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Research Among the Mongols

Early in 1926 I was officially notified by the chairman of the Mongolian Commission of the Academy of Sciences that I would be sent to the Mongolian People's Republic to conduct research. This was a very happy event. I had been very anxious to travel to Mongolia ever since that commission had been established. Now my dream was about to come true. Only one circumstance somewhat lessened my happiness, and that was the thought that I would be separated for a while from our little son Valerian, named after his grandfather, who was going to spend his first summer in the countryside in Berngardovka near Leningrad.

In May 1926 Vladimirtsov, Alekseev and I went by train via Moscow to Verkhneudinsk, now called Ulan-Udè, the capital of the Buryat Autonomous Republic in Eastern Siberia. There we spent a few days and were joined by our Buryat student Balji Bambaev. Saddles had to be purchased in Verkhneudinsk because in Mongolia one could only get Mongolian saddles which were rather uncomfortable. After buying a few saddles, we took a riverboat up the Selenga River to the Mongolian border. After thirty-six hours we arrived at Ust' Kyakhta (Mouth of the Kyakhta) and from there we went by horsedrawn coach to Troitskosavsk, a rather old and large town. Bambaev temporarily left us there, for he had to cross the border illegally. During the civil war he, like many Buryats, had fought as a Cossack officer on the anti-Communist side. His home village was in the Selenga area, and the local Buryats were Cossacks. For this

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reason Bambaev could not obtain a Soviet travel passport and an exit visa. When on the following day the three of us had crossed the border at the checkpoint and moved about 300 meters into the Mongolian border town Altan Bulag (Golden Spring), Bambaev was already there waiting for us. He had managed to slip across the border undetected only about 300 or 400 meters from the checkpoint. If he had been detected, the punishment would have been severe because he carried a pistol.

In Ulaanbaatar, the capital of Mongolia, there was no hotel so we were accommodated in a local school. Ulaanbaatar was a typical Chinese town. There were numerous Buddhist temples and monasteries, Chinese shops and restaurants (*kuantzu*) and only a few Russian-style houses. It was an interesting city. The former palace of the late Jebtsundamba Khutuktu (Living Buddha) who had died in 1924 had been turned into a museum and contained many interesting and valuable exhibits. There was also a stuffed elephant which, when he was still alive, had been presented to the Living Buddha by the Tsarist government. On the day of the elephant's arrival a large crowd of believers gathered and was greatly impressed when the elephant knelt in front of the Living Buddha and bowed his head. As it turned out, the elephant had been purchased from a circus where he had learned many tricks, but the believers marveled at a beast which seemingly could recognize a true saint!

Vladimirtsov and Alekseev went on to Peking where Vladimirtsov bought some Mongolian books and Alekseev did some research of his own. Afterwards they went by ship to Europe and from there back to the Soviet Union. In the meantime Bambaev and I bought some horses, found a guide who knew the country and hired several Buryat servants. We also had to buy some dry foods such as noodles, rice, macaroni, canned foods, tea, sugar and the like. We then set out in the direction of the Erdeni Dzuu monastery on the banks of the Orkhon River. First we arrived at Ching Tolgoi, a man-made mound about 100 feet high which had been a Kitan fortress. We found there the lower part of a stele in the shape of a turtle. The inscription, however, was missing, and we were told by the local Mongols that it had already been missing thirty years earlier when

some "Russians" had been investigating that area. Those "Russians" were actually Radloff and his companions on their Orkhon expedition of 1891. From Ching Tolgoi we went to the well-known ruins of the Tsagaan baishing, a temple built on the left bank of the Tuula River, west of Ulaanbaatar, in the seventeenth century by Tsogtu Taiji, a prince famous in the history of Mongolia's struggle for independence. The inscription found there had been published with a German translation by Georg Huth in 1894.¹ We searched for other inscriptions and found one chiseled in a rock on behalf of Tsogtu Taiji in 1627. In 1929 I published this inscription in my report on my journey.² We continued our travels and arrived at Kharuukhyn Khar Balgas (The Black Ruins at the Kharuukha River) which had been a temple of the Red Hat sect many years ago. There was also a rather well-preserved *caitya*, (in Mongolian *suburgan*), a shrine with a cupola, in which often sacred books and medicinal herbs were preserved. The most interesting place we saw up to then was Khöshöö Tsaidam, where the famous Ancient Turkic Orkhon inscriptions of the eighth century are located. The inscriptions were still there but many letters were already obliterated by cattle rubbing against the stele. Birds had also done their share, filling the chiseled letters with their excrement which in the course of time became hard as cement and could not be scraped out of the letters without damage to the stone.

From there we moved on to the ruins of the ancient Uighur city of Khara Balgasun, and from there we went upstream on the Orkhon to the Erdeni Dzuu monastery which had been founded by Abatai Khan in 1586. At that time several hundred lamas were living at Erdeni Dzuu. The lamas were not overtly hostile to us but they were uncooperative and disliked our plan of photographing inscriptions and making rubbings. We were invited to see the head lama, and he asked us who we were and how we had traveled. He then asked, *inter alia*, whether we had passed through the country of the dog-headed people. These lamas struck me as utterly ignorant of the outside world. They even argued with us about whether the sun was going around the earth or vice versa and insisted that the sun circled the earth.

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There was great splendor and magnificent art in the monastery's numerous temples, but there was also much filth. The lamas by no means observed the rule of celibacy, and near the monastery there were *ger* inhabited by women whom the lamas visited. The rate of venereal disease must have been high.

While staying near Erdeni Dzuu, I witnessed the Tsam ceremony for the first time. This event consists of masked dances and pantomime on subjects taken from the Buddhist legends, and it was interesting to see how the ordinary Mongols completely misunderstood the meaning of the ceremony. They believed Tsam to be a kind of divine service and even took blessings from the actors by touching them with the crowns of their heads, even though some of the performers actually represented a deer or some other animal which was hunted by one of the other characters.

During the Tsam performance a serious accident occurred. The rifle of one of the artists, an eighteenth-century muzzle loader, exploded and severely damaged the palm of his hand. He was bleeding profusely, and there was no physician on hand, the lama medics being of no help because they did not know anything about surgery. I therefore assumed the role of a surgeon. I could tell that the bones of the hand, in this case the metacarpus, had not been damaged. I disinfected the wound with a strong solution of potassium permanganate and stopped the bleeding by using a tourniquet. I then made numerous stitches with an ordinary needle, having no surgical needle with me, and could only hope that the man might retain the use of his fingers.

After leaving Erdeni Dzuu we photographed ancient monuments, made rubbings, and collected examples of colloquial Mongolian language and folklore. The Mongols were still very superstitious at that time. They were not afraid of being photographed or being asked questions—on the contrary, they were flattered by such attention—but they strongly resented any actions of ours which, in their opinion, might anger the "lords of the place" (Tibetan *sabdag*, Sanskrit *lokapala*), i.e., spirits dwelling in certain locations such as a particular rock. Once I tried to make a rubbing from an inscription on a stele which was lying on the ground. The side facing up bore a

Chinese inscription and it seemed easy to make a rubbing of it. When I turned the stele over, two long snakes crawled out and slithered away. My rubbing did not turn out well, and the Mongols were triumphant, saying "You see, you disturbed the lords, and this is your punishment."

I could speak Mongolian and read Tibetan, and this impressed the Mongols. In fact, by the time of this, my first trip to Mongolia, I could already speak Mongolian quite fluently. Since 1924 a young Mongol named Gombojab, who was the son of the late prince Mergen Gln, had lived in my apartment in Leningrad. He was in Leningrad to learn Russian, and while I taught him Russian I also learned to speak Mongolian—*docendo discimus*. Gombojab, who was Zhamtsarano's protégé, later went to Paris to study with Paul Pelliot, the famous Sinologist, Iranist, Mongolist, and Turcologist, and became a research scholar in his own right. In 1937, during the Great Purge, he was arrested and "liquidated." His wife Oyun Bilig, a young Buryat, and their two children, Dzoriktu and Biliktu, were exiled to the Bashkir area in the Volga region.

As for the Mongol people themselves, they were rather filthy. They never washed and those few who wore any underwear at all rarely changed it. They were lazy but also very honest. This last trait can be illustrated by the following examples. The Mongols never had any loose change. When I had to buy something, for example, a sheep to replenish my food supply, I had to pay the exact amount. Therefore I had to carry with me a wooden chest filled with Mongolian equivalents of nickels, dimes, and quarters. The Mongols were inquisitive. Each time we arrived at a place, they would ask: "What is in this box?" and "What is this?" When my guide Dagva told them it was money, they marveled and insisted on seeing it. In one of the places I visited I learned that there was an inscription on a rock somewhere about sixty miles away. I wanted to see it so I made plans to go there on horseback and return next day. "What shall I do with my box of silver coins?" I asked Dagva. He replied: "Leave it here. Nothing will happen." I did as he suggested and when Dagva and I returned the next day, everything was in perfect order. No one had taken anything.

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In light of my experience I am inclined to believe this next story which was told to me by a bank clerk in Ulaanbaatar. The bank had sent silver bullion to a certain mint in the Soviet Union to have coins made. The coins came back in large sacks loaded on a truck. On the way the sacks rubbed against each other. One sack got a hole in it, and some coins spilled onto the road. The accompanying bank officer finally noticed this, and turned the truck back. He encountered a caravan and asked the headman whether he had seen money spilled on the road. "Oh, yes, we did," he answered, "it's still there." They went farther and, indeed, the money still lay on the road. Later when the money was counted only a few coins were missing. They must have rolled into the high grass by the side of the road.

The third example of Mongolian honesty took place on the steppe. I had been there for two months and had had no opportunity to send a letter or telegram to my wife in Leningrad. One day I met a Mongol who was riding on horseback to Ulaanbaatar. I asked him if he would send a telegram for me and he agreed, so I gave him money and the text of the telegram. A week later I met a Chinese on a mule-drawn cart who was also en route to Ulaanbaatar. Just to be sure I asked him to send a telegram and gave him money. Still later a Russian truck driver came along. I gave him money, a tip, and the text of my telegram. Two months later when I returned to Ulaanbaatar and was walking just across from the telegraph office, who should I meet but the Mongol. He greeted me cheerfully like an old friend and said: "Here's your money back. I didn't have time to get to the telegraph office." When I returned to Leningrad, I asked Nataliya whether she had received two telegrams in July. "No, just one," was the answer. I asked her to show me the telegram. It was the one sent by the Chinese who was apparently also an honest person. And the Russian truck driver? Let him have the benefit of the doubt: perhaps he sent the telegram but it got lost on the way.

Besides having this precious quality of honesty, the Mongols were also hospitable. Whenever we were passing a settlement, even if the *ger* were as much as a mile or more off our path, Mongols immediately came to us on horseback with large *dombo*, jug-shaped

pots, filled with tea or *airig*, fermented mare's milk, for us to drink.

People everywhere told us stories, legends, and epics. They recited verses and songs so willingly that both Bambaev and I collected a large amount of folklore material. While in Erdeni Dzuu we also investigated the site of the former capital of Old Mongolia, Karakorum, which had been founded in 1220 and later, after Chingis Khan's death in 1227, became the capital of Mongolia. The site is quite near the monastery and we could see many small mounds, which indicated housing sites, and found numerous fragments of chinaware.

From Erdeni Dzuu we went to Ulaanbaatar and from there returned to Leningrad. This was my first and last expedition with Balji Bambaev. Later he graduated and returned to his native Buryatia where he got a job as a research scholar at the Learned Committee in Ulan Udè. Balji was arrested in the 1930s and jailed in Ulan Udè, but he was fortunate in having a friend among the prison laborers. One day his friend came to empty the septic tank in the section of the jail where Balji was held. He filled the receiving tank only halfway, placed Balji in it and in this manner smuggled him out of jail. His friend took the tank to a spot on the Selenga River far away from the city, where soap and a set of clean clothes awaited Balji. After a good bath, Balji Bambaev headed towards Manchuria, and he was never heard of again. It is possible that he made it to China and lived there for a long time, but he may also have perished at the time, either in Manchuria or on the way to the border.

I returned to Leningrad in late September 1926 and started preparing my materials for publication. During the summer my little son Valerian had grown and he was a friendly and good-natured child. He hardly ever cried and was in good health. Of course, he was not immune to colds and children's diseases. One day Nataliya and I went to a party and while we were gone the little fellow started running a fever. My mother was very concerned about this and called Dr. Grinberg. It was a good thing that my mother had recognized the danger and called him, because our physician found

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that something was also wrong with Valerian's ears. The next day we called our ear doctor Goldshtein and soon everything was all right again. Our Valerian was also an intelligent child. He was no more than a year and a half old when he uttered his first words. It was summer and the three of us were living in a rented summer cottage in Berngardovka. One day I was walking about with him perched on my arm, when he pointed in the direction of some bee hives standing behind a fence and said "bee houses." Such words are rarely spoken by children of his age, and I wonder where he had ever heard these words which are so different from the first words children ordinarily say.

My second trip to Mongolia was particularly successful and took place in 1927. I went with my colleague and friend V. A. Kazakevich, who had been a year behind me in school, and Garma Sanzheev, a Buryat who at that time was a student at the Institute of Living Oriental Languages. We left in the middle of May and traveled via Ulan Udë and Altan Bulag to Ulaanbaatar. There we separated. Kazakevich went to Dariganga, a region in the southern part of Mongolia, and Sanzheev went to the Darkhats, a Mongolian tribe inhabiting the area near Lake Khöbsögöl (Kossogol) in the northern part of the country. I remained, however, in Ulaanbaatar for about six weeks, studying Dagur, a language of special interest, because it has preserved some features of Middle Mongolian, the language of the twelfth to sixteenth centuries. In Ulaanbaatar I also found some Bargu Buryats who lived in the northwestern corner of Manchuria, speakers of Kharchin, Ordos, and the dialect spoken in Ulaan Tsab, all three in Inner, i.e., Chinese, Mongolia. I published my Dagur grammar in 1930, and the Bargu Buryat materials appeared as an article in 1931.³

I left Ulaanbaatar at the end of June and went on horseback to the area adjacent to the Russian border. A few days after my departure from Ulaanbaatar I fell ill with dysentery, and the local Mongols suggested I eat boiled dog testicles which, according to their witch doctors, was the best medicine. I refused to take this sort of medicine and instead took castor oil and drank strong tea, not eating solid food at all for a few days. This helped and I soon

recovered. I went via Kui to the upper reaches of the Kharaa River and spent a couple of weeks in the beautiful hilly and wooded area on the Tüngeliin gol which comes down from the Khentei mountains. It is possible that this river is the one mentioned in the *Secret History of the Mongols* (1240). I collected a large number of songs and even some epics in this region. From there I went to the Amar Bayaskhalant Khiid monastery (The Monastery of Peace and Joy) on the banks of the Orkhon river and saw the relics of one of the first Jebtsundamba Khutuktus, i.e., the Living Buddhas of Mongolia. From there I went on to Chuluut where I wrote down a number of tales and a few epics. I met a shaman in Chuluut, my first and last shaman in Mongolia, and managed to write down some of his incantations. I returned to Ulaanbaatar at the beginning of September.

My stay in Ulaanbaatar proved to be highly interesting, and not only from the scholarly point of view. My friend Kazakevich had the remarkable ability to get acquainted very quickly with all kinds of people. One of these acquaintances was a certain Persander. He claimed to be of Swedish origin but was a French citizen. He was one of several adventurers then still living in Ulaanbaatar. Later they were expelled from Mongolia and jailed in the Soviet Union. It was hard to say what Persander's specialty was, but his main occupation was investigating old houses in Ulaanbaatar so as to find the exact one where Baron Ungern-Sternberg had lived during the civil war. It was rumored that in 1921, just before his capture by the Soviets, the baron had hidden his treasure under the floor of one of the houses which he had occupied, and Persander was trying to find that treasure.

In 1927 there were still many foreigners in Ulaanbaatar. I remember the Norwegian Oskar Mamen, an American by the name of Carter, a German Dr. Rot (or Roth), and many Russian merchants from Harbin, most of them of Jewish extraction. The Chinese were the most numerous of all the foreigners and, at least in my experience, also the most reliable. They were punctual. For instance, once I ordered a big book chest from a Chinese carpenter and asked him to deliver it as early as possible the next day. The man brought

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the chest around four o'clock in the morning when it was still pitch dark.

In the following year, 1928, I went to Buryat Mongolia. I chose to study the Alar Buryats, who lived in the western part of the then Buryat Mongolian Autonomous Republic of the Soviet Union. This region was also the homeland of Garma Sanzheev who had come to Leningrad in 1925 and had begun to study Mongolian under Vladimirtsov. Sanzheev was the first Buryat with whom I did research. He was my native informant. I wrote down a number of texts as he pronounced them and with his help I then translated them into Russian. Now in 1928, having thus acquired some knowledge of the language, I decided to go to his native place and do further study. The Alar area is thirty to forty kilometers from the Zabitui railroad station on the Trans-Siberian line, not far from Cheremkhovo, which has since become quite an industrial city. Sanzheev's village was called Taishin. In winter the Alar Buryats lived in villages of the Siberian-Russian type consisting of one or several streets fronted on both sides by log houses. Each house had several rooms and a roof made of clapboard. In summer, however, they lived in wooden *ger* in an area called *Ülzeitü* which is about twenty kilometers from Taishin. There I collected some epics, songs, and other folklore materials.

The Alar Buryats were semi-sedentary. They had been engaged in agriculture since the eighteenth century, but they had so many cattle that they had to pasture them far away from the fields. Therefore in summer they lived in large, mostly hexagonal wooden *ger* with floors, small openings in the walls which served as windows and large openings in the roofs through which the smoke escaped. The local Buryats were rather well-to-do. It was interesting to me that their farm hands and domestic servants were Russians. Garma's mother had died long before, and his father lived alone and was a heavy drinker. Garma had a half-brother, the son of his father's second wife. The Sanzheevs had been rich and had sold their cattle just in time so that later, when farms were collectivized they had almost no cattle at all. I lived in the *ger* of Garma's uncle Aleksei. It was a large and tidy *ger*, and I never noticed any vermin whereas

normally in Mongolian *ger* you inevitably were infested with lice within minutes after going inside.

For the first few days after my arrival the Buryats were mistrustful and obviously afraid that I might report on them if they said anything against the regime. They therefore tried to convince me what loyal Soviet citizens they were by telling me how happy they were and how much they owed to the Soviets for their happiness. Soon, however, they showed me old photographs in which they appeared in their best garments: the women in silk robes with golden coins sewn along the hems, and wearing precious necklaces. They said: "Formerly we used to wear beautiful garments, but we have hidden them so nobody can see them and now we try to look as poor as possible and wear only the worst garments we have." These, then, were their true feelings!

The Alar Buryats had been officially converted to Russian Orthodoxy but in actuality remained shamanist. It was strange to see them go to the Russian church, later to a Lamaist temple at a small lamasery and, finally, to a shamanistic service. Their explanation was quite logical: if one god does not help, the others might. The shamanism of the Alar Buryats contained some Buddhist and Christian elements of a later date. Once I had the opportunity to attend a *tailgan* (sacrifice) to the shamanist gods or spirits. Men came with their children, and their sisters who had married outside the clan were present as well. Wives, that is, women who had married into the clan, did not attend the ceremony. This is due to exogamy: the wives had to have come from other clans, as men could not marry women of their own clan. Therefore, wives would customarily return to their home clans to conduct their own sacrifices to their clan deities.

Several shamans were present. A mare was slaughtered and part of the meat was offered to the deities along with libations of *arsi* (the Alar form of Buryat *arkhi*), an alcoholic beverage distilled from sour milk. The remaining meat was distributed among the participants. To my surprise, I also received a piece. This was because I was a guest of members of this clan but did not belong to any other clan. One might surmise that only members of other clans

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were excluded from the sacrifices, and that belonging to another clan was a more serious reason for exclusion than having no clan affiliation whatsoever.

In Buryatia, conditions in the summer of 1928 were still rather normal. Shamans were not yet persecuted, and collective farms had not yet come into existence, although rumors about them were circulating. Once I was even approached by a teacher from Golumet', a Russian village. He wanted to know why collectivization was necessary. It was by no means easy to explain the situation and at the same time avoid criticism of the current policies of the Soviet government. Fortunately his daughter, a pretty but extremely provincial girl of about eighteen, diverted the conversation in another direction, by asking me if I played the guitar.

After my return to Leningrad in August I worked on the materials collected and wrote a two-volume work entitled *Alarskii govor* (The Alar Dialect).⁴ The first volume is the grammar of the dialect, the second is texts and Russian translations.

On August 25, 1928 my second son was born and we named him Nikolai (Nicholas). I had been a full professor at Leningrad University since 1925 and now, in 1928, I was also promoted to full professor at the Institute of Living Oriental Languages.

I went to Mongolia once more in May 1929. This turned out to be my last trip to Mongolia because after 1929 I could never get an exit visa. This time I only went for a short time and stayed in Ulaanbaatar where I continued my studies of Solon, Bargu, Ordos and Urat. These dialects were spoken mostly in Inner Mongolia, but many speakers also lived and worked in Ulaanbaatar. After sessions with my informants, I had time to do some sightseeing outside the city. Once I went to Bogdo Uula (Holy Mountain) and walked in a dense and beautiful forest. There were many caves with Buddhist pictures, and occasionally a wild animal appeared, for Bogdo Uula was a reservation where hunting and lumbering were prohibited. Another rule was that death sentences could not be carried out within sight of the mountain. Therefore, those who were to be shot were led into a depression behind a hill from where the mountain could not be seen, and were there executed.

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I had also time to visit a few persons I knew. One of them was Dr. P. N. Shastin, a medical doctor. For a long time, Dr. Shastin had been the only European physician in Mongolia. In 1929 he was both head physician at a hospital for civilians and an army surgeon. Once I came to the Shastins for dinner, and Dr. Shastin had come home only a few minutes before and looked very tired. I asked him if he had had a very long, tiring day, and he replied that he had been examining recruits just drafted into the army. Of more than 150 men he had examined more than half showed very clear symptoms of hereditary syphilis.

I was not the only visitor in Shastin's home. Other scholars and members of research expeditions were his guests. Among the frequent visitors was a Russian botanist from the Academy of Sciences in Leningrad who turned out to know less about fauna than flora. He had heard of the very high incidence of venereal diseases in Mongolia and was extremely afraid he would catch it himself. One day when we were dining at Shastin's, I saw the botanist make a very unhappy face. He was obviously feeling ill. After dinner both of us walked home. We were staying in a house belonging to the Mongolian Learned Committee, the predecessor of the present Academy of Sciences. In earlier years walking had been dangerous because of the existence of enormous packs of ferocious stray dogs, and we still remembered the Russian soldier who had been torn to pieces by dogs. I also remembered that even as late as 1926 it was suicidal to walk alone at night. As we walked along I asked him: "What's the matter with you? You look so unhappy." He answered that he had caught venereal disease while sitting at the dining table. The proof was that he suddenly felt pain in a particular part of his body. I explained to him that this could not possibly have happened, because these diseases are not transmitted by air, and this seemed to comfort him. The irony of it, however, involved his wife who had come with him to work as a collector on the expedition. She was probably half his age (about twenty) and he, being overly concerned about his health, had obviously neglected his conjugal obligations. It was known to many that she compensated for this by having affairs with several Russian chauffeurs. I wonder what his reaction would

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have been if he had known about this.

After this short stay in Mongolia I returned to the Soviet side of the border, with plans to continue my summer research among the Buryats. This time I had intended to visit the island of Ol'khon in Lake Baikal. It had attracted my interest because it had a very small population of about four or five hundred people but at least fifty or sixty shamans. Unfortunately I had to return to Leningrad immediately, for a purge of the Academy of Sciences was in the offing, and I did not want to be away during such a critical event. I shall describe that event in the following chapter, but will now continue my narration about fieldwork among the Buryats.

My next opportunity to return to Buryatia came in 1930. I went to the Aga region in the easternmost part of the then Buryat Mongolian Republic bordering on Manchuria. Later this region was detached from the republic and became a mere autonomous county in the Chita region of Eastern Siberia. In June of that year I went to Ulan-Udè where I was given several assistants to work with me. One of them was the Khalkha Mongol Gombojab Mergen Gûn mentioned above. At that time Gombojab was a research fellow at the Buryat Learned Committee headed by Bazar Baradiin. Bazar Baradiin was a very learned Buryat who had made a journey to Lhasa, published a book⁵ and several articles in academic publications and taught Mongolian at St. Petersburg University prior to World War I.

Another assistant was Gombojab's wife, Oyun Bilig, a young Buryat. Her Russian name was Agrippina Nikolaevna Borzhonova. She had graduated from Irkutsk University, with a major in Russian, and was also a research fellow of the Learned Committee. The third companion was Bakhanov, a student at the Pedagogical Institute in Ulan-Udè. He was to learn how to do field work on dialects.

We went by train from Ulan-Udè to the railroad station Mogoitui which is located between Chita and the Manchurian border. From there we proceeded to the Russian village called Aginskoe where the famous Aga lamasery, also called the Aga Datsan, is situated. The monastery was very large at that time and housed about 300 monks. I became acquainted with some lamas and saw their very impressive printing office which contained the

wooden printing blocks for about 200 xylographs. The Aga monastery also had a very fine library but later, toward the end of the thirties, it was closed and the library was actually destroyed. A film was once made in that area in which during one scene some lamas were required to form a procession coming out of the monastery, carrying volumes of the Kanjur (Sanskrit: Tripitaka), a collection of Buddhist works, on their heads. This procession of lamas walked around the monastery and here the scene ended. The books were then thrown into a ditch by the road, and the actors started on the next scene. What books were not destroyed then were later sent to paper mills for recycling. I should point out that lamas would never have done such a thing, but the movies, not only in the Soviet Union but also in Europe and the United States, are notorious for distorting the history and real life of "exotic" peoples.

After leaving the monastery we proceeded to Chiluuu, Khoito-Aga (North Aga), Urda-Aga (South Aga), and Khara Sheber. In Urda-Aga I visited Professor Gombojab Tsybikov, the well-known Mongolist whose account of his pilgrimage to Tibet was published by the Russian Geographical Society in 1919.⁶ Gombojab Tsybikov is also the author of numerous works on Mongolian philology. For many years he had been professor at the Oriental Institute in Vladivostok. After the revolution he taught Mongolian at Irkutsk University, although his family stayed in Urda-Aga while he lived in a very modest apartment in Irkutsk. His one passion was cattle breeding, and he spent almost his entire salary on buying livestock. Coming from a nomad's family, he could not imagine life without a herd. He kept buying cattle and sheep until after he had retired from Irkutsk University to become a member of the Buryat Institute of Language, Literature, and History in Ulan-Udê. By then he had acquired a huge herd. When collectivization began in 1929, at first they left Tsybikov alone. In 1930, however, several months after my visit, all his cattle were taken away and he soon died of a broken heart. The Communists ignored the fact that he had not acquired his herd by exploiting the poor but by buying it with his earned salary. His widow and his foster son, who was in his early twenties at the time, were arrested and exiled to Northern Siberia where they

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died a short time later. This is how the life of one of the few native Buryat scholars at that time came to a close.

When I visited him, Professor Tsybikov had a comfortable and well-furnished Russian-style house. One of the rooms was actually a small Buddhist shrine which contained a model of the Buddhist Paradise, *bde-ba-can*, pronounced by the Buryats Dewaajan. On a platform of about twelve square feet were models of a palace, temples, pagodas, *caityas* and trees, all made of gilded brass and enamel, with the Buddha seated in the center surrounded by his disciples. This shrine must have cost a fortune. After Tsybikov's dispossession the collection, a real treasure, was destroyed.

From Urda-Aga I went to Khara Sheber, which means the Black or Dark Thicket. I had been told that that area was particularly interesting because the people were very backward, shamanism flourished, and folk singers could be found who knew the epics. As it turned out, I did not find anyone who knew epics, but I did collect songs, riddles, and short stories. I had also the good fortune to witness the ordaining of a young shamaness. It is too long a ritual to describe here in its entirety, so I will give only a brief account of it.

The shamaness was seated in her felt *ger* which was identical to those of the nomadic Buryats in the Aga district and quite similar to the Khalkha-Mongolian *ger* of the Mongolian People's Republic. In the center of the *ger* where ordinarily the hearth stands, a thirty-foot tall birch tree had been planted. Its branches stuck out from the *toono*, the smoke vent in the roof. About halfway up the birch was a small nest made of sheep wool containing several eggs, also made of wool. This tree was called the Mother Tree. About fifty feet away from the *ger* another birch had been planted of the same height as the Mother Tree and connected to it by a woolen string. This tree, called the Father Tree, was believed to impregnate the Mother Tree by way of the string, and the eggs in the nest were the result of this union.

The shamaness' old tutor was present in the *ger* when she began her incantations which lasted several hours without interruption. The entire ritual, called *shanar* (lit. essence, nature, character, characteristic, quality, property and animation), continued for

three days and nights. At the end, the shamaness became ecstatic, fainted, and collapsed. After lying motionless for a while, she resumed her incantations but with a different voice, the voice of the spirit which had entered her body and was now speaking through her mouth. During the entire performance the shamaness abstained from food, only occasionally sipping some tea from a cup.

I had met shamans before, in Mongolia, at the *taligan* (sacrifices) of the Alar Buryats and in the early 1920s at the Institute of Living Oriental Languages in Petrograd, but this was the most interesting performance I had seen, and I even managed to photograph some parts of it. The photos turned out quite well, but unfortunately I had to leave them behind when I escaped from Leningrad in 1941.

I also found another shaman in that area who was willing to recite incantations and invocations for me. I succeeded in writing them down and they are published in my book *Buryat-mongol'skii fol'klorny i dialektologicheskii sbornik* (Buryat-Mongolian Folkloristic and Dialectological Collection).⁷ At the end of my sojourn in Buryatia in late August I learned that the great scholar Bartol'd had died some weeks earlier. He died quite suddenly of uremic poisoning shortly after the death of his wife, a sister of V. A. Zhukovskii, mentioned earlier. His death was an enormous loss for international scholarship.

Before my trip to Buryatia in 1930, I spent the month of May in the Crimean Tatar Republic. In Simferopol' (Tatar: Ak Mesjid; English: White Mosque) there was a pedagogical institute for both Russian and Tatar students. These students were being trained by a special Tatar faculty to become teachers in Tatar schools. Nataliya accompanied me because both of us wanted to be in the Crimea in the spring when everything was in bloom. The blue sea, the cliffs, and the shore lined with cypress forests, the beautiful gardens, wild roses, wisterias, and other blooming shrubs and trees made us feel that we were in paradise. However, not everything was so idyllic. Collectivization of the farms had begun two years before, and many Tatars who had been dispossessed of their vineyards and orchards had been exiled to Siberia or northern Russia where most of them

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died of tuberculosis or simply froze to death. Food shortages in the Crimea were the result of this collectivization, and we were rather hungry during most of our stay.

The Crimea, especially its southern part which very much resembles Turkey, was the home of the Tatars and of the so-called South Coast Tatars. The latter are actually Turks and even speak the Turkish as it is spoken in Turkey. Village names were either pure Turkish or Tatar. I remember one village named Taushan Bazar which means the Hare Market in Tatar and another K  k K  zi which means the Eye of the Sky in Turkish. The Turks and Tatars were friendly and hospitable people. They were excellent workers, and their homes were much cleaner than those of the Russians. Another prosperous ethnic group living in the Crimea were the Germans who had been settled there at the time of Catherine the Great. This ethnic diversity had deep historical roots. I could see this in the many Greek relics found in the area and in an old fortress I visited which had been built by the Genoese in the early Middle Ages. After the second world war the Crimean Tatars were exiled for having collaborated with the German invaders. The local Germans were also exiled to various places, and their whereabouts now are unknown. Today the Crimea is inhabited almost exclusively by Russians and Ukrainians.

Nataliya and I returned to the Crimea a year later, in May 1931, when the institute again invited me to teach Turkic linguistics, the comparative study of the Turkic languages, and related subjects. Many years later I met one of these former students in Germany where he had fled during World War II when the German army retreated from the Crimea. He had become a scholar and published a book on the Crimean Tatars and their struggle for liberation.⁸

After my month in the Crimea I went to Buryatia with my student, T. A. Bertagaev. Bertagaev, who later became a scholar and published several works on Mongolian languages, was a Buryat from the area west of Lake Baikal.⁹ Our destination was the basin of the Selenga, a mighty river flowing from Mongolia northward into Lake Baikal. After reaching Ulan-U   we went by steamboat to Novoselenginsk, a city on the left bank of the Selenga River. From

there we proceeded to Tamcha, the administrative center of Selenga aimak which is located on the southern shore of Gusinoe Ozero (Goose Lake).¹⁰ Tamcha is near a famous Lamaist monastery, which had already been closed by the time we visited it, and all the lamas had been exiled to various places, mostly in northern Siberia. From Tamcha we visited first the Ulaan Odo (Red Star) collective farm and later went to the Noikhon area and the Iskra (Spark) collective farm on the right bank of the Selenga where the river Khilok joins the Selenga. I collected epics, songs, riddles, proverbs, and other materials in Noikhon which many years later I translated into English.¹¹ This work was entitled *Tsongol Folklore* because the local Buryats speak the Tsongol dialect which is somewhere between the Buryat language and Khalkha Mongolian. The phonology is almost like Khalkha, but in other features it is like Buryat. I was quite surprised at the amount of folklore materials which could still be obtained in collective farms. I spent several weeks in the Noikhon area and when in late August 1931 I returned to Ulan-Udè, I learned that Vladimirtsov had died on August 17. I could not believe it because when I had left Leningrad he was in good health, and though he had lived a rather irregular life one would never have expected him to die so soon. The cause of his death was heart failure.

In 1931 the economic situation in Buryatia was very bad. The total collectivization of farms had been completed only a year before, and there was practically nothing to eat. The Selenga area was better off because, although butter and cheese had been taken from the collective farms for export abroad, it had all been returned. The products had been made in the spring, when the cows fed on wild onions and garlic, and consequently the butter and cheese were unexportable! At every place we stayed we had no trouble obtaining plenty of cheese, butter, and some bread. The Buryats justifiably blamed collectivization for all their sufferings. They called it *saldagan ezii* (the pantless old hag), meaning that collectivization was causing such widespread poverty that soon people would have no pants to wear!

In 1932 I went with two Buryat students, Lubsan Gomboin and Aleksandr Khamgashalov, and the local teacher Zandaraa Baatorov

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from Ulan-Udè to the Barguzin area where the Barguzin river flows into Lake Baikal from the northeast. We went by train from Ulan-Udè to Tataurovo where I found a man who owned a troika, a vehicle drawn by three horses. From there we traveled about 200 kilometers to the Barguzin area through the virgin Siberian forest on a very bad road full of ruts and loose rocks. The owner of the troika, Elisei, was good-natured and talkative, a man in his thirties, who had been one of the partisans fighting against Kolchak's army. One day when I was discussing verbs in the local dialect with my students, Elisei suddenly asked, "What is a verb? Our priest always says 'verb' during the services." What Elisei had heard was, of course, the phrase *audiamus verbum divinum* which means "let us listen to the divine word." I explained to him what a verb is, and his face brightened, "So that's what a verb is! Tell me, professor, is this also a verb?" And he mentioned a four-letter word for copulating. "Yes," I assured him, "that's also a verb. All action words are verbs." All the time we were traveling through virgin cedar forests along the shore of Lake Baikal, we could see across the lake the snow-covered mountain ridges glistening in the sunlight like white marble studded with diamonds. It was probably the most beautiful and wildest scenery I have ever seen. When we reached the village of Maksimikha, slightly more than half-way between Tataurovo and Barguzin, we stopped for the night. Early the next morning we were awakened by heart-rending wails and laments. Later we learned that the bodies of sixteen fishermen had been brought ashore from an ice floe in the middle of the lake. The men had been fishing when a sudden storm broke up the ice, and they had been tossed about the lake until they died of hunger and exposure.

We finally arrived at the mouth of the Barguzin river. It was a very stormy day, and enormous waves rolled from the lake right up the mouth of the river. We had to cross the river, which was about 500 meters wide at that point, on a raft. When we reached the middle of the river the raft pitched and rolled, vehicles and horses slid to one side, and we almost capsized. Cold and wet, we finally reached the opposite bank. We entered a house in the village there, changed clothes and warmed up with vodka and hot tea. I said to my

companions, "Well, I thought for sure we would capsize, and I had my eyes on a large plank which I would have grabbed just in case." Elisei drew a switchblade from his boot, flicked it upon and brandished it in my direction. "Some other people had their eyes on it, too," he snarled and put the switchblade back into his boot. He seemed pleasant enough and witty, but in an emergency all his animal instincts would have been awakened.

In the Barguzin area my companions and I dispersed in all directions to collect interesting folklore and shamanist materials. I also found a group of Tunguses and gathered materials on their dialect and folklore. In one of the old barns I found an abandoned archive dating from the eighteenth century, and based on the tax rolls contained in it I could determine that the pedigrees the Tunguses had given me were indeed correct. In this connection, I would like to mention that the natives, both the Tunguses and Buryats, usually have very good memories and can remember all their ancestors. Thus when Zandaraa Baatorov asked people, "Whose son are you?" the answer would go back several generations. Once when an acquaintance of Zandaraa arrived at the name of an ancestor some eight or ten generations back, Zandaraa asked, "Are you of the Chono [wolf] clan?" "Yes," the man answered. It turned out that Zandaraa Baatorov had suddenly discovered one of his own relatives among the ancestors of the man interrogated.

From the Barguzin area we went by steamboat across Lake Baikal to the island of Oikhon (Russian: Ol'khon) where many shamans lived. I decided to stay about two weeks in order to find good narrators of epics and shamans. An excellent narrator was found immediately. He knew the most beautiful epics I had ever heard, but he was a fisherman and as the fishing season would last for another month, he was not able to spend time with me. Search for other narrators proved unsuccessful. It seemed none existed, or if there were any, they denied knowing any epics. An uprising of shamans had taken place less than a year before. The unfortunate shamans were arrested and deported, and as a result we had to leave Oikhon without the opportunity to record any epics. We went by rowboat to the western shore of the lake and crossed an area named

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Kosaya Step' (Slanting Steppe), to a large village called Khogot, on the road from Irkutsk to Yakutsk. Khogot was the home village of my student Bertagaev, and here we met the young secretary of the local party organization who was also an excellent storyteller and knew very long epics by heart. He was, however, too busy to work with us. While we were in Khogot, a tragedy occurred. A boy who was tending pigs was found shot to death. Several pigs had also been shot and others were apparently stolen. The police came from Irkutsk, about 150 kilometers away, and set up roadblocks everywhere, and anyone transporting large numbers of pigs was stopped and searched. I do not know if the murderer or murderers were ever caught.

From Khogot we went by truck to Irkutsk and from there I returned to Leningrad in early September. It was not until 1936 that I returned to Buryatia. A linguistic conference was held in Ulan-Udë in that year. To honor the participants of that conference a dinner had been arranged by the local government and M. N. Erbanov, the regional party secretary, was present. He sat at the head of the table, with myself on his right side and across from me the commissar of the interior, Markizov. I received a Buryat national silken caftan as a gift from the government and was also presented with the national meal of honor, the *töölei* which consists of a whole sheep's head complete with a scapula and several long ribs. It was, of course, impossible for me to eat all of this, but I had the right to share it with other guests. I used this opportunity to mention to Erbanov that old customs and landmarks should somehow be preserved. For instance, I suggested at least one Lamaist monastery should be preserved as a historical and ethnographical art museum. "I disagree, professor," said Erbanov. "I'm sure you would also wish to preserve a few lamas, and I can assure you that we are keeping them in labor camps where they are being so well preserved that you need not worry about them."

This was his reply. Poor Erbanov was always and everywhere faithful to the party line, but this did not help him because in 1937, when he went to a party conference in Moscow, he was arrested and shot. That was the time of the Great Purge, but before Erbanov met

his end there was an occasion soon after the conference in 1936 in Ulan-Udè, where Stalin gave a reception to honor the shock workers of Buryatia. Of course Stalin was present, and Markizov also attended since he was the foreman of that Buryat group of shock workers. Markizov's little daughter, Gelya, was with him and presented Stalin with a bouquet of beautiful flowers. Stalin took her in his arms and kissed her. This scene was photographed and reproduced in all the newspapers and displayed on posters in every school with the caption, "We Thank Our Dear Comrade Stalin For Our Happy Childhood." The photo was still on public display when Markizov and his wife were arrested. He was shot, and his wife perished in a concentration camp. Their Gelya, then four or five years old, was sent to an orphanage under another name. I wonder if she still thanked her dear comrade Stalin for her happy childhood.

My next trip to Ulan-Udè in July 1939 lasted only about ten days during which I attended a linguistic conference. I encountered hunger and deprivation. Fortunately for me, I was given a pass to the dining hall of the local party committee. When I first arrived there, the manager told me, "I will also give you your bread ration, if you don't mind." Surprised, I asked, "But why? Can't I get it elsewhere?" "Oh, no," he informed me, "you won't find any bread in the city." He gave me one kilogram of bread which consisted of a loaf and a single slice. I took it very reluctantly, and on my way back to the hotel I heard someone running after me. It was a young woman who begged me, "Citizen, please give me that slice of bread you're carrying. My children have not eaten for two days. There's absolutely nothing to eat in the whole city." I gave her not only the slice but the entire ration. I was astonished when she fell on her knees and thanked me profusely. I thought of the expression, "The word 'man' sounds proud." Would Gor'kii still have said it under these conditions?

In summer 1940 I was again in Ulan-Udè to help organize a *dekada* of Buryat arts. This *dekada* was to be performed for the government in Moscow, and it was thought that Stalin himself might attend. I was invited to check the historical and ethnographic accuracy of every aspect of the stage plays, including costumes and

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weapons. The *dekada* took place in the late fall of 1940 in Moscow, but Stalin did not attend, and stars and other decorations were so few that most participants were greatly disappointed.

My last trip to Buryatia was in May of 1941. At that time a conference was held to discuss the publication of the Geser epic which had been declared the Buryat,' national epic. In 1940 the Kalmucks had organized a celebration for the 500th anniversary of their Jangar epics. It is interesting that the Kalmucks had approached Stalin and asked him for permission to organize the celebration. He was agreeable, but he changed the wording. Instead of "Jangar, the Kalmuck national epic," he decreed that it read "Jangar, the epic of the Kalmuck people." Actually the Jangar epic only appeared after 1771 when a large number of Kalmucks fled from Russia to Mongolia. Jangar contains numerous Buddhist elements whereas in 1440 most Oirats, to which group the Kalmucks belonged, were not Buddhist but still shamanist. The Buryats, however, wanted a national epic of their own and Geser, which is ultimately of Tibetan origin, was proclaimed their national epic.

Soon after my return to Leningrad the Soviet Union was engulfed in World War II. Before I proceed to that period, however, I must mention some events in the years 1930 to 1941 which had a great influence, mostly adverse, on my life and my work.