

"The fascinating, tragic, forgotten story of the Kazakh nomads of central Asia under Stalin's brutal rule...an unusual and special book." —Simon Sebag Montefiore

# The Silent Steppe

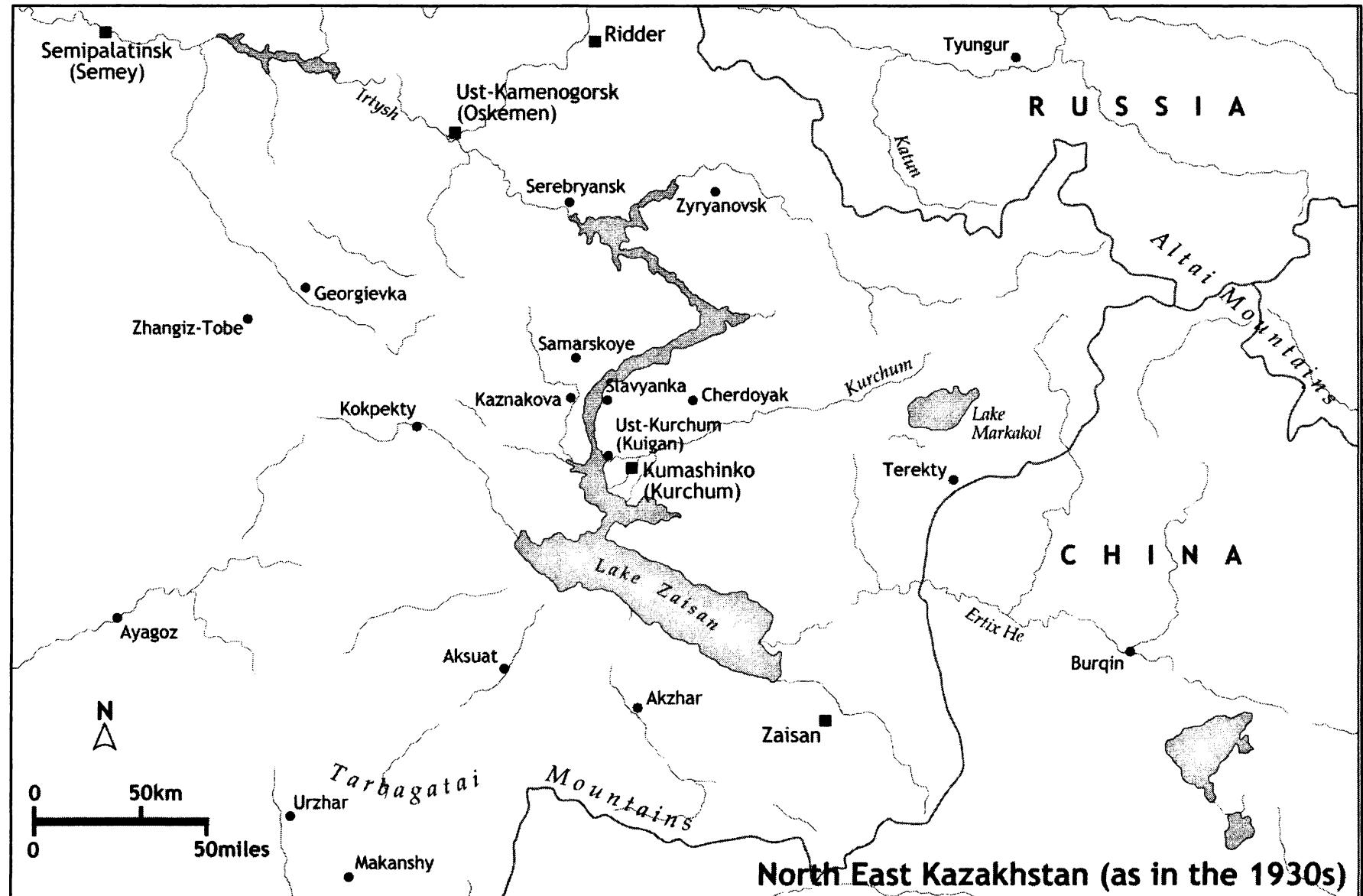
The Memoir of a Kazakh Nomad Under Stalin



Mukhamet Shayakhmetov

PART TWO

FAMINE



# Chapter Fifteen

## The Refugees

1 932 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 puttying 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 seen 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 Kózhakhmet. 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 Boldekeshev'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 Boldekeshev, 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 – Aifysh, 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!'

# Chapter Eighteen

## Days of Mourning

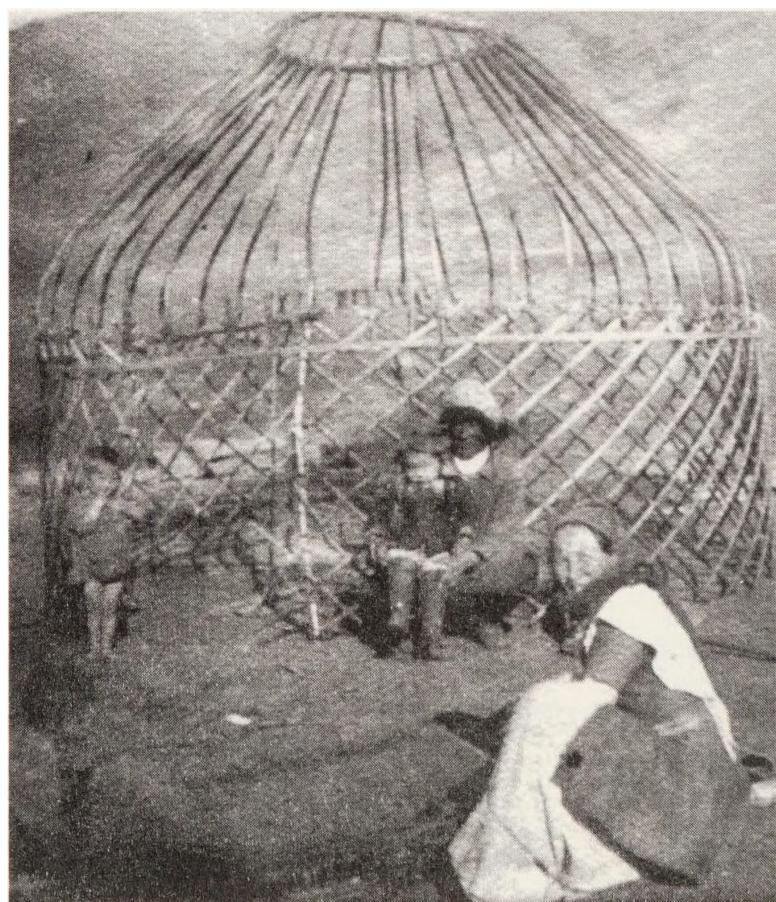
It was now the middle of 1933. All the ears of corn left on the fields after last year's harvest, which had provided the hungry with a temporary source of nourishment, had been picked up and the fields ploughed. The last grains left in the straw and chaff in the old stacks had also all been taken. People's meagre sources of food had run out. Famine now swept through the entire region as far as the outcrops of Southern Altai and the upper reaches of the Irtysh, parts of the republic that were renowned as grain-producing areas. There were more and more famine victims roaming about in search of food. Mother had reduced the portion sizes of our three meals as much as possible; but how was my six-year-old brother to understand that this harsh regime had to be stuck to? Apart from the few minutes a day when he was gobbling down his miserable ration of food, he spent the whole time pleading for food and crying. Appalled by the sight of his tears, Mother was forced to give him something extra to eat.

Just at this point during the famine we received an unexpected visit from Toimbai-ata's son, Aiken, who had made the same 150-



*Part of a Kazakh family's horse and camel train, fully loaded, in the course of a seasonal migration in pre-Soviet days, in a rare photograph (above) which endorses the somewhat idealized record made by the Russian painter Nikolai Khludov in the late 19th century (below).*





**Left and below:**

*1927. The last migrations. Kazakh families arrive at their summer pastures for what was to prove one of the last seasonal migrations before the imposition of collectivisation.*



**Below left:**

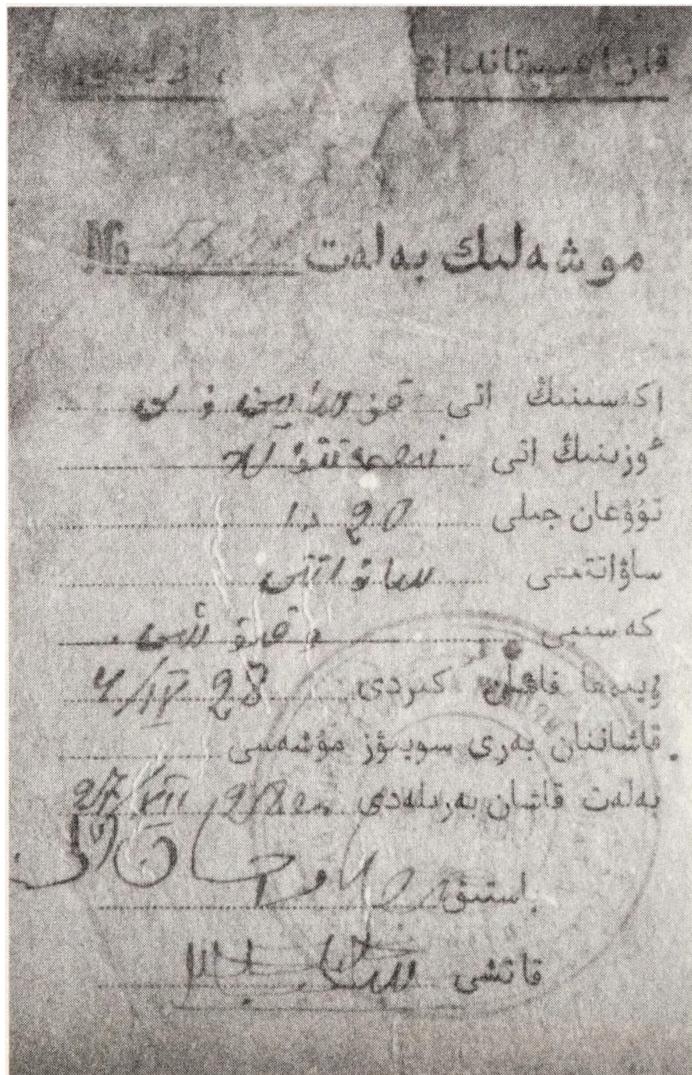
*An early camera (1920s) catches a Kazakh couple with their three young children during the construction of their summer yurt, showing a panel of felt cladding in the foreground.*





**Above:**

1929. A rally of nomadic Kazakhs, whose horses graze the steppe, is harangued by a Party official (centre, left) on the requirement to join kolkhozes – collective farms.



**Left:**

1928. A certificate in Arabic script (until then the customary medium of writing among the Kazakhs) records the owner's membership of the 'Kosshy' farm labourers' union, upon which employment came to depend.

**Right:**

*Enforced settlement and collectivisation was accompanied by attempts at mechanisation and the allocation of new roles to women.*



**Below:**

*The milk yield of the single cow permitted for any one family had to be delivered in a standard pail daily for collective distribution.*



**Right:**

*The most feared man among the Kazakhs from the mid-1920s and throughout collectivisation was Feodor Goloshchekin, Stalin's Party chief for the territory.*



**Below:**

*The coming of the railways to Kazakhstan gave a new dimension to Soviet power, including deportation of unwanted families.*





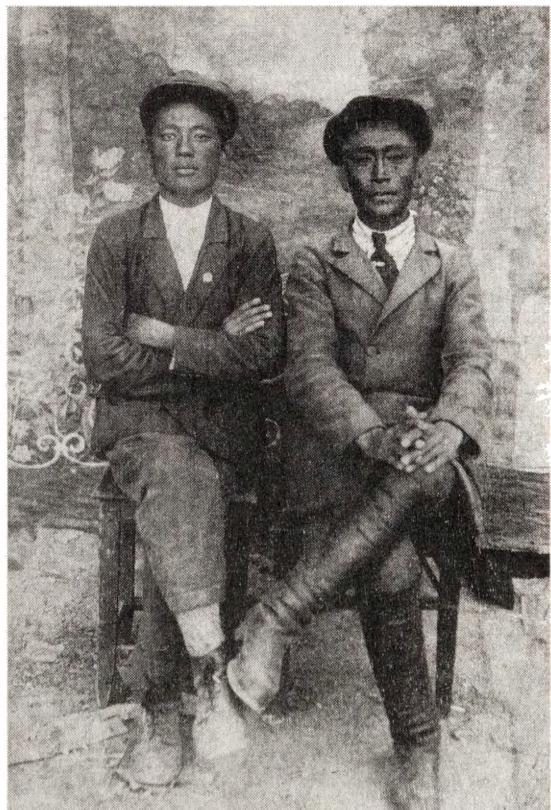
**Left:**

*Mukhamet Shayakhmetov in Red Army winter kit, December 1941.*



**Below:**

*The author in 1938, aged about 16, with a school friend (below left), and in 1939 with a cousin (below right), both of whom were killed at the front towards the end of the War. Shayakhmetov is on the left in both pictures.*





**Left:**

*Mukhamet Shayakhmetov's wife with daughter Aliya and son Bagdat. Seated, right, is the author's mother.*

**Below left:** *The author at school in 1940.*

**Below right:** *Denied, as a boy, the education he craved, as 'an enemy of the people', Mukhamet Shayakhmetov was to become a schoolteacher, serving the cause of education among his own people in Ust-Kamenogorsk (today's Oskemen) with distinction. He is pictured here displaying medals awarded for his service to education along with his military medals.*



kilometre walk from Lake Zaisan that his father had. I was so dismayed by his appearance that at first I very much hoped it was not Aiken at all. Standing before us was not the pale-faced young man we knew so well, but an emaciated man with a sallow complexion. Not so long ago he had been a handsome young man dressed in the European manner; now, wearing a dirty, tattered old coat draped over him like a bedcover, he looked to me like a complete stranger. Instead of the calf boots he used to wear, he now had thick cloths wrapped round his feet and rawhide shoes.

Still, we were very pleased that he had come to see us, and eager to learn news of his family, whom we had not heard from for a long time. As it turned out, though, the news that Aiken brought us was anything but good.

It is an age-old Kazakh tradition that the news of a person's death is conveyed to his or her close relatives in a particular way and according to set rules and rituals. The most respected close friends and acquaintances of the deceased get together and then go in a group or one by one to the house of the person they have to convey the sad news to. When they arrive, they engage in conversation on general topics, gradually broaching the difficult subject and reason for their visit. They only break the sad news to the family after they have prepared them for it. The most revered person in the group is entrusted with the task of conveying all the necessary details; once they have broken the news to them, they express their condolences and stay to comfort and mourn with them for the first few hours of their grief. Neighbours or close relatives living nearby then bring hot dishes of food from their houses, and offer them to everyone else present. After comforting the bereaved, the visitors all go home a few hours later.

Aiken did not dare break with tradition and tell us the sad news as soon as he had arrived. Without us realising it, he first went and told our neighbours.

The day after his arrival, our neighbours started calling into our hut one by one and talking with Aiken because he was our guest.

I was under the impression that the neighbours had come to greet him in keeping with the Kazakh custom of calling upon any

guest who has come from afar; but I could see that Mother was not her usual self. I thought she was not happy about the neighbours coming to greet Aiken, because she kept stonily silent; but it turned out that she had sensed something was wrong. And indeed, the visiting neighbours proceeded to tell first Mother and then us that Father had died.

According to Aiken, it had happened the previous December. Someone who had worked and lived with Father in the same lodgings had written to his relatives in Kumashinko with the news, and from them it had filtered through to some of our relatives in the Topterek aul. However, for some reason or other they had kept this information to themselves. Aiken had only found out about Father's death when he called in to Topterek on his way to us, and that is why it was he who informed us about it.

It seems that, while trying to make his escape from Ridder, Father had been stopped by a passing militiaman, who decided quite by chance to carry out a spot check on him. As a result, he had been separated from his companions and unable to leave the town, where he then fell ill and died. More than that, we simply do not know.

I wept so bitterly that I found it hard to breathe. I could not bear the idea that Father had died far from home and those who loved him, without anyone to give him the care he desperately needed. I imagined him missing us – and me in particular – in the last moments of his life; and I wondered what was to become of us without him in this time of starvation and death.

Our next-door neighbours arranged a small memorial gathering for us with food from their meagre supplies. The gathered company said prayers at the table for the soul of the deceased, and for the future well-being of his loved ones.

Mother was wracked with grief and, left without a husband at such a difficult time, retreated even further into her own world. What tormented her greatly was not only that Father had died in unfamiliar surroundings, but also that the death of a man who had been a highly respected member of the community had been commemorated in such a low-key manner by a few mourners in a

small aul. 'In the old days,' she would say regretfully, 'hundreds of people would have mourned his death, and close relatives and friends would have honoured his memory by coming over with camels and horses and organising a lavish funeral for him.'

She was also sad that she had not been able to commemorate her husband on the seventh and 40th day after his death, as tradition demanded. Nor could she afford to pay for prayers to be said for his soul: how could she, when she was struggling to keep her children from dying of starvation? A true believer, she was deeply upset that since his death the previous winter not a single word of prayer had been said to comfort his tortured soul.

## ii

During the summer of 1933, the numbers of adults, old people and children roaming around the aul asking for charity and food increased by the day. They were grateful even for a handful of grain (to say 'crust of bread' would be misleading, since bread was a rarity in those days, and if someone got hold of any, they kept quiet about it). Whereas in the early spring it had been unsettling to hear that some family or other had had to go without supper or breakfast, we were now facing the appalling sight of starving people with bloated bodies.

As for us, we had nearly used up our small supply of food and had no means of getting any more. Mother was not expecting any help from her sons-in-law, for Manap had a large family of his own and was not earning much, while Kairankhazi and Altynzhan had been sent off by the collective farm to a timber works somewhere far away in the *taiga*, and we had lost contact with them.

After Aiken had set off home from our aul, I started thinking more and more about our relatives in Topterek. In the end I suggested to Mother that we move there. She replied by saying that we had nobody there to go to. 'These relatives of your Father,' she continued, 'didn't help you one bit when you were with them in

the spring, so I doubt if they'll help us now. Anyway, how are we going to get there?"

A while later, however, when she was sitting at home worrying herself sick about what was going to happen to us, I repeated the suggestion. This time she kept quiet instead of objecting as before. Two or three days later she called my younger brother and me to her and asked us in a serious tone, as though we were adults, 'Do you want to go to your clan's aul?' And my younger brother and I at once shrieked in unison: 'Y-e-e-s!' 'All right,' she said, 'I'll take you to your relatives. I am not expecting to get any help or charity from them. They're not capable of such things, I know. But if you are destined to die of starvation, let it happen among your close family in your home region.'

My little brother and I were completely delighted. We were moving back home! It turned out, however, to be easier said than done.

Mother heard a rumour from a neighbouring aul about someone about to travel to Ust-Kurchum – an individual peasant farmer by the name of Shaken who owned his own horse. She went to see him and got him to agree to take us all the way there in his cart, free of charge. He was in such a hurry, however, that we did not even have time to say goodbye to our relatives.

My mother, brother and I sat in the cart while Shaken and his partner rode the two horses harnessed to it. We travelled very slowly, taking the whole day to cover between 40 and 50 kilometres. The long, bumpy journey in the heat made us all so drowsy that we boys kept nodding off to sleep – but we only managed to doze a little before the driver would wake us up again by shouting out: 'Wake up, lad! You're making it harder for the horses!'

In the late afternoon the men turned off the road and rode towards a meadow in the middle of the rushes along the bank of the Irtysh where the horses could rest and graze. Just then, two other men rode up with a cart of their own and started unharnessing their horses with the same intention as our drivers. Then they lit a fire, heaved the plump carcass of a sheep off the cart, slashed it in half and started cooking a large chunk in a cauldron. Our drivers, who turned

out to be acquaintances of theirs, began chatting with them and waiting for the meat to be cooked. They sat by the fire, talking ever more animatedly and laughing raucously, until long after they had finished eating the steaming, fatty meat.

As for us, we sat a little way away in the rushes waiting for them for what seemed like ages. All we could hear was a lot of loud noise. As we were half-starved, we could not get over the fact that these travellers were carrying fresh mutton with them on their journey and treating their friends to a feast washed down with strong alcohol, while all around us people were dying of hunger, unable to find even a scrap of food to eat. How lucky these people were! Where had they got hold of the meat, when most people had not tasted it for over a year? This is what I kept wondering.

A month later we discovered the answer. It turned out that they were agents who drove around purchasing gold and gold articles from the general public on the State's behalf. Starving people were giving away everything they had, including gold, in exchange for something to eat – and these rogues were fleecing them.

Delayed by this long halt, it was the middle of the night by the time we arrived in Ust-Kurchum. Nobody was expecting us, of course. We were just a few of the masses of people struggling to find ways and means of staying alive. We had no idea where we were going to live there, so Mother asked Shaken to take us to the lodgings we had stayed in two years previously, which was the home of the only people we knew in the aul. Not daring to wake up the house's owner, Akhat Sabitov, we sat outside in his yard until morning. The man, God bless him, gave in to our pleas and let us stay for a while in his winter cowshed. Mother regarded this as the act of a true Muslim.

### iii

Now that we had reached Ust-Kurchum, Mother was in no hurry to move to Father's family aul, and did not even inform our relatives of our arrival – though she was sure that the news would

reach them instantly by word of mouth. She explained her decision like this:

‘We are in mourning for the head of our family, and so it’s not right for us to go calling on acquaintances or sending them news of ourselves. Anyone who had even a grain of respect for us or Father’s memory would come and see us first to express their condolences in the traditional way, and say a prayer with the family of the deceased. Until this happens, it would be wrong for us to try and make contact with our relatives. If they fail to behave towards us in a dutiful manner as set down by tradition, it means they no longer consider us close relatives or value us as such. It might just be, though, that they are no better off than us. Either way, we can’t expect help from them. They, of course, already know that we are here. Perhaps they’re scared of having contact with us as a kulak’s family and that’s keeping them away. As far as that goes, we really could cause your father’s relatives at Topterek some harm.’

Meanwhile, the ring of famine was growing ever tighter around us. Everywhere you looked, you could see starving people with swollen faces wandering about or, worst still, living skeletons, all skin and bones, in tattered clothing. There were corpses lying in the streets, the steppe and the roads, and the sight of them even touched the hearts of people on the verge of starvation themselves who could feel virtually nothing any more except pangs of hunger.

During the first stage of starvation and especially in the second (when the person is no more than a living skeleton), most people lose all sense of conscience and human dignity. The victim’s thoughts are concentrated entirely on getting something to eat. Moreover, they no longer care what they are eating – they are totally in thrall to the blind demands of hunger. In those days it did not take long for a respectable mother of several children to turn into a wretched old beggar; for proud young women and pretty girls to turn into skeletons and be reduced to marrying men unworthy of them; for widows to become second wives to anyone at all just to save their children, or to marry their fourteen- or fifteen-year old daughters off to someone more prosperous. Famine made people forget the traditions that made their nation so special.

But no matter how much havoc the famine was wreaking, you could still come across people who had retained their sanity and self-respect. Such people refused to give in to their instincts, and whenever they found something new to eat, they would try to eat it sparingly and with the next day in mind. In this way they kept going longer.

Fortunately, Mother was one of them. She sat us down in the cowshed and then said, as though giving a lecture: ‘This is how much food we’ve got left, and that’s all.’ She pointed at a sack with about eight kilograms of millet in it, and another with about three kilograms of half-rotten grains of wheat which we had gathered in the summer from the straw and chaff in an old stack. ‘No matter how hungry you are, you’re not to touch the millet without my permission. For the time being we are going to eat the wheat grain. When needs be, I’ll give you the millet to eat as well. If you don’t do as you are told, and if you start poking your hands in the bag of millet, you’ve got to realise, it’ll all be gone soon. And when the millet’s gone, there’ll be nothing to eat and you’ll die of starvation. Don’t forget that: you’re my clever ones.’ From that day on we had to make do with even smaller portions of half-rotten fried wheat grain. Occasionally Mother gave us a meal of watery millet porridge.

The other source of support Mother hoped to find in the area was Uncle Kozhakhmet; but as I had seen in the spring, he was hardly managing to make ends meet, and had nothing left to share with us.

So Mother started looking for job openings – another reason why she had agreed to move to Ust-Kurchum. She looked for work as a boiler stoker, cleaner and home help. She managed to find the odd vacancy, but as soon as her prospective employers found out that she was from a kulak’s family, they refused to take her on. Wherever she went, she took me with her as her ‘interpreter and secretary’. I remember going with her to Berdikhozh Kalybayev, the chairman of the Topterek collective farm where people from our aul were now living, and him saying to us: ‘We aren’t allowed to take a kulak’s family into our collective farm. We could only do

so if we were to get a letter of authorisation from the regional authorities.'

So off we went to the regional executive committee with a written request to be taken into the collective farm, since we had been left without the head of our family, a kulak now deceased. The chairman returned it at once with the following comment written on it in red ink: 'To be decided by the collective farm's management and collective farmers' general council.'

We took this reply to the collective farm chairman; but he was illiterate, so he handed it over to his secretary to read. When he had heard what it contained, he exclaimed, 'It says you're not to be allowed in! Of course, you should join some collective farm: the regular grain rations would help you get by until the new harvest. But we can't take you into ours. If I was to admit you, I'd be given the sack and even prosecuted. I want to stay alive too, and I've got children of my own. I'm sorry. No offence meant.'

By this time we had only one kilogram of food left, and were in serious danger of dying of starvation. But, constantly searching for ways out of our dilemma, Mother at last managed to find a small and not very reliable means of income to tide us over. One of her acquaintances had tipped her off that some of the regional office workers liked to buy bunches of hops to use as yeast when they baked bread, and bundles of birch twigs to beat themselves with at the steam baths. As soon as she found out about this, she took us both off to pick hops. After picking a sack of them the first day, we carried it back to Ust-Kurchum and then walked from door to door offering it for sale. A woman took the whole sack in exchange for half a round loaf, which was a lot of food during a famine. The bread made a meal for the three of us. It also gave us hope that we might be able to survive and cheered us up immensely.

Encouraged by this, we carried on. We would go out in the morning and get back to town towards the evening, walking from house to house in search of customers; and whenever we found one, instead of asking for money, we took whatever food they offered us in exchange.

Every day we had to walk across the turbulent River Kurchum to and from the place where we picked the hops. It was a dangerous crossing, and Mother and I used to hold onto my younger brother's hands and wade across the fast-flowing mountain river, nearly up to our waists in water. On our way across on the third day, Mukhametrakhim somehow slipped out of our grasp, and we only just managed to catch hold of him to save him being swept down-river. From then on Mother stopped taking him with us, leaving him in the aul all on his own as there was nobody to look after him. That was also quite a risky thing to do, and Mother spent the whole day fretting about him. However, she had no choice: we could still very easily starve to death.

When it came to the bartering, it was the men who tended to be difficult. They would say to their wives, 'What do you need them for? You haven't got any flour to make bread with, have you?' In the end, though, the women would often talk them round and take our wares.

What we got in return depended on people's generosity. One day Mother hurried home instead of taking the hops round the houses as usual and got me to do it. I managed to find a customer in the very first house I tried on the edge of town. As soon as I called out in Russian, as I had been taught, the owner of the house appeared, took one look at the hops and invited me inside. His wife started haranguing him, but he ignored her objections and went over to a trunk, raised its lid slightly, took out a brick of tea and handed it to me. I left in a hurry in case the woman made him change his mind.

On my way home, I kept thinking about the deal I had just struck and worrying over it. All I had got was a brick of tea – and not even a full brick, since it had a corner missing. Would Mother be angry with me for accepting it instead of food?

When I handed it to Mother, however, she cried out in delight, 'Oibai-ai, what a gem! It's a gift from God! Do you know how much this brick is worth? The same as a man's wages for two weeks' work!' Tea it turned out, was a much sought-after commodity: it was not usually for sale on the open market, and even if it did appear, ordinary people could not afford to buy it.

One of the few places it was available was a ‘closed’ shop – known locally as ‘Dvadstatka’, from the Russian word for twenty – which was set up and run purely for the region’s twenty most senior officials. The men were supplied on a regular basis with all the different goods and food products they needed, so they never knew what it was like to feel hungry. It should be said, however, that it was not their fault that they did not have either the financial resources or the authority to help the victims of the famine: everything was in the hands of the Soviet Government. Even the Government of the Kazakh Autonomous Republic did not have the authority to resolve all the problems involved.

Unfortunately, our hop business came to an end after only ten days: we could find no more customers, and we had pulled all the hops off the bushes within walking distance of Ust-Kurchum. So we started making bundles of birch twigs and bartering them instead. They were harder to carry than the hops, but they kept us going for another week, getting one meal at a time. Our goal was to survive until the new harvest, which was now not very far off: the collective farmers would then have something to eat, and something or other was bound to come our way as well.

The scene that greeted us as we sold our goods from door to door was a harrowing one. Wherever we went, we came across starving people begging for crumbs as they wandered along. Some of them would even ask us for food.

Besides feeling permanently hungry, a starving person gets extremely thirsty and drinks a lot of fluid. This soon causes swellings on his face and then over the rest of his body. After a week or two, depending on his food intake, the swellings go down and he is just skin and bones. He will not last long without a minimum amount of nutrition. If he gets it, he may survive for a matter of months.

Small children and older people always die of starvation first, because when they are weak their resistance to all sorts of illnesses is lower. Starving children develop potbellies and wrinkled faces and looking increasingly like old dwarves on spindly little legs; eventually they grow so weak that they can no longer walk, and

have to remain lying down all the time. It is terrible watching a baby who is too exhausted to cry any more, and makes strange little sounds instead; it is terrible watching his suffering before he dies, and the despair of his mother, helpless to do anything to save him.

Dying is never easy, but starving to death is extremely painful. A person suffers both physically and mentally, for it takes a long time to die, and he is constantly anticipating his own end. And yet it causes starving people even more pain and suffering to watch their loved ones die than to experience death themselves: they suffer not only because they are unable to help, but because they are too weak to bury the body of their loved one. May God prevent anything like this ever happening in our country again!

Mother advised the beggars we met to follow our example and find something to do in exchange for food; but though they used to nod their heads, they would then go on begging just as before. Hunger had caused them to lose their reason.

Not until much later did it come home to me that in 1931-34, when millions of people were dying of starvation in Kazakhstan and other parts of the USSR, the Soviet Government was still pursuing its policy to industrialise the country with reckless and ruthless intransigence. All public capital, State gold reserves and other revenue went on buying foreign equipment for major construction projects. If only the authorities had put a temporary halt to this and helped the victims of the famine instead! But no, our 'people's' Government had to live up to the slogans it had invented to speed up the industrialisation process.

When you look at archival documents relating to those tragic years, you can see how much public money was spent not only on industry, but also on endless conferences attended by thousands upon thousands of people all over the Soviet Union. The funds squandered on these alone would have been sufficient to save many lives. Tragically, however, our leaders were more concerned about receiving accolades from Party delegates than they were about the deaths of working people.