CHAPTER 25

Sent to Kongpo for the Second Time

THERE WERE ABOUT four hundred of us on the list to be sent from Lhasa to join the construction of the Chinese army weapons depot in the summer of 1970, and over a few days we all went for a medical examination at a clinic in the TMD headquarters. Those who passed were then taken to a timber yard in an army camp at Lha-dong Shenka on the other side of the Kyi-chu river, where we had to stay for about two weeks at the height of the rainy season. Each of us was questioned on our personal history since age eight, our social background, and so on, and the information we gave was scrupulously checked with our neighborhood committee officials. While that was going on, some of the activists from that workplace organized us into groups to study Communist thought, chiefly the *Collected Works of Mao Zedong*. It was a suffocatingly restrictive environment in which we had to give an account of our own thinking, exactly as I had had to do in prison. The subject matter was "class struggle" and "proletarian dictatorship," and we had to account for our own thoughts with reference to our immediate situation. In my case, that meant having to regularly recite that I belonged to the former ruling class and was guilty of participation in the uprising, but that due to the correct policy of the Communist Party, I now had the opportunity to participate in this noble work of construction, and in recognition of this great kindness I was going to thoroughly complete personal reform and sincerely strive to contribute my utmost in the construction of the New Tibet.

During that period of investigation, it seemed that I would not qualify to be sent to Kongpo, but when they made the final announcement, there was only one person from our east Lhasa sectional office group who had a social background problem (Téring Ten-nor-la, whose parents had fled to

India and whose mother even worked for the Tibetan broadcasting service of All-India Radio in Delhi) and was therefore excluded, as well as a few others from poor class backgrounds whose behavior was considered undesirable. Coming from a higher class category was not a bar in itself. Being selected to go to Kongpo spared me from having to destroy monasteries in Lhasa, but as I was the only one from the "former ruling class" (*mNga' bdag*), I was worried that that would make me a principal target in future political campaigns.

When we got to Kongpo, because our workplace was in a military area, we had to follow the same daily routine as the soldiers. The work was hard and the civilian workers were paid less, but there was no discriminative treatment of higher and lower class categories in terms of work, wages, or bullying. We could buy military clothing, for summer or winter as appropriate, of a quality scarcely available in society at large, and it was a season of fine weather, so we got to supplement our diet with a variety of fruits and other foods that grew wild thereabouts. We took our daily meals in a common kitchen with no discrimination of access or fixed grain ration, so people could eat to satisfaction. Since they subtracted about 12 *yuan* per month from our wages for food, the monthly wage was insufficient when we had to buy clothing as well, but if you managed it economically it was certainly enough to live on.

The political education classes differed from those for civilians in that we had to study directives issued by the Central Military Commission, as well as routinely reciting Mao's quotations. Occasionally they would hold events for the whole camp known as "Recall Past Misery, Reflect on Present Happiness" (*sDug dran skyid bsam*), when people had to "remember the misery of the old society and appreciate the joys of the new one," and while I was there they had one lasting a week, during which they constantly played the song of mourning for revolutionary martyr Lei Feng, called "The Misery of Class [Society]," no cultural events were held, and people were supposed to wear ragged clothes and avoid looking cheerful. The kitchen served nothing but a plain, watery soup, and in the daily political meetings we had to sing the class misery song and condemn the suffering of the "old society," but the "class enemies" among the workers were not singled out for attack. Quite contrary to the fears I'd had on arrival, this was the most easy-going work site I had been sent to so far, and was just like the proverbial "sparrow's nest sheltered by a hawk's nest."

Lei Feng was one of the army's role models, and at that time the main figures in the central leadership wrote messages in his memory. Mao Zedong

said, "We must learn to be like Comrade Lei Feng," and Prime Minister Zhou Enlai wrote, "In firm solidarity with the working class, clearly distinguishing between friend and foe, putting words into action with revolutionary courage, Lei Feng was a perfect Communist who spurned his own personal advantage in favor of the common good, and whoever wishes to further the proletarian struggle without regard for his own life should study and follow his example." "Learning from Lei Feng" was repeatedly propagated throughout society, but particularly in the army and in primary schools.

Although the One Smash and Three Antis campaign was being vigorously implemented in Lhasa, life had been going on normally within the army, but one evening about four months [after my arrival there] they held a general meeting to announce the already mentioned revelation of a secret youth organization struggling for Tibetan freedom, at which the sentencing document from the public execution was read out and posters with the photos of the executed offenders were put up everywhere. Afterward, there were group meetings to discuss the case and oblige participants to state their views about it, and since many of the workers in our group had relatives among the arrested youths, there were emotional scenes in many of the dormitory tents, and I feared that would lead to a campaign being launched in our own work camp. When we showed up for work as usual the next morning, those of us from Lhasa were told to assemble on one side, and a list of names was read out. The names were all those from the "middle trader" class category upward, and we were told that we would be going back to Lhasa the next day. Meanwhile our movement was restricted, and we were not even permitted to conclude any transactions we might have had with local people.

At four o'clock the next morning we left in a convoy of military trucks and drove for eighteen hours, stopping only for the drivers to relieve themselves, which they had to do in unison, reaching Lhasa that same night. Each truckload had half a sack of *tsampa* to go around and no liquid to mix it with, so we had no choice but to eat it dry, whereas on the outward journey we had taken three days and been given sleeping quarters in military truck stops along the way and plentiful servings of rice, steamed buns, and vegetables at mealtimes, just like the Tibetan saying, "Welcomed in and booted out." The reason for our suddenly being sent back before the completion of the construction work was the renowned suspiciousness of the Chinese: most of the workers sent from Lhasa were the children of "class enemy" families, as were the members of the secret organization exposed in Lhasa in our absence, and they seem to have suspected that some of us

might have been implicated, particularly as we were working on a military project and could have tried to sabotage it.

For a long time during my stay at that work camp I was given the job of transporting building materials, and therefore got to visit many side valleys and other spots in the Nyingtri area, where I had been before, and had a chance to learn my way around and familiarize myself with the landscape. When I had come there to do construction work four years earlier in 1966, the Kongpo landscape was a brilliant green in all seasons, and although the forest was being cut along the north bank of the Nyang-chu river, the ancient forests on the south bank were unaffected and retained their natural splendor. By 1970, however, all the forest on the accessible mountainsides along the north bank had been cut down, leaving a denuded wasteland in their place, while a large number of bridges had been built across the Nyang-chu for the exclusive purpose of transporting timber and the forests on the south bank were being felled. There seemed no doubt that at that rate, Kongpo would be nothing but bare rock within a couple of generations. I found out from local people that the climate had changed, and although the weather was fine while I was there, when a strong wind picked up it would bring a dust storm like those we get in Lhasa.

When a forest is wiped out, a whole variety of other benefits is lost simultaneously, but at that time I had no idea how many useful forest resources there are besides timber, or of the importance of forests to the people and economy of the country as a whole. And I assumed that whether the timber being extracted from the valleys of Kongpo was benefiting Chinese or Tibetans, it was being used within Tibet. Not until I got to the processing factory described next did I realize that the lion's share was being transported to China as soon as it had been processed.