CHAPTER 15

The Establishment of the Tibet Autonomous Region

WHEN THE TIBET Autonomous Region was formally established in September 1965, a group of central government representatives, led by one of the then vice premiers of the State Council and Public Security Minister Xie Fuchi, arrived in Tibet to attend a grand inaugural ceremony. Not long afterward, it was decided at an autonomous region conference that the Communist Party Tibet work committee and most of the main TAR departments would move to the Powo Yiwong region once the necessary construction had been completed. Thus, most of the construction units in the autonomous region departed for that place, and a large number of ordinary laborers were recruited from Lhasa municipality, Chamdo prefecture, and so on. In Lhasa, each neighborhood committee had to recruit a quota of workers—sixty in Banak-shöl's case—and if there were not enough volunteers, it was up to each subcommittee to designate candidates, and our subcommittee put down my name. My younger brother Nga-nam was working as a construction laborer at the time and volunteered to go with me. All of the recruited workers left Lhasa together in a convoy of ten trucks on September 26.

This was before the start of the Cultural Revolution, and the workers' parents and relatives came to see them off with tea and beer as is the Tibetan custom, and my brothers and sisters also came. As we set off, they put a greeting scarf (*Kha btags*) around my neck, which was the first time I had worn one since the [1959] troubles. For me, this was a chance to see the Kongpo and Powo regions, where I had never been before, which are quite different from Ü province and well known for their unique landscape, although the earlier news of the deaths of so many prisoners in those areas had left a strong impression on me, and there was a reluctance [to go] in the back

of my mind. Once we got there, however, we found that it was an extremely beautiful place. After we passed Numa-ri, where Kongpo begins, six hours by truck from Lhasa, the mountains on both sides of the road were filled with a verdant abundance of flora, and we could see the famous Nyang-chu river surging into waves as it flowed southeast through a valley somewhat broader than a gorge, whose flanks were adorned by fields like ornaments, planted with various crops and terraced in some places, like the stepped base of a *stupa*. In the uplands there were said to be rich pastures where many nomads lived. It was September, and the fruit of the walnut and peach trees, which belonged to no one, was there for all to enjoy as they pleased.

The beauty of the area was such as I had never seen in the other parts of Tibet I had visited. However, it was because of these natural resources and environmental conditions that most of the Chinese business enterprises in Tibet at that time, both private and state-run, had been established in Kongpo. By the time we got there, only a few years had passed since the enforcement of Communist rule in Tibet, but in this area with the largest concentration of Chinese outside Lhasa, Chinese settlements both military and civilian were already to be seen in every corner of the valley, most notably logging teams and big timber yards, for the forests were being cut indiscriminately. However, the upper and lower reaches of the main valley were still covered with forest, and the scars left by logging had not yet become evident.

After crossing the Serkyim-la pass beyond Nyingtri, we reached Kongpo Lu-nang. There is a popular proverb, "If once you set foot in Kongpo Lu-nang, you will not think of your own homeland anymore": it is a broad valley bounded on either side by mountains capped with snow and covered with virgin forest in their middle reaches, sweeping down into lush meadows the color of parrots' plumage. The inhabitants are semipastoralists, for cattle thrive on the abundance of water and grazing, and the climate is pleasantly temperate. It is as fair a land as can be found anywhere in Tibet. It is said that most of the inhabitants are the descendants of Khampas who passed through on their way from eastern Tibet to holy Lhasa and other pilgrimage destinations in Ü, and were so taken with the area that they returned to settle there. There were a few Chinese army camps and a few road workers' camps, for the highway running through Powo was continually affected by landslides during the summer rains. Otherwise, there weren't many Chinese settlements there at that time.

Even as we went on toward Powo Yiwong the way was blocked by a landslide, and we had to stop in a road workers' compound. I well remember

being in that place during the celebration of National Day [October 1]. Then we reached Powo Yiwong. According to local tradition, that area too was a special "hidden valley"; before reaching it one has to pass through a very narrow gorge, which gradually opens out into a broad river valley, covered with primordial forest, with a fabulous lake at its center that is supposed to be the talismanic lake of some protector deity. Beyond the lake to the north is one of the great snow mountains of ancient myth, a splendid peak known as Ngang-yak Karpo. According to the locals, there is a great cleft in the mountains on one side of the lake where iron ore is found, and that is smelted and worked to produce the famous Powo knives (*sPo gri*). Here and there, the land is adorned with level meadows like natural sports fields, and the crop cultivated in that area is a type of grain that ripens into a flower, which was in bloom as we arrived, so from a distance the scene really looked like something painted by a master artist.

However, the people's way of life was apparently primitive. Many of them had a poor physique, perhaps because of the plant life in the water; there were a lot of people with goiter and warts on their faces and hands; some had deformed limbs; and there seemed to be a high proportion of congenital idiocy. Their settlements were not concentrated in villages, but dispersed, and their main form of livelihood was forestry. As well as [the usual] wheat, barley, peas, buckwheat, millet, and so on also grew well, and the climate and elevation allowed for two annual crops. They had cattle such as *dzomo* [yak-cow hybrids], cows, and goats, and also kept hens and pigs. Most of the men liked to hunt, and they had different kinds of hunting dogs of which they were very fond. The most crucial imported commodity was salt, but although Tibet had salt in inexhaustible quantity, the Chinese government did not allow for its supply to such small communities, so evidently they had to find other sources.

By the time we arrived in Yiwong there were already many construction work sites, and the workers arriving from Lhasa were allocated to different ones. The workers from the four neighborhood committees under the East Lhasa sectional office were bound for a place called Chakar on the north side of the lake where there was a brick factory and a logging team nearby, and we were sent to the brick factory. The place we had to stay in, where the bricks were made, had just a roof to keep off the rain, with no side walls, and a hundred people were put there together, with a space assigned to each subcommittee. It was autumn, and with the warmer temperatures in that area the lack of walls was not a problem, for the breeze served as welcome ventilation to clear the stench of so many people living in a confined space.

There were different sections in the workplace, the adobe-brick makers and clay-brick makers, the brick kiln operators and those who cut wood for the kilns, while the most important [pieces of equipment] were the hand carts, and more important still were those who repaired them. Since I had a little experience of repairing such small vehicles from my time in prison, I was put in the vehicle repair division (*Tshogs chung*). The vehicle repair people were entitled to a skilled worker's wage, but since I belonged to the "ruling class" category, my wage level was among the lowest even for unskilled workers. Although there was not such an enormous practical difference between these wage levels, the indiscriminate exploitation of even our physical strength under the regulations of an oppressive political ideology was in itself offensive. However, since this construction work had been deemed one of the autonomous region's most important targets, some consideration was given to the workers' standard of living, and the provision of food and other necessities was no worse than for civilians in Lhasa at that time.

To judge from the scale of the construction work sites in Yiwong, they seemed to be engaged in a project that would be going on for at least five or six years, but after about four months the intensity of the work lessened, and we heard a whispered rumor that we were to be moved to Kongpo Nyingtri. Not long afterward an announcement came that our work group had to move on to Nyingtri, and the other work groups in Yiwong were also moved, to places in Kongpo and in Chamdo prefecture. I heard two different explanations why these large-scale construction units suddenly had to quit: some said that although in terms of the climate and landscape this was a suitable place for Chinese people to stay, a team of British geologists had earlier found that the area was flood-prone, and some Chinese geologists had recently confirmed this. Other people said that there had been several cases of spies being dropped by [foreign] aircraft in that area. Neither version was confirmed by the authorities, but the latter seems more likely to me. Anyhow, that great construction project was abandoned midway through, and later on, apart from a "secret" Party training school ("*Yid 'ong sbas tshon*") and a few agricultural units, no large-scale official complex was ever [built] there.

All the same, it was clear that they managed to devastate the forest in that area within a very short time. Obviously the proposed construction site had to be cleared and leveled, and timber provided for construction. Then, just to take the example of our brick factory, they needed 40 to 50 truckloads of firewood per day to fuel the kiln, and they used an unimaginable quantity of timber for the scaffolding alone when they set up a new kiln.

One of the logging teams nearby had about 400 or 500 workers, and if you work out how much they must have cut every day, it is frightening. Moreover, the sequence of the work was totally haphazard, with no thought at all being given to the regeneration of the forest, which was not the usual practice even in China, not to mention elsewhere. The only substantial outcome of the construction program in Powo Yiwong, then, was the tremendous damage inflicted on the surrounding forests.

Our work group moved to Kongpo Nyingtri early in 1966. We traveled back on the same road by which we had come to Yiwong and found that in the space of those five months the area had undergone great changes. A logging department and timber yard had been established in Kongpo Lu-nang and, most striking of all, the mountain slopes above Nyingtri leading up to Serkyim-la pass were full of logging teams. The largest of them was the team affiliated with Drapchi prison. All the trees near the passable section of road on that mountain had been cut, and now they were making inroads in areas not accessible by the road.

Our new factory was established on the site of a disused brick kiln, which we enlarged, on open land in front of Nyingtri township. The centerpiece of construction in Kongpo at that time was the so-called "Eight-one" [August 1] new town (*Ba-yi* in Chinese) in the area [formerly known as] Ba-chi, where a large textile factory, a power station, a match factory, and a paper factory were being built. Since our factory had to supply all those construction sites with bricks, tiles, and quicklime and the strength of our workforce and the required production levels were in inverse proportion, the work became extremely demanding. Less efficient groups of workers had to make up for it in their spare time. Things got worse not long after our arrival in Nyingtri with the launch of the "Four Cleanups" campaign (*gTsang ma bzhi*), when official work teams (*Las don ru khag*) organized by the TAR Party committee were deputed to each departmental division and a six-member official subcommittee arrived at our work site. The "Four Cleanups" were "clean administration," "clean thinking," "clean economy," and "clean conduct," and the main objectives concerned the Party organization and the leaders of our factory, but also involved "education" for the rest of us in the current political drive. Having to go to the meetings every evening before we could recover from the day's toil was one of the worst torments of the Communist system.

There were separate meetings for the few of us in the "ruling class" and "ruling class deputy" categories, where we had to account for our progress in "thought reform," and in the name of "labor reform" we were called on

to clean up around the workplace, cut firewood for general use, and help in the preparation of a general meeting hall, playing field, and other facilities in the mornings and evenings, on Sundays, and whenever we had free time. One of the members of the official subcommittee was a short Chinese man who particularly had it in for me. He was always looking for any issue with which he could attack me, asking my fellow workers how I was doing, ordering them to supervise and criticize me, and ordering those in my dormitory to report to him on any rumors I might spread, any reactionary thoughts I might express, or any irregularity of behavior they could think of. When there was a political campaign going on, the work teams would politicize any incident they could find as an accomplishment of their mission, regardless of whether it was really a matter of concern, and that Chinese went to all possible lengths to stir up trouble for me. However, most of my fellow workers and those in my dormitory were kind and well-intentioned people, and they always let me know discreetly that he was vindictively looking for an accusation to frame me, and sincerely confided in me about how to stay out of trouble.

But there were always a few mindless ones who followed whatever the Chinese told them. Dönden, the cook in our communal kitchen, was one of them, and he handed in a "thought report" to that Chinese saying that I had been making exaggerated remarks about the virtues of the "old society" in order to corrupt the thinking of young people who had grown up "under the red flag." In the next meeting, the Chinese official told me several times while pointing his finger at me, "If you voluntarily confess your mistakes, the Party will treat you leniently," but I was not aware of making any mistakes and had nothing to confess. Finally, in an attempt to intimidate me, he told me very aggressively, "Unless you confess your crime of corrupting the thoughts of the youth who have grown up under the red flag, as well as your objective in doing so, you will have to face struggle at the general meeting and could end up going back to prison." Thereupon, I said that if anyone could testify or demonstrate that there had been any incident of my poisoning others' thoughts, they should please speak up, but none of the young people present so much as opened their mouths. Finally, the false accuser Dönden told the Chinese official privately that he had seen the young ones always gathering around me and listening to what I had to say, but since he could produce nothing more in support of his accusation and no one else came forward to confront me, he and the Chinese were confounded, and after they warned me to "think carefully about my guilt," the meeting came to an end.

After that, no one tried to sustain or repeat this allegation, but the official work team stayed on, and thereafter, with the issue of two successive central government policy documents, "The Dictatorship of the Proletariat Must Be Consolidated" and "Class Struggle Must Never Be Abandoned," those in the "ruling class" categories were cornered. We each had three individuals assigned to us as supervisors, and whenever we needed to go into town or any other place, we had to ask the "supervision subcommittee" (*lTa rtog tshogs chung*) for leave and give our reasons. And they made a rule that even if we were given leave, we had to be back within four hours.

It seems that at that time there was a fierce dispute within the central government over the direction of official policy, and there was one incident I clearly recall. They used to give a weekly film show in our factory, and one time, before the main film, they showed a newsreel of the central leaders meeting with foreign guests. I was sitting next to a Muslim fellow whose family name was Ma, and he asked me if I noticed anything in particular about the newsreel. I had not, so I asked him what he meant, and he replied that one of the leaders was heading for disaster. He knew this because the main concern of newsreel producers was to respect the status of the top leaders, so one could easily tell from those films who were the most powerful even though it was not actually stated. In the film we had just seen, Liu Shaoqi was not very evident and appeared only momentarily. You could tell from that, Ma said, that an internal dispute was going on, and he turned out to be right. Those documents on consolidating the proletarian dictatorship and continuing the class struggle seem to have been designed to influence an ongoing struggle within the central leadership, and the campaign known as the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was started shortly afterward.