

The
SILENT
STEPPE

The Memoir of a Kazakh Nomad under Stalin

MUKHAMET
SHAYAKHMETOV

Translated from the Russian by Jan Butler



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THE SILENT STEPPE

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INTRODUCTION

The educated world knows little – if anything at all – of the suffering of the nomadic peoples of central Asia under the rule of Stalin and the policy of collectivisation launched in 1929: least of all, of Kazakhs whose immemorial habitat comprised that vast swathe of steppe-land from the Eastern shores of the Caspian to the great Tien Shan range of mountains which, with the Altai range to the north, forms the frontier of Kazakh territory, and today's Kazakhstan, with China. During that period the population of indigenous Kazakhs fell by approximately 1.2 million from death by starvation. Over the whole of the first decade and a half of effective Soviet Communist rule, from – say – around 1923, some 1.75 million Kazakhs out of a previous population of around 4 million were lost by starvation or execution or, in the case of about a tenth of that number, by flight to other countries in the region, notably China, Afghanistan and Iran. This is a story of willed catastrophe, on a scale of ideological horror unequalled even in the total record of Stalin's tyranny, and only subsequently surpassed by Mao Tse-tung and Pol Pot.

It comprised not only the massacre of people in vast numbers but the destruction of a nomadic culture and way of life of antiquity such as defined in essence the Kazakh nation. In today's terms, it would unquestionably justify the accusation of genocide. It is a matter of joyful irony that it was the Leninist principle of recognising, within the ruthless matrix of his Marxist empire, the factor of ethnic 'nationalities', with their puppet governments of indigenous Soviet toadies and their phoney territorial autonomies, which has resulted today in the Republic of Kazakhstan, the ninth biggest country in the world, no less, and no less than the major economic presence in central Asia with its vast capital of Caspian oil, and with a population of more than 14 million of which over half is of Kazakh blood. Blood carries memories; and today

Kazakhs are, to a man and a woman, the descendants of that remnant who somehow survived the privations of the appalling period this book covers.

The Kazakh people were no strangers to Russian persecution and exploitation. For three quarters of a century prior to the time when Mukhamet Shayakhmetov was born (1922), Russia had been established as colonial authority across all Turkic-speaking central Asia (less the Uighurs of Sinkiang), involving the Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Turkmens and Uzbeks; and indeed their Farsi-speaking neighbours towards the Afghan border, the Tadjiks. All are of Moslem adherence, converted at various points from the seventh century onwards, albeit some of them quite recently and fairly loosely. They had a sustained if secret allegiance to their shamanistic inheritance, which in turn had coloured that combination of Buddhist, Zoroastrian and Nestorian Christian amalgam comprising what today we term 'tengrism': a faith in the unity of creation with Man at its centre and in communion with it, and of Man as the inheritor of a potential gift of ecstatic enlightenment. All this was mystically exercised among the Kazakhs in the rituals of their immensely ancient nomadic and transhumant existence, based upon their horse- and camel-borne economy of herding sheep and goats across the vast breadth of the steppe, and subject to a climate of extreme conditions, especially in winter. With it came an oral tradition of song and saga and poetry, and a flowering in the written corpus of work of the Kazakh Abai Kunanbaev, who had died in 1904. To all this young Mukhamet Shayakhmetov was a devout heir. His was a way of life traceable down the centuries from the Scythians of Greek mythology and classical times, from the panning of gold by the sacred (and secret) means of the fleece, and indeed from the techniques of domesticating the wild horse for human transportation, first devised on these very steppes some seven thousand years ago.

From early in their colonial intrusion, the Russians had sought to break, or at least override, the traditional Kazakh nomadic life and defiant clan allegiances, its lines of authority descending from its various Khans, and the complex weave of its three *zhuzes* – of the

Senior of the partially settled south and south-east, containing their ancient cities; the Middle *zhuz* of the families and clans of which Mukhamet Shayakhmetov was a part, in the north-east and north of Kazakh territory; and the 'Junior' *zhuz* of the west. In the mid-nineteenth century the Russians had offered to protect the steppeland inhabitants from the ravages of Jungarian invaders from across the Eastern mountain borders of what is today Chinese and Mongolian territory. Their price was an unwanted colonial control and Russian settlement which, by 1854, had become energetic and determined.

From their base in Fort Verny, soon to be renamed Alma Ata (today's Almaty), Tsarist Russia presided over relentless resettlement of Russian peasantry. All Kazakh land serving the nomadic way of life was deemed to belong to the Russian state. The newcomers were invariably and advisedly armed. In 1880, the Russian commander at Fort Verny declared, as he said, in the 'requirement of sincerity' that 'Our business here is a Russian one, first and foremost, and all the land populated by the Kazakhs is not their own... The Russian settled elements must force them off the land or lead them into oblivion.' At the same time, the territory of the Kazakhs (or Kyrgyz, as they were commonly termed, in the absence of distinction from their ethnic neighbours settled in the mountains of the extreme southeast of the territory), was used as a dumping ground or place of exile for those elements or individuals St Petersburg deemed subversive. Those exiled included the novelist Feodor Dostoevsky, dispatched to Semipalatinsk, the main urban centre of the territory covered by the story of this work, and Taras Shevchenko, the Ukrainian writer and poet, to Mangyshlak.

By 1916, six years before Mukhamet Shayakhmetov's birth and two years into the conflict in which Russia was locked with Germany, the Kazakhs rose in steppe-wide revolt against their Russian masters. No fewer than 385,000 Kazakhs, the cream of the entire generation of males, were to be drafted into the Tsarist army, to provide backing for the front line against the Kaiser's armies. In 1914-15 alone, 260,000 head of Kazakh livestock were 'requisitioned' by the Russians without a kopek of compensation. Seizing that moment of evident vulnerability in St Petersburg, a

group of Kazakh patriots, headed by the nationalist intellectuals of Alash Orda, raised the flag of Kazakh independence. The rebellion was ruthlessly quelled. Thousands of patriots died, thousands more fled: a few, awaiting execution, were saved by the revolution of February 1917, which ended Romanov Tsarist rule, and led to Russia's withdrawal from the Great War.

For a tumultuous year or two following Lenin's putsch of November 7, 1917 – the 'Great October Socialist Revolution' – it seemed that a renewed surge by the Kazakhs, allied to the Whites, would achieve the people's independence. But slowly the Reds gained the upper hand, and with the arrival of the fifth Red Army under General V Frunze, submission to Marxist-Leninist rule from Moscow became the ineluctable reality for the whole of the former Tsarist central Asia. In 1923, the year before Lenin's death, two of the darkest figures of early Communist rule across the Soviet empire were posted to Kazakhstan. One was Nikolai Yezhov, founder of first Lenin's – and soon afterwards, Stalin's – secret police, OGPU; the other was Feodor Goloshchenkin, who five years earlier had participated in the gratuitous murder of the entire Romanov royal family of Russia at Ekaterinburg. Their brief was to consolidate the grip of the Party on the region. They succeeded. Goloshchenkin remained to develop and sustain the Communist regime in Kazakhstan which in 1928 was instructed to implement the 'collectivisation' and enforced settlement of the entire population of the steppes, exclusively ethnic Kazakhs. This destruction of an ancient way of life and a subtle and successful economy was accompanied by the liquidation of all social distinctions (except in so far as it applied to the new Party hierarchy), the enforced introduction of monetary exchange over against traditional barter, and confiscation of all 'kulak' land or flocks and their 'redistribution'. The winter of 1926-27 had experienced a peculiarly evil *jut*, the climatic phenomenon where a freeze follows a spring-time thaw and the animals' pasturage, while visible, is frozen under an impenetrable film of ice. Herds and flocks were catastrophically diminished when, the next year, collectivisation was promulgated. The policy was imposed under a

regime of terror. The grain yield plummeted, animals in their thousands died; hunger was rampant and famine had descended upon the entire rural population. In one year alone (1933) 33,000 Kazakh men and women were convicted and sentenced (sometimes to death) for attempting to hide grain or meat to feed their own families.

Such was the political and social background of the personal story of the boy, so remarkably to survive, who as an old man – now in his eighties – he unfolds here: the record of his own experience kept faithfully throughout those terrible years, and up to his recruitment into the Red Army and his participation in the defence of Stalingrad. It is a document virtually unique, and of unchallengeable honesty and exactitude, first produced in a version in Russian under the title *Sudba* ('Destiny') and printed in Kazakhstan in 2002. Under the deft guidance of his editor, Anthony Gardner, and the skilled translation of Jan Butler, Mukhamet Shayakhmetov has now given access to an English-speaking readership worldwide to the full narrative which seems destined to be treasured as a key resource in the annals of his fellow Kazakhs and their emerging nation.

Kazakhstan was projected, blinking, into independent nationhood in 1991, following the extraordinary events of August that year, and the then virtually powerless Mikhail Gorbachev's 'suspension' of the activities of the Russian Communist Party. Up to as late as December of that year it was widely expected that the USSR's constituent 'Republics' would remain within a Russian-dominated union. Such was not to evolve. It was to be full independence for Kazakhstan and all the constituent republics of equivalent status.

As for the great steppe-land, the eternal Kazakh heartland, collectivised agriculture never succeeded. The yields of animals for meat and milk and wool or hides never recovered. By the death of Stalin, 1953, vast areas of steppe were unproductive and virtually uninhabited. The following year, to great fanfare, Nikita Khrushchev launched the 'virgin lands' scheme – *tselinnyy kray* – by which vast stretches of northern Kazakhstan were to be settled by 350,000 drafted-in Russian, Belorussian and Ukrainian peasantry, and to

grow immense harvests of wheat. The rainfall and soil fertility were not sufficient to sustain the early promise; even so, Kazakhstan remains to this day a significant exporter of wheat. Meanwhile, in the northeast, that same Kazakh territory where the story of *The Silent Steppe* was played out, Stalin had allocated 18,500 square kilometres, the Semipalatinsk Polygon, for the detonation of what – over forty years – was to amount to 470 nuclear bombs, leaving a legacy upon the local population of cancer, leukaemia, stillbirths, and congenital deformity not yet entirely eradicated.

Of the nomadic way of life, a fragment – perhaps some 5 per cent of the stock-rearing population – has to this day still survived, or has resumed something akin to the old way of life. These Kazakh nomads are to be found in the arid far south-west of the country. Farming in Kazakhstan has been formally privatised, and has struggled back to profitable production, albeit patchily, usually as quite large-scale agro-business. The Kazakh nomads of the ‘Junior’ *zhuz*, of the semi-desert region west and north of the Aral Sea (itself an ecological disaster as a result of the theft of its tributary waters for the sake of Uzbekistan’s now defunct cotton plantations), are still to be found erecting their yurts and foregathering in their auls, moving their flocks from one remote region of grazing to another. The herders themselves are vehicle-borne now, not horse-borne. With the freeing of markets they have lately come to flourish, with a high yield per head of animal (often the Karakul sheep), adhering to the remnant structures of family and clan, and benefiting from the long neglect of ancient Kazakh pastures. They are the living relic of a way of life and inheritance of spirit into which Mukhamet Shayakhmetov was born in the far north-east reaches of their homeland territory, some 85 years ago, and which this gallant author so poignantly illuminates and vivifies on behalf of all his nation in his intensely personal, microcosmic account of its devastation.

Tom Stacey

PROLOGUE

THE FUGITIVE

Late Summer, 1930.

It was two days since our aul, or nomadic clan, had migrated from the summer pastures high up in the Altai range’s foothills to the natural shelter of the Karagash just east of the Irtysh river where we usually stopped at this time of the year. The dense tussocks of grass were so tall and springy – some of them waist-high to an adult – that they could trip a child up and knock him to the ground. As the cool evening closed in, the summer air grew denser and the gathering darkness blanked nearly everything out; but I was still able to see three silhouettes hurrying through the fading twilight from our yurt to the one next door.

After catching and tethering the lambs of the ewes that were going to be milked, and finishing off the evening chores I was set as an eight-year-old, I returned to our tent and found my mother sitting all alone. Softly, as though fearing we might be overheard, she whispered to me, ‘The Chief Aga has arrived.’

Then I realised that the silhouettes had been those of my grandmother and my two elder sisters, on their way to meet my Uncle Toimbai.

He was my father’s half-brother, and the head of our clan. His real name was Shayakhmet, but according to an age-old custom of ours, my mother was not allowed to call her husband’s male relatives by their real names, but had to invent other ones for them instead. The names, chosen at the time of marriage, were not only terms of endearment, but indicated how closely the person was related to her husband, and his age. In keeping with tradition, we children of Toimbai’s younger brother added the Kazakh word for ‘grandfather’ – ‘ata’ – to his name and called him Toimbai-ata. The

other children in the aul must have copied us because they called him that, too.

Toimbai-ata was the oldest person in our aul, and the wealthiest. He was a naturally taciturn and gentle man, but his opinion and will were accepted unquestioningly by all the members of our clan. Unlike the other elders, he never abused his status by using his authority to override other people's wishes, or interfering unnecessarily in his kinsmen's affairs. In the communal organisation of the aul, he was responsible for all the livestock, making sure that they were properly grazed and calculating the time and duration of each journey between stopping places in summertime. For two years after the Soviet authorities had banned privately hired labour, he had also taken turns with all the other men in grazing the communal flock of sheep in three-day shifts.

It was a whole year since Toimbai-ata had been in our aul. He was very fond of children and always used to spoil me, and as it was very rare for us not to see a relative for such a long time, I had missed him terribly. So I immediately rushed over to my uncle's yurt, dashing across the yard and through the doorway, where I caught sight of Toimbai-ata in the middle of the tent, hugging my grandmother. Although he was sixty years old, he was sobbing convulsively as he quietly repeated two words over and over again: 'Mother! Darling!'

It was the first time I had seen grown-ups crying inconsolably, and it upset and baffled me. Where, I wondered, had my uncle come from? Where had he been for so long that people had grown tired of waiting for him? And now they had seen him, why were they crying so bitterly?

But I also felt embarrassed. I knew that the previous autumn my uncle had been classified as a kulak or class enemy of the Soviet regime, had all his property confiscated, and been sentenced to two years' imprisonment. And now here he was a year later, returning home like a thief in the night, under the cover of darkness.

PART ONE

CLASS ENEMY



Above: *Modern-day Kazakhstan*

Below: *Soviet Central Asia in the Stalin era*



Chapter One

The Life We Lost

For as long as anyone could remember, a stock-breeder's entire life in the steppe had been bound up with his animals. Our people always looked after them with great care, because they were our main livelihood, and we knew just about everything there was to know about rearing them. The death of even one of them was always treated very seriously: a kid accidentally strangling itself on its tether would cause great consternation, and the whole family would mourn the loss of a favourite horse or camel, because they were the main means of transport and work force in a nomadic household. Relatives and friends would solemnly express their condolences, just as if a member of the family had died, and help them to cover their loss. The Kazakh nomads could not imagine an existence without their livestock: they knew of no other kind, and believed that to be left without their animals would mean certain death.

The pattern of our year was dictated by the needs of our herds and flocks. In order to provide enough grazing for them, we were always on the move between pastures, following routes established by our forefathers. In the south and south-west of Kazakhstan, migration to the abundant summer pastures could mean a journey of over a thousand kilometres. For us in the eastern, mountainous

part of the country, the distances were smaller: 150 to 200 kilometres, divided into stages of five kilometres upwards. Each move had to take into account the stamina of our animals – particularly the ewes, which could usually cover no more than twenty kilometres in one day.

Each move was like a festival, especially for us children; everyone was happy, and dressed up for the occasion. The caravan was headed by the most respected woman of the aul, who rode on a horse, leading the camels which carried her family's possessions. These animals are very obedient, and quietly followed the leader. The other women came next, also leading pack camels, in a long line accompanied by two men who acted as guides. The rest of the men would drive the flocks separately from the caravan, and the young people would play along the way, racing one another on horses, singing songs, and picking flowers and wild berries.

These moves were made as a rule at warm times of year, and followed the seasons exactly. The first were in early spring from winter camps to places known as 'spring/autumn stopping places of the aul'. These were light dwellings, suitable for habitation in early spring and late autumn – though most of the stock-breeders preferred to put up their yurts and live in those. Here lambing took place; then, after a month or six weeks, when new-born lambs were old enough to travel small distances, there would be a move to new pastures, up to ten kilometres away. In another month – around the middle of June, when the hot summer days came – the nomads headed up into the mountains, or else further north. By the beginning of July they had reached their final destination – cool summer pastures with plenty of grass – and would remain there till mid-August, though they would continue to move their flocks between meadows.

The first part of the return journey would take them down to the lower slopes of the mountains. Then, in early September, with the weather becoming cooler in the lowlands, they would head onto the steppe, staying there until the end of October, with occasional short moves to different pastures: we called one of these a *zhayau kosh*, or 'migration on foot'.

On the eve of the winter, people settled again in the stopping places they had used in the spring. Only when the first snowfall came in mid-November would they move into their winter dwellings, where they would remain until March and the beginning of the next nomadic cycle. This final move was always left as late as possible, in order to conserve the winter pastures.

These moves were easy for us, as they had been developed to a fine art, and the whole business of dismantling the yurt, packing what was needed for summer living and loading it onto a camel could be managed in an hour or an hour and a half.

The yurt was made up of a frustrum-shaped wooden frame consisting of long poles, and panels woven from osiers. The size could be increased simply by adding more panels, if the owner was wealthy enough. The tops of the poles were inserted into a canopy of withies, creating a dome, and the frame was then covered with a large waterproof felt mat. The temperature could be regulated by opening or closing the dome as required.

As for our winter houses, these were simple affairs made from stones, clay bricks or logs. Each had a flat roof and consisted of two or three rooms, or simply one big room for all members of the family. In the one-room houses people would spend the night in different corners, separated by curtains. It was even more huggier in the yurts.

The floor, whether in a yurt or in a house, would be covered with a felt mat decorated with patterns and thick enough to ensure protection from cold and moisture. Homespun rugs were also used for warmth and decoration. At mealtimes, the whole family would sit at the *dastarkhan* (a low table) in winter, or around a tablecloth spread on the floor in summer.

Nomads had almost no furniture in its present-day meaning, apart from their dinner table, wooden beds, and chests and boxes for storing household things and food. The yurts were even more sparsely furnished than their houses, because they left as much as they could behind in their winter dwellings to minimise the burden on the camels.

Once a week we washed in a bathhouse. There was usually one

of these for each winter or autumn/spring stopping place, though there might be two if there were a lot of yurts based there. They were far from perfect, each heated by a stone fireplace which filled the place with smoke. In the summertime, a temporary bathhouse would be erected wherever we stopped, using a frame covered with floor mats.

Around our winter houses were pens for sheep, camels and oxen – but not for horses, who stayed in their pastures day and night throughout the winter, clearing the snow with their hoofs to reach the grass beneath. The other animals would be let out during the day and brought back to the pens at night. Stopping-places were usually chosen for their light snowfall, or for their situation at the foot of a mountain where frequent winds would blow the snow clear. Nomads did not put aside a stock of fodder for winter, except for the possibility of a couple of horses or animals falling sick. There was always the danger that in severe winters large numbers of animals could die of starvation – a devastating blow to their owners.

On arrival at the spring stopping places, wheat and other crops would be sown in fields some distance away from our pastures. Then, when we returned in the autumn, most of the men and youths would go off to harvest them and make hay. The men generally would not return home at all while they were busy harvesting, and those of them who did come back for a short while would return to the fields the following morning. The older women were left in charge of the aul, along with the old men and children who were unable to manage the heavy field work. The tough, older boys would graze the livestock and look after them under the supervision of the old men. They had a great many duties, such as herding the sheep out to pasture, keeping an eye on the calves, watching the kid goats whose mothers were still being milked and the foals which – unlike in summer – were allowed to run with the herd, attached by a rope to their mothers' necks, and graze in the steppe.

I learnt to ride at the age of five, and my father encouraged me from early on to get used to taking a horse out on my own. He

would send me on errands to relatives or friends, and when a regional official came to visit the area and needed to borrow a horse to get to the next aul, I would sit behind him and then ride it home. I used to undertake these journeys with great eagerness and pride, and my father rewarded me with enthusiastic praise.

Every two hours from morning until nightfall, the mares had to be herded back to the aul and milked and then driven out to pasture again – and the boys were expected to do all this work as well as catching the foals every morning. The horses were hard to round up in the chilly mist after the night's rain: when they got near the aul, they suddenly got excited and sometimes spun round and galloped back into the steppe. This caused the old men and women and young boys a lot of extra work: it seemed as though the herd could sense there were no young men around in the aul to chase after them on their fast horses and yell commands at them. This is how our great Kazakh poet, Abai, described the picture in the autumn steppe he had probably seen ever since his childhood:

Cold storm-clouds spinning darkness,
Swathe the bare mountain crags in mist,
And herds of horses in the pasture frolic
In the frost or drowsy, droning heat.

For us boys, the hardest and most worrying work, apart from grazing the flock of sheep, was looking after the kid goats. Usually born in early spring, the kids would spend the summer grazing with the lambs, which were also separated from their mothers all day during the summer while they were still being milked. In autumn the kids were kept apart from the lambs. They were not as docile as the lambs and harder to graze, because they were always darting about and never stood still. It was difficult to tell whether they were just searching for new grass in the pasture or simply restless by nature and had to keep racing off somewhere.

If you didn't keep your eyes trained on them, they would be gone in a flash and completely disappear. They were particularly hard to manage on windy days. The dry autumn wind was their

idea of heaven. They could quickly bunch together in the wind and then, as if something had taken hold of them, dart off all together in the opposite direction to the wind, jostling each other, nibbling at the tops of the grass as they ran. And then before you knew it, they had disappeared from sight and you wouldn't be able to catch up with them on foot. Sometimes they would all wander off far into the steppe and fall prey to wolves – in which case, the boys in charge of them would be sure to get a beating.

These were the jobs all the boys in the aul had to do. But I also had some duties that others didn't. For instance, I used to graze the communal flock two days in row while the other boys only grazed them for one day at a time, since we had twice as many sheep as the others. Even before my father sent me at the age of eight to graze the communal flock, I had already worked as an 'apprentice' shepherd for three years, for I had sometimes been asked by the elders to take charge of the flock for a couple of hours a day.

To begin with, I was really happy to do this work as it seemed so important and made me feel grown-up: I used to stride boldly out into the steppe on my own with the 700 sheep in the flock and drive them back to the aul in good time, proud of myself for managing an adult's job. But as I grew older, the only thing I enjoyed about grazing the sheep was that I could spend the whole day on horseback in the steppe. Pretending you were riding round the flock, you could gallop about as much as you liked, even though it was strictly forbidden for a nomad to gallop and tire his horse out needlessly. If you happened to meet another boy on horseback also grazing a flock, you could have races with him.

While men had overall responsibility for the animals and crops and providing fuel and other necessities, women were kept busy at home. Contrary to the established Western idea of women in oriental countries, they enjoyed extensive rights, and often became the head not only of the family but of the whole clan. Nevertheless, although they were not expected to do heavy physical work such as building and ploughing, their chores occupied them from early morning until late evening. These included anything to do with dairy produce: they spent three to four hours every day just

treating the milk, in addition to milking all the cows and ewes twice a day. They were also in charge of cooking, looking after the children, tanning, felt-making, weaving and sewing.

Meat was the most important part of our diet – though in the summer we tended to eat more dairy produce – and Kazakh women excelled at cooking it. Another staple was millet, which was God's gift to a farmer, since it required comparatively few seeds, was drought-resistant, and stored well. Our traditional millet recipes are rarely used nowadays because they are so difficult and time-consuming. Cooking it in a cauldron and then husking it in a mortar would take several hours, until the grains – known as *tary* – were pearly-white and deliciously crunchy, light and crumbly. They could then be served with butter, cream, milk or simply on their own; they could be made into porridge or added to cream and meat-based soups. A favourite dish was *tary* soaked in warm milk and served with a topping of sour cream; another delicious version of this was to pound it in a mortar with the raw fat of sheep's tail and serve it with tea. It was often flavoured with curd cheese, sugar or honey and then boiled in animal fat and served as a sweet cake to guests at special family celebrations. Sadly, even with all the high-tech expertise available today, no husking machinery has been adapted to process Kazakh millet, so *tary* has fallen out of favour.

Then there were clothes to be made and mended. Most were made from homespun wool, or leather from the skin of our animals (though we also bought factory-made material for things such as underwear and bedding). My winter outfit included a fur coat, wide leather trousers made from ewe skin, and a warm astrakhan hat.

Traditionally, children seldom received much education, since the teachers were mullahs who gave learning the (Arabic) Koran by heart precedence over more practical things. Following the Revolution, the mullahs were banned from teaching, and conventional Soviet schools introduced instead. We nevertheless continued to observe our faith, praying five times a day to Mecca, though the scattered nature of the steppe aul made it impossible to come together regularly in a mosque.

Although we worked hard, there was one free day a week – Friday – and we celebrated various holidays throughout the year, including New Year and the opening and closing day of the farming season. There were also special occasions such as the birth of children, the celebration of a baby's first step, the initiation of a boy as a *dzhigit* or young warrior, and weddings (lasting, as a rule, for several days). Any of these would involve relatives, friends and acquaintances from nearby and more remote aul. In addition, our two-month stay in the mountain meadows was for most men a time of relaxation – and every movement of the aul to a new stopping place was considered a holiday. We would celebrate with folk songs and music, competitions for improvising poetry, and different kinds of sporting contests.

This is how life was while I was growing up in our small aul, with its half-dozen yurts belonging to close relatives. But the Soviet authorities brought it all to an end when they introduced collective farms, and gave the terrible name 'kulak' to my father and Uncle Toimbai.

Chapter Two

My Uncle's Trial

The authorities' drive to dispossess the kulaks – destroying well-off peasant holdings by confiscating their livestock, land and property and deporting the owner and his family from their home – began across the USSR in 1928, and reached the remote regions of Southern Altai and the upper reaches of the River Irtysh in the autumn of 1929. Those of the wealthy people in the aul who recognised the threat set off with their families and possessions in search of safety – some of them crossing the border into China, where the Government not only allowed them to settle but offered them exemption from tax for three years. Others, however, somehow hoped that they would not get caught up in the policy. Yet it hit most of them like a bolt from the blue. In our family, we were caught quite unawares by the alarming news that Uncle Toimbai had been arrested and was likely to be put on trial the very next day.

The men in our aul decided to travel to the local courthouse to see and hear for themselves exactly what was going on there. I asked Mother (as Father was away from home) if I could go as well.

In those days the very notion of a person being convicted by an official court was practically unheard-of among Kazakhs. On this occasion six or seven well-off farmers from our group of villages (officially known as Administrative Aul Number Six of the Kumashinko-Altai rural district, Bukhtarminsk region, Semipalatinsk province) had been put on trial. A large number of people attended the court session, mainly *belsendi* (activists) from local aul who were carrying through the Soviet authorities' policies in the countryside. Relatives of the accused also attended, and so did quite a few people who were there purely for the curiosity value. There were those, too, who had heard that the kulaks' money, property and livestock were going to be confiscated and distributed to the poor, and had come in the hope of receiving a share of the spoils.

At that time there were no particularly rich Kazakhs living in the mountain regions of Southern Altai and the narrow valley of the River Irtysh. The wealthiest among them might own one thousand head of sheep, between one and two hundred horses and several dozen head of large-horned cattle and a few camels. The major landowners (or *bai*, as they were locally known) had been eliminated and deported to other parts of the country back in 1926. Now, three years later, the State set about eliminating and alienating the next group of well-off peasant farmers and nomadic stock-breeders by classifying them as kulaks.

In 1929 – hailed by Stalin and the Communists as ‘the year of radical change’ on account of the peasants’ supposedly voluntary mass transition to collective farms – the Government’s efforts to merge small-scale farm holdings into large units had not, in fact, received the support of the population as a whole. The peasants were not joining the collectives. The authorities put all the blame for this on the well-off peasants and decided that the best way of removing this obstacle was to destroy them. A draconian law set out the criteria for classifying an individual peasant as a kulak, defined by the size of the farm holding, by the size of the area under crops, by livestock numbers, the ownership of a single mechanical engine (mill, threshing machine, harvester, or mowing-machine),

and even by the use of a single hired hand. On 1 May, 1929, the farm belonging to my Uncle Toimbai (who, according to official calculations, was the most comfortably well-off among us) consisted of 350 head of sheep, three geldings, one stallion, two mares with their offspring from the past two years, five dairy cows, one working ox, four large-horned bullocks and four camels; he had sown no crops.

As an immediate way of eliminating kulak holdings, the authorities devised new taxes and obligatory in-kind deliveries of grain or livestock. The taxes were expressly exorbitant and unrealisable – in many cases they were several times higher than the total harvest or head of livestock on the holding. What is more, the time allowed for delivering the grain and livestock and paying off the tax was impossible to keep to. Failure to pay these taxes on time then resulted in the farmer being convicted of opposing Soviet policy, with draconian consequences.

Well-off nomadic Kazakh farmers who never went in for arable farming were expected to pay tax in the form of grain deliveries to the State, and so were forced to buy in grain from other farms. This meant having cash to pay for it, which was something nomadic farmers never had, since they were used to paying in kind; they were therefore forced to sell off their livestock as quickly as possible to get the cash to purchase the grain with. But inevitably, an increase in the amount of animals for sale caused their value to plummet; and since any livestock belonging to private individuals was being put in collective farms, very few people were interested in buying it.

Even if the livestock was successfully sold off or bartered, it took quite some time to amass sufficient grain to pay off the tax. Delays would occur and the deadline would pass; even if a farmer did manage to meet it, he was then presented with yet more demands, so that in the end some decided that they would never be able to pay everything they owed and simply stopped handing over their grain and livestock to the State. The authorities would respond by instigating criminal proceedings against them. Whether they refused or were simply unable to pay, their actions were categorised

as anti-Soviet. Eventually the matter was resolved in court, where the farmer was sentenced to imprisonment and had all his property confiscated, while his family was deported some distance from their permanent home.

The trials of peasants officially classified as kulaks were conducted in a bizarre manner. The proceedings against the group of six or seven men from Administrative Aul Number Six, for instance, were held in a private apartment rather than a courtroom, and could be summarised like this:

Judge to the accused: 'Citizen X, you are accused of malicious failure to pay an obligatory tax to the Soviet State. You have committed the crime of refusing to obey Soviet laws. What do you say to this?'

Accused to the judge: 'I was ordered to pay tax in the form of grain deliveries. I did not sow grain myself. So I have no grain. I didn't have any money either. So I sold off some livestock and got hold of some money and then found some grain and bought it and delivered it to the State, but I didn't manage to do it all in time. I'd paid two taxes before; if I'm given more time and if I can find grain for sale, I'll pay this third tax as well.'

Judge to the second accused: 'You have tried to deceive the Soviet State. You mixed sand and grit in the grain you delivered to the State. Why did you do this?'

Accused: 'The grain I delivered to the State was bought from local people at market. When I was buying it, I carefully checked it for quality and purity. I delivered it myself to the man on duty at the collection point and it was top-quality and totally clean. It is not true that I deceived anyone. I swear it on my children...'

Judge to one of the witnesses for the prosecution: 'Did you receive the grain as an obligatory delivery to the State from the accused kulaks? What can you tell us about the quality of the grain you received from the suppliers?'

Witness to the judge: 'I did not do a quality check on it when it was delivered. Later, when the grain collected in various auls was delivered to the State procurement station it was discovered that the grain had sand and grit in it. These suppliers here, these

enemies of the Soviet authorities and working people, had poured sand and grit into the bottom of the sacks of grain.'

Judge to the same witness: 'Give the full names of the accused seated in this courtroom who, with the intent of sabotaging and swindling the Soviet authorities, attempted to deliver grain adulterated with sand to the State.'

Witness: 'All the accused kulaks seated here deliberately did so.'

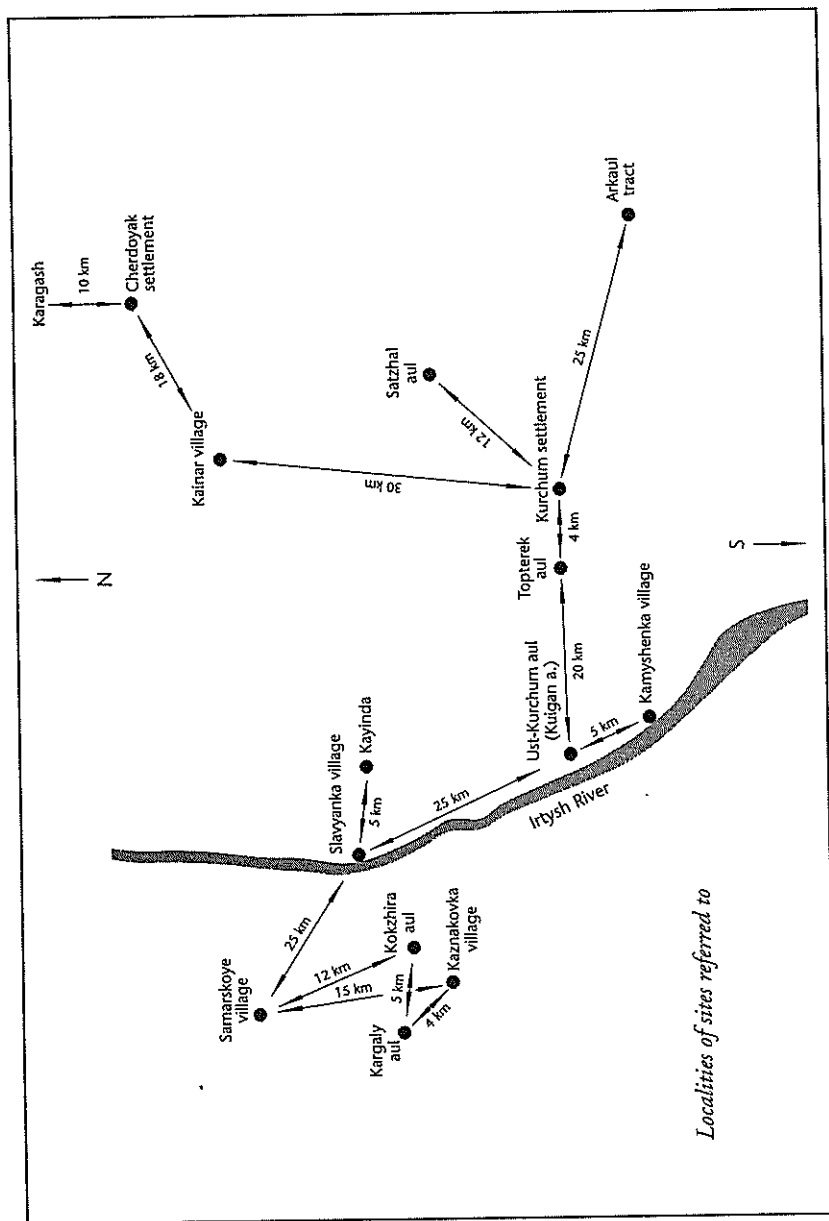
Those of us who witnessed the proceedings were astonished; some even dared to laugh. It was obvious that everything was designed to speed up the destruction of the well-off holdings in the villages with a total disregard for logic or the law.

The same day 'justice' was administered to the 'most recent enemies of the Soviet authorities, poorest peasants and former farm labourers'. The court's sentence read as follows: 'For malicious failure to fulfil specified deliveries of grain to the State, for sabotaging the State by adding sand and grit to grain delivered to the State, the persons listed by name below are deprived of their freedom and sentenced to two years of imprisonment. All their property – their livestock and domestic property – is to be confiscated. After serving their custodial sentence they will be deported for five years to a remote part of the country. This sentence is final and not subject to appeal and will take immediate effect.'

The convicted were escorted from the 'courtroom' under guard and shortly afterwards their families had all their livestock and domestic property, right down to cups and cutlery, confiscated. Within two days twenty 'class enemies' and 'exploiters' from the various auls had been sent under escort to be imprisoned in the town of Ust-Kamenogorsk (now Oskemen), 250 kilometres away.

Accustomed since time immemorial to a life of freedom and to the fresh air of the vast open spaces, these people of the steppe found it hard enough during the winter months when they were confined to their huts. They regarded life in town – from what they had heard of it – as hell, and were quite sure that incarceration in a prison cell could only mean death. It was therefore only natural for them to seek ways and means of escaping.

The method chosen by the authorities for transferring the



prisoners to Ust-Kamenogorsk made it easy for them. As they had no organised means of transport at their disposal, the court officials decided to send the group under escort on their own horses. And so, loaded with provisions, the men set off on horseback accompanied by two militia guards. After travelling some 25 or 30 kilometres, the group set up camp for the first night in the aul of Kayinda and were warmly welcomed by the local residents, many of whom were acquaintances and even relatives. The arrested men were put up in small groups in their friends' homes. The people of Kayinda offered them traditional hospitality as well as heartfelt sympathy for their situation.

The morning after their first night in the aul, none of the arrested men was anywhere to be seen and the two militia guards were lying with their hands and feet tied up. But none of the fugitives had any idea what to do now they were on the run: most could think of nothing better than to hide in the homes of friends and relatives in other auls close to home. Some collected their families and fled across the border to safety in China, but these were a small minority. Most did not wish to leave their homeland and hoped in vain to hide from the authorities nearby, with the support of their fellow countrymen and relatives.

Among these fugitives were Toimbai-ata and one of our cousins, Muksiin Nurmukhambetov. That night the two of them crossed over to the left bank of the River Irtysh, and found temporary shelter at the home of some distant relatives. They were convinced they had travelled far enough not to be recognised by any locals, whereas in actual fact they were only about thirty kilometres away from where they had escaped their guards, and seventy to eighty kilometres from their aul and families.

Their hope lay in the covert sympathy and support they were shown by ordinary people. It was no secret that most peasants did not support the Soviet authorities' policy of setting the poor against the well-off. The persecution of the kulaks and the coercion used to turn farms into collectives gave rise to deep discontent, and this led people to harbour fugitives as a form of protest. Nevertheless, within a short time most of the fugitives were

recaptured. By staying on the run for a year before the night he reappeared at our aul, Uncle Toimbai-ata proved himself to be much the most resourceful.

He seemed safe among us to begin with. In late summer and early autumn there were few casual visitors to the aul, because most people were busy haymaking and tending to the ripening crops of corn. Only the elderly who were still able to watch over the communal livestock were left in the stopping places dotted across the steppe and lower foothills of the Altai mountains, and though they used to visit our aul to drink *kumys* (mare's milk), they were taciturn men, good at keeping secrets. If they saw Toimbai-ata they would pay their respects to him, and even advise him on how best to hide.

But after he had been with us for a month, his grey horse – which was well-known in the area – was spotted standing by the water hole with the communal herd, and seized by local activists; and though no one came looking for him in the days that followed, Toimbai-ata – discouraged by his loss and convinced of the futility of life as a fugitive – finally decided to give himself up to the authorities. They reaffirmed his sentence, and sent him to prison in the town of Zaisan.

Chapter Three

The Holy Yurt

Toimbai-ata's fellow fugitive Muksiin Nurmukhambetov had given himself up in the spring, but – because he was suffering from a severe lung infection after a winter on the run – the authorities soon released him and allowed him to return home. His presence among us was to cause unexpected problems for our annual migration to the summer pastures in the mountains.

The number of families in each aul had always been determined by the amount of livestock they had between them – the sheep in the flock and horses in the herd. In the summer months, there could be as many as one thousand sheep in the flock (including the new lambs), but only half as many in winter. If this number was exceeded, the grass in the pastures would be eaten too quickly and the weakest sheep in the flock, which ate only what the others left, would fall sick and die.

The need to stick to this size of flock forced the aul members to split the herds of horses and flocks of sheep in two. Consequently, the people who looked after them also had to split up. And so sons were separated from parents and one set of relatives from another, all creating new auls. These could range

from two to ten yurts in size, which would be positioned a kilometre or several kilometres apart from the next aul, depending on the time of year and the grazing available.

According to the version of our family tree that had been passed down by word of mouth, our ancestors were descended from the Naiman tribe, once one of the principal tribes of the so-called Middle Zhuz of Kazakhstan. (Zhuzes were originally federations of tribes occupying different parts of the country, which in the sixteenth century took shape as three regions – the other two being the ‘Senior’ and ‘Junior’ Zhuz.) Long before, in the twelfth century, the Naiman had their own state – one of the most powerful of the time – extending from the lands of modern-day Mongolia to Southern Altai and the upper reaches of the River Irtysh. For many years the Naiman waged war against the Mongolian Tartar forces of Genghis Khan, but after finally being defeated at the turn of the thirteenth century, they fled to Central Asia, where they remained for 500 years. Their long and peaceful existence there was shattered when they were invaded by the Jungars from Chinese Turkmenistan in the early eighteenth century, and were forced to flee towards the western and northern lands of present-day Kazakhstan. As the Jungars were gradually expelled in the latter half of the eighteenth century, the Naiman chose to settle in the liberated lands of central and eastern Kazakhstan.

The key Kazakh figure at this time was the great leader Abylai Khan, who succeeded in uniting the country’s various factions against the Jungars. Among his supporters were two of our ancestors, Barak and Zhandeli, who earned the title of ‘батыр’ (meaning ‘heroic warrior’); both died of wounds received in battle, and after their deaths our family moved for greater safety to a region which was then part of China, on the east bank of the River Kurchum. It was only in 1881, when the State borders between the Russian and Chinese Empires were finally established, that our ancestors – known as the Orei kinsmen – became citizens of Russia.

Zhandeli’s eldest son was called Myrzabai, and among his sons was my great-great-grandfather, Nauei. At the turn of the

twentieth century Nauei’s great-grandsons formed four independent aul with all the administrative and legal attributes of an organised nomadic community; but in 1916 they lost considerable numbers of clan members and livestock when many Kazakhs – aggrieved by the Tsarist regime’s policies – emigrated to China. They were further depleted by the cholera epidemics of 1917-1918, and attacks by Jhut invaders in 1911 and 1918, so that at the beginning of the 1920s the four auls were forced to merge into two. Now, because each of these had lost members in the drive against kulaks, it was decided to merge them into one.

Traditionally, the whole aul would move to the summer pastures at the same time, and the families with insufficient saddle horses or pack animals (camels, oxen and sometimes horses as well) would borrow them from the wealthier ones. But now the livestock belonging to the two rich families had been confiscated by the State, there was no longer enough transport to go round. Rather than all remain behind in the stifling summer heat, the families whose kinsmen had been dispossessed decided to move to the summer stopping place in two goes. Part of the aul would move first, and then the necessary transport would go back and pick up the rest.

Among those left behind on the initial journey was Muksiin’s yurt, since he was not well enough to complete the journey on horseback. But no one felt at all comfortable about this, because the yurt in question was held in particular reverence, having once belonged to Muksiin’s grandfather, the holy Hadji Bayan.

The traditions of steppe Muslims included that of the so-called posthumous ‘Hadj by default’, whereby arrangements were made for a relative or other person to undertake a pilgrimage to the holy sites in the Arabian cities of Mecca and Medina on behalf of someone who had died. Of my great-great-grandfather Nauei’s six sons, the youngest, Bayan, was the most prosperous, and after his death in 1907 his son hired a man who had experience of guiding pilgrims to make the Hadj for him. Unfortunately the man died in Mecca and never returned; but although there was no evidence that he had fulfilled all the conditions of the Hadj, the venerable title of Hadji was still posthumously conferred on Bayan.

In those days it was believed that the relics of such people had considerable power, and it became a custom for everyone in the area to cross the threshold of Hadji Bayan's yurt before starting any important business or embarking on a distant journey: there they would pray to his ashes and eat a meal in the blessed household. This was still the practice when Bayan's grandson became the head of the family. So when this venerated yurt was left behind instead of heading the migrating caravan as it should have done, everything seemed to have been turned upside down.

According to Kazakh custom, it was obligatory for relatives who shared the same great-grandparents to help one another when times were hard. (Even the seventh generation of a family considered one another to be brothers.) So the day after the first section of the aul had settled in its new stopping place, the elders from other aul who were all descended from Naei and fourth-generation descendants of Myrzabai, gathered together in our yurt at the invitation of my father Shayakhmet, who was now the oldest man left in our clan.

Traditionally, when the elders got together to talk, the young children were expected to remain with them in the yurt. We were encouraged to listen to the adults' conversation, in the hope that we would find it edifying; and anyone with a sensitive ear and curious mind could certainly learn a great deal from their eloquence. I was among the assembled company that day, and I was struck by their brilliant figures of speech, their astute comparisons, their sayings and their proverbs, many of which were in verse and recited from memory.

Pouring fresh mare's milk into the bowl in front of each guest, my father began speaking: 'Honourable elders, older and younger brothers, it is perhaps the will of Allah or perhaps because of our mortal sins that an incomprehensible, grim time is now upon us and some people have started taking away other people's livestock, wealth and happiness. Remember the popular old saying: "God has no wealth. He gives it from one person to another". Well, it now appears to be true. The authorities and aul activists have taken everything away from the rich and handed it over to idlers and

made some of us extremely poor overnight. Just such a misfortune has befallen the family of Hadji Bayan. So revered by us all, the blessed yurt belonging to the holy Hadji and all his grandsons and great-grandsons has been left behind on its own in the old stopping place. The Hadji's eldest grandson who now owns this yurt is laid up and seriously ill. In the good old days each and every one of us used to visit this blessed yurt to ask God and the Hadji's spirit for their blessing and assistance. All of you, all of Myrzabai's clan, have more than once received generous help in this yurt, first in Hadji Bayan's lifetime and more recently when it belonged to his son Mukshai and his grandson Muksiin. We have all felt the support and benevolence of the Hadji's spirit. The question now is how to move this yurt which has been left behind on its own, this yurt belonging to the Hadji and his grandsons and great-grandsons and the present head of the family, Muksiin, who is on his death bed, and bring it here to our aul along with the other yurts. I have invited you to hear your advice. What are your thoughts on this and how can you help in this matter which concerns all of Myrzabai's clan?

It took a short exchange of opinions for the elders to settle the matter. They agreed that it was completely disgraceful for the yurt of the Hadji's grandsons to be moved last when the aul migrated: the other families found this abhorrent and sinful, and believed it might incite the wrath of the Hadji's spirit. And so it was decided to move the Hadji's yurt first whenever the aul migrated. It was also decided to assemble a number of young men the very next day and allocate them pack camels and horses to move the rest of the yurts, and to include several older people in this group – among them the mullah, so that he could appease the Hadji's spirit if need be.

Quite a long time was spent working out how to move the sick man. (In such cases a home-made stretcher was usually strung up between two horses: camels could not be used because they jolted their passengers about so much.) However, the very same evening that the helpers arrived with their carts to pick up the yurt that had been left behind, Muksiin passed away. The funeral arrangements then delayed the move for another few days.

Muksiin was only 33 years old. Either because it was my first experience of death in the aul, or because the adults mourned the death of their kinsman and the Hadji's descendant so profoundly, I have remembered that period of mourning all my life. It was possibly the very last time in an aul that the traditional funeral rite was performed almost in its entirety.

When the funeral procession came within half a kilometre of the aul, the widow of the dead man started weeping loudly and lamenting her loss. Echoing her, everyone else in the aul replied by wailing, 'Oi, baurym! Oh, beloved!' The women of the aul then began lamenting with incredible force. People from neighbouring aul added their voices to the lamentation. So deep were their expressions of grief that I can still hear them today.

When I remember it all now, I cannot fully understand why people subjected themselves to such a harrowing ritual and prolonged period of mourning, involving such heartrending cries and so many tears. The wailing was kept up for more than a day. And over the next few days, relatives, friends and acquaintances of the deceased came to our aul from far and wide. Each visitor to the household in mourning expressed their grief by lamenting bitterly as they embraced each and every member of the family, in keeping with tradition. In addition to all this, the women mourned the dead man with special two-part laments three times a day, just before sunrise and sunset and at midday. On this occasion the ceremony was performed by the widow and daughter-in-law, who extolled the noble and almost sacred descent of the deceased, his forebears' exploits and the exceptional nature of their most recent offspring. This was followed by an account of the deceased's singular merits and noble acts and how he had departed this life prematurely, and how his death was willed by God but caused by the new authorities' evil doings.

It was not, however, the Soviet Government itself, but the *belsendi* who were principally blamed for the tragedy. After all, it was argued, any authority is God-given, and so finding fault with it was a sin; but if it had not been for the activists, Muksiin would never have been persecuted or have contracted his fatal disease. The

human emotion of pity was beyond the comprehension of godless people like them. They were wreckers.

The daily two-part laments weighed heavily on everyone's hearts, and the mournful words were hard to listen to – though at least they were never boring, since each was a new and skilfully improvised piece of poetry. For forty days they went on, always being performed exactly at the prescribed times; and whenever they took place, everyone in the aul had to stop what they were doing and listen to them.

Chapter Four

My Sister's Secret Wedding

The activists in every aul comprised a small group of young men from poor families who busily supported the Soviet authorities' class policy and tried to sow discord, even among relatives who had always lived in harmony and relied on mutual assistance in their close-knit community. These were people who sincerely believed all the slogans about the Soviet authorities 'empowering the poor, freeing them all from bondage', and 'granting them the same rights and privileges as everyone else'.

Most of the activists were illiterate. If a very small percentage of them could read and write, it was because some time in the past they had been taught by the poorly educated aul mullah. Some of these young men had learnt to recognise the letters of the alphabet and read words by the syllable at the short-lived schools which were set up to eradicate illiteracy. Only two of our activists had paid jobs: the chairman and secretary of the aul council. The rest worked on a voluntary basis, assisting the aul and rural district chairmen and all the other countless local and regional officials in the hope that if they showed enough enthusiasm, they might possibly land some kind of permanent job. They spent most of their time in the aul alarming the

illiterate residents with made-up stories about impending upheavals which the authorities would surely be implementing. At the same time, they tried to impress upon the frightened people that they would intercede for them if need be.

In their daily lives and relations with the locals, they made no particular effort to introduce the Soviet authorities' new policies. They behaved arrogantly towards simple people, just like the officials of tsarist times. They would do deals with the landowners whenever it suited them, so betraying the interests of their political masters, and tried to line their own pockets any way they could. They used to intimidate not only the rich but also the poor and moderately well-off peasants, which was why they were so unpopular and often given derogatory nicknames.

It would be a distortion of the truth to say that all the activists were loathed by people in the aul. Some were serious and thoughtful, and always easy to get on with: they correctly understood the authorities' policies and people's aspirations, and explained the way things were in an intelligent and comprehensible manner. Most, however – because of their lack of education – interpreted the law as they saw fit. They deliberately went to extremes when conducting any campaign, exceeding State targets, and persecuted their fellow Kazakhs in order to impress the authorities. Just one example of their 'assistance' in introducing new laws is enough to illustrate how heavy-handed they were.

The Soviet authorities did quite a lot to give women equal rights with men and elevate their role in society. In particular, they liberated the women of the East from old customs such as polygamy and the obligation of a widowed woman in an aul to marry a relative of her late husband. They also introduced an undeniably progressive law banning so-called 'bride money' – the custom of a man's family paying for his bride.

Originally, this custom probably had a positive function. It was devised as a way of creating comfortable living conditions for a young couple who had just set up home on their own, and – along with the dowry paid by the bride's family – enabled her to be provided with clothing, bed linen, cooking equipment, household

goods, somewhere to live, a new yurt and definitely a horse and camel, so that she arrived at her groom's house with the basic essentials for a nomadic way of life and could be independent, at least for the time being. However, with the passing of time, bride money acquired a new significance, and in the hands of certain greedy people often became a commodity and source of easy profit.

No sooner had the new law been introduced than the activists began to abuse it. Every time there was a wedding, they would see to it that it was denounced as a criminal act. They would insist that a payment must have been received for the bride, and ensure that the bride's father was prosecuted; the bridegroom would also face prosecution for buying his bride. And so, to avoid trouble, parents started marrying their daughters off in secret, without weddings. They would announce that their daughter had secretly run away from them; the groom's family, for their part, would then announce that their son had stolen the girl and brought her home and that they now had a daughter-in-law.

Another part of the wedding tradition was that the families marked the couple's betrothal by a verbal agreement sealed with a vow at a *dastarkhan* meal. As it happened, in 1929, our family had concluded just such an agreement concerning my sister Zhamba with a family from the Karauzhasssyk clan who lived on the other side of the River Irtysh. It had been mutually agreed to set the date of the wedding for the autumn of 1930, before the sheep shearing, since nomads usually organised major family celebrations to fit in with farm work and migration schedules. (The best times were after lambing, before the migration to the summer stopping place, or after the migration to the winter stopping place.)

As the time drew near for the groom to come for his bride, the tension started to mount in our family and all over the aul. It was mainly the fear of being accused of receiving bride money, and thus breaking the new marriage and family law; but what also alarmed people was the prospect of a young girl getting married without a wedding ceremony. Unless the customs were observed and rites performed, they believed, neither the bride nor the groom could be happy and prosperous in the future.

It was arranged that the groom would arrive secretly, under cover of darkness, accompanied not by his family or an entourage, but by a single friend. By the time he did so, there was not a single man left at home: they had all officially gone off till the following day to make hay and harvest the ripe cereal crops, so as not to be accused of collusion in the 'sale' of the girl.

The mothers of the aul also tried to get their children to sleep early that night, so that they would not witness the 'crime' about to be committed and perhaps later give away the secret. This included me, on the pretext that I had to go and graze the flock the next morning. Aware of the women's secret plans, I could not get to sleep; but not daring to disobey orders, I peeped over my blanket and watched what was going on. I was aware that I was about to part with my favourite sister and would no longer be able to see her every day.

Zhamba (the name means 'gold ingot' in Kazakh) had only turned eighteen the previous spring. She was the eldest child in our family and not only my parents' but the whole community's favourite. Besides being beautiful, she was skilled at all the duties that would be required of her as a housewife: Mother had taught her how to cut out clothes, sow and embroider and make everything usually found in a nomadic home, such as felt rugs and leather goods. Her graceful manners and the attention and respect she showed older people charmed everyone who knew her, as did her lovely singing. We were all sorry she was leaving.

As she was so young, she was naturally nervous about what the future had in store for her. She had heard of the miserable lives of girls who lost all their freedom once they were married off, and love for her future husband was tinged with fear and uncertainty about the unfamiliar house she would be entering. She felt even more anxious because she was being given away in this secret and seemingly unlawful manner and being deprived of all the usual wedding celebrations and fun and games. She tearfully said goodbye to each of her friends, who were also crying and saying, 'Oh, it's so sad! How shall we manage without you?' And then Zhamba replied sadly, 'Dear God, what sin have I committed

against You? Why have you made these cruel laws for me and all the other girls like me, and where have these terrible times come from? Why am I being carried off from my home in secret, like a prisoner?’

Her friends told her, ‘Such is the will of Allah! Do we really have a say in anything? We would do all we could to prevent this disgrace and injustice, but all we can do is cry. Instead of tormenting yourself, darling, accept the way things are. You have to leave in total secrecy for your parents’ and loved ones’ safety.’

After saying goodbye to the women, my sister crept over to where her two younger brothers and little sister were sleeping and started kissing each of us and weeping over us. When she realised that I was not asleep, she started sobbing even more. Kissing me and wetting my face with her tears, she whispered, ‘Get Father’s permission to come and visit me in a month’s time!’ I had no idea exactly where she was going or how I would get there, but I silently nodded in reply. Even then I was not allowed to get out of bed and go outside to see her off.

Chapter Five

The Last Autumn of the Nomadic Aul

At the end of 1930, and in the winter of 1931, the Kazakh people’s age-old nomadic way of life finally came to an end. The clans were all joined together into collective farms, and each aul settled in one place for good. Many years have gone by since then, and we who experienced the joys and freedom of the wandering way of life tend to remember none of the hardships involved, but only the good things: the green carpet of meadows stretching out before us as we arrived at our summer stopping place, the unforgettable scent of the wild flowers and the blaze of colour they created all around, and the cool, fresh breeze blowing from the snowy peaks.

In autumn, when most of the men were busy with harvesting and haymaking, it was rare for people to come visiting, but once in a while groups of elders would do so for old times’ sake, and sit around drinking mare’s milk and discussing the issues of the day. Mare’s milk was kept chiefly as a drink for guests, and it was very popular: at less busy times men would ride round the aul in groups every morning until midday, visiting the yurts with foals

Chapter Eight

The Kulak's Son

In late 1930, and early 1931, the campaign to eradicate individual farms and collectivise agriculture became more vicious. Lenin (who died in 1924) had said that 'Every minute of every hour, millions of individual peasant farms are engendering exploiter elements and must be destroyed' – and the Government was taking him at his word. Many politicians believed that collectivisation in the countryside would not only eliminate exploitation, but also raise productivity in agriculture and greatly improve the poor peasants' standard of living.

The authorities used all sorts of tactics to push people into the collective farms, from promises of a beautiful life to harassment in the form of taxes and court appearances. Some managed to carry on for a few years as so-called 'individualists', but in the end they had to bow to the inevitable.

According to a Soviet Government decree of 1927, it was envisaged that collectivisation in Kazakhstan would be complete by the end of 1933. However, the officials who were put in charge of running the country – notably Feodor Goloshchekin, the brutal First Secretary of the Kazakhstan Communist Party – were mainly

strangers to it, and neither knew nor particularly wanted to find out about the customs and mind-set of the nomadic population. Some of them who originated from Russia, for instance, had no understanding of the differences between stock-breeding in nomadic Kazakhstan and the agricultural districts of their own homeland. They made artificial comparisons between them and resolved to complete collectivisation in Kazakhstan to the same time-scale as in Russia, by the end of 1931; but in so doing, they totally ignored the interests and wishes of the peasants.

The peasantry was not at all keen on joining the collective farms. Those who were of average means or well-off refused to do so, and, as a result, were accused of being enemies of the policy of collectivisation and, by implication, of the Soviet State. Many of these were hardworking peasants who expertly managed their holdings and supplied the country with much-needed agricultural produce; in some cases they had dragged themselves up from poverty by farming land they had actually been given by the authorities. Among them were men who had fought in the Civil War to establish the Soviet regime.

The aul and village councils compiled black lists with the names of well-off kulak peasants, who were then prosecuted as class enemies. This was also a means of intimidating the rest of the peasantry, but it was only partly successful, and so the authorities began searching for class enemies among the poor peasants who were left outside the collective farms and even among those who had already joined them. The pejorative name 'podkulachnik' was devised for these particular class enemies, who were subjected to the same repression as kulaks.

The work of the aul, village and regional councils was now appraised according to the number of 'class enemies' they exposed and convicted. This produced some quite extraordinary results. Whereas, according to official estimates, kulaks made up only 5 per cent of the entire country's peasant population, as many as 15 per cent were exposed and convicted as class enemies.

One thing these officials had given insufficient thought to was what to do with the livestock confiscated from the kulaks. During

the winter of 1931, the animals which had been taken in the outlying regions of Eastern Kazakhstan began to be killed for meat and the frozen carcasses transported to the towns of Semipalatinsk and Ust-Kamenogorsk. When, towards the end of winter, the sleigh-roads could no longer be used and the meat stopped being transported to the towns, the local authorities could not decide what to do with the rest of the animals, which then began to die from malnutrition and the cold.

In such a situation it would have been judicious to halt the campaign to dispossess the kulaks, at least until the spring. Instead, the Communists stepped it up.

In the Kumashinko region the decision was taken to keep part of the confiscated livestock for breeding purposes. It was also hurriedly decided to organise a State farm for this purpose which was to be grandly known as a 'model livestock farm'; but when it transpired that the farm was not big enough for all the animals, the authorities decided to keep only the dairy cows, ewes and she-goats and kill off the non-dairy stock. A slaughterhouse was chosen for this purpose on the banks of the River Irtysh. As there were no roads or means of transporting the meat outside the region, the regional authorities planned to freeze the carcasses, stack them on the river bank and cover them with a thick layer of reeds to keep them frozen until the ice on the river melted. When the first river barges arrived in the early spring, the frozen carcasses were to be loaded on board and transported to the towns.

However, as it turned out, the dairy livestock were too weak and malnourished to be driven to the State farm, so they also ended up being driven to the slaughterhouse. This increased the amount of emaciated carcasses stacked in the open air. Nobody thought about the quality of the meat – all that really mattered was that the numbers of prepared carcasses and slaughtered livestock tallied.

But the unusually low snowfall that winter caused the River Irtysh's water level to drop considerably, and greatly delayed the start of the shipping season. By the time the first steamers made it to the upper reaches of the Irtysh, the stacks of meat were stinking to high heaven. The stench was so appalling that the residents of

neighbouring aul had to move away. In the end, the authorities had to conscript the local population to bury the rotting meat before an epidemic broke out.

Since the break-up of the Soviet Union, it has been argued that the terrible famine of 1932-34, which engulfed the whole of Kazakhstan and killed a quarter of its ethnic population, was deliberately orchestrated. Whatever the truth of this theory, the overzealous confiscation campaign certainly adds weight to it. The fact is that if it had been delayed only until the end of winter, all the animals would have been saved and could have been collectivised as planned. Instead, 48 per cent of the total livestock in the region was destroyed in one winter. It marked the start of a great catastrophe for the Kazakhs who had no livelihood other than stock-breeding.

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To start with, the black lists kept changing, since those who compiled them were easily influenced by personal relationships and grudges. In addition, many changes were made to the instructions from above, as a result of which there was a hiatus between the lists being compiled and the victims being prosecuted. During this period alarming rumours would be spread around the aul about the people who had been classified as kulaks – and it was a rumour which first brought the news to me, away at school, that my family was among them. Before long I found that I was being shunned by some of my schoolmates and – like other children of suspected kulaks – excluded from their games.

At the start of the holidays I arrived home in my aul at its winter stopping place a long way from the school. The first day, before sending me into the steppe with the flock of sheep, my father turned to me and said in a resigned and aggrieved tone, 'We've joined a collective. In spring, while you're at school, all the livestock are going to be taken to the collective farm and you'll never have to graze the flock again.'

To me this was good news, because his acceptance by the collective farm meant that he was no longer blacklisted. I had no idea what a collective farm was like, but I was happy that I would no longer have to bear the shame of being called a kulak's son.

After the holidays I went back to school in a carefree mood; but I soon began to feel uneasy again because of all the rumours and conversations about people who had recently been classified as kulaks and arrested. My fears that we were not yet out of the woods proved well-founded.

Every weekend there was a market at Kumashkino which we children used to walk to. One Sunday, as I arrived there with the other boys from the aul, I spotted the piebald horse Father rode in winter standing by the gates of a house just off the market square. Above the gates was a sign with large letters which said: 'ANIMAL UNION.'

I soon found Father. He said, 'I've just driven in the last stock and turned them over to the State.' On the other side of the fence I could see eleven or twelve animals including our three piebald mares with all their two-year-old and yearling foals, a few other horses and a camel. 'The activists had driven the sheep and cows away straight from the pasture. They said they would turn them over to the State themselves. They told me to bring the horses and camel here. And so they're off my hands now. No other hoofed livestock is left back home. Where the front wheel goes, the back wheel has to follow...Now I know what that saying means.' He was referring to his elder brother Toimbai's dispossession as a kulak in a similar way the year before. After thinking for a few moments, he added gloomily, 'Although I've turned over every single animal to the State apart from my old piebald, I've still got to pay more taxes. Now I suppose they'll start wrangling over our household goods. They're not going to leave me in peace.'

The truth was that his stock was of average size, consisting of 100 sheep, twelve horses, eight large-horned cattle and two camels. As far as the law on these matters was concerned, this was not enough to merit confiscation, and he should not have been prosecuted. He was just another, and by no means the last, victim

of an arbitrary selection. The local authorities were plucking figures from the air and deliberately falsifying the number of livestock and size of crops so that they could classify people more or less at random as kulaks: this is what incensed my father most.

He was then 48 years old. By nature an optimist, not inclined to panic, and always sociable and witty, he suddenly seemed totally different. Everything about his demeanour – the slouched shoulders; the hunched body; the eyebrows overhanging sunken eyes filled with despair; the complexion, once so light and clear, turned sallow – reflected the hopelessness of someone who had had his future taken away from him. A man who had spent his entire life as a stock-breeder, and who regarded it as his sole livelihood, had been deprived of everything he had earned, stored up, reared and acquired through honest work all his life, and was now left with nothing except seven mouths to feed. He was totally bereft.

iii

Although he was now officially classified as a kulak, and had had to hand over his last emaciated calf to the State, Father was at least still at liberty for the time being; and I continued going to school, putting up with the hurtful name of 'kulak's son' which the other children called me. Taken in by the temporary lull, I sometimes even forgot about the danger hanging over Father and our family. But then, one ordinary school day in March 1931, when the pupils were starting to leave the classroom after the last lesson, our form teacher – the most popular in the school – Agzam Baitorin asked me to stay behind. Waiting until everyone else had gone, he went up and firmly closed the door, and then returned to his desk. He settled slowly and cautiously down in his chair as though playing for time and, keeping his eyes fixed on the desk, said calmly, without looking up at me, 'My dear child, your father has been sent to prison. As the son of a kulak, you can't come to school any more. That's the law. Don't come back here.'

I stood in silence in front of him, totally speechless. Cold shivers

ran through me, and I could feel the tears welling up, but mustering all my self-restraint, I fought them back. Baitorin remained quiet for a while and then said gently, 'Off you go. Keep well. Goodbye!'

When I got outside, there were no children left in the yard. The tears spilled out of my eyes and I let them flow. How I wanted to go to school! I had always been a keen pupil, and now I was barred from lessons for ever. I cried all the way back to my lodgings.

When I got there, I stayed outside until I had pulled myself together and dried my eyes. But the moment I stepped inside, Granny Maibas, seeing the state I was in, rushed over, asking, 'Who's upset you, sweetheart? Why have you been crying?' She started taking off my coat and fussing over me in a way she had never done before, as though she was prepared to go and make the person who had hurt me pay for it. I kept silent for a while, and when I eventually told her what had happened, everyone sitting in the house – the old granny, her son and daughter-in-law – exclaimed in unison, 'Oh Lord! You poor boy!'

Although the Akhmetovs had been extremely kind to me, I was so upset that I hated the idea of spending another night with them, as though they were to blame for my misfortune. However, I had no idea where else to go, or how I might get home, and in any case my host Izameddin refused to let me leave until proper arrangements had been made. He knew that there was no sleigh-road to our home, some 30 kilometres away, and that very few people travelled between the two locations; but the next day he managed to find someone who was travelling in the direction of our aul's winter stopping place, sat me behind him on his horse, and sent me home.

Chapter Nine

Confiscation

When I got home to our isolated aul nestling at the foot of the spurs of the Arkaul Ridge, my mother told me what had happened. The series of court appearances to which my father had been subjected had ended in his conviction for failing to pay tax owed to the State. His sentence was 'to be isolated from society as a public enemy' (that is, sent to prison) for two years, have his household goods confiscated, and then, once released from jail, to be deported with his family to an area far away from his native land.

The scene that awaited me in our house was a dismal one. The floor was bare – stripped of its usual carpet, as it only used to be when it was being cleaned or before we moved away from our winter stopping place. The corner storage area where we kept the spare bed linen and all our clothes was now completely empty. Standing in the space to the left of the entrance which served as my parents' sleeping quarters was a bare wooden bed frame. Outside in the livestock yard, where the sheep pen and cattle shed had been, there was now a silent, empty space. Even the dog which guarded the yard had run off after the requisitioned herd.

The repressive measures against peasants classified as kulaks

were, it seemed, being executed more harshly all the time. While in 1929, the procedure had been to leave kulaks with two horses and two heads of horned livestock, and all their household goods, now everything was confiscated, down to the last puny sheep, cups and cutlery.

Not long after my return, two representatives of the aul council turned up at our house. They came straight in and announced sternly like officers of the law, 'Your household is in arrears with its tax payments. To eliminate this debt, we are going to make an inventory and remove the stock and property which you were left with after your other property was confiscated.'

They started taking the mats, blankets and other bits and pieces which they had not bothered with the first time. Then they spotted the bed my sick 86-year-old grandmother was lying on, and her dressing gown hanging on the wall. Seeing their greedy eyes widening, my mother said to one of them, who was called Bozhikov Bolyskhan and was obviously the senior of the two, 'Bolyskhan, you call yourselves activists, but you haven't really lost your human conscience, have you? Are you really not afraid of the spirit of your ancestors, or of God? Fear their anger! Surely you're not going to disturb a sick old person who is closer to the dead than the living?'

However, these officials who were safeguarding the interests of the State lifted my sick old grandmother and laid her out on the floor. They seized everything that was on the bed – the mattress, the covers, and even my grandmother's shawl – and piled it on top of the other articles they had taken. Then my mother again spoke up and said, 'That shawl is very old – 65 years ago Granny was wearing it when she came through the doorway of this yurt as a bride. It's been lying in a trunk ever since and she only wears it on very special festive occasions. It's completely worn and threadbare and of no use whatsoever. At least leave it for its old owner so she can wear it at her funeral, and God will bear in mind your good deed.'

But she was wasting her breath. The senior official responded by cursing all the gods and ancestors' spirits and then turned on my mother, saying, 'You still have some livestock, expensive things and

even gold hidden from the authorities. Hand them over! Tell me where you've hidden them!'

Only after they had failed to find anything more did they ride off, taking everything they considered worthwhile. They never bothered to tell us whose authority they acted on, how much tax we were supposed to owe, or how far the confiscations went towards paying it.

As for my grandmother, she remained silent throughout her ordeal, as though she no longer cared what was going on around her. But no sooner had the officials left than she started crying aloud, 'O Almighty Allah! Take me, your slave, to you! Do not leave me to shame and humiliation. Do not make me a living witness to the new sufferings of my children.'

Two days later she died.

While all this was going on, the same officials from the aul council announced to Uncle Toimbai's family – who were now living without their main breadwinner – that they were also in arrears with their tax. They too had to hand over their last miserable bits and pieces and the few heads of livestock that had not been confiscated the previous year, but it was not enough to prevent Toimbai-ata's twenty-year-old son Aiken from being arrested, sentenced and imprisoned like his father.

A week after their second visit, Bozhikov Bolyskhan and his junior colleague showed up yet again. This time they were even more thuggish. With us four children watching, Bozhikov started shouting terrible things at my mother: 'Do you have any undisclosed livestock, valuable household goods such as carpets, mats, sheepskin coats or other rich folks' stuff? Where are they? Confess where you've hidden them! These valuables must be handed over to the Treasury for the building of socialism. If you don't, you'll be put on trial. We'll take you in today and throw you in the clink and start criminal proceedings against you. And your little kulak serpents will be left at home all on their own. Confess!'

My mother replied defiantly, 'You've already fleeced us several times. Do you think anything's still left after that? All our valuables are here in front of you' – and she pointed at our bare walls.

When their attempt to intimidate my mother failed – although they had managed to scare us children very much – the officials gathered together the adults from the neighbouring houses and interviewed each of them separately, using various forms of bribery and threat.

'If you show us where Shayakhmer's valuables and livestock are hidden,' they said, 'you'll get a reward. But if you keep silent and conceal goods that have been hidden by a kulak's family, you'll face prosecution as kulaks' accomplices and enemies of the Soviet authorities.'

These tactics proved equally unproductive. But the officials refused to leave empty-handed, and deemed it lawful and necessary to take away the only things they could think of, an iron cauldron and two zinc buckets.

Those who suffered as we did wept bitterly for their losses and cursed those who had introduced such inhuman laws: for people whose lives revolved around their animals, it was worse than being invaded by Genghis Khan's hordes. Their suffering was shared by their relatives in the aul, and the tears continued for weeks in these communities.

As for the confiscated livestock, farm equipment and household goods, these were supposed to be distributed among poor local peasants and stock-breeders – but as no precise records were kept, it is impossible to know how much was taken and who exactly it went to. In many cases the impoverished peasants did not seem to value these free gifts, and quickly squandered them all. (Some actually refused them, as a protest against the confiscations – though typically the supporters of the new regime attributed their behaviour to underdeveloped class consciousness rather than high moral standards.) One thing is certain: in 1929, the State Treasury received absolutely no income from all the possessions and valuables requisitioned from peasants; and when holdings were collectivised the following year, only a very small proportion of the confiscated livestock actually ended up in the collective farms. The rest had apparently vanished into thin air – hidden, some said, in far-off ravines and gorges.

ii

Simple villagers could not grasp why their neighbours, who were simple workers like themselves, were being classified as enemies of the authorities, and having everything they owned confiscated; nor why the people in question should have to be persecuted and shut away from society. But our administrative aul council did not stop at imprisoning householders it considered to be kulaks: once it had dealt with them, it went on to prosecute their wives, on the same pretext as always – that they had failed to pay the extortionate taxes demanded from them.

Shortly after the confiscations, a messenger from the aul suddenly turned up with a court summons in Mother's name and announced imperiously, 'You must appear in court in 24 hours' time! I have been ordered to escort you there. Get ready this minute!' When asked, however, the messenger could not explain why she had been summonsed. Then she began asking him permission to stay at home for just one more night, explaining that her eldest daughter had come back home earlier that day for the first time since her marriage a year ago; but the messenger would have none of it. So Mother had to set out at nightfall with me to accompany her, leaving behind her other children in the care of a tearful Zhamba, who had only just arrived to visit us.

Next day we arrived at the courtroom, which had been set up in the same building as the school I had recently been expelled from. There were another five or six women there from kulaks' families whose husbands were also in prison; they included mothers with babes in arms. Others had brought along young sons around my age. All the witnesses, prosecutors, local officials and judges were men, and all the defendants women. Everyone sat down at the school desks in the classroom. The officials had either not thought about having children present or decided that they should be made aware of the precise nature of the wicked deeds which their parents had committed, because we children were allowed to listen to the entire proceedings.

The same charge was brought against all the defendants. In each

case the judges' questions and defendants' responses were along these lines:

'Why have you failed to pay the tax you owe to the Soviet State?'

'We had nothing left of our property and possessions to pay the taxes with. It's all been confiscated. We've no livestock left. No money either.'

'You are charged as follows: your family and you personally have avoided handing over part of your livestock and valuable household goods, because you want to sabotage and oppose a Soviet policy. Your crime is recorded in this document.' The judge held up some papers.

'We do not have any livestock or valuables hidden at home – I'll be damned if we do. Anyone who thinks we're hiding something can go and find it and keep it for themselves. We have been left without our husbands: you sentenced them yourselves. And what do we women know about the tax levied against our household? Who set it? How much was it? What sort of tax was it? And when did we have to pay it? How much was paid by our husbands and how much was left? Was any left at all? We do not know. Some officials came and asked us to pay the taxes. How are we supposed to pay? Our homes and yards are completely empty. We haven't got a single head of livestock left.'

In addition, the judge laid into my mother on the subject of the bride money which had allegedly been paid for Zhamba the previous autumn; but she kept insisting that she had never made such an agreement with anyone and no matchmaking had taken place.

The court sitting lasted one day. All the defendants, including those with babes in arms, were sentenced to two years' house arrest. Already baffled as to why they had been brought to court, they had no idea what the point of the punishment was.

How could the trial of illiterate, defenceless women help consolidate the collective farm movement? This was a question, to my mind, that neither the defendants nor the prosecutors knew the answer to. As for ordinary Kazakhs, their general response to these events was, 'Whoever heard of women standing trial? It's true what they say: wonders will never cease!'

Chapter Ten

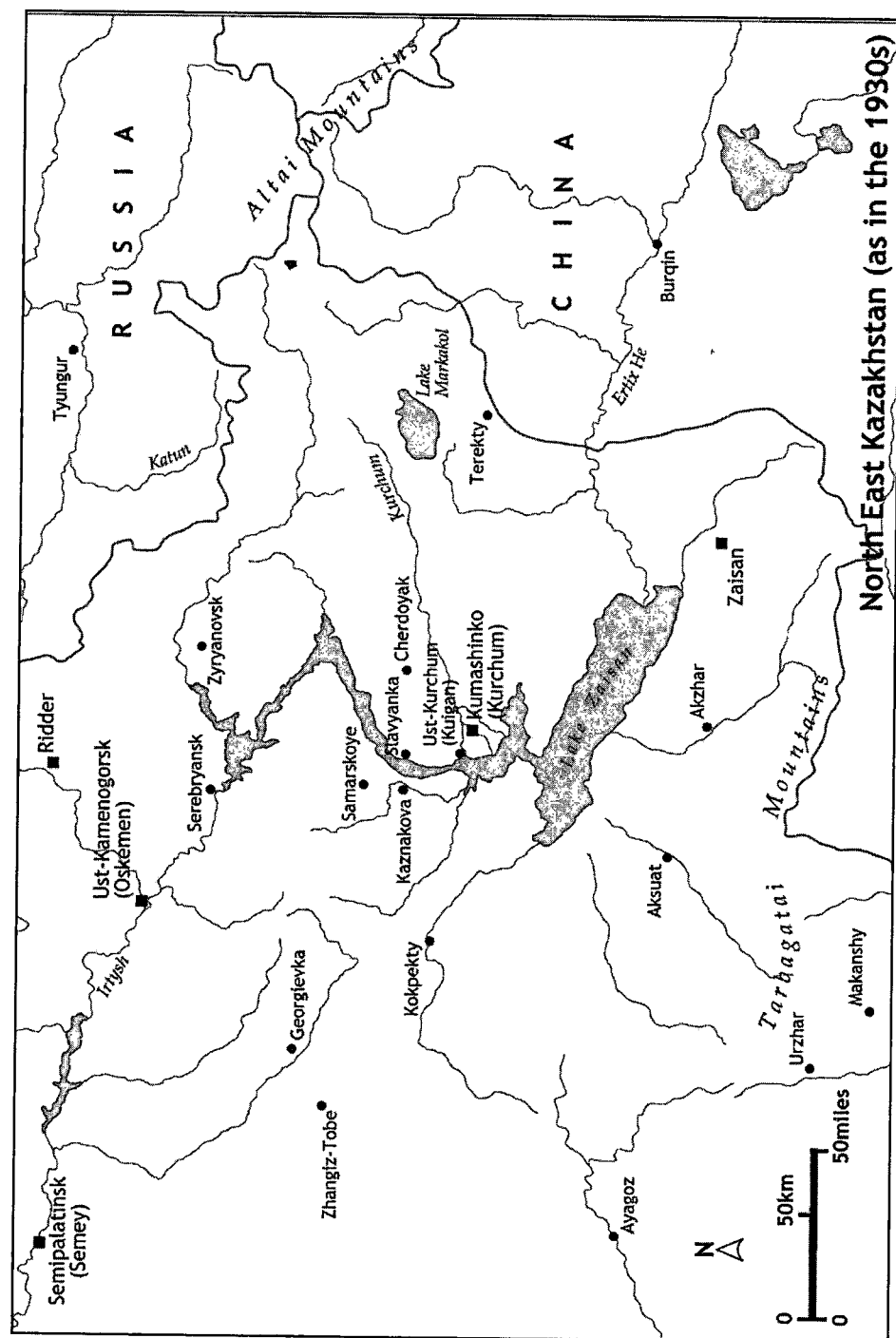
The Silent Steppe

By February 1931, less than half of the peasants in Eastern Kazakhstan had joined collective farms. The campaign to expose 'enemies' of collectivisation gathered such momentum that there were no longer enough prisons to house all the convicted kulaks. (According to the regional court's records, 447 people were convicted as class enemies in the first half of 1931 alone.) Even when all the kulaks of the Kumashinko regional centre were evicted from their houses so that they could be used as prisons for other peasants under arrest, there was still a shortage of places. In addition, the spring thaw made the roads so muddy that it was impossible to deport the arrested peasants to other areas.

Unable to accommodate all the arrested kulaks, the local regional authorities decided to release some of them temporarily on bail. These included Father and my cousin Aiken. As with most actions taken by the Soviet authorities, no explanation was given to the general masses – and in this particular case, the people released on bail were given no information either. Bewildered, they hovered by the gates of the 'prisons' waiting for a passer-by to give them a lift home.

PART TWO

FAMINE



Chapter Fifteen

The Refugees

1932 was a year of terrible famine in many regions of the USSR. The immediate cause was a bad harvest following a period of drought – but collectivisation made the consequences many times worse for the Kazakh people. Transferred hastily and without any preparation to a settled way of life and method of farming, the nomadic livestock breeders simply did not have the means or expertise to run collective farms efficiently. Over the next two years, 1.2 million of them were to die of starvation.

This dreadful catastrophe did not, however, become as rampant that year in the northern, north-western and agricultural mountainous areas of Eastern Kazakhstan as in the rest of the country. But as the popular Kazakh saying goes: 'Once one family's going hungry, soon the whole aul is, and once one aul's going hungry, soon there's a famine nation-wide'.

By summer, droves of starving refugees from the republic's other regions started heading for Eastern Kazakhstan. After hearing that the people there had plenty to eat, that there was work to be had in the towns and mining districts, and that food rations were being given out, they poured into the villages and into the towns of

Zyryanovsk and Ust-Kamenogorsk. However, instead of organising famine relief, certain top officials in these places looked for ways of getting rid of the refugees. There is archive material in the form of written reports from various meetings at which these officials requested authorisation to have the refugees forcibly removed from the town by the militia, on the grounds that they were putting an excessive strain on the system providing locals with food. This attitude persisted until June 1932, when a Resolution of the USSR Council of Ministers was passed on organising relief for the starving population of Kazakhstan.

Grain from the State reserves was distributed throughout the countryside; the most needy were transported from remote regions to towns and other places where there were sufficient stocks of food, and local authorities were committed to feeding a certain number of refugees. Tragically, this action came too late: the famine had already struck hard and taken a great many lives. Even after the passing of the resolution, many of the starving died because of the length of time it took for the relief to reach them, or because it was insufficient.

Let me explain how relief was administered to the first organised group of famine victims brought to Ridder.

One day, without warning, the local authorities ordered all of us in the barrack to move out and camp 'in to the fresh air'. Each family, depending on how many members it had, was issued with some planks of wood to knock together some sort of makeshift shelter. Two days later there was a whole stretch of wooden shacks covered with grass roofs. The only way of getting inside was to crawl in; but at least you could sit down with your family inside and eat meals together. People were willing to put up with these conditions because they were relieved to escape the stifling, musty and cramped barrack.

The adults kept talking about the starving refugees being brought here and housed in the barrack. As a child, I had no idea what the Kazakh word for 'starving', 'asharyk', meant and when I asked, Father and Mother started flapping their hands and exclaiming fearfully, 'Be quiet! Don't say that word!' And then they

began whispering, 'O Allah, may this misfortune pass us by!'

Meanwhile the local authorities began cordoning off a small area next to the railway line. Inside, they set up three open hearths with cauldrons, and three sacks of flour next to them – a commodity that locals had not seen for some time. The cordoned-off area was then placed under guard.

We children, though we were going hungry, still did not understand what the word 'starving' really meant, and we could not wait to see what the 'starving' looked like. Hearing that they were about to arrive at the station, we rushed over to have a look.

God! What an appalling sight! Some of the young children got such a shock that they ran off straightaway.

Out of the train's freight wagons came not people but walking skeletons. The skin on their faces looked as though it had been stretched and then stuck tightly to their bare skulls. It was impossible to tell whether their faces were black from being in the sun or smeared with dirt. Their arms looked unnaturally long and their eyes, sunken and terrifyingly lifeless, like sheep's. They could hardly stand, let alone walk, and kept stumbling and falling over. Some, dreadfully weak, were being helped along, while several others were being carried – but the people doing the carrying had hardly any strength left themselves, and kept falling over with the other person in their arms. For the most part they did not say anything, only exchanging a few short phrases in very hushed voices.

There were no elderly people or small children among the living corpses emerging from the wagons: they had not made it this far. They had either starved long before the resolution on famine relief, or they had died during the journey. The corpses of those who had died during the last few kilometres were left behind in the empty wagons after the survivors had got out: their relatives were simply too weak to carry them out and bury them. The authorities organised their funerals with the help of local workers.

The famine victims who had managed to get out of the wagons were led into the cordoned-off area and each given a small portion of broth. Every few hours the portion size was gradually increased

under doctors' supervision. The victims were kept outside like this for several days, and then moved into the barrack we had vacated for them. And then a week or so later, before they had recovered or were anything like back to normal, they were deemed well enough to take on the same jobs as all the other workers and receive the standard food rations.

Those who believe that the famine in Kazakhstan was deliberately orchestrated by the Soviet Government should bear in mind these efforts to help the starving population, which – though in insufficient quantities and greatly delayed – certainly saved lives. Despite the losses on the journey to Ridder, the refugees who survived felt tremendously grateful for the care they had received. However, the relief organised by the Government in 1932 did not end the famine in the republic, but merely reduced its scope and number of victims. Kazakhs continued to die of starvation until the harvest of 1934.

ii

We 'special migrants', as we were now known, spent nearly a month in our makeshift shelters. We were happy enough to have some fresh air – but most people seemed to have forgotten all about the coming winter. As far as they were concerned, they were in the hands of the State, and the State was thinking about them and knew what to do. Exactly how the State dealt with working people, we now know full well: nobody, for example, considered it necessary to inform deportees in good time about decisions over their future, which is why far-fetched rumours used to do the rounds.

This time the authorities informed us that we were to move into new accommodation within 24 hours. The accommodation in question was located seven or eight kilometres from Kirpichnaya in the large settlement of Pozdnopalovka, now the site of the Tishinsky Mine in the Ridder coal-mining complex. The management had decided to use the 'special migrants' on the

construction of a hydro-electric station on the River Ulba, a tributary of the Irtysh flowing out of the Altai mountains, that had just got underway. Several large one-storey houses had been built for us, each consisting of one room measuring eighteen square metres, a quarter of which was taken up by a so-called 'Russian stove'. This room had to accommodate two families, no matter how many people that meant – and sometimes there were as many as ten per family. We were accommodated in a room like this with Uncle Mukatai's family of five.

Worse, these houses had been left unfinished, because the management had sent the builders off to make hay. Instead of being insulated, the walls inside were lined simply with planks, while a few stakes nailed at intervals to the outer walls at intervals created the effect of a fence. The builders and decorators had obviously intended finishing the houses off by insulating the gaps between the planks and stakes in the walls with wood shavings and earth, and putting and plastering the stakes outside; the ceiling inside also needed to be insulated in the same way. But they had not got round to it, and the houses were clearly not ready for winter habitation.

What's more, the men were sent off to work some distance away, also making hay, which meant the women, children and old people were left to fend for themselves in their new accommodation. Since there was no work for them there, they remained on a ration of 200 grams of bread. Naturally, every newly arrived family in the settlement grew deeply concerned about how they were going to get sufficient food to survive. But nobody in the village of Pozdnopalovka seemed concerned about how we were going to get by on such meagre rations; nor could our menfolk be contacted – none of us were allowed to visit them, and they were forbidden to leave the fields. Like convicts, they were guarded round the clock by militiamen.

Faced with the threat of malnutrition and, increasingly, of starving to death, the women and children started walking out to the Tishinsky Hills, picking berries and filling their empty stomachs with them. When the cereal crops were harvested, they

began picking up the grain left on the fields to supplement their rations. Then, much to their joy, the time came to harvest the potato crop, which meant that they now had work, if only temporarily.

On 1 September, the children of Pozdnopalovka (near Ridder) and the children of the Russian special migrants started school. Teaching was, of course, conducted in Russian. None of the Kazakh children went to school: just as before, it was something I could only dream about. Anyway, I had no time to attend lessons, as every day – from morning until nightfall – Mother and I were out looking for food. I used to watch other children of my age enviously as they made their way to school, and sometimes when I spotted them playing noisily during break, I could not stop tears welling into my eyes. I longed to study with them – but it was not to be.

The men did not come back until late autumn. In the meantime, the women and children who had been left behind went on living in the chilly houses. A few of the Russian tried to make them habitable for the winter, but the Kazakhs seemed simply to hope that either Allah would send them mild weather or the authorities would look after them. The fact was that most of them could not adapt to their new environment because they were so naïvely and hopelessly nostalgic about their former life.

In addition, because they did not speak Russian, they were unable to strike up close friendships with the Russians they worked with, let alone the local residents (who did not particularly trust the families of kulaks). In the entire village of Pozdnopalovka, there was not a single adult Kazakh who spoke even one word of Russian, or a Russian who could understand even a smattering of Kazakh. This made communication practically impossible. Conversations – which were often quite comical – involved a lot of mimicry and a hotchpotch of Russian and Kazakh words.

All ten Kazakh families living in Pozdnopalovka at the time needed the help of the only boy who knew a few words of Russian: me. They dragged me all over the village, getting me to interpret all sorts of important and urgent things as well as the totally trivial. Sometimes one of the Kazakh women would call me over and ask

me to explain what a Russian was saying to her; another time, a woman, not daring to say her surname aloud as it was also the name of her husband's father – which, according to our customs, she was forbidden to use – would ask me to say it for her. Russians always used to roar with laughter at the way I interpreted what Kazakhs were saying to them. You can judge for yourselves how good my interpreting was from the following episode.

One day, several Kazakh women who had worked during the potato harvest went to the Ulbostroi cashier's office to collect their wages. The office was at the construction project's headquarters, some three or four kilometres from Pozdnopalovka. One of these women was my mother and she had taken me along as her 'full-time interpreter'.

When we arrived at the main block, the door to the cashier's office was open, so we all went inside. The doors of all the rooms were closed and there was nobody about so we sat down in the corridor to wait for the cashier. A sheet of paper was stuck to the small window in the wall of one of the rooms, and some words in capital letters were scrawled across it in red ink. No matter how hard I tried, I could not make out what they said. So we went on sitting there and waiting for the cashier. There was nobody around to ask. It was gone midday by this time. At long last, a woman from the house next-door came into the office and asked if we were waiting to collect our wages. I replied that we were. Then she explained to us that there was no money left and the cashier would not be there that day. She pointed to the sheet of paper over the window and then I realised what it said: 'No cash available'. If it had said: 'No money today', I would have understood at once. So much for my good spoken Russian – though as the Kazakh women could not, of course, understand what the Russian was explaining to me, I managed to get away with it.

Work on the hydroelectric power station had yet to begin, though a drainage canal from the River Ulba to the station was already underway. The canal started one kilometre from the village, and we children used to go and gawp at the amazing, brand-new excavator which was digging it. The excavator seemed

to us as big as a house. It was operated by steam, someone explained to us, produced by the water inside its large boiler; there was a stoker whose job was to shovel coal into its fire-chamber every now and then. The excavator emitted clouds of smoke through a pipe and occasionally hooted like a steam engine or boat – something we loved.

Ulbinskaya Hydro-Electric Station came into service in 1937, and has been providing cheap energy ever since. As someone who looked on admiringly as work got underway digging the canal, I still feel a sort of bond with its builders.

Chapter Sixteen

Fleeing Back Home

October arrived. The distant peaks of the Altai mountains looming above the town of Ridder were covered in snow, signalling the onset of winter. The heads of the families at last returned home from harvesting the hay – but Father was not among them. According to Uncle Mukatai, he and two other workers were being kept on in the fields to finish off some small jobs and drive back the draught horses. He assured us, however, that Father would be back by the end of the week.

The first party of men came back full of resolve not to stay any longer in their place of deportation, but to escape back home. They had secretly agreed this among themselves, and on the very first day of his return, Uncle Mukatai started making preparations for the journey with his family. He let Mother in on the secret.

'Shayakhmet will be back any day now,' he said. 'We'll set off as soon as he arrives. We must be packed and ready before he gets here.'

The preparations for our escape consisted of making food for the journey from the scanty supplies we had at home, and packing whatever essential household goods we could carry as far as the

railway station. A week passed and, according to Uncle's calculations, Father should have returned; but though everything was ready, there was still no sign of him. Several families from the group who had made the pact started secretly leaving Pozdnopalovka, and Uncle Mukatai began getting agitated:

'If we stay another week waiting for Shayakhmet, we won't make it to the Irtysh before it freezes over and the steamers stop running,' he said. 'Then we won't be able to leave here this year and we'll have to see the winter through. And if we're late leaving, we won't get further than Ust-Kamenogorsk and we'll get stuck mid-way with winter coming.'

Mother, however, refused to leave without Father, and suggested that her brother and his family should go on their own. But Mukatai would not give in, and eventually persuaded her.

'Shayakhmet gave me strict instructions that if he was delayed at the harvest, I was to take you with me when I left,' he said. 'He could see it'd be easier for him to hide if he left here on his own and followed us back to the aul. If you stay here with the children, you'll make things harder for him. And if you dilly-dally, you won't get any further than Ust-Kamenogorsk, because the steamers will have stopped running. Then you'll be like a lead weight round his neck. But if he's on his own, he'll be able to walk from Ust-Kamenogorsk all the way back to the aul.'

I should make it clear at this point that I was by now the only child left with our two families. Uncle Mukatai's two surviving children (a thirteen-year-old daughter and five-year-old son) and my little brother had been sent back to relatives in the aul. At the time, the adults had explained that this was because of the poor quality of the food we were getting in Kirpichnaya; but it now seems to me that they were already planning to escape as soon as the time was right.

While we were waiting for Father to return, our Kazakh neighbours secretly slipped away, too. Only the day before the house next door had been packed with two families; now it was completely empty, although the doors and windows had been carefully closed as if its inmates had only gone off to work or to

visit someone. The fugitives left at night while the villagers were fast asleep: they loaded their belongings onto their backs and, as there were no tracks, set off in a straight line to get as far away as possible from the village and other people while it was dark. And that is exactly how we left as well.

When the village became silent at night and all its residents were fast asleep, we slung our bundles onto our backs and set off in the darkness, winding our way between the bushes across the trackless land. However, despite all our efforts, we made very slow progress. My bundle turned out to be much heavier than I could manage, and I had to keep pausing for breath and holding up the others. So we lost a lot of valuable time and covered very little ground.

Our main aim that night was to cross the bridge over the River Ulba by dawn. In those days, bridges – particularly those around Ridder – tended to have sentries guarding them. Exactly who they were being guarded against remains a mystery, but our adults were afraid that the sentries would presumably be checking people's documents before they crossed the bridge on horseback and on foot. They were worried that we were walking too slowly, and would not make it across the bridge while it was still dark; in the end they tossed part of my load into the bushes to help me walk faster. As it was, we reached the bridge just as dawn was breaking – only to find that it was not being guarded after all. After crossing over without any hitches, we managed to reach the pinewood alongside the station before it grew light, and lay down and hid there.

Gromotukha Station consisted of a small house that served as both a ticket office and lodgings for the stationmaster, who was also the ticket clerk and cleaner. A passenger train from Ust-Kamenogorsk stopped for one minute at the station just once a day; none of the freight trains stopped there at all. Very occasionally, two or three people from the surrounding villages would get off, but sometimes there was nobody for days at a time. I could not understand why the adults were afraid of walking up to the station and why we were not waiting for the train on the platform. Who would notice us there? I queried this with my uncle and he replied, 'Oh, don't be daft! There're always militiamen from the

commandant's office on the lookout there. We mustn't be seen there during the day. We'll hang about in the wood until the evening, and then walk up there just before the train from Ridder's due, quickly buy the tickets and then get on the train straightaway.'

So we waited for the train in the dense pinewood.

Writing these words now, so many years later, I find myself thinking long and hard about the past. For years our ancestors lived under a tribal system where relationships were based on mutual help: they were convinced of the enduring worth of their centuries-old principles, and perhaps as a consequence used to regard any innovation with suspicion, fear and even disapproval. They were conservative by nature and clung to what was familiar: why else, in 1932, when the population of Kazakhstan was in the grip of a terrible famine, did our two families of fugitives head for a starving aul – where a year before they had been robbed, prosecuted and deported – instead of staying in Ridder, where they were getting limited but at least regular food rations?

It might be argued that they were trying to escape from being discriminated against as 'special migrants' and not being allowed to choose work and move around freely. But by the time of their escape, nearly all of them had already served two thirds of their sentences: if they had waited a little longer, they would have been able to enjoy the full rights of citizens again. Some of them, in fact, had already been freed.

My 22-year-old cousin Aiken was a case in point. Sentenced a year before to two years' imprisonment as the son of a prominent kulak, Aiken was released a year early from a timber-felling camp near Ridder, and came to see us the day we arrived in Kirpichnaya. After spending the night with us, he declined to stay on a few more days, as my parents begged him to, and rushed back home instead to his mother and younger sister: after hearing much talk about people starving in the aul, he was desperate to rescue his family from starvation. Of course, this resolve did him credit: but there was a more rational way of rescuing relatives, and that was to stay on as a hired worker in Ridder and then arrange for them to be brought over to where he was living. His wages would have been enough to

support two dependants – but instead Aiken travelled to his aul, where no one was going to give a convicted kulak work, to add to the number of starving people there.

The way we Kazakhs have always clung to the past has proved disastrous for our people – and yet this stubborn habit still sometimes obtains at the start of the twenty-first century. To say that the fear of innovation hampers our development and leaves us lagging behind is an understatement.

But let us return to our escape attempt. We lay there all day waiting for the train. There were six of us in three families, and a seventh man without a family. We did not dare cook any food because the smoke would certainly have attracted unwanted attention such as militiamen's – fugitives with no identification papers are afraid of everyone and everything, and we feared militiamen most of all. Just before the train was due to arrive we clambered up to station with our things; we put them down by the ticket office window and hid behind the stationmaster's house, out of sight. The men were reluctant to go up to the office for the tickets, again in case they attracted unwelcome attention, so they filled me in on what to do. Although I was ten years old, I had never heard the word 'tickets' before and had no idea what they were, but they explained to me how to purchase them, and then handed me the money and told me to hold onto it tightly in case of thieves.

There was one other customer in front of me at the ticket office. Copying him, I handed my money through the window; in return, I was given a whole wad of papers. A few moments later the train drew in. We hurriedly jumped on board, trying not to be noticed by anyone – though in fact the only other people on the station were the man who had just purchased a ticket in front of me and the multi-tasked stationmaster. Without identification papers we were even afraid of our own shadows. Still, we were over the first hurdle and on board the train.

Off we went, taking all our worries and cares with us, and collecting even more on our way.

'Checks are carried out on the train, I've heard, and everyone who's travelling is asked to show his ticket and documents. Recently

a group of people like us were checked and then detained and turned over to the militia,' said a passenger, frightening everyone who was listening.

'The large station of Cheremshanka is ahead. There's a militiaman on duty there who always checks passengers' documents,' added another.

We all grew alarmed listening to these conversations: I felt as though I was going to be taken off on my own and handed over to the militia. The upshot of it all was that even though it was after midnight, none of us could get to sleep. Our fears about the militiaman in Cheremshanka were borne out when a 'blue-collar' (as they were known) came into our carriage in the middle of the night; my heart sank, but fortunately he turned out to be accompanying a passenger. Just before the train moved off, he went out of the carriage without taking any notice of the rest of us. The adults heaved a sigh of relief and I instantly dropped off to sleep.

'Get up, wake up, we've arrived!' Mother kept saying to me. When I opened my eyes and came to my senses, I realised that we had arrived at Ust-Kamenogorsk. As a boy brought up in a small aul, I marvelled at the great many different carts standing at night by the station. I heard the adults repeating the word 'quay' several times. Not understanding what they meant, I walked sleepily beside Mother and the other adults, following a cart full of our belongings.

From early morning until the following evening we sat on the Ust-Kamenogorsk quay on the River Irtysh at the very foot of the mountains. Mother, my aunt and I perched on top of the pile of our belongings, guarding them from thieves – we had been warned that there were masses of them about. We saw quite a few scary-looking, ragged, homeless people wandering about begging for food; there were also crowds of people waiting, like us, for the steamer. The men in our group were afraid of staying with us in case they caught the eye of the blue-collars and were asked for their documents. Once in a while, however, one of them would come up to enquire how we were and tell us news – for instance, that the last steamer of the season would be arriving from Semipalatinsk that evening, heading up the Irtysh. All navigation on the river would then cease until the

following spring. This came as worrying news for everyone sitting on the quay for whom the steamer was their last hope of getting away – and by then there were a great many of us hopefuls. I was staggered by the numbers. Where were they all going?

In the late afternoon we caught sight of the steamer's black smoke in the distance. The hordes of people who only moments ago had been sitting quietly on their luggage started seething like the sea during a storm.

After finding out how many tickets were on sale for the trip up-river, and that there would not be enough for everyone there, people instantly lost all their dignity, humanity and reason. They started rushing towards the ticket office in a frenzied stampede, barging, pushing and stamping on anybody in their way. None of them took any notice of anyone else or kept anything in their sights except the precious window of the ticket office.

Vigilant as ever, the adults had made sure I joined the queue in front of the ticket office early that morning. While the queue was still intact, they taught me how to purchase the tickets and counted up enough money for seven tickets, and again put it in my fist, telling me only to open it in front of the cashier. Just when it was nearly my turn at the ticket counter, the seething crowd – who were oblivious to everything by that stage – decided to resort to survival-of-the-fittest tactics. There was a swell in front of the counter caused by sudden jostling to the left and right. Tossed from side to side, I completely lost my bearings. Just then a group of people surged forward, hemming me in and carrying me with them towards the ticket counter. Several hands shot through the window. Copying them, I raised my fist clutching the money and thrust it towards the window. My small fist must have caught the cashier's attention among all the others because he opened it, took the money and instead of just asking, shouted out loudly, 'How many?' 'Seven,' I managed to gasp in reply. The cashier then gave me some pieces of paper in return for the money, carefully closed my fist and then pushed it gently away from the counter as if to say, 'Off you go!'

Elbowing my way back from the window and getting out of the crowd proved no less difficult than getting there. A dense wall of

people kept surging frantically towards the ticket office. By good fortune, I found myself between two burly young men who had just purchased tickets. Accidentally pressing against either side of me, they forced a way through the crowd, taking me out of the hellhole with them. Had it not been for them, the demented crowd would probably have crushed me to death.

As for boarding the steamer, everyone just started barging onto it, whether they had tickets or not. The pushing and shoving by the gangway was even more frenzied than by the ticket office. And when the steamer's horn first sounded to warn of its imminent departure, the people trying to force their way on board began struggling even harder. As Mother and I reached the gangway, a mass of people surged towards us, pushing me away from her; and while she just made it up the gangway and onto the deck, it now looked ominously as if she was going to leave on the steamer while I was stranded on my own on the quay.

At that very moment some of the sailors on board started removing half of the gangway, which meant it was almost departure time. The people at the front of the crowd rushed frantically forward again, sweeping me with them. Although the sailor standing at the end of the gangway on dry land tried to stop them, they kept scrambling onto the narrow plank to get on board. Just as the sailor was leaping onto the gangway himself to run up and lift it off the quay, I managed to call out to him, 'Please, I've got a ticket, but it's with Mum. She's on board. Let me on or I'll miss the boat and lose my mum!'

Just then, on board the steamer, Mother let out a piercing cry of despair and panic. The end of the gangway was already clear of the quay, so the sailor grabbed hold of my back and my bundle and tossed me over the railings so that I thudded onto the metallic floor of the lower deck. By the time I had come to my senses and struggled to my feet, the steamer was slowly gliding away from the quay, its paddle wheels gently splashing through the water. A great many people who did not make it on board were left wandering aimlessly about the quay: among them were women and babes in arms, elderly, weak and needy people. You could tell how desperate and

inconsolable they were by the way they kept flapping their arms confusedly and sobbing hysterically.

The lack of rainfall which had caused the harvest to fail had also made the river levels sink dangerously low. Islets, sandbanks and shallows had gradually appeared in the Irtysh, and these now hampered the progress of the steamer we were so happy to be on. Designed to function at low speeds, it was sailing against the current at about five knots; but even so, it spent less time forging upriver than getting stuck on sandbanks or backing away and searching for alternative passages through the shallows. Every now and then it would plough into a sandbank and get totally stuck: then the crew would make all the passengers stand in the stern to make the prow lighter so the steamer could slide off the bank. Sometimes a convenient place would be found to set all the passengers ashore so that the boat was light enough to negotiate a stretch of shallows; it would then pick us up again further upriver. In the end the journey took four whole days instead of the usual one and a half.

As Mother and I were going back to the aul where Manap's family lived, we disembarked earlier than our companions, at the quay by the village of Baty from which Father had originally been sent off to Ridder. Uncle Mukatai and his family and travelling companions continued further upriver to their various aul, where they were to be welcomed and taken in by their close relatives. We did not have such close relatives in our aul and so, as Mother put it, we were 'going to the aul of someone else's clan where her daughter was married.'

By the time Mother and I ended up on the bank of the River Irtysh on our own, she had already gained quite a lot of experience living among strangers in 'far-off' Ridder: she had spent an entire summer working with people of different nationalities, and learned to socialise with them as well. However, she had not managed to lose her shyness and reticence, or the narrow views of an aul woman. Whether because of what she was used to, or because she did not know another language, she was rather scared of Russians, when she actually needed to become more outgoing and resourceful and learn ways of communicating with strangers if her children were to survive. As she possessed none of these skills, she grew very anxious

and agitated when the two of us found ourselves on dry land and on the other side of the fence cordoning off the quay. It was already late afternoon and we did not know how we were going to get to the aul or which road to take.

Anxious and confused, Mother told me to get directions from some locals. I started asking people we met the way to Kargaly aul, where my sister was living. I phrased my question as well as I could, using all the Russian words I had at my fingertips – but nobody could tell me, since they had never even heard of the place. How were villagers leading isolated lives in their community to know one of the numerous auls consisting of only a few households scattered around the steppes, valleys and hills?

Night was falling. There was nobody in the village we knew. What were we to do? Who could we turn to? We had no idea.

Noticing our frightened faces as we sat huddled on the riverbank all alone, the watchman at the quay asked us who we were and where we were from. Then his face lit up and he began saying something in a mixture of Russian and Kazakh, as local people tended to when they did not speak both languages well. This is what he was trying to say: 'How am I to know your Kargaly? On the edge of the village upriver, however, there's a place where all the grain is delivered from the collective farms. I'd go there, young man, and ask them which way to go. They're bound to know. You may even meet a Kazakh from your Kargaly there.'

Luck was on our side. When I reached the storehouse the watchman had directed me to, I met a driver I had worked with ploughing the fields that spring. It was already dark by the time he had delivered the grain and we had driven over to the quay, and I do not need to describe how my mother, sitting alone on a riverbank at night, was feeling; but the watchman turned out to be a kind man. Appreciating the predicament the frightened Kazakh woman was in, he had allowed her to wait inside the secure quay area. Delighted by his act of kindness, Mother came to the following conclusion: 'It turns out that some Russians are Moslems, too.'

Chapter Seventeen

Hunger Comes to the Aul

Manap, his mother and grandmother were delighted to see us back again. Their initial elation, and especially my sister's, was only spoiled by the news that Father was not with us. Along with all the other members of the collective farm brigade, they were living in a temporary camp on arable land, and helping to gather in the disappointing harvest. Various things had happened in their aul over the summer during our absence. Dear Aunt Batish had died and Uncle Zhantursyn had got remarried to a woman from a neighbouring aul and gone to live with her. One of the first few days after our arrival Mother took me with her to visit Aunt Batish's grave. On her way there she recited prayers to the deceased woman's soul and then uttered the following words at her graveside:

'Unforgettable, dear Apai! Dear Tate!' she cried, using the traditional Kazakh forms of address for an older woman. 'You did not wait for your loved ones to come back. May the earth gently cradle you. May your kind, radiant soul take up its place in Heaven. Your kind deeds on this earth have earned you the gratitude of everyone who knew you and the approval of your

ancestors' spirits. During the most difficult times you came straight over to help your brother's children and took them under your wing and fed your nephews all winter long. We, your close relatives, were not beside you when you took your last breath. We did not hear your last words and did not ask you for the last time to forgive us. Your brothers could not be there when you were committed to the earth – God willed it so. Farewell! Never stop caring for your relatives still on this earth.'

Mother's speech made a big impression on me and set me thinking. Experiencing town life and food shortages, cramped living conditions and what it really felt like to be in dire need had made me think long and hard – possibly, for the first time – about Aunt Batish and her husband's generosity. Mother's heartfelt words of gratitude were etched on my memory, and I promised myself there and then that when I grew up, I would do my duty as far as my family was concerned, and help all those who were in need.

Recent reforms, bringing change to our society, remind me of the importance of this. The transition to a market economy since 1991 has resulted in factories grinding to a halt, arable fields going uncultivated, livestock numbers being cut back and unemployment levels rising in both urban and rural areas. Villagers abandoned their homes and smallholdings and poured into the towns, swelling the ranks of the unemployed. I have tried to contribute by at least reminding my children (who have always lived in towns) of the duty families have towards needy relations. Every living creature has to take care not only of itself, but also of its descendants who will ensure the survival of the species. And as a popular Kazakh saying puts it, 'There is no life without movement': constant activity is required to sustain it.

Mother, it appears, had taken this saying very much to heart. Three or four days after our arrival she called me over when I was playing with some local boys and said, 'Darling, we can't go on living here any more as though we haven't a care in the world. It's impossible to say when your father will arrive: it won't be easy for him to get to us now that the steamers have stopped coming here. Winter is on the way. We've got to think about how we're going to

live from now on and how we are going to get food. Manap can't look after us all – look how many other mouths he's got to feed. We've got to do something until Father gets back so we're not a burden round Manap's neck. There are still a lot of ears of corn left in the fields near the camp: let's pick them all up so we've at least got a small amount of grain put by for us all. We'll start work tomorrow morning.'

I did not dare object because I had been taught to obey my parents and elders, but I was not particularly enthusiastic about doing the work. I thought to myself, 'Last year Aunt Batish and her husband took us in and fed us until the spring. Why can't Manap and our Zhamba do the same?' And I was sure I was right. I did not realise just yet that the drought had ruined the crops for the second year running and in some places the collective farms had not even managed to cover the costs of the seeds that had been sown in spring; nor that people living in the region were already facing a grim future with insufficient food to last them until the next harvest time. How was I to know that Manap's family of seven were faced with this terrible dilemma?

Our work gathering up the ears of corn from the fields did not continue for long. Now that it was late autumn, the days started getting colder and in the mornings the fields were covered in hoar frost. It was on a day like this that my other brother-in-law, Kairankazhi, who had married my sister Altynzhan the winter before, turned up with his horse and cart and announced that he was taking us to live with them at Kokzhura aul. Then he helped us pile our belongings into the cart and drove us off. You see, a Kazakh man was traditionally duty-bound to look after his wife's parents or, as the Kazakh saying put it: 'Once you've cut the corn, you mustn't burn the straw left behind'. Even though he did not have adequate housing, Kairankazhi took the three of us into the home he already shared with the four other members of his family. To take in your mother-in-law and two children in such circumstances you needed not only a sense of duty and responsibility but also, most definitely, a kind heart and conscience.

So, where was he living exactly? As the watchman and stoker respectively of the collective farm office, he and Altynzhan had been allocated literally a corner of it to live in. The office consisted of a large, spacious room in a house consisting of two apartments. For some reason or other, all three identical houses built in the farm's new centre over the summer were heated by means of an ordinary Russian stove. The one in the office was screened by a wooden partition – and it was in the small area between this partition and the side of the stove, measuring four metres square, that the eight of us had to live in. During the day there was scarcely enough room for us all to have our meals there. At night the mothers of the two families slept there with one child each. The rest of us – the young couple, Kairankazhi's sixteen-year-old brother and I – slept in the office space.

Every morning we used to get up early to vacate the office, clear away our bedding and carry it all into our corner behind the partition. Then all day long there was a constant flow of people coming into the office: chairmen, vice-chairmen, secretaries, accounts clerks – as well as regional officials who kept appearing one after the other, chatting, arguing, sometimes shouting at each other, and even coming to blows. There was always a blue haze in the room from tobacco smoke, because although smoking was not yet popular among Kazakhs in those days, it was regarded as the height of sophistication by anyone in an official post or aspiring to one: it set them apart – you see – from ordinary people.

These were the conditions we lived in that winter – thanks be to merciful Allah, as the mothers of our families always used to say. To get by in such circumstances you have to be patient and count your blessings, which we did. We had enough clothes and footwear still in fairly good shape, and we did not have to worry about food; the room we were living in was warm, no matter how cramped. What more did homeless people need?

When times are hard, a small fillip is something to be really thankful for, and one came in December 1932 when we learnt that the USSR Council of Ministers had passed a resolution permitting every collective farm member to take a dairy cow from the

communal herd. This was a very joyful event. The farmers who had cursed the Soviet authorities for collectivising their private property now started celebrating and praising 'their' Government for carrying through a policy that 'took account of the people's aspirations'.

On the appointed day, the cows selected from the herd were brought to the collective farm's office. The chairman explained to the assembled farmers how things would proceed: a family with five or more dependants would get a cow, a family with three or four dependants a heifer, and all the other families a heifer that was going to calve the following spring. Everyone grabbed the cow offered to them by the horns without any objections or criticism and led her home as fast as they could.

Why had this action been taken? One of the reasons was that – because of the drought – the collective farms did not have enough hay put by to feed the communal herds, and there was a serious threat of them dying of malnutrition. So the Government decided to give part of the herds away to the collective farmers, presuming that each family would look after their cow as it was now their private property. But in the event, many of the peasants lacked winter stocks of fodder, and the cows died anyway. Other peasants, fearing that the Government would make them hand their cow back when spring came, simply slaughtered them and ate their meat. So, during the third winter of the collective farm system, there was a significant decrease in the numbers of livestock throughout the country, and in Kazakhstan in particular. This in turn had a serious knock-on effect on food stocks throughout the country. By the end of winter, there were ominous signs that famine the famine was beginning to affect the population of the upper reaches of the River Irtysh and the adjacent foothills of the Altai mountain range.

This, however, lay in the future. On the day when Kairankazhi's cow was led into the yard beside his house, everyone was absolutely thrilled. His elderly mother walked towards her and hugged her round the neck as though she was a favourite daughter who had returned to her father's home after a year of marriage. Shortly

afterwards, the cow produced a calf, and again we were over the moon.

Then, as if to prove what people used to say about God's bounteous nature, yet another joy was bestowed upon us with the arrival of Toimbai-ata.

We had not seen my uncle since he gave up his fugitive life and turned himself in to the authorities. After serving a two-year prison sentence, he had been sent to a small, isolated aul consisting of four or five households on the shore of Lake Zaisan. It was from there that he – a 63-year-old man who in better times had never gone anywhere on foot – had just walked over 150 kilometres along sleigh tracks to visit us, his brother's family.

I cannot speak for the others, but I was more pleased to see Toimbai-ata than I would have been to see my own father. I stuck by his side during his entire visit. Even though he could see we were living in very cramped conditions, he still praised Kairankazhi for looking after us: 'The fact that you've taken in your in-laws' family and are getting on well despite having so little space is worthy of God's praise,' he said. 'You've done a good deed, and you'll definitely be repaid in kind. You may be living in cramped conditions, but you're not miserable. If a person has a big heart, he can never feel hemmed in!'

In keeping with a Kazakh custom, as a relative through marriage he received invitations to the homes of Kairankazhi's relatives. I accompanied him to these meals in his honour. Each time he was about to leave, it was customary for the head of the household who had invited and entertained him to say, 'As an honoured guest, we ask you to forgive our rather meagre offerings and hospitality. You deserve more. But I hope you will not hold it against us. Perhaps you have some request to ask us? Please don't be afraid to ask.'

It is another Kazakh custom that when a revered person – and particularly a relative through marriage or a close friend – is invited into a home, presents are given along with the specially prepared food. What's more, the recipient is always asked if he or she is pleased with the present. Even if there were no presents, the hosts are always anxious to know whether his guest minds or not. If, in

keeping with tradition, such a guest considers he is owed something by his host, he may lay claim to a present reflecting the closeness of their relationship and his own personal standing. The guest is given the right openly to express his wishes, or to ask for a present – although such requests are not always made.

In this instance, after the master of the house had asked him various questions of this kind, Toimbai-ata's reply was, 'What can I say? I do not need anything from you. I have travelled a long way to see my little nephews. Now I've seen you and become acquainted with the new relatives through marriage God has granted me. Thank you for your hospitality – I shall pray to God for your health and prosperity. May your children always bring you joy. You've mostly likely heard about me: I was released from prison not long ago, and sent to a place far away where you never see a soul. It's tough living there. But what can you do? Such is the will of the powers that be and of God.' He finished his speech with an apologetic request, 'We haven't got enough food or grain there. If there was a bit of grain...'

I swelled with indignation. How could he be asking for something so trifling when his host had entertained him in a suitable manner and showed him all the respect he deserved? I did not want to see our wonderful Toimbai-ata asking for what was, to all intents and purposes, charity. However, I did not dare speak up or interrupt the adults' conversations. One of the hosts gave him between five and ten kilograms of wheat grain, saying by way of an apology, 'Forgive us, most honoured brother-in-law, but this is all we can do for you. We can't help you any more. It's the same for us: we spend all our time wondering what we are going to eat tomorrow.'

Other people there asked for his forgiveness and then lowered their eyes, sombre and ashamed.

After staying with us for a week, Toimbai-ata loaded the gifts he had received – a sack just over half full of grain – on to his sleigh and set off on his long journey back home. I walked with him from the aul as far as the main sleigh track. I really did not want to say goodbye to him: in fact, I wanted to go with him. Before setting off,

he hugged me tightly with what seemed to me particular warmth, kissed me several times on the cheeks, and shed a few tears. I could scarcely hold back my tears either. What I did not know then was that this parting was to be our last; but recalling our goodbyes, I now think that Toimbai must have somehow sensed this. I stood there for ages watching him gradually disappear in the distance, stooping and wearily pulling the sleigh behind him. This is the lasting memory I have of him. Six months later, we heard that he had died.

ii

It was now the middle of winter, and several months since we had left the area we were deported to and settled in Kokzhura aul. Father had still not turned up; nor had we had any news of him. However, I did not notice my mother seeming unduly alarmed – either because we had already lived without Father for over two years and got used to it, or because she was just good at keeping her worries to herself.

Meanwhile, we continued living behind the plank partition in a corner of the collective farm's office. We had all the bare essentials, even though our living conditions were so cramped: we were in the warmth, and always had enough of everything to eat except meat. Certainly, I never heard any complaints from the adults about the food situation.

Living in the office meant that we could not help but witness all the goings-on there. From the raucous discussions and arguments we knew exactly what instructions were being issued from above, what plans were being put in place to implement them and how these were carried out, what problems cropped up and who was responsible and why. We also used to overhear conversations of a non-business nature and on a whole range of different subjects, not intended for public consumption. The noisiest part of the day was usually the morning. Then the officials would go off in different directions, leaving behind the secretaries, clerks and various other office workers until the end of the working day.

I always used to hang about nearby, and far from chasing me away, they would give me various bits of paperwork to copy while they chatted among themselves, puffing away on their long roll-ups. As a young boy with nothing to do all day, I found this work interesting and good fun. I tried to do all their jobs neatly, and so they started giving me more and more complicated business documents to copy and various forms to fill out; I also learnt how to write different kinds of business letters. Sometimes, too, they sent me on errands here and there and to fetch different things. I felt flattered when the office boys started calling me their helper. It was all an education for me: that winter I gained plenty of practical experience of life.

However, for reasons unknown to me, one day in mid-winter Kairankazhi suddenly decided to look for other lodgings for Mother and us. Later on, from the adults' conversations, I gathered that the family of a class enemy was not allowed to live in the collective farm and aul council's office. Consequently, Kairankazhi had been told he had to move the politically unreliable family out or vacate the office entirely. As it was extremely hard for a family of eight to find any living accommodation in mid-winter, and in order to keep the jobs of office watchman and stoker, the adults decided that my mother, brother and I should move out. We were, after all, already used to going wherever Destiny and the authorities decided to send us.

In whose way were we getting and how were we preventing Soviet policy from being implemented? When I recall those days now, it occurs to me that we were moved out because the local officials needed to be seen to be acting vigilantly, and not because they were carrying out instructions from above. Certainly, there was nothing to suggest that internal tensions between our two families had anything to do with it. As far as I could tell, the adults all got on very well together.

Unable to find anywhere for us to stay nearby, Kairankazhi took us over to Manap's house about seven or eight kilometres away. Before we three arrived, there were already four people in the house: Manap's parents, grandmother and seven-year-old daughter, the only

one of five children to have survived the previous year's terrible smallpox epidemic. Manap and my darling sister Zhamba had been sent by the collective farm to do compulsory work for the State all winter at the Kuludzhun mine.

At Manap's house we ate separately from his relations, since it was now vital for each family to manage and conserve its meagre food supplies. It has to be said that Kairankazhi had given us enough food to last us until the end of the winter, which is why I never heard Mother complain about being short of it; what's more, his family continued to supply us with milk, which would be left outside to freeze until I could collect it, as I did once a week. Still, it was possibly the first time in the history of the Kazakh people that two families living under the same roof – and, what's more, related through marriage – did not eat together.

iii

It was the spring of 1933, and Kazakhstan had been in the grip of famine for over a year. It had already taken a great many lives. Until the very end of winter, it was not as widespread among the population living in the foothills of the Altai mountain range, the Kalbin range and along the banks of the Irtysh in Eastern Kazakhstan as in other areas of the republic. But then it finally hit the aul of the Samara region where we were living.

Apart from the increasingly frequent incidents of families running out of food, there were growing numbers of people roaming around begging. To start with, these beggars were greeted in the aul with alarm and quickly given something to eat and anxiously asked how they had been reduced to such a state; but it did not take long for the residents to tire of their increasing numbers and offer them less charity. When the snow had thawed and the fields dried off, the famine victims started gathering the ears of corn from the fields and cooking them. Once there were none left and the fields had been ploughed and summer arrived, people started shaking the straw chaff on the old stacks and searching for edible grain.

Famine now gripped an area that had only ever heard rumours of it before. Everyone was now preoccupied by the problem of getting something to eat for the following day – or the same day, or that very moment, to relieve their hunger pangs. Even the kindest-hearted people and closest friends and relatives could no longer help one other. Our Manap had not returned to his collective farm from the mine as he was supposed to: he had managed to stay on in his job there, and arranged for his parents to join him. As for Kairankazhi, he had been sent off somewhere far away by the collective farm, and so we were unable to contact or seek help from either family any more.

By the spring, we were not only all on our own but our food supplies had nearly run out. So we too started collecting the ears of corn left behind on the fields. We used to dry the damp ears we had collected during the day and husk the grains; then Mother would wash and leave them to dry again. We only ate the grains after she had fried them.

What we did not know then was that grains became toxic from lying under the snow all winter, and could affect people badly if they ate them without cooking them properly first. We found out about this later when the first cases of poisoning happened. What had evidently saved us was the fact that Mother had washed the grains carefully before cooking them. Whole families were poisoned in this way because they had nothing else to eat and had thrown caution to the wind.

Mother put some food by in case the situation got really bad. Once a day, mostly in the evenings, on our return from collecting the ears of corn in the fields, she used to feed us from her old stocks; and twice a day we would eat the grains we had picked up. When we first started scavenging like this, Mother tried to conserve our meagre supplies by not allowing us to ask for food between the three meals we had a day. She explained it like this:

'If we don't do it this way, we'll eat up our last supplies and die of hunger. If we're clever and strong, we'll learn to get by and stop ourselves eating between meals, and then we'll last out till the next harvest and stay alive. We've got nobody to rely on now. We've had

no news from your father. We don't know where he is or even if he's alive. Let's hope for your sake that he turns up soon. He's already served his time away from home. If he was with us, we wouldn't go hungry.'

At the time I did not wonder why we had heard nothing from Father, even though seven months had already gone by since we last parted.

iv

Oriental peoples who live by the seven-day calendar believe in seven supreme values. A person's love for their home and country is one of them. The story is told of Nebuchadnezzar's wife, who fell ill because she missed her distant homeland so much; no cure could be found until a huge garden built on hills was built as an exact copy of the one she had been used to as a child in her own country. Even though more than two years had gone by since we had left our aul, I still missed it terribly. I often used to imagine my friends and the places we used to play together in, and our relatives, and I constantly longed to see them again.

One day a man named Abdul, who had lived next to us the year before, arrived on foot to see his relatives. Shortly before he was due to leave for home, I suddenly had the idea of going with him as far as his aul and then walking on by myself to my family's aul. I asked Mother to let me go. She was shocked at first and tried to frighten me by saying, 'You'll get lost on the way! You'll get eaten by starving beggars! I heard of a boy just like you getting eaten not so long ago on the banks of the Irtysh.' However, when I started explaining how much I was missing home, she eventually agreed to let me go on the long journey with the unexpected visitor.

And so off I set on foot with Abdul. Instead of following the main road, Abdul took a short cut along an old nomadic path leading to the Irtysh. There was not a soul to be seen. Every now and then we came across abandoned houses that local people had once used as winter stopping-places; now they were all living in a

collective farm centre and nobody had been here for over a year. There were holes in the roofs and ceilings and parts of the walls were caving in. The dreadful scene of dereliction sent shivers down my spine and made me feel fearful and sad.

After we had walked across trackless countryside and around marshy stretches of land, we came out onto the bank of the Irtysh at a place where there was a small house on the opposite bank. I found all the unfamiliar sights here fascinating. Without warning, Abdul shouted out twice at the top of his voice: 'Boat! Boat!' A moment later someone started rowing towards us in a boat from the other bank, his oars splashing through the water. It was the beacon-keeper. In those times, there were beacons at regular intervals all the way along any navigable river, showing the safe route along the channel. Most of the beacon-keepers were Russians and lived with their families on plots of land allocated to them beside the river. Before nightfall they would row out to the beacons and light the kerosene lamps mounted on them, before returning to extinguish them at dawn. They were always pleased to meet anyone because they led such isolated lives. This was certainly true of the beacon-keeper who rowed us across the Irtysh.

After crossing the river and walking another three or four kilometres, we came to Abdul's house. By then it was midday. When Mother had agreed to let me go with Abdul, she had arranged that he would let me spend the first night at his house and feed me, and then the following morning show me the way to our relatives' aul. After walking for half a day, we were naturally very tired and hungry. Unfortunately, Abdul's house was empty and there was nobody about to offer us a meal – or perhaps there was nothing to serve up. Abdul was so weary that he lay down to have a rest, and I did the same.

I do not know how long I slept for. When I woke up, Abdul was still snoring with his back to me. I went outside. Judging by the position of the sun, it was already mid-afternoon. I wondered when, or indeed if Abdul's wife was going to show up. The house certainly looked untidy and rundown. And I did not like the way Abdul was sleeping with his back to me as though I was not there.

What's more, I was famished. As it seemed highly unlikely that I was going to be fed by Abdul, I decided I had better continue on my journey before it got too late.

I reckoned I could walk as far as the next aul, Ust-Kurchum, before dark, spend the night there and then quickly run the rest of the way to the home of Uncle Kozhakhmet. I did not expect to get supper in Ust-Kurchum where I was planning to spend the night because I did not know anyone there. Even though I had not eaten since the morning, I decided I could go without food until the following morning. Having made up my mind, I woke Abdul and told him of my decision to go on with my journey. Abdul seemed delighted. As though afraid I might change my mind, he hurriedly explained to me how to get there. Although I was very much hoping he would say something about feeding me before I set off, he avoided the subject completely.

It turned out that I already knew the way from my travels in the autumn of 1931. I walked along the same wide dusty road I had ridden along several times two years before. I kept glancing back in the hope of spotting a cart coming up behind which I might be able to hitch a ride on. The sun seemed to be moving faster than usual towards the western horizon. As I did not want to be out after dark, I took off my boots in order to walk more quickly and continued barefoot with them in my hands. At a place Abdul had told me about, I turned off the main road onto a narrow path that was short cut to the aul I heading for and started walking up a long, steep gorge. By the time I had got up to the top, the sun had set. I had another five or six kilometres to go before I reached Ust-Kurchum. I speeded up again, breaking into a run, afraid of the descending darkness.

Then, in the gloaming, I noticed the silhouettes of two people walking in the distance ahead. With a sense of relief, I started running even faster to catch them up as soon as I could. They turned out to be a man and woman, most likely a married couple. They were thin like all the local people affected by the famine, but dressed in clean clothes. The man asked my name and where I was from and on my way to. When I told him, he shook his head and

exclaimed, 'How could your parents let you go at a time like this? It's dangerous, you know.'

We were now getting close to Ust-Kurchum. The man asked if I knew anyone in the aul. When I shook my head, he added, 'Then stick with us, lad. We know a family here. You can spend the night there with us.'

This was a real spot of luck. I knew that traditionally Kazakhs never turned away any traveller asking to stay the night, and sure enough, the acquaintances of my new companions let us in. However, contrary to another Kazakh custom, our hosts did not offer us any food. Judging by the late hour, they must have already had supper and none of them mentioned it. We were not offered beds either. So, still hungry, we all lay down to sleep on the floor without getting undressed. I ended up sleeping near the porch.

When I woke up, it was already light inside but not yet sunrise. All the family of our hosts and the other guests were still asleep. I slipped outside. It was early spring and the bitterly cold wind cut through me and made me shiver all over, as I had not eaten for 24 hours. Realising I would not get a crumb to eat there, I hurried off without going back inside or thanking my host for letting me stay, and ran towards where my uncle should still be living, about five or six kilometres further on from Ust-Kurchum.

When you have not eaten for over a day, your stomach keeps reminding you that you are hungry. I could think of nothing else. Longing for food, I raced towards uncle's place. However, when I eventually reached the aul he had previously been living in, I found that there was not a single family left among my mother's relatives. In an attempt to escape the famine, some had gone off in various directions – even as far as China – while the others were now living on different parts of the collective farm.

I was so disappointed and shocked that I simply collapsed with exhaustion. I must have used up the last ounce of my strength on the final stage of my journey that morning. I felt dizzy and too tired to even stir and my wretched stomach went on demanding food. It dawned on me that I should perhaps go up to one of the locals and ask for some, even though I did not know anyone there.

But that was begging! Ravenous I might be, but I could not beg.

I did not know this then, but during those times of famine quite a few people disappeared without trace, especially children and youngsters like me. They travelled great distances to find their relatives, only to learn when they arrived that their family had moved on and they had nowhere to seek refuge. They were by then too weak to go back home, and often ended up dying of hunger. Recalling all this now horrifies me.

As I was sitting there exhausted and confused, one of the elders came up to me and, after enquiring who I was, where I was from and what the purpose of my visit was, replied: 'You're in luck, lad. You see that house over there with the haycock in the yard? It belongs to you Uncle Mukatai's daughter. Her husband is the vice-chairman of the aul council. They're well off. You go to them, son. But do you know your aunt? Will she welcome you as one of the family? Some won't have anything to do with their relatives any more, you know.'

As I walked towards the house he had pointed out, my doubts grew and I started feeling very nervous. How was I to know what sort of welcome I would get? I had not seen that side of the family for three years. Perhaps my cousin would turn out to be one of those who had disowned their relatives, as the elder had warned me.

I need not have worried. As soon as she set eyes on me, my cousin Boldekesh looked pleasantly surprised and immediately started firing questions at me:

'Lord, where have you come from? How did you get here? Where are you all living? Do feel well? Are your parents alive and well? Where's your father?'

This welcome made me feel much more relaxed. I stayed overnight with her, getting my strength back and filling my hungry stomach. I ate plenty of delicious food at Boldekesh's house, some of which I had not tasted for ages and other dishes I had never tried before. They ate like royalty – or at least, that is how it seemed to me as I savoured the long-forgotten taste of good food. I could not help wondering where it had come from: there seemed to be so

much, at a time when so many people were suffering from malnutrition and dying of starvation. I told myself it had surely been sent by God.

I should also mention Boldekesh's husband, Adilkhan Sikimbayev, and his reaction to me turning up at his door. When my family was living in our aul and my parents were running a profitable smallholding, Sikimbayev – who had only recently married into the family – used to pay us visits and bring presents to us children. He used to joke and have fun with my sisters, and we were always pleased to see him. But when he saw me in his house after such a long time, he did not bother to ask after my family, what our circumstances were or where my father was; he did not seem to even notice me. I sensed this at once because I recalled how affectionate he used to be with me. People change the way they behave amazingly fast, depending on where they happen to be on the social ladder at the time, and Sikimbayev seemed to prove this theory; but he may simply have been scared of being accused by the authorities he served of associating with a kulak's son.

According to Boldekesh, Uncle Kozhakhmet was living somewhere in a small settlement at the collective farm's winter stopping place. Following the faint outline of the steppe track that was hardly ever used, I reached his home in the afternoon.

I found him working as a watchman at the farm's winter cowshed, which although empty needed, apparently, to be guarded against 'enemies of socialism'. He and his wife were living there by themselves, so in an emergency they were unable to alert anyone or seek help anywhere.

Observing them, you could get a very good idea of the way simple, honest, rank-and-file collective farmers lived in those difficult times. They kept no food supplies at home, and lived off the meagre rations that were doled out by the collective farm every now and then; unlike other collective farmers, Uncle did not even own a cow. The collective farm management not only provided him with meagre provisions, they also took advantage of his diligence by putting him in charge of clearing the irrigation ditches so that they could be used to water the crops in the summer. As he

and his wife could not survive on their official rations, he used to work on two jobs during the day, and then in the evenings he would go and shake the straw and chaff on the old stacks to get a few grains to eat. This was also a laborious task, but if you worked really hard, you could get enough grain in a day to make a single meal. People were driven to these extremes when there was no other way of getting food.

Apart from consistently not having enough to eat, what drove my uncle to despair was the way Communism had undermined the foundations of family life. He did not have any children of his own, but he had adopted his brother's young daughter and his elder sister's son. It was a common practice among Kazakhs to adopt a relative's child, even though the biological parents might still be alive, in order to reduce the strain on a family which already had a lot of mouths to feed: the parents for their part took an oath that they were giving their children up voluntarily, and would never demand them back or consider them as their own. This was strictly observed even after the adopted parents' deaths – although the biological parents might take their children back, the children retained their adopted parents' surname and continued to be regarded as their offspring. It was not just that people were afraid of breaking an oath they had made before God: their principles also forbade them from doing so.

But at the time of my visit, Uncle had recently been forced to give up his adopted son. It was a terrible blow for a man who had gone through agonies finding enough food to save his children from starving to death. What had happened was that his elder nephew Arshabai, who was on good terms with the new authorities in his region, had turned up and persuaded his brother to leave his adopted father and go away with him. This was quite scandalous as far as Kazakh traditions were concerned. The young man caused his uncle considerable grief by violating his parents' oath; what's more, he also demanded that Kozhakhmet give him a share of the household goods and the money supposedly owing to him for grazing the flock of sheep, a task all the aul children helped their parents with. He ended up taking away Uncle's last two goats as compensation.

A second blow to Uncle was that his adopted daughter also chose to ignore the old traditions by secretly getting married without his permission and blessing. Uncle Kozhakhmet had to put up with all these affronts to his dignity because there was nothing else he could do; as he said himself, he had been 'stamped on all over' as a human being. Yet when he told me all this – since there was nobody else to pour his heart to – he still showed extraordinary generosity of spirit. 'The children of your sisters and daughters, as people used to say, come from another clan, while your own daughters are destined for another clan,' he said. 'My daughter Kauariya certainly was. I do not curse her or feel upset with her. I hope she is happy. If you really think about it, what could I have given her at home? Certainly not enough food to live on. What joy can I offer her now? Her husband is the chairman of an aul council, I've heard, so perhaps she'll have enough to eat at least. It's just a shame that my new son-in-law and his close relatives have not been in contact over the past three months since the marriage. They haven't bothered to come and sort things out with me. After all, they're my relatives now and evidently plan to remain so forever. But they obviously do not consider me their equal. That's what I find so upsetting and confusing! That's what's getting me down!'

Recalling Uncle's complaints over sixty years later, I have come to the conclusion that he would have had every right not to let me anywhere near his home, since his other nephews had treated him so badly. But on the contrary, he seemed very pleased to see me. Despite being very hard up, he insisted on me staying with him for a week.

When I told him that I wanted to visit my father's aul, he approved of my plan and wished me well, saying: 'I've heard that your father's cousins Rakhimzhan and Alzhan Mukazhanov are quite well off. The younger of the two, Alzhan, is in charge of the keys to the collective farm's granaries. They, of course, have plenty to eat and a lot of food put by. Go and see them. At least you'll have enough to eat for a while.'

Then, after a moment's thought, he added, 'It's not on the way

to your aul, but go and see my Kauariya and spend a bit of time with her. Find out how she is. Then come and see us on the way back and tell us all about what you've discovered.'

I did as he had asked me to.

I had not seen my cousin for two years, but she greeted me in the usual way in such circumstances and then spent a long time asking me all sorts of questions about the family. When she found out that I had come straight from Uncle Kozhakhmet's house, she started weeping silently. Then she wiped away her tears and started anxiously asking, 'How's Father? Is he furious with me? What kind of food have they got to eat? I'm sure they don't have enough, do they?'

I told her how I had gone to the old threshing-floor with him to shake some grains out of the straw, but did not mention how upset he was with his son-in-law and the young man's relatives. After hearing this, she must have realised how famished I was, for she stopped asking questions and ran off and fetched me a whole cup of yoghurt and a plate of cold fried fish. After putting it all on the table, she told me to help myself while she went and made the tea. In those hard times it was a tremendous honour to be served a meal like this, not just for a boy like me, but even for the most distinguished guest. And what a meal it was, too! I wolfed down the whole lot and felt full for the first time in ages. After I had drunk all the tea I could manage – fresh tea with tea leaves, whose taste I had long forgotten, not the usual boiling water with tea dregs – I sat back and rested and marvelled at how well some people lived compared to my family and our neighbours. However, I did not dwell on where the food on the table had come from at a time when people were dying of starvation. I came to the conclusion that God must have answered Uncle Kozhakhmet's prayers to give his daughter Kauariya enough food for her not to go hungry.

The people whose names are mentioned in this memoir have all long passed away, and it is considered unseemly to criticise the dead. However, this is not the only reason why I want to mention the great concern shown to me by Kauariya's husband Nugman

Mukushev, even though he had neglected my uncle. On the morning I was due to leave, he found time before going to work to get me across the river by boat and then drive me to the road leading to my father's aul, explaining to me how to get there. I felt truly privileged to be shown such attention by my cousin's husband, especially as he was the chairman of the local aul council, and I decided he was a good man. I have always remembered his act of kindness, although later on I was never to hear any of his acquaintances describe him in such glowing terms.

v

In the days of that appalling famine, you would see hordes of homeless beggars wandering along the main roads between the towns and villages. But the roads between the small aul in isolated areas were uncannily deserted. There was very little movement between the main estates of the collective farms, and the traditional socialising that went on between people in neighbouring aul had almost ceased due to the lack of transport.

It was along one of these deserted roads that I walked fifteen kilometres without meeting a soul, until I reached the aul that had once been the centre of the Topterek collective farm. I had never been to it before, because it had only been set up over the past two years, during collectivisation – so I did not know how to find the houses of my closest relatives. I stopped by the first hut I came to, unsure whether to go inside and ask directions. Fortunately, a boy came out of the next hut, pointed to the one I was standing beside and told me it belonged to Rakhimzhan and Alzhan Mukazhanov – the cousins who had looked after our hidden rugs, and sent me off on my terrifying ride across the frozen Irtysh.

I did not know what kind of reception to expect. Though renowned for their hospitality, Kazakhs react differently to guests they have never set eyes on before, particularly when they turn out to be relatives from some distant aul asking for charity 'in God's name' and calling themselves 'God's guests'. The welcome

extended to these guests depends first on the host's financial circumstances and then on his generosity and sense of obligation. It was two years since my relatives in this village had seen me: how was I to know if they would guess that the emaciated lad was the same boy they had known? Then you had to take into account that the famine had forced many of the most welcoming people to renounce their national traditions of hospitality and duty to close relatives. I went into the two brothers' house with great trepidation, like a hunter creeping up to the den of a sleeping bear.

I carefully opened the door into the front room and quietly stepped inside. There were three women sitting in the room who, I could tell at once, were the grandmother and her two daughters-in-law – Aimysh, the elder of the two, and Nukhan. Catching sight of me in the doorway, all three stared at me with eyes full of wonder and fear. A second later, as though at the wave of a magic wand, all three gasped in unison, 'Oibai-ai [My God], it's Mukhamet! Is it really you?'

Sitting up on a bed, wrapped up to her waist in blankets, the other grandmother Maria called me to her in a quavering voice, embraced me and hugged me tightly to her for a long time, kissing me. Her daughters-in-law then came up and did the same, if less effusively. Then they started bombarding me with questions: 'Where have you come from? How long have you been in these parts? Where are you living? Have you had news of your father? How's your mother doing? How are things? Do you have enough food? You're not going hungry, are you?' All three were desperate to know all about our daily lives.

The two Mukazhanov brothers' families lived all together. The elder brother, Rakhimzhan, was 49 and the younger, Alzhan, 37. Their father had died when they were young, and in keeping with tradition his brother Aitlembet – my grandfather – had taken their mother as his wife and treated his nephews in the same way he did his own sons. We, their cousins, used to call their mother our 'younger grandmother', because she was our grandfather's third wife.

The men in the Mukazhanov household were less enthusiastic about my arrival than the women had been. Was it because men

are naturally more reticent, or because they were afraid of having ties with a kulak's family? I can't say. To make up for it, though, their children were genuinely thrilled to see me. Rakhimzhan's son Mubarak was five years my senior, and Alzhan's daughter Altynsar a year younger than me. Mubarak in particular did everything he could for me all the time I was staying with them.

In terms of the food supplies, the Mukazhanovs were relatively well off by the standards of 1933: they had a dairy cow and – because Uncle Alzhan had access to the collective farm's granary – grain stocks that were quite substantial for those days. What's more, unlike most people, the brothers' family was not subject to any rationing. Compared to what I had seen at our neighbours' when we were living with Uncle Kozhakhmet, and how we ate at home, life at the Mukazhanovs' was, to my mind, simply heaven. I had not realised then that they lived so well compared to the rest of the aul residents.

Other relatives in the aul gave me a warm welcome. All were anxious to know about our daily lives and, first and foremost, about Father. When they heard that we had not heard from him for eight months, they stopped asking me questions and began sighing instead.

After staying just over a week at my relatives', I got ready to go home. However, the Mukazhanovs – especially my grandmother and the other women – started trying to make me change my mind:

'Why are you in such a hurry to get home? Stay a while longer with us. You know what it's like back at home. Why take your meagre rations away from your brother and mother when you can live here with us? Whatever we have to eat, you'll eat with us.'

They did not have to twist my arm much, as I knew I would never go hungry at their place. What's more, there were a lot of boys of my age in the aul who I knew from my school days. In the end I stayed for three weeks.

All the members of the Mukazhanov brothers' families got on well. They had lived under the same roof most of their lives and worked on the same smallholding. In a patriarchal family such as

theirs, it was customary for the younger brother's wife to be responsible for all the housework. In this case, it was Aunt Nukhan. As she was at work on the collective farm all day, she had to do the household chores early in the morning and all evening after work. While I was staying with them, I tried to relieve her of some of her work. During the day I would fetch water from the river half a kilometre away from the aul; I would also collect firewood along the riverbank and carry it home.

Of course, in those days I did not know all the intricate rules that had to be followed in the relationships between people of the same clan. The day before I left the Topterek aul for home, a man called Nurgalii Kystaubayev – who was related to the Mukazhanovs through marriage, and so to my family as well – said something to me about the Mukazhanovs' duty to us. He considered that as soon as I showed up, they could at least have put by a sack of millet grain, and – once it had been ground into flour – taken it to the local market in the next village and sold it. Then my family could have used the money to buy the same amount of millet at our local market, which would have really helped us.

'You're too young to know about this sort of thing,' he told me, 'but your relatives here haven't shown any concern over what might happen to your family and do not appreciate what a difficult position you're in. They must all be skinflints, or must have forgotten all about their duty as relatives. In the past your father Shayakhmet did plenty of good deeds for each and every one of them.'

As if to confirm this, neither of my father's cousins enquired about the route I would be taking home, or whether I needed anything for my journey. Nurgalii was the only one to give me some useful tips:

'From what you've told me of your journey here, I can see that you had to walk long distances all on your own,' he said. 'Never sit down, let alone lie down, to rest on your own on a deserted road. If you're tired, you may fall asleep and sleep through the daylight hours, and even end up spending the night in the steppe all by yourself. God forbid that that should happen, as it's dangerous. Always try to make it to a village before dark.'

When I did reach home, Mother echoed Nurgalii's criticisms of the Mukazhanovs. Three or four days after my return, she said indignantly, 'The neighbours want to know if our relatives have helped us in any way and whether they've sent any food back with you. They reckon they haven't done enough for us. I feel ashamed that they've shown themselves up like this to outsiders! What a pity your father has cousins like them!'