, or running water.

Here is the bare outline of her day. She rises before sunrise and prays. She fetches water from the stream. She cooks, cleans, does laundry. She cares for her children; they are the center of her life. Robina is 13. Zahida is three. Alia, the baby, is one. A fourth daughter died in infancy. Sharbat has never known a happy day, her brother says, except perhaps the day of her marriage.

Her husband, Rahmat Gul, is slight in build, with a smile like the gleam of a lantern at dusk. She remembers being married at 13. No, he says, she was 16. The match was arranged.

He lives in Peshawar (there are few jobs in Afghanistan) and works in a bakery. He bears the burden of medical bills; the dollar a day he earns vanishes like smoke. Her asthma, which cannot tolerate the heat and pollution of Peshawar in summer, limits her time in the city and with her husband to the winter. The rest of the year she lives in the mountains.

At the age of 13, Yusufzai, the journalist, explained, she would have gone into purdah, the secluded existence followed by many Islamic women once they reach puberty. "Women vanish from the public eye," he said. In the street she wears a plum-colored burka,
which walls her off from the world and from the eyes of any man other than her husband. "It is a beautiful thing to wear, not a curse," she says. Faced by questions, she retreats into the black shawl wrapped around her face, as if by doing so she might will herself to evaporate. The eyes flash anger. It is not her custom to subject herself to the questions of strangers. Had she ever felt safe? "No. But life under the Taliban was better. At least there was peace and order."

Had she ever seen the photograph of herself as a girl? "No."

She can write her name, but cannot read. She harbors the hope of education for her children. "I want my daughters to have skills," she said. "I wanted to finish school but could not. I was sorry when I had to leave."

Education, it is said, is the light in the eye. There is no such light for her. It is possibly too late for her 13-year-old daughter as well, Sharbat Gula said. The two younger daughters still have a chance.

The reunion between the woman with green eyes and the photographer was quiet. On the subject of married women, cultural tradition is strict. She must not look—and certainly must not smile—at a man who is not her husband. She did not smile at McCurry. Her expression, he said, was flat. She cannot understand how her picture has touched so many. She does not know the power of those eyes.

Such knife-thin odds. That she would be alive. That she could be found. That she could endure such loss. Surely, in the face of such bitterness the spirit could atrophy. How, she was asked, did she survive?

The answer came wrapped in unshakable certitude. "It was," said Sharbat Gula, "the will of God."
By STEVE McCURRY

I could see her eyes through the camera lens. They’re still the same.

Her skin is weathered, there are wrinkles now, but she’s as striking as the young girl I photographed 17 years ago. Both times our connection was through the lens. This time she found it easier to look into the lens than at me. She is a married woman and must not look at a man who is not her husband.

Our conversation was brief. There was little emotion. I explained that so many had been moved by her photograph. I’ve received countless letters from people around the world who were inspired by the photograph to volunteer in refugee camps or do aid work in Afghanistan. When she saw the photo for the first time, she was embarrassed by the holes in her red shawl. A cooking fire had burned it, she said. She is glad her picture was an inspiration. But I don’t think the photograph means anything to her. The only thing that matters is her husband and children.

I remember the noise and confusion in that refugee camp 17 years ago. I knew that Afghan girls, just a few years away from disappearing behind a traditional veil, might be reluctant to have their picture taken by a male Westerner. So I proceeded carefully. I asked the teacher for permission to enter the girls’ school tent and photograph a few of the students. The shyest of them, Sharbat, said I could take her photograph, and I shot a few frames.

When I saw the film, I was surprised by how still and quiet it appeared. At that point the Soviets had been in Afghanistan for five years. So it was a specific moment in time. Yet it was a timeless moment. There’s the idea that this image was emblematic for what was happening in Afghanistan. But a lot of people don’t know the picture is related to Afghanistan, and they still respond to that look.

I’m relieved to know that this young woman has survived and has been able to carve out a life for herself. I hope that finding her will be a good thing for her and her family. I’d like her to look back in ten years and be happy this happened. I intend to check in on her for the rest of my life.

It’s fortunate we found her now. The local government is going to rip down the refugee camp and build a housing development. If we had tried to do this a year from now, it would have been impossible. Only through contacts in the camp were we able to locate her. Afghanistan has been in a Dark Age for two decades. That she’s resurfaced now is perhaps prophetic, a hopeful sign. We’ll have to wait and see.

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY’S AFGHAN GIRLS FUND

Many women in Afghanistan want the same thing for their daughters that Sharbat Gula wants for hers: an education. The National Geographic Society has decided to create the Afghan Girls Fund. The Society will work with select nonprofit organizations to develop educational opportunities for the girls and young women of Afghanistan. You are welcome to participate by going to nationalgeographic.com/ngm/0204 or sending a check directly to the Afghan Girls Fund, Development Office, National Geographic Society, 1145 17th Street NW, Washington, DC 20036.
**Antarctica**

I would like to know the story behind the Weddell seal pup on pages 10-11. I cannot believe that an exceptional organization like National Geographic would not intervene on the pup’s behalf. To allow an abandoned pup to wander off and die is inhumane.

**NANCY J. CRIDER**
El Paso, Texas

“Even though I’d learned that only half of Weddell seals survive their first year, it was very upsetting,” says photographer Maria Stenzel. The international Antarctic Treaty prohibits interfering with wildlife without a research permit, which Maria did not have. Nor could the scientist accompanying Maria legally euthanize the pup, as some readers have suggested would have been humane. The pup attempted to join other pups and mothers nearby but was rejected when it tried to suckle. Adoption is rare; each mother has only one pup a year, and enough milk and energy for that pup.

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There are also permanent lava lakes in the Riff Valley volcanoes Erta’ale in Ethiopia and Nyiragongo in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which erupted so devastatingly in late January.

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**Journey of Faith**

Tad Szulc’s article on Abraham was the best I’ve ever read on the subject. It should be required reading for Israelis, Palestinians, and anyone who cares about peace in the Middle East. The caption on page 27 states that the giant petrel was banded in 1979. Does this bird really survive that long?

**GARY LEVESQUE**
Tucson, Arizona

The life span of the giant petrel has not been documented, but ornithologists presume that individuals may live well past 40, as do albatrosses, also members of the order Procellariiformes.

I greatly enjoyed the Antarctica article. I was surprised to learn on page 12 that Erebus has “one of the few permanent lava lakes in the world.” I eagerly awaited the names of the others but was disappointed. So what are they?

**ANN STILLWATER**
Bowerston, Ohio

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For more information

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Afghanistan

Congratulations on the map of Afghanistan. The map stays where I watch television, and it is a pleasure to pick it up and document where the action is.

ANNABEL GIRARD
Danville, Kentucky

I am concerned about the heroizing of Ahmad Shah Massoud [right]. His forces have been accused of brutal human rights violations in the past, just as the Taliban has been. The Northern Alliance is only an alliance in name, formed against the common threat of the Taliban and composed of a number of rival groups who would otherwise be competing for power with each other. What is needed is a measured view of military allies that exposes their ugly sides as well as their pleasant ones.

ADAM McCONNEL
Istanbul, Turkey

I admire Edward Girardet for a job well done on Afghanistan. I was touched by the lives of the Afghan people under the cruel hands of the Taliban. I hope people will unite and continue to help them improve their lives and become completely free from the bondage that hinders their development and well-being. I didn’t know the real story there until I read Girardet’s article.

DIANA D. ADORABLE
Naga, Philippines

In 1972 I was visiting Afghanistan, and my best memory is a stay near the wonderful lakes of Band-e Amir, west of Bamian. A river ran through a chalky white mountain, forming a chain of five lakes. The blue water was so transparent that I could see trout on the bottom.

MONIQUE LAURENT
Frontenis, France

It is easy to see today that indeed the five simple words “My God will save me” have changed the world. Unfortunately, with many of Abraham’s offspring enveloping the world in their mutual hatred and killing in the name of “my God,” it is hard to argue that such a belief has changed the world for the better.

TOM LYNCH
Atlanta, Georgia

The caption on pages 124-5 misleadingly characterizes Hamas, the Islamic Resistance Movement, as a group that seeks “to force the ‘Zionist entity’ out of Palestine.” Based on my own and other journalists’ interviews in the area, I’d say it’s more accurate to describe it as a Palestinian grassroots organization whose goal is to end Israel’s 34-year-old military occupation of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza so that a viable Palestinian state can be established alongside Israel. Of course, the terrorism Hamas’s military wing often employs should be deplored, just as should Israel’s state terrorism.

ROGER GAESS
New York, New York

Your use of Rembrandt’s “Sacrifice of Isaac” on the cover summarizes the key moral concepts of the three great faiths: obedience (Judaism), submission (Islam), and mercy (Christianity). The values are embodied, respectively, in the figures of Abraham, Isaac, and the angel.

THOMAS A. REISNER
St.-Lambert-de-Lévis, Quebec

On page 127 the author writes of how Sarah acted independently of Abraham: “I asked him if this makes Sarah the first great feminist. ‘Yes,’ the rabbi shot back.” But my question is: What about mother Eve?

VERDE HUGHES
Mesquite, Nevada

As a retired Episcopal priest and sometime college instructor in the humanities and world religion, I found the article on Abraham to be brilliantly written. But to give credit where credit is due,
The Future Is Calling

Your map on pages 80-81 gives a good representation of world Internet use. However, I think it misses the geographically important fact that Scandinavia, Iceland, and Canada have a significantly higher percentage of Internet users than the United States.

JOHN TERPSTRA
Garson, Ontario

Silicon Valley

Living in your cubicle? Being homeless despite earning $105,000 a year? Constantly networking without really getting to know anyone? I made less than $20,000 last year, and I feel positively rich compared with these people. Talk about the pretty landscape and the nice weather all you want. Silicon Valley sounds like a man-made hell on Earth to me.

TIMOTHY WHITE
Chicago, Illinois

People have to have enough space to house thousands of bottles of wine, six cars, and seasonal closets to survive in our monoclimate.

We are victims of our own success.

NICK PERRY
Mountain View, California

I grew up on the border of Atherton, then an affluent, white-collar town but really just filled with spacious ranch homes and a lot of regular folks. Fast forward to the 1990s, and it has been turned into a town of opulent homes. People have to have enough space to house thousands of bottles of wine, six cars, and seasonal closets to survive in our monoclimate. The ranches have been demolished at a feverish rate. People can buy their way out of civic and public engagement here. We are victims of our own success.

CHARMAINE Picone MCRystal
Redwood City, California