THE SAVIOUR OF

A simple act of kindness in a remote mountain region of Pakistan was a devoted her life to the medical care and wellbeing of a vanishing tribe

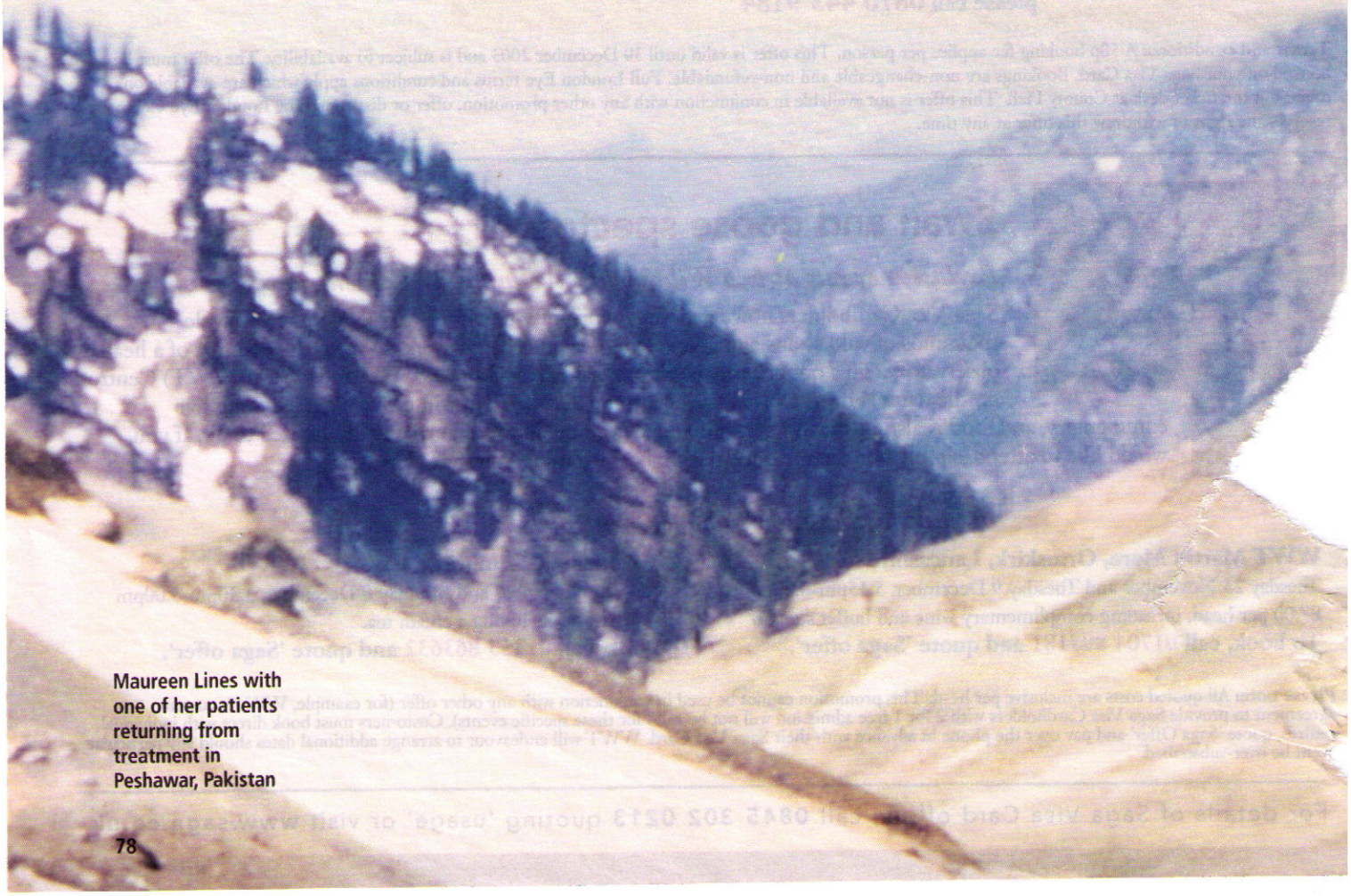
IT WAS A MAGICAL SPOT ON A MAGICAL TRIP: the northern tip of Pakistan, where the world's four most majestic mountain ranges: the Himalayas, Hindu Kush, Karakorams and Pamirs brush shoulders. Here, even the tallest local peak, Tirich Mir, is inhabited by fairies, according to native folklore.

Permanently covered by ice, the 25,000ft mountain is just 3,000ft short of Everest and glistens like glass over the valley where 43-year-old Maureen Lines was hiking alone. As she was jumping a stream she lost her footing. A woman working in the fields grabbed her hand, preventing a dunking. As she did, her face veil, unusual in this region, fell away, and Maureen could see what she had chosen to obscure. The young woman's face was a mass of terrible scars and sores.

"It was clear she was expecting me to recoil," says Maureen, "and that many others had." Instead, Maureen returned to the nearest town of any substance, several hours away by road, and in sign language described to a druggist what she had seen. She came back to treat the woman with medications and ointments; it was only much later that she learnt she had healed the condition. Several years later, Maureen discovered that the woman had had a severe case of impetigo, a highly contagious skin disease which, if untreated, can damage the kidneys, and cause septicaemia.

This single act of kindness changed Maureen's life dramatically. It also changed the life of the Kalasha, a vanishing tribe of some 4,000 people who inhabit three isolated, rugged valleys near the border of Pakistan and Afghanistan. For the past 19 years, Maureen, now 64, who stands 5ft 3in, her brilliant Paul Newman-blue eyes sparkling under cropped silver hair, has lived among them, tending to their medical needs.

"That young woman was so distressed, and had no help. I had a compulsion to do something about it," she says. "I knew that somehow, I had to get as much medical training as I could. The urge to come back to these valleys was overwhelming. Since medical school training would take ▶



Maureen Lines with one of her patients returning from treatment in Peshawar, Pakistan

THE VALLEYS

turning point in the life of Maureen Lines. From that moment, she

By **Jan Goodwin**

◄ too long, Maureen returned to New York, where she had lived briefly after leaving England, and underwent an intense Emergency Medical Technician's course at St Vincent's Hospital in Greenwich Village.

After two years, she knew how to deal with medical emergencies, deliver babies, set broken bones, perform cardiopulmonary resuscitation and diagnose and treat many diseases. In 1984 she returned to the Kalash Valleys to live full-time, carrying with her as much medicine as she could afford, and as much medical equipment as she knew how to use. She was not a physician, but her training was similar to that given to China's "barefoot doctors", who provided health services under Mao in some rural areas.

One of her first cases came about when a man lopped off a large branch from a tree and it fell on his daughter, aged about five. "The child had a terrible wound on the back of her head and her skull was dented, suggesting it was fractured. She was bleeding heavily and had trouble moving her arms. Though conscious, she was vomiting – not a good sign with head injuries. I stood there in shock, thunderstruck, trying to remember what I was supposed to do."

In the West, such a casualty would have been whisked by ambulance to hospital. This was not an option, there were no vehicles. The child would probably not survive the spine-jarring drive, anyway. "I made her comfortable, cleaned the wound, and convinced the family she was not to eat or drink anything for 24 hours, which is a matter of course with brain injuries," says Maureen. "Beyond that there was little I could do except pray, and that I did." Some weeks later, the girl was walking and talking, with no apparent side effects. "This was probably as much due to the resilience of young kids than anything I was able to do," says Maureen.

But this story followed Maureen as she tramped through the valleys, her "clinic" stuffed in her bulging backpack. Soon she found she was constantly being sought out to treat a variety of ills and injuries. People would greet her with "Ishpata, Dr Baba" – Greetings, Sister Doctor."

The Kalasha live for the most part the way they have for generations, in primitive stone and wooden houses clinging vertiginously to mountain slopes. Cooking is over open wood fires – the only source of heat in the frigid winters. The valleys, which rise precipitously to 16,000ft, are blanketed with as much as 10 feet of snow in the winter.

Maureen knew her first hurdle would be language. Kalasha is an oral language; it has never been written down. Acceptance, which she also feared would be a problem, was not. She was "adopted" by Tak-Dira, a matriarch, and her large extended family, whom she had met during her first trip. "She gave me tea, pointed to me, pointed to a charpoy [a crude string and wooden bed the Kalasha make themselves], and began unpacking my bags and putting things away," says Maureen. "It was clear she intended me to stay." In this gerontocratic society, having Tak-Dira as an ally would prove extremely valuable. So would learning to speak Kalasha – which she did from everyone she dealt with.

One of the first words Maureen learnt was *daran* – flood. An annual springtime event, floods have claimed many lives, and one almost cost Maureen hers. "Here in the mountains, *daran* is a word to strike fear into anyone's heart," she says. Once she was returning to her valley home with supplies in her 30-year-old Willys Jeep, along a rough track. The route, almost continuous Z-bends on the edge of precipices, is one few drivers are willing to risk.

"Distances are measured in time here, never in miles, because of the difficulty in travelling," Maureen says. "Anything can happen, floods washing the track away, landslides making it impassable, or the side of the track giving way, and the vehicle plunging over the edge."

Coming into the valley, she and one of her helpers saw menacing black clouds settling in. At a bend in the road, they were met by a Kalasha who told them the track ahead was washed out. The three of them continued on foot. As they walked, the sky became so dark it was like night. First came the torrential rain and then hailstones the size of ping-pong balls. As they tried to ford the river, Maureen recalls, "Suddenly, we heard a huge roar. Someone shouted "*Daran*! Run!" We did – straight up the mountain. A minute later, a surging tide of brown water came soaring through, sweeping over the spot where we'd been. The water took everything in its path, boulders and tree trunks, triggering landslides on either side of us. We clung to an ancient walnut tree. It all happened so fast we didn't have time to be scared. It was a lesson in the power of nature."

BEFORE THAT INITIAL VISIT TO THE KALASH VALLEYS, there was little in Maureen's background, except a lifelong love of travel, that prepared her for what she would face. An only child, she was born in London shortly before the start of the Second World War. Her father was chief executive of de Havilland, which made fighter bombers during the war and produced the world's first jet airliner, before it went on to become British Aerospace.

It was a privileged life of large homes and private schools. A precocious bookworm, Maureen was consuming adult

Cooking is over open wood fires – the only source of heat in the frigid winters

books at the age of eight, her favourites being travel writers and atlases. Despite being a gifted student, she was expelled at 13 for "rebellious behaviour".

"I was never very good at conformity for conforming's sake," she explains, but she redeemed herself later, under the guidance of an inspirational teacher.

"He introduced me to the Greek philosophers and taught me the negative side of colonialism at a time when Britain ruled a quarter of the globe," says Maureen. "He confirmed to me that one should never blindly accept authority. A tremendous influence in my life, he enabled me much later to be a fighter for the rights of the Kalasha. After school, she fell into a set that was the forerunner of Princess Diana's Sloane Rangers, moving with debutantes, and dating titled young men with fast sports cars.

At 19 she moved to Paris and discovered that the cheap hotel she had moved into usually rented its rooms by the hour to prostitutes. Maureen's one aim in life was to work so that she could travel. Until she arrived in the Kalash Valleys, her CV rarely listed the same profession twice, or for very long. A stint in a trendy espresso bar in Chelsea, frequented by Princess Margaret, was followed by a year in Mykonos, writing two Gothic novels, one of which was published.

She hitchhiked alone through Turkey, Syria and Lebanon, despite warnings that she would be raped, murdered, or sold into white slavery. "It was unusual to find a young Western woman travelling alone in those days," she says. "Wherever I went, families invited me into their homes. I enjoyed their hospitality, and Arab courteousness, and learnt a respect for Muslim culture and Islam."

In her twenties, she moved to the USA. In New York, she►

◀took a variety of jobs including teaching civil rights in Harlem, while studying creative writing, international affairs and classical Arabic. She caught the eye of the *New York Times* when she started what the newspaper called "the first all-woman's home decorating company".

"It was just at the dawn of feminism, and we were in what was then an all-male preserve," she says. Booked solid after the publicity, Maureen enjoyed the looks on clients' faces when she showed up with her crew. "We were white, black, Chinese, Mongolian, Colombian and Caribbean – the original Rainbow coalition."

A legacy from her grandfather, which she supplemented by teaching English, enabled her to dust off her passport again. This time she went through Israel, Jordan, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and China, and back to Pakistan. "I'm very flexible when I travel, and never have an itinerary, never follow a guidebook. I just go step by step." This was how she found her way to the Kalash Valleys.

Known as the Wearers of the Black Robes (now worn only by women), the Kalasha are reputed to have descended from deserters from the armies of Alexander the Great. Anthropologists who have studied them believe it is more likely that they arrived in the first or second Aryan (prehistoric Indo-Iranian) invasion from Asia.

THE KALASHA, WHO BURY THEIR DEAD above the ground, are polytheistic (believe in more than one god), and for centuries fought off forcible conversion to Islam. Many chose death to avoid that fate, throwing themselves en masse off clifftops when besieged. Even today, the Kalasha refuse to keep or eat chickens because, according to their oral history, "If you see a chicken, a Muslim will not be far behind."

Since living among the Kalasha, Maureen works whenever she is needed, which means seven days a week. Until she arrived, malaria, tuberculosis, dysentery, abscesses, infections and venomous snake and spider bites often proved fatal because they went untreated. Infant mortality in the valleys was one in five and adults rarely lived beyond their late forties. Women's health in particular was often plagued by frequent pregnancies and poor diets. The Kalasha also had a tradition of packing dog bite wounds with cow dung, a sure route to deadly tetanus, since they lacked immunisation. And what should have been relatively minor ills also took their toll. There are many conditions, of course, that Maureen cannot treat: cancer, or bone TB, which cripples many Kalasha, being just two. Tak-Dira, her "adoptive mother" died six years ago from what may have been metastasised cancer. By the time she agreed to be treated at a hospital in Peshawar, some 16 hours' drive away (it was the first time in her life she had left the valley), the road out was closed by flooding. "Tak-Dira had been a very close friend," says Maureen sadly. "I still miss her."

At first, Maureen paid for medication and hospital treatment for Kalasha patients from her own savings. Now they are depleted, she tries to persuade doctors in Peshawar to donate their services for free, but is not always successful. For several months after the attack on the World Trade Centre in New York, she was sometimes unable to drive patients needing hospital care out of the mountains because the road was closed by the Pakistani authorities to prevent the Taliban from escaping.

Maureen has founded the Hindu Kush Conservation Association, a registered charity, which means she can accept funding from larger donors, such as governments. So far the British, Canadians, Finns and Australians have helped, and she is currently negotiating with the USA. But most grants are sufficient only to fund pilot projects. Governments tend to grant major awards to large international humanitarian organisations, none of which is working in the Kalash.

Typically, Maureen's personal annual income is less than $3,000 a year, with most of that going to operating and maintaining her Jeep which is essential to transport acutely ill patients to Peshawar. Maureen's clothes and boots come from secondhand stores, and she has few other possessions except for her backpack, sleeping bag, charpoy and a prized but antiquated camera – she is a gifted photographer. The Kalasha built her one-room house in the valleys for her.

Over the years she has become a cross between a woman warrior fighting for the Kalasha's rights and to preserve their ancient culture, and a fairy godmother, intent on improving their quality of life. Now fluent in their language, she trains basic healthcare workers and holds hygiene classes for local women – as well as lobbying the government to ban deforestation by outside logging companies, which cut down the ancient oak and cedar. She is helping the Kalasha restore historical structures and is searching for foreign markets for their pine nut harvest, so that this tribe, which traditionally relied on bartering for its needs, can earn an income.

She is often asked by non-Kalasha how she can survive such a primitive existence. "It depends on what you consider luxury," she chuckles. "I have my own latrine, and two kettles of hot water for bathing that my new adopted family gives me every morning. They also refuse to let me cook for myself, so I share all meals with them."

'The one precaution I always take is to shake out my boots before I put them on'

Maureen admits that there are times when she misses intellectual stimulation. "But I don't have time to read. I get up at dawn like the Kalasha, work all day and, like them, go to bed when it is dark. I live the same way they live out of choice. If I were any other way, I don't think I would have been accepted. I find my pleasure walking through the summer fields, enjoying the company of my dogs, who just showed up one day and never left." As for her own health, she's broken a couple of ribs, and an ankle when she slipped on a marble floor in Peshawar.

"The one precaution I always take is to shake out my boots before I put them on each morning, and check my sleeping bag before climbing into it at night to make sure poisonous critters, like snakes and scorpions, have not taken up residence."

How long will she continue? "Until I drop dead. I want to be buried in my beloved mountains." Maureen insists she is unable to assess what she has given the Kalasha. "I know only that they have given me a great deal and taught me so much. They are my friends and my surrogate family. I love their habitat as much as they do, and I love the life I lead here. I have constant affection and companionship. I think that makes me rich, don't you?" ■

Donations can be sent to The Hindu Kush Conservation Association, c/o Keith Howman, Chairman, Ashmere, Felix Lane, Shepperton, Middlesex TW17 8NN