

CHAPTER 31

The Banak-shöl Production Cooperative

ONCE THE BUSINESS of ascertaining class categories and assessing the targeted groups came to an end, the second stage of that campaign was the compulsory organization of nonaffiliated wage earners into institutions under the slogan of “Full cooperativization and collectivization of economic production.” Although most working citizens already belonged to organizations in many different fields of employment, there were some who for a variety of reasons earned their living independently, and they were now brought together in newly established cooperatives under each neighborhood committee called production cooperatives (*Thon skyed mnyam las khang*), and the municipal government allotted each of them an area of open land near the city that they were supposed to cultivate for grain production.

I heard that a “Banak-shöl production cooperative” was organized with about a hundred nonaffiliated workers under the Banak-shöl neighborhood committee and one A-ché Tendzin, the committee’s local Party leader (*Tre pu’u hru’u ci*), was appointed in charge, while the other leaders were elected from among the membership. As with any organization started without capital, there was no way for the cooperative’s members to earn an income for some time, so they were bound to face some hardship, especially since the leader, A-ché Tendzin, was a brute of a woman who spoke only about “class struggle,” “revolution,” and “proletarian dictatorship” and had no enterprise management skills whatsoever. I was working at the Tölung power station camp at the time, and felt relieved that since I had been sent there by the neighborhood committee I would not have to join the new cooperative, but one day one of its leaders called A-po Tra-lo showed up at the power station with a horse cart to fetch the “class enemies” from Banak-shöl. That

felt like being plunged back into darkness, since whatever conditions were like at the new cooperative, just the fact that A-ché Tendzin was in charge meant that it would be miserable, but reluctant as I was, there was nothing to do but roll up my bedding along with the others, get in Tra-lo's cart, and go back to Lhasa.

We were told to attend a meeting of the new cooperative the same evening, and arriving there we found only the leaders and no ordinary people. A-ché Tendzin addressed us at length about how the new cooperative had been set up and why "class enemies" in particular were being recruited into it.

"Our nation is devoted to the noble cause of socialism," she announced, "and under socialism there is no such thing as individual economic activity, only cooperatives and communes, so under the regulations introduced by the Socialist Transformation campaign, a new production cooperative has been established for those who have so far been working individually. However, since some members of the new cooperative are unable to come to work regularly because of various domestic difficulties, some are sick, then there are the elderly and the young, and of course the majority are women, we are very short of manpower. That is why we are recruiting you 'class enemies' into our cooperative with the permission of the sectional office and neighborhood committee, and in line with the undertakings you all made during the recent comparative assessment meetings to exert yourselves in reform, you will have to give us your best efforts. This will be the test of how well you have done in reform."

Thus whether the cooperative was going to work efficiently or not would depend on the efforts of the few of us "class enemies," which meant sucking our blood and sweat dry, for the other leaders were no less rough-mannered, work-shy, and loudmouthed than she. One of them, a brother-in-law of Chamdo Pakpa-la from Kham Li-tang known as Mi-sing, was said to have formerly been a well-known swindler, and when he was given responsibility for the cooperative's production work, he drew up numerous financial plans quite at odds with the officially stated program and confidently established numerous subcommittees dealing with various undertakings such as carpet weaving, carpentry, construction, and stone quarrying, supposedly as a temporary measure to raise funds for the cooperative's main task of agricultural production. Since the "class enemies" from the power station work camp had been working as stone layers, they were sent to the construction subcommittee, but I was allocated to the stone-quarrying subcommittee. I had spent a few months doing stone quarrying while in prison, but that had

only involved dynamiting, and I had no experience in cutting stone for use in construction. When I explained to the leaders that I had experience in stone laying, not cutting, and asked to be sent with the construction group, they told me:

“The fundamental aspirations of this cooperative rest on making the stone-quarrying group our mainstay, and we have sent you there because we have higher expectations of you than of any of the other ‘class enemies.’ As for familiarity with the work, this can never be gained other than by actually doing it. For example, although you are someone who formerly lived by exploiting the masses while ‘seated on a square carpet,’ you have learned stone laying simply by engaging in that work. Although you may face difficulties initially, you have to put up with them. Anyway, what is required of you members of the exploiting class is to recognize how you bossed around the masses according to your own whims, and it is not your place to pick and choose.” Some of the leaders expressed themselves more softly and some were more threatening, but either way they said the same thing: that I had to not only work for the quarrying subcommittee, but take responsibility for productivity as well.

Of the nine people in that subcommittee, three were women, two were elderly, two were school-age boys, and the only able-bodied workers were the incarnate Lama of Khardo, Ten-nor-la, and myself, so that was totally discouraging for a start. Then we had to find our own stonecutting tools and a suitable place to work. As far as tools were concerned, we had to make our own arrangements, but to buy decent tools would have cost the equivalent of two months’ wages. Since I had been working as a stone layer at the power station camp I could rustle up a sledgehammer, chisel, and crowbar, but some of the others didn’t even have an ordinary hammer. As for a work site, there was a stone-quarrying unit of the TAR construction company working at a place known as South Bank at the entrance to the Dodé valley, and by making a contribution to their kitchen and passing a gift to the foreman, we got an already overworked spot alongside theirs. They had quarried it for so long that only useless remnants were left, but our inexperienced leaders regarded it as a bonanza and sent us there with high expectations. We pitched our tent near their workplace and started off sharing their makeshift tool workshop, but if none of us had experience in cutting stone for building, we had even less knowledge of how to turn out tools like chisels and crowbars.

Then we had to bring down rock from the mountainside above using dynamite, but there were many cattle in the vicinity and a much-used mo-

tor road nearby, as well as our host work site, so if we used too much it could cause a lot of damage, but if we used too little the rock would not come down, and none of us even had experience in using dynamite. So according to circumstances and with great effort, some of us gathered fragments of quarried stone, others managed to loosen boulders with crowbars and roll them down without using dynamite, but far from earning any income for the cooperative, we didn't even make enough to cover our own daily rations. I explained our difficulties to the cooperative leaders and requested them to hire a stonemason who knew about tool making and explosives, and after a while they engaged someone from the Banak-shöl Yukung workshop's farming cooperative to come and give us training. He gave us the rudiments of stonemasonry, but didn't know tool making and had no experience with explosives, so our problems were not over. Then it turned out that one of the cooperative leaders, the one called Tubten Lo-dro who had survived the massacre at the Tsukla-khang during the Cultural Revolution, had experience in making tools and using dynamite from his days as a road builder, so he came to our work site for a few days to teach us, but as the deputy leader of the cooperative he had no time to stay with us.

In any case, there was no way to accomplish the work we had been given without learning how to make what we needed by ourselves, so in order to make our work easier and more productive, I determined to start making tools myself by taking the trouble to go to stone-quarrying units thereabouts and learn how to do it. For a while I was unable to control the red-hot iron with the tongs and occasionally touched it accidentally, and the burns on my hands came up in blisters. Then it took me so long to shape a chisel blade that I went through a large amount of charcoal, and moreover I endangered my own and others' safety trying to get the temper of the blade right, but after a while I got the knack of working molten metal and fixing the correct temper, and overcame the problem of tools. We still had problems getting rocks down the mountain, however, and occasionally, when we did manage to roll a boulder down and everyone gathered around to help split it, if we failed to strike the driving chisel head-on with the sledgehammer it would spin off to one side, and many injuries happened that way. One time when Khardo Rinpoché struck the driving chisel off-center it flew into my cheek and nearly broke my cheekbone.

We carried on in this way, ill equipped and ill prepared, for about a year, and rather than bringing in any earnings, the other workers in the group had to have their wages supplemented by the cooperative. At that time my daily wage was 2 *guan*. By then, the other members of the stone-

quarrying subcommittee moved on to work in other subcommittees since ours had not been successful, until only Khardo Tulku Ten-nor-la and I were left. However, with just the two of us working together we managed things very well: I prepared the tools and split the fresh rocks while Rinpoché did the dynamiting and broke the rocks I had split into small pieces, and we found that concentrating on our own tasks made the work easier and even quite productive. I had become adept in tool making, and of all the different kinds of work I had had to do, I came to like metalworking the best. Meanwhile Khardo Rinpoché had become a highly judicious explosives engineer, and was able to dislodge boulders yielding more than 300 cubic yards (*Kung spang*) of gravel with a single blast, more than the two of us could get through in a whole year.

Then the cooperative imposed a work target on us. We each had to produce 500 *yuan* worth of rock per month, while we received no more than 90 *yuan* per month each in wages and an additional 20 *yuan* per month to cover the cost of tool maintenance and charcoal, but our earnings still paid the cooperative leaders' wages. Stone was in short supply at the time, and the cooperative got benefits such as transportation and timber from the army camps that bought our stone, as well as supplies of otherwise rare commodities like meat, butter, tobacco, sugar, soap, packaged foods, and so on, so we really had become the cooperative's mainstay. Even so, we never saw any increase in our wages, and the profits of our labor were enjoyed by a few leaders. Such was the everyday reality of "democratic centralism" and the "unique characteristics of socialism."