CHAPTER 11

Back Home from Prison

ON MY RELEASE on March 21, 1963, I walked out of Drapchi prison with my bedroll on my back, and when I got to the east Ling-khor road I met an old childhood playmate who greeted me warmly and explained where my family was staying. He said that my youngest brother, Nga-nam-la, was in school and he would let him know that I had been released, and thus encouraged by such a spirit of cheerfulness among my contemporaries, I reached the Tara Khangsar house in Banak-shöl where my brothers and sisters were living. The house had two street entrances, back and front, but although I banged for a long time on the back door, no one came to open it. After a while, a schoolgirl told me to go in through the front door, and when I went around to the front and through the entrance I found my middle sister Losang Chödzom-la milking a cow. She was so overjoyed to see me that she shed tears as she welcomed me, and right away made some tasty, nourishing butter tea.

As I drank that delicious tea of which I'd so often dreamed, I felt that I had left behind the suffering of the past and the ordeal of months and years of hunger and privation, and was glad to have survived it all in one piece. To have managed to live through it was to recognize that the pleasant or unpleasant things that happened were the nature of cyclic existence itself, and I reflected on how miserable it was that so many people had died untimely deaths in prison due to various terrible conditions, and even worse, that some people had taken their own lives when the suffering was too much for them to bear. Then my youngest brother, Nga-nam, came in, having been told of my release and taken leave from school. He hugged my leg and sobbed for a moment, and I too was overcome with feelings of joy and sorrow combined.

My sister said that first of all I should report to the leader (*Tsu'u krang*) of our local subcommittee, and then report my release to both the Banakshöl neighborhood committee (*Grong mi lhan tshogs*) and the East Lhasa sectional office (*Don gcod khru'u*). So I made my report to the leader, and was told to take my release certificate and letters of recommendation to the subpolice station (*mNgags gtong khang*) in the sectional office to finalize my residence card, and then to go to the food grains office (*'Bru rigs las khung*) to finalize my ration card. When I had my residence card and ration card after running up and down among the police station, sectional office, and food grains office a few times and got home again, Losang Chödzom seemed slightly more relaxed. She asked if I had gotten my documents and then asked, "Did the sectional office say you have a 'hat'?"

Not understanding her, I asked, "What's a 'hat'?"

"'Having a hat' means someone is deprived of political rights and has to live under the supervision and control of 'the masses.' Except for a few special cases, most prisoners who have been released after completing their sentences are given 'hats.' Having a hat makes things extremely difficult. Even to go to work as usual you have to report to your supervision subcommittee, not to mention for any other purpose. And when you come back in the evening you have to report that you are back. Every week you have to make a written report of your thoughts and hand it in. I hope you don't have a hat. Last night I dreamed that you arrived at the door of our old house with your bedroll on your back. I particularly noticed that you were not wearing a hat. I didn't take this to mean that you would come home today, but now that I think about the dream, there is hope that you won't have a hat."

When my sentence had originally been decided, I was to spend four years in prison doing Reform Through Labor with two years' deprivation of political rights, and they had even given me the sentencing document. Now that I had been released after the end of my term, my political rights were unclear, and when I had gone to get my residence and ration cards the sectional office and subpolice station staff hadn't said a word about it, so I was left in a state between hope and fear, wondering whether I had to wear a "hat" or not.

Then, when my other brothers and sisters came home after work that evening and we were all reunited, I started to hear about the devastating transformation of the lives of ordinary Tibetans since the "changes." To start with, maybe I should give a very brief account of what my own family members went through.

Five people from our household had been involved in the 1959 uprising, and except our mother, who was too ill to be conveniently arrested, had all

been arrested and imprisoned during the Chinese suppression of the uprising. Our mother and siblings who had been left at home were given an allowance of immediate necessities, such as bedding and a small amount of food to last for a few days, and confined to an adjacent building. Our household was declared "reactionary," the door was sealed, and all our property was confiscated. The same thing happened to most households associated with the former government whose members had participated in the uprising.

At that time, my family had hoped that those of us at the Norbu Lingka had been able to escape into exile, but none of us had managed to escape and we were in custody under tight control, so those left at home were assailed by troubles from all sides. Like people all over Tibet, under the oppressive demands of the occupation they had no rights whatsoever and had to obey and accept whatever they were told. They had to look after those of us in prison by bringing us provisions, without letting us know how little they could afford it once their every possession had been confiscated, and since we were being held in different locations and provisions could only be brought at the time appointed by prison regulations, they continually had to cope with these nuisances. However, most of our former servants and tenants, as well as our neighbors, did whatever they could to help out of sympathy, and our family members were not subjected to struggle due to false accusation or condemnation by those who might have profited by or been compelled to do it. At the time of my release, even though there were tight restrictions on the interaction of the extended family (*Pha spun*), our servants and tenants secretly came to see us, bringing tea, and did whatever they could to help us through the political campaigns that followed. This was not generally the case, since Chinese official practice was for people in every group to be pressured as much as they had to be to recriminate and struggle against their relatives and associates.

In the Democratic Reform campaign that followed the suppression of the uprising, not just members of the government, noble families, and monasteries (*gZhung sger chos gsum*) who had participated in the uprising but all those even slightly associated with them had their wealth confiscated—the exceptionally precious riches of many generations, which were stockpiled by the Chinese government's so-called Office of Industry and Commerce (*bZo tshong las khung*) to be transported back to China. Their furniture, chests, tables, feather pillows, Chinese and antique Tibetan carpets (*gTsang rum*), and floor rugs were taken by Chinese government offices for their own use. Superb articles of clothing, the finery once worn by the nobility for state occasions, made of old brocades with their own

distinguished histories, precious furs, and different grades of broadcloth, and many other exquisite and valuable accoutrements were traded by the Chinese officials among themselves. The three kinds of sacred images [statues, scriptures, and *stupa*s] confiscated from the government, nobility, and monasteries were stockpiled by the so-called Cultural Relics Preservation Office (*Rig dngos do dam las khung*), and the historic books and especially rare, handwritten works were set aside and taken to China, where today they are kept in the so-called Nationalities Cultural Palace (*Mi rigs rig gnas pho brang*) in Beijing.

Among the collection of books from Drépung monastery taken to China at that time was the fabulous copy of the Buddhist canon (*bKa' 'gyur*) written in gold, known as "the single ornament of the world," which was kept in the main assembly hall at Drépung. But one of its volumes happened to be left behind, and the monks took this as a sign that it would eventually return intact. When it was returned to the monastery twenty-five years later under the so-called Liberalization policy, people were quite amazed. Anyway, at that time (1959–60), after taking the best of what the Tibetans had for themselves, the Chinese government and its officials carried out Democratic Reform by distributing useless clothing, worn-out bedding, farm tools, and such among the people, while shaking both sky and earth with propaganda that they were justly redistributing to the masses the goods that the "three feudal lords" [state, church, and nobility] had amassed through their exploitation and oppression of the masses in the past.

Not long after, they initiated the Three Rejections and Two Reductions campaign. The three things to be rejected were the three feudal lords, and the two things to be reduced were high-interest loans and property rents. They announced to the public that the "old society" had been terribly backward, cruel, dark, and barbaric, and pressured ordinary people into agreeing to speak out about how they had suffered under the old system. They convened daily meetings for the condemnation and ridicule of the former society, which of course involved servants subjecting their former masters to struggle, but students were also cajoled and threatened into struggling against their teachers and children against their parents, and for a while the noise of struggle could be heard continuously, day and night.

In Lhasa at that time [His Holiness's tutor] the great Kyapjé Trijang Dorjé-chang was a particular target of Chinese animosity, and they incited people against him by staging a special display of illicit items and arranging for a couple of [former] junior attendants to claim that these things had been found in his Lhasa residence (*Khri byang bla brang*). They obliged

members of the families that had been his main sponsors, like Rampa and Kashöpa, to lead the denunciation, and they emphatically claimed at numerous public rallies that Kyapjé Dorjé-chang was an immoral person. They staged theatrical shows in many localities as a way of spreading propaganda against him, and drawings intended to insult or demean him were put up on the walls of many houses in the city. Even more cruelly, the remaining [senior] members of the monastic communities of Séra and Drépung and the upper and lower tantric colleges who had been inducted into an organization called the Buddhist Association (*Chos tshogs*) were especially forced and harassed into denouncing and rejecting Kyapjé Rinpoché, and many of those who had received his teachings and initiations and refused to denounce him were imprisoned. One of the best known, Géshé Yéshé Gyatso of Drépung Go-mang, who had served as chant leader of the lower tantric college, had to spend a long time in prison. Another example was Séra Lawa Géshé Jampa Chöpel, who, with a number of his students, had tried to escape due to this situation but was arrested on the road and put in prison, where he eventually died. In short, the most distressing part of all the false accusations being leveled at individuals in society was being forced to criticize and repudiate the lamas, teachers, and benefactors who had once been the kind providers of religious teaching or the material welfare of religious practitioners.

Then, in 1960 the Chinese started the Reexamination campaign, for the further investigation of rebels and [hidden] weapons. There were hunts for those who had been indirectly involved or had hidden weapons during the uprising in which many people were falsely implicated, subjected to struggle at mass meetings, and then imprisoned. That was the time when I was in Téring prison where, on a single night, about a hundred people from around Lhasa were brought in, as happened at other prisons. One way or another, most people were imprisoned during that campaign. In Lhasa, one could estimate that during the suppression of the uprising and Reexamination, about two thirds of the male population between the ages of seventeen and seventy were imprisoned: if you ask any three men of my age or older, two of them will have prison experiences to talk about.

Concerning economic life, since that was the time of failed harvests and famine in China, whatever essentials one could buy were rationed, and edible oil was especially tightly controlled. Lhasa citizens, whether old or young, employed or not, were entitled to 20 pounds (*rGya ma*) of grain per month, half a pound of butter, and half a pound of tea, while children got 5, 9, 13, or 16 pounds of grain according to age. As for livelihood, apart

from a little trade, most people had to work as unskilled laborers in the construction of new Chinese buildings. In the Lhasa area, most of the young monks who had not been imprisoned were sent to Kongpo to do road construction. Otherwise, they were in the Buddhist Association, but there was no religious practice at all and they were obliged to support themselves by joining in collective labor, the elderly working in vegetable gardens and the stronger ones breaking rocks or making mud bricks. Even then, their income was lower than the city people's.

The main employment for [former] Séra monks at that time was bringing wasteland under cultivation in the Dromtö agricultural area east of Lhasa, and the elder monks were given the duty of gathering manure. The amount they had to bring each day was fixed, and if they fell short they would face criticism and struggle at the evening meeting. Therefore, they would have to set off for Lhasa before dawn to look for whatever human or dog excrement they could find, and it was even said that they had to mix it by hand, but whether that was so or not, they did have to pick up such things with their fingers and make up a load by wrapping them in bits of cloth to carry back to the fields at Dromtö. Not only were the monks deliberately subjected to this kind of hateful and demeaning task, but also, as part of a campaign for the eradication of insects said to "cause disease and damage productivity," both the Buddhist Association people and the ordinary citizens were required to kill one hundred flies per day and as many mice and sparrows as they could, and present the corpses to their group leader every evening to be checked.

My younger brother Jam-pun-la was a teacher at the East Lhasa People's School (*dMangs slob*), and since the schoolchildren each had to present a daily quota of dead flies, mice, and sparrows to their teachers, he used to bring them home so that our family members could reuse them to fulfill their own quotas. These were some of the torments that people in civil society had had to endure during the four years I spent in prison, which I heard about from my family afterward.

Concerning the state of Lhasa society at the time of my release: the executive offices of the Chinese administration and their branches were many times larger than the offices of the former Tibetan government had been. Within the Preparatory Committee for the Tibet Autonomous Region (PCART), the city government came directly under the Lhasa Chengguanchu or municipality office, which included executive offices called sectional offices (*Don gcod khang*) for the east, north, and south parts of the city, and three more for the surrounding agricultural area, making six sectional of-

fices under the municipality. Under each of these were four neighborhood committees (*Grong mi lhan khang*), making twelve committees in the city and then twelve rural administrative divisions (*Xiang*) in the nearby villages. The sectional officials were Chinese government employees, and the senior leaders at committee and *Xiang* level received the equivalent of half a government salary, while the rest of the leaders at that level were ordinary people who had to make their own living. Nonetheless, their status gave them a power sufficient to strike terror in the heart of any ordinary person whose dwelling they approached. Those were the offices involved in the direct governing of ordinary citizens, and besides them, there were numerous quotidian departments and enterprises whose workers and employees were roughly equal in number to the entire civilian population of Lhasa; among those, the staff of the Public Security Office (*sPyi bde las khung*) was then the most powerful and notorious.

In terms of commercial activity, there were a few privately run sweet tea shops and a few people who set up stalls along the main roads selling candy and cheap cigarettes from China. Fewest of all were those who managed to get permits to sell bread, and all the other shops in the marketplace had been closed and their occupants were now working as construction laborers. You needed a permit (*sPa se*) to buy anything in most of the state-run stores, and these were given as a monthly allowance to workers in government departments or factories. No such permits were given to ordinary citizens. They could only buy a fixed amount of provisions, on the basis of a ration certificate, from the small stores known as "refills" (*'Dzad sprod khang*) in each committee where, in the case of clothing, for example, there was no choice at all of color or size. Above all, since edible oil was extremely scarce and the monthly ration was inadequate for most people, who were engaged in heavy labor such as construction, their main concern was to try to get hold of supplementary food like bread, which is why there were always a great many people to be seen crowding around the bread seller's door. But the bread sellers could only get flour on a monthly ration, and baked no more than five times a month. There was never enough for all those waiting to buy, so they jostled and pushed, and sometimes they would spill over into the baker's room, clay pots and kettle stands would get broken, and uncooked bread snatched out of the pan.

Some people who were very shrewd in such matters would secretly manage to buy oil directly from farmers who had plenty, but then it was very difficult to use, for when they made butter tea they would have to wipe off the tea churn with a bit of cloth in such a way that no one noticed, or if

they fried vegetables they would have to do it so that no one else could hear or smell them doing it. These things are hard for the present generation to believe, but those who lived through those times had many experiences that are not easily told, stories that excite both tears and laughter.

At that time, skilled laborers like carpenters and masons could earn 2.5 *yuan* per day, ordinary laborers earned 1.2 *yuan* if they were strong, while those with less strength, as well as tailors, spinners, and weavers, got only 0.9 *yuan*. Even if you could work all the time, your monthly wage would only be enough to cover the rationed essentials like edible oil, so households like ours whose entire property had been confiscated by the state had no choice but to sell off the few things they had been able to hide to so-called "Khachara" ("half-breed") members of Lhasa's Nepalese community for a nominal price. Just like the proverb "When the old horse is struck down by lightning, the old dog takes on a new shine," the Khacharas made more profit from the changed situation in Tibet than they had for generations.

The Chinese government itself had people buying up precious items like gold, silver, jewels, pearls, and coral, as well as fabulous artifacts and other valuables. Those former nobles and large or medium-sized traders who had not participated in the 1959 uprising, had avoided having their possessions confiscated, and still had precious goods and artifacts to sell were exchanging them directly for commodities of completely incommensurate value, such as sugar, tea bricks, and cloth, which had become extremely scarce. Coral of a weight that would currently fetch tens of thousands of rupees in Nepal, for example, was exchanged for 5 or 6 pounds of sugar, or enough cotton to make a pair of pajamas. Later, that government emporium acquired precious medicinal plants like ginseng (*dKar po gcig thub*) and caterpillar fungus (*dByar rtsa dgun 'bu*), and [animal products like] musk, pilose deer antler (*Sha ba'i khrag rva*), bear gall, and precious furs from ordinary farmers and nomads at similarly unbalanced rates.

In society at that time, incomes and purchasing power were completely out of proportion; a month's income was sufficient only for basic necessities rationed at government rates, and anything else had to be purchased illicitly at inconceivably high prices. To give an example from my own experience, the most important item of clothing in those days was shoes, and there was no way to buy according to choice. One time, someone I knew had three pairs of Chinese army shoes for sale, and since my younger brother and I were in great need, we had to buy them. At first, he wanted 40 *yuan* per pair, but in the end he reluctantly agreed on 100 *yuan* for all three, the equivalent of three months' wages for me at the time. Fortunately, we had

recently managed to sell off one of our hidden possessions, so I was able to find the money.

Under such conditions, people were too frightened not to go to work. Even if one had had enough money and provisions, it was not permitted to stay home at leisure, and apart from the hour of the morning when everyone went to work and the evening when they returned, the city was empty and silent. Coming and going in the morning and evening, people wore torn clothing covered in patches, and since they had neither the means nor the opportunity to wash their faces and hair regularly, they looked exactly like down-at-the-heels characters in a play; not a single one of them looked clean or healthy. And except for having the chance to live with my dear sisters again after my release, [I found] the mental and physical stress at times even worse than in prison.

For a few days after my release I stayed home at ease, and since the pretense of freedom of religious belief was still in place and people were allowed into the Tsukla-khang temple for worship in the mornings and evenings, I had a good chance to do that. A few days later, as I was getting around to looking for work, the security chief and other leaders of our committee came repeatedly to demand whether I was going to work and what I thought I was doing. At that point, since everything we had had been confiscated by the state, I didn't even have pocket money to keep me going for a month and my only possession was the ragged bedding I had carried on my back when I came out of prison; there was no option other than to earn some money. It was not so easy to find a job on the spot, but I asked many of my friends to look out for something, and my relative Késang Déchen-la, a former teacher at the Drépung tantric college, told me there was work digging the foundations for some new houses and collecting building materials with the construction unit he had joined, which had been involved with building the new Kyi-chu bridge. Before long, I was fully employed in the carpentry workshop in that unit, cutting house timbers on an electric saw, and sometimes cutting huge logs by handsaw. While I was there, the highest wage for ordinary workers was 1.3 *yuan* per day. I worked conscientiously without shirking or cheating, so the Chinese carpenters in charge didn't give me such a hard time.

After nine months or so, they recruited a certain number of workers from each neighborhood committee to work on fixing the canal at the Ngachen power station, and I was one of those who had to go. The wages were lower than at my previous job, and the work was heavier, particularly as I had to load rocks for the canal onto a truck, which was of course hard work

but also caused frequent injuries and was very demanding with our inadequate nutrition and clothing. After four months the work force was reduced, and I was part of a group of workers sent on from there to the Lhasa cement factory. The wages were just as low and the work just as heavy, and I experienced for myself what they say about cement dust being extremely harmful to the health. I applied to the committee for permission not to work there anymore, but since they had not sent us there directly, they in turn had to get leave from Nga-chen.

It was no more than three weeks before I was able to leave and come back home. While I had been at the carpentry workshop I had learned to cut timber with a [two-man] handsaw, and the highest wages to be had in Lhasa at the time were with a group of private-sector Chinese workers cutting timber that way, where those employed in pulling the saw from below were all Tibetan. Someone I knew put me in touch with one of those Chinese saw workers. He was the brother of the number 6 Lhasa transport company depot manager and did his saw work at that depot. He paid 3 *yuan* a day, which was the highest wage in the city for any craft work, but he was just as nasty as could be. If I hadn't finished the amount of timber he wanted sawn in a day, he wouldn't let me go home even when it got dark. If something was even slightly wrong, he scolded me viciously, and at times was even ready to beat me. His income was at least 30 *yuan* a day, and even though I did most of the hard work, he gave me no more than a tenth of what he earned, but I couldn't find any other job so had to stay with him.

How was it that his income was so much greater than that of any Tibetan with the same skills? Generally speaking, carpenters and masons were paid according to the amount they produced on a sort of hire basis (*Bogs ma*), unlike other workers, and at that time the rate was 1.5 *yuan* per cubic meter, so you earned according to the amount of timber you could saw. But in reality, most of the people doing that work were individual Chinese entrepreneurs, and they used to bribe the managers of the offices that hired them to cook the books. In our case, for example, since the Chinese saw man's brother was the manager of the office where the wood was sawn, whatever was omitted from the accounts went straight into their pockets. This can be seen from the fact that the few Tibetans who were in that business did exactly the same work as the Chinese but earned far less from it. Before long, one of my former prison mates called Tubten Gyeltsen-la, who was also doing sawing work, took me on as his employee. There was no guarantee of earning 3 *yuan* a day, but at least I would not have to put up with a Chinese boss. I helped him with the saw, but he took care of the tools

and finding the work, and we divided whatever we earned between us, but in terms of facilities, skills, and especially finding work, we were never able to do as well as the Chinese entrepreneurs.

Then, around the end of 1964, the Labor Affairs Office (*Ngal rtsol do dam las khung*) of the PCART issued a proclamation fixing the wages for all categories of workers in the city and forcefully prohibiting the contracting of labor on any other terms, effective immediately. The wage rates specified in that document were more or less the same as the going rates, but what was different was the strict specification that members of the former ruling class (*mNga' bdag*) and their deputies (*mNga' tshab*) as well as members of the "four categories" (*Rigs bzhi'i mi sna ie*: ruling class, ruling class deputies, counterrevolutionaries, bad elements) were to be paid no more than 0.9 *yuan* a day, regardless of their work or ability. All workers were to be issued a certificate specifying their line of work and class category with the stamp of the Labor Affairs Office and their local committee, which was to be the sole basis for remuneration in all places of work. Since I was in the ruling class category, had participated in the uprising, and had been released after serving a prison sentence, I could earn no more than 0.9 *yuan* a day, whatever work I did. So I quit the job I had been doing and looked for some undemanding construction work, spending a few months doing odd jobs on the restoration of a building in the hospital on the site of the former bodyguard regiment barracks in the Norbu Lingka. Far from being able to repay the kindness of my family members, it was very hard even to meet my own needs on a wage of 0.9 *yuan* a day.

It was around that time that people involved in trade were subjected to struggle at mass meetings for allegedly evading taxes and eventually forced to pay an unthinkably high rate of taxes, and many of them were given political "hats" and made to do Reform Through Labor under the supervision of the masses. During 1962, when Liu Shaoqi was China's supreme leader, he had promulgated a twenty-six-point document on economic affairs that slightly relaxed the restrictions on individual or voluntary economic activity, and trade had been permitted in Tibet in accordance with the conditions in each region. At that time many people got permits (*Lag 'khyer*) and engaged in trade, but the document didn't remain in force for very long, and more than two years had gone by since controls had been reimposed and the traders had gone back to doing various kinds of labor. However, when the tax campaign was launched [i.e., in early 1965], they investigated those who had previously held trade permits to see how much capital they had, and imposed a limit called the "profit margin" (*Khe slebs*) based on the

Chinese government's own estimate, which the former traders were forced to admit having crossed, and then taxed them accordingly.

The worst offender in our neighborhood was the former horse trader called Powo Tségyé, who was ordered to pay an astronomical amount in taxes. He honestly pleaded that he was an old man with absolutely no business assets or profits on which he might pay such a tax, but instead of listening to him, they threatened him with the statutory punishment of imprisonment for not paying. He decided to commit suicide by throwing himself in the Kyi-chu river, but his relatives found out and managed to stop him, and they had to sell everything in the house down to the butter tea churn to pay the tax. He was put in the "big trader" (*Tshong chen*) class category and had to do unpaid Reform Through Labor along with us members of the former ruling class, their deputies, and the "four categories" of people with dubious loyalties, forbidden to sit with the ordinary citizens in the meetings, and subjected to political abuse. Later on, when we ended up working in the same place, I heard Powo Tségyé telling how when they came to look into his assets, the high rate of tax they demanded was entirely based on the average standard set by the Chinese government, and he did not even possess a tenth of that amount.