CHAPTER 9

In Drapchi Prison

IT WAS IN June 1960 that the six [five] of us were sentenced, and the following morning at about ten o'clock, we put our bedding on our backs and, together with a number of others who had been sentenced in Tölung Déchen county and four Chinese soldiers as our guards, we were sent to the Reform Through Labor prison at Drapchi. It takes no more than half an hour to cover the distance from Téring prison to Drapchi prison, but even so we were taken on a short cut through the fields. Since it was during the summer rains, there was a lot of water flowing through the irrigation channels and it was very muddy in places, making the going difficult. While in Téring, we had not been allowed to keep even the drawstrings in our long underwear or our bootstraps, let alone cord to tie up our bedding, so that day we had nothing to tie our bundles with, and this gave us a lot of difficulty once we started walking. A couple of us, the coppersmith Puntsok Wangdü and the Tsatrul-tsang secretary, had a little more to carry, and their loads kept coming apart and having to be repacked. At first the guards shouted at them; then they started to kick them and beat them with their rifle butts. Those of us with lighter loads tried to help them, but the guards would not let us and told us that those two had to carry their loads by themselves. Some of our companions from Tölung had very little bedding and offered to carry some of their things, but the guards would not allow this either and forced them on. As they became weaker and weaker, they sank in the mud or, unable to jump across the water channels, they fell in, and the beatings they received were difficult for the rest of us to bear, not to mention for the victims themselves. Eventually, they were obliged to jettison most of their belongings, not selectively but arbitrarily, and by the time we approached the Drapchi prison walls they were on the verge of collapse. We encouraged

them by saying that we were nearly there, but as we entered the main west gate of the prison and heard the terrifying noise of a mass struggle meeting going on, our sense of relief at having arrived suddenly dissipated and we stared at one another wide-eyed, as if we had lost our wits. It was about noon by the time we reached Drapchi.

Drapchi prison, situated between Lhasa and Séra monastery, was formerly the Drapchi military camp and headquarters of the second (*Kha*) regiment of the Tibetan army. After the uprising, the Chinese had initially put the prisoners arrested at Séra and Drépung there. Gradually they enlarged it into a Reform Through Labor prison where sentenced prisoners from all over Tibet were concentrated and relocated to many different work sites. The sign over the main gate read PRISON NO. 1—REFORM THROUGH LABOR CENTER—PUBLIC SECURITY OFFICE DEPARTMENT NO. 4. Of the three sections within Drapchi, the one with the tightest security was the Detention Center (*lTa srung khang*), where the higher-ranking prisoners from Séra and Drépung, abbots and managerial staff, had been put at first. Later on, a group of senior government officials under close guard had been transferred there, and prisoners held there were never sent out to work but kept under special scrutiny. The other two sections were the Sentenced Brigade (*Thag bcod ru khag*) and the Training Brigade (*sByong brdar ru khag*); the latter comprised the ordinary monks arrested from Séra and Drépung who had been there all along, and the former included sentenced prisoners from Drapchi or had been sent there from other prisons. At the time we got there, the number of cells occupied by both brigades was 40 to 50 altogether, with about 20 prisoners in each. There was also a women's brigade and an infirmary, and taking them into account, there must have been at least 1,500, and who knows how many in the 16 cells in the Detention Center. When we arrived as sentenced prisoners from Téring, we were put in the Sentenced Brigade cell number 24.

Since our arrival coincided with a political campaign, it was a time of high security, and besides occasionally having to go out and collect firewood from the mountain hermitages north of Lhasa, we had to do political reeducation. During the day we were not even allowed to go to the toilet except when our group was taken there, and at ten o'clock at night the guards locked the cell doors. There were no prison uniforms, so all the prisoners, both monks and laypeople, had to wear their own clothes and looked very ragged. Some who had been there longer smiled as if they recognized me, but although they were people I had been acquainted with, I was unable to identify them except that in their ragged clothes they seemed like former

monks. Amusingly, when my elder sister Yangdröl-la's father-in-law, Yakdé Démön Rikdzin, greeted me, at first I could tell nothing more than that he was a monk I had once known.

The main targets of struggle in that political campaign were Ön Gyelsé Tulku Ngawang Losang-la, in the Training Brigade, for his counterrevolutionary remarks on the *Tibet Daily* newspaper, and one Késang in the Sentenced Brigade, a member of the Panam Ayarwa family and a brother of the Ga-drang chief treasurer (*sPyi khyab mkhan po*), for having been caught plotting to escape while in the Panam county prison. They were struggled against in meetings of several groups combined, and sometimes at general meetings. Otherwise, those in every group who were accused of being "rumor spreaders," harboring "empty hopes of reestablishing the old society," showing a "bad attitude to compulsory labor," and so on, were struggled against regardless of whether their offenses were great or small. However, by the time we got there, the brunt of the campaign had passed and it was being wound down. On the day we arrived, the brigade leaders introduced themselves and appointed one of our number as the group leader (*Tsu'u krang*), a former clerk (*Jo lags*) of the "Labrang bursary" called Losang Tséring, from Tölung Déchen. The brigade leaders instructed us on how political education was to be conducted, but the prisoners in our group had just arrived at Drapchi, and most did not know their fellows from their previous places of confinement and therefore could not accuse or speak against one another. So we spent the following days giving accounts of our own thoughts, instead of in accusatory struggle, until the general meeting concluding the campaign. The principal crimes dealt with during the campaign were listed and a concluding statement made; there were no executions or increased sentences, but it was said that Ön Gyelsé Tulku was moved from the Training Brigade to the Detention Center.

My elder sister Losang Chönyi was in the women's brigade at Drapchi prison then and I was overjoyed to meet up with her, but she still didn't know about our mother having passed away, and except for a slip of paper with the food parcel she received once a month saying that all the family members were fine, she had heard nothing about Mother's health for a long time and had naturally been wondering what was up. She pressed me, saying that I must know about it and should tell her whether Mother was really fine, making me feel miserable that our reunion should be marred by discussing this bad news. If I told her directly that Mother had passed away months ago, she could make final prayers for her, but since my elder sister had been very attached to our mother, there was no saying what sud-

den effect this could have on her, so for the moment I could only tell her that Mother was fine, and gradually break the news to her using her fellow female prisoners as intermediaries.

As I had been hoping, the food allowance and control regime at Drapchi were far better than at Téring prison. At that time, we received a pound (*rGya ma*) of *tsampa* per day, four ounces (*Srang*) in the morning, four at midday, and two in the evening with gruel. If one had relatives to bring extra food, one could meet them to receive it every fortnight. Except during the political campaign mentioned earlier, we were allowed to go to the toilet as we pleased during the day. But Drapchi was a Reform Through Labor institution where we were made to work, and except during the occasional political campaign, we had to do productive labor constantly, making adobe bricks in spring and autumn, breaking rocks in summer and winter, and collecting firewood from the mountainside at least once a week throughout. We were also given other kinds of heavy labor, such as construction and vegetable gardening, and had to meet excessively high work quotas, which was both physically and mentally exhausting.

The first work I had to do at Drapchi was collecting firewood from the mountains. I particularly remember my first day. Whatever kind of work we had to do, physical strength was not enough, experience and familiarity with the technique were also required, and in this case, the wood we had to cut was thorny and I was not only inexperienced, that day I didn't even have gloves to protect against the thorns. Before dawn, the leader of our group collected tools from the office and distributed two pieces of rope each and a sickle or hatchet to every two or three of us, and we marched off, lined up in our groups of ten with guards to either side and at the front and back of the line, and the brigade leaders carrying guns and binoculars and so on in case of any attempt to escape. We were taken through the Nyang-tren valley north of Lhasa up to the Jokpo hermitage at its head, and reached there about eleven o'clock. We rested for a moment as the guards spread out across the slopes to either side; then the officials pointed out the area in which we were to work, saying that if we went beyond it, the guards would fire on us immediately, and each of us had responsibility [for preventing this]. Then we were ordered to finish cutting the wood within a period of fifty minutes, and when the whistle blew, to reassemble at the starting point. Thereupon, the prisoners started to rush up the hill as if it were a race, and when they reached the wood, they threw their ropes or shirts or back pads over the thorn bushes to stake their claims.

Completely out of breath from running uphill and unaware of the practice of claiming a bush, I was unable to find any large thorn bush for myself,

and the member of my group of ten with whom I shared tools, Dondrup from Pelnang in the Penpo valley, was nowhere to be seen. If you did it by hand, in the minute or two it took to break the bushes you would feel the pain of the thorns piercing your hand, and especially the pain of thorns under your fingernails, which seemed to assail your whole body. Carrying on like that, by the time the work period was over and the whistle was blown to call us back down the mountain, I had collected no more than a few sticks, while most of the other prisoners were heading back down with hefty loads. I thought that if all the prisoners did not return together the guards might suspect an escape and start firing, but if I went back down the hill with only a few sticks, I would be beaten or shouted at, as well as embarrassed in front of the others. As I hesitated, not knowing what to do, someone carrying a big load came from behind. As he approached I saw that it was Késang Chöpel-la, former caretaker of Nangtsé-shak, and when I asked if I could borrow his sickle, he showed concern, put down his load, and helped me to cut some of the thorn bush. Gathering up what he had cut, he told me to tie it into a load, but even that was by no means easy; it was heavier on one side than on the other, and since it was not bound tightly enough, it gradually came apart on the way down. I was planning to retie it when we got there, but the rest of the prisoners had been waiting for the few stragglers like me and began marching off as soon as we arrived. I couldn't even get my breath back before joining them and then had to repeatedly retie the load on the way down, and the one or two prisoners and I who lagged behind the main group were forced on by the guards, pushing us, kicking us, or beating us with their rifle butts.

When we finally got back to Drapchi, some officials near the gate were keeping back the prisoners with smaller loads and weighing them, and since my load was one of the smallest, I was taken aside, and when it was weighed it did not even come to 30 pounds, and they wrote down my name. The names were read out at the brigade meeting that evening, and when it was discussed at the group meeting, I had to explain first that I had never done this work before, and second that I had become separated from the companion with whom I shared tools, but without this being taken into consideration I had to give a guarantee that I would bring a full load next time. That night I fell asleep in the misery of reflecting on the hardship and fear I had been through that day and the pain of the thorns all over my hands, and that suffering is something I can clearly recall even now. As I tried to remove the thorns that evening, the more experienced ones in my group of ten advised me that even in a few days I would not finish getting

them all out, but if I left them alone they would become infected, and then they would be easier to squeeze out, and this advice was invaluable. I had to do many different kinds of work in those days, but to make it simpler for the reader, I will continue with the story of collecting firewood.

After the hardship of the first day of woodcutting without experience or equipment, I learned my lesson. On my second trip, in accord with the proverb "To fall over the edge once is to increase your wisdom once," I stuck close to those I was sharing tools with, and as I was put with someone who had grown up in the forest and knew about gathering firewood, and had taken care of immediate needs like leather gloves and a back pad, the work was very easy, unlike before. Whatever kind of work was assigned, I learned from experience, and by requesting the necessary equipment from my family [visitors] or even by my elder sister getting hold of what I needed within the prison, I kept myself supplied and was able to match the loads collected by the other prisoners and moreover, to do so within the allotted time.

I will describe one other occasion, though not because of any particular difficulty it caused me. The harvests failed in China for three years running from 1959, while the differences that had emerged with Russia worsened. Russia was said to have demanded that China repay the loans it had given earlier as assistance, just as the famine was taking place. For the sake of its reputation and with no regard for the suffering of its own people, China is said to have used whatever [grain] it had to repay the debt. In any case, Tibet also experienced the horror of famine as an adjunct of China; edible oil became very tightly controlled and other basic necessities were rationed. Needless to say, the daily food allowance in prison was reduced day by day, and the firewood that we had to collect also became more scarce. When I first came, we were cutting the thorn bushes around the nearby mountain hermitages, but as those became depleted, we had to go as far as the Ga-la pass on the way from Lhasa to Penpo and the top of the mountain called Sandy Spring (*Bye ma chu mgo*), starting before dawn and not getting back before dusk. Once the bushes were finished, we had to go with picks and dig out the roots. Then, when the roots were also finished, we had to use the tools for breaking rocks to extract tree roots from rocky crevices, and dismantle the hermitage buildings. With no wood left on the mountain, their timbers were stripped, and if you came back empty-handed you would have to face struggle in the evening. Because of that, prisoners had no choice but to risk their lives, tying ropes around their waists to venture onto cliff sides where even mountain goats wouldn't go, and every time one or two would be killed or injured.

One time, we went back and forth between the top of the Canopy Mountain (*gDugs ri*), behind the Tashi Chöling hermitage north of Lhasa, and the nearby Takten hermitage. My companion that day was a former truck driver from the bodyguard regiment called Tséring Dondrup, and, contented with having taken a meager amount of wood from a cliff near Takten hermitage, we were on our way back down when we caught a glimpse of what looked like a piece of red cloth up ahead, being blown away by the wind and out of sight. After a while, we saw that many of the prisoners who had already gotten down to the foot of the mountain had huddled together on top of a rock and were standing there. My good friend, the lay official Sumdo Lekdrup Chödar, called out my name and shouted, "You better take care on the way down, one of us has been made into *momo*s [dumplings]." "Made into *momo*s" is a way of saying "killed." His words echoed clearly off the mountain above in a terrifying way. My entire body stiffened and was quivering as if I had been electrified, and I felt unable to continue down the mountain. Incidents of prisoners being killed and wounded happened all the time, but none of them had made me feel anything like this. I told my companion that what stopped me from going on today was a fear I had not felt before, and since there was no saying what might happen to me as a result, I would either roll my load of wood down the mountain or divide it into smaller loads. He concurred that to feel something one has not felt before was a bad sign, but said that if we rolled the load down the mountainside we might not be able to retrieve it, and without it we would be beaten. He said it was better for me to reduce the load and he would carry the extra. When we got down to the place where we drank tea, we could adjust the loads again so that mine would be big enough. And so we reduced my load. When we got to the foot of the mountain, the elderly former disciplinarian (*Zhal zur*) of the Lawa house (*La ba khang tshan*) at Séra lay there dead, his brains splattered all around, having fallen off the mountain. Since the prisoners present could not touch his body until the officials and guards arrived, they were [just] standing around it. Once they had come, one of the prisoners divided up his load among the others so that he could carry the body.

That day we had our midday tea at the foot of the mountain, near the Chubsang hermitage. At the time, we got two ounces of *tsampa* [per day each] when we were collecting wood, and usually, in my case, I would not be able to keep it until midday but would eat it all for breakfast and have nothing left for lunch but the weak black tea. However, it was just a few days since my family had brought things for me, and I was carrying some of the *tsampa* from my sisters in a leather bag; besides being relieved to get

down from the dangerous spot where I had been frightened for the first time, I was looking forward to a decent piece of *tsampa* dough at lunchtime. Some way before the Chubsang hermitage was a narrow defile where, instead of moving freely, prisoners were continually stopping and waiting. I wondered what this was about, and as I approached, saw something I had not even imagined: the officials and guards were searching the pockets of all those with small loads and confiscating their lunchtime *tsampa*. Usually my load was heavy enough, and that day I had only reduced it because of getting frightened and planned on readjusting it once we reached the midday tea stop, when that situation came from out of the blue. My pockets were searched and my *tsampa* bag taken away.

At that, I felt more anger, sorrow, and dejection than ever before. From the prisoner's point of view, the value of one meal's worth of *tsampa* was the same as life itself. By then, the work targets and the food allowance at Drapchi prison were as far apart as the earth and the sky, so that for a period there were seven to ten prisoners dying every day, not from infectious disease but from hunger. When we went to collect wood, we would pass four or five bodies along the way, left lying on the spot where they had died. I myself was oppressed by the thought of having gained this precious human body for once, only to succumb to starvation. You had to find any way of feeding yourself, and people would disregard even prison rules and danger just to get a bite to eat. The former disciplinarian of Séra's Lawa house had fallen from the mountain and lost his life that day because of the scarcity of wood, not because it was plentiful and he had failed to collect a heavy enough load. And to take away my share of *tsampa* for the midday break in that way, at such a time, was really the height of cruelty. Those who had their *tsampa* ration confiscated that day discussed it openly and unabashedly among themselves, asking if anyone could recall anything meaner, and saying that it was worse than a hundred lashes of the whip. Some said that they felt worse about this than they had when the state confiscated all their property. Usually when our loads did not meet the target weight, they would slap us and kick us on the spot, and then in the evening we would have to face the torture of struggle at the meeting, but those things were commonplace and the prisoners ignored them. This episode, however, gave us the deep conviction that having lost their country, the Tibetan people were quietly being wiped out.

At that time, each of the Chinese and Tibetan officials who came along to supervise the prisoners collecting wood brought a full leather bag of best-quality *tsampa* for their midday meal, made with the [grain provided

for the] prisoners' edible oil allowance and mixed with butter, instead of using their own monthly ration of rice and wheat flour. Among the Drapchi officials at the time was a woman from Rong Rinpung called Tashi, who had a fearsome appearance, physically strong with long hair and gold teeth, and was always smoking. She carried a Sten gun and called all prisoners both young and old not by their names but only in derogatory terms like "Ké!" [for men] and "Mé!" [for women], and she was among the officials who marshaled the prisoners collecting wood. Like the others, she came with a bag of buttered *tsampa* taken from the prisoners' allowance. One of my friends told me that if you waited in front of that official while she ate her *tsampa* dough she would surreptitiously give you the leftovers, so one day I went and waited in front of her like a hungry dog. At first, she gave me a mean look and said, "I'm not putting any *tsampa* in his mouth," turning her head in the other direction. I went to that side and kneeled down again, waiting and watching, and after a while, after looking this way and that, the other officials surreptitiously threw me the actual bag she had been eating out of. From then on, whenever she came along with the prisoners gathering wood, I would manage to get hold of the leftover *tsampa* dough at lunchtime.

She had been sent back to Tibet as an official from the Chengdu Nationalities Institute, and had initially worked at either Drépung or Séra. In 1959, when the imprisoned monks were sent to do labor at the Nga-chen power station, she went there as a supervisor. Prisoners were still getting rice and wheat flour then, but because they only had a few minutes in which to eat it, most had to jostle with the crowd to be in time, and the elderly monks got nothing. When she came to know about this, that woman went and stood by the rice bowl and filled the common bowl for the elder monks herself so that they were served first. I heard about her kindness after my release from those who had been acquainted with her, which showed the truth of the saying, "A tiger's stripes are [visible] on the outside, but a person's stripes are [invisible] on the inside." Among the officials working for the Chinese were some who were well disposed toward the Tibetans and discreetly did what they could to help, and since the outlook of the officials, and especially those in charge of prisoners, was not uniformly hostile, it was extremely important to be able to distinguish between them. I still believe that when things reach a critical juncture in the future, some of the Tibetans working as Chinese officials could prove to be an important force.

Another time, we were taken to gather wood near the Khardo hermitage, a beautiful site with a sweeping view, where formerly there was a more abundant growth of bushes such as wild rose, barberry (*sKyer pa*), and rock-

spray (*Tshar pa*) than at the other nearby hermitages, and the sweet sound of the songbird was heard. After many previous wood-gathering trips, there were no bushes left and even the roots had all been dug up; no free person would consider going there to collect firewood, but as enslaved prisoners who were driven up there, we had no alternative, and as the folk saying goes, "You never leave your parents or the mountains empty-handed," and if we worked hard without fearing death, we could just about make a load each. However, since I wasn't feeling well at the time, I stayed in the vicinity of the hermitage and didn't climb any farther up the mountain; some prisoners were stripping the roof of the abandoned hermitage building, and I waited nearby, hoping to make up a load from their leftovers. The apparent leader of the officials supervising us was called Pao-pao; his parents were western Chinese from Qinghai, but he had grown up in Gyéku-do [in eastern Tibet], and he was a brute. He went inside the former hermitage and emerged carrying a statue in one hand and a long spear that had been kept in the protector chapel in the other, and wearing an iron helmet from the protector chapel on his head. As soon as he saw me and another prisoner, he demanded, "Where are your loads?" and seeing that the roof timbers the other prisoners had removed were not ours and we were waiting to pick up their scraps, he struck the other prisoner once with his spear and it broke into pieces. [That fellow] said, "Excuse me," and ran off. I considered explaining to Pao-pao that I was sick that day, but before I could say a word, he picked up one of the pieces of the broken spear shaft to beat me with it as best he could. I just tried to protect my head, while exposing my upper back, where he beat me repeatedly until that piece of the shaft broke as well. He threw it away, called me a vandal, and kicked me several times. One of the kicks hit me in the stomach and winded me so that I rolled on the ground, and then he laid off and went away.

When I stood up again, intending to try to collect some wood, Tsöndru Neljor of Séra's Tantric college and someone called Min-gyur Dorjé from Lho-ka Dra-nang, who were standing behind me and had watched me being beaten, sympathized, and with their help I was able to gather some firewood and did not have to return empty-handed. But that day, feeling ill and suffering from the physical pain and mental dejection of a savage beating, I returned to Drapchi thinking that although I would not have to die of starvation thanks to the support of my dear elder sisters, I didn't know how I was going to get through the remaining three years and more of my sentence under such oppressive conditions. That night, my upper back was so swollen I could barely get my shirt off.

The beatings that that official Pao-pao inflicted on prisoners were innumerable, but not long after mine, an investigation was carried out following cases of prison officials taking prisoners' belongings for themselves. The authorities looked into whether or not the cash, wristwatches, and so on belonging to prisoners had been registered upon their arrival and which officials had been responsible for it, and it was said that Pao-pao turned out to have appropriated property belonging to a large number of different prisoners. In any case, he was removed from his position and had to do some forced labor himself for a while. Those who had suffered beatings at his hands may have felt some gratification over this, but the way the prison was run remained unchanged. Firewood for the prison kitchen, as well as the officials' kitchen, still had to be brought from the nearby mountain hermitages where of course nothing growing was left, and once the roots had been dug out we had to go onto the mountains with crowbars. These were what we used for breaking rocks, and one might wonder how we were supposed to use them to gather firewood: it was to overturn or topple boulders to expose any roots and tendrils that might have been growing in the rock crevices underneath.

Once when we were overturning a boulder on the Ne'u-chung-ri mountain, where there was a nunnery, a nest of lizards was struck by a shard of rock and a large number of them were killed or injured. There was a former monk from Drépung's Go-mang college called Jampa Sonam who used to boil tea for the prisoners, and meanwhile, of his own accord, he would pick nettles growing nearby and cook them up for us. That day, after some of the prisoners had claimed that these creatures were very good for the stomach, kidneys, and so on, and could even make a tonic to strengthen the whole body, he added a few of the dead lizards to the boiling nettles. He didn't tell us about it until we had finished eating, and then he announced that it wasn't a joke, he had really done it. Most people didn't seem to mind very much, and I myself didn't feel particularly revolted. Later on, when Jampa Sonam and I spent a long time as members of the same group, he explained that he had fed us lizard flesh because he wanted to use his job as tea maker to do whatever he could to further the prisoners' welfare, and it had come about that we had been reduced to eating the flesh of such a repugnant creature in order to keep ourselves going. After all, there was no grain to fortify us for the hard work of providing the prison with firewood.

At the time, we were getting the same gruel morning and evening, and as firewood was scarcer than before, no one was going to make a fuss if the prisoners' tea and gruel was uncooked from time to time. But as the food

for the officials and the guards really had to be cooked, most of the prisoners' strength and effort was spent simply on collecting firewood. Because other kinds of productive labor suffered as a result, they eventually selected a group of the fittest prisoners to stay on the mountain and stockpile wood, which ordinary prisoners would occasionally come and collect. That did spare most of the prisoners a little hardship, but I was selected as one of the fittest, which was like a special punishment for me. One day during the extremely cold winter of 1960, an official called Kun-yang read out a list of names, and the sixteen of us whose names had appeared were called to one side. They told us that we would have to stay on the mountain for some time, and tried to encourage us by saying that the work was an urgent necessity and to accomplish it was glorious and would be very helpful for us in the future, and we were each given a fleece jacket to wear.

Kun-yang was from Pema-kö and was said to be the son of Kyapjé Düjom Rinpoché. He loved to destroy life. When we went onto the mountain to collect wood, he would bring his rifle and go hunting, and when he took us to the vegetable garden or other places of work, he would kill whatever mice, birds, or even insects he laid eyes on, without mercy. He would force prisoners to work without any limit and treat them with the utmost cruelty even for small things or in ambiguous circumstances. He didn't even have the mentality of an ordinary Tibetan, and no one would believe that he could be the son of Kyapjé Düjom Rinpoché, a great Nyingma-pa religious master, but these days when I see a picture of Düjom Rinpoché their features look identical, something I cannot explain. In any case, he was the one in charge of our elite squad of prison laborers, and to be in any kind of group with him in charge made me despair, but there was nothing to be done about it.

That day we arranged for tools and other necessities, and the next day, carrying our own bedding and *tsampa* rations, as well as the cooking pot and the tools, we set off with a detachment of ten guards accompanying another group of prisoners and reached the Jokpo hermitage in the upper Nyangtren valley. By then, except for two nomad families, there was no one at the hermitage and it had become very dilapidated, but at least we were able to stay there, rather than out in tents through those freezing winter nights. Our sixteen had been selected from three different groups, and Kun-yang appointed a leader to take responsibility for each group. Our daily work target was six loads of firewood, each weighing no less than 80 pounds. Every evening, the leader of each group had to account for the work performed, and put it in writing for the competition between the different groups in which

we had to participate. Even worse, we were under tight prison discipline, not allowed to move except when ordered to by the guards, and had to listen to a lot of threatening, abusive talk [from them].

All the vegetation in that vicinity had long since been wiped out, and meeting the target was extremely difficult. The Chinese convention is that when an order comes from higher up, even if it is obvious that it cannot be fulfilled, there is no way of saying that, so in our group discussions we had to commit ourselves to succeeding. Occasionally, when there was good weather and we found a place with a lot of scrub, we could just about make adequate loads, but most of the time, even staying out on the mountain from before dawn until after dusk, that was impossible. When there was a high wind, whatever twigs we had managed to collect got blown away, and sometimes, coming back down with our loads, the wind was too strong to withstand and we would fall and roll downhill, but in spite of enduring endless difficulties and setbacks, we could never talk about them and had to spend every evening until midnight being shouted at in the meeting.

Since no one managed to meet the work target and they were obliged to shout at everyone rather than punish us selectively, it became routine after a while and everyone ignored it. Still, there was no way to avoid spending the whole day in the cold wind going up to one mountaintop or another, and especially having to touch thorns early in the morning when we could not yet see the lines on our hands, which made the whole body tingle with pain. Every few days someone would be injured, and whether because of the chilling wind or the hard work, many of us fell sick, but since no rest was permitted, we had to take them up the mountain with us.

The worst of all was when our group leader, Mindro Ngawang Puntsok of Drichu Sérka, stepped on a sharp splinter of wood one morning that pierced his shoe, went straight through his foot, and came out the other side. When we removed the splinter, his foot was covered in blood and for a while he was speechless with pain, but far from being allowed to rest or given treatment, he was sent to collect wood alongside me. Then his wound got frostbitten and after a few days his leg had swollen to the size of a beam, and the pain prevented not just him but all his comrades from sleeping at night. Thereupon, we made a request to the officials that Ngawang Puntsok and the other wounded men return to Drapchi and be replaced, and after a few days they responded by sending some of the injured back down. A week or two later, I pinched the nerve in my waist and could only walk bent over, but when I told the official about it, he said that it was psychological, that I was faking because a group of prisoners had recently been sent back

to Drapchi and I hoped the same would happen to me, and although I got a day off, I had to go back up the mountain, regardless of the fact that I was unable to work. But with the help of our group members I managed to make up a load each day, and gradually I got better and did not have to go back down. A few days later, that official was replaced, and after we had been at Jokpo for about a month and a half, a larger number of prisoners were sent there for wood collection.

We moved on to the village called Jéma Chun-go [Sandy Spring] on the other side of a pass from Jokpo hermitage, where it was a little warmer. Moreover, our leader, a young man called Tséring Wangdü, did not make us work more than eight hours a day, and for the next two months things were much less onerous than before. Then, by the time all the bushes and roots in that area had been consumed, Drapchi prison's firewood duty came to an end. Eventually they started bringing loose wood by truck from Kongpo for the officials' kitchen, and since there was only tea and gruel to boil in the prisoners' kitchen, they used electricity. At that point, we were allowed to go back to Drapchi.

After that, it seemed that the hardest and most dangerous work was over for the Drapchi prisoners. In the beginning, I had suffered for my lack of experience and preparation and, like everyone else, from the hardship of the work and the beatings I received on a few occasions due to circumstances, but as my elder sisters continually provided me with such essential items as boots, gloves, and thornproof back pad, as well as warm clothing and above all sustenance, I never got injured or totally exhausted. But due to various causes, many other prisoners lost their lives in the course of that work.

Among the ornaments of the erstwhile "city of peace," the delightful places of solitude where noble beings meditated one-pointedly on the cultivation of altruism and their followers sought liberation through developing their powers of concentration, where earth and water are pure, medicinal herbs and all kinds of flowers grow untended, with the fragrance of fruit trees and the music of birdsong, where wild animals stayed comfortably, free from any harm or fear, were such perfect and excellent solitary resorts as Drépung Gémpel Ri-trö, Gönsar Ri-trö, Pa-ri Ri-trö, Jokpo Ri-trö, Ga-ri nunnery, Pabongka Ri-trö, Tashi Chöding, Takten Ri-trö, Chubsang Ri-trö, Séra-tsé Drupkhang Ri-trö, Raka-drak Ri-trö, Kyu-tsang east and west, Purbuchok Ri-trö, Khardo Ri-trö, Néuchung-ri nunnery, Ri-gya Samten-ling, Rak Ri-trö, Garpa Ri-trö, and more, sprinkled across the mountainsides like stars in the night sky. Since the institutions of the occupying Chinese

state already forced prisoners to destroy their sanctuaries and the trees that surrounded them as well as any flora and fauna in the locale, the blame for this destruction can in no way be put on the Cultural Revolution or the so-called Gang of Four. Pabongka Ri-trö, for instance, was a great holy place with a long history, a meditation place of King Songtsen Gampo, the place where Tönmi Sambhota created the Tibetan alphabet, and one of the earliest surviving examples of Tibetan multistory architecture. Similarly, Séra Chöding, Raka-drak, and others were among the very blessed hermitages in which Jé Tsongka-pa stayed. At the same time, the eradication of the thorn bushes and other vegetation in the Do-dé and Nyang-tren valleys at the foot of the mountains where the hermitages were situated had a very adverse effect on the livelihood of the inhabitants of both areas. Since the cultivable part of Do-dé and Nyang-tren was small and the farmers could not live from agriculture alone, they used to supplement their income by grinding *tsampa,* and they relied on the thorn bush for fuel to roast the grain. Before it was eradicated, they used to harvest the bush with scythes, allowing it to grow back so that the supply was not depleted, but after the Drapchi prisoners dug up even the roots there was no new growth, and the income of those two communities was affected.

Concerning nutrition, when I first arrived at Drapchi prison, the food was a little better than at Téring, but before long it deteriorated. Once for quite a long period we were given nothing but a very thin gruel both morning and evening; one couldn't even tell whether it had been boiled, and if it hadn't it would make the body ache. Sometimes we even had to go without salt for long periods, so that the tea and gruel not only had no taste but also gave us stomachaches. The learned former palace steward (*Tsha rdor rtse mgron*) Jampa Tendar-la composed this verse about it:

> This thin pea gruel, clear like river water
> Lacking even salt, it makes the teeth tingle
> No solids like meat or fat, even a pale vegetable's rare as gold
> But don't say so, better keep it to yourself.

The first line tells that the gruel made with pea flour was as thin as water. The second means that however hungry one is, the pea flour gruel without salt tastes nauseatingly bland. The third says that far from containing meat or fat, even bits of vegetable yellowed with age were as rare as gold in the gruel, but since commentary on such things was not permitted, these lines had to be recited only to oneself.

Everyone knows that Tibet has inexhaustible natural deposits of salt capable of supplying the whole country and other countries too, but like telling fibs to children, they said that normal supplies had been disrupted by the poor harvests. Actually, it was during this time that the campaign known as "Maximize production, minimize expenditure, build the nation by thrift" was launched in civil society, and food and clothing were in shorter supply than ever. But we could still meet our relatives every fortnight to receive small gifts of food or fresh clothes, and my elder sisters always brought something extra to eat, regardless of the quantity, even if they had to ask others for it, and a change of clothes. I asked them for some salt, and when it came, I handed it out to friends like *jinlap* [any substance empowered with blessing by a lama, taken in minute quantity].

Since most Drapchi prisoners were from other regions, with no relatives nearby, they had to make do with prison clothing that didn't warm the body and prison food that didn't fill the stomach and moreover was inadequate nutrition for the heavy labor they had to do, so they were mostly emaciated and had bags under their eyes. At that time, the more people there were from Lhasa or nearby in one's group of ten, the happier one was, for on the day when their relatives brought provisions, as soon as they arrived the recipient would give out a piece of whatever it was to each member of his group. A piece of bread would be divided into many portions and shared, and even if it was no more than a spoonful of *tsampa*, the practice was to divide it up and share it out, so those with many comrades from the Lhasa area would receive gifts of food even though no one had come to visit them.

For those who had relatives nearby, it was difficult to use the gifts of food economically, because apart from leaving them under one's bedding, there was no secure place to put them, and with prisoners on the verge of death from starvation, they would be stolen. Also, the officials sometimes did unannounced searches of all the prisoners' belongings for articles prohibited by the regulations, and bits of food brought by relatives or leftover *tsampa* would also be confiscated. This was because they suspected escape attempts, but in any case, to have food that one was unable to enjoy confiscated by the officials was more disheartening than to have it stolen by one's fellow prisoners. Once or twice, *tsampa* in my possession that had been saved for me by my eldest sister Losang Chönyi-la was confiscated during searches. Thus, those with relatives had no chance to ration the extra food they received. One time one of the prisoners was brought a dish of dough balls in melted butter (*Bag tsha mar khu*) by his relatives, and for the reasons

just mentioned, he had to eat it all at once. Being accustomed to a very poor diet, he was unable to digest it, and a little while later he vomited. The vomit was eaten by all the other starving prisoners who managed to get some.

This took place from the end of 1960 through the middle of 1961—the period of the largest number of deaths due to starvation among Tibetan prisoners. For example, we Drapchi prisoners were given secondhand uniforms of padded cotton with multicolored triangular identification tags on the upper back that were said to have come from prisoners who had died while working at Chang Tsala Karpo [the boron deposits on the northern plateau]. Those uniforms were not worn out at all, but were covered with fleas and lice both inside and out, and especially in the seams, which were so full of lice that the stitching could no longer be seen. At that time, my elder sister was in a group of women prisoners doing the prison laundry, and after she washed one for me and I flushed all the dead fleas and lice out of the seams, I could wear it. There weren't just a few dozen of these uniforms; five or six hundred of them came to Drapchi in one batch, so the number of deaths from starvation at Chang Tsala Karpo certainly wasn't small.

In the same period, a group from the Norbu Lingka prison were sent to Samyé to work on cultivating desert land, and most of them died of starvation. Among them were several people connected with or known to our family. Those who survived the experience jokingly rephrased a verse from the praise to Guru Padmasambhava that goes, "On the hill of Hépo-ri at Samyé / He subdued the eight classes of local deities and spirits," to say, "On the hill of Samyé Hépo-ri / All the '*pulu*' were subdued / Some keeled over backward and died / Some fell flat on their faces and died." "*Pulu*" was the Chinese word for prisoners of war. Anyway, what I heard from the survivors was that two thirds of the original group had died there. Weakened by hunger, they dropped off even as they worked, or on the way to and from work. It may well be that compared with the boron mines and places like Samyé, the situation in Drapchi prison was a little better, because the prisoners from Lhasa were able to meet their relatives every fortnight and receive extra provisions, no matter how small, and since Drapchi was in close proximity to the city, the civilian population would find out and spread the word if a very large number of prisoners died from starvation, so the prison leaders and others had to be careful, as later became apparent.

Nonetheless, what we had to do in those leanest of times was to make mud bricks, which was the heaviest kind of work and the most physically demanding, with the longest shifts. This was Drapchi prison's main business then, so the level of production was the main concern, and there was

no regard for the feeding, clothing, or physical condition of the prisoners. We were made to work 12 hours a day, and every group of 20 or so members had to produce 4,000 to 5,000 bricks per day, which was a very difficult quota to meet. Each group had four brick molds and selected four of the most skilled workers to operate them. The others dug the earth and mixed the mud, while the weakest members had to carry it. The work site was at the mouth of the Do-dé valley, north of Lhasa.

Although the prisoners' physical state was very poor, at the start, when the necessary earth and water were at hand, we were sometimes able to fulfill the quota, but as the extreme disparity between labor and sustenance widened, our physical strength weakened day by day, the quality of the materials worsened, the hardship increased, and by midday two or three members of each group would be laid out with exhaustion. In particular, the weakest workers carrying the mud would roll over as they dumped their loads, and even when they got back to their feet their bodies stiffened and they were unable to move, like overworked donkeys. There were many who died while on the job. But in spite of such grave hardship, at the nightly group or general meetings, many of the weaker workers were said to be "resisting labor reform" and subjected to struggle. There were those who passed away the same night after undergoing the torture of struggle.

The youngest and strongest were chosen as brick makers and the ability to meet the quota depended on them, but even if they didn't collapse from exhaustion, after molding a thousand or more bricks every day, day after day, their forearms became so swollen and numb (*rTsa dkar*) that they could no longer work and had to be replaced. At first, I was one of those mixing mud in the digging pit, but later I had to become a replacement brick molder, working without even stopping to go to the toilet, and making sometimes more, sometimes less than a thousand. Being unused to brick molding, I was unable to stand up afterward and would have to walk bent over for a while, and many times I blacked out and nearly fainted, but gradually I got used to it. After a couple of weeks or so, my forearms became swollen and numb like the earlier brick molders', so that at mealtimes I couldn't even pick up my bowl and at night I couldn't fix my own bedding and had to ask someone to help me. Rolling over during the night was the most painful of all. At the elementary clinic in Drapchi they gave us traditional Chinese-style acupuncture, ointments, and so on, but it did no good. Unable to mold bricks anymore, I went into the lowest position of carrying mud.

Since I was young and received some extra food from my relatives, I myself did not get completely exhausted or depleted, but I believe that it

was during this time that the greatest number of deaths occurred among Drapchi prisoners. When malnutrition led to death from starvation, initially the prisoners' bodies became very dry and their faces swollen. Then, as their legs could no longer support their bodies, they would just sort of drag themselves along, unable even to get over a doorstep. Sometimes they would slip on stony ground and fall over, and if no one came to help they would not be able to get up again. In that case, they were generally beyond hope, and were taken to a corner of the clinic where before long they would finally die. Some died while still in their work groups, before there was a chance to take them to the sickroom. In my own group, there were instances of both. One night, Sang-gyé-la, a monastic functionary, maybe a disciplinarian or a chant leader, from a monastery in Tsang Uyuk, was on my right, and in the next space but one on my left was someone called Loga from Drikung Mangshung. During the night, their breathing stopped one after the other, and until the prison officials came in the morning, I had to lie there between two corpses. However, I was as unaffected by this as a young child, for not only were there regular deaths from starvation in every group at that time, but after such experiences as having to collect and manhandle the body of a dead Drapchi prisoner from Lhasa People's Hospital not long before and having the person next to me die during the night while I was in Téring prison, I had become accustomed to it. It was more the idea that we had to spend our lives undergoing terrible suffering due to such a turn of events that depressed me deeply, however I thought about it.

Going to collect the corpse from the People's Hospital was a job I volunteered for by mistake. It was on a day when all the prisoners were kept back from work in order to be searched, and at around midday, the young woman known as "mini-official" came to a prisoner I knew called Yönten Puntsok with a handcart, telling him to accompany a guard going to Lhasa and take one helper with him. I asked Yönten Puntsok to take me, thinking that the guard was going to pick up some supplies and there was a chance that someone would give us a little food along the way. But once we were out of the main gate, that guard asked Yönten Puntsok in Chinese if he knew someone called Tashi, and Yönten Puntsok asked which brigade and group, for there were many Tashis, and then asked what was up. "He's dead," said the guard, "we are going to collect his corpse from the hospital," a mission quite contrary to what I had hoped for. When we reached the hospital, the guard went into the main office and had us wait outside. He came out holding a slip of paper, and said, "We have to go in the morgue. If you two can recognize his corpse, that will do; otherwise we have to identify it by the number."

The morgue was a small, dilapidated building alongside the main hospital building of several stories. Inside, there was a large platform for laying out corpses, but there was only one there, and on inspection we could see that it was indeed Khampa Tashi from brigade 1. A few days before, one could have seen him alive and well, but now he was laid out on that platform naked, without a shred of covering. At the door of the hospital and nearby, there were many Lhasa people who had come for treatment, and we thought we should wrap the body in a shroud as Tibetans normally do, but the guard told us to put him on the cart just as he was. The two of us looked around [in vain] for any scraps of cloth to lessen the embarrassment and defilement of carrying a naked corpse as we loaded it on the cart, but as we headed off, the body had to be repeatedly rearranged, because it did not sit well and we had no rope to keep it in place. Whatever the cause of death had been, there was a mixture of blood and pus oozing quite disgustingly out of its eyes, mouth, and other orifices, and by the time we got back to Drapchi we had had to lay our hands on it ten times over, so that in complete opposition to my hopes for a gift of food, I ended up handling a revolting, rotten corpse.

Since the majority of deaths at that time were from hunger, there was no intense pain at the moment of death, just the cessation of breathing. There were also some whose physical condition did not degenerate that far, but who died suddenly and painfully. Those taken to the [sky burial] cemetery rather than being buried, who were examined by the doctor of the Drapchi clinic, were generally said to have died from overeating! The very idea of deaths from overeating when the majority were dying of hunger sounds preposterous, but the reason for it was this: a large quantity of sheep fleece had recently been brought from the northern plateau to be used for making winter uniforms. The fleeces had to be softened before they could be worn, so a group of prisoners with the necessary experience was arranged and put to work. Since the weather was rather cold at the time, the fleece kneaders were permitted to take a small tin of cinders from the kitchen hearth to prevent the fleeces from stiffening, so many of them grilled bits of sheepskin in the embers and ate them. After some time, it swelled in their stomachs and killed them.

Sometimes those sent to harvest the vegetable gardens would eat the raw vegetables or whatever else they could find there. On my trips to the garden I ate a great deal of raw vegetables. Cabbage was quite digestible, but turnips and such would make you feel ill for the whole day. Then there were always those who wandered constantly with their eyes on the ground,

scavenging like pigs or dogs for any edible thing, and even picking [raw] barley and peas out of the nosebags of the prison's draft horses and mules. Due to the lack of nutrition, people's intestines became very thin, so that even if they got something solid to eat it was difficult to absorb, and even if absorbed it was said that the movement tore the intestinal passage and killed them. When we folded up the mattress of one deceased member of our group, a monk from Sung-rab-ling monastery in Lho-ka, we saw a heavy bag under the pillow, and when we looked inside we found old bones of animals such as horses and mules that he had dug up out of the ground, collected, and stored. It seems that in times of such severe hunger, the concept of what is edible gets adapted.

While there were only a few public executions of Tibetan prisoners at that time, loss of life due to such circumstances as these was by no means minimal. The Drapchi prison undertaker, a Khampa called Pu-sang, could not manage alone and someone had to be sent to help him. Most of the bodies were taken out behind the prison boundary wall through a small door and buried, so among ourselves we used to jokingly make the prayer that we would not have to go through that door on Pu-sang's back, and we would make it in earnest when we got up in the morning. Most of the prisoners who died untimely deaths in Drapchi were farmers and nomads from all over the country, and monks. They died because they had no relatives nearby to bring them the extra food they needed to stave off hunger.

Since the prisoners' names, ages, places of birth, and crimes were repeatedly recorded in that period, one came to know something about them. For example, many of the prisoners from upper Tsang were never told why or on what charge they had been arrested, but if they did not admit to any particular crime once in custody, they were beaten and subjected to the torture of struggle on the pretext that they were denying their guilt. Thus, when the officials recorded their offenses, many people from Tsang said "reactionary religious worship." This was a reference to the practice in some parts of Tsang of burning incense at dusk as an offering to the local deities, an ancient custom that was an expression of Buddhist faith and had nothing to do with opposing the Chinese Communists. As for the monks detained there, most were functionaries, such as heads of college houses, managers, bursars and so on, and had assumed these worldly duties only because it was required by their rank [in the monastery], not because they had actively sought such responsibilities. These were true monks, who earned their sustenance from the daily offerings of the devoted, but they were taken into custody after being labeled "monastic members of the exploiting class."

Anyway, many blameless farmers and nomads who had been toiling for generations in pursuit of their traditional livelihood died of starvation in that period, as well as innocent and committed monastics who had taken cold ground for their beds and cold rock for their pillow with no attachment to this life while teaching and serving their communities.

One day around that time the names of a large group of sentenced prisoners were read out and they were sent off to labor in the Kongpo region. Just as when I was in Téring, getting to a place where there was enough to eat, however much labor we had to do, was all I could think of. Many of my comrades' names were called out but mine was not, and I was distinctly sorry to be left behind at Drapchi, but the reality was that had I not been left behind, but for a flutter of good fortune, I would not be here now writing this story. When I later met up with some of those who had been sent to Kongpo, they said that the suffering there was much worse still than what we had gone through in Drapchi. Living on an extremely poor diet, unable to receive any extra supplies from their families to alleviate hunger, and having to do hard work with no provision for the most basic needs, two thirds of the group died, just as had happened at Chang Tsala Karpo and Lho-ka Samyé.

Most of Lhasa's Muslim business community of Kashmiri origin had returned to Kashmir after the events [of 1959], but two of their leaders, one called Gadhi, whose shop was on the ground floor of the Shékar-ling house, and Abdul Ghani, who resided in the Drapchi Shar house, were arrested by the Chinese, sentenced to ten years in prison, and sent to Kongpo. Not long after that group was sent off [from Drapchi] to Kongpo, due to special circumstances those two were suddenly brought back to Drapchi, and when they arrived they were on the verge of death. Abdul Ghani had a connection with our family, so when I found a chance to do so, I greeted him. At first he didn't recognize me and was frightened, but once I had explained clearly who I was he grasped my hand, his eyes filled with tears, and uttering "Godhar" [the name of God] he choked, unable to say anything more for a moment. Then, after drawing breath, he started to recount the hardships he had been through for the last year or so in Kongpo. Since he had been arrested as a leader of the Muslim community, before departing for Kashmir and other foreign countries their people had arranged for someone to look after the two of them and left enough funds for extra food to be brought to them periodically wherever they were, which had kept them alive. Otherwise, of the thirty-four members of the group in which he was sent to Kongpo, all but twelve were dead. As he spoke, I felt relief that, through the

mercy of the Three Jewels, my name had not been among those chosen to be sent to Kongpo.

As talk of the huge numbers of dying prisoners gained force outside prison, changes in the policy of treating prisoners came within. It was said that the so-called higher-ups (*Rim pa gong ma*) had made inquiries into the large number of deaths at Drapchi prison. In any case, one day the leaders of all the groups were called to a meeting and asked the reasons for so many deaths, and bravely they explained that it was both the poor diet and the heavy workload. Then gradually the prison officials dealt with the lack of nutrition, giving us cooked lentils at first until the supply of *tsampa* came through, while a group of prisoners who had been sent earlier to work at an army camp was given a truckload of wild ass (*rKyang*) meat on their return, which was a real boon, and gradually the death rate decreased. However, the prison leaders would not admit the main reasons for the deaths and attributed them to more trivial causes such as poor hygiene, initiating a campaign in which every brigade and group had to compete in improving hygiene. They brought the former kitchen cauldrons from Séra monastery to the prison, filled the three largest with hot water, and had all the prisoners immerse themselves, one group of ten at a time, whether they wanted to or not. Since there is no habit of frequent bathing in Tibet due to the climate, and from the outset, far from having baths, there had been no provision for prisoners to wash even their hands and faces, when they changed the water after every two or three groups of ten, there was a residue of filth more than an inch thick, and they made a lot of talk about hygiene being the real reason for the high mortality rate, to lessen their responsibility for the deaths from starvation.

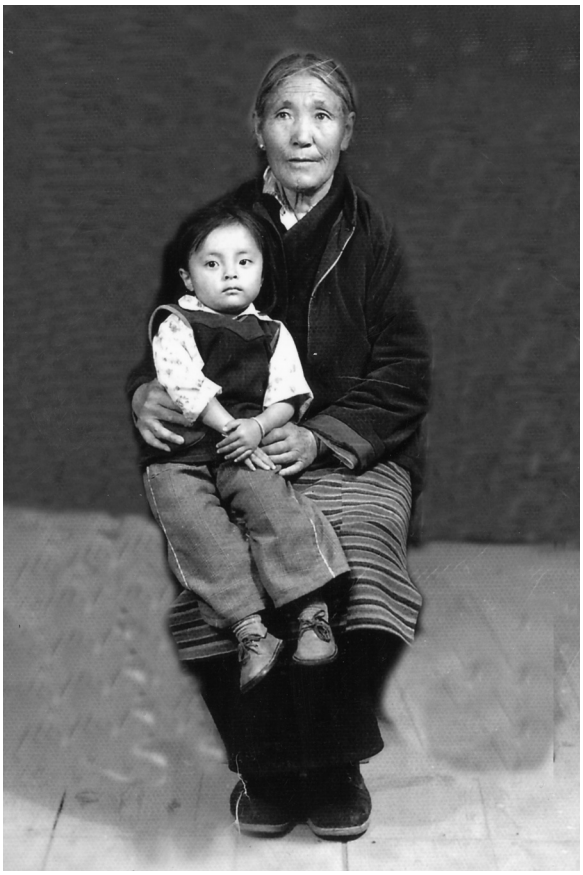
Nonetheless, with a basic level of control having been established, such practices as inflicting struggle without reason and forced labor with no fixed hours were phased out, the sick received attention, the regular political education session on Saturday evening was replaced with a cultural event, and after reconsideration of prisoners' crimes, a large number of those imprisoned without substantial charge during the suppression of the uprising and the imposition of Democratic Reform were released without having to complete their sentences.

One day as I returned from cutting swamp grass, I was thinking that at that point there were four members of our family in prison, the contents of our house had been seized during Democratic Reform, and my mother, two elder sisters, and three younger brothers and sisters had been evicted and moved into the basement of a ruined house where Mother had passed

away in the grip of a serious illness. Now my two elder sisters were looking after the three younger ones, and they faced the difficulty of finding others to bring supplementary food to the four of us in prison at the appointed times because they were unable to come themselves. As I approached the prison walls, I was thinking with stronger feeling than usual how in this situation it would be best if I could be released early, but if not, then how great it would be if my elder sister Losang Chönyi-la were to be released. As we got inside the outer wall, one of the leaders of the women's movement for independence, Kyiré Risur Ama Yangchen-la, who was among the prisoners of the women's brigade washing there as usual, was looking out for me among the group returning with loads of swamp grass on our backs. Ama Yangchen-la had been in the same group as my mother during the independence movement, they had been comrades, and since her imprisonment she had been close to my elder sister and treated me like her own son. That day, she looked as if there had been some good news. I backed out of the line to approach her while she headed toward me and said, "Your elder sister's being released! Put your load down and go see her, she's in the workshop. I'll take care of tying up your load." I went straight there and found my elder sister with her bedding rolled up and ready to go. With her was Chimé-la of Banak-shöl Shonka Tsenkhang, who had been a kind of secretary of the women's movement, and two other women.

My elder sister's release made me happier than if I had been released myself, while she appeared sad and dejected that I had to remain in prison. She was the second eldest of our siblings, and since she was young she had helped our parents with bringing up the younger ones and taking care of household duties like a second mother. She had done as much as she could as a neighborhood organizer during the 1959 uprising, and in communicating the decisions of the assembly to the public. She was arrested by the Chinese and later sentenced to five years, but the sentence had now been favorably reviewed. Except for my time in the TMD prison, we had been imprisoned together all along, at the Nga-chen power station, in Téring, and in Drapchi, and throughout my sister, with unlimited kindness, had disregarded all difficulties in order to wash and patch my clothes, and even to give me her share of the rations brought by our brothers and sisters from home.

Maybe there was a change in the style of governance throughout China during 1962, but in any case a policy statement of "Twenty-six Points" was publicized in Tibet, and the extremely tight restrictions on trade and barter between farmers and nomads in different areas of Tibet were lifted. For those of us in prison, there was a slight improvement in all aspects of life



Risur Ama Yangchen with her grandson, after her release from prison. *Author's collection*

compared with before, like a respite from hell. As I said, there was a process for the review of prisoners' sentences, and when those in the Training Brigade and Detention Center at Drapchi came up for sentencing, many of them and even some of those already sentenced were released, as my elder sister had been, so that many of us had hopes of being released as well. I had already completed two and a half years of my four-year sentence, and since I had only a year and a half to go, prison conditions had improved, and I believed that the worst was over, I became a little more relaxed. For the next few months I was sometimes breaking rocks and sometimes working in the vegetable gardens, but mostly I was transporting the earth and stone required for the work of expanding the prison compound.

One day when another list of names was read out, mine was among them. It was said that we were going to Powo Tramo to work on the cultivation of vacant land. Having been told by the two Muslims about how two thirds of a large group of prisoners had met their deaths in Kongpo, when I heard my name read, I was immediately downcast. The situation in Drapchi might have improved slightly, but there was no saying whether that would be the case in Powo. Moreover, since it would be extremely difficult for my relatives to bring me the extra food required to stave off desperation, there was no doubt that it was going to be difficult to get by. Except for Amdo Yéshé, a Lhasa resident, most of those whose names were called out along with my own were in a group that had come from Shika-tsé prison. Most of them had been officials working for the Chinese during the so-called Democratic Reform period who were accused of misappropriating property and other management errors. They used to say, "We may have made some mistakes in economic matters, but we are not counterrevolutionaries like you who rebelled against the Party and the People's government," and since they consistently oppressed us politically, the prison officials had quite a different attitude toward them. Thus it was clear that once we got to Powo Tramo we would face not only problems with basic needs but also discrimination, bullying, and recrimination among the prisoners. This was a prospect I particularly dreaded.

As those of us whose names were on the list had a special opportunity to send messages to our families informing them that we were to be transferred and asking them to visit beforehand, I sent a note to my family right away. My middle sister Losang Chödzom was home at the time, and using her skill in procuring from others what she could not provide herself, she came to see me the same day, bringing *tsampa*, wheat flour, meat, and butter, as well as a change of clothes and even 20 *yuan*. That was the largest food parcel I had ever received in prison, and since the official who supervised our meeting that day was one of the better ones, it was relaxed. Still, there was nothing else we could talk about, and finally my sister told me to look after myself and encouraged me to write as soon as I could. As we parted, it occurred to me that if anything were to happen, that would be our last meeting. I could not erase the resounding impression made on me by hearing about the large number of prisoners who had died in Kongpo, and my sister was similarly affected. Even now I can clearly recall her looking back again and again as she walked away, and waving to me.

Then they divided the thirty of us into three groups of ten and made ready for departure. The next day a large truck came, into which they loaded

the first group, together with the work tools, and sent them off. For the next few days, those of us in the remaining two groups of ten rolled up our bedding after breakfast and waited in readiness, but no truck came for us. Fortunately, it turned out that on the way to Powo Tramo we were first going to the Drikung valley, an area under Medro Gongkar county. Whatever the differences between the two places in terms of workload and living conditions, the latter was much closer to Lhasa, and since it would be much easier for my family to reach me there, I became less gloomy. Suddenly one day about a week later, around midday, two large trucks arrived, which were the ones taking us. We had to leave hurriedly, without a chance to eat the midday meal. Then we crossed the Kyi-chu bridge east of Lhasa, and as we passed through Lha-dong Shenka, Tsé Kungtang, and beyond, there was nothing in my mind but the misery of watching the glorious gilded roofs of the Potala palace receding in the distance, and on we went, reaching Medro Gongkar as it got dark.

During that part of the journey we had no problems at all because we were on the main road from Chengdu to Lhasa, and as this was the supply route for the Chinese garrison in Lhasa, there were workers permanently engaged in maintaining it. The road from there to Drikung, however, served only the local villagers, and since it was irrelevant to the needs of the Chinese, it received only haphazard maintenance. In particular, there was no bridge for crossing the Medro Pu-chu [river] on the way from Medro Gongkar to the village of Ka-tsel, and you had to find your own way across. The driver followed previous tire tracks, but as it was the coldest time of year the water was frozen, and one of the wheels of our first truck broke through the ice and got stuck. We immediately got down and tried to pull the wheel out by breaking up the ice around it, while some pulled on a rope tied to the front of the truck and others pushed from behind, but despite our many attempts, we not only failed to extricate the wheel but also made it sink in deeper.

Meanwhile, night had fallen and there was a very bright moon, for it would have been something like the twelfth or thirteenth day of the lunar month by Tibetan reckoning. Everyone was hungry, as we had left Drapchi that day without eating the midday meal, but as that spot was cut off from nearby villages by deep water, there was nowhere to go looking even for some hot water. The four guards and one official with us, irritated by hunger, ordered us to hurry up and pull the truck out. If we could have pulled it out quickly, of course we would happily have done so, but since all of our strength combined was insufficient, we had to go about it more patiently. We took turns crawling under the truck to break up the ice with our iron bowls, and scooping out the broken ice by hand. I was hampered by the big

fleece jacket I was wearing and had to take it off, but as soon as I did so, the cold became unbearable. Because I dipped my arm in the icy water while wearing my jacket, the right sleeve became soaked right up to the shoulder, and as soon as I took a break it froze and the arm became extremely painful with cold. In any case, although we younger ones worked through the night with our swollen fingers in the ice, we were still unable to move the truck as the moon set behind the western horizon.

Then it became so dark that, far from being able to work, we couldn't even see the person we were standing next to. Finally, the guards decided that one of them should stay behind while the prisoners put their bedding and other necessities on their backs and headed off in the dark, under the supervision of the others, through Ka-tsel and toward Drikung. But then, although our drivers had been told where exactly in Drikung we had to go, they had stayed behind with the trucks, and the official and guards not only had no detailed directions but didn't even know which side of the river to walk on, and in the pitch dark there were no local people to ask and all we could do was guess which way to go. After a while, dawn broke and we found ourselves in a village called Medro Lha-dong-gang. We asked the villagers where the Drapchi prisoners were working on uncultivated land, and they replied that they had seen or heard of a few prisoners' tents on some vacant land near a place called Trong-nying (*Drong nying*) on the north bank of the river, but weren't sure if they were from Drapchi or not. As that seemed to be the right place, we headed on to the coracle ferry at Tangkya, reaching there soon after sunrise, but the boat was on the far side, and though we kept calling, there was no response. A villager told us that at this coldest time of the year, there were chunks of ice floating down the river in the morning, and the coracles could ply only after midday.

"You'll have to wait until noon," he said. We asked if there were no other ferry, but he replied, "Everyone knows that this Tangkya coracle ferry is the main one. Local people sometimes cross in other suitable places, but that's hardly going to help you. The river is frozen at Drikung Rongdo and you can easily cross there, but that's half a day's march away."

Apart from a cup of tea the previous morning before leaving Drapchi, we had had no chance to eat anything and were desperate. Our guards had been very feisty that morning, making us march in order under strict control, but as they had likewise had to go without food, they gradually started to lag behind us with hunger and fatigue.

As we marched on toward the ford at Rongdo, we asked for black tea or boiled water in the villages we passed along the road, and some brave

people shared what they had with us, but as we were more than twenty people there was no way to cope with us all. Although many of the villagers were willing to help us quench our thirst, they were under political pressure not to associate with prisoners and the like, and so avoided us out of fear. Anyway, having taken only one meal in two days, we reached a village called Bamda, on the way to Drikung Rongdo, at about five o'clock in the evening, and opposite there, on open land on the far side of the river, were some military tents that belonged to the Drapchi prisoners' camp. But as there were no coracles or boats at all in that stretch of the river, we faced the tiresome prospect of having to go on to Rongdo, still several hours' walk away, and then all the way back [on the other side of the river]. Then two shepherds, one elder and one younger, told us that this was a particularly cold winter, and that in a place nearby where the river had never frozen before, they had been able to drive their flocks over on the ice. "As long as you don't all cross together, but go a few at a time," they said, "you can get across without having to go up to Rongdo," and that is what we decided to do.

The first one to go across was Pema Dorjé from Lho-drak, who said he had experience of walking on the frozen surface of the Yamdrok-tso lake, and although the ice made a couple of cracking noises, he got across without difficulty. I went next, and for more than two thirds of the way everything was fine, but suddenly, as I was about to reach the far shore, there was a tremendous cracking noise and I fell over. I looked around, wondering what had happened, and saw a huge crack opening up in the ice just nearby. Those on the shore shouted at me to get up at once, but at first I panicked trying to disentangle the strap from the load of bedding on my back, which had gotten wrapped around my neck, and once free, my body went stiff with fear as I tried to get up, and I was unable to do it. Then Pema Dorjé, who had already made it across, untied the strap from his own load and threw me one end, and by holding on to that, I managed to get across the crack. But there was no way for the rest of the prisoners and the guards to come after us, and they had no choice but to go on to Rongdo.

When the two of us got to the tents of the Drapchi prisoners it was sunset, and the group of ten that was already there immediately boiled some tea and gave it to us. After drinking tea and eating *tsampa* dough, we rested and reflected on that day's hardships. The rest of the prisoners finally got there around midnight.