

CHAPTER 6

Imprisoned at the Norbu Lingka Barracks

IT IS WELL known to those who spent time in the Norbu Lingka prison and their relatives and acquaintances, but those unfamiliar with that period and those both in and outside Tibet who grew up later may be interested to know how control of the prison passed from Tibetan into Chinese hands. The Chinese fabricated false stories about the former [Tibetan government] prisons at the Potala, Norbu Lingka, Lhasa Nangtsé-shak, and Shöl, saying that this was where the laboring masses were put to death, and used them for internal and external propaganda. So maybe I should explain a little about the Norbu Lingka prison to clarify the situation for the reader: it was located on the southwest side of the Norbu Lingka grounds and formerly served as the barracks of the Dalai Lamas' bodyguard regiment (*sKu srung dmag sgar*). As for how the Chinese used it as a place to incarcerate Tibetans: at the time of the uprising, the fiercest armed resistance to the Chinese was concentrated around the summer palace, and since the Norbu Lingka was also the center of the suppression of the fighting, most people were arrested from that area. For a few days, they were held inside the boundary wall of the Norbu Lingka under armed guard. Then the bodyguard regiment barracks were stripped of their former contents and used to hold the detainees. Later, most of those taken prisoner by the army in Lho-ka were detained there, with the exception of a few notables. It thus became known as the "Norbu Lingka prison." Similarly, as will be explained below, the so-called "Drapchi prison" was formerly the location of the Drapchi [Tibetan] military base, and once the Chinese established the most extensive of their "Reform Through Labor" prisons there, people called it "Drapchi prison."

It was autumn when we were taken to the Norbu Lingka prison, around the eighth [Tibetan] month, just as the trees start to shed their leaves. We were not put together with the other prisoners, but in a separate group of rooms that had been arranged for us. The prison population was 1,500. There was a separate canteen for each team (*Ru khag*). Before eating, the prisoners had to line up in order, holding their eating bowls and spoons, and sing revolutionary songs. At those times, the great yard of the barracks was completely filled with people. Those of us transferred from the TMD prison did not need our own kitchen but ate at the canteen of a team with relatively fewer members. Compared with the army headquarters prison, the food was a little worse, but we could receive food and clothes from our relatives once a week.

The people held at that prison were former soldiers in the Tibetan army, regular monks from Séra and Drépung, and other Lhasa people who had not been in government service. So the Chinese officials told them that “the prisoners who came from the TMD prison are not like you, they are ringleaders of the uprising as well as representatives of the historically exploitative ruling class; they will not work alongside you, and apart from watching them, you should have nothing to do with them.” Meanwhile they told us, “So far the other prisoners have not even studied the Party’s policies,” and other disparaging things, as a way of enhancing their control by inciting disagreements and divisions among us.

One day, after we had been there for about three weeks, the list of names of the prisoners sent from TMD was read out and we were divided into four groups. I was in a group of about fourteen that was assembled for a separate meeting where the officials told us pleasantly, “Since you have committed lighter offenses, there is a chance that you will be released soon. But for the moment you will be doing compulsory labor on the construction of the Nga-chen power station. This is like taking an exam in school, so you should make your best effort when you join in that noble work.” The names that had been called were those of former government officials with no political responsibility, such as official physicians (*Bla sman*), doormen (*gZim ‘gag*), a few junior officials like me, and a couple of ordinary people. The highest in rank was Shölkhang-sé Sonam Targyé. That he was not accused of involvement in the fighting seemed to be because he had sold all his integrity to the Communist Party while in the TMD prison and become one of the internal accusers, and had his sentence reduced.

One of the other three groups was sent to the Téring prison in Lhasa; another was sent to China. The rest remained at the TMD prison. Our group was taken off to labor the very next day, in a prisoner transport truck. We arrived at the Nga-chen work site with hopes of being released soon, but it turned out to be quite the opposite, for working there was just the start of the ordeal of hunger, thirst, exhaustion, and torment that I was to go through.