## Chapter Two

## The Early Life of Dambijantsan

The accounts of the Diluv Khutagt, Maisky, the Roerichs, and others who either knew Dambijantsan or gathered information from those who did provided the basic details of what is known about his life. The findings of later researchers who had access to Mongolian and Russian archives, including a biography of Dambijantsan by Russian historian Inessa Lomakina entitled *Golova Dja-Lamy (Head of the Ja Lama)* offered still more information. Armed with these sources, I was ready to begin my own investigations into the life of Dambijantsan. It was not, however, until after I had done considerable research of my own on the ground in Mongolia that I was able to visit the purported birthplace of Dambijantsan, the so-called Malo-Dörböt (Little Dörböt) ulus of what in the nineteenth-century was the province of Astrakhan, part of Czarist Russia. This region is now located in the Republic of Kalmykia, part of the Russian Federation, on the west side of the lower Volga River.

By an odd concatenation of circumstances I was able to visit Kalmykia under the auspices of the Kalmyk lama Telo Tulku Rinpoche, who is recognized as the current incarnation of the afore mentioned Diluv Khutagt, whose memoirs were my main written source of information about Dambijantsan. Telo Tulku Rinpoche, a.k.a. Eddy Ombadykow, was born in Philadephia, Pennsylvania, in 1972, the child of Kalmyk immigrants who had settled in the United States after World War II. Ethnically he is a Dörböt, a sub-division of the Kalmyks, the same tribe to which Dambijantsan belonged. As a boy he became a monk and studied in a monastery in South India from the age of seven to twenty-one. Eventually he was recognized as the reincarnation of the Diluv Khutagt by the 14th Dalai Lama himself. Although no longer an ordained monk—he now has

a wife and child—he currently holds the title of Shajin Lama, the highest ranking Buddhist hierarch in Kalmykia. In his role as the leader of Kalmykia's Buddhists he oversees the largest Buddhist temple in Europe, the magnificent Golden Süm, located in Elista, the capital of Kalmykia, and numerous other temples throughout Kalmykia.

He has also made several trips to Mongolia and is involved in various projects to promote Buddhism in the country of his previous incarnation. On his last day of his 2008 visit he hosted a small luncheon at the Indian restaurant in the Puma Imperial Hotel in Ulaan Baatar. Telo Tulku Rinpoche proved to be quite approachable and friendly, and he immediately recognized from my accent that we were fellow Pennsylvanians. At the first opportunity I questioned him about Dambijantsan. He said while he had heard various tales and legends of a fanciful nature about his putative fellow Dörböt he admitted that he knew very little if anything concrete about his life. Although he had paged through the Diluv Khutagt's book in a library he had not read the whole thing and was unaware that his previous incarnation had written about Dambijantsan. The man sitting to my right, overhearing our conversation about Dambijantsan, now chose to introduce himself to me. His name was Khongor Badmaevich, and it turned out he was the Vice-Chairman of the People's Parliament of the Republic of Kalmykia. He is a Torgut, one of the other ethnic groups which make up the Kalmyk people. Somewhat to my surprise he seemed quite familiar with the basic outlines of the life of Dambijantsan. He even asked if I was a disciple of the Dambijantsan, the Ja Lama! I said no, I was not a disciple of Dambijantsan; I was unaware that Dambijantsan currently had disciples—he was of course dead—and that in any case I was approaching his life strictly from an historical point-of-view. I asked if it was possible to come to Kalmykia and continue these historical investigations. "No problem," said, Mr. Badmaevich, "I will have the Parliament of Kalmykia issue you an official invitation to visit Telo Tulku Rinpoche for the purpose of cultural exchange."

Thus armed with a Russian visa obtained with this invitation I winged westward from Ulaan Baatar to Moscow, where I caught a flight south to Volgograd, on the Volga River. Stepping out into the main lobby of the Volgograd airport I was greeted by a young Kalmyk man holding a sign with my name on it. I quickly discovered that he does not speak English. He told me in Russian that his name was Genan. He had been dispatched by Telo Tulku Rinpoche with orders to deliver me up in Elista, the capital

of Kalmykia, 160 miles to the south. Outside in the parking lot we met another Kalmyk named Savr, a big, hulking guy who looks like a Mongolian wrestler, and we piled into his car, a new, spotlessly clean Toyota Corolla.

Volgograd is of course the former Stalingrad, where on the vast plains surrounding the city the Soviet Red Army had cornered the Germany army during World War II and dealt it a defeat from which Nazi Germany never recovered. The name of the city has been changed but no one has been allowed to forgot what happened here. Billboards in the old—and now newly popular—Socialist Realism style proclaim the upcoming celebration of the anniversary of the Soviet victory. One large billboard announces: "Volgograd: City of Heroes." Apparently we missed the city center but the environs extend for miles. It took a good hour to drive through the suburbs and small villages surrounding the city. Beyond the villages lay vast cultivated fields, the horizon disappearing beyond the curvature of the earth. The road is straight, flat, and in reasonably good condition, and the lead-footed driver soon has the Corolla cruising along at ninety miles an hour. Almost imperceptibly the cultivated fields start grading into mixed farm lands and pasture until finally the countryside turns to uninterrupted grasslands.

Probably not by accident the border of Kalmykia is near where the steppe takes over completely. Russians are people of the plowed land; Kalmyks are people of the steppe. Just across the border, near Barmantsk Lake, is the small town of Malo-Dörböt, a reminder of the old Malo-Dörböt administrative district that existed here in Dambijantsan's day. For two hours we drive through the perfectly flat, now-green steppe, the monotonous landscape interrupted only by an occasional pond or small lake ringed with tall reeds. We see no gers, the tents of nomadic herders so common in Mongolia, and very little livestock. Except for few tiny villages we pass through the land seems deserted. Yet this region, known as the Pontic-Caspian Steppe, is steeped in history. According to historian Michael Khodarkovsky it is a "pastoral El Dorado, glorified in songs and epics of many nomadic people . . ."[1]

We are about a hundred miles west of the Volga, Europe's largest river by length, volume of water, and area of watershed, and the main artery leading into the very heart of Russia. The immense Pontic-Caspian Steppe, which flanks the lower Volga on either side, covering almost 400,000 square miles, an area two-thirds the size of Mongolia itself, is one of the

cradles of Mankind. Four thousand years ago it was inhabited by the near-mythical Indo-Aryans, who according to some theories, admittedly controversial, went on to to conquer and colonize the Indian sub-continent. Later came the Scythians, fierce tribesmen who with their fabulous hordes of golden jewelry and ornaments continue to excite imaginations up to the present day; then Sarmatians, Goths, Bugars, the Huns of Attila, and the Avars, proto-Mongols who had migrated west from their original homeland of what is now Mongolia in the fifth or sixth century. From the seventh to tenth centuries A.D. the steppe was dominated by the Khazars, a mostly Turkic people who founded an empire here and eventually embraced Judaism as a state religion. Then came the Magyars, forerunners of the Hungarian people, and the nomadic Pechenegs, Kipchaks, and Cumans. With the ascendancy of the Mongol Empire in the thirteenth century Chingis Khan's grandson Batu, leader of the Golden Horde, conquered the region, establishing his capital at Serai, on the Volga River southeast of current-day Volgograd, in the 1240s. Around this time the city of Xacitarxan was founded on the Volga Delta, near where it runs into the Caspian Sea, just a few miles north of the current city of Astrakhan. In 1395 Amir Temur, a.k.a. Tamurlane, the Sword of Islam and Scourge of God, stormed through and burned the city of Xacitarxan to the ground. With the collapse of the Golden Horde in the mid-1400s the Astrakhan Khanate, founded by Qasim I and peopled by Tatar and Nogai tribesmen, was established on the lower Volga, with the rebuilt city of Xacitarxan as its capital. In 1556 Ivan the Terrible of Russia conquered the lower Volga valley and established a fortress, or *kremlin*, at the current site of Astrakhan city, just south of the old city of Xacitarxan. Armies of the Ottoman Empire armies invaded the lower Volga in the 1560s and in 1569 invested the city of Astrakhan. They were soon forced to retreat, and in 1570 the Ottoman Sultan acknowledged Russian control of the lower Volga River. From then on the Volga, the longest river in Europe, became an entirely Russian waterway. The last nomadic people to arrive on the Pontic-Caspian Steppes, then under the nominal control of Russia, were Oirats, or Western Mongolia, who then became known as Kalmyks. One sub-group of the Kalmyks, the Little Dörböts, lived here on these steppes which I was now barreling through at ninety miles an hour.

As we have seen, Pozdneev as far back as 1892 stated that Dambijantsan was a Kalmyk of the Little Dörböt tribe, a descendant of the Ori-

ats who had originally migrated to the Caspian Steppe back in the early seventeenth century. But even this simple fact about Dambijantsan's life would later be obscured behind a welter of myths. In 1926 Owen Lattimore was told by caravan men on the Winding Road caravan route that Dambijantsan was variously a "a true Mongol" (i.e., Khalkh or Eastern Mongol), a Russian, or a Buryat from Siberia. "The most substantial story of all," opined Lattimore, "is that he a Chinese from Manchuria who had served in Mongolia as a herder of ponies for the princely firm of Ta Sheng K'uei."[2] He also relates that one of the things most remembered about Dambijantsan by those who had known or at least seen him was his habit of changing his dress every day or so from Russian to Mongolian to Chinese and back again. This constant changing of his clothes could only have added to the confusion about his origins.

Dambijantsan himself once told A. V. Burdukov that he was a Khalkh Mongol born at a place called Ashigkhorgyn Chuluu in the old Tüsheet Khan Aimag. That Burdukov, who spoke Mongolian, apparently believed this story was strange, since several other people who knew Dambijantsan commented that he spoke the Khalkh dialect of the Mongolian language very poorly. Even to this day people in Gov-Altai Aimag remember stories about Dambijantsan's poor command of the Khalkh dialect and his use of the words from the Kalmyk or Western Mongolian form of the Mongolian language. (The Diluv Khutagt dissented: "Although he came from the Volga, he spoke the Khalkh dialect very well."[3]) Later evidence, including letters written by Dambijantsan himself, would seem to confirm that he was indeed a Kalmyk. One source maintains that he was born near the town of Aidarkhan, somewhere on the west bank of the Volga. but again the origins of this information is unclear.[4]

Yet doubts persists. The Russian historian Inessa Lomakina, author of the Russian language biography of Dambijantsan, did extensive research in the archives of the Soviet Academy of Sciences about Dambijantsan and was able to locate a census of all Kalmyks living in the Malo-Dörböt district of the Astrakhan *Gubernia* in the mid-nineteenth century. Searching for all known variants of Dambijantsan's name she was unable to come up with any information about him or his family. "The conclusion which suggests itself," she wrote, "was that either Ja Lama (Dambijantsan) wasn't from this region or that he had changed his name."[5] She added that in 1914, after Dambijantsan had been arrested in Mongolia, the governor of Astrakhan *Gubernia* had been ordered by Russian officials to find out

if Dambijantsan was, as he was then claiming, a Dörböt from Russia, but even he had not been able to determine if the errant lama's story was true.

Of course, all the names which our subject used may have been aliases, which would account for why no trace of him or his family could be found in the Little Dörböt ulus. "Dambijantsan" is a Mongolian name said to be based on the Tibetan words for "standard-bearer." George Roerich claims this name was rendered from the Tibetan "Ten-pei Jal-tsen (bsTsan-pa'I rgyal-mtshan)" but goes on to say that Dambijantsan's real name was "Pal-den (dPal-den)"[6] It has been suggested that "Dambijantsan" was a monastic name, given to our subject after he began his monastic career.[7] Other sources state that his given name in Mongolian was Davaasambuu.[8] Dambijantsan himself told Burdukov that his real name was Dawa, which may be just a shortened version of Davaasambuu.

But while Dambijantsan was ethnically Mongolian, he was born in Russia and was nominally a Russian citizen. Thus he reportedly also had the Russian, or at least semi-Russian, name of Amur Sanaev. This name would appear to be nothing more than a Russianized form of "Amarsanaa." As we shall see, Amarsanaa was the Oirat chieftain who had led the last great Mongol revolt against the Qing Dynasty in the 1750s. Dambijantsan would eventually claim to be a descendant of Amarsanaa, and still later his reincarnation. That he was an actual lineal descendant of the Oirat chieftain seems highly unlikely, and a reincarnation a matter of speculation. If he was not related to Amarsanaa, it is really possible, as one Russian researcher maintains, that he was born into a family named Sanaev and given the name "Amur"?[9] The coincidence seems too great. Or was this just another alias chosen to further enhance his connection with the illustrious Amarsanaa, who according to legend would return and once again lead the Mongols in revolt against the Qing oppressors? In any case, both in the 1990s and as late as 1914 Dambijantsan was known to Russians in Mongolia as Amur Sanaev.[10] He also traveled under the Russian alias Ichinnorov and was said to use the Tibetan aliases of Dawa Shabrong, Shiret Lama, and She-rap Lama. After arriving in Mongolia in the early 1890s he would acquire a whole host of Mongolian aliases and nicknames.

Dambijantsan's age is also a matter of dispute. His contemporaries had no clear idea of how old he was. Like the notorious Count St. Germain of eighteenth century Europe Dambijantsan had the curious trait of appearing ageless. The Diluv Khutagt, who knew him for a period of over thirty

years, says simply, "No one knew his real age. No one knew the real truth about him."[11] A. M. Pozdneev, writing in 1892, noted that Dambijantsan "was about thirty or forty years old."[12] Yet A. V. Burdukov, who would become very well acquainted with Dambijantsan, stated that when he first met him, some twenty years later in 1912, "He looked a little over forty."[13] If we are believe these accounts it would appear that Dambijantsan aged very little between 1891 and 1912. These discrepancies in his appearance would cause some to speculate that there was more than one Dambijantsan, and that some witnesses had confused the various characters who had assumed his name. Indeed, as we shall see several impostors did eventually appear in Mongolia, all claiming to be Dambijantsan.

After his death various researchers would claim that the Dambijantsan was born in 1860, although the actual source of this information is never quite clear.[14] One Mongolian scholar, apparently using a comment of Dambijantsan's on the astrological details of his birth, would claim he was born in 1862.[15] Lacking any more concrete information we will use 1860 as the probable date of his birth. This would make him thirty years old when he first arrived in Mongolia in 1890, fifty-two when he took part in the siege of Khovd in 1912, and sixty-two at the time of his assassination in 1922.

We arrive in Elista, the capital of Kalmykia, about three and a half hours after leaving Volgograd. The city is located in a depression in the otherwise level steppe. Its population is said to be just over 100,000. My first impression is of surprisingly clean, tidy, tree-lined streets backed by modest two and three story apartment houses. Telo Tulku Rinpoche's monastery has a guest apartment but at the moment it is unavailable, so I am taken to small three-story hotel on quiet side street lined with trees and lilac bushes in full bloom.

The next morning a young monk named Andzha whom I had met earlier in Mongolia called and said that Telo Rinpoche had been in India but he had just arrived yesterday with his teacher, the head of Drepung Gomang Monastery in southern India. At noon there will be a greeting ceremony for the Drepung Tripa, the official title of the lama from India, at the Golden Temple. The Rinpoche will be able to speak to me in his office beforehand. An hour later Andzha picks me up in his battered old Toyota and we proceed directly to the Golden Temple.

Buddhism had been largely stamped out in Kalmykia during the com-

munist era, but in the 1990s there was a resurgence of interest among the Kalmyks. During his visit to Elista in 1998 the Fourteen Dalai Lama, hoping to revitalize Buddhism in Kalmykia and at the same time establish a beachhead in Europe, chose a location for a new temple not far from the city center. The six-story, lavishly appointed structure was finally opened in December of 2005. As noted it is the largest Buddhist temple in Europe.

Andzha drives in the private entrance at the back of the monastery and after removing our shoes in the first floor entry hall we take an elevator to the fourth floor where Telo Rinpoche has his residence and office. From the elevator we step into a large room which at first glance seems to contain an enormous Buddhist-oriented craps table. But no, it is in fact an immense conference table, seating twenty-four, with a mandala embedded in the middle of it. Andzha adds that the main temple hall is directly below this room, and that the bottom side of the mandala, painted with the same design, can be seen in the ceiling of the hall. All the prayers offered in the main temple ascend through the mandala, he says, and concentrate themselves here in this conference room. Telo Tulku Rinpoche's luxurious office is off to one side of this awe-inspiring conference room. The redolence odor of rancid butter, mutton fat, and juniper incense common to temples in Mongolia, some of which have not felt a broom since before the fall of the Qing Dynasty, is noticeably absent here.

The Telo Rinpoche, the latest in a line of incarnations going back to Mangala, one of the original disciples of the Buddha, and including the last Diluv Khutagt of Mongolia, greets me warmly. He must meet the Drepung Tripa shortly but he says that afterward he will give me a guided tour of the temple. In the meantime what can he do for me? I tell him that I would like to talk to historians who might know something about Dambijantsan, who was born here in Kalmykia and who, in some circles at least, is considered an incarnation of one the Eighty-Four Mahasiddis of India, in Dambijantsan's case the mahasiddi known as Güwari. One of Telo Tulku Rinpoche's previous incarnations, Tilopa, was thought to be one of the original Eighty-Four Mahasiddis. The Rinpoche summons his secretary and instructs her to call one of the local research institutes and track anyone who can shed some light on the up-until-now shadowy existence of Dambijantsan here in Kalmykia.

We then take the elevator downstairs where the reception for the Drepung Tripa is just beginning. The Drepung Tripa, who appears to be in

his sixties, enters the temple bestowing his blessings on all those who approach him. He is the head of Drepung Gomang Monastery in southern India, which was founded by Tibetans who fled Tibet after the Chinese invasion of 1959 and named after Drepung Monastery in Tibet. Gomang was one of the several colleges at Drepung in Lhasa and the one attended by most Mongolian monks who studied in Tibet. Zanabazar (1635–1723), the first of the eight Bogd Gegeen of Mongolia and a famed artist and polymath, stayed at Gomang during his visits to Mongolia. Many other famous Mongolian lamas studied here, including Agvan Dorzhiev, the Buryat Mongol who eventually became a tutor to the 13th Dalai and who accompanied the Dalai Lama to Mongolia in 1904 when the latter fled Tibet after the invasion of the Younghusband Expedition. Dambijantsan also reportedly attended Gomang College at Drepung, at which time he may have met Dorjieff. In any case, Dambijantsan's stay at Drepung ended disasterously, as we shall soon see.

The next morning a young Kalmyk named Chogdor Sandjiev picks me up at my hotel and we proceed by car to the Kalmyk Institute of Humanistic Studies. In the small library of the institute we are met by another Kalmyk in his twenties with a long ponytail and a *mala* wrapped around his wrist. His name is Bem. He is a student at the institute and is very fluent in English. He in turn introduces me to a short, stocky woman who must be in her seventies. She is in charge of research in the library, and she says the library has an extensive collection of materials about Dambijantsan. She is in the process of digging out the relevant documents and will have them ready in half an hour.

Bem, Chogdor, and I proceed upstairs to the office of B. A. Bicheev, a professor at the institute. An stern looking man in this forties, he abrupty asks, "Why are you interested in Dambijantsan?" and without waiting for an answer adds, "Are you with the CIA?" Fifteen years ago, when I first lived in Russia, it was de rigueur to ask every American if they were CIA agents but this has gotten a bit old hat by now. "No," I reply, "and in any case, I don't think the CIA is interested in Dambijantsan."

"Well, I don't think Dambijantsan was a Kalmyk anyhow," he says. I allow that Inessa Lomakina, author of the book *The Head of the Ja Lama*, had thoroughly searched local records and archives in Kalmykia and had come up with nothing about Dambijantsan's family or birthplace, but add that there is a host of peripheral and anecdotal data indicating that he was a Kalmyk of the Dörböt tribe. Why do you think he was not a Kalmyk?

I ask the professor.

"Well, it is well known that Dambijantsan lived in Astrakhan in 1917, after he was released from prison in Siberia," he says. "Astrakhan was a very difficult and dangerous place to live at time. If he had relatives in the countryside he would have gone and stayed with them. But he didn't. So I don't think he had any relatives here, and therefore was not a Kalmyk."

This argument does not sound entirely convincing to me. Moving on, I point out that Dambijantsan was allegedly born near a town or village named Aidarkhan and ask the professor if he knows of any such place. Aidarkhan, he says, and Chogdor and Bem concur, is just the Kalmyk name for Astrakhan, the ancient city near the mouth of the Volga River. None of them are aware of any town named Aidarkhan in the territory of Kalmykia. I suspect that the sources which say Dambijantsan was born in Aidarkhan (Astrakhan) meant that he was born in the province of Astrakhan, in which the Malo-Dörböt district was located in the nineteenth century. When I mention that I might go to the city of Astrakhan from Elista the professor exclaims, "Why do you want to go to Astrakhan? Do you work for the CIA?"

Changing the subject, I ask him if he knows anything about Inessa Lomikina's current whereabouts. I had attempted to track down information about her on the internet but had been unable to find anything. He says she died two or three years ago. This was sad, but intriguing. How old was she, I wondered, and of what did she die? The professor did not know. I added that there was a legend in Mongolia that anyone who tried to write about the life of Dambijantsan either did not succeed or came to a bad end. "I know about this," said the professor. "Lomakina herself wrote in an article that she prayed that she would be allowed to finish her book without anything bad happening to her." Also, Lomakina told of a Russian in Mongolia who in the 1920s gathered masses of material about Dambijantsan in view of writing a biography only to be arrested and later perish in a GULAG. His research materials disappeared without a trace. Then there was the German guy who spent twenty years amassing material for a movie about Dambijantsan. In the end the movie was never made . . .

There seemed little point in pursuing the discussion with Professor Bicheev. We went back down to the library where we were greeted by the elderly woman in charge. I had visions of a mass of unpublished manuscripts, records, and other virgin documents and was somewhat deflated

when I saw the pile of books she had gathered together. Most them were well known sources which I had already studied. There was Burdukov's *Old and New Mongolia*, one of the best sources of material about Dambijantsan, but which I have in my own Scriptorium in Mongolian as well as the original Russian edition; Maisky's 1919 *Modern Mongolia*, which I have in English translation; the original Russian edition of Pozdneev's *Mongolia and the Mongols*, which I also have in English translation; several scholarly journals with articles by Lomakina, and a few other items, most of which I had either already seen or was aware of. It's soon clear that there is nothing really new here. I thanked the kindly old woman for digging out the materials and we made our exit.

The doubts of Professor Bicheev and the lack of collaberative information in the nineteenth century census reports notwithstanding, it would appear from most other available materials that Dambijantsan was a Kalmyk from what is now Kalmykia. At the very least, the people who knew him best, including Diluv Khutagt, believed he was a Kalmyk from the Volga region. Since by the time he was born Russia had asserted full control over the area he also would have been a Russian citizen, a factor which was to play a crucial role in his life. Yet he always identified with the Oirats, or Western Mongols, from whom the Kalmyks had originated, and would eventually assert that his real homeland, the land of his ancestors, was the traditional territories of the Oirats in western Mongolia and northwest China.

How the people who became known as Kalmyks, originally nomads from Inner Asia, ended up in Europe as citizens of the Russian Empire, on the steppes straddling the Volga River north of the Caspian Sea, is a fascinating tale in itself. The saga of the Kalmyks is part of the larger story of the conflict between the Eastern Mongols of Chingis Khan and his Chingisid descendants and the Western, or Oirat, Mongols. The roots of this story go back to the thirteen century when a basic division took place between the Chingisid Mongols and the Mongols who became known as Oirats.

The Oirats were originally a forest people who dwelt in the taiga and mixed steppe-woodlands west of Lake Baikal, around Lake Khövsgöl to the south, and the basins of the upper tributaries of the Yenisei River still farther west. Their name might be based on the Mongolian word oi, which means "forest." We first hear of the Oirats in the *Yüan Chi*, or *History of the Yüan Dynasty*, where they are called *Wei-la* or *Wa-i-la*. Other

thirteenth century documents refer them as the *Oira* or *Wan Oira*.[16] The Persian historian Rashid-al-din (1247–1318) referred to the Oirats by name and said they lived in the basins of the eight rivers which combine to form the Yenisei River.[17] These would include the Biy Khem and Ka Khem in what is now the republic of Tuva, the Shishigt Gol and its tributaries west of Lake Khövsgöl in Mongolia, and others. The *Yüan Chi* and Rashid-al-Din both report further that in 1204 the Oirat joined with the Naiman, a tribe which lived in the northwest of current-day Mongolia, and fought against Chingis Khan. This venture failed and in 1208 they submitted to Chingis, under whose his banner they then served as auxiliaries in the great military campaigns of the Chingisid Mongols. Later, in 1260–64, they sided with the rebellion of Arig Boga against Chingis's grandson and founder of the Yüan Dynasty Khubilai. After the defeat of Arig Boga they remained more or less subordinate to the Chingisids until after the fall of the Yüan Dynasty and the expulsion of the Mongols from China in 1368.

The Chingisids, shorn of their Chinese empire, regrouped around their old capital of Kharkhorum on the Orkhon River. In 1372 and again in 1388, huge armies mustered by the Ming, who had replaced the Mongols as rulers of the Celestial Empire, crossed the Gobi Desert into Mongolia, hoping to stamp out any chance of a Chingisid revival. The 1388 invasion, consisting of over 100,000 Chinese troops, crushed the Mongols in a decisive battle south of Lake Buir in current-day Dornod Aimag, after which the reigning khan, Töqüz Temür, was assassinated by a disgruntled relative. In 1399 an Oirat commander killed one of the successors to Töqüz Temür, an event which signaled the decline of the Chingisid Mongols and the ascension of the Oirats.

Yet for the Mongols as a whole the rise of the Oirats posed a problem. According to the unwritten laws of the steppe only a Chingisid, a descendant of Chingis Khan, could be anointed as Great Khan. This stricture was so inviolate that even the great Amir Temur (Tamerlane), whose military exploits rivaled those of Chingis himself, never dared to assume the title of Great Khan but instead tried to legitimize his rule in the eyes of his followers by marrying the Chingisid princess Saray Mulkkhanum, the daughter of Khazan, the last ruler of the Chagatai Khanate founded by Chagatai, Chingis's second son.[18] Thus the Eastern Chingisid Mongols considered themselves to be the only legitimate rulers of the Mongolian people and viewed the Oirats as upstarts and usurpers who

must forever remain their subordinates. Yet the Oirats would soon throw up great leaders who created empires which rivaled and surpassed the power of the Eastern Mongols. They would attack China itself and even dreamed of restoring the Yüan Dynasty which the Eastern Mongols had allowed to crumble away in their hands.

By 1434 the Oirat chieftain Toghan, after half a century of internecine Mongol warfare, had melded the four main tribes—the Torgut, Dörböt, Khoshut, and Choros (sometimes known as the Khoit) of Western Mongols into the first Oirat Empire. At its height in the mid-fifteenth century the Oirat realm stretched from Lake Baikal west to Lake Balkhash in what is now Kazakhstan, and from Baikal south to the Great Wall of China. Included in the empire was much of current-day Mongolia and the Zungarian Basin, the slopes of the Tian Shan, and the oasis city of Hami in what is now the Chinese province of Xinjiang. In the early 1440s Toghan's son Esen assumed control of the Oirat Empire. Although the ruler of a huge swatch of Inner Asia, as an Oirat he could not claim to be the Great Khan of all the Mongols. In an effort to legitimize his rule Esen married off his daughter to Toghto-Bukha, a descendant of Chingis Khan, who then assumed the more-or-less ceremonial title of khan, while Esen ruled as hegemon. Soon he would challenge the Ming dynasty itself.

The immediate source of conflict was over trade relations. The Oirats wanted free and open trade with China, while the Ming Dynasty rulers tended to consider commercial relations with the so-called barbarians of the steppe as beneath them.[19] (One Ming emperor's distain for the nomads to the north went so far that he issued an order that the Chinese characters for "barbarian" be written as small as possible in all official records.[20]) Also, according to one source, Esen was promised a Ming princess as a wife by the Ming emperor Yingzong. When the bride was not forthcoming Esen used this as a pretext to invade China.[21]

The twenty-one year-old emperor Yingzong thirsted for military glory, and under the baleful influence of a court eunuch named Wang Zhen he unwisely decided to himself lead an army into battle and confront the Mongols before they could reach Beijing. On August 4, 1449, the Ming army with Yingzong at its head left the capital and headed west toward Datong. After sixteen days it became apparent that the badly organized and ill-equipped force was incapable of confronting the Oirats under Esen. A retreat was ordered, but on September 1 Esen's forces cornered

the Ming army at a place called Tumu, sixty some miles north of Beijing and twenty-five miles or so beyond the Great Wall in what is now Hubei Province. Almost the entire army of 50,000 Chinese was annihilated, and most humiliatingly of all emperor Yingzong was taken prisoner. His advisor the eunuch Wang Zhen was cut down on the field of battle, according to one version of the story dispatched by disgruntled Chinese soldiers who realized too late they had been led like sheep to the slaughter.[22]

A month or two later Esen was camped in the suburbs of Beijing. Although adept at steppe warfare he was unable to master the siege tactics necessary to overpower the walled and fortified capital. His royal hostage was of no help either. Yingzong's younger brother Prince Cheng had assumed the vacant throne and taken the title of Jingtai Emperor. Esen had hoped to gain great concessions in return for the person of Yingzong but now the Ming court was in no hurry to get him back. After Ming reinforcements from other cities began converging on Beijing and the Mongol horses had eaten most of the available grass around the capital Esen decided to return to the more hospitable steppes of Mongolia. Eventually Esen released Yingzong, but upon the latter's return to Beijing he was placed under virtual house arrest in an out-of-the-way palace in the southeast corner of the Forbidden City and ignored, while his younger brother continued to rule. Yingzong did eventually retake his throne, but the details of these events are outside the scope of our narrative.

For a brief moment while the Oirats were camped outside Beijing it appeared that Esen was about to retake the throne of China lost by the Chingisids in 1368 and install a new version of the Yüan Dynasty. Esen's success was short-lived however. He had not been able to take Beijing, had not received the anticipated massive ransom for Yingzong, and in fact had very little to show in the way of plunder for his great victory on the battlefield at Tumu. Yet he had become so emboldened by his military feat that in 1453 he had his Chingisid son-in-law assassinated and he himself assumed the title of Great Khan of all the Mongols. As an Oirat he had no right to make such a claim; some considered him an usurper and in 1455 he himself was assassinated by disgruntled Mongols. The Oirat Empire depended on large part on the person of Esen, and with him gone it rapidly began to disintegrate.

The Eastern Mongols, who as descendants of Chingis Khan claimed to be the only legitimate rulers of Mongolia, were still in the throes of a long

period of internal strife. Mandagul Khan, the twenty-seventh successor of Chingis Khan, was killed in a struggle with his great-nephew Bolkho, and after Bolkho himself was assassinated his five year-old son Dayan was place on the throne. Khan Mandagul's widow Mandukhai took the little boy under her wing and acting as his de-facto regent assumed command herself of the Mongol armies. Later she took the extraordinary step of marrying him, the son of the great-nephew of her deceased husband, thus making herself *khatun*, or queen of the Eastern Mongols. Under the leadership of *Khatun* Mandukhai —now a much revered and venerated figure in Mongolian history—the Eastern Mongols were able to subdue the then disorganized Oirats and by the 1490s reassert the supremacy of the Chingisids. "It is to her that tradition gives credit for having overthrown Oirat supremacy and restored the hegemony to the eastern Mongols," proclaims historian of the steppes René Grousset.[23]

Dayan Khan's grandson Altan Khan (r. 1543–83), who ruled the Tümed Mongols on the steppe north of the Ordos Desert, in what is now Inner Mongolia, continued the struggle against the Oirats, pushing them northward and westward of his domains. Meanwhile Dayan Khan's son Geresenje had taken as his inheritance much of what is now the country of Mongolia. When he died these lands were parceled out to his descendants and eventually became the Tüsheet, Zasagt, Setsen, and the Altan khanates.

By the 1550s the combined forces of the Eastern Mongols had driven the Oirats out of central Mongolia, recapturing the ancient Mongol capital of Kharkhorum in 1552. The Oirat retreated to the west of the Khangai Mountains, but continued pressure by Altan Khan of the Khalkh (please don't confuse him with Altan Khan of the Tümed) at the beginning of the seventeenth century pushed them still farther west, beyond the Altai Mountains into the valleys of the Black Irtysh, Ili, and the Imil, in what is now Xinjiang in China, and onto the steppes of southern Siberia in what is now Russia.

But now, as if to counteract their diminishing influence, a charismatic new leader arose among the Oirat. This was Khara-Khula, who dreamed of recreating the Oirat Empire which had flourished under Esen in the fifteenth century and even of retaking the throne of China which had been so improvidently squandered by the Chingisid Mongols. Khara-Khula belonged to the Choros, one of the four tribes which made up the Oirat Confederation. He began his rise to power around 1600 and by

1606, the Torgut, Dörböt, and Khoshut, faced with the rising power of the Khalkh Altan Khan to the east, accepted his leadership.

By 1608–1609 he and the Oirats confronted Altan Khan and halted the westward advance of the Khalkh. Skirmishes continued for the next decade, until in 1619 all-out war broke out between Khara-Khula and Altan Khan. At first Altan Khan prevailed, but the Oirats fought back and by 1725 had driven the Eastern Mongols out of the Zungarian Basin in what is now Xinjiang. This would remain a Oirat stronghold until they were completely defeated by forces of the Qing Dynasty in the 1750s.

While the other three confederates had accepted Khara-Khula's leadership against Altan Khan they were not happy with the subordinate position they had assumed in the Oirat Confederation. Faced with both the rise of Khara-Khula, who threatened their independence, and the continuing incursions into their traditional grazing lands by the Eastern Mongols, some chose to leave Inner Asia altogether. Thus began the great migration westward of the people who would become known as Kalmyks. It was among these Kalmyks that Dambijantsan would emerge.

The Torgut who lived in the upper Irtysh River in what is now Xinjiang Province of China were particularly susceptible to pressure from the Altan Khan centered just to the north in what are now the Mongolian aimags of Khovd and Bayan-Ölgii. Hearing of rich pasture land to the west the Torgut chieftain Kho-Urlük had sent out scouts west to search for new grazing lands as early as 1608. Starting in the summer of 1615 some 15,000 Torgut began moving westward toward the steppes south of the Siberian towns of Tara, Tiumen, and Tobolsk. In the early 1630s the Torgut, along with a contingent of Dörböt and a smattering of dissatisfied Choros and Khoshut, moved still farther westward to the Pontic-Caspian Steppe north of the Caspian Sea. The Torgut alone who migrated may have numbered over 200,000. These new arrivals quickly overcame the disorganized nomads already inhabiting the area and by the beginning of the 1640s occupied the entire Caspian Steppe from the Emba River in the east to the Terek River in the west, including the rich basin of the lower Volga River, the biggest tributary of the Caspian Sea.

These are the people who became known as Kalmyks, a word about which there is some dispute. It would appear that the word Kalmyk was used to describe Oirats as far back as the fourteenth century by Arab geographer abn Alvardi.[24] This was of course long before the migration to

the West of the people now known as Kalmyks. Some popular and even scholarly literature continues to refer to the Western Mongols, or Oirats, who did not migrate to the West as Kalmyks. I adapt here the usage proposed by Khodarkovksy and "reserve the name Kalmyk only for the group of Oirats who came from Jungaria to roam the Caspian steppes in the early seventeenth century."[25]

For the next hundred years or so the Kalmyks nomadized on the steppe north of the Caspian Sea while gradually acceding to the overall authority of the Russian government. In 1724 they officially accepted Russian suzerainty. By the 1740s, however, relations between the nomads and the Russian empire began to deteriorate. One of the main bones of contention was the continuing encroachment of Russian colonists into the Kalmyk pasture lands. Cossacks from the Don River began emigrating to the lower Volga, followed by Russian and Ukrainian settlers. They built towns, established industries, and began plowing up the traditional Kalmyk pasture lands. By the mid-1740s some 10,000 Kalmyk families no longer had enough livestock to support themselves. Many were forced to work for commercial fishing operations and other Russian-owned industries. Between the years 1764 to 1768 alone more than one hundred new settlements of Russian and Ukrainian colonists were established on the lower Volga. The Kalmyks who attempted to maintain their nomadic lifestyle were shoved off onto arid, inhospitable desert-steppe far from the major rivers.

Another contentious issue was the forced recruitment of Kalmyk cavalrymen into various Russian military campaigns. When they had first arrived on the Caspian steppe the Kalmyks were more than willing to help the Russians in campaigns against other nomads who were competing with them for pasture lands and from whom they could expect considerable booty, the traditional motivation for steppe warfare. As the Kalmyks became more and more impoverished they were less and less eager to fight those with whom they had no real beef and from whom no immediate treasure would be forthcoming. The matter came to a head when the Russo-Ottoman War broke out in 1768 and empress Catherine II tried to impress 20,000 Kalmyk cavalrymen to fight the Ottoman Empire and its minions. The Kalmyks could only provide 10,000 men and after disputes with the Russian army commanders many of these deserted.

Then there was the dispute over religion. The Kalmyks had continued

to practice the Tibetan form of Buddhism which they had brought with them from Inner Asia. They maintained close ties with Tibet and regularly sent embassies to the Dalai Lama. Kalmyk lamas went to Tibet for training and Kalmyk noblemen and others who could afford it (the roundtrip often took several years) made pilgrimages to Lhasa and other religious sites in Tibet. As their political and economic situation deteriorated, however, the Kalmyks came under more and more pressure to convert to Russian Orthodox Christianity. According to Khodarkovsky:

> The Russian government encouraged conversion by all possible feasible means. Those Kalmyks who chose to convert and settle down with the Don Cossacks were put on the military payroll and for the next few years were paid a higher salary than the cossacks. On other occasions, the [converted] Kalmyks were granted tax exemptions for three to five years. The Kalmyk tayishis [noblemen] who chose to convert were rewarded with handsome salaries and could live in towns or settlements especially built for them.[26]

When Donduk-Dashi Khan (r. 1741–61) attempted to build a Buddhist temple in Astrakhan, the largest city on the lower Volga, he was told by the Russian government in St. Petersburg that "it was not appropriate to build a temple for idol worshipping in the empire of Her Majesty . . ."[27] Traditional-minded Kalmyks in general were deeply offended by these assaults on their religious beliefs. Kalmyk noblemen infuriated by what they viewed as the subversion of their Buddhism-based society even burned down the settlements of some Christian converts. Russo-Kalmyk relations were quickly reaching their nadir.

As early as 1747 some Kalymks, intensely disillusioned with life in Russia, had raised the possibility of leaving the country altogether and returning to their original homeland in Inner Asia. The sentiment picked up steam throughout the 1750s and 60s. In 1771, at long last, the Kalmyks had had enough. They decided to return to Inner Asia. Thus began the tragic epic of the Kalmyk Migration, what Khodarkovsky calls "the last known exodus of a nomadic people in the history of Asia."[28]

In late 1770 the nobleman Tsebek-Dorji had addressed the issue in a speech to the governing council of the Kalmyk Khan:

> Look how your rights are being limited in all respects. Russian officials mistreat you and the government wants to make peasants out of you. The banks of the Yayik and Volga are now covered with cossack settlements, and the northern borders of your steppes are inhabited by Germans. In a

> little while, the Don, Terek, and Kum will also be colonized and you will be pushed to the waterless steppes and the only source of your existence, your herds, will perish. Ubashi's son has already been ordered given as a hostage, and three hundred from among the noble Kalmyks are to reside in the Russian capital. You can see your situation, and in the future you will have two options—either to carry your burden of slavery, or to leave Russia and thus end your misfortunes. Dalai Lama himself selected two years in which a migration to Jungaria could be undertaken. These two years have arrived. So your present decision will determine your future."[29]

Ubashi Khan and Louzang Jalchin, the head lama of the Kalmyks, agreed that the time had come to act. At this time the majority of the Kalmyks, including most of the Torgut, were on the east side of the Volga. The Dörböt and Khoshut, along a few Torgut, were on the west side. Ubashi Khan himself had moved to the east side of the Volga in the autumn of 1770. The decision to leave Russia had been made, but Ubashi wanted to wait until the Volga was frozen over so the Kalmyks on the west side could cross over and join the exodus. Events forced his hand. Rumors of the planned departure of the Kalymks had leaked out and there was a chance the Russians would take military action to stop them. Then Russian authorities called up 10,000 more Kalmyk cavalryman for service with the Russian army. This was the last straw.

On the morning of January 5 all the Kalmyks on the east side of the Volga—31,000 families, some 150,000 men, women, and children, mounted up and headed eastward to Inner Asia. Various detachments of Cossacks, Russians, and Bashkirs (Moslem tribesmen) were send to halt the escaping Kalmyks and force them to return to the Russian dominions, but they were outnumbered and eventually returned empty-handed. The Kalmyk horde reached the banks of the Emba River, where they camped while awaiting Spring and fresh grass. Yet more detachments of Russian troops were set out after the Kalmyks but they too were rebuffed. The Kalmyks moved on and by early June had reached Lake Balkhash in what is now Kazakhstan. Here they encountered their hereditary enemies the Kazakhs, who were thirsting for revenge for earlier Kalmyk attacks against them. Outnumbered and surrounded, the Kalmyks only managed to escape by means of an unexpected night-time breakout and a forced march onward. Most of their sheep herds they had brought with them were lost in the fighting and soon famine set in. By the time they reached the Ili River in what is now Xinjiang Province of China over 100,000 Kalmyks had died from fighting, famine, and lack of water. The survivors, number-

ing at most 50,000, were greeted by Qing officials and given emergency aid of tents, wheat, rice, sheep, and other commodities. The Qing viewed the return of the Kalmyks as a huge propaganda victory, demonstrating to other nomads the advantages of living under Chinese rather than Russian rule.

The Qianlong emperor found even greater significant in the return of the Kalmyks. His mother Hsin-mao was celebrating her 80th birthday in 1771 and in her honor Qianlong had commissioned the construction of an enormous temple in the Qing summer resort of Jehol (current-day Chengde). The Putuozongcheng Temple, as it was called, was supposed to be replica of the Potala in Lhasa. Then came news of the return of the Kalmyks, coinciding with the dedication of the temple. Qianlong caused a stele to be erected at the temple with an inscription on it in Chinese, Mongolian, Tibetan, and Manchurian which read in part:

> Our vassals over the border all believe in the religion of Sakyamuni. Jehol was the spot where our grandfather the Emperor K'ang-hsi [the Kangxi Emperor], pacified and appeased them, and there he granted them audiences . . . Now the temple is finished in time for a great national event [Hsin-mao's birthday] that is to be celebrated by all, in a unique manner . . . In addition to this, the Torgot [Kalmyks, including the Torgut], who have lived in Russia for some time, have returned for religious reasons. The whole of their tribe—which numbers many ten-thousands—arrived just at this time, after wandering about for more than six months. Here is a connection that is mystic.[30]

Ubashi himself was invited to Jehol and sumptuously wined and dined by Qianlong. He was told he could keep his title of Khan but in fact his people were divided into separate banners and dispersed throughout Xinjiang. They were now under Qing jurisdiction and Ubashi was their ruler in name only. Despite Qianlong's honeyed words, the Kalmyks quickly discovered that Qing rule was anything but benign. As Khodarkovsky puts it, "The Kalmyks had escaped Russian tentacles only to be ensnared in Chinese ones."[31] (The immense pile of the Putuozongcheng Temple, which is actually little more than a hollow façade, looms over the city of Chengde to this day; Qianlong's stele is still prominently displayed out front.)

In the meantime, Russian Empress Catherine II was infuriated that 150,000 of her subjects had managed to escape her domains. She issued ultimatums to the Qing government demanding the return of "these rogues and traitors" but they were ignored.

This great exodus of the Kalmyks inspired Thomas de Quincey (1785-1859), the eccentric Engish author perhaps better known for his *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, to pen an ode entitled *Revolt of the Tartars*, which begins with an exegesis of the whole episode:

> There is no great event in modern history, or, perhaps it may be said more broadly, none in all history, from its earliest records, less generally known, or more striking to the imagination, than the flight eastwards of a principal Tartar nation across the boundless steppes of Asia in the latter half of the last century. The *terminus a quo* of this flight and the *terminus ad quem* are equally magnificent—the mightiest of Christian thrones being the one, the mightiest of pagan the other; and the grandeur of these two terminal objects is harmoniously supported by the romantic circumstances of the flight. In the abruptness of its commencement and the fierce velocity of its execution we read an expression of the wild, barbaric character of the agents. In the unity of purpose connecting this myriad of wills, and in the blind but unerring aim at a mark so remote, there is something which recalls to the mind those almighty instincts that propel the migrations of the swallow and the leeming [sic] or the life-withering marches of the locust. Then, again, in the gloomy vengeance of Russia and her vast artillery, which hung upon the rear and the skirts of the fugitive vassals, we are reminded of Miltonic images--such, for instance, as that of the solitary hand pursuing through desert spaces and through ancient chaos a rebellious host, and overtaking with volleying thunders those who believed themselves already within the security of darkness and of distance.[33]

As we surmise, Dambijantsan was a member of the Dörböt tribe. The Dörböt, who in the early years of the Kalmyk occupation of the Caspian steppe had roamed the westernmost stretches of the Kalmyk realm, along the River Don, a tributary of the Azov Sea, had in 1743 been moved en masse eastward to the steppes bordering the west bank of the Volga River by Donduk Dashi Khan, who had been granted power over them by the Russian government.[32] Residing as they did on the west bank of the Volga, most if not all of the Dörböts remained behind after the great migration of the Kalmyks back to Zungaria in 1771.

In retaliation for the exodus the Russian government on October 19 1771 stripped these remaining Kalmyks of "the last vestige of their political independence" and ordered them all to remain of the west side of the Volga River year-round.[34] Thus it was on the Caspian Steppes on the west bank of the Volga that Dambijantsan, as we have posited, was born in 1860. As noted, he may have been born into the Sanaev family, but this is by no means certain. From his very earliest age he must have been

aware that he was one of the 'left behind people," and that the vast majority of his fellow Mongols were off somewhere to the east in Inner Asia. He would spend most of his life trying to reconnect with these people.

At the time Dambijantsan was born, at the beginning of the 1860s, Tibetan Buddhism, despite the continued pressure to convert the Kalmyks to Russian Orthodoxy, was still prevalent in Kalmykia. In all likelihood Dambijantsan was born into a family which adhered to Buddhism to one degree or another. The first news we hear of him is that at the age of seven he was supposedly enrolled as a novice in a Buddhist monastery in Dolonnuur, in what is now the Chinese province of Inner Mongolia. Maisky heard this story while in western Mongolia in 1919, when Dambijantsan was still alive. Dolonnuur was firmly in the orbit of the Eastern Mongols, the Chahar of Inner Mongolia and Khalkh of what was then considered Outer Mongolia, and at first glance it appears strange that a young Dörböt from the Volga River in Russia would have gravitated there. Kalmyks wishing to enter a monastery outside of Kalmykia, one would think, would have been more drawn to western China, including the modern-day provinces of Xinjiang, Qinghai, and Gansu, the traditional strongholds of the Torgut, Dörbot, and other Oirats, both those who not migrated westward in the early seventeenth century and those who had returned in the great exodus of 1771. Fred Adelman, in his introduction to Pozdneev's *Mongolia and Mongols* makes precisely this objection, and John Gaunt in his doctoral thesis on Dambijantsan repeats it: "it would be unlikely to find a Volga Kalmuk at Doloon Nuur, as they were not oriented toward Inner Mongolia's monastic net."[35] The French scholar Isabelle Charleux, an expert on Inner Mongolian monasteries, has a different view: "There were many monks and students [at Dolonnuur] from all of the Mongol world, given the reputation of the Dolonnuur monasteries that attracted people from very far away . . . The Dolonnuur monasteries were not only connected with the Khalkh Mongols; but also with the Inner Mongolians of Alashan and Kholun Buir . . . Also the migrant population of the Chahar banners included many Oirat Mongols. If Dambijantsan's parents were especially fond of the Dolonnuur monasteries—because they knew a lama there, because of the reputation of the monasteries, etc.—they would have sent their child there."[36]

A Russian researcher adds that Dambijantsan's parents moved to Inner Mongolia "for all the usual reasons"—presumably they were traders—

when he was a very small boy, which would explain how the seven-year old boy ended up there.[37] Therefore it is entirely possible that this entry into Dambijantsan's curriculum vitae was not simply a later invention meant to burnish this reputation among the Khalkh Mongols but that he actually was enrolled as a monk at Dolonnuur at an early age. In any case, this is the last we hear of his putative parents.

Dolonnuur (*doloon* = seven, *nuur* = lake; Seven Lakes) is located in the grasslands (now suffering from increasing desertification) 210 miles north of Beijing, about fifty-two miles beyond the first major pass leading to the Mongolian Plateau. The area is much hallowed in Mongolian history. Fourteen miles from the current town of Dolonnuur is the site of Shangdu, originally established in 1256 as the headquarters of Chingis Khan's grandson Khubilai. After Khubilai founded the Yüan Dynasty he made what is now Beijing the primary capital of his empire, but he retained Shangdu as his summer capital, where he and his court retired each year to escape the enervating heat of the North China Plain. Shangdu was destroyed in the so-called "Red Scarf Rebellion" of 1358, a precursor to the upheavals which led to the fall of the Yuan Dynasty in 1368 and the rise of the Ming Dynasty. Later the city became known to some as the Xiancheng, or Apparition City, since people claimed that at certain times the old city as it was in the days of Khubilai appeared suddenly before their eyes and then disappeared just as quickly, leaving only the ruins as we see them today. Shangdu is also remembered as the subject of Coleridge's much celebrated poem "Xanadu":

> In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
> A stately pleasure-dome decree:
> Where Alph, the sacred river ran
> Through caverns measureless to man
> Down to a sunless sea . . .

The ruins are now a popular tourist attraction and the area still serves as a summer getaway, only now not for Mongol potentates but for Beijing's middle classes. More important to our story, however, it was at nearby Dolonnuur that in 1691 a fateful meeting took place between the Kangxi emperor of China and Zanabazar, the First Bogd Gegeen of Mongolia and the nominal head of the Khalkh Mongols.

❧

When we last left Khara Khula he was organizing the four tribes of the Oirat into the Oirat Confederation. He died in 1634 and his son Baatar-Khongtaiji then assumed the throne. In 1635 the Dalai Lama officially recognized Baatar-Khongtaiji as the leader of the Oirats and gave him the title of *Yerdyen*.[38] By 1640 Baatar-Khongtaiji's realm become known as the Zungarian Khanate.[39] The name derives from the Mongol *zuun gar*, "left hand", or "eastern side"; although the Oirats dwelt in the western end of the lands inhabited by Mongol peoples, the Choros tribe to which Khara Khula and Baatar-Khongtaiji's belonged was the easternmost of the Oirat confederation and thus on the "left hand" looking southward, as the Mongols always oriented themselves.[40]

Following a long internecine struggle between Baatar-Khongtaiji's offspring, replete with fratricide and rivers of blood, Galdan, probably the youngest of his eleven or so sons, seized the reins of the Zungarian Khanate. Under Galdan the Zungarian Khanate eventually encompassed a huge swath of Inner Asia, including the western edge of current-day Mongolia, the current-day Chinese province of Xinjiang, including the Silk Road cities of Hami, Turpan, and Kashgar, the legendary cities of Bukhara and Samarkand in what is now Uzbekistan, and the eastern part of current-day Kazakhstan. Although little remembered today, during Galdan's reign the Zungarian Khanate was a formidable adversary of both Czarist Russia and Qing-Dynasty China.

Galdan would become one of the role models of Dambijantsan, and we will return for a more detailed examination of his career in good time. Suffice it to say here that in 1688 Galdan, hoping to add the territory of the Khalkh Mongols to the Zungarian Empire, invaded what is now the country of Mongolia. Meeting little opposition from the disorganized Khalkh, his army first trashed the great monastery of Erdene Zuu, built on site of the old Mongol capital of Kharkhorum, and the monastery at Khögno Khan Uul (now known as Khögnö Taryn Khiid), just to the east. Advancing farther eastward into the Khentii Mountains north of Ulaan Baatar, Galdan's men then demolished Saridgiin Khiid, the monastery which had been established by Zanabazar himself and intended to be the center of Buddhism in Mongolia. Zanabazar, his brother Chakhuundorj the Tüsheet khan, the leaders of the other Khalkh khanates, and, according to one source, at least 30,000 of their followers fled southeastward before the advance of Galdan's troops, eventually reaching the edge of the Mongolian Plateau near Dolonnuur, land of the Chahar Mongols, who

had already accepted the authority of the Qing Dynasty. Here the Khalkh Mongols, by now almost destitute, threw themselves at mercy of the Qing emperor Kangxi.[41] Dolonnuur was at that time already an important monastic center, with no less then twelve incarnate lamas in residence. The town, strategically located at the edge of the Mongolian plateau, was also a busy Chinese-Mongolian entrepôt. Because of deposits of copper ore nearby it became a center of mining and smelting, and its factories were well-known for their weapons, and later its workshops better known for the bronze Buddhist artwork of the Dolonnuur School.

The Kangxi emperor, apprized of the arrival of the Khalkh Mongols in his domains, decided to meet with their leaders and if possible bring them into the fold of the Qing Dynasty. He left Beijing on May 9, 1691 and made his leisurely way north, stopping to do a spot of hunting on the way. From May 29 to June 3 Kangxi finally meet with Zanabazar and the other Khalkh leaders in Dolonnuur. A great banquet was followed by a display of Qing might in the form of cannons, newly acquired from Jesuits in Beijing, the firing of which caused the Mongols "to tremble with fear and admiration," at least according to Qing sources.[42] The upshot of all this was that in exchange for protection from the forces of Galdan Bolshigt and a promise from Kangxi to restore to the Khalkh their lost lands in Mongolia, Zanabazar accepted the suzerainty of the Qing Dynasty, in effect making Mongolia a province of China. The country which Chingis Khan and his sons had conquered and his grandson Khubilai had once ruled as the first emperor of the Mongol Yüan Dynasty now dominated Mongolia. Mongolia would remain under Chinese control until 1911, when the Qing Dynasty fell. Those 220 years of subjugation by the Qing Empire are seen by some as a direct consequence of Zanabazar's capitulation to Kangxi, and as a result many Mongolians resent him to this day. Dambijantsan himself would devote the greater part of his life to undoing what Zanabazar had done and restoring the independence of Mongolia.

But that was all in the future. In 1691, In honor of his meeting with Zanabazar and the capitulation of the Mongols, Kangxi ordered the construction of what would become the Khökh Süm, or Blue Temple. (One prominent Mongolian incarnation, the Kanjurwa Khutagt (1914–1980), maintained that on the contrary Mongol nobles built the temple in honor of Kangxi, a telling interpretation of events from a Mongol viewpoint[43]) The Khökh Süm was completed around 1700 and it eventually became the center of a sizable monastery. About a half mile away, the Shar Süm,

Yellow Temple, was built between 1729 and 1731 and it too became the foundation of a monastery. Both monasteries were overseen by a line of incarnate lamas known as the Jangjya Khutagts. Sedendonub, the first Jangjya Khutagt, was instructed by Kangxi himself to "spend the chilly wintertime in Peking and in the summertime heat govern here and the direct the local clergy."[44] The Jangjya Khutagts maintained residences at both the Blue Temple and the Yellow Temple. The second Jangjya Khutagt, Rölpé Dorjé, was described by one scholar as "an intimate of the Qianlong emperor and thus perhaps the most powerful Tibetan hierarch in the Qing Empire."[45]

Dolonnuur's importance as a monastic center was underlined by the fact that the Third Panchen Lama visited here during his trip to China in 1780. The Panchen Lamas along with the Dalai Lamas were the highest ranking incarnate lamas in Tibet. The Panchen Lama arrived in Dolonnuur on the 20th day of the 6th month, and according to hagiographic Tibetan accounts was greeted by one million people, although this is almost certainly an exaggeration. In any case, while in Dolonnuur the Panchen Lama reportedly "performed a purification ritual that pacified the restless demons of Mongolia."[46] He also gave Yamantaka initiation to the Jangjya Khutagt and read prayers dedicated to the sacred land of Shambhala, a realm for which he had already written a guidebook entitled *Shambhala Lamyig*.

From Dolonnuur the Panchen Lama proceeded to the Qing Summer Resort at Jehol where he was amazed to discover not only a huge replica of the Potala in Lhasa, already alluded to, but also a replica of his own Tashilhunpo Monastery in Shigatse. This complex of temples and facades, known as the Xumifoushou Miao (Happiness and Longevity Temple of Mt. Sumeru) was hurriedly constructed in 1779 and early 1780 by order of the Qianlong emperor. In front of it he placed yet another stele declaring that the complex had been built to provide the Panchen Lama with "a restful place for meditation."[47] The Xumifoushou Miao too is now a major tourist attraction. Unfortunately, the Panchen Lama never returned to Tibet from this trip. From Jehol he proceeded Beijing to where he contracted small pox and died in late November of 1780.

The Russian ethnographer A. M. Podzneev visited Dolonuur in 1893. By then the monastic center seems to have lost some of its luster. The Yellow Temple had some 400 monks and the Khökh Temple some 500, not a lot compared to monasteries in Lhasa in Tibet and Örgöö (now Ulaan

Baatar) in Mongolia. The fourth Jangjya Khutagt, who died in 1891, spent most of his life in Beijing and had not visited Dolonnuur in fifty years. Pozdneev was by that time a very seasoned traveler in Mongolia and China but even he was shocked by conditions in Dolonnuur: "It would be hard to imagine anything dirtier and in greater disarray than Doloon Nuur's street and alleys. The street in all Chinese cities are normally narrow and dirty, but here they are even narrower and dirtier . . . In the rainy season these ditches used as thoroughfares are so full of water and mud that some of the streets become iiterally impassable."[48] Presumably this was more-or-less the same Dolonnuur Dambijantsan would have experienced in the late 1860s when he arrived there at the age of seven and became a novice monk.

The beginnings of Dambijantsan's monastic career are unclear. He may have taken the preliminary vow known as *Rabjun*, which is given to young boys when they first enter a monastery. In addition to learning to read and write Mongolian, he probably began to study at least written Tibetan, since at that time most Buddhist texts were in the Tibetan language, and he he would have received lessons in elementary Buddhism teachings, including the doctrines of the Gelug, or Yellow Hat, sect, one of the four main divisions of Tibetan Buddhism and the one to which the Dalai Lama belonged.

From his fellow Mongolian students, many of them from Khalkh Mongolia, the young boy who had been born in Russia may have imbibed the anti-Manchu sentiment then growing among a people ever-increasingly impoverished by their Qing masters. And perhaps he even got a sense that all was not well in the Qing Dynasty itself, then still reeling from the disastrous Second Opium War of 1856–60. In 1860, the year Dambijantsan was born, British and French forces had entered Bejing and sacked the Summer Palace, then forced on the Qing government to sign the so-called Peking Convention, which opened several Chinese ports to foreign trade, gave foreigners the right to travel in the interior of China, allowed Christian missionaries into the country, and, perhaps most importantly, legalized the importation of opium, the mainstay of British trade at the time. It was a blow from which the Qing Dynasty would never really recover. The emperor Xianfeng, totally mortified by China's defeat in the Opium War and the onerous settlement forced on him by the foreign powers, died a broken man a year later at the age of twenty-nine. One

of his concubines would lead a coup état and subsequently rule China for the next forty-seven years as the Empress Dowager Cixi, overseeing the slow but inexorable decline leading to the final extinguishment of the Qing Dynasty. When the Qing Dynasty finally did fall, in 1911–12, Dambijantsan would be in western Mongolian, leading the fight for Mongolian independence.

Maisky and George Roerich both allude to Dambijantsan's youthful soujourn in Dolonuur but give no details.[49] According to one of his Russian biographers he excelled in his studies and was soon marked out for advancement in the lamaistic community. Talented and ambitious young monks were inevitably drawn to Lhasa, the wellspring and lodestone of Tibetan Buddhism, so it is not surprising that Dambijantsan would have set his sights on the Tibetan capital. There was a problem, however. Although a Kalmyk, he was apparently a Russian citizen, and most foreigners, including even Buddhists from Russia, were not allowed into Tibet. The earlier fraternal ties the Kalmyks had enjoyed with Tibet had ended at least a hundred years ago. But as a Mongolian-speaking Kalmyk studying in Doloonuur he might well have been able to pass himself off as a Khalkh from Mongolia. As such he would have been allowed to travel to Tibet and enroll in a monasteries there. Dambijantsan's propensity for assumed false identities might well have begun at this point.

In any event, we soon find Dambijantsan in Lhasa, the capital of Tibet and home of the Dalai Lama, enrolled in Drepung Monastery, one of the "Great Three" monasteries of Tibet, along with Sera and Gandan. Drepung (literally "rice heap") Monastery had been founded in 1416 by Jamyang Chöje Tashi Pelden ("Dashi-baldan" in Mongolian accounts), born in Tibet near Samye Monastery, and a close disciple of Tsongkhapa, the founder of the Gelug sect. He was believed to be the eleventh appearance of Javzandamba, the line of incarnations of which Zanabazar, the First Bogd Gegeen of Mongolia, was the sixteenth. In addition to Drepung, he established more than one hundred other monasteries, retreat centers, and hermitages all over Tibet.[50] Drepung, located at the base of Gambo Utse Mountain about five miles west of the Potala, was once reputed to be the largest Buddhist monastery in the world, with as many as 8,000 monks in residence. The second, third and fourth Dalai Lamas lived at Drepung—this was before the completion of the Potala, later the residence of the Dalai Lamas—and their bodies were emtombed here.

Zanabazar, the First Bogd Gegeen of Mongolia stayed at Drepung during his visits to Tibet in the years 1649–51 and 1655–56. Drepung was divided into colleges (*dratsangs*) which specialized in a particular teaching or hosted monks from some specific area in the Buddhist world. One college, for example, hosted monks from Kham, in eastern Tibet. Gomang College was famous for its Mongolian monks, and it was here that Dambijantsan gravitated.

Drepung in general was renowned as an institute of higher learning, with many monks studying for fifteen or twenty year to achieve the Buddhist equivalent of a doctorate degree. Any monk aspiring to reach the pinnacle of Buddhist teachings could fulfill his ambitions here. According to George Roerich, Dambijantsan spent "many years" at Drepung. Unfortunately we do not know who his teachers were, what specific teachings he specialized in, or what initiations he might have taken. His years at Gomang College were not wasted, however. "People who knew him well," according to Roerich, "affirm that his knowledge of Buddhist metaphysics and secret Tantric teachings was unusually vast and it seems he enjoyed a high reputation among the high lamas of Mongolia."

Given his apparent talents, Dambijantsan might have gone to beome a teacher himself at Drepung or some other monastery and eventually become a high-ranking lama in the Buddhist hierarchy. It was not to be. According to Roerich, "From his youth, he manifested an ambitous, impestous, and cruel character." This aspect of his character now came to the fore. "It is generally said," continues Roerich, "that he killed his roommate in the monastery because of a dispute and had to flee Llhasa in order to escape from the stern monastic law. This fact is generally known in Tibet and Mongolia."

Obviously any advancement in the monastic world was now impossible. A new stage of Dambijantsan's life was about to begin. As Roerich notes, "It seems the murder was the crucial point of his life for from then on begins his life as an errant warrior monk, full of wonderful adventures, messianic prophecies, and cruel deeds."[51]

Later in life, when he was living in Mongolia, Dambijantsan regaled A. V. Burdukov with tales of his earlier travels, including soujourns in India. Maisky and Roerich also heard tell of these Indian travels. It is never quite clear when he went to India, but we might surmise that after killing his roommate he might have found it wise to remove himself to the Indian

subcontinent and thereby escape severe punishment for the crime of murder from the monastic and perhaps civil authorities in Tibet. Dambijantsan, already deeply steeped in metaphysics and tantric teachings, would have found himself at home among the various yogis, fakirs, magicians, and itinerant savants of India, and would have ample opportunities for learning and expanding the wide variety of talents he would exhibit in later life. He would become legendary for his skills at hypnosis, clairvoyance, mind-reading, fortune telling and other arcane arts which were the stock and trade of India's holy men. What talents he may have had in these areas would have been further honed during his stay on the subcontinent. By the early 1930s, almost a decade after his death, these Indian adventures had became an accepted part of his curriculum vitae. Henning Haslund picked up the story circulating around the campfires of Mongolia that Dambijantsan "himself asserted that he acquired in India the supernatural qualities of the fakirs."[52] Beyond this we can add northing about Dambijantsan's alleged Indian interlude.

At some point in time in the early 1880s Dambijantsan may have gone back to Russia. In any event, he somehow managed to attach himself to the 1883–85 Inner Asian Expedition of Russian explorer and zoologist N. M. Przhevalsky (1839-1888). Przhevalsky's earlier 1870–1873 expedition had been first serious Russian attempt to penetrate the maidenhead of virginal—at least from the Russian viewpoint—Tibet. On this first try he reached the northern edge of the Tibetan Plateau and the vicinity of the headwaters of the Yangtze River before being forced to turn back. A later expedition in 1879-80, this one authorized by the Czar and backed up by a formidable detachment of armed-to-the-teeth Cossacks, got to within 150 miles of Lhasa before encountering a large contingent of the Tibetan army. In the ensuing stand-off Przhevalsky finally backed down. "Let someone else, a luckier traveler than me, proceed farther into Asia. I have done everything I could do and that was possible to do," pouted the disheartened explorer.[53] Russians, unlike the English a few decades later, were not yet ready to shoot their way into Lhasa.

Interestingly, upon his return to Russia Przhevalsky prepared a memorandum in which he proposed pushing the Russian border with Mongolia down to about the latitude of Örgöö, now Ulaan Baatar. Russian geographers, it seems, had opined that the mountains and mixed forest-steppe from the vicinity of Örgöö northward were really a continuation

of Siberia, and thus based on landforms the border should run along the crest of Bogd Khan Uul (mountain) just south of Örgöö, beyond which lies the treeless steppe, desert steppe, and deserts of Mongolia proper. Thus Örgöö would then be in Russia. Przhevalsky had a religio-political motive for this proposal:

> In future, should the English want to penetrate into Tibet from India, it is very likely that the Dalai Lama would move his residence to Urga, towards his most ardent believers there, the Mongols. Then, by, possessing Urga and patronizing the Dalai Lama, we would be able to influence the entire Buddhist world.[54]

Przhevalsky was surprisingly prescient here. As already mentioned, in 1904 the English Younghusband Expedition did invade Tibet and the 13th Dalai Lama did flee to Örgöö. Of course Przhevalsky's proposal to move the border south had not been taken serious and at the time Örgöö was still the capital of Mongolia and not a Russian city.

Przhevalsky's 1883–1885 expedition started at Khyakhta, the entrepôt on the Russian-Mongolian border, proceeded south, presumably through Örgöö, to the Gobi Desert and then westward to the eastern spurs of the Tian Shan Mountains in Xinjiang. The expedition then veered off to the sources of Yangtze River and Qinghai Lake in modern-day Qinghai Province, China, continued on westwards to Khotan, on the southern edge of the Takhlimakan Desert, and finally northward to the huge lake of Issyk Kol in modern-day Kyrgyzstan. Thus the three-year-long expedition traversed a huge swatch of Inner Asia but did not enter Tibet proper.

Dambijantsan reportedly accompanied the expedition as one of its eighteen armed escorts. At this time he was traveling under the Russian alias Irinchinov. A photograph of the escorts showing Dambijantsan at the far left is, according to one researcher, "the first pictorial record of the charismatic adventurer that can be traced hitherto."[55] Dambijantsan was already familiar with Inner Mongolia from his stay at Dolonuur, and assuming that he joined the expedition at its beginning in Khyakhta he now would have had ample opportunities to spy out the land of the Khalkh, the current-day country of Mongolia. At this time, however, he was just a hired-hand traveling under an alias and had not yet assumed the role of Ja Lama, the descendant/incarnation of Amarsanaa come to free the Mongols from the yoke of the Manchus. Yet we may assume that the ambitious adventurer had his eyes wide open, and was even at this point plotting his dramatic reappearance in Mongolia as the leader of a libera-

tion movement.

While it is easy to imagine a gun-toting Dambijantsan as part of an armed escort on expeditions to the remote fastnesses of Inner Asia, it is a bit more difficult to picture him as a lawyer with a briefcase stalking the halls of a courthouse. Yet while in Mongolia in 1927 painter, mystic, and Shambhalist Nicholas Roerich, father of already mentioned George Roerich, would hear that Dambijantsan, "no ordinary bandit," was "a graduate of law from Petrograd University."[56] For a moment a vision rises before us of Dambijantsan, a Kalmyk Mongol from the sun-drenched Caspian Steppes, striding the cobblestone streets of Peter the Great's gray, gloomy city by the Gulf of Finland. Inessa Lomakina, Dambijantsan's indefatigable Russian biographer, took the time to track down even this flimsy lead and came away with a different picture:

> I couldn't believe it at all [that Dambijantsan had studied law in St. Petersburg], so I decided to consult the historical archives of St. Petersburg, where the records of the university is stored, in order to check on whether this information was true or not. Fortunately, there was the card index of all the students who studied at that university before the revolution. I searched very carefully for any of the names which the Ja Lama may have used but didn't find any. Moreover, I looked through all the personal files of students, entrance application forms, graduation certificates of the gymnasium, college graduation diplomas, exam papers, course papers, application forms for the higher education courses, etc. . . .[57]

She found nothing and by the end must have seriously regretted Roerich's off-hand comment about Dambijantsan's studies in St. Petersburg. Thus whatever else Dambijantsan was guilty of in his long and eventful life he cannot be accused of being a lawyer.

Dambijantsan himself claimed that he "served as one of the Ta Lamas or Heads of Department in the Chang-skya Khutughtu [Jangjya Khutagt) yamen at Peking, a learned ecclesiastical institution entrusted with the fixing of the calendar and other astronomical and metaphysical questions."[58] The Jangjya Khutagts were as we have seen incarnate lamas connected with the monasteries in Dolonnuur where Dambijantsan may have studied as a boy. The fourth Jangjya Khutagt, who would have been alive at the time in question, was very seldom in attendance at Dolonnuur and lived almost full-time in Beijing.

The Songzhu Monastery in the old Imperial city was his full time

residence in the capital. This ancient Chinese monastery, which specialized in printing sutras during the Ming Dynasty, was converted into a Tibetan monastery in 1712 by the Kangxi emperor. In 1724 it was given to Rölpé Dorjé, the second Jangjya Khutagt, and served as the residence of the subsequent Jangjya Khutagts. It did not appear, however, to have been a "learned ecclesiastical institution" of the kind where Dambijantsan supposedly served. The Yonghe Gong was the main academic monastery of Beijing, with various colleges that dealt with astronomy and calendar making, medicine, and various esoteric studies, and this may be the institution of which Dambijantsan made mention. Whether he was actually one of the Ta (or Da) Lamas there is another question altogether. Since the position would have acquired considerable academic credentials he could have held the post only after his studies at Drepung. But after his stay at Drepung he was reportedly wanted for murder in Tibet, and this would seem to preclude him from holding a high position in a Tibeto-Mongolian Buddhist institution in Beijing. Either officials in Beijing were unaware of his past, or he had just made up this episode about being a Ta Lama in Beijing to further burnish his reputation after he began a famous man in Mongolia.

We have covered most everything known about the first three decades of Dambijantsan's life. Up until 1890 he had, in effect, been in training for his future role. At the age of thirty or so he was about to assume a new persona: the descendant of Amarsanaa returning to the land of the Mongols in order to free them from their Qing oppressors.