CHAPTER 6

Among the Buryats

Ten days after we first arrived in Irkutsk by train, Tom and I boarded the Trans-Siberian Railroad again, retracing the route eastward to Ulan-Ude, the capital of Russia's Buryat Republic. We had been invited to speak at a World Bank conference, held in the regional government's main office building, a ponderous, multistoried edifice that still displayed a bronze plaque identifying it as the headquarters of the "Buryat Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic." In front of the building—and dominating Ulan-Ude's spacious, concrete-covered central square—was a monumental bronze head of Lenin, the largest of its kind in the world.

Tom's lectures on market economics were among the first presentations on that topic in a public forum in Ulan-Ude since Lenin and his Bolsheviks seized power in Russia more than seventy-five years before. Three hundred people from south-central Siberia attended the symposium, many of them ethnic Buryats from Ulan-Ude and the regions around Lake Baikal. At the buffet dinner that capped the first day of the conference, Tom and I found ourselves again in the company of these Asiatic people, with whom we had lively conversations about the changes occurring in post-Soviet Russia and about the future of the Siberian economy from the Buryats' point of view—encounters that piqued my interest in learning more about the Buryats themselves.

As the symposiasts stood patiently around the heavily laden buffet tables, waiting for the feast to begin, a tall, bulky Buryat man, straining the seams of his shiny gray-green suit, suddenly picked up a bottle of Russian champagne. Had I been making a movie about Genghis Khan, I would have

immediately cast him in the leading role. In one swift move he tore the metal foil off the top of the bottle and untwisted the wire, releasing the plastic cork with such force that it struck and shattered a light fixture above the table. Laughing loudly, he began swilling champagne directly from the bottle, while the other guests—apparently unperturbed about the debris that had fallen into the food—took this as a cue to start filling their plates. Later in the evening, after most of the guests had left, I spotted Genghis Khan plundering the leftovers, stuffing sandwiches, fruits, and cold meats into the pockets of his tight-fitting suit.

I first became aware of the people known as Buryats on the journey from Vladivostok to Irkutsk in January, 1994. As the train neared Ulan-Ude, I noticed several old wooden signs with peeling paint that still bore the traces of words written in a cursive, exotic-looking alphabet that was certainly not Cyrillic. On the crowded station platform at least half the people were of Asian descent, most of them with high cheekbones, swarthy complexions, and jet-black hair. Having traveled in many other parts of Asia, I could tell only that they were a type of Asian different from the ones I had seen before.

I soon learned that many of them were local Buryats, residents of the Buryat Republic, a section of Siberia located just north of Mongolia and east of Lake Baikal. Occupying part of the area known as Transbaikalia in tsarist and early Soviet times, the Buryat-Mongol Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic had been established in 1923 as one of several smaller political entities that made up the Russian Federated Soviet Socialist Republic of the Soviet Union. ("Mongol" was dropped from the Buryat Republic's name in 1958, in an effort to distance Soviet Buryats, politically, from their kin across the border in Mongolia.) Despite the nomenclature, however, such "autonomous republics" were neither truly autonomous nor on the same level as the fifteen socialist republics that made up the Soviet state. Autonomous republics and other areas designated as "autonomous" were subordinate territorial and administrative subdivisions created for certain ethnic minorities living in the Soviet Union.

In the 1990s the Buryat Republic had a population of more than one million, comprising sixty ethnic groups, of which the Buryats were the largest non-Russian group. During the Soviet era two other smaller Buryat "autonomous districts" had been also been created (within larger administrative regions), and these continued to exist in the new Russian federal structure established in 1992: the Ust'-Ordynskiy Buryat Autonomous District

(within the Irkutsk Region), west of Lake Baikal and north of the city of Irkutsk; and the Aginskiy Buryat Autonomous District (within the Chita Region), east of Lake Baikal and the Buryat Republic.

Culturally and geographically, the Buryats are divided into two major subgroups: the Western Buryats, or Baikal Buryats, who live west and north of Lake Baikal and on Ol'khon Island in the lake; and the more numerous Eastern Buryats, or Transbaikal Buryats, who live in the areas east of the lake. Buryats are closely related to Mongolians, whom they resemble in language and appearance and with whom they share many customs. Some Buryats even claim their people are descendants of Genghis Khan, the legendary thirteenth-century Mongol warrior whose vast empire extended from northern China across most of Central Asia and southern Russia, and whose grandson, Batu Khan, led the Golden Horde that terrorized and subjugated much of Russia and Eastern Europe, ushering in 250 years of Mongol domination.

The Buryats were actually a separate Mongolic group, distantly related to Genghis Khan's clan, who lived in the lands just to the north of them. History tells us that conflicts between these two tribes eventually drove the Buryats farther north where, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, they began to inhabit the area near the southern end of Lake Baikal. Buryat folklore, on the other hand, identifies the Buryats as originating on the shores of Lake Baikal itself. Whatever their place of origin, the Buryats no doubt mingled with the Mongol clans united under Genghis Khan and his descendants, as they swept through the Transbaikal region, producing a number of mixed Mongol-Buryat children, the ancestors of today's modern Buryats, many of whom proudly claim kinship with their warrior forebears.

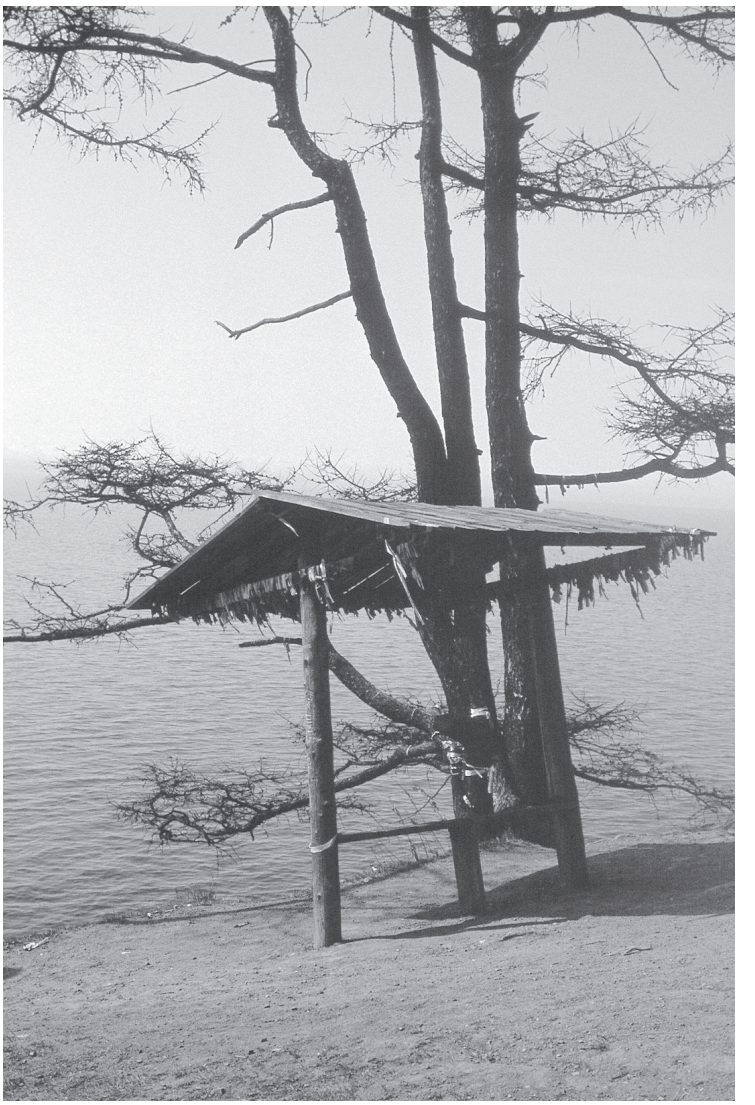
Nomadic herders of cattle, horses, camels, sheep, and goats, the Buryats were well established in the areas around Lake Baikal when the first Russian Cossacks arrived in that region in the seventeenth century. Expert archers and horsemen, the Buryats initially resisted Russian rule and the forced payment of tribute, in the form of fur pelts, to their Cossack overlords. Only after a century of Buryat uprisings and guerrilla actions against the Russian invaders did these two Asiatic and European peoples reach an uneasy accord. Eventually the Russians and Buryats began to live together more peacefully, some of them intermarrying and producing children with mixed loyalties to their Russian and Buryat progenitors.

During the nineteenth century the Buryats became more Russified than their other native Siberian neighbors, the Yakuts and Evenks. Under pressure from the tsarist authorities, some Buryats even gave up their nomadic

life, became farmers, and traded their portable felt-covered yurts for more stationary wooden yurts made of logs (although these wooden structures could still be disassembled and moved if necessary). Others served in Cossack regiments in the Transbaikal region. In the twentieth century Stalin's policy of forced collectivization drove even more Buryats into larger, permanent settlements on both sides of Lake Baikal. By the time I first encountered Buryats in the 1990s, most of them were settled members of modern society in the Russian Federation. The majority of them lived in rural areas, in small, single-family wooden houses in villages and towns in south-central Siberia, where they worked as farmers, fishermen, or stockmen. Others lived in the high-rise apartment blocks in major cities such as Irkutsk and Ulan-Ude, where they worked as industrial laborers and white-collar professionals.

Ulan-Ude was established by the Russians in 1648 as a fort near the confluence of the Selenga and Uda rivers. By the late twentieth century it had grown into one of the major cities in southern Siberia, with a population of four hundred thousand, of which approximately one-fifth were Buryats. Originally named Verkhneudinsk (Upper Udinsk, in Russian, because of its location on the Uda River), its name was changed to Ulan-Ude (Red Uda, in Mongolian) during the early Soviet era. An industrial city known for its large locomotive plant and railway repair workshops, Ulan-Ude was off-limits to most foreigners until the early 1990s, primarily because of its strategic location on the Trans-Siberian Railroad and its proximity to several military sites. Surrounded by typical Soviet-era high-rises, the center of the city in 1994 still retained a number of its old traditional wooden buildings trimmed with wooden fretwork. Ulan-Ude also boasted an opera house, a ballet company, two drama theaters, a large horse-racing track, interesting museums of fine arts and natural history, and a large, open-air, ethnographic museum, one of the best in Russia, where I spent an entire day wandering among the authentically restored wooden houses, looking at exhibits of daily life among the Russian Orthodox, Old Believer, and Buryat communities of the Transbaikal region in earlier times.

About twenty miles from Ulan-Ude is the Ivolginskiy Datsan (lamasery), the center of Tibetan Buddhism in Russia and a sacred place to many Buryats. Situated on a barren plain with a range of snow-capped mountains in the background, the Ivolginskiy Datsan looks like an exotic bird that somehow lost its way and alighted on the steppes of Siberia. Within its high-walled enclosure accessed by tall, ornately carved-and-painted wooden gates, the monastery complex comprises several houses, temples, prayer wheels, stat-



Buryat shrine overlooking Lake Baikal.

ues, stupas, and shrines, painted in a rainbow of bright colors accented with gold. In the center rises the main temple, a three-story brick edifice with curving roofs like a pagoda. Constructed in 1971, the main temple burned down only a few months after completion but was rebuilt within less than a year. Perhaps its initial fate was a reminder of the not-too-distant past when the Soviet government closed all the Buddhist monasteries in southern

Siberia, confiscated or destroyed most of the buildings, and sent thousands of lamas to the gulag. Only two lamaseries were reestablished after World War II, one of which was the Ivolginskiy Datsan, which has occupied this site since 1946. Today it serves as a center of Buddhist instruction and worship, a repository of rare manuscripts and valuable art, and a peaceful place of pilgrimage for believers and tourists alike.

Prior to the arrival of Buddhist lamas and Russian Orthodox priests in the Baikal region, the Buryats originally believed in a number of god-spirits who inhabited the earth, the water, and the sky. Beginning in the mid eighteenth century, however, many of the Buryats living east and south of Lake Baikal converted to Buddhism, whereas most of the Buryats living west and north of the lake tended to remain pagan or eventually converted, often only superficially, to Russian Orthodoxy. During my five months in Siberia, I asked several Buryats how many of their people were now practicing Buddhists, since Buddhism was experiencing a revival in post-Soviet Russia. The answer was often a sideways glance and the reply, in a quiet voice, "Some. But of course we have our own religion, shamanism."

Three months after our initial trip to Ulan-Ude, Tom and I were invited to speak at another World Bank conference, this one in Ust'-Orda, the capital of the small Ust'-Ordynskiy Buryat district west of Lake Baikal and about forty miles north of the city of Irkutsk. When I first visited this home of the Western Buryats, the winter snows had already melted, but spring had not yet arrived. Strong winds blew across arid landscapes reminiscent of west Texas or the high plains of Wyoming and Montana. Mineral salt deposits streaked the surface of the steppes like sweat marks on silk. In small villages, rows of unpainted wooden houses lined the narrow dirt streets. Everywhere I looked, the dominant color was brown.

Ust'-Orda, the largest town in the district, had a population of thirteen thousand, most of whom lived in traditional one-story, Russian-style wooden houses. Many were farmers and stockmen, for the Buryats are Siberia's cowboys (in fur hats instead of Stetsons). Cattle and horses wandered down the unpaved streets, and clouds of dust filled the air. Except for a couple of surfaced roads, a few Soviet-era multistory buildings, and a small central square with a statue of Lenin, Ust'-Orda looked much like it did when another American, Jeremiah Curtin, described his sojourn there a century ago, in an interesting account titled *A Journey in Southern Siberia: The Mongols, Their Religion and Their Myths*. Even in 1994, Ust'-Orda reminded me of sepia-toned photographs of small towns in the American West in the late 1800s.

After a morning session of the conference, I visited Ust'-Orda's ethnographic museum, in the company of two Buryat guides. Elizaveta (Liza) Alekseyeva was an attractive single mother in her mid-thirties, a local teacher of English who had honed her language skills at the regional pedagogical institute. Terry Batagayev, an uncle of the chief government official of the district, was a wiry, energetic, older former Communist who had learned his English as a Soviet military translator in the Russian Far East more than two decades earlier, monitoring radio transmissions by U.S. forces stationed in Alaska, Korea, and Japan. Both he and Liza seemed delighted to have an opportunity—rare in that part of Siberia—to actually converse in English with native speakers while also showing them the sights of Ust'-Orda.

The local ethnographic museum contained interesting displays of old Buryat folk art, iron agricultural implements, wooden kitchen utensils, ornately embroidered silk robes, and silver-and-coral jewelry. Liza explained what the kitchen utensils were used for, how coral had been a medium of exchange among Buryats in the past, and what symbols were sewn onto the ceremonial clothing. At the end of our tour, past and present suddenly converged in the form of a small television set showing a videotape of an annual Buryat summer festival called *sur-kharban* ("straight shooting")—a combination country fair and sports competition, with archery contests, horse racing, wrestling, singing, and dancing—that draws participants and onlookers from all over the region. Although a few of the Buryats on screen were dressed in colorful folk costumes, most of the crowd looked like modern Asian Americans, in blue jeans, T-shirts, and baseball caps.

As we looked at the museum's reconstruction of an old Buryat kitchen, I mentioned to Liza that I would like to learn more about traditional Buryat cuisine. Reticent at first, she must have sensed my genuine interest in the subject, because later she offered to arrange a meeting with her mother, a seventy-two-year-old retired geography teacher with a longstanding interest in Buryat foods. Pleased at this chance to talk with a Buryat outside the official context of the conference, I agreed to meet her mother, at her convenience, the following day.

A handsome woman of regal bearing, Liza's mother, Sofya Garankina, arrived wearing a simple black dress, white crocheted shawl, white mink hat, and a long necklace made of red coral. And, true to her daughter's description, Sofya proved to be a knowledgeable source of information about local foods and culinary customs. By the end of our long afternoon together, I had learned a new vocabulary of Buryat food terms and discovered how much Buryat cuisine differs from Russian cooking.

Sofya began by pointing out the importance of climate in influencing traditional Buryat cuisine, emphasizing that earlier nomadic Buryats lived off their livestock, whereas more settled ones in the modern era also ate fish and the kinds of vegetables that could be grown in southern Siberia. She went on to say that milk and meat—from horses, cows, sheep, and goats—are still the two major components of the Buryats' diet. And she emphasized that dishes made from milk "occupy first place in the 'national cuisine' of the Buryats"—including drinks such as "Buryat tea" (black tea flavored with butter, flour, salt, and cream or milk) and *tarasun*, known as "the Buryats' wine," a clear alcoholic beverage distilled from naturally soured milk. Milk also plays a symbolic role in Buryat life. For example, when guests arrive at a Buryat home, the hosts welcome them at the entrance with a bowl of milk or other milk products—such as sour cream or sweet cream—in the same way that Russians greet their guests with an offering of bread and salt.

Among the many Buryat meat dishes that Sofya described were meat-filled steamed dumplings similar to ones I had eaten in other parts of Asia, from Turkey to Japan. Far less appetizing (to me) was a Buryat specialty made from horse liver. Sofya told how several families in a Buryat village will join together to purchase a horse, which is given extra feed to fatten it for slaughter. The horse is killed in December—and among its meat products shared by the collective owners is a simple dish made by slicing the liver into very thin pieces, each topped with a thin layer of the best yellow-white horse fat. These slices of liver and fat are rolled up together into roulades and then put outside, in a place protected from hungry animals, to freeze solid in the Siberian winter. The Buryats cut the roulades crosswise into thin slices and eat them raw, garnished with chopped onion, garlic, and salt. Sofya said that one horse liver, prepared and preserved in this manner, was sufficient for the several families who had bought into the horse. According to her, these raw liver roulades, which stay frozen throughout the winter, are eaten mainly in the spring, by people who are anemic or who have bad eyesight. But I got the distinct impression that raw horse liver layered with fat was considered to be a tasty delicacy by many Buryats, including Sofya herself, regardless of their state of health.

The three-day World Bank conference in Ust'-Orda concluded with a banquet for fifty people in the dining hall of the district government—a room whose paneled walls were decorated with stylized horses and Buryat motifs made of wood and brushed metal. The meal, which began at half past noon, consisted of a jumble of courses, with heavy emphasis on meat dishes much like Sofya had described: first, an appetizer of sliced fresh

tomatoes and Russian *kolbasa* sausage, followed by beef soup made with potatoes, onions, pickled red peppers, and paprika. Next came a large meatball accompanied by mashed potatoes, then a plate of stir-fried beef strips, onions, and pickled red peppers, garnished with pickled cabbage. Dessert was a flaky pastry made with lard, accompanied by a glass of milky tea. Before we could even finish dessert, however, the waitresses put plates of sliced fresh cucumbers on the table, then platters of sausage, followed by more stir-fried meat-and-onion strips, and yet another round of meatballs and mashed potatoes.

Every course was accompanied by tumblers of Russian champagne and seemingly innumerable toasts with small glasses of vodka. Before each Buryat knocked back a glass of vodka, he dipped the tip of the third finger of his right hand into the liquor and flicked a small amount of liquid into the air or shook a drop or two onto the table. One man always tapped his finger tip on the right-hand lapel of his suit coat. These were gestures that I had seen before, not only among Buryats but also among some of the ethnic Russians I knew in Irkutsk and Ulan-Ude. Russians had told me that the gesture was meant as an offering to "Burkhan," whom they identified as the god or spirit of Lake Baikal. But our Buryat hosts in Ust'-Orda said that many of their deities of earth, air, water, or fire could be honored in this manner.

Toast after toast, we all gulped down the vodka in the name of international friendship, personal goodwill, everyone's health, and future prosperity—always after making the requisite ritual offering to the various gods, whoever they were. As the meal wore on, toasts turned into speeches, which seemed to become more long-winded as each new speaker stood up to say his piece. Suddenly it was my turn. Fifty faces, most of them Buryat, looked expectantly at the head table where Tom and I were sitting with the other guests of honor, including the Buryat district chief. But after all that vodka and champagne, I had to concentrate on just standing up. Steadying myself by holding onto the edge of the table, I peered out at the group and wondered what I could possibly say to a bunch of Buryat farmers, stockmen, factory managers, and local government officials in the outback of Siberia.

I took my cue from the physiognomy of the faces in front of me. After making the customary introductory remarks about how pleased I was to be there, I launched into an impromptu speech. "As you all know," I began, "most anthropologists think that the first people to inhabit America originally came from Siberia more than ten thousand years ago." The listeners looked at each other in surprise, as if I had just told them that President Clinton was really a Russian. "They walked across the land bridge that used

to connect northern Siberia with present-day Alaska," I continued, "and they eventually migrated farther down into what we now call North and South America. Those Siberians were the ancient ancestors of our so-called Indians, or Native Americans, today." The dinner guests continued to stare at me as if I were recounting some strange new fable. "And since some of my own ancestors were Native Americans," I went on, "that means way back in time we're all actually related to each other—you and I. And therefore we're all members of the same family!"

Those words brought the house down. After the loud applause finally subsided, an elderly, weathered-looking Buryat man stood up and said that he had never heard such a story before, but he would believe it because it was told to him by an honored American guest. And he added that since we were "family," he wanted to sing an old Buryat song to me. Everyone in the room became very quiet. Softly at first, then louder and louder, he began chanting in the Buryat language, his eyes closed and his face tilted toward the sky. The man seemed to be singing in a trance, enchanting his audience with secretly shared memories. In the midst of this unexpected performance, Tom and I looked at each other incredulously, both of us recognizing the strange familiarity of the song, which sounded just like Native American music we had heard as children in the American West. As the old Buryat continued to sing, louder and louder, with an intensity bordering on the ecstatic, the haunting sound sent chills down my spine, like a mystical melody from a long forgotten past.

When the singer finished, all the other Buryats cheered and clapped wildly. Then the old Buryat man asked Tom and me to reciprocate, to sing him a song from our own native land. We looked at each other apprehensively. Neither of us could sing our way out of a burlap bag if our life depended on it. But we had no choice: politeness required us to give it a try. "The Eyes of Texas?" I suggested to Tom. "I will if you will," he replied warily. Knowing that we were going to make fools of ourselves and embarrass our hosts, we stood up and proceeded to do just that. We sounded so terrible that both of us broke down laughing, long before we could finish the song—surely to the great relief of the audience, all of whom were laughing with us, acknowledging that we had at least made an effort, even if we couldn't carry a tune. "Now you know why we work as professors, not singers," Tom interjected between bouts of laughter, as we both gladly sank back into our seats, thankful that our social obligations had been fulfilled.

Our Russian colleagues from Irkutsk insisted that we leave the feast with them at 3:30 that afternoon, in order to get back to the city by nightfall,

driving on a bad road ahead of a storm that was blowing in. Stuffed to the gills and barely able to stand on our feet, we bade farewell to our Buryat hosts. Some of them walked us to the door of the dining hall, all the while asking us—in halting French—how we, as Texans, might help them develop their livestock industry in the region. By that time Tom and I were so looped that we didn't think there was anything unusual about discussing ranching in French with a bunch of Buryat stockmen in Siberia. Meanwhile the other Buryats in the dining room were still going strong, singing songs in their native language, ordering more rounds of vodka, and asking why we were leaving so soon after the party had started. Later I learned that the banquet in Ust'-Orda had continued nonstop for another twelve hours, until 3:30 the next morning!

Two months after that official feast, I was pleasantly surprised when Liza Alekseyeva telephoned our university office in Irkutsk and left word that Tom and I were invited to Ust'-Orda on a certain day in June, for an opportunity to sample traditional Buryat foods. The message said only that someone would pick us up early in the morning in Irkutsk to drive us to Ust'-Orda—and that a full day was planned for us. The actual reason for the invitation, as well as the itinerary, remained a mystery to us.

Liza and a Buryat driver arrived by car in Irkutsk at 8:30 A.M. on the appointed day. During the hour-and-a-half trip to Ust'-Orda, Liza told me the story of her own Buryat family: how they had lost their house and lands during the forced collectivization of the 1930s; how some of the men had disappeared into the gulag; how her grandmother had managed to hide some of her jewelry when the Communists confiscated all their household goods and personal property. Liza's family, who lived in a rural area north of Irkutsk, had been forced, like so many others, to move from their own village into a designated town—in their case Ust'-Orda—during the "dekulakization" period in Siberia in the 1930s, when several thousand Buryat farmers and herders were displaced from their homes and an estimated ten thousand Buryats perished from starvation or at the hands of Stalin's henchmen. Without looking directly at me, Liza told the story quietly, dispassionately, as if such topics were matter-of-fact, daily fare. But she glanced at me occasionally as if to ascertain whether I really understood this hidden history now revealed, these events that people had dared not mention for decades, and which, even in the 1990s, some people still suppressed or denied. As I listened to her stories, I felt like we were traveling through time, across a landscape that had been ravaged by rulers from the Communist collectivizers of the twentieth century all the way back to the early Mongol khans.

The route to Ust'-Orda took us near the village where the log house of Liza's family had once been located, before they were driven off their land and the house sold to someone more acceptable to Stalin's regime. (The purchaser had dismantled the house and transported it elsewhere, to be reassembled.) We also passed a couple of old, dilapidated Russian Orthodox churches now being restored, a small Buddhist temple set back from the road, and—simplest yet most impressive of all—a pagan shrine, an *oboo*, consisting of two very tall wooden poles with a horse's tail attached to the top of each one. Also tied to the poles were hundreds of strips of colored cloth that fluttered in the wind above a jumble of small offerings placed at the shrine: pieces of sausage and bread, unsmoked cigarettes, a jar half full of homemade tomato sauce, even coins and paper money. Empty vodka bottles littered the ground all around. In fewer than forty miles, we had seen symbols of the four different belief systems—communism, Russian Orthodoxy, Buddhism, shamanism—that had vied for the Buryats' allegiance at various times over the centuries.

When I asked Liza why the shrine on the road to Ust'-Orda was situated in that particular, rather desolate and nondescript spot, she answered that a shaman had chosen the location. To her, that seemed to be explanation enough. I had seen similar but smaller shrines on the shores of Lake Baikal, deep in the Siberian forest, and on the steppes near Ulan-Ude. But, for

Three generations of a Buryat family in Ust'-Orda.

some reason, this particular *oboo* in western Buryatiya struck a primordial chord in me. Each time that I passed it on the way to and from Ust'-Orda, I felt the presence of something primitive pulling me toward it, as if I were recalling memories formed centuries before I was born.

We arrived in Ust'-Orda at ten o'clock that morning and went directly to the official government dining hall for breakfast. Although there were only three of us—Liza, Tom and me—the table was set for a formal dinner for twelve, with the best dishes, glasses, flatware, and linens available in that part of Russia. As we dined on fresh tomatoes and cucumbers, hot yeast buns made from Liza's own recipe, sliced cold sausages, raw *omul'*, milky tea, and the inevitable vodka, Liza outlined our schedule for the day. She felt obliged to advise us that in the afternoon something special was planned: we could choose to be present for the event, or we could, of course, be excused from watching it, whichever we wished. When Tom quietly asked me what she was talking about, I whispered to him, "The Buryats are going to kill a sheep for us, in their traditional manner. The sheep is going to die whether we watch or not—so we might as well be present." Tom put down his forkful of raw fish and reached for a swallow of vodka, while I told Liza that we would be honored to attend all the events planned for us that day.

The first stop after breakfast was at the headquarters of the District Education Committee, where it finally became clear to me that our trip to Ust'-Orda was at least partially sponsored by that organization, apparently in gratitude for some assistance I had provided in obtaining English-language educational materials for their schools. The chairman of the committee ushered us into his office and made a formal speech welcoming us to Ust'-Orda, then surprised us with unexpected gifts: for me, a set of traditional Buryat jade-and-silver-filigree jewelry—earrings, necklace, and ring—and, for Tom, a drinking cup made out of a cow's horn decorated with Buryat metalwork. After such largesse we could not refuse the chairman's offer of something to eat and drink: rich chocolate candies with cups of black coffee and glasses of cognac. At eleven o'clock in the morning, however, that combination of caffeine, sugar, and alcohol did not sit well on the raw fish and vodka we had downed for breakfast only a short time before.

At the Education Committee's headquarters we were joined by Terry Batagayev, the English-speaking Buryat who had accompanied us during our first visit to Ust'-Orda in April. Together with Terry, Liza, and two drivers, we set off in two cars in the direction of a former Pioneer camp—similar to our Scout camps—several miles beyond Ust'-Orda, where we were scheduled to eat a midday meal of typical Buryat foods. About halfway to our

destination, at a spot where I could see nothing but forest on either side of the road, both cars stopped. "This is 'Three Pines,'" said Terry, "a sacred place for Buryats. Buryat people always stop here when they pass this way." I looked around at the forest, but no three particular pines stood out from the hundreds of trees surrounding us. "Why is it called 'Three Pines,' and why is it sacred?" I asked. "Because the shaman said so," replied Terry, as if that explained everything.

Out came the vodka bottles. We clambered up a steep, muddy embankment, through dense, wet undergrowth, until we reached the edge of the forest. "This is it . . . I think," Terry said rather uncertainly. Nothing distinguished that spot from any other place I could see. Terry poured the vodka, and we all performed the ritual of dipping our third finger into the glass and sprinkling some of the alcohol into the air as an offering to the Buryat spirits. Then we stood around in a rather uncomfortable silence, wondering what was supposed to happen next, until Terry abruptly piped up, "Okay, time to go."

A few miles down the highway, both cars turned off onto a road so deep in mud that we had to get out and stand aside while the drivers made several attempts to move the vehicles onto firmer ground. Finally leaving one car behind, Liza, Terry, Tom, and I climbed into the second car and bumped down the rutted, muddy track for about half a mile until we bogged down once more. Just then, a spiffy, well-dressed Buryat woman in a tailored suit and high heels emerged from the forest and came walking toward us, struggling to maintain her balance in the squishy morass. She'd come from the Pioneer camp to tell us that the road was not passable beyond this point and the truck bringing the food supplies for our special Buryat meal had not been able to get through to the site.

Terry—who had apparently spent a lot of time arranging the noon meal for us—was obviously disappointed at this unexpected turn of events. Undaunted by the situation, however, we all got out of the car and slogged through the mud for the remaining half mile to the camp. Despite the remoteness of the location and the lack of special supplies, the camp's cook had managed to prepare a copious and delicious meal: fresh fish, stewed chicken, and fried potatoes; a salad of finely chopped red radishes, green onion tops, and wild garlic; plenty of yeasty Russian brown bread and a special fried bread made from a Kirghiz recipe; and commercial chocolates for dessert. Pitchers of Kool-Aid–colored *sok*—watery, artificially flavored "fruit" juice—were ignored in favor of bottles of warm Russian champagne. As we sat under two large hand-painted banners proclaiming PRIYATNOGO

APPETITA! (BON APPETIT! in Russian) and WELCOME (in English), our hosts presented us with more unexpected gifts: a Russian wristwatch for me and a decorative ceramic samovar for Tom—along with a bottle of champagne and a bottle of vodka, which we promptly opened and passed around the table, to the obvious delight of everyone there, including the cook, who slipped out of her kitchen to join the festivities in the dining hall.

Barely able to stay awake after so much midday booze, we took a short tour of the Pioneer camp, then boarded a large Russian four-wheel–drive vehicle that managed to get us back through the oozing mud to the two cars waiting at the highway. On the return trip to Ust'-Orda, we stopped again at the sacred spot of the three pines to make the requisite offering to the gods and consume another round of vodka. Fortunately for us, Terry didn't insist that we climb the embankment that time. Apparently a roadside offering was sufficient, especially at that stage of our fatigue and lightheadedness.

At four o'clock in the afternoon the car pulled up to a high wooden gate at the home of the Tabikhanovs, a Buryat family who lived in Ust'-Orda. As we started through the front door, Yekaterina Tabikhanova, the woman of the house, warned us not to step on the threshold: to do so would bring bad luck—a custom that Buryats share with Russians, Chinese, and Mongolians. However, the Buryats were pleased that it was raining when we arrived, for they considered it a good omen when guests brought wet weather with them. After we had removed our shoes in the entry hall and changed into slippers, Olya Tabikhanova, the grandmother, greeted us in the traditional Buryat manner by presenting each of us with a bowl of *tarag*, a cool, refreshing, and (thankfully) nonalcoholic soured-milk drink similar to kefir or cultured buttermilk. Under other circumstances I would have been better able to appreciate its taste and restorative properties. But soured milk was not the best substance to add to a stomach already brimming with vodka, cognac, and champagne.

The Tabikhanov family of husband, wife, five children, and one grandmother lived in a single-story wooden house, its exterior similar to farmhouses that I knew well from my childhood in Texas in the 1950s. The interior had blue-washed plaster walls, middle-class Russian furniture, and a graceful, Oriental-looking peaked archway leading into the kitchen. Although the house had electricity, there was no running water and indoor plumbing; the toilet was located outdoors in a privy next to the barn. To my surprise the Tabikhanovs had three cookstoves: a gas stove, hooked up to a large orange gas cannister, in the entry hall; a modern Russian electric range in the kitchen; and a traditional Russian brick-and-plaster stove, used

both for cooking and for heating the house, built into one wall of the kitchen itself.

As soon as we finished drinking the *tarag*, we all went outdoors to watch the slaughter of the sheep. The head of the family, Rodion Tabikhanov, led a ewe from his barn into the enclosed yard behind the house. He flipped the ewe on her back, knelt over her, and with a long knife swiftly made a deep incision in her breast. The he reached inside the animal with one hand to squeeze her heart until it stopped. This is the Buryats' traditional method of slaughter, the way that they and the Mongols have killed their livestock for centuries.

We watched as Rodion and his three sons butchered the sheep, first cutting off the forelegs and hind legs at the lowest joint, then gradually removing the sheepskin in one piece. The Buryats used a special knife—and only that one knife, which is reserved for this ritual—to make the initial incision and to butcher the animal. The method of slaughter ensured that little blood was lost and none of it touched the earth (for religious reasons, I was later told). An ax was used only once, with only one blow, to split the pelvic bone, as part of the ritualized process. And the carcass was then butchered in such a way as to preserve as much blood as possible, to be collected and used in making one of the specialties of the feast.

As the men proceeded to cut up the sheep, the women of the family worked on processing the innards at tables set up in the yard. When the sheep's liver was removed, fresh and steaming, from the carcass, the raw liver was cut into chunks and distributed among all of us as a special treat. I have to admit that I busied myself with taking photographs at that point, but Tom could not avoid the inevitable. He saved face for both of us by picking up a piece of raw liver, sprinkling it with salt, and managing to swallow it, all the while smiling and saying how good it tasted.

Rodion removed the sheep's heart, lungs, and trachea in one piece and hung them from a nail on the outside of the barn. The stomach and intestines were taken out and washed in cold water, while the muscle meat and the bones were thrown into an iron cauldron of boiling water, set over a wood fire. Soon the sheep's head—unskinned, with wool and eyeballs still intact—was placed next to the fire, to singe the wool a bit, before the head was also thrown into the pot. Occasionally Grandmother Tabikhanova tossed a tiny piece of raw meat or innards into the fire, as did two other Buryat men who showed up to help with the butchering. When I asked Terry why they were throwing those pieces of meat directly into the fire, he said they were making a gift to the gods—and that in earlier times people knew the

prayers they were supposed to recite when making such offerings. I could see Grandmother Tabikhanova mumbling something each time she tossed a piece into the fire, and I suspected that she, of all the Buryats present, was the only one who really knew the appropriate words to utter.

I was curious about these offerings to particular deities worshiped by the Buryats. But when I pressed Terry for more information about these customs, he admitted that he didn't know much about such matters. A middle-aged former Communist, he was obviously one of the Buryats who, during the Soviet era, had consciously rejected many aspects of their own traditional culture in favor of the more modern, career-enhancing values of the dominant Soviet-Russian culture. Yet Terry was obviously enjoying all the Buryat rituals and foods that day, and I surmised that he—like many other indigenous Siberians—might seek solace in the symbols of his ancient past when confronted with the challenges of an uncertain future.

During all these activities outdoors, everybody drank mugs of *tarasun*, the potent clear liquor distilled from soured milk, which had the distinct and completely unappetizing aroma of a baby's wet diaper that needed changing long ago. When I asked Terry where our hosts had procured the *tarasun*, he just grinned and said that *tarasun* was something that couldn't be purchased in stores. Beyond that he was unable or unwilling to identify the owner of the illegal still that had produced the alcohol. But he hastened to assure me that it was first-rate *tarasun*, unlike the tainted home brews of vodka and other spirits that poisoned thousands of people in Russia every year.

The ritual associated with drinking *tarasun* was different from the vodka rituals I had seen before. When a Buryat was first given a mug of *tarasun*, he dipped the third finger of his right hand into the liquor and tossed some of it into the air or into the fire. Then he took one swallow from the mug and passed it someone else, who repeated the process. After that, the mug was returned to the first person, who could then drink the rest of its contents. All the Buryats were quaffing large quantities of this strong stuff as if it were water, and they just laughed when Tom and I were unable to match them mug for mug. Grandmother Tabikhanova was the hardiest drinker of all. While processing the bloody innards and eating raw liver, she downed huge amounts of *tarasun*, which didn't seem to affect her in the least.

When the meat was cooked, we all went indoors and crowded around a large dining table in the living room. By that time there were twelve adults in our party; the five children ate in the kitchen or carried plates of food back to the bedrooms. There were no napkins at the place settings, but the hostess ceremoniously draped a large towel across our laps, for Tom and me

to share. Bottles of vodka, Russian champagne, and Bulgarian white wine stood at each end of the table.

Rodion Tabikhanov offered the first toast, welcoming us to his house and saying how honored his family was to prepare this feast for us. Then his wife passed around platters of appetizers to start the meal: slices of sausage, chunks of fresh raw *omul'*, sliced fresh tomatoes and cucumbers, and thick pieces of dense, chewy white bread. These were followed by a soup course of hot mutton broth, which we drank from bowls. Before the broth was served, I noticed Grandmother Tabikhanova going outside to toss a small cup of it as an offering into the fire.

Vodka and wine glasses kept being refilled, as we toasted our hosts and they drank to our friendship. Then Tom and I, as the guests of honor, were served the most important part of the feast. The entire sheep's head, wet wool and sightless eyeballs still attached, was placed in front of Tom. Terry explained that it was traditional for the guest to sing a *töölei*, a special song about the sheep's head. But since Tom was not a Buryat and didn't know any sheep's head songs, we moved on to the next ritual. Rodion handed Tom a hunting knife and told him to cut off the sheep's left ear, to cut a cross on the top of its head, and to slice out a piece of the right cheek. Rodion then took the ear and cheek outside and threw them into the fire.

My turn was next. Placed in front of me was the sheep's stomach, which had been filled with a mixture of fresh cow's milk, fresh sheep's blood, garlic, and spring onions, then tied up with the sheep's intestines and boiled in the pot with the rest of the meat. I told myself that—despite all the food and alcohol I had already consumed that day—I was going to eat that repulsive blob without throwing up. I couldn't insult a group of people who had been so kind and generous to me. All the Buryats around the table waited expectantly for me to take the first bite. But I didn't know how or where to begin. Finally our hostess leaned over and sliced the top off the stomach. The contents had not been fully cooked and blood oozed out onto my plate. She took a large spoon, scooped out some of the semi-coagulated mass, and handed the spoonful to me. Trying to focus my mind on something else—anything else—far away, I swallowed the junketlike lump and forced a smile.

The other guests still waited for me to make the next move. Suddenly it occurred to me: pass the dish around. That's exactly what they wanted. The Buryats happily and hungrily scooped out and devoured big portions of the blood pudding, while Tom and I concentrated on the huge platter of boiled mutton in the middle of the table. More vodka. More toasts. Declarations of friendship. Buryat songs. More vodka. More wine. More champagne.

Buryats butchering a sheep for a feast in Ust'-Orda.

The Tabikhanovs presented me with a large purple paisley shawl and gave Tom a brown plaid shirt like those we had seen on Buryat cowboys near Ust'-Orda. Unprepared for all the gift-giving ceremonies of that special day, we had only a few small items to offer in return, including a box of Belgian chocolates that Grandmother Tabikhanova promptly opened and passed around the table before taking a piece for herself. The Buryats then gave me a bottle of wine and Tom a bottle of vodka, both of which we immediately opened and passed around the table, too. I was hoping the food and alcohol would soon run out, but there was still plenty of boiled mutton on the serving platters and a whole cauldron of steamy mutton broth simmering outside. When Tom and I protested that we couldn't eat another mouthful of their fine feast, the Buryats merely laughed, claiming that in the old days one sheep would not have been enough for twelve adults: at least three sheep would have been needed to feed such a gathering. Just at that moment, Grandmother Tabikhanova came out of the kitchen and set in front of us large bowls of *salamat*—a rich sour cream porridge, swimming in melted butter—which we were not allowed to eat until she had put an offering of *salamat* into the fire.

We had been at this feast for only five hours when Terry announced that it was time to leave for the *next* meal—at the home of Liza and her mother, Sofya Garankina. Sick from too much food and alcohol, Tom and I just

wanted to crawl away and hide somewhere. But we knew we couldn't disappoint the Buryats still waiting for us. So at nine o'clock that evening, we thanked the Tabikhanov family and bade them farewell, then climbed into the car and bounced down the rutted, muddy streets of Ust'-Orda to Sofya's house, all the while trying mightily to keep down the meal we had just consumed.

The last feast of that long day remains only a pleasant blur in my memory. I recall a beautifully set table in a cheerful kitchen, with white painted cabinets, fresh flowers in a vase on the window sill, and a view of the garden outside, luminous in the lingering Siberian twilight. I remember cups of hot tea, fresh vegetables from Sofya's garden, rich mounds of homemade clotted cream, tales of Buryat ancestors, a family photo album with pictures of a man in military uniform and a beautiful Buryat woman adorned with silver-and-coral jewelry—those fleeting images accompanied by a bottle of sweet berry liqueur that proved to be an excellent digestif. I could have spent days in that house in Ust'-Orda, looking at old photographs and listening to Sofya's stories about Buryat history, Buryat customs, and Buryat cuisine. But all too soon it was time to go.

Liza, our companion for that entire unforgettable day, insisted on seeing us safely home, even though it was a roundtrip journey of three hours, very late at night. On the way back to Irkutsk we were all too tired for much conversation. But I did learn that Liza would be taking a group of eighteen school children from Ust'-Orda to London to study English for two weeks in August. Her only other trip abroad had been to next-door Mongolia, and none of the students had ever been outside of Russia at all. As we drove across the steppes on that Siberian summer night, I tried to imagine what the streets of London would look like to the children of Ust'-Orda—and what they would think of the people, the foods, and the customs they encountered in such a strange and different land halfway around the globe.

Several months later, back in the United States, I happened to read Jeremiah Curtin's account of his own visit to Ust'-Orda and the lands of the Western Buryats in 1900. Only after having lived in Siberia could I truly appreciate the conclusion to his narrative: "We left Usturdi [Ust'-Orda] September 13. I was glad to go from the Buriat country, where, though I had gained considerable knowledge, we had endured many hardships." In 1900 Curtin arrived in Irkutsk after a two-day journey from Ust'-Orda, having traveled the same route that took us only ninety minutes by car almost a century later. Irkutsk must have indeed seemed like a welcome sanctuary to him after two months of living with the Buryats, for he concluded:

That evening I dined with the governor of Irkutsk, and went with him to the opera. In this quick change from life among the Buriats to the refinements of civilized life in the capital of Siberia, I experienced the striking results of some centuries of social evolution—an evolution which through its effects upon humanity enables the man of cities to step back in a moment and with no mental effort from the wild, free life of fancy to the prescribed surroundings of material facts.

Thus did I leave the heroes of the past . . . and return to the no less valiant men of the present who, struggling with the evil forces of indifference and ignorance, are bringing to Siberia the prosperity that country so well deserves to call her own.