

CHAPTER 18

A Disastrous New Year

THE FIRST DAY of the Tibetan earth monkey year, 1968, was a new year's day to go down in history. Every society has its own way of celebrating the beginning of a new year, and in Tibet both the government and the common people used to stage very elaborate ceremonies with strong historical associations. Although the official celebrations had come to an end with the events of 1959, popular celebrations and some religious observances continued. With the start of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 and the forceful prohibition of the Four Olds, however, not only was there no question of celebrating the new year, but "class enemies" who stayed home at that time could very well be accused of wanting to celebrate, so we definitely had to be at our places of work and act as normal. Still, it is difficult to do away with people's ideas all at once, like cutting them off with a knife, and most Tibetans celebrated the new year at home before dawn, and discreetly greeted their trusted acquaintances with a "Tashi délek" [new year greeting] when they got to work.

But in 1968, Tibetan new year fell on the same day as the Chinese new year spring festival, and as it was the government's practice to grant everyone several days off for that occasion, they could not prevent Tibetans from having their own new year holiday. So that year Tibetans started saving up the things they needed to celebrate the new year months in advance, and we also put aside whatever foodstuffs we could. At that time, my younger brother Jam-pun was one of the teachers at the People's School in east Lhasa who, unlike most people, bought their monthly rations from the officials' ration store, and he got some very good quality *tsampa* in the month before the new year that we mixed with butter and discreetly stored in the cupboard together with other foods, ready for the holiday. The first day of Tibetan new

year dawned with beautiful weather and bright sunshine, the queen of the heavens honored Tibetans with a special new year greeting, and people were enjoying the boon of the Chinese and Tibetan calendars coinciding on that lovely sunny morning. We had no idea of the disaster about to strike.

After our family celebration on new year's day, I was in the courtyard watching our neighbors' children play a game of dice when A-ché Tendzin and Lulu, Gyenlok leaders in the Banak-shöl neighborhood committee, and a few young Red Guards came into our apartment. It was normal for the neighborhood committee security personnel to patrol and check on "class enemies" or other suspicious people on special days, and I assumed that was what they were doing, but when I did not see them come out again, I wondered what was going on and went back inside to find them searching our cupboard. It was as if the fine weather had suddenly turned into a raging storm. That apartment had an inner and an outer room separated by a door curtain, and in the inner room we had lit a butter lamp as a new year offering. In one cupboard in the outer living room was the first-poured cup of tea (*Ja phud*) and a porcelain bowl containing new year sweet rice (*'Bras bsil*), and in the other a bowl of dry rice, a plate full of candies and other things, and a plate full of buttered *tsampa* dough. Lulu the Gyenlok leader looked through both cupboards and took out the plate of dough, shouting, "Who put this 'spirit monster' stuff here?"

While they were searching the cupboards, my elder sister Losang Chönyi-la went behind the curtain into the inner room to extinguish the butter lamp, and the smoke from the doused wick floated out. At this I got scared, thinking that there was no other explanation for it than as a religious act, but it seemed that the younger ones had grown up "under the red flag" and the older two had no knowledge of what religious offerings were, so none of them noticed the smell of the extinguished lamp. Meanwhile, Lulu kept demanding in a snarling voice to know who had prepared the *tsampa* dough. When I told him I had done it, he said, "You bring this and come with us," and making me hold the plate of dough, with one of their people on either side, they led me off to the neighborhood committee building, where Gyenlok had their base. There was another "class enemy" with a new year offering plate of dry rice, a plate full of sweets, and so on, as well as a scorpion-shaped piece of fried dough, which is traditionally made as an offering to the *nagas* when frying new year pastries (*Kha zas*). They put my plate of dough together with the other confiscated items, and told me, "You should think about what this means. This matter will be decided later; meanwhile, stay home and behave properly," then sent me back.

I returned to find my brothers and sisters in a state of anxiety. They told me that after I was taken away, our “class enemy” neighbor A-ché Sonam-la and Ama A-tra, a member of our group who had a “hat,” had been led away by Nyamdrel leaders accompanied by Red Guards and had not returned. Although I had been allowed to come home, having been told to think and await judgment, I could not relax for the rest of the new year holiday. I had already agreed to visit one of my friends, who lived by the entrance to the Banak-shöl neighborhood committee, on the first day of the new year, and as I passed there I saw Nyamdrel Red Guards leading in many “class enemies” holding new year offerings of buttered *tsampa* (*phye mar*) and barley beer (*chang phud*), butter lamps, plates of pastries, and so on. I assumed that they would be sent home again as I had been, but a little while later the Banak-shöl Nyamdrel leaders and Red Guards led them around the Parkor in a procession with drums and cymbals, shouting, “‘Spirit monsters’ must be eliminated.” This scared me and, thinking that my case could be decided at any time, and that if they called me and I was not home they could take my elder sisters instead, I hurried home to wait for Gyenlok’s summons. But I did not have to join any humiliation procession that day, nor did anyone call on me during the four days of the Chinese new year holiday.

In fact, it seems that the Nyamdrel headquarters called Farmers and Pastoralists Command under the Lhasa municipality was responsible for carrying out that vicious plan on new year’s day, and as soon as some of the Gyenlok units got wind of it they set out to do the same, but since they came late, the Banak-shöl Gyenlok caught only three of us—the former secretary of the Tibet military command, Pema Norbu; the treasurer of Tsawa Ösér Labrang, Dondrup Tséring; and myself—and were unable to stage a great parade as the Nyamdrel had done. Not only that, but I heard that since the central Gyenlok command had not approved of the plan to conduct house searches that day, the neighborhood-level Gyenlok units involved were accused of imitating Nyamdrel and this led to some internal criticism.

But the Nyamdrel led people from each neighborhood committee around the Parkor in humiliation processions that day, subjecting them to various kinds of mistreatment, and those whose offenses they considered more serious were not sent home again but kept in detention. They took our neighbor A-ché Sonam because they found her with a porcelain cup full of *chang*. As for Ama A-tra, she wore a “hat” and was in one of the “four categories” [of undesirable people], and in addition all her neighbors were neighborhood committee leaders and activists, so she had to be particularly

careful and always kept up the necessary appearances. It seems that they could find no particular reason for making her join the humiliation procession that day, but the Nyamdrel brought a photo of Liu Shaoqi with them that they claimed to have found in her house, and led her away together with her son-in-law, an employee of the long-distance telegraph office.

The people taken in procession that day were made to wear various kinds of clothing and to carry their traditional new year *tsampa* boxes (*Gro so phyé mar*), butter lamps, *chang* offerings, pastries, etc., and paraded up and down the Parkor for almost the whole day. Some mindless people in the crowd of onlookers who did not understand the significance of what was happening showered them with dirt and spat or flicked mucus at them, jeered, and subjected them to absolute misery. Among those in the parade were two eminent lamas under the Tromsi-khang neighborhood committee, the former abbot of Séra-jé Lhundrup Tapké, and another senior Séra-jé scholar (*mTshan zhabs*), Ngo-drup Tsoknyi, who had been marking the occasion with some ceremony, apparently quite oblivious to the danger of something like this happening. Red Guards had burst into their quarters that morning and found them conducting religious ceremonies dressed in full monastic robes, and they were led in procession in their robes and carrying a wooden tray with *vajra* scepters and ritual bells and other religious paraphernalia. It had been many years since anyone wearing the full uniform of the noble *sangha* had been seen in our country, and many of those who witnessed the procession that day spoke of experiencing a sensation of joy at seeing those robes, mixed with the unbearable sorrow of the circumstances in which they had come to light.

Then, on the fourth day of the Tibetan month, I got the summons from Gyenlok to come to their meeting hall at seven o'clock that evening. When I arrived, there was a sign pasted above the door reading STRUGGLE MEETING AGAINST "SPIRIT MONSTERS," which meant that I was going to be subjected to struggle. Until then, I had never been singled out as the target for a group struggle session, and in the current campaign there had been cases of a few morons among the public crippling people with their gratuitous beatings. Of course I was concerned about getting severely injured myself, but also about the kind of difficulties my family members could face, and as I waited there for the crowd to assemble my mind raced with such fears and I started shaking in terror. As I waited, an old tailor who used to live in our compound came and handed me a large cup full of strong *chang*, which I knocked back in one gulp, and that gave me courage and gradually stopped the shaking. *Whatever happens*, I thought, *there is no need for regret*, and my



Public humiliation of Dr. Lhundrup Peljor, former headmaster of the Nyarong-shak school, and his son and daughter. *Used with kind permission from Woesser.*

fear subsided. Once the Gyenlok participants had assembled, I was called into the hall. As soon as I entered, a loud voice led the crowd in chanting, “Never abandon class struggle” and “Clean up the ‘spirit monsters,’” as I was led in front of the stage and made to stand with my head lowered. When the meeting began, I was told, “You, Tubten Khétsun, a reactionary oppressor who participated in the uprising, have indulged in superstition, without regret for your former crimes. You should make a full confession in front of the masses of your intention in making religious offerings!”

“It was just buttered dough, not an offering,” I said. “I have always liked eating it, and since before new year my younger brother received a ration of good quality *tsampa* and I had an extra half-pound of butter for the spring festival, we had the ingredients to make some dough, so that’s what I did.

Whether in terms of its shape, color, or anything else, that dough was nothing like a religious offering.”

One of the Gyenlok leaders called Jampa Lung-rik had once served as chairman (*Kru'u ren*) of Séra monastery and before the uprising had studied debate at Séra, so he was an assiduous interrogator who knew not to make his maliciousness evident. He now challenged me: “Tubten Khétsun, you should speak honestly. It was a form of offering. The manner of making offerings can differ according to the situation. Since you class enemies are very deceitful, you disguised it as food, but in reality you were determined to celebrate Tibetan new year!”

As soon as he had spoken, the other leaders and activists took up the cry, “It was an offering!” “He’s holding on to the empty hope of bringing back the old society!” “Making prayers to the Dalai and Panchen, do you want to restore their power or not? Tell us clearly!” and they bullied me a lot, pulling me up by the back of the neck, pushing me down again, and so on.

“Why would I hope for the restoration of the old society?” I said. “Since our country did not produce so much as a needle, there is no reason to have any attachment to such a backward social system. I have no ‘empty hope’ whatsoever.”

Then Jampa Lung-rik said, “Instead of just saying that the old society was backward, why do you not enumerate its faults? If you say the old society was merely backward, you avoid listing the crimes of the three big oppressors to which you belong. The whole world knows that the old society in Tibet was extremely dark, extremely barbaric, and extremely cruel as well as extremely backward,” and then they all shouted at me at once, about things that had nothing to do with the original accusation, and told me threateningly that this was not the way to make a confession. Even worse, having to stand bent over for a long time without putting my hands on my knees made my waist hurt and my face swell up, and as I had a cold at the time, I was constantly dribbling, which worsened the suffering. But I no longer felt the anxiety I had before the session began.

I had to stand like that for a long time while they brought up many unrelated things while refusing to let me give any answer in my defense, until some more kind-hearted youths in the crowd who could stand it no longer stood up and, acting as if they were very tough, lifted my head by the scruff of my neck and said, “Now you must confess.” Then, after a few more slogans were shouted, the inquisition abated, and when they lifted my head, ostensibly to “show my face to the masses,” I got some relief from standing bent over for so long. The youths kept chanting slogans and making a lot

of noise, which passed the time, and finally around eleven o'clock at night, I was told to come back with a clear statement in writing and the struggle meeting came to an end.

I certainly met with misfortune on that occasion, but I was lucky not to have been taken by Nyamdrel: since the plan to search houses on new year's day was not prepared in advance and they only caught three of us, they could not stage a humiliation parade as Nyamdrel did, and since they were criticized by the Gyenlok headquarters for imitating Nyamdrel and staged the struggle meeting in order not to lose face, I was not badly beaten at all, and the case was resolved that same night. Nonetheless, I would have to account for the incident during subsequent political campaigns, and it was put on my "reform record" (*bsGyur bkod bya rim gyi yig cha*).