

CHAPTER 34

The Rewards of My Hard Work

WITH THE DEATH of Mao Zedong, a new chapter of history began, and in order to secure popular goodwill and support, the heads of government and incumbent officials made radical changes in their conduct of public affairs. In Tibet, as issues related to “nationality policy” became a focus of concern, Tibetan officials dedicated to the welfare of their people seized the opportunity and began to move ahead energetically on working for the reestablishment of Tibetan culture. In the field of education, knowledge of written Tibetan had hitherto been restricted to reading Mao’s quotations, with no wider currency at all, and had greatly degenerated, so the task of reestablishing it was a most immediate and pressing concern. In order to improve the level of written Tibetan, ensuring the quality of school-teachers was the initial priority, and when schools were on the lookout for qualified Tibetan teachers, I was identified by the directorate of the TAR teacher training college as a potential recruit; they approached me through the leader of my local subcommittee, Ama Sonam Drölma, to see if I was interested in working there.

This was something of which I had so far not even dreamed. In view of my situation at the time, I would have been content to be appointed as a sweeper at the teacher training college, not to mention becoming a teacher there. However, to be quite honest about myself, having learned basic reading and writing at a private school when I was a child, I joined the palace secretariat as a junior government servant for a brief period before the upheavals of 1959; I learned the official style of writing but never had the opportunity to study grammar and spelling [enough] to be able to teach others. Then I was imprisoned, and ever since I had done nothing but manual labor, so I replied frankly via the subcommittee leader that after such a lapse

of time I had no confidence at all to accept a teaching position at the teacher training college, but I hoped to be able to make other contributions, such as helping to write examples for school textbooks. Nonetheless, the college directorate had a higher estimation of my abilities and two of its members, Lungtok-la and Tendzin Lekdrup, approached the east Lhasa sectional office and the Banak-shöl neighborhood committee with a letter of recommendation from the school, as was official practice, to request that I be released from my duties in order to work there.

The office and the committee were ready to oblige and approved my release, but my immediate masters, the Banak-shöl production cooperative, refused to release me, and A-ché Tendzin lied to the two people requesting it that I was badly behaved, that I had not done well in reform, and that I was not a hard worker, to put them off. They were not about to believe this, but in the Communist system you have to accept what the leaders say, so they just said some sweet-sounding words to the leader of my subcommittee that they would keep making efforts to get me released and left it at that. This was an apt illustration of the Tibetan saying, “After working as a servant you end up being unfit for anything else.” In short, it was because I had worked too hard for that cooperative. As already mentioned, the income from the stone I produced not only paid the leaders’ wages but also helped them establish a link with the army camps that brought them far greater benefits, which they feared they would lose. On top of that, they were not prepared to acknowledge that they were denying the request for my release because of the resulting loss to the cooperative, as this would mean revealing how hard I had worked, and even that was too great a concession for them to make.

It was a grave disappointment for me that a few leaders were prepared to spoil my future by making false accusations and perversely passing off white as black for the sake of their own profit. For the moment there was nothing I could do about it, but I resolved that one way or another, I would give up stone quarrying. As the general situation continued to improve, my work partner Khardo Rinpoché gave up stone quarrying and went to do carpentry, and I was left to work alone as solitary as a deer, but I still managed to get the month’s workload finished within fifteen or twenty days unassisted. However, sometimes overturning boulders alone was difficult and dangerous, and I developed problems with the joints in my right forearm from doing that work, and because of my general unhappiness over what had happened, I used that as a pretext to stop quarrying. Because of the way things were going, the cooperative leaders had no means of thwarting me.

Since for the moment there was no other work, I joined the cooperative's construction group. Meanwhile, it turned out that there was a large collection of scriptures, originally confiscated from the monasteries and lamas' and nobles' residences during Democratic Reform, that had not been shipped off to China with the rest but left in the Shöl printery and Potala palace. The soldiers occupying the palace during the Cultural Revolution had removed all the cloth covers in which these books were wrapped for their own purposes and left the leaves in a disorderly pile, and now the TAR Cultural Relics Office was hiring people in the Lhasa area who could read and were familiar with traditional literature to put them back in order. Dampo Tubten Gyeltsen, one of my former work mates from the timber-sawing workshop, was one of them, and with his help, I was taken on. Judging that the prevailing wind was in my favor, I simply informed the cooperative leaders and without waiting for their approval, started going to work at the Potala. They couldn't find any way of stopping me, so they just demanded that I pay a percentage of my wages to the cooperative, which I did. That was in 1978.