

THE

What happened to the people who fled the Taliban? A year after the fall of Kabul, *Matthew Campbell* meets the British woman helping these Afghan children and their families, who are still trying to find sanctuary

FORGOTTEN

PORTRAIT BY
OLIVER MARSDEN

REFUGEES



Sophia Swire enjoys a day trip with some of the younger guests from her Islamabad safe house

Three-year-old Navid lies asleep on a mattress on the floor as his parents tell me what happened. They say he sleeps a lot and eats little.

“I was carrying him on my shoulders when the bomb went off,” says Mohsen Arefi, a geologist, describing an explosion that ripped through a crowd of refugees at Kabul airport last August as they waited to board planes in the wake of the Taliban invasion. It killed 183 people, including 13 US marines, and injured hundreds more, including his son Navid. Now three, Navid has not spoken a word since and does not respond when his parents call him.

“At first I didn’t realise that he’d been hurt,” Arefi says. “Then I saw the blood on his clothes.”

The toddler received emergency surgery at the French hospital in Kabul, where doctors said some of the shrapnel was embedded too deeply to safely be removed. They then managed to get to Pakistan. Arefi shows me an x-ray done in Islamabad revealing two inch-long slivers of metal in Navid’s neck and shoulder. The shrapnel is razor-sharp and near his lungs. He may need further specialist surgery.

Great Ormond Street Hospital had offered to operate last year when it heard of his plight. The family had to get Navid to London — but they were not on the UK’s list of Afghans qualifying for repatriation in Britain. The Home Office told them to apply for a medical visa, which would require them to go back to Afghanistan afterwards, but this was not an option: the Taliban have an arrest warrant for Arefi, a former government employee.

I ask Navid’s sister, Najwa, a ten-year-old with a radiant smile, if she remembers the bomb and she bursts into tears.

Almost one year on, the Arefi family are living in a block of flats in the arid outskirts of Islamabad. The “safe house” — currently sheltering 23 Afghan families while trying to find them permanent asylum elsewhere — has been established by Sophia Swire, a “social impact investor” from London, through her charity, Future Brilliance, and a local partner, Alight.

Swire decided to help after receiving heart-rending pleas from young Afghan women during the bungled British and American evacuation of Kabul. “They were



Three-year-old Navid Arefi, above and circled below, has not spoken since he was injured by a bomb at Kabul airport last August as his family tried to flee the country. The Arefis are now in limbo in Pakistan, top right. Navid still has shrapnel in his neck and shoulder, above right



threatening to kill themselves if we didn’t get them out,” she tells me as we walk up the steps to the building.

Today, the place is abuzz with excitement about Brazil agreeing to take four of the families — a result Swire and her influential women’s network can claim credit for: one of her supporters is the wife of a European diplomat who appears to have pulled strings in the South American country.

“How’s your Portuguese coming on?” Swire asks Edriss Raha, 42, from Herat, a leadership trainer about to start a new life in Sao Paulo with his wife and two children. “*Muito bem*,” he replies with a smile. Mursal Mirzad, a 34-year-old

graphic designer, is on the list for Australia: “Have you filled in your form?” Swire asks. Mirzad nods. “Good girl.”

However, not everyone is cheered by this beacon of hope. Some of the residents had hoped to qualify for resettlement in Britain because of an association with it before the Taliban takeover, but fear they have now been abandoned.

“They’ve been forgotten in the shadow of the war and exodus of refugees from Ukraine,” says Swire, the sister of Britain’s former minister of state for the foreign office, Sir Hugo Swire (and the sister-in-law of Sasha Swire, whose eye-popping *Diary of an MP’s Wife* caused ructions in Westminster in 2020). “It’s much harder now to get them safe passage and asylum to other countries. The British government has wriggled out of its responsibilities.”

According to the Ministry of Defence, 9,000 Afghans have relocated to Britain under a resettlement scheme for former military and government workers in the past year. By contrast, Britain had taken in some 65,000 Ukrainians during the first three months of the Russian invasion.

To make matters worse, Pakistan — which has close ties to the Taliban — might soon send home Afghan refugees without visas, Swire fears. This could be a death sentence for some of her charges, including one man, an affable middle-aged judge, who condemned hundreds of Taliban militants to prison before they won power. “They’d be happy to get their hands on me,” he says.

Also living in the “guesthouse”, as they call it, are women activists, journalists and development experts, some of whom worked with the British and fear retribution from the Taliban if sent home. “All we want is a place where we can live safely,” says 24-year-old Hena Sadat, ►

THE RAZOR-SHARP SHRAPNEL IS NEAR NAVID’S LUNGS. GREAT ORMOND STREET HAS OFFERED TO OPERATE, BUT HE CAN’T GET TO THE UK

a former TV journalist in Kabul who has applied, with her mother and brother, for asylum in Canada.

“At the moment these people feel like my extended family,” says Swire, who is unmarried and has no children. The 58-year-old has long felt drawn to this part of the world. Her first encounter with Afghanistan was at the Ritz hotel in London when she was 15. Hugo — one of three brothers — had talked her into stuffing envelopes for a benefit in aid of the mujahidin rebels who had taken up arms against the Soviet invasion in 1979. “Hugo was on the fund-raising committee of course,” Swire says.

As “a conscientious teenager”, she did such a good job that she was invited to the ball — she still has the cutting from *Tatler*. “I was totally bewitched by what I saw in that ballroom,” she recalls, referring to Afghan men who had been injured in the fighting and now stood on wooden stumps. “They were so handsome, proud and elegant. Even on wooden legs, they commanded this room of the great and the good. They would nonchalantly toss their woollen capes around their shoulders as though in an Armani fashion shoot. They seemed totally lacking in self-pity — in short, real men.”

After graduating from Manchester University, where she studied history of art and Italian, Swire — whose father, Humphrey, was a Sotheby’s director —

“THEY’VE BEEN FORGOTTEN IN THE EXODUS OF REFUGEES FROM UKRAINE. THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT HAS WRIGGLED OUT OF ITS RESPONSIBILITIES”

ended up working for an investment bank in the City of London. Still in her early twenties, she found it unfulfilling. “It was soulless, all about money,” she says.

One day, during a row with her boss on the dealing room floor, she felt a “bird on my shoulder tweeting into my ear, saying, ‘Why are you fighting so hard for something you don’t care about? You should be fighting for something you believe in.’ Even before the end of the argument I had decided to become a war correspondent or an aid worker.”

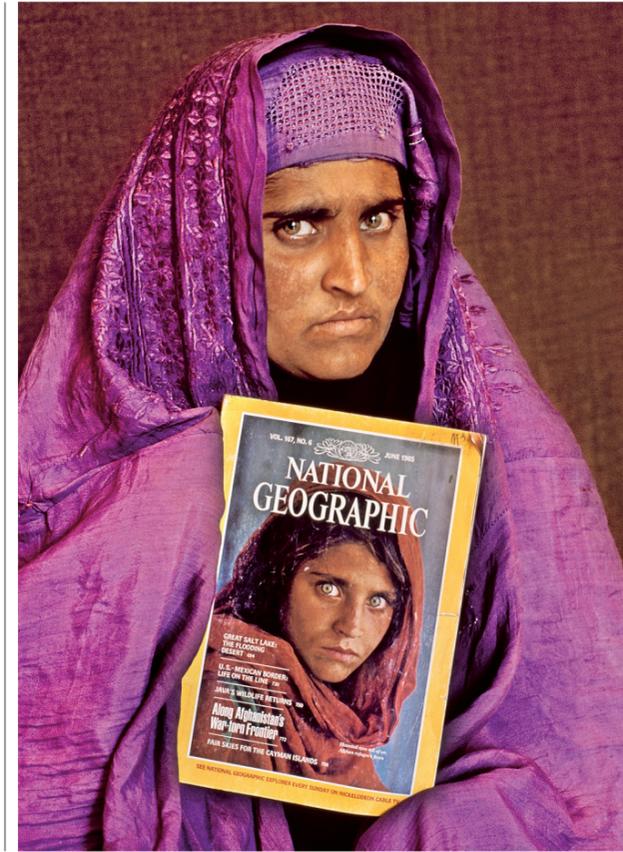
Back then the Pakistani city of Peshawar near the Afghan border boasted the world’s highest concentration of both, and Swire decided to go there on holiday. She asked her brothers if they had any contacts in the area. Philip, the youngest, suggested his friend Vaughan Smith, a former Grenadier Guardsman and news cameraman who, in the early 1980s, had what he calls “a very

odd job” as a pilot smuggling satellite parts into Afghanistan “under the wings” of a microlight aircraft for news crews covering the war.

He agreed to help Swire in Peshawar if she would deliver a box containing bolts needed to fix the latest microlight Smith had crashed. “I was an incompetent pilot,” he tells me. When he met Swire at Peshawar airport and asked for the box, she realised she had left it in the security scanner in London. A furious Smith stormed off. In retrospect, though, he is grateful to her: “It was an insane project. If she’d remembered that box, I’d probably be dead.”

The feeling of indebtedness is mutual. “Had I not forgotten that box, I probably would have returned to a house in the country, a Range Rover and a twinset and pearls,” Swire says.

But, without anyone to show her round Peshawar, she decided to accompany



STEVE MCCURRY / MAGNUM PHOTOS

Swire helped organise safe passage out of Afghanistan for Sharbat Gula, who famously appeared on the cover of the *National Geographic* in 1985. Gula, pictured here in 2002, feared her celebrity would make her a target when the Taliban retook control

some British friends she had bumped into on the flight to Chitral, a former princely state in the Hindu Kush mountains. “I woke on the morning of my 25th birthday in the most beautiful place on the planet,” she says.

Before long she had fallen in love with a Chitrali prince who was determined she should stay. “He asked the deputy commissioner to persuade me not to leave; I was tapped on the shoulder to set up an English school. It seemed like kismet, fate.” That Christmas she spent her city bonus on 300kg of schoolbooks and equipment. “I flew back with some friends and spent the happiest year of my life in Chitral.”

For her, the mystique of the region was captured not only in the majestic landscapes and its proud people. She had been profoundly moved by a picture of an Afghan refugee girl with green eyes and a haunting gaze under a red shawl that had appeared on the cover of *National Geographic* magazine in 1985. Steve McCurry, the American war photographer, had stumbled upon Sharbat Gula when she was an anonymous 12-year-old refugee, one of millions of Afghans who had fled Soviet-occupied Afghanistan for the safety of camps in neighbouring Pakistan.

“The picture is one of the most iconic images of the 20th century, capturing the spirit and the soul of Afghanistan, the strength, the defiance, trauma, anger and pain,” Swire says. ➤



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Far left: chaotic scenes at Kabul airport as allied forces withdraw in August 2021. Left: Taliban fighters patrol the streets after their capture of the city

It inspired her to set up Learning for Life, a girls' education charity that eventually funded more than 250 village schools in Pakistan, Afghanistan and India. She also started a fashion label that turned cashmere pashmina shawls into a must-have accessory from London to Los Angeles. Swire had first seen them worn at a party in Lahore at the home of her friend Imran Khan, Pakistan's former prime minister.

In 2008 she returned to Afghanistan to establish a school for jewellers and gem-cutters at the Prince of Wales's Turquoise Mountain foundation in Kabul. Four years later she launched Future Brilliance, her female-led, non-profit organisation that helps Afghan women into business and education, anathema for the Taliban.

When the militants swept into Kabul last August, she was concerned that the women who had benefited from an association with her charity could become a target. Some called her to say they were also afraid of being forcibly married. "These young Taliban fighters had been told that women were the spoils of war and that they could take their pick when Kabul was conquered. We couldn't watch from the sidelines, we had to do something."

Swire had forged a powerful global network while launching a venture capital fund for women. Now she focused her backers, including a Scandinavian royal princess and a Silicon Valley entrepreneur, on a new challenge: how to help get vulnerable women and children out of Afghanistan. Within a couple of weeks they had raised half a million dollars through a GoFundMe campaign and chartered an aircraft to evacuate refugees. The charity also began providing food to dozens of families as the humanitarian crisis worsened.

"We stepped in where the international support system failed, with some of the best brains on the planet, innovation experts, futurists, entrepreneurs," Swire says. "We didn't have to go through government to get stuff done, we just did it."

She goes on: "Totally disparate groups of people from all over the world came together — disaffected CIA operatives,

thoroughly disgruntled US Department of Defence people, diplomats, venture capitalists, private equity people... There was a tsunami of goodwill."

One day Bonnie McCurry, the sister of the photographer who took the *National Geographic* portrait, called Swire to say that Gula, the former poster girl of Afghan refugee suffering — now aged about 50 and living in Afghanistan again — felt vulnerable and

that Elisabetta Belloni was a woman who could "get things done" and she thought the idea of taking in the "Afghan girl" might appeal to Italy, where the photograph had always struck a deep chord. "Aesthetically, the picture is very much in the tradition of Renaissance portraiture," Swire explains. "The framing of the image makes her almost like a defiant Madonna."

When Gardner told her Belloni was her best friend, Swire thought she was joking. "I said, 'Yeah, right, don't tease me,' but she said, 'No, no, really — I'm having dinner with her tomorrow night in Rome.'"

"WE HAVE LAWYERS, NURSES AND BOOK-KEEPERS HERE WHO WOULD BE AN ASSET TO THE BRITISH ECONOMY — NOT A BURDEN AT ALL"

wanted to leave the country. She feared her fame from the photograph, which showed her with an uncovered face, could make her a target for the fundamentalists.

Swire offered to help: "I wrote to prime ministers and presidents of every country I'd ever had a connection with, asking if they would please take the green-eyed Afghan girl," Swire recalls. "I also wrote to the British government. They ignored me."

In late October last year, she addressed a women's forum on the margins of the G20 summit in Milan. She was about to go on stage when Nina Gardner, the panel moderator, said: "You look tired."

Swire told her that she had been up all night helping to arrange evacuation flights for Afghan women and children. "Every few seconds, my phone is ringing with another request," she explained. Gardner, an academic, asked how she could help. "I said, 'If you know the head of Italian intelligence, you can help,'" Swire recalls. She had heard

Gardner says she told her friend: "I don't bother you very often, but Sophia and her people are serious women who get things done. It's not a fly-by-night operation."

Belloni said she would look into it. Swire clearly remembers the moment a mysterious caller ID popped up on her phone screen. "It was a strange number, more like a code, an 'x,' followed by an exclamation mark and more letters," Swire says. "It was very James Bondy, so I thought, 'This must be the call I've been waiting for.'"

The softly spoken woman on the line was Belloni, 63, the Italian spy chief. She told Swire she was happy to help and if Future Brilliance could get Gula and her family to the Pakistani border, she would do the rest. Gula and her family are now living in Rome.

She is one of over 500 Afghans for whom Swire's charity has found safe passage to other countries. About 75 of them who have been granted asylum in the West passed through the Islamabad safe house.

Swire is determined to find homes for all those remaining.

At the same time she is trying to keep them occupied while they wait, particularly the children: she is organising a robotics class for them in the long summer holidays. "As the old saying goes, the devil makes work for idle hands," she says. "They have to stay as positive as they can." This has grown increasingly difficult.

Swire tells me a British diplomat friend warned her that Whitehall worries Afghan refugees will be "a burden on the British taxpayer" — they are less likely than Ukrainian refugees to return home one day, goes the argument.

In her view, the "guesthouse" is a hotbed of talent. "There are lawyers and book-keepers. We have 23 nurses who'd be immediately employable in Britain's care homes. They would be a great asset to the economy, not a burden at all. We should change our mindset and be welcoming to individuals who are going to be British taxpayers as soon as they get settled."

With the help of a £30,000 grant from the Canadian embassy in Islamabad, she is organising training to improve the chances of less-qualified refugees being welcomed by countries such as Australia, which accepts immigrants depending on skills.

"Every adult will receive training of some sort or another," she tells a gathering of the refugees in the conference room downstairs. "We need to develop skills that developed countries are short of. I will not stop until I've found some solution for every one of you."

Listening to this is Milad Salezadah, 27, who used to work for the Afghan air force. "Miss Sophia is now the only one helping us. She's trying her best to relocate us. If I were in her position, I would just run away. But not her — she's a great human being."

The next day Swire organises a picnic for the refugees in the home of friends,



Swire in the mid-1990s, when she first started travelling to Afghanistan

an idyllic setting in the pine-forested hills outside Islamabad. "I thought a change of atmosphere might do them good," she says.

Another of her supporters, a Pakistani businessman — "I have a gold mine in the Yukon," he tells me — has brought a pack of cards and performs magic tricks, prompting squeals of delight from the children. The women watch on with contented smiles.

One is Rukshana Rahemi, 30, who fled Afghanistan with her four children after her husband — she married at 13 — was killed in a Taliban rocket attack on their restaurant in the northern city of Kunduz.

"His family wanted me to marry his brother or to hand over my children to them, so I left," she says, sitting in the garden under a pagoda, surrounded by forest still smouldering from a recent fire.

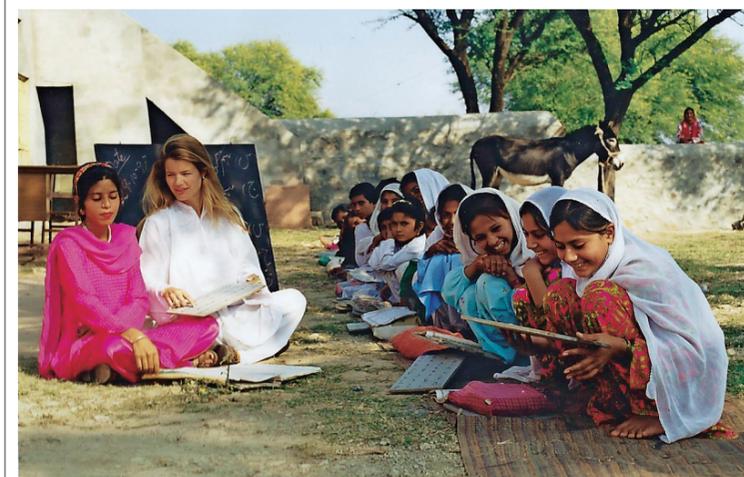
It emerges that she had worked as a midwife at the hospital in Kunduz. "We must get you on the list for Australia," Swire says. "They're looking for midwives."

Nearby, Navid, the boy injured in the airport bombing, sits on the ground placing one pebble on top of another. "You can tell he's the son of a geologist," Swire says.

Later, she messages me with good news: Navid's family are one of two in the guesthouse to be offered asylum in Germany. They are expected to arrive in Frankfurt imminently.

She is worried, however, about the families destined for Brazil — a country with very little infrastructure for receiving refugees. So she fires off a WhatsApp to the San Francisco headquarters of Burning Man, the annual festival she has often attended in the Nevada desert. "They have their own community, Burners without Borders — they can pull off miracles," she explains. Her message prompts immediate offers of help from "burners" in Brazil, who organise for the first of the families to be picked up from the airport in Sao Paulo and find them accommodation.

When we next speak, she is happy to announce that this family has enjoyed a "soft landing" in Brazil. "It's like hands across the world, basically," Swire says. "Exceptional women coming together to fix an appalling mess created by the powers that be. Humanitarian-minded, proactive, resourceful people who get things done." ■



From left: Swire's charity work has championed girls' education in Pakistan, India and Afghanistan since the early 1990s; in the safe house on the outskirts of Islamabad, refugee families come together to make jewellery they will be able to sell