

MEMORIES OF LIFE IN LHASA UNDER CHINESE RULE

TUBTEN KHÉTSUN

TRANSLATED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION

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CHAPTER 4

The Chinese Fan the Flames of War

AROUND FOUR O'CLOCK Lhasa time on the morning of March 20, all the Chinese army bases and settlements in the surrounding area trained their cannon on the Norbu Lingka summer palace and began to fire. Even now, recalling that sound evokes a distinct sensation of despair. At that point, I was still guarding the entrance to the Khamsum Silnön palace. As soon as I heard the cannon, I knew that fighting had broken out and was terrified at the thought that I could not expect to survive the day ahead. But the two regular members of the bodyguard regiment on duty with me were not so frightened, and seeing their air of determination, I felt a little more sanguine. As it was still dark, there was nothing to do but stay where we were and remain alert, and headquarters gave us no particular instructions. The volunteers staying outside the southern boundary wall of the summer palace could be heard shouting "Ki!" and returning fire. I imagined that the Chinese soldiers had advanced under artillery cover and engaged the volunteers in fighting at close quarters, and fully expected those of us inside to come under attack if they could not hold the Chinese back, but no Chinese came and the shouts of "Ki!" gradually receded. [Then] I imagined that the Chinese soldiers had been unable to break through on their first try and had withdrawn, and even that, judging by the fierce shouting and firing we had heard, a large number of them could have been killed or wounded. As dawn arrived, I was curious to look outside, but when I went to do so, there was not even the whiff of a Chinese nearby. It turned out that the gunfire and war cries during the early hours had been quite arbitrary.

Then, as the sun rose, the artillery fire became heavier. To either side of our post, I could see many unexploded shells. There was a tremendous noise as some of our cannon in the bodyguard regiment camp were fired

toward the Chinese encampment at Nor-tö Lingka [a short distance to the west], in the hope that they might make some impact, but almost instantly enemy shells fell near that gun emplacement, killing and wounding the gunners, and thus we lost the use of our cannon. The Gyantsé soldiers near the Chinese truck depot on the north side of the Norbu Lingka, the Amdo unit stationed near Nor-tö Lingka, and the Tibetan army and volunteers at Bongwa-ri and Chakpo-ri had a clear view of the Chinese and engaged them in exchanges of fire for some time, but those of us in the summer palace and on the south side of Chakpo-ri could do nothing but stay where we were and be pounded by enemy fire. We had absolutely no experience of warfare, and since we also had no experienced commanders, by about ten o'clock that morning we were all disorganized, and instead of staying in our shelters, we began running here and there trying to avoid the falling shells, making our casualties even heavier.

Returning to my uncle's room, I got the message that remaining officials were to gather at the palace secretariat office, and went there. There were twenty-odd monastic and lay officials, as well as an Amdo-wa chief and representatives from the Upper Tantric College. The commander of the emergency headquarters, Khenchung Tara-wa of the Nangma-gang, had had to retreat from heavy fighting with the Chinese at Chakpo-ri after running out of ammunition, but he was determined to go back and appealed to us, saying, "They say, 'The time has come for smart young people [to get out], now no trace is left where Lhasa was,' but since His Holiness has not fallen into enemy hands we still have a chance! Which of you will join me?" The monk official Gyeltsen Tashi declared, "I will go!" but the others remained silent. He spoke again decisively, saying, "Staying inside the Norbu Lingka, you have no way to fight back and will just be slaughtered. It would be better to find a way to get outside, and you should combine your strength to do that by any means," then went back to Chakpo-ri with Tsédrung Gyeltsen Tashi and his brother Tara Sonam Tséring. But there was no discussion about how to unite among the rest of us, and as everyone looked for his own place to shelter, I went back to my uncle's room. He was there, and I appealed to him, "People are fleeing! How can we stay here any longer?" but he said, "That is just your idea. If you want to leave you can do as you please, but we have work to do!" and set off again to the Chensel Po-trang palace to procure weapons. Meanwhile, I waited for my elder brother, whom he had sent with Khenchung Gyeltsen-la to the protector chapel to request a divination (*Zan brtags*), and as soon as he got back, we set off together for the Chensel Po-trang. By this time it was about three o'clock in

the afternoon, the bombardment was at its height, and we ran this way and that trying to avoid the falling shells.

When we got there, the treasurer, Lha-ding Khen-chen Ngawang Drakpa-la, my uncle, and the palace steward Losang Dondrup-la were handing over the rifles and pistols they had removed from the Nyiwö and Késang Dékyil apartments at Chensel Po-trang to the ex-monk official Losang Yéshé and Gönsar-pa, a former officer of the "Ga" (third) regiment [based in Shika-tsé], to be sent to the rebel army in Lho-ka. The cannon shells started to fall like rain, and several landed within the yellow [inner] boundary wall. Thinking it would be safer to shelter in a building, we went inside the Lu-khang palace and waited there. We removed some blessed substances from the amulet boxes we carried with us everywhere and ate them. Then the building was hit by a shell and badly damaged, the windows shattering from the force of the explosion.

We had to retreat once again, and as we did so, more shells exploded nearby, and we lost sight of one another and became separated. My left thigh was hit by fragments in one of the explosions, and although I was not seriously wounded, it became difficult for me to move. As I tried to crawl outside the boundary wall, there was another explosion and my right cheek was hit, again not seriously, but maybe a vein was severed, because I was soaked with blood, even inside my shoes. I was still doggedly trying to get outside by going through the inner section of the stables when the main door of that building was hit by a shell and it collapsed instantly, crushing several of the people inside. Many people inside the stables, as well as horses and mules, were killed or injured, and those still alive shouted for others to help pull them out of the wreckage. By then, my throat was absolutely dry with thirst [from blood loss] and all I could think about was finding water to quench it. I went into the nearby living quarters of several of the sweepers and stablehands but found no one there. Finally, I went into the room in the basement of the "stables palace" (*Chibs rva pho brang*) that was the stablemaster's office, and the stablemaster himself was there. When I asked if I might also come inside, he recognized me and urged me, "Come in, sit down, it should be slightly safer than outside." When I asked him for water, he at once tore open a paper packet of blessed pills, poured a few into a cup of water, and handed it to me, and that sensation of relieving my terrible thirst is something I remember even now.

The two of us stayed in that basement for some time, while the noise of the bombardment outside was as loud as could be. When I reluctantly re-emerged, I saw a pet monkey tied to a wooden post in the stable courtyard

that no one had thought to release, and it was scampering up and down in terror, holding the cotton awning from a nearby doorway, which it wrapped around its head for protection when it heard another explosion, just like a human. When there was a lull in the firing, it stared around wide-eyed at the dead and wounded people and horses and became more terrified still. I looked for a way to release it from its chain, but as it did not know me, it ran back to the top of the post as I approached. Fearing that worse was to come, I made no further attempt to save the monkey and left the stables.

It was about six o'clock by then. Many people were leaving from the west gate on the southern side of the Norbu Lingka and heading toward Rama-gang. This seemed the best direction in which to escape because there were no Chinese military bases or camps on that side, and I also followed people going that way, but after I had crossed a stream in front of that gate and started crawling on across the open plain toward the Kyi-chu river, my wet shoes and clothes were caked in mud and sand and became extremely heavy. And after getting wet in the stream, the wound on my leg became very painful. One group of those fleeing carried their weapons with them, while another group abandoned them and waved sticks to which they had tied white scarves as they walked, as a sign of surrender that could be seen from afar. At first, as we left the west gate, gunfire could be heard in all directions, but it did not seem to be aimed at this area, and people were heading for the hills behind Rama-gang thinking that no Chinese soldiers were there. But shortly after, many machine guns began firing simultaneously from the hills behind Rama-gang, and a great many of those walking across the river plain were killed. Some were hit from behind as they fled, some kept going forward, but as the firing continued, many more were killed and wounded. It was terrifying to see this happen right in front of me, but as I was mostly crawling along, I did not get hit; whereas had I gone farther, it would have been the same as committing suicide.

It was getting dark, and I resolved to turn back, return to the Norbu Lingka, and try to find my uncle and elder brother. It was dusk by the time I got there, my search proved futile, and just as night fell, Chinese troops approaching from all sides entered the summer palace. They fired or threw grenades at anything that moved, and shouted in Chinese that we should stand still, not move, and give up our weapons. Those of us sheltering inside the palace stables surrendered together. One group of soldiers kept their guns trained on us from a distance, while another group searched us for weapons before leading us outside the yellow boundary wall. We were grouped together with others being led out by the soldiers, in the open area

between the main gate and the entrance to Késang Po-trang. Eventually, all of the four or five thousand people arrested in the Norbu Lingka or its environs that night were assembled there. Chinese soldiers stood around the perimeter with various kinds of weapons, guarding us so strictly that we were not allowed to get up even to urinate.

One Ba-pa Késang Yang-ga, who seemed to be a Chinese army officer, effectively instilled us with fear by telling us that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) would not hesitate to shoot if we made any untoward movement or sign of resistance. Then, gradually, Tibetans serving as Chinese officials, and in particular officials of the United Front Bureau, arrived and began to pick out officials of the Tibetan government from among the crowd; they were loaded into prisoner transport trucks and sent off. I imagined that the government officials had been separated from the crowd because they were going to be shot, and did my best not to be recognized, putting on a wool hat that covered my eyes and trying to look as ordinary as possible, so that night I was not identified and stayed among the common people. But I had the wounds on my leg and cheek, my clothes were wet from crossing the stream by the southern gate while trying to flee, and the ground we were made to sit on was frozen at that time of year, so I suffered more from the cold that night than at any other time in my life.

Anyway, we got through the night suffering from cold, hunger, thirst, and fear, and the next morning, army officers from the so-called Tibet Military District (TMD) headquarters arrived, accompanied by photographers and reporters. They checked again to see if there were any remaining government officials, and among the Tibetans working as Chinese officials, there was one, Shölkhang Jédrung Tubten Nyima, whom I recognized. He was checking carefully among the crowd and picking out officials, but he could not recognize me, as he had been with the Chinese side since their arrival in Tibet and had largely withdrawn from government service, so he was not familiar with the newly inducted officials. However, there was a United Front Bureau official called Kung Ping who had formerly served as UF representative and been in contact with most government departments, and he recognized me and picked me out. There were about seven of us remaining officials identified that day, and although we generally didn't look like very strong individuals, we were bound together with a cotton rope, not close together but at some distance from each other, and those reporters and photographers took a lot of photos of us.

That day they gave out the food they had collected from the Norbu Lingka and the voluntary security people's camp, but people had gone with-

out food for two days and there was a great crush, so only the stronger ones managed to get a morsel while the weak and the wounded got nothing. Those of us who had been picked out were not only denied food, we were not even allowed to drink from the small water channel running behind us. We were put in the *puja* hall, where the seriously wounded were gathered, and around five o'clock in the evening we were taken to the quarters of the chief monk official (*mKhan po tshang*) in the Norbu Lingka, which had become a makeshift Chinese army canteen. There they gave us *tsampa* and a white, milky liquid that the Chinese themselves drank, but our hands were still tied behind our backs and we did not know how we should eat. A young soldier untied my hands and told me to make *tsampa* dough (*sPags*) and feed it to the others, so I prepared the *tsampa* in a large enamel food container (*ku'u rtsi*) and gave it to them, but they did not eat more than a mouthful, and although I had gone two days without any food, I too could eat no more than a mouthful.

After that, my hands were tied behind my back once more, and after waiting a while in the courtyard, we were loaded like sacks of flour into a big army truck with a canvas top and taken away. Gunfire had not yet ceased at the Potala and around Lhasa, and our truck was fired on from the Potala. The guards told us not to squat but to lie down. The truck passed Dékyi Lingka and went south along the river and into the west gate of the TMD headquarters. All along that road there were a great number of corpses. At that point, I no longer feared summary execution, but since I had been recognized as a government official, I knew I was in for some bad treatment.