

CHAPTER 27

The Tölung Power Station Construction Camp

AS SOON AS the coal mine road was finished in the early spring of 1971, the workers moved on to Ka-tak, farther up the Tölung valley, to start on the power station canal. It wasn't the coldest time of year, but there were brisk spring winds, and the only tents and other equipment we had were those the neighborhood committees had provided, the cotton summer picnic tents and screens confiscated all those years ago. They had since been used by a great many work camps and worn to shreds by the sun and wind, so one of the hardships of working on the coal mine road and the power station was staying in tents that offered no protection against the winter winds or the summer rains. Also, as this was the most extensive construction project since the start of the Cultural Revolution and the workers were not participating voluntarily, the municipal government specified that they should be organized into groups under the direct supervision of local officials from the sectional offices and neighborhood committees to which they belonged, and follow the regular discipline. That meant work meetings as well as political education classes every evening, and performing the daily labor in a state of apprehension.

During the nearly six years I spent on that construction site, I did a variety of jobs: first I worked on the canal like everyone else; then for a while I went up the mountains to collect firewood for the camp kitchen; then I was harvesting turf in the marsh, also for the kitchen fires; and when they began construction of the power station building, I was first transporting building materials and then cutting rocks. After that was done, I had to do maintenance and supervision work on the canal. Initially, during the hard work of digging the canal and building, because of the effects of the Cultural Revolution we were singled out for abuse, given the hardest and most dangerous

jobs, the lowest wages, and the worst tents, and suffered badly from the unequal treatment. Later on, after the work camp administration building was completed and the workers got new tents, our condition improved, and after the power station was finished and I went on to do maintenance work, things became a little more relaxed, at least while there were no problems with the canal. However, due to the lay of the land in that area, the canal was dug into the mountainside, above the local farming villages and their fields, and during the excavation we were working on a strict deadline so that the main point was to finish in time, and no one paid attention to doing a good job. Thus, when water flowed into the canal it started to leak uncontrollably all over the place, damaging the fields and village houses, and especially the Qinghai–Tibet highway that ran alongside, and some of us “class enemies” had to risk our lives trying to stop it.

The most memorable incident was after the completion of the number 6 power station at Dongkar. A few days before, a ceremony was to be held to mark its inauguration. In order to prevent any mishap on the inaugural day, water was to be released into the section of the canal leading to the new power station as a test, so all the workers on hand spread out along the canal with their tools, having arranged to send a signal to close the sluice gate upstream in case of any leaks. But one stretch of that canal passed within the boundary wall of the petroleum storage depot at Dongkar, and all such installations were guarded by the army. The administrative office of the power station project had not informed the soldiers of their intentions, so when we came to check on the stretch of canal inside their boundary wall, they not only denied us entry but would not even let us come close and trained their guns on us. As the power station office and the guards were discussing how to handle the situation, the canal inside the depot’s boundary wall started to leak.

At that point, the workers were allowed inside to try to fix it, but the canal was positioned above the petroleum storage tanks and in an instant, before anything could be done about it, water rushed out of the canal and overturned an enormous metal canister containing one hundred tons of fuel, which started to roll downhill. Those of us workers already inside the boundary wall dug up nearby rocks and earth and showed off all the skills we knew trying to stem the flood, but it did no good at all. A telephone call had already been made to the head of the canal telling them to redirect the flow, but since it took almost a day’s walk to cover the length of the canal between there and Dongkar, it could not be cut off instantly, and meanwhile the water swept many more storage tanks down as far as the Dongkar

number 2 brigade's threshing ground, burying their harvest in petroleum and mud. The highway was also flooded, blocking a large number of trucks, and in accordance with the traffic department regulations prohibiting even momentary man-made obstructions on the highways linking Lhasa with Qinghai and Chengdu, there were angry phone calls from the TAR Public Affairs Department (*gZhung don thing*), the traffic department, and TMD headquarters one after the other to the power station office, and the traffic department sent an investigation team.

Under unbearable pressure from their superiors, the office leaders had no choice but to take emergency measures, regardless of whether they would be effective or not, and summoned all their workers to the fuel depot. A group of those ["class enemies"] in no position to object were told to stand in the water and form two lines with our arms linked to fill the breach in the ruptured canal wall, while another group of workers were told to fill sacks with earth and pile them up in front of where we were standing, and the rest carried baskets of earth and rock to dump in there. The initial burst had occurred toward sunset, and it was nearly dark by the time we got into the water, so those dumping earth and rock could not see what they were doing and sometimes even emptied their loads on top of us. It was late autumn, and although the ground was not yet frozen, the mornings and evenings were very chilly, and we got so cold standing there in the water with linked arms for such a long period that some of the weaker ones started to collapse. But on the orders from above, we could not get out until the flow of water had abated, and ended up standing there for five hours. Only after midnight were we permitted to go back to our tents, and when we got out of the water our teeth were chattering so hard we couldn't speak and our limbs were numb and frozen stiff. Some of us couldn't even walk back to their tents and had to be carried.

Our teeth didn't stop chattering until long after we got back to our tents, and our bodies did not warm up again, yet as soon as the sun rose next morning the work of repairing the ruptured canal began with a meeting to announce that we must strive to complete the repair within ten days. First of all, the sacks of earth dumped there the night before, which had done nothing to hold back the water, had to be dug out of the mud, which caused us great hardship. The mixture of sand and earth coating the sacks scoured our hands, and by the end of the first day the skin on our fingers had split open. Things were a little better for those carrying earth and rock in baskets, who did not have to handle the stuff, but my job at the time was stone laying, so I had to work on the new stone lining for that section of the

canal, and even touching the stone and cement plaster gave me heart pain and an unbearable burning sensation in my fingers. If the repaired canal wall was not perfectly durable and another breach occurred, it would mean problems of a greater order of magnitude, but it would have taken a month to make it perfectly durable and we had a ten-day deadline, so we were driven without an instant of respite from dawn to dusk. The ordeal of those ten days is so unforgettable that I can still vividly picture that canal wall.

This is just one example, but every time the canal was damaged by heavy rain in summer or ice in winter, we “class enemies” were driven harder than prisoners to repair it, with no more concern for our lives than if we were inanimate things. In prison, all the inmates were treated with equal harshness, whereas the “class enemies” in civil society could be pushed around by everyone else and made to do the jobs they couldn’t or wouldn’t do themselves. When there was tough work like that to be done, we were under orders so strict it was as if even falling sick or dying was prohibited, and although everyone worked in the same camp, “class enemies” were given the hottest place in summer and the coldest in winter. In brief, “class enemies” downtrodden by the two slogans “Reform Through Labor” and “Proletarian Dictatorship” were like the tormented underlings of the wrathful deities, who have the merest whims of their masters visited on their flesh. Notably, many of the “class enemies” mercilessly put to work in water or humid environments on that power station construction site and others like it ended up suffering from kidney disease and hemorrhoids, as can be attested by those of us who have survived until now.