CHAPTER 32

The Farmer's Life

DURING 1974, THE arrival in Lhasa of a large number of destitute villagers from places like Drikung in Medro Gongkar county of Lhasa prefecture and Uyuk valley in Shika-tsé prefecture led to some anxiety over the hardships being endured by the great majority of people in rural areas. At that time of heightened concern, we received a letter from my elder sister Yangdröl-la, who was living in Yakdé Khang-shung in Rinpung county, Shika-tsé prefecture, saying that since there had been no rain in Yakdé that season the harvest had failed, and asking us to procure whatever grain we could for her in Lhasa. Like the saying "One fallen yak brings down a hundred others," this caused even more shortage than usual for us as well, but the food shortage in my sister's household gave me a chance to meet her again after a long separation, and to find out about the hardship among the majority of Tibetans in the countryside. I had wanted to go and visit my sister's place for a long time, but we were still young and had been content to wait for a suitable occasion to present itself; however, generally speaking human life is impermanent, and in particular, resources of every kind were scarcer in the rural areas than in the city and life was harder, so with the food shortage in Yakdé making things even worse, I got the impetus to visit my sister as I had long been intending.

In the summer of 1976 I applied to the neighborhood committee for leave to visit my sister, explaining that we had not met for a long time, and since the main leader, Chö-nga Tenpa-la, was a person with Tibetan sensibilities, he granted the request without much delay. At once I packed up the few sacks of wheat *tsampa* that we had managed to gradually accumulate by economizing, and set out for Yakdé. By that time a lot of motor roads had been built in Tibet, but they were exclusively for the benefit of the Chinese

and only served their main centers, so in out-of-the-way village areas like Yakdé there were only mule tracks, and the Chinese government had not provided so much as an arm's length of modern road. Also, the impact of Mao's command to "dig deep and stockpile grain underground" had not yet receded, grain was still strictly controlled, and county and township administrations appointed people to check on individuals buying and selling grain and transporting it here and there. If they found out you had saved any or were giving it to someone else, you could be accused of undermining the socialist market system, have your grain confiscated, and go to prison, so I made the journey carrying the little grain we had worked so hard to procure and save by thrift in constant fear of official confiscation, as well as having the difficulty of finding and paying for rides in trucks and then on pack animals. I eventually reached my destination one evening at dusk.

When I first saw my sister I didn't know it was her. She had the same features and manner as our kind mother, but she was so downcast in body and spirit I could not bear to see it, and became deeply saddened. She herself was moved with both joy and sorrow, and wept for a moment as she embraced me.

After we had greeted and consoled each other and it was late, we said good night and lay down to sleep, but all I could think of was the conditions my sister was living in. The dwelling was like a leftover pastoralists' corral with a roof stuck on top, in derelict condition, with no windows to let light in and no whitewash on the walls. Inside, there was no furniture except a couple of cracked earthenware cooking pots, a couple of worn-out tin pans, and some ragged mattresses. The two elder children had worked alongside their parents since they were small and did not have the physique of most primary school children although they were around that age. Moreover, because they had had no chance to study they were completely illiterate, and there was no saying that the same would not happen to the younger two who, for the moment, were looking after the family's few cattle as best they could. They had no shoes to wear and their hands and feet looked alarmingly like birds' claws caked in grime. In other words, the exaggerated poverty of this household looked like something out of the fake reconstructions of the "sufferings of the old society" in Chinese propaganda, and with the scene occupying my thoughts and many questions running through my mind, I couldn't sleep a wink that night.

Everyone has their own tales of what they went through after the devastating events of 1959 plunged the Tibetan people into a pit of unbearable misery, and as I recall those of my own family I sometimes start to cry and

at other times laugh out loud, but most notable of all is the situation I came across during the week I spent in that area, the conditions in which the local people as a whole had come to face a shortage of grain, and the particular ordeal of my elder sister's household.

Generally speaking, while the imbalance between Yakdé's large area and its small population had long been an impediment to prosperity, before the Chinese invasion the villagers did not depend solely on agriculture; the men used to buy rapeseed from other areas and produce their own edible oil, and with the wool they bought from the neighboring Yamdrok area, the women used to manufacture a homespun cloth called Yaktér, much worn by ordinary monks at the great universities around Lhasa, as well as other woven items like women's aprons, on quite a large scale. The wealthy engaged in trade and, being at liberty to pursue various enterprises according to their ability, they could procure grain from elsewhere whether natural setbacks [to agriculture] occurred or not.

When the Chinese government imposed direct rule over Tibet in 1959 and implemented Democratic Reform, they took possession of all the land and established organizations with fine-sounding names like mutual-aid groups (*Rogs re tshogs chung*) and people's communes (*Mi dmangs kung hre*) that deprived the people of their liberty and required them to engage solely in agriculture. Other traditional forms of secondary livelihood such as trade and handicrafts were banned and all household looms were confiscated. During summer and winter when there was little work to do in the fields, the people were forced to provide labor for the construction of Chinese official buildings, roads, and bridges, as well as mining and other work, as a tax obligation, and received no more than 1 *yuan* a day in wages, usually much less. Likewise, when the time came to collect the harvest for which the farmers had risen early and retired late and worked harder and suffered more than animals to produce, they had to surrender the greater part as a tax known as "patriotic state grain" (*rGyal gces gzhung 'bru*), receiving not one cent in payment.

Officials from the county, township, and village-level administrations came to inspect the fields, first in early summer when the barley shoots were growing and a second time when the heads of grain had formed, and made an estimate of the amount of grain tax they expected to collect at harvest time, and the farmers had to render exactly the quantity fixed in advance, even if there had been losses due to frost and hail. Even in a good year, each person received a fixed allowance of ten measures [*Khal* = approx. 28 lbs.] of grain, with an extra nominal allowance known as "grain

points" for working people. The remaining grain, known as "surplus grain for sale" (*'Bru lhag spus tshong*), had to be sold to the state at a very low fixed price. A few measures of each person's allowance were also set aside as a "famine preparedness" measure by the township and village officials, and once they had put their seal on it, people could not use it even if they had run out of food.

After the establishment of the so-called "people's communes," individual work teams could not even choose whether to plant barley, wheat, or peas, as this was decided for everyone by the local government. After grain production was increased in some parts of China by planting a crop known as winter wheat, they had large areas of that sown, regardless of the different soil and climate in Tibet, like "taking a shoe as the model to make a hat." Winter wheat was particularly inappropriate in Yakdé, which is a high and exposed territory, but, like the proverb "The king's command can no more be resisted than a boulder rolling down a steep mountainside," orders were orders, and it had to be planted. Fields planted with winter wheat had to be irrigated all year round, which required a lot of manpower; more seed was required than for other crops; and the straw it produced had no nutritional value, thus depriving the cattle, horses, and mules of fodder, a problem scarcely less serious than depriving people of grain. Unlike other grains, the flour made from winter wheat was harmful to people's health, causing kidney problems, pneumonia, and many other diseases. The disastrous results of planting winter wheat were hit upon very pertinently in a dramatized commentary performed by the Lhasa theater troupe after Mao's death, for during that period the practice had imposed a heavy burden of misery on the people, livestock, and resources in many rural areas.

At the same time, under the campaign slogan "In agriculture, learn from Dazhai and emulate the courage of the people of Dazhai far and wide," Tibetan villagers were made to construct useless terraces on dry mountainsides. Whether or not this was a way to increase grain production was apparently a matter of less concern than wasting a lot of their time and effort to see whether they could "emulate the courage of Dazhai." They were made to construct irrigation canals many miles long, most of which were so incorrectly surveyed and measured that they ended up reaching the intended fields at the wrong level and were therefore useless. Since the manpower and resources for these undertakings had to come from the local cooperatives, their members suffered huge losses in annual "work point" earnings, while the Chinese government technicians who planned these reservoirs and canals faced not so much as a word of reprimand.

Then the agricultural cooperatives were ordered to use chemical fertilizers on their fields, which had to be bought for a high price from the state supplier. These fertilizers made already thin, dry soil dry up altogether, and in moister conditions they made the plants grow without bearing fruit, causing more harm than good, but anyone who pointed out that they were inappropriate for local conditions was condemned for standing in the way of "scientific agriculture." Similarly, they organized groups of people to set off explosions in the sky in summertime, which was the "scientific" method of preventing hail, and they had to do this as soon as they saw the clouds massing, but whether or not it prevented hailstorms, the cost of the explosives had to be met out of the farmers' earnings and was one of the most onerous imposed on them.

Under such oppressive and exploitative conditions, farmers got only ten measures of grain per person per year even when there was a good harvest, and since all household necessities right down to the year's supply of salt and soda had to be paid for out of the grain allowance, it was not enough, and most people ran out of *tsampa* by early spring each year and had to satisfy their hunger by eating vegetation. Before their work brigade would lend them grain, they came to search the house, and if they found as little as four or five measures [*Bre* = approx. 1 lb.] of *tsampa* inside, the applicant was not only denied the loan but also taken to face struggle at a public meeting. Grain loans were generally granted to only a few households on political grounds, and most farmers had to go hungry for half the year, doing heavy agricultural labor all the while, which sapped their strength and left them vulnerable to disease. Since medical facilities were minimal, there was a high proportion of early deaths among the rural population as a whole, and even the young people often looked as if they were over fifty.

As for the treatment of "class enemies" in rural areas, my elder sister's household could serve as an example: during the Democratic Reform of 1959 they were classified as "ruling class deputies," and the head of the household, Démön Rikdzin-la, was condemned for involvement in the "reactionary uprising" and imprisoned. The family's fields and all the contents of their house were confiscated, my sister and her husband Palden-la, Démön Rikdzin-la's son, and their two children were given enough *tsampa* to last a few days, mattresses, and a few other nominal possessions and sent to live in a decrepit building little better than a pigsty.

The cultivable land that was redistributed on the basis of family size was the most marginal in the area, and although after my sister's younger children were born the number of family members increased to nine, there

was no corresponding increase in the allowance. Although they were a family of nine living on an allowance of marginal land for only four, when the people's commune was established they were excluded on the pretext that they were "class enemies" and left to fend for themselves. During the period of drought, excluded "class enemy" families were not allowed to irrigate their fields until the irrigation of the commune's fields was finished, so by the time they got water their fields were already parched, and without the timely arrival of seasonal rains there was no way to grow any crops.

Then there was a continual obligation for able-bodied household members to go and perform labor on Chinese road- and bridge-building projects and so on, and in addition, the local township and village administrations called on the "class enemies" in their area to do miscellaneous dirty jobs, so my sister's husband, Palden-la, was kept extremely busy. Even during the agricultural seasons he had to drop everything and go when the local officials summoned him. The most tiresome of these duties was frequently having to deliver letters to the Rinpung county administration, some 30 miles away, on foot and within a narrow time limit, regardless of the weather or the time of day or night. Since both working members of the household spent most of their time and energy performing unpaid tax obligations, they barely had the opportunity to try to meet their own needs by tending the few poor fields allotted to them, and in this way my sister's family were reduced to the status of beggars who were neither able nor permitted to beg.