

Jennifer Musa – obituary

Kerry nurse who became head of a tribe in Baluchistan and dedicated her life to its interest

FIRST PUBLISHED: DAILY TELEGRAPH JANUARY 19, 2008

Jennifer Musa, who has died aged 90, was an Irishwoman of modest stock who took over from her husband as head of a tribe in the remote borderlands of Baluchistan; unveiled and uncompromising, she dedicated her life to the conservative Muslim tribesmen among whom she lived for 60 years until her death.

“Mummy Jennifer”, as she was known, married the scion of a noble Pathan family that played a key role in bringing the oil-rich province of Baluchistan into Pakistan after its creation in 1947. She founded an ice factory, became the first woman member of the national assembly from her province, and later acted as an intermediary for rebels who staged an armed uprising against the federal government.

Far from being a colonial figure who “stayed on”, and despite having been dubbed “the Queen of Baluchistan”, Jennifer Musa was a tough-minded, unassuming nurse who arrived at the parched fringes of the Indian subcontinent a year after Partition. When she arrived there, as she later recalled, locals believed that the British monarchy had gifted the “London lady” to their chief in return for killing a tiger.

She was born Bridget Wren at Tarmons, Co Kerry, on November 11 1917, the daughter of smallholding farmers. She had four sisters and two brothers and received a Roman Catholic education. Known as Bridie, she later changed her name to Jennifer and left for England to train as a nurse. In 1939 she met Qazi Mohammed Musa in Oxford, at Exeter College’s May Ball.

Qazi Musa, who read Philosophy, was a ward of the Governor-General of Baluchistan and the eldest son of the prime minister to the Khan of Kalat, Baluchistan’s princely state. Jennifer took the Muslim name of Jehan Zeba and they married in 1940, despite some opposition from his otherwise “liberal” family.

Qazi had been married off to his first wife when he was 14 years old amid fears that he would be killed, most likely poisoned, by clan rivals. The marriage



produced four sons and one daughter. Jennifer and Qazi’s first wife, a member of the neighbouring Kansi tribe, remained neighbours and friends in later years.

Qazi’s father had been a key figure in the Pakistan movement and the couple arrived there from England in 1948. The family stronghold at Pishin, a dusty, baked plateau 30 miles north of Baluchistan’s capital, Quetta, is a far cry from the banks of the Shannon. For centuries it fell under the suzerainty of tribes from the neighbouring city of Kandahar, where the Qazis once wielded influence before being expelled by the British.

The area, which is hemmed in by russet mountains and tormented by dust devils and temperatures in excess of 50 degrees Celsius, was retained within the borders of British India after the Second Afghan War in 1881.

Jennifer donned the shalwar kameez, but without wearing a headscarf or the all-encompassing burqa, and lived the rarified life of the frontier sardars (tribal chiefs).

In a land of camels, her family owned the only car; despite the austere surroundings, they lived in relative security within the thick, mud-walled, colonial-era home that was festooned with daggers, tigers’ heads and photographs of her extravagantly whiskered in-laws.

Pakistan’s founder, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, stayed

for several nights at the house, from where they often forayed across the border to the fashionable, Francophone court of the Afghan king at Kabul. But the idyll ended when her husband died in a motor accident in 1956. Despite her wish to return to Ireland, her husband's family persuaded her to stay in Pishin with their 14-year-old son, Ashraf Jehangir Qazi.

Her independence of mind, often attributed to her "Irishness", led her to enter politics. She joined the now-defunct National Awami (Freedom) Party (NAP) of the Pathan nationalist Wali Khan. At what are often called Pakistan's "first and last free and fair elections", in 1970, she won a seat in the national assembly. Her flaxen hair, grey-blue eyes and fair skin caused unease among its more bearded members.

Jennifer served as a parliamentarian for seven years, during which time she demonstrated her empathy for the underdog. She founded the area's first women's association and its first family planning clinic. "You can't liberate women until you liberate men," she said. More famously, she resisted strong pressure from the overbearing prime minister, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, to water down autonomous rights for Baluchistan. Perhaps apocryphally, Bhutto was reputed to have mused whether she thought she was "the Queen of Baluchistan". Then he added: "Fix that woman."

She was a proud signatory of Pakistan's 1973 constitution. But when Bhutto savagely crushed a Baluch insurgency during the 1970s Jennifer acted as a conduit for messages from the rebel leadership and jailed fighters to their families, because their women were cut off from public life as they were in purdah.

Democratic politics in Pakistan, and Jennifer's political career, came to an end with the imposition of martial law at the end of the 1970s, and she turned her focus on her family home and lands. She grafted a rose garden among its pomegranate and pine trees. During the 1980s she worked among Afghan refugees who flocked to Pishin due to the fighting in the anti-Soviet jihad; she set up and managed an ice factory in a land that lacks refrigeration and electricity; and - to the chagrin of the mullahs - she promoted literacy for women.

But it was in her capacity as a traditional tribal administrator that she made her mark. She

dispensed favours, settled disputes and signed chits for tribesmen who gathered at her gate. "You have to be astute dealing with the Baluch," she remarked.

Her emphasis was on education, health and hard work. A local superintendent of police recalled how, when he was a schoolboy, Jennifer pinched his ear for missing class. In such a way she inspired a generation of local professionals who lived in fear of being "whacked".

It remained a mystery to her family how she managed. She had little grasp of the local language, Pashto. A family retainer was amused to overhear the somewhat whimsical explanation for the town's name of Pishin that she offered to a visitor - she said, erroneously, that it was derived from the Pashto for "cat". When angry, her smatterings of Urdu and Pashto gave way to pure English.

Purposefully vague about when she "became Islamic", Jennifer did not feel bound by religion, preferring to remark on the similarities of the various faiths.

She retained a faint Kerry brogue, but said she knew more about Pakistan than Ireland, which she last visited in the 1960s. She was an unfussy Irishwoman with a twinkly sense of humour who felt "very much at home" at Pishin. In Ireland, she noted, the women did not mix much with the men.

In her later years visiting foreign journalists mused about how the wild, tribal frontier, where women are in purdah and even goatherds carry Kalashnikovs, was an unlikely place to find an elderly Irish widow serving afternoon tea. The area has lately become a stronghold for the Taliban, and is generally out of bounds to foreigners.

Jennifer died on January 12. Her funeral procession was attended by thousands of burly, turbaned Pathans (many of them allied to the Taliban) who raised cheers of "Mummy Jennifer!" in her honour as the cortège passed through a shuttered Pishin.

She was buried at the Qazis' ancestral burial ground near the tomb of the family Sufi saint, Sheikh Farid Baba.

President Pervez Musharraf telephoned Jennifer's son, a former Pakistani ambassador to the United States, to offer his condolences for the death of a woman who, in one of her last interviews, said: "Mummy has had her innings."