CHAPTER 23

PLA Soldiers Destroy the Fruits of the People's Labor in the Marshes

WHEN LHASA PEOPLE could no longer make a living even as construction laborers because of the civil war during the Cultural Revolution and their hardship was greater than ever, the marshes west of the city gave them a way to survive. First, I should say a few words about that marshland: it lies on the north side of the Kyangtang Naka meadow, [which used to stretch] to the west of Lhasa, where many generations ago it is said there was a small lake from which, according to folklore, lake-dwelling cows (*mTsho glang*) and horses (*mTsho rta*) magically appeared. As the lake waters gradually receded it turned into a marsh, and until the Chinese invasion it was a peaceful sanctuary of beautiful water birds such as cranes, geese, and swans, and was one of the natural ornaments of the city as it used to be. After the suppression of the uprising, the Chinese set about destroying Tibet's natural environment and wanted to turn marshes like this into agricultural land. They built drainage ditches in the marsh, and as the water level went down, the feathered occupants vanished and it became a field of swamp grass. When the clumps of turf formed by the roots of that grass were dug up and dried, they could be used as a kind of fuel, which we call "*la-ma*," and it gave Lhasa people an opportunity both to supplement their own supply of heating fuel and to sell it to others.

Generally speaking, the use of machinery was not widespread in Tibet, and we did not have the kinds of fuel used in developed countries, such as coal and coal gas. Moreover, there was not much forest in the Lhasa region, so traditionally, dried cattle dung was used for fuel. The farmers used to buy it from pastoralists in the neighboring highlands and supply it in turn to the city dwellers, an exchange from which all three communities benefited greatly. After the implementation of Democratic Reform, all the farmers

and pastoralists had to join "mutual aid groups" (*Rogs res tshogs chung*), followed by the people's collectives (*Mi dmangs spyi khang*) of the commune system, in which individual economic activity was forbidden. Moreover, all kinds of crop fertilizer were controlled under the terms of the so-called "Eight-Character Directive on Agriculture" (*Zhing las yig 'bru brgyad kyi rtsa don*), which forced citizens to surrender their supplies of dung fuel for use as fertilizer, while under the core agricultural policy farmers were prohibited from selling any of their resources or products in the city. The Chinese met their own fuel needs by cutting the forests in the valleys of Kongpo, east of Lhasa, as much as they pleased and transporting the wood to Lhasa in truckload after truckload, without giving any thought to the needs of ordinary people. So it was that many poor households in the city ended up having to burn old bones and plastic and such things, the clear skies over our fair city were contaminated with acrid black smoke, and the high plateau air was filled with a foul stench. If the physical health of citizens at that time could have been analyzed with the kind of equipment we have today, it would undoubtedly have shown that many of them were adversely affected by this.

Because of the difficulty with lack of heating fuel, and especially when there was so little employment, the marsh became like a grant and a benefactor providing work for the citizens. At that time I too had no work, and no choice but to go and harvest turf in the marsh. Only people who had no other work did that. I was a young man who had spent four years after 1959 doing forced labor in prison and even after my release had to continue doing supervised labor, so since that is what I was used to, doing any other kind of labor should have been no great difficulty. Nonetheless, that work brought me no end of physical and mental hardship from the start.

To give a rough account of what it involved: to begin with, you had to look around the whole area to find a suitable place to work, not too wet, with a broad space for laying the stuff out to dry, and near enough to a road that was passable for vehicles, because the carrying distance from where the turf was cut inside the marsh back to dry land could only be covered by human effort; not even beasts of burden like horses or mules could go, much less wheeled vehicles, so if you failed to choose a good spot it made a huge difference in the amount you were able to harvest. After deciding on a spot, you came back the following day bringing a shovel with a good sharp blade for digging, one long and one short rope for carrying, and something to eat in the middle of the day. On arrival people would put markers around the space in which they intended to work. Then, after marking out similar-sized

squares of about ten clumps [of turf] each with the shovel, they spent the next few days digging them out, and every so often laying them out in the sun to dry. The clumps had to be turned over after a few days, and when they had more or less dried, you brought the strongest members of your household to help carry them to the nearest roadside. The hardest part of the whole process was the carrying, and that day was like the Tibetan saying, "Those with strength need all they've got and those without suffer like hell," [but] as long as there was no problem with the weather, doing it that way worked well enough.

The going rate for one clump of turf was 0.2 *yuan*. Although I was counted among the strongest workers, I could not earn more than 2 *yuan* a day, so even though one clump of turf that took so much effort to harvest was worth so little, everyone who did that work used to feel very upset if a single one went to waste. Yet once the piles of turf were stacked up on the side of the main road, quite unthinkably, people came during the night and set fire to them. The next day, the marsh workers stood around the pile of ashes discussing what kind of villains could have done such a thing. Those to whom the burned turf belonged had arrived that morning with rented carts to transport it back to their homes, and naturally felt even more angry and upset. At that point, they all assumed that the culprit must be one of the harvesters, since there had been arguments among them over territory, especially spaces by the roadside, so those who had argued were mutually suspicious and remained wary of one another. However, the burning didn't end there but happened again and again, and when those suspected of responsibility had their stock burned too, people were even more amazed. A big pile of about 300 pieces that my colleague, the former disciplinarian of Méru monastery Losang Jikmé, and I had stacked up nearby got burned at the same time.

As we had no other place to stack our harvested turf, we had to put an end to this somehow, so all the marsh workers agreed in bitter resolve that regardless of the wind, the rain, and the cold, we had to get to the bottom of the matter by catching the culprit red-handed and producing the incontrovertible proof of an eyewitness to establish who was responsible. However, as those who stayed to watch the harvested turf by night concentrated only on getting their own share home as quickly as they could, no one could say who the arsonist might be. At that time, an old man called A-shang Chokdrup with whom I had been in prison had to spend two nights in the marsh guarding turf for the Tromsi-khang neighborhood committee people, and found out for sure. When questioned, he said, "It would be better not to

look too closely into this business. The main thing is just to ensure that you don't have to leave your turf there overnight. Searching for the arsonist and pouncing on him would amount to suicide, so keep quiet."

But no matter how quiet you try to keep something, as the saying goes, "Water can be contained in a vessel, but no vessel can contain the spoken word," and eventually we found out that it was PLA soldiers who had burned our turf. This was something really unimaginable, and I myself couldn't quite believe it at first. Of course I had gained quite a deep impression of the army's attitude toward Tibetans and their capacity for cruel behavior since my time in prison, but I had not thought it possible that they could have set fire to the harvest for no reason at all, and anyone who had not been in close contact with the army and was familiar only with their propaganda would certainly have doubted it. But without following secondhand stories and by checking again, we found this to indeed be the case, and as the news passed from one person to the next working in the marshes, everyone knew it. Young people in Lhasa even coined a saying, "Uncle-all-yellow has made the turf all red," whose meaning was as follows: schoolchildren were supposed to call the soldiers "Uncle Liberation Army," so "all-yellow" was a reference to their yellow uniforms, and "all red" meant setting the stuff on fire.

Anyway, at that time those who worked in the marshes as well as their family members and dependents found themselves staring into the western sky as soon as they got up in the morning to see if there was any smoke in the direction of the marshes, in much the same way that farmers watch the sky for signs of dreaded hail as their crops ripen. It was a hazard against which we had no defense, and like the proverb, "If the lord of the manor becomes your enemy, flight is the best option," some gave up in absolute desperation.

As for the reason the soldiers burned the fruits of the people's sweat, blood, and toil, A-shang Chokdrup finally explained it to me directly: the road where we had stacked up our turf was the only motor road giving access to the artillery base at Pa-ri-ku, north of Lhasa, as well as some of the army's vegetable gardens in that area. The road was rather narrow, and piling turf along the sides made it even narrower, so when big trucks came that way they would have to drive slowly and make turns here and there to get by, and because of their refusal to put up with this, the soldiers flicked lighted matches and cigarette butts into the piles and burned them down. Those who have not used turf for fuel might think it impossible to set a big pile of it alight with something like a cigarette butt, and in a domestic

hearth it is indeed one of the slowest kinds of fuel to catch, but outside in the driving wind a whole pile can burn down in a few minutes from just a spark of fire. But even with proof of this crime of destroying the fruits of the people's labor, not only was legal redress out of the question, if the Chinese even caught wind of such talk they would heap a mountain of accusations of defaming the "glorious Liberation Army" on those who said so, rather than offering any compensation for the burned harvest, and in certain circumstances it could result in heads rolling.

These things took place around 1969. Even the commanders of the troops involved knew all about it, but far from putting a stop to it or compensating ordinary people for their losses, they went even further in order to cover up these misdeeds, and decided that the entire marsh should be divided among the different army camps under the TMD and turned into an experimental farm. The army camps ordered people to stop harvesting turf and gave them a deadline of a few days to remove their existing stock. It wasn't easy to pack up that work in the space of three or four days, and as the battle between the Cultural Revolution factions was still not over, very little construction work was going on and alternative employment was scarce. Moreover, citizens had no other source of fuel, so there was no choice but to carry on.

At about that time, I was sent by the neighborhood committee to join a power station construction site in Tölung, west of Lhasa, and did not have to do that work anymore. Nonetheless, a few months later I was sent back in a group of young men to collect turf for the construction site's communal kitchen. By then, most of the harvesters were unable to continue where they had worked before and had moved nearer to Pa-ri-ku. We also picked a spot in that area, and as we were a team, we pitched a tent near the marshland rather than go back home in the evenings.

Meanwhile, the mistreatment of the marsh diggers by PLA soldiers had become widely talked about, but I would not be describing it here if I had not seen it for myself. The most depressing episode during the time we stayed there concerned a woman of about forty with three sons, who used to leave her tools and cooking pot in our tent overnight. Her eldest boy said he was fourteen, which I remember even now because we used to carry our turf along the same path as them, and when we gave little gifts to the children and asked them their names and ages, the eldest said that his mother told him he was born after the Democratic Reform, but couldn't say even that much about when the younger two were born. When we guessed their ages we thought the eldest really could have been fourteen, but in fact

all three of them were no older than primary school age, and it was because they had to do such hard work alongside their mother that they looked older. Every day they cut and carried as much turf as they could manage, and every evening they filled up their handcart and dragged it back home. For clothing the eldest at least had a top and a pair of pants, albeit in rags, but the younger two just wore adult-sized shirts that served to cover their legs as well. The sunburned faces of mother and children alike were blackened by the mud from the swamp grass, which stuck to the sweat on their brows, and except where it had been washed off by fresh trickles of sweat, the only thing showing through the caked dirt was their white teeth. Pus and blood constantly oozed from cracks in the skin on the boys' hands and feet. Such was the poverty of this mother and her children whose hard-won produce was destroyed by soldiers using a tractor.

Whenever we heard the soldiers starting up their tractor, our foreman, Powo Tarchin, went to check whose turf they might be driving over, and one time as we were eating our breakfast in the tent he came rushing in, telling us, "Come quick! The army tractor is bulldozing the children's harvest, come and help them!" and by the time we got there about a third of their turf had been driven over. Some of us pleaded with the soldiers while others started gathering up the remaining turf. The boys' mother was down on her knees in front of the tractor, pleading, "Kind sirs! I have many children! I belong to the laboring masses!" in a mixture of Chinese and Tibetan, while her children tried to pull her back in fear that the tractor would run her over.

In addition to the two soldiers driving the tractor, there was an officer (*Phad krang*) in charge who seemed to be of slightly senior rank, and whose face was creased into an expression of haughty anger. His uniform jacket with red insignia was unbuttoned down the front, his left hand was planted on his waist, and in his right hand he held a thin willow cane, which he thrust aloft. Over the uniform cap emblazoned with the five-pointed star he wore a broad-brimmed straw sun hat that had a phrase from Mao's quotations, "In the service of the masses," inscribed on it in red ink. He had dark glasses on, and he was directing the two soldiers driving the tractor. The more we all pleaded, the more incensed he became, and he swore at us with whatever curses he could think of. My young fellow workers sang the Liberation Army song of the "Three Great Disciplines and Eight Responsibilities," and backed it up by chanting the slogan from Mao's quotations that says "Without the people's army, nothing could be achieved on behalf of the people," but although they were written on paper and used to fool the

masses, those codes of discipline and sayings of Mao Zedong had not even a single sesame seed's chance of being put into practice, and chanting them only made the soldiers more determined. The song and the quotations with which my companions hoped to stop the wrecking had quite the opposite effect, and as if to spite us, the two drivers crushed what was left of the harvest in an instant.

At that, the woman slumped her head down on her knees and wailed, "Alas! Whatever have we done to deserve this? For mercy's sake!" while the children stood by her side weeping, and we tried to console them by saying that we could go and dig in some other place. The youngest boy asked his mother, "Are they Guomindang?" to which she replied, "Whoever they are, they've destroyed our harvest. Now if it weren't for you cursed children, there would be nothing to do but go and take my own life."

This incident is just one example of the state of affairs that drove many people to desperation. The little boy probably asked if those soldiers were Guomindang because the propaganda films often showed Nationalist soldiers inflicting harm on ordinary people and the Communist army defending and caring for them. Meanwhile, having reduced the mother and her children to misery, the two soldiers went back to their quarters with an air of self-satisfaction, as if they had just accomplished a tough mission, mimicking the woman's pleas as they went and laughing about it between themselves. For our part, we felt downcast that we had not only failed to save the harvest but made things worse by trying, and even rebuked one another for singing the song and chanting the slogan, but apart from consoling the mother and her children and picking up the few pieces of turf that were still usable, there was nothing we could do. If a photograph could have been taken of that scene, it would now serve as a very special testimony to put before the people of the world, but not only are there no such things, I never even got to know the woman's name or where she lived, which is quite frustrating. So I would like to call on anyone who has seen that marshland and is capable of drawing an artistic reconstruction of the event to please do so as a reminder for future generations.

There was another army camp near our tent that was a branch of the artillery camp, and when the cows owned by the Pa-ri-ku farmers came to browse on their vegetable patch the Chinese soldiers would beat the animals like anything, and the marsh diggers used to say that on occasion they had seriously wounded and even killed them. On either side of that army camp's vegetable garden were a few compost pits several yards deep and two or three yards across, lined inside with stone walls smoothed over with a layer

of cement. Once when several of us were passing nearby with loads of turf, we saw some of the Chinese soldiers grab one of the Pa-ri-ku farmers' cows that had strayed onto the vegetable patch and dump it in one of those pits. If no one had seen them do it and it had been left there, the animal would surely have died within a few hours. In real terms, a cow was a farmer's sole possession, because apart from the division of the annual grain harvest by the cooperative, it was up to individual households to provide themselves with such things as butter or oil, and since cows were the only possible source, they were as dear to the farmers as their own children, and they were the most valuable resource left in the hands of individuals.

Fortunately on that occasion, a few of us saw the soldiers throw the cow in the pit. We were not going to ignore it and looked for a way to get her out, but the pit was deep, and as it wasn't filled with green manure or silt but human and pig feces, going in any deeper would have been unpleasant, and we were also too few. So some of us went to inform the Pa-ri-ku farmers, while others went to call those working in the marsh to come and help. Once we had summoned a large number of people and were setting about getting the cow out of the pit with the ropes we used to carry the turf, the Chinese soldiers saw us and came to expel us from their vegetable garden. We tried to explain how valuable the cow was to the farmers and that we had to get her out, but not a single one of us could express himself in Chinese. After explaining in a mixture of Chinese and Tibetan, we waited there while some of us went to explain the situation to the camp office, whereupon one of their officers came out with a Tibetan soldier to interpret. After a lot of discussion back and forth between the soldiers who had thrown the cow in the pit and the officer and interpreter, the officer told us through the interpreter, "We need [to talk to] the owner of the cow. We made this compost pit because it's important for the vegetable garden, and it's not our fault if a cow comes along and falls in. We want to know who its owner is, and the people digging the marsh should not interfere."

One of the marsh diggers among us replied, "The owner is a farmer. The cow may have fallen in by itself or it may have been deliberately thrown in, but in any case, it's everyone's responsibility to safeguard the people's property. Since the army is the people's army, it's their responsibility as well. If the owner doesn't come and the cow is left there, it's going to die."

"Are you saying that our soldiers deliberately threw the cow in?" the Tibetan translator demanded threateningly.

"I don't know," he replied. "All I saw was the cow in that pit, and if we don't get it out fast, it's going to die."

At that, one of our group of workers collecting turf for the power station construction site, a Muslim youth, pointed at the soldiers who had thrown the cow in the pit and fearlessly blurted out, "They threw it." At once the officer became furious, took out a notebook and pen from his jacket pocket, and asked the youth his name, age, neighborhood committee, class category, and so on. Our foreman, Powo Tarchin, got scared and said, "We had better not stay around here," and he told me with genuine concern, "Since you're a 'class enemy,' you will have a problem if the neighborhood committee finds out you were involved in this." So our group went back to work. Around midday, a junior leader of the Pa-ri-ku farmers' cooperative arrived at the army camp vegetable garden and managed to get the cow out of the pit, but when he got into an argument with the soldiers about the incident, they beat him and held him in the barracks for about two hours.

After that, our group of workers gathering turf for the power station construction site moved to another place on the south side of the marsh, the site of Lhasa's present coal-fired power station, from where the carrying distance was slightly shorter. Nearby was another military vegetable patch tended by two squads of Chinese soldiers, and they had put up a barbed-wire fence around it to keep animals out. However, sometimes the cows of the farmers in the Lha-lu area, as well as the horses and mules that pulled carts belonging to the local farmers' cooperative, managed to get in, despite the fence. When we saw animals like cows, horses, and sheep in there, we used to chase them out, in order to prevent them receiving the kind of abuse visited on the Pa-ri-ku farmers' cow, although, at least while we were around, the soldiers working on the patch also chased them out in good humor, without resorting to vicious behavior.

Then, one Sunday, most of us went home for a day off, leaving Powo Tarchin to watch the tent. When we came back on Monday morning, there was a dead horse with a bloated stomach lying near the army vegetable patch. We reckoned the soldiers must have poisoned it with insecticide, but Powo Tarchin told us that when the soldiers figured there was no one in our tent, they had electrocuted it. The horse belonged to the Lha-lu farmers' cooperative, whose sole means of income to buy renewable commodities came from providing horse cart transport for hire outside the peak agricultural season in spring and autumn, so the loss of a horse or mule was as serious for them as the loss of a cow for the Pa-ri-ku farmers. In fact, the value of all the vegetables in the soldiers' garden did not equal even half the value of a draft horse. The Three Great Disciplines and Eight Responsibilities of the PLA discipline code put great emphasis on safeguarding the people's

property, and included such phrases as "not taking so much as a needle from the people," but in practice it was just the opposite.

Whether people in China would have put up with this dereliction of military discipline or not, I can't say, but in Tibet, even if crimes against ordinary people's property were committed in broad daylight for all to see, there was no appeal to justice. Even though our claims rested on a mountain of evidence, they would be disregarded, just as pointing out that soldiers had thrown a cow into a cesspit resulted in our names, ages, addresses, class categories, and so on being recorded and threats of reprisal made against us. All this followed from the loss of our freedom, and demonstrates the truth of the saying that "By losing freedom you lose everything." In any case, of all Tibetans living under Chinese occupation, it is especially those living in the vicinity of army camps who have suffered the most grievous losses and deliberate cruelty, as these stories show.