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'All Roads Lead to Siberia'. Two Stories of the Kalmyk Deportation

Introduction

For a long time, I have had both a professional and a personal interest in the deportation, a topic which began making its way into public discussion during the 1990s. I used every possible opportunity to discuss it with Kalmyks of the older generation, to read relevant publications in the press and in scholarly journals, and to take part in political action related to it. But it took me some time to grasp how productive the deportation would be as the subject of an anthropological investigation. That came only as my professional competence in, and familiarity with, recent methodological practice in social anthropology increased and developed. In fact, I developed a firm scholarly interest in the topic only after I left Kalmykia.

The two texts published here are taken from a group of interviews — twenty in all — about the deportation of the Kalmyks in December 1943. I carried these out in Elista during October 2004. Before I began, I imagined there would be few problems with finding people to talk to. Elista is a small town, and the pace of life is relaxed — people amble home for lunch in the

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middle of the working day — so you'd imagine that pensioners, in particular, would have nothing to do all day and would be only too happy to receive guests. But right from day one, when I began ringing round the list I'd made of possible informants among my acquaintances, snags started cropping up. So-and-so was in hospital, having to make regular visits to the clinic, someone else was busy looking after their grandchildren or the dacha, a third person was at a Second World War veterans' meeting or a ballroom-dancing class. No-one turned me down flat, but fitting their plans into my own constrictive schedule sometimes turned out to be impossible. This was why I limited myself, at this stage, to meeting the first twenty informants on the list, ten men and ten women.

I understood how important trust would be in a situation like this, and so I decided that I'd begin by talking to people I already knew, which mostly meant my friends' parents and the neighbours in the apartment block where I used to live. I knew some of them quite well, but others more or less only to say hallo to. I talked to them in their own homes, which meant that many were able to give an eye to domestic affairs as we talked, or get out a family album, make tea, and so on — this made for a relaxed atmosphere. In many cases, it was the first time these people had ever talked to me on a footing of equality, as adult to adult. They saw me in two different ways at the same time: as the daughter of people they knew, or the friend and contemporary of their own children, on the one hand, and on the other, as an academic, who was going to 'represent the Kalmyks in the world of serious scholarship'. For most of them, this was their first experience of trying to talk coherently about themselves and about their life during and after the deportation. Often, the stories were very emotional; many people broke down in tears. Interviews usually ended up lasting about three hours, discounting interruptions, but there were shorter ones too, and on the other hand, one lasting about six hours (taken in two sessions).

Among the people I talked to, there were a few who had already addressed the deportation in scholarly studies of their own. In these cases, we discussed not only personal experience of the event itself, but the difficulties they had to experience when they tried to get their work published, the reactions to it from the authorities, the intellectual public and readers at large, and what they had said in their work and who the imagined readership was when they wrote it. Writers and journalists often hesitated, wondering whether they should really be sharing this fascinating stuff with someone else at all, but they ended up agreeing to — they saw me as a comrade-in-arms who would be able to do the material justice.

The purpose of my interviews was to record stories about the everyday life of the Kalmyks in conditions of forced resettlement,

about their strategies of physical and social survival, about how the stigma of social exclusion on ethnic grounds was experienced. I was interested not only in the period of the deportation itself, but in the years leading up to it as well: the informants' childhood, schooldays, their lives during the German occupation — and also the years after it ended: the return home and the impact of this upon them, and also how their feelings about and attitudes to the deportation, to its causes, and to its consequences for those deported, had changed over the passing years.

In interviews relating to historical trauma, the figure of the interviewer, his or her age and life experience, are of considerable importance. I come from the generation born immediately after the Kalmyks returned home from Siberia. We came from the first 'harvest' raised in the newly-reacquired homeland, and had a strong sense of ourselves as special children, wanted children. I left my school in Elista in 1978, and had only the vaguest impressions of what my parents' life in Siberia had been like. The people who talked to me may well have been addressing their stories to their own children through me. For my part, I would have given a lot to have been able to talk about those times with my parents — which, alas, by now was impossible.

My father, the army officer Matsak Guchinov, and my mother, Mariya Balzirova, a student of Astrakhan Pedagogical Institute, and the holder of a Stalin stipend,¹ were forcibly resettled along with their families. My mother went to Surgut, and my father to Novosibirsk Province. Both joined the Communist Party during the war, and never discussed in my presence why or how the Kalmyks had been resettled, though they often reminisced about Siberia and the friends they had made there. We had hundreds of photographs at home, which my father had taken in Kuibyshev with his 'Zorkii'² camera. So why had my mother, who now taught Russian language and literature, trained as a doctor in Siberia and worked in a hospital? At the time, I never asked questions about all this, or anything else either, but they hovered in my consciousness, waiting for answers. But then my father went into a better world when I was in my second year at university, and my mother two years later. Now I'm addressing all those unanswered questions to their contemporaries, who also spent their late teenage and young adult years in Siberia.

The interviews took a free, unstructured form. Before we began talking, I'd explain that I was generally interested in the life of the informant and his or her family during the deportation, and that

¹ A higher than usual stipend for students, awarded on the basis of academic merit. Renamed 'Lenin Stipends' in the Khrushchev era. [Editor].

² A brand name of the day, literally 'sharp eyed'. [Editor].

everything they could remember was of interest. However, I also suggested that they begin by talking about their childhood. If the informants themselves failed to mention certain key subjects, I would ask direct questions about these, doing my best not to impede the natural flow of information. Do you remember the occupation, Victory Day, the death of Stalin, how did you come to hear about the decree restoring Kalmyk autonomy?¹ Even the most skilled story-tellers had to be prompted when it came to intimate topics, for instance, hygiene and physiological details. In the texts that appear here, I have excised my own questions, but otherwise the oral narratives appear pretty well verbatim. In the course of our conversations, the narrators, returning to this emotionally complex period of their lives, eschewed official formulae in favour of the kind of straightforward language that is natural in private, heart-to-heart, conversation, albeit addressed to interlocutors who are in different respects 'other': members of the younger generation of Kalmyks, or of different societies, who know nothing about the fate of the deportees.

All the interviews were conducted in Russian, but from time to time people would, often without noticing it, break into Kalmyk and then, also without noticing this, move back into Russian again.

I am well aware of the difference between reactions to a comment made in an orally-transmitted text and to a comment made in a written text, let alone a published one, and so I gave my interlocutors the chance to read through the transcriptions of the interviews and correct these if they so wished. I was delighted to have the chance of correcting mistakes in personal names and toponyms, but on the other hand felt sad that I had to delete various details that the informants felt on second thoughts weren't of any interest. I was particularly sad to lose various verbal slips, since these often gave a vivid sense of an informant's true view of events.

Finally, a word on the reason why I selected the two interviews here for publication. They happened to be the first two interviews that I carried out, and they turned out to be similar in many ways. Both informants experienced the deportation as children, but both were later able to enjoy not just a secondary education, but even a higher education.² It was important to include both a woman's and a man's

¹ Issued on 9 January 1957. See also below. [Editor].

² In the Soviet Union, rates of participation in higher education were strongly related to social status, with children of workers and peasants (officially 'collective farmers') under-represented proportionately, compared with children of urban officials and professionals. In addition, children of groups that had been labelled 'anti-Soviet' or 'treacherous' could expect to endure explicit discrimination. The same was true about the higher classes at secondary school (until the 1950s, seven years of education was the maximum that many living in the Soviet countryside could expect). [Editor].

story, given that the gender differences characteristic of Kalmyk tradition and of Soviet society created different opportunities and obstacles for women on the one hand, and men on the other. Both the informants had successful careers in the Soviet period. One of them, Roza Kirillovna Urkhaeva (née Chumatova), is an Honoured Doctor of the Kalmyk Republic,¹ and her employment record² lists the following four positions: director of the Elista city health department, medical director of the Elista children's hospital, deputy minister of health of the Kalmyk Republic, Minister of Social Welfare. Pavel Ochkaevich Godaev, who was formerly the director of the Party Regional Committee Publishing House, is a well-known publicist, and himself the compiler and editor of two books about the deportation. Both of them still have active public careers today. To both of them, I express my deep gratitude for their permission to publish their recollections, and to use their real names when doing so.

Interview 1: Roza Urkhaeva (Chumatova)

I was born in Bashanta settlement³ — the name's changed now and it's become a town, Gorodovikovsk — in the Kalmyk Republic. At that time it was the centre of the Western ulus.⁴ I'm from a civil servant's family. Before the War, Dad had a job in the State Agricultural Supplies department; at first he was a warehouseman, later he worked his way up to director. Mum was a housewife. In February 1942, Dad volunteered for the army, and was sent to the front line. He was the commander of a machine gun division, and he fought all the way through the war. He was wounded three times — he was serving in the Bryansk area. After he'd been wounded for the third time — and seriously — right at the end of the war, they sorted him out in hospital, and then sent him to the Tambov Cavalry School, to teach recruits. He was only demobbed in August 1945. Things didn't turn out for him like they did for some other Kalmyks, who got sent straight from the Front to Shiroktag.⁵ He served through the Great Patriotic War, and then he came and found us, up in the North.

¹ An honour awarded to distinguished professionals at the level of individual republics, and of the Soviet Union, and carrying with it various privileges and benefits. The award at all-Soviet level was second only to People's Artiste, Teacher, Doctor, etc. of the Soviet Union. [Editor].

² Literally 'work notebook' [*trudovaya knizhka*], carrying information about a person's place of employment, the length of time worked there [*stazh* — see further below], honours and misdemeanours, and so on. [Editor].

³ Literally 'workers' settlement' [*rabochii poselok*], a semi-urbanised population centre that was smaller and less developed than a town [*gorod*]. [Editor].

⁴ Administrative district. [Editor].

⁵ In Spring 1944, Kalmyk serving as privates and NCOs were recalled from the Front and sent to the Shirokstroï labour camp, popularly known as 'Shiroktag'. Officers were sent to Siberia, to join their families. [EG].

When the War started, I was ten, and in my second year at school.¹ It was a Sunday, I remember, and we were all at this festival. There was a club in Bashanta, and all of us, Dad, Mum, my sister, my little brother, and me, had gone along. I was supposed to be taking part in a show — we were doing this dance, ‘Red Poppies’, all dressed up like red poppies and so on — only then suddenly everything ground to a halt. Evening was coming on. There was this tremendous fuss, people bawling their eyes out. Then everyone rushed to the town square. That’s how it all started.

Dad went off to the Front on 21 February 1942. The State Agricultural Supply department must have been the kind of place where specialists were not automatically drafted. Dad sent in a volunteer form to the local army office straight away, but he didn’t get sent to the Front for a while. Mum got his things ready, she made him a sort of canvas bag to keep rusks in, then she baked a load of rusks out of dough with butter in, then she dried them. We asked her for a taste. She let us have one each and then said that would do, after all, Dad might go off any day now. But he didn’t, so she finished baking the rusks. I can remember this dark patch left from the grease leaking through behind where the bag had been hanging.

When Dad finally did go off into the army, they sent him to a training camp at Kotelnikovo, in Rostov Province, and Mum and a neighbour’s wife decided to take them some vitals, as my mother put it. Only our friend, another neighbour, Nikifor Iltskhaev his name was, he was disabled, and the chairman of the Party district committee, he persuaded Mum not to go because the fighting was moving in that direction. So Mum didn’t get there, and Dad ended up going straight to the front line.

We had the Germans here six months. I can remember every family digging trenches. We were told not everyone would get evacuated, the families of Communists and government officials would be at the front of the queue. They said we should get ready to sit out the occupation, that we shouldn’t get scared, we had to survive and wait till our troops got through and liberated us. So we dug trenches: this little narrow entrance, then a ditch running in a straight line, then another straight line, and then the way out. And they showed everyone how to make a trench, how to make the steps down, what you needed to cover it up. That was where we were supposed to go when the fighting broke out. And we did, only it was very scary: you could hear the Nazi planes throbbing overhead.

We lived on the main street in town. When our troops were retreating, they went down our street. Infantry men, all covered in

¹ Until 1943, when it was reduced to seven, the normal start age for primary school was eight. [Editor].

dust. We kids took them out water and bread. They drank the water as they were marching along. The women were all staring hard, trying to pick out their husbands, brothers, sons. The last military divisions went past, and then everything started juddering, collapsing, catching on fire. There was water and stuff running everywhere, just flooding the place. Then we heard that our boys had set fire to the grain elevator, the oil refinery, the wool factory, so the enemy didn't get his hands on vital supplies. There was this terrific juddering and all these flames from the butter warehouse. But no-one took any of it, though we were all hungry. There was no looting at all.

Then the Germans started arriving. It was August — baking hot, dust everywhere, planes all over the sky. Bashanta itself wasn't bombed, but you could hear explosions in the distance. We were terrified, and our auntie Zhenya — she lived with her kids on another street — they all moved in with us, they just abandoned their house, their cow and everything. We all hid together in the one trench. We'd laid in plenty of water and food, just like the authorities told us to. It all ended up coming in handy...

So what was the occupation like? People on motorbikes turned up first, they made us climb out of our trenches. Our house was a big one, so they commandeered it to put their officers in, and we all had to move to the covered porch. Mum dragged in our feather mattress and some bedding, and we slept right there, in the porch, under the table. We were scared even to look round the door of our rooms. The officers had a batman, and he just grabbed everything — milk, eggs, the lot. He was afraid of them getting poisoned. And Volodya,¹ he was only five then, with these huge eyes — he'd got stomach and intestinal problems because of the hunger — in time the batman started feeling sorry for him and gave him some of our own milk and eggs. That batman asked Mum where her husband was, and she told him we'd no idea: we never got any letters, he was at the Front. Well, you should know that, after all, you're at the Front yourself, she said. She wasn't scared talking to him at all — anyway, his Russian was dreadful.

The Germans were never around long. One lot would go off, then another lot would turn up. Eventually, someone told us a good trick for getting them out of the house. Put my elder sister in bed with a hanky round her head, rub something red on her face, and say she was ill, then put a bowl beside her to catch the vomit. Mother said three words to them: sick, lice, typhus. The Germans put a sign outside the house saying in their language, '*Quarantine*', and things started getting better, we got to eat our milk and butter ourselves. We couldn't butcher any of the animals though, that was forbidden.

¹ The informant's brother, also known as 'Vova'. [Editor].

When the Germans were retreating, Mum said: they looked so cheerful when they were on the way in, playing the mouth organ and so on, but now they've changed, they're crying. It was winter, and they were dressed in what they could get hold of: some had their legs wrapped in towels, there were lots of them in women's clothes even. Then one day this German on a motorbike stopped, the engine went silent and he says, *'Mother, we're kaput, everyone's gone, they'll put our backs to the wall now.'* And Mum says: *'So whose backs did you put to the wall yourselves? Well, go on, get out, quick as you can.'* Oh, she was fearless, Mum was, though talk like that could have cost her dear.

Soon our troops came on the attack, it was just at New Year. No-one was sleeping. Everyone was looking forward to something wonderful happening. They came knocking at the door: *'It's us, your own!'* *'Well, what with the dark nights,'* Mum said, *'Let's see your cap badges now, are they stars or what?'* It was tough for us then, but Mum put everything we had on the table. The soldiers said: *'What we really need, love, is some sleep.'* *'No, first you should get some food in you',* Mum says, *'Go on, while it's hot, then maybe you'd like to wash your feet?'* They had some kasha and noodles and then they just collapsed into bed... There was this snoring and stink of foot-rags... And we stayed awake all night wondering what to feed our dear soldiers on. They were like long-lost relatives to us. They wouldn't drink our Kalmyk green tea, we knew, and we hadn't any sugar for their Russian black tea. In the morning they brought us some horsemeat. Mum told them that was good meat, but it needs long cooking, and you can only eat it once it cooled down. They could see how hungry we were, so they said to Mum: *'Go on, feed the kids first.'* Mum got the stove alight, and she started simmering the meat: we're just so hungry. She got the meat ready in the big stew-pot, she put some salt in, a bit of nice onion too. She says to the soldiers: *'Eat plenty, eat plenty, maybe our dad's hungry out there somewhere too.'* We had no contact with him, we showed the home-made envelope¹ he sent to them, but you can't tell by the numbers where a unit may be. They wished us all the best with him finding us.

On 28 December 1943, a column of Studebakers drove up to the edge of Bashanta. What was this, we wondered, what could they be here for? Maybe a unit was moving through Bashanta? No-one had the first idea that all the Kalmyks would be shipped off to exile in those vehicles. But then a rumour started going round they were going to exile the Kalmyks, as traitors to the motherland. Mum said to the soldiers that we were no traitors, our Dad was at the front. They just

¹ *Treugolnik*, literally 'triangle': a piece of paper, usually torn from an exercise book and folded to make a primitive envelope in circumstances where none of these could be purchased. [Editor].

knew nothing, our mothers... The neighbour told Mum she should slaughter some chickens to take with us, but Mum left the last hen alone, she was just waiting to lay. She just couldn't believe it right till the last minute. We children couldn't cope with the stress, we all fell asleep. Then at three in the morning this dreadful sound of knocking woke us all up. We were terrified, all got a fit of the shivers. Mum calls out: *'Who's that?' 'Anyone at home?'* and then they walk right in. *'These are my kids, three of them!'* *'So where's your husband?'* *'What do you mean, "where"? At the front, of course!'* *'Anyone around who's not family?'* Two soldiers hung around, the rest went off. They read out some order or other. *'You're being exiled to Siberia.'* *'So what kind of traitors are we?'* Mum started showing them Dad's letters, the ones he'd sent from the Front, they had a look, but then they said: *'Orders are orders, we've got to do as we're told.'* But they were nicer to us after that. The senior soldier said, *'No time to waste, take all your best things, don't cry, you've got only minutes in hand. The children can't pack for themselves, can they? Go on, take all your valuables.'* Mum says: *'So what should we take? What should we take?'* They both started helping her pack: the best-made, most valuable, warmest things we had. They saw we had this winter coat, Mum called it her *dokha*, she'd bought that in Krasnodar, it cost her a whole two cows. *'Now that cost you a packet, you take that coat with you. That coat'll be the saving of your kids, but make sure you hide it somewhere so no-one can take it off you on the way. That coat'll be the saving of you, maybe you'll wear it yourself, who knows?'* And the soldier wrapped it up in a few sheets, but then he said time was up, we had to go.

Our neighbour, auntie Marfa we called her, or Kosyachikha (that was her nickname locally),¹ her husband was an accountant, he worked in the same office as Dad, her daughter Mariya was in the same class as our Elya, she came running up, she stands at the gates weeping and wailing: *'What on earth's going on? Whatever happened? Let me in, I want to say goodbye.'* But it turned out they wouldn't let anyone in the house or anyone out. And Mum called out in Russian: *'See! See what our dads have earned us, fighting at the Front! Now we're traitors, see!'* And they start calming her down, Hey, enough of that, hey. *'What d'you mean, enough of that? Marfa, it's not fair, this should never have happened! Marfa, don't you forget us!'*

All day they were collecting Kalmyk families in the school. On 29 December, at night, they took us away to Salsk. Aunt Marfa cooked some chickens in an enamel bucket, she got hold of two loaves from somewhere, and she found a way to reach us in the school. That stopped us from starving in the first few days. Thirteen years later,

¹ From Kosyakov, the family's surname (see below), with the feminine suffix *ikha* added. [Editor].

we got back home, but Auntie Marfa wasn't there any more, her husband was killed at the Front and then she died herself, and even her daughter Mariya had disappeared. Lots of Russians moved out during those years. They were good people, the Kosyakovs were.

During the trip, we got one meal a day, something hot, pottage or whatever. The toilet? Well, they made a hole in the floor of one of the railway cars, then banked up suitcases round it to make a screen. Whenever we stopped, everyone would rush in and use it, no-one felt any shame, you just had to do your job as quick as you could. No-one died in our car all the way. We all got to know each other, made friends, the children were put to sleep on the bunks, the adults slept on the floor. We shared our food. No-one pegged out, everyone got through safely, but we saw them carrying the corpses out of the other cars, you could see through the window. We looked at them go and we had a good weep. The train moved on and on, and along the line corpses were lying everywhere: there, there, there. When the train made a halt, we'd rush to get water.

Kids will be kids. We were fascinated by everything, we'd never been on a train before: so what if this was a cattle car? When we were going through Syzran though, Auntie Tanya got left behind. She made a second trip for hot water and she didn't get back to the car in time. How we cried then! Hey, look, we've lost Tanya, we said to the soldiers, and they said to us: Never mind, she'll soon catch up. Catch up? You're joking! Luckily, she had plenty of warm clothes on. A few days later they collected all the people who missed the train, they were sitting there freezing and hungry, and bawled them out for not paying attention to the time. They called them 'deserters'. Tanya got back a couple of days later. She kept us all fed on the train, she was our salvation. Tanya was the daughter of Mum's elder sister, when our family was moved over here from the Urals¹ her mother died, and Mum and Dad brought Tanya up.

I can't remember how long it took to get there, thirteen or fourteen days, probably. They uncoupled our wagon on the Trans-Siberian line. We ended up in Kornilovka station in Omsk province, about 45 kilometres from Omsk itself. Fifty years later, in 1993, I visited the place again voluntarily, on the 'Memorial' train.²

¹ After the Kalmyk autonomous administrative unit was set up, the Kalmyks from Orenburg (the Urals group) and the Tersk (Kuma) group were resettled on the territory of what was then the Kalmyk province [later the Kalmyk Autonomous Republic]. [EG].

² The 'Memorial' trains were an initiative organised by the leadership of the Kalmyk Republic between 1993 and 2004. Special trains took those wanting to visit the places where they spent their youth to the territories to which they had been exiled. Five trains in all were organised. In 1993, the slogan used for the train was 'Thanks to the Siberians from Kalmykia'. [To an outsider reader, this sounds ironic, along the lines of 'Arbeit Macht Frei', but returning Kalmykians genuinely did feel that they had survived only because of the Siberians' kindness.] [Editor].

At the station, sleighs with fur coats were already waiting. Every family had a sleigh to itself. They covered us up to the eyes with big warm fur coats. There was a snowstorm going, a blizzard, drifts everywhere. We children loved that too! When had any of us ever ridden in a sleigh over snowdrifts? Curiosity got the better of us. Deep inside, we felt no fear. Where were we going, we wondered? We arrived in Bogdanovka village, 'New World' collective farm. They put us in the club building — it was freezing, there wasn't any heating there. We spent a day and night camping out in the club. They sent us off to the bathhouse for a wash as well. Then the chairman of the collective farm got all the families billeted. The collective farm workers were all forced to take in 'traitor Kalmyks'. Of course, none of them wanted to have us there. They were scared out of their skins of us, they'd heard rumours we were cannibals, devils with horns on our heads — all sorts of stories were going round. The chairman of the collective farm limped round himself,¹ he took us to someone's house and called out, '*Mefody Ivanovich, come out here and meet your guests!*' The master of the house scratched his head and said, Well, orders is orders, we all know there's a war on. He was an elderly man, and he said: '*There are no beds going spare.*' The house was clean, cosy, warm. My Mum says to him straight away in Russian: '*We know what you mean, everyone told you they were bringing in a load of devils. Have a good look: can you see any horns on me or the children?*' Mum never let things get her down. They got a shock when they saw we could speak Russian. But Mum was brought up in the Urals, Chelyabinsk province, in the Orenburg area, she'd spent her early life among Russians. '*Come in, then.*' '*So if we're not devils, we're cannibals, is that it? Well, just you wait — if we get hungry enough, we'll eat you straight off.*' '*You'd never have the strength.*' They were fighting it out. '*Of course, our teeth won't work on you.*' '*Come in, here's the corner where we'll put you.*' We came in and washed our hands and feet. They got out their things — a feather mattress, red satin eiderdowns, pillows, lovely pillowcases, all with embroidery over them, it was all absolutely spotless. Sheets, covers for the eiderdowns, bedspreads — everything just as it should be. We spread ourselves over half the room, not just the corner. '*Don't worry, don't worry,*' said grandpa Mefody, Udovichenko his surname was. They slept there too: him in a bedstead, and Gran, his wife, on a bunk over the stove.

They gave us some tea straight away. Not just tea to drink, but potatoes, everything. We were fast friends from the first day: maybe it helped that my mother knew Russian, or maybe it was her sense of humour. Mum told them later on: '*If you think we're traitors, then*

¹ Because he had impaired mobility. My thanks to Elza-Bair Guchinova for this elucidation. [Editor].

look at this: it's my husband's letters from the Front.' Grandma asks: 'So what's your name?' 'Klavdiya Aleksandrovna,' Mum says. 'We'll call you Klasha. Klasha, we trust you.' Then in came their neighbours, the Tsarkovs, they were educated people. They wanted to know who'd been put with their neighbours. They speak Russian, the Udovichenkos told them, and they're ever so clean too. Well, we'd taken all our best clothes with us, after all! Little Vova, my brother, was worn out with the long journey, his eyes were looking huge. They said: 'What big eyes the boy has!' He was my father's favourite. When Dad went off to the front, he said to Mum, 'Whatever happens, make sure you take care of him. He's everything to me — my whole life, the person I love best of all in the world.' Vova got ill on the train journey, but now his diarrhoea was getting better. 'We'll sort that out, don't worry. We'll feed him ourselves.' So they brought some food over for him — potatoes, bread, cabbage — and Vova got better again. The Tsarkovs had no children, they started taking care of him, all winter they looked after him. Vova got very fond of them. They were always pulling his leg: we haven't got any children, would you like to be our son?

Grandma Udovichenko said to us: 'There's a whole barrel of sprats there.' That's salted fish, small ones, the Siberians have salted fish for hundreds of years. They had a whole barrel of salted cabbage too, they didn't set any store by it. When Mum got cooking, Grandma would say to her: 'Help yourself, Klasha, what are you buying fish for, help yourself to ours, help yourself to cabbage and potato too.' She was forever dropping something of her own into our pot. Grandpa would overhear and say, 'What are you whispering for, help yourself, Klasha, take whatever you like. Don't be tight, old woman, you've got barrels full of food there. Go on, eat.'

In other families, though, they wouldn't even let people cook, let alone give them any food. Mum said: 'I'm very grateful, but you mustn't try and feed us. You shouldn't: you're not wealthy yourselves. I'll go and trade some of this junk we brought with us. Then we can go and buy food, potatoes, milk, butter, and stuff.' Grandpa Mefody says: 'Oh, the station's a long trip from here, we're not letting you go there alone, if someone makes a trip by sledge, then fine. And what are you talking about, what 'junk' do you mean?' Mum got out her lovely cat-fur coat. 'Klasha, you mustn't go there on your own, what've you got into you? That coat's priceless.' That was the coat the guards had told us to take and said we shouldn't show anyone because the coat would be the saving of us. 'Why should we eat your food? I'd be better to trade it in.' Some people who had business at the station took Mum there on their sledge. Mum brought a load of potatoes and some other food, she shared it with her sister Zhenya's family. That was how we got through the long, hungry winter of 1944.

Mum helped Grandma with the cows and so on. The Udovichenkos'

children worked in Omsk, in the factories. They came home every now and then: God, they were in a terrible state, freezing, hungry. Grandma always had stores laid in for them. So when the Udovichenkos told Mum to take their food, Mum said: *'You've got plenty of your own to look after as it is.'* And all the same Grandma kept saying: *'Help yourself, eat all you can...'* At first we were happy to eat those sprats, later we went off them. We were amazed by those big barrels, and then the tiny fish: how were you supposed to eat them? Grandpa and Grandma showed us how: leave the tail and the backbone for the cat, and eat the rest. We baked potatoes in the stove, and they showed us how to make *vareniki* out of potatoes, how to make *kartoplyaniki*.¹ That's how we spent the first months at Kornilovka.

How did we find my dad? Elya and I kept writing letters to him. Elya knew how to read and write, so she'd put the address on the outside of the letter: she'd put the number of the division, but there wasn't any room to put anything else. Never mind, it would get there anyway. We kept sending off letters like that, but nothing ever came back to Kornilovka. One day, our relative came round, she was a teacher, and she asked us: *'What is it, Klava, why aren't there any letters from Kirill?' 'I don't know, maybe he's been killed in action, if he's not replying, after all, he's fighting on the front line. The girls keep writing to him, but there's never any answer.'* *'Well, girls, let's have a look: I'll write the address myself.'* And we say to her, *'You've got such lovely writing, you've even managed to fit those letters in.'* *'What letters?'* *'We can only fit the numbers in, not those letters.'* She put her arms round us and burst into tears. *'Klava, Kirill will soon write back to you, we'll find Kirill! Girls, I don't want to get cross with you, it's not your fault, my dears! That's what ignorance will do!'* And fair enough: I'd had two years of school, and Elya four, with interruptions. We could have lost touch with Dad for good like that. How would he have found us in Siberia?

In Spring 1944, there were more torments for us Kalmyks. The idea was that we emaciated, exhausted lot would be packed off even further to be used for forced labour. There was a rule: no more than one dependant to each worker. So as not to break it, we had to club together as a family: Aunt Zhenya, her two sons, Mum, Tanya, Elya — who was already fifteen, so she counted as a worker — and Vova and me. That was four workers and four dependents. So then we had to get ready for another journey. We were all transported off to Omsk, then by boat to the Khanti-Mansiisk National Region. Mum got very worked up, she started crying and saying: *'Why did we agree to this, another long journey, we should have stayed where we*

¹ *Vareniki* are pasta pouches with filling inside, very like ravioli; *kartoplyaniki* are small potato pancakes, resembling Irish 'potato cakes' or 'potato scones'. [Editor].

were, on the collective farm. *They'll probably drown us all on the way.* But they didn't drown us, they took us to Irtysh and unloaded us at 'Samara' jetty. Then we and Aunt Zhenya's family got split up: they stayed working in a lumber camp there. We were sent off to a lumber mill preparing wood for the Samara fish factory. It turned out to be the saving of us.

They took us there in June: there were midges and mosquitoes everywhere. The heart of the taiga. Huge forests wherever you looked, and in the distance a big lake — it ran into the Irtysh. A dreadful sight. Vova started crying and said to Mum: *'Let's go home, I don't want to live here, these little flies keep biting me, they're really nasty. Let's go home, that's it!'* All the women were crying, they felt so sorry for the children. But how could we go home? Where was home?

The boss of the mill, Kozlov he was called, said to us: *'Don't cry, girls. Everything will be all right. We've just smoked out your barracks, and killed all the mosquitoes in there. You can shake yourselves down, and then move in. See, over there, you can shake yourselves down, and then go in one by one. You'll soon stop noticing the mosquitoes. Don't make a drama out of a crisis. We'll give you some netting for your bunks. You'll soon be glad enough you ended up here: we'll make sure you're treated properly. We'll give you all kinds of fish to eat. We'll give you bread and butter, you'll even get a string of onions in winter. You'll get paid too.'* And our women say to him: *'You're promising us the moon, it sounds like a fairy tale.'* We got into the barracks, and there was a long table laid out for us there, there really was. On it were piles of berries and fish heads. They were great big heads — from *mussskun* [a type of whitefish] and sturgeon. Oh, later we got so bored with fish three times a day. They told us: you're going to saw wood in the mill, first you'll plait ropes out of branches, then you'll fasten the logs together, we'll show you how. You'll make rafts, and take the wood off to Samara fish factory. That's your main job. *'We've never seen trees in our lives, how are we supposed to work with them? The tree will fall on top of us and we'll get killed.'* *'Never mind, the brigade leader will tell you everything. Which side to approach the tree from, which side to saw it from, when there's a wind blowing. He'll show you how to collect the branches and then what lengths you saw them in, how to stack them properly. You'll have a work quota, all of you, so that you can work your labour day. If you don't stack the wood right, you'll have to do it again. They'll show you how to take the boughs off, so the cut heals over. How to clean up the lumbering areas properly so you don't get hoar frost on you.'*

To cut a long story short, all our mums and sisters turned into lumberjacks, and they cut everything by hand. There were no electric saws then. Summer was one thing, but in winter you were knee-deep

in snow, and there was still the work quota to fulfil. It was just as well all the women were young. Volodya and me counted as assistant workers. I was thirteen, and I helped the adults, and Volodya helped me. We carried wood round and kept the stove going. We could here when the workers were coming into dinner by the sound coming down the track: they'd be singing, shouting, making noise. We'd run to put the big pots of fish-heads out, cut the bread, distribute the string of onions down the table. We filled the glasses and helped the cook, doing the washing up and so on — she couldn't manage on her own. They didn't wake us up in the morning — they managed on their own. We'd set the table again in the evening, but after that, they let us off — the workers cleared up themselves. That was how we lived from 1944 to 1945.

After the War ended, Dad was demobbed in August 1945, and he came and found us, and then he had to take us away while the rivers were still navigable — the Irtysh gets iced over as early as September or October.

The climate there didn't suit Elya — she got very ill indeed in April 1945. It was dreadful taking her out in a *dvukolka*. That's a cart with two big wheels and one horse harnessed to the front: there are two seats in it. We went in the back, me and her, and the driver in the front. She got taken to Khanty-Mansiisk. They sent me so I'd remember the way. I walked back — fifteen kilometres through the taiga — and after that, I went and saw her once a week. You'd walk and walk through the forest, carrying a bag of provisions. Even though it was spring, and the trees were going green and the birds were singing, it was scary, you felt gloomy and down. It was frightening, frankly — after all, it was the end of the world. I cried the whole way. You'd walk fifteen kilometres and not see a soul. It took me half the day to get there, so I could get back in the same day. I'd go off in the morning and get back in the evening. The first time I got there, I remember, Elya was sitting at the window, looking very skinny, with her hair all cut off. As soon as I saw her, I called out, '*Elya, Elya!*' She took one look at me and burst into tears. The nurses did what they could, they told me they couldn't come in, it was an isolation ward and they didn't know what she had, but we could talk through the window. They opened the ventilation pane at the top. I passed in all the stuff I brought. Spring evenings are light, but even so, the return trip made my hair stand on end. But I got home all right. The workers were already back in the barracks, resting after their long day. I can remember it as clearly as yesterday: I couldn't get a single word out, I was just crying all the time. Mum asks: '*What's the matter with her? What are you crying for.*' '*Hang on, hang on, I'll soon stop crying*' — I can't say a word myself. '*They didn't let me in.*' Everyone decided that was the problem. When I calmed down, I told my mother that I'd been scared to death, that Elya was as thin as a shadow and that they'd

cut her hair off, and that they wouldn't tell me when they'd let her out — who'd bother to talk to a child? — that the nurse wouldn't let me talk by the window for long, because Elya might catch cold. Later, when they did let her out, the doctor said she was physically exhausted, emaciated, and the climate didn't suit her. So what could we do about the climate, when we were special settlers? We hadn't chosen to come here, and we had no right to move anywhere else.

Dad had got together all the right documents, and he went to the military command. They put him on the special list, even though they understood perfectly well what he'd done for his country. But they did help us leave Khanty-Mansiisk. Dad wanted to go to the Urals, but Mum wanted to go back to Kormilovka — it was nearer and there were quite good people there. My parents fixed up a special farewell meal for everyone in the barracks, they treated them all. Kozlov arranged all the supplies — after all, Dad had fought through the entire war and lived to tell the tale. And then we left. I think we didn't do too badly — we had to work very hard, but at least we didn't starve. There was always fish to eat. Later on, I always used to say, *'Mum, fish is full of phosphorus, and it helped me get top marks at school and then at the institute.'* But my mother never touched fish again.

In Kormilovka, Dad got a job right away, in the tractor station. He was jack of all trades there: carpenter, brick-layer, stove-builder, cobbler. They gave him a room for all of us. By now, it was winter again, and we all met up: the Chumatovs, the Udovichenkos, the Tsarkovs. That was such a joy, such great happiness for us all.

My little brother Sasha was born in Kormilovka in 1946, and in 1947 we moved to Kalachinsk, where we lived till 1953, when we moved to the Urals after all, after Dad got permission. I went to school in Kormilovka, and then in Kalachinsk till 1952. I hadn't completed the second year in Bashanta, so I had to repeat the second year — in any case, between 1943 and 1945 I hadn't been in school at all. I graduated from primary school with 'excellent' — I've still got the 'highly commended' certificates, with pictures of Lenin and Stalin. Everyone treated me well there. I loved my school: my parents attended all the parents' meetings, the concerts, everything. But I can remember one thing. When I came top of my class, they were going to send me to the first ever Pioneer rally in Omsk province. I ran home overjoyed and told my parents that I'm the only one going from my school, there'd be only ten children from our whole district. But my parents didn't seem to react. They used to talk Bashkir to each other when they had something secret to discuss. *'What are we going to do? She's on the special list in the military command post. They'll never let her go. What are we going to do?'* And Mum said, *'Kirill, you go and talk to our neighbour, he works for the NKVD, tell him everything straight out. Be honest. Why spoil a treat*

for a child?' I can't get my head round it and I keep telling them: they told us all, all of us going to the rally, to buy a new Pioneer tie, a white blouse, a black skirt. I had a tie already, but the rest was very hard to get hold of. We went off looking for, we looked and looked: there wasn't a white blouse, there was just a beige shirt, and Mum's trying to calm me down, and I keep insisting they told us it must be a white one. A day goes past, then another day. Dad was working on getting permission for me to attend. We bought a pale yellow top and a black skirt. One day Dad gets back, delighted — they'd told him somebody from the military command would be going along, in mufti, posing as a teacher, his daughter needn't even know about it. And I didn't have any idea — I went off to the rally, overjoyed.

That was the first time in my life I ever saw the demonstrations for 7 November. It made my head start spinning. Made an indelible impression on me. We stayed at the Young Naturalists centre, but the rally itself took place in the Omsk Drama Theatre. We went along in a group to sign up. It was such a beautiful building, with a big wide marble staircase. What did I know then, after all? I'm admiring everything, it's all so beautiful and clean. Suddenly I see this huge bear there on a landing. I yell out: 'Au!'¹ [A bear!] The Russian women round me don't understand, and they say to me: '*What's the matter? He's not alive, you know. He's stuffed!*' But I couldn't say anything at all: I'd been terrified of bears all my life, back to when we were living in the taiga. Obviously, the shock effect had lasted. But later I was able to laugh at myself, at home, I told my family in Kalmyk: '*Augas äächküv bi. Iki gidg au tend zogschana*' [I got scared by a bear. There was this enormous bear standing there!] — Later, we did round dances and all other kinds of dances. A boy came up and asked me my name — he thought I was Kazakh. — We had a whole week there in Omsk. Our Tanya was living there, working in a factory. Her family told us about me, and she visited me, we had a good time together, but she couldn't have me staying with her, and I couldn't leave where I was staying either. — That was the first Pioneer rally in Omsk province.

Later on, my daughter, Kema, asked me: '*When you were a Pioneer, did anything interesting ever happen?*' I'll say. Just imagine what an honour it was, me, a special settler, going off to the rally, with a worker from the military command as my escort!

I was a leader at my school, an organiser. Everyone respected me, and no-one ever said anything hurtful to me. By that time everyone knew, of course, that we Kalmyks weren't traitors or cannibals or devils. Those were tough years, and everyone lived in hardship, we all had to work hard, but my parents understood what I needed and

¹ The Kalmyk word for bear. [Editor].

did everything to help me study. I was the only Kalmyk girl or boy at secondary school: no-one else had the chance, they all had to feed their families. The children all worked too: they watered the potatoes, cleared snow away. Once, Dad got taken ill. He was suffering from nervous exhaustion after the War, and the doctors said he wasn't to work for a year. So who would feed the family? Elya, Tanya? That was it. I told Dad: *'I'll get a job, I'll clear snow on the railway.'* But he said to me: *'No, love [dochenka], don't you do that. I'll get better and the doctors will let me work again. Learning is light and ignorance is darkness,¹ you know. You study now, and later you can help us out. Someone in the family ought to know their letters properly. You shouldn't let yourself get upset, you've got your Dad, I'll get better and then start work again, we'll not starve.'* As for Elya, she cleaned snow on the railway, she didn't earn much, she watered potatoes, and she did odd jobs.

One winter, a young man started visiting: he was an orphan, or considered so. Dad said: *'You come round whenever you like, don't be shy. If you see smoke coming out of the chimney, it means Klavdiya's working, cooking noodles or something, there'll be some for you too.'* And he was forever saying to my Mum: *'How do you do it all so fast? I can't even keep track of your fingers...'*

Dad would work at his main job, and then do more jobs there when he'd finished for the day. He was a cobbler, and he built stoves on his days off, the Siberians were grateful, they'd give him some *saló* [smoked pork fat], or some flour or whatever. And he didn't lose his *stazh*,² and we always had food in the house.

I was accepted into the Komsomol along with everyone else, and no questions were asked about my nationality.³ In 1952, I went to Omsk to apply to a medical institute — with a companion, of course.⁴ My application was accepted, although many Kalmyks were turned down for higher education at the time. Maybe it was because I didn't look like a Kalmyk. Then a telegram arrived inviting me along for the exams. 500 of us were sat down there in the gym, doing the exams, but the discipline was strict.⁵ I had one dress, white linen with embroidery on it, every night I'd wash it and every morning I'd get up before anyone else so that I could iron it. So I'd walk round in

¹ Traditional saying widely used in education propaganda of the early Soviet era. [Editor].

² *stazh*: the length of time worked in a particular job or position, which, under the Soviet system, carried various privileges and benefits. A person who changed jobs (or took time off for sick leave) would lose his or her *stazh*. [Editor].

³ Here and passim, the word 'nationality' is used in the Soviet sense, i.e. ethnic background, as stipulated in Point 5 of a person's internal passport. [Editor].

⁴ i.e. with a guard from the military command, as with the trip to the Pioneer rally. [Editor].

⁵ i.e. there was no cheating, which was fairly common in exams throughout the Soviet period. [Editor].

my one white dress, and they'd call me, '*the girl in the white dress with the plaits*'. They taught quite a lot of subjects well in our school, especially physics: there wasn't anything on electricity in the textbooks, but the exam questions had stuff on how to wire a bell, an iron, and so on. When the candidates asked me, I started to explain, and while I was doing it, Professor S. N. Lyaporsky, the chairman of examiners, a Doctor of Philology, started to walk past. I'll be grateful to him till the end of my days. He was elderly then, but he opened up the road into life for me. He noticed that this *natsmenka* could speak Russian well, and knew about physics into the bargain. Later, he took us for Latin and called me *Rosa Rubrum*, which means beautiful Roza.¹ I'd get up in the morning and immediately a gaggle would form round me wanting explanations: I realised this was getting too much. I'd run away from them all to the banks of the Omsk — I loved studying outdoors, in the park.

The first exam was in essay-writing: I picked the free choice of subject. I can still remember what the topic was: '*We are a peaceful people, but our armoured train stands on the siding in case of need.*' Well, it was 1952 after all: not everything in the world was so peaceful! I wrote a good answer on that topic: not one mistake in grammar or style. I got 'excellent'.²

Our next exam was an oral, in Russian language and literature. I'd prepared for that very carefully — learned up all the rules, written them down. But drat! what was this? The literature extract was some lines from [Pushkin's] *The Bronze Horseman* — and the beginning had just flown out of my head.³ Professor Lyaporsky asked: '*Who was ready for questioning?*' It was my turn and I knew I mustn't miss it. He looked at my essay script. '*Chumatova, I see you've got "excellent" for this.*' It turned out that he'd made enquiries about how I'd done at school: he'd rung them and been convinced the mark was justified, not a fluke. So why hadn't I got a medal? Well, you see, she's a Kalmyk, a special settler. — By now he knew everything there was to know about me, but he pretended he'd no idea. I put the exam paper down. '*So have you answered all the questions?*' 'Yes.' '*Can you place the extract?*' 'Yes.' '*Recite the end of the text for me.*' I knew the end well, and I rattled it out. '*Now tell me: whereabouts do you come*

¹ The situation is a little more complicated than the informant suggests. *Rosa pulchra* would be the Latin for 'beautiful rose', but the professor was punning: a literal translation of *Rosa Rubrum*, 'red rose', into Russian would be *krasnaya roza*, which also means 'beautiful rose'. [Editor].

² The 'free essay' topic was assigned a mark not just for content, but also for grammar, spelling, punctuation, etc.; essays with any significant mistakes of the latter kind would automatically be denied top marks. [Editor].

³ This mattered because an obvious request from the examiners would have been to ask the candidate to recite the opening lines of the poem, some of the most famous in Russian literature, and routinely set for learning by heart in schools. [Editor].

in your family?’ ‘The second eldest.’ ‘And what family are you from?’ ‘Manual workers.’ ‘What nationality?’ ‘Kalmyk, we’re special settlers.’ ‘So did you write the essay yourself?’ I looked him straight in the eye. ‘Yes!’ ‘So why did you pick that free topic?’ ‘I thought it wouldn’t give me any trouble.’ I was giving as good as I got, and he liked it, you could tell from the questions he was asking, they were all tough ones. ‘Well, then: “excellent” for you!’ Then I went on to physics, where they already knew very well who I was, and then to chemistry — I also got ‘excellent’ there. I got ‘excellent’ in every subject.

Aza and I stood out because of studying at the medical institute, we even had a song made up about us: *‘Roza, Aza, Irkutsk girl, Number Thirty-Two...’* It was only girls studying paediatrics then. Mum rubbed into me that if you study medicine, you really have to study it. Don’t even think about getting married till you’re through the course. She put it as a command: don’t even think about it! Aza must have been told the same thing. We’d dance and sing at all the parties, and then run off quietly while it was still light. We didn’t let anyone get ideas. Mazai would always take us home: he was our faithful friend, like a little brother to us.

When did I hear that the Republic was being set up again? We were all waiting to hear then, we all knew that they were going to pass a law to that effect.¹ In March 1957, all the Kalmyks in Omsk gathered in the meeting room at the Epidemics Station. When they read out the decree, we were all overjoyed, started crying and so on. Those of us who could move back straight away were especially happy. But I was in the last year of my course, so we {sic.}² felt a bit frustrated. In June 1958, I had to do my finals. And then, of course, they sent for me.³ The members of the Organising Committee knew exactly who was studying what. I got my degree, and then straight away, on 2 June 1958, I started work in Kalmykia.

When I look back now, I realise those years were tough. After I began my university course, I had to go to the military command once a month to sign on. When we were renting a room, I said to Aza: *‘Let’s tell the landlady straight out we’re special settlers, or else when they come and check up, she’ll decide we’ve pulled a fast one.’* So we said: *‘Marya Sergeevna, we’re special settlers, we’re going to have to sign on*

¹ The Decree of the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federation, 9 January 1957, about the formation of the Kalmyk Autonomous Province on the territory of Stavropol’ Region. [EG].

² Curly brackets {} are used for insertions in the translation for the purposes of comprehensibility in English. [Editor].

³ After finishing their degree, Soviet graduates were compelled to do a period of national service, officially known as ‘distribution’ [*raspredelenie*], which required them to work where they were sent by the authorities. For example, graduates of metropolitan pedagogical and medical institutes were likely — unless they could pull strings — to find themselves sent out to work in villages and provincial towns. [Editor].

once a month, and they might come and ask you how we're behaving. We promise you we'll behave impeccably.' 'Don't worry, my dears, the whole thing's a big political mistake. If they do come, I'll be sure to tell them {you're no trouble}.'

It was very degrading, having to sign on at the military command. But what could you do? I was specially worried after I moved to Omsk. Suppose I didn't manage to sign on in time sometime, and they found out about it in the dean's office, the rector's office?¹ In September 1952, I had to find out where the military command was, and also when to sign on. Everyone had a fixed time. We talked to Marya Sergeevna, and she told us where the military command was, and said they'd tell us there what the day and time of our appointment was. We went over and they did give us a time. All the same, whenever I called in, I never seemed to be able to find anyone. It got me very worried, especially when I was in my first year.

Those thirteen years were so tough. Tough for everyone. The number of people with TB! Imagine what our gene pool was like after all that cold, hunger, degradation. These days all of us, anyone who was young at that time, has problems with their legs and so on, because we never got enough vitamins and proteins, we never had enough clothes or shoes to put on. Mum had pains in her arms and legs too. She'd never touched a saw before, and now there she was knee-deep in snow, having to fulfil her quota. But her spirit was so indomitable she kept going to 92. Elya, though, died young — she'd been ill in Siberia, after all. And every family was like that... Quite honestly, it nearly finished off our entire nation. But we did hold out. As a paediatrician, I can tell you what the generation we had to deal with, look after, was like. In 1958, I was working as a district children's doctor, and I had a full 'slate' of call-outs all the time. I'd visit District 101: people were living in barracks there, and how they were living! Anywhere there was a roof to cover them there'd be a family. It was cruelly hot. They'd arrived back, but there wasn't anything to eat. The children had a whole heap of infections: scarlatina, measles, diphtheria, TB. Children were arriving from everywhere with the parents. And as for giving birth... The mothers were worn out, and the children they brought into the world were as well.

There were lots of flare-ups of infections. A teletmessage came into the Party Provincial Committee from Yustinsky District: the children had gone down with a plague of some kind, no-one knew what it was. There were only three paediatricians in the entire town. So I got sent over in the air ambulance to save them. The flight took three hours, over air pockets and turbulence. We landed and went

¹ In Soviet institutions, these offices had the duty of political as well as academic control. [Editor].

that very minute to have a look at our patients. It was mostly Kalmyks and Kazakhs. The children had a mixture of different infections: some had measles and diphtheria at the same time, and I was sitting there empty-handed — I only got sent a chit for medicines the next day. We spent six weeks fighting the infections. When I arrived in ‘Wormwood’ state farm, Yustinsky District, it was 40 degrees Celsius: I’d never seen the steppe there before, it was nothing like Bashanta at all. I wondered how anyone could live out there, in those sand dunes. Horror, where had I ended up! The only thing I could compare it with was Siberia. Omsk was a different world — modern equipment in the clinic, professors in charge. But here? Out there, on your own, in the wilds, just try getting the diagnosis or the cure a bit wrong...

In 1993, I visited Siberia on the ‘Memorial’ train. I had mixed feelings, but more sorrow than joy. The first thing we did was to seek out where our Kalmyks were buried, and often we didn’t find the graves. We went through our rituals, but without knowing where they were. But even if it wasn’t under that particular bush or that particular birch, our Kalmyks had been left there for eternity. Carrying out the ritual of honour to the dead made many of us feel at peace. It was forty degrees below in Krasnoyarsk, and we carried out the rituals of remembrance without feeling the cold, because we had our minds fixed on something more important. They took us for lunch in a restaurant and I sat so I could look at the boats going past, at the river that was just starting to freeze, and Raisa A. sat down next to me. I could hear her crying: nothing seemed to calm her down. A journalist from the local paper in Kalmykia joined us, and I heard what Raisa was saying to her: her mother was buried in Krasnoyarsk, Raisa was only six then so she wasn’t at the funeral, she couldn’t find the grave, they stuck her in an orphanage. I asked the journalist to stop doing the interview and give her time to pull herself together. When a person’s reliving their awful childhood, it’s not the right time for newspapers to get involved. And there were buckets of tears shed on that train, of course...

Interview 2: Pavel Godaev

I’ve taken an interest in the topic of the deportations for a long time now: after all, I lived through it myself, and I saw what other people were going through, and when I got back, I saw people trying to adapt to another new set of circumstances here. It was tough trying to do that, even for the older generation who had once been used to life here, because most of the former settlements had just disappeared: people had to move into new places they knew nothing about. Seeing all that, experiencing it, I was working away at things inside. It all stayed inside me without making a splash because you couldn’t write about it then, it was forbidden. But we never stopped

talking about it, they went on inside families: I often got involved in such discussions myself. In 1988, I wrote the first version of my memoirs. People were just starting to do things like that then: there were just a few articles in the main Kalmykia newspapers and so on. Kugultinov published something, so did Katushov, and there were other people doing it as well. I had an agreement with Yury Ivanovich Yudin, he was the editor of *Sovetskaya Kalmykiya* at the time (by the way, he's nothing to do with the late {pianist called} Yudina, he's just got the same surname). At that time, I was working as the director of the local Party publishing house, and I had good connections with newspaper editors. When I was going off for my annual break, I agreed with Yudin I'd write my memoirs and that he'd publish them. But when I got back, the text turned out to be a bit long for that newspaper format. I asked: '*How many column inches do I get? Can I have forty?*' I was going for broke. And then I told him what I'd written about. He suddenly lost his rag completely and said: '*You were only in short trousers then, you can't possibly have had anyone from the military command overseeing you: you're making this up, it's garbage.*' So I decided to have a look for documents to support my story. I knew they had to have them in the archives of the local KGB, and I began searching for them there. I finished doing that work in 1992. In my book, *We Were Exiled For Ever*,¹ I only managed to include a few documents from my and my brother's personal files. It's not worth trying to convince people: you just need to cite the documents. I'd also published a book called *The Pain of Memory*,² but there was nothing about me in there. I decided that my first book should be about what others had suffered.

Every person gets as much out of that topic as his or her emotional reactions will allow. When I was finishing my first book, I wrote in the conclusion that those of us who lived through exile in Siberia don't fully recognise our own mission and don't fully recognise what we went through. As for later generations, unfortunately, even many intellectuals, even many historians will ask you what the problem is: they don't want to open their eyes to what went on. Yet events such as the forced deportations of entire peoples cry out for attention. I think we all ought to know about them, remember them, and pass our memories and knowledge to later generations. The history of a people consists of what gets experienced directly. Otherwise, what's the point of studying it? I found working on both of those books very tough. It was specially tough when I was collecting materials about the deportation of Kalmyks from Krasnoyarsk to Taimyr on the Arctic in summer 1944. A person will tell you what he or she lived

¹ P. O. Godaev, *My — iz vyslannykh navechno. Vospominaniya deportirovannykh kalmykov*. Elista, 2003. [EG].

² P. O. Godaev, *Bol pamyati*. Elista, 1999. [EG].

through, but he or she is thinking about that experience at the same time. A person will be telling you about it, but then they'll stop speaking and wander off into themselves, then you'll suddenly see they're crying. I also had to keep my own memories at a distance, and I think that stripped something out of the text, in fact. Also, I'd be talking to people in Kalmyk, and transcribing what they said in Kalmyk, but then everything would get more colourless once I'd translated it into Russian. I tried to talk to old people because they had the most complete memories. These days, there's more understanding about the whole episode, but the essence of what we lived through hasn't changed.

When I was at school in Siberia, I heard rumours about informers, though not often, but the topic did come up. There was a person who used to visit our village who came from another village: he'd come round to our house and talk to my uncles. It seems amazing, but he managed never to voice his own opinion. My uncle noticed this and he once said: '*Akad kün, küündäd suusn biin' küünä kelsig songsch biin' sogsch törüts jum kelhsh*' [That's an odd man, he sits listening to other people, but he'll not tell you what he thinks for anyone's money]. My father had four brothers. The youngest one was called up at the very start of the war and came back in 1946. The other three were in the Marines, that's part of the Red Army too. So all of them had their own different experiences of the deportation, and when they shared their experiences, they expected to hear from the person they were talking to what had happened to him. But he kept up this odd silence. Now I think he was probably an informer: he'd come along specially to listen and then pass on what he'd heard in the right direction.

There were informers in every era, in {pre-revolutionary} Russia as well. But the Soviet system got them to a fine art. I've often worked in the KGB archives with case files under Article 58,¹ and I can tell you there were Kalmyk informers, and local {Russian} informers, and sometimes you'd even get specialists working in factories and members of the factory management informing as well.² Informing had different sides to it. You can see from {the document collection} *Book of Memory. The Exile of the Kalmyks: The Facts*³ that in February 1940, the local NKVD officials were complaining to Moscow that there weren't enough informers with the new arrivals:

¹ The article of the Soviet Criminal Code (1926 and later editions) dealing with political crimes, such as 'counter-revolutionary activity', 'sabotage', 'murder of political activists', etc. [Editor].

² The word 'even' is, from the point of view of the Soviet system itself, somewhat out of place here: those in 'responsible positions' were deemed to have a duty of surveillance over their inferiors. If they did not identify subversion among these, they risked arrest and imprisonment for 'failure to denounce' themselves. [Editor].

³ *Kniga pamyati. Ssylka kalmykov: kak eto bylo*. Vol. 1. Book 1. Elista, 1993. [EG].

an informer network would have to be set up. That is, a network already existed before we arrived, and it was set up in secret. But there was also an overt kind of informer system. A group of householders would be called together, and the principle of shared responsibility would be aired. They'd say in public: '*Badma, you're responsible for those five households, if anyone tries to organise an escape and so on, Badma has to do something about it.*' Everyone knew Badma was responsible and that they mustn't let him down. In any case, they could perfectly well have a secret informer living amongst them too. There were traitors everywhere. These days, you hear the Cossacks rattling their sabres and saying what patriots they are. In 1942, when our troops were fighting at Stalingrad, a Cossack union was set up in Novocherkassk and they made an oath of loyalty to Hitler. The Kalmykia Cossacks had a few representatives there as well.

I'm from Erkn-Amn village: I was brought up there, it's a little place, not more than 50 families or so. We all knew each other well and were related to each other. My father died not long after I was born. I've got one brother — he's three years older. After my father died, my mother, who wasn't at all well, was left to look after the two of us. We had our own house, but there wasn't much space. Three of my father's four brothers had their own families, but the other one wasn't married. He'd been in the army for a bit, served at Khalkhin-gole: he got back in 1941, before the war started. I went to the village school — we had a primary school, with four classes. The lessons were in Kalmyk and only in Kalmyk. They didn't teach Russian, and I didn't know a word — not even *Zdravstvuite!* Our village was Kalmyk through and through. But the next village was half-Russian, half-Kalmyk. My aunt lived there.

When they came for us in the morning, I didn't understand a thing. But my brother, who was thirteen, did know some Russian. He'd done some damage to his feet with tight shoes and could well remember the phrase '*bashmak tesnyi, pochto vzyal?*' [those shoes are too small, what did you buy them for]. But that was almost all he did know. The soldiers settled with our neighbour opposite, and every day we'd take some *kizyak*¹ over. The *kizyak* was made in the summer. We'd take a bowl each and go over. There were steep steps there, we had to climb up them: it was a big wooden house. We lived in an ugly little hut. In the whole of our village, there were only two wooden houses — one was our neighbour's, the other belonged to our *kürgn ah* [the husband of our father's younger sister]. And when we'd brought it, and we were at the threshold and wanting to put it in the stove, one of the soldiers started telling us something and

¹ Soured milk, similar to *kefir*, *koumiss*, etc. [Editor].

didn't let us in. And then the other one said something too, so we left the *kizyak* and went off. And when we'd got home, my brother said, he was telling us no-one needs the *kizyak*, what did you bring it for? Take it back home. But the second one said — they won't be needing it either. And in the morning, it all happened.

It was a cold evening. In those days, you got bitter winters: lots of snow and it would lie and lie. But the days were warmer, so the snow would get a thick layer of ice on top. That ice, we called it *firmoyi*, would stay on top of the snow: literally two or three days before we were deported, our uncle Kötjärjä went off to the sea at his own pace in his *chunki*, he was in the Marines. *Chunki* — that's a home-made sledge, built of boards, with metal runners: you hold ski-sticks in your hands while you're driving it. He went skating over the ice to the Caspian, to a place that was good for fishing. When we were deported, none of my uncles was at home, they were all on the Caspian going fishing. The major part of that division of the Marines was made up by Kalmyks, and there were 1200 women in it too. Because a lot of fishermen had gone to the Front, the women had replaced them. In Lagansk District, they only managed to collect 200 fishermen out of 1200 in 1944, after the Kalmyks had been deported, that was Russians and Kazakhs. My uncles kept hold of their identity cards from that division, and later every year of service counted for two of ordinary work. But the work they did for a collective farm in Siberia didn't count towards their pension. The fishermen had a course of military training, it lasted 110 hours. In the winter, they'd prepare ice for storing over the summer.¹ In the summer, three floating fish factories would process the catch. Every brigade of the division was attached to one particular fish factory. In autumn, they'd often, poor things, get caught up in natural disasters. In 1941, the frosts came very early — that was a big disaster. The boats ended up trapped in the ice, far away from the coast, and a storm drove them up towards Dagestan, and for a few weeks they couldn't land, they were stuck at sea cold and hungry.

I was living with my mother and brother then. We shared a courtyard with our uncle, who had the house next door. On 28 December, we heard a loud knock at the door. The night before, when my brother and I came home, my mother said we should *zul örgh* [light the lamp]. My mother had made a lamp out of uncooked dough: we'd put it on the end of a post next to the half-open door, and she'd whispered a prayer over it. My brother and I stood beside her: we were freezing, but we were scared to disobey. My mother said it was the law. The lamp went out and we shut the door. Then we heard

¹ So it could be used for cold storage in ice houses etc., as was done everywhere before the arrival of electric refrigeration. [Editor].

a knock at the door in the dark, and two people came rushing up. You couldn't see who they were in the gloom. We're standing by the bed. Mother asks in Kalmyk what's happened. I can remember exactly what I was feeling, it's almost photographic. One young soldier started behaving dreadfully, he was just destroying the room. Our house was little, built of reed panels spread with mud. He starting tipping over everything in the corners and staring at it. We usually lit the stove before we went to bed. We used reeds as fuel. Long reeds, tied in bundles, and you'd burn a bundle at a time. We stood there trembling, and my mother did, and she couldn't work out what was going on at all. The soldier herded us off with the butt of his rifle, pushed us away from the bed, and started looking and feeling underneath it. He seemed to be trying to check whether there was some bandit hidden there. The other soldier, who was older, was acting more calmly. He wrote down who we were. They didn't tell us anything. Some people remember them coming in and saying, you're being sent away. But they didn't tell us anything.

After they'd left, we fussed about at home, cleared up a bit: it had started to get light. Mother began getting ready to go out. When we got to my uncle's, it turned out they'd gone through the same procedure. By the gate to the street was standing a soldier that I remember with the greatest affection. He got together everything we needed. It was an officer who told us we were being sent away. When we went out into the yard, an officer came up with a man we'd never seen before — he was a Kalmyk, but not from our village — acting as interpreter. He said, *'halmgudyg nüül'gdjänä. Tigäd selänä shkoltal jovtn'* [The Kalmyks are being resettled. You are to go to the village school]. We stood round, stamped about a bit, then Mother said: well, if they've told us to, then we should go, let's be off. And so we went off just as we were, lightly and hurriedly dressed. But the soldier guarding the gate stopped us and said something. My brother translated it for my mother: we were being taken a long way off, somewhere cold, and so we'd better pack some things. Then the soldier took us back home. But we'd no idea what to pack. So the soldier said to my brother: take this, and this, and this. And we took all the stuff he'd managed to pack for us. He also said Mother should make some food and take it along. He'd take us along there, 'and I'll help to load the things.' Then my mother finally got round to asking something. Our aunt, her sister Halga, was married to my father's brother, two sisters married to two brothers. She said {to me}, *'chi güügäd halja'* [run along and look]. The soldier said that was all right, *'but my commander's in her house now'*. When I got there, my aunt was standing holding her baby in the far corner and yelling at him in Kalmyk. My aunt and uncle were doing well, my uncle was one of the best fishermen on the Caspian, they wanted for nothing. The officer was scooping everything up, grabbing things out

of the chiffonier and packing them. They had a big leather trunk and he was telling two soldiers to carry that out to the street. I crept in quietly: I could see the officer was busy with all that. Later, when we got back from Siberia in 58, our *kürgn ah*, the one with the nice house, found out that the officer who'd done the looting while he was deporting them worked in the local police. He worked out who he was and started tracking him. But the man worked things out too and in a week he'd vanished. It turned out he'd resigned from his job and gone off to parts unknown.

— When the officer had helped himself to everything, my aunt came out into the street and joined us. Mother made tea: by now it must have been about 9 in the morning. When the cart arrived, the same soldier helped us and our other aunts load, since they had little children. All the men were away at sea, the oldest male in four families was my thirteen-year-old brother. We had a grandmother too, she was over eighty by then. She lived opposite us, next to the neighbour whose house the soldiers were in. I ran over to Grandma's and found her in a real panic. What was it? She had two bottles of clarified butter in her shed. She said to me, Go and climb up there and get me one of those bottles, but leave the other one where it is. When we get back, we'll need it. I burrowed in there like a mole, digging away at the straw: I managed to get one bottle, but the other stayed. When the cart rolled up, our elderly neighbours joined us: they had no children, only this dog, and it stayed behind. We arrived at the school in a big bunch. We put our stuff on a wagon. Everyone in the village was there: we were at the edge of the village, so we were the last to get there. We spent a whole day crowded there at the village and in the yard of the house next to it, feeling petrified. At night, the transport arrived. There were no men left: some were in the army, some in the marine division, everyone was at sea. There were only boys and some men too old to sail any longer. Aunt Halga, my mother's younger sister, was an energetic person and a good organiser. There was one truck next to us, and our things were on the snow next to it. My aunt said straight away: '*and bidn suuhm*' [we'll sit down here], our four families and our old neighbours, let's do it. But some people couldn't work out what was going on. Someone would take their stuff to one truck, and another family member would end up carting theirs to another truck. The soldiers were in a hurry, and so they'd end up chucking stuff in anywhere. It was much the same picture at the station. We were unloaded there in the snow. Later I learned that it wasn't a station at all really, just a halt. At the time, the only station people knew about was Ulanhol.

We got there late at night, so there wasn't a train waiting, there was nothing on the rails. I only know from what older people have told me that it didn't turn up till after midnight. But I do remember at

first hand that not only I, but more or less everyone else had never seen a station or a train before in their lives. When we heard something roaring up, people thought it was *shulm* — the devil. That was a widespread notion at the time. That was why they used to say that devils bred in thickets of sorrel. And at night solitary travellers were supposed to be easy prey for the devil. Lots of people started to assume the approaching train was the devil — lights were coming nearer, something was huffing and puffing. People were scattered everywhere, some close to the wagons, some further away. Then we were told to go right to the head of the train. That was quite a long walk. Although we hadn't much baggage, we had to drag it all along ourselves. And we weren't much use — I was just a little boy then, a wee shrimp of a thing. Even my brother was only 13. Still, we all did what we could, dragged whatever came to hand. But the layer of ice on top of the packed snow was treacherous: sometimes it held, but sometimes it gave way. When we were walking on the fresh stuff, it was hellish. You'd put your foot down and it would seem to hold, but then when you lifted your second foot, you'd fall through. And you got deep falls of snow then. Above us children's knees, at any rate. And then we had to drag Mother along too. She wasn't well, and she was lying there half-collapsed.

When we got the things dragged up, the embankment turned out to be very steep. We had to scramble up and then hand them across, and the track was over our heads. Even my brother couldn't reach the floor of the wagons. When we were handing stuff over, it was hard to get a sack over at one go: if it had any weight to it, it would fall straight back down on someone's head or whatever. When we'd got the stuff loaded, we had to collect our mother, who was lying there on her own, where the luggage was. Everyone else was in the wagons by then, she was there on her own. It was very hard to orient, with no houses or trees, just the bare white steppe. We only had the tracks where people had walked to guide us. Then we had to get her lifted up, she couldn't walk by herself any more. Our old neighbour and his wife had taken a new *shirdyk* [piece of felt] and we put Mother on it, and covered her up: when we got out of the wagon, aunt Halga realised we might not be able to lift her, so she'd have to be dragged. She undid the ropes that were round our things and we tied mother to the *shirdyk* and dragged her up that way.

They closed up the wagon straight away and we went off — I can't remember what happened the next morning or before mid-day, when the train came to a halt. We were in a station somewhere in Astrakhan. We weren't there long before the train went off again. It didn't halt for a long time after that. We were mostly in darkness, but there was a little window up by the second tier of bunks. Anyone up there could look out. There was a fierce draught coming through, so there was a bit of space round it on the bunk. Children like my

brother and me would go for water. Two people at a time would go for food. The adult men in our wagon turned out to include Dava Muevich Sangadzhiev, he was supposed to be at sea, only he'd actually been at home that particular day, and his brother Elta. They shared the food round everyone. Only they didn't do it fairly. Elta started giving my brother grief when he tried to get warm: he lay down next to the iron stove. And when my brother didn't want to do as he said, Elta sat astride him and more or less started bouncing up and down: he said, you want to get warm, you see how warm I'll get you. He only quieted down when aunt Halga yelled at him.

Fortunately for us, the train stopped at Aralsk. When we woke up, the train was standing at the station. They let us get out and opened all the doors. Suddenly, uncle Boktan came up: he didn't climb in the wagon, he just asked: is it our lot travelling here? He was just checking up, in case. They told him: *'Your family's here, climb in, they're having a tough time.'* And he answers: *'I can't, they said we shouldn't move round on the way, we should stay with our immediate families.'* And he says to his wife, Baila, *'neg shiltä tosn bääni? Nand ugchkich neg shil tos'* (do you have a bottle of clarified butter? Give me a bottle]. He picks up the bottle, and then he goes. In his wake arrive uncle Badma, born 1901, and uncle Kötjärjä, born 1904, both carrying their things. They'd heard that the train was carrying people from our village Soviet, and they'd carried their things right along the train, looking for us. They asked: Has Boktan come round? *'Yes, he was here, but he's gone away again.'* *'Well, what else do you expect from him?'* Once they arrived, things got much better in the wagon. They started fetching water and food themselves, and they divided it fairly too. And Dava began behaving like a lamb. Butter wouldn't melt. That went on till we reached Siberia.

When the train was coming to a halt, people managed to jump out. The women, poor things, went to the other side of the train — they had to relieve themselves. There was a hole in the floor of the wagon, and it was pitch dark, so that made things easier. As for washing, we couldn't be doing with that. You couldn't risk splashing water: if it went on the floor, it would freeze right away, then you'd slip over. The wagon was literally coated with hoar frost. We'd keep warm by pressing up against each other. I don't remember how we ever got any sleep. Whichever way, we arrived around twelve days after we set off.

The station was called Chany, in Novosibirsk Province. It was a busy place, marking the East-West Siberia line. Not all the passenger trains stopped there. We had NKVD workers to meet us, with a load of sleighs. They took us on the sleighs to the local House of Culture. A huge crowd of people was taken there. At any rate, you couldn't squeeze between them, you had to step over the bodies to move

anywhere. We were there three days. They fetched us at the end of the third. We went off to Dobrinka village — it was about 37 kilometres from the district centre. We set off early in the evening and travelled all night. There were three families: our uncles, our grandma, and two other sets of relatives, our father's sister Demchi — her husband was in the marine division, at sea, and she'd been deported with her family, but without him. They had lots of children, and their girls were already grown, teenagers, fourteen, seventeen, that kind of age. And there was another family with no man in it too, no-one, relations of Demchi's. So we ended up in Dobrinka — that's in Chanovsky District.

We were billeted on the chief accountant of the collective farm, Ivan Frantsevich Sherstyuk. He was a Ukrainian — when the Germans invaded he'd had to leave and ended up here. There were four in his family. We were there till spring, my brother and I, my mother, Grandma, Uncle Kötjäre and his wife, Aunt Halga, and their son — seven of us in all. We all slept in the one room — there wasn't a single bed in it, we all slept on the floor, and I was on a Siberian bench. Siberians don't use chairs, they have benches along the wall 30 centimetres wide. At home, we had a big wooden bed. They put me to sleep by the wall, and my brother was next to me, and then my mother on the edge. In that bed, I was quite capable of rolling right over my brother and my mother and then on to the floor, all in my sleep. But somehow I managed to sleep on that 30 centimetres wide bench and never roll out at all.

There was no food around at all. The collective farm couldn't help us out — it was one of the poorest in the district. My uncle and aunt started working to keep the seven of us. Though actually my aunt couldn't go to work every day because of her little boy — you couldn't leave him on his own. And even if she had been able to, there wouldn't have been enough food to go round.

One night I suddenly started singing. I was sleeping on my bench with my back to the others, my face to the wall. According to Kalmyk custom, singing at night is bad form in the first place, and doing it in bed... The adults all started hissing at me. But then Grandma suddenly said: *'Why are you getting on at him?'* She asked me: *'Why did you start singing?'* I said, *'gesn ösläd, guir häägäd'* [I'm hungry, I want some bread]. And a day later they gave us a ration of flour, 3 kilos. And uncle started getting hold of potatoes one way or another. He could do us a good turn, and there was reason to.

The village wasn't very big, but even so there wasn't a man in it. It was a Polish village in fact, the villagers had been resettled from Poland before the Revolution, at the end of the nineteenth century. In 1937 and 1938 all the men had been rounded up and arrested, they'd been deported somewhere and had never come back. The

chairman was a Tatar, Umarov: the only local man left, literally the only one, was called Josef Bolbat. It turned out that he was the one who'd denounced everyone else in the village. I heard that from children my own age. The adults in our family, my aunt and uncle, also got to hear about it, once they'd made friends with the locals, but people only whispered about such things at the time.

I went back to Siberia for the first time in '64, then again in '92. The third time I went there was 2002, I was a guest of our very own Chanovsk Secondary School. My brother and I were the only ones who really had to fight with the local military command to be allowed to study there. The commandant put pressure on my uncle to stop us from studying. But Uncle said, How can I do that, they're not my own children, just my nephews. If you've got the law on your side, then stop them yourself, I can't do it. Uncle could read and write — he'd been through the illiteracy courses — but he'd never been to school: he could literally only read, write, and sign his name. But he told us: *iovadatn* [do it]. And in '92, when I arrived at the district centre — I've always stayed in touch with my friends in the village — I stayed with my friends there. We packed into a car and off we went to the cemetery. My mother, my grandmother, my Aunt Halga and my two little cousins all died not long after we arrived in Siberia. That's why we went there first. And my friend Kobyljak, the first thing he did was to go rushing up to a grave and start kicking the little fence round it hard. He says: Bolbat's buried there, and he started cursing him and swearing and he said: that so-and-so sent down the whole village, my father among them. They started rehabilitating them in the '50s, but he only got the notification through in '82. Bolbat was arrested himself, but after everyone else, and they only kept him in a few months and then released him.

I made friends with some of the boys straight away. None of them had fathers either, they were all very friendly. There was one exception — Lyonya Rekuc, he and I were at primary school together, and then went into the fifth year together. He was always trying to poke me, hit me — and he was a big solid boy. He'd say something nasty and pick on me all the time. But I was prickly from an early age, and I always paid him back in the same coin, I didn't give in. And then this other big boy, Bronislaw Bolbat — his mother was Latvian, and his father was a Pole — used to stand up for me. Bronislaw's mother, Aunt Marianna, was a very good woman. And he always helped me out whatever happened. One of them might go for me, but the other would back me up.

During the first year [of exile], 1944, my uncle was deputed to herd the village livestock — the ones owned by the collective farm, and the ones belonging to individual collective farmers. But it was very tough trying to deal with both herds at the same time on your own.

An old man had been doing it before, a Kazakh called Makashev, and he'd given up on it straight away. Then we Kalmyks arrived, and we didn't have any work. I imagine Uncle Kostya¹ was put to do it because they thought he'd rope the rest of the family in. And in fact my brother and I did help herd the animals right into the late autumn. You can forget school with that going on. Anyway, we didn't have any clothes or anything. What you had to put on your feet then was this. You'd cut up some rawhide and pull it on. Underneath you wore this worn-out stuff, rags and stuff. That lasted till we started being able to get sheep's wool, then people began knitting socks — I even learned to knit myself. Traditional Kalmyk shoes, *burshm*, are made like that, but I can't remember anyone wearing them before we were taken away.

We were in the accountant's house till the Spring. Their son was almost the same age as me, and the family treated us pretty well. He was the chief accountant, one of the top management of the collective farm, so he couldn't afford to put a foot wrong. But his elderly mother tried to freeze us out — she wouldn't have anything to do with the adults in our family.

By now the war was over. I never asked the adults why we'd been deported, and I didn't even discuss it with my brother. But by the time I was in the sixth or seventh year of school, I did start thinking about it. Maybe the most persistent emotion that went through my head — it may have been influenced by the talk I heard from adults — was the hope that *dän chülhlä*, *tegin tal garhm* [when the war's over, we'll be moving back to the steppe]. The hope that it would only stay as it was till the end of the war, then Stalin would get to hear {about us}, and everything would go back to normal.

It amazes me even now how the old people managed to get into those wagons. '*Urdasn' ükch bol'shgo*' [You won't die before you're meant to]. That was the philosophy among our old people — you have to live till you get justice. The traditional view of life was also expressed in the words: no-one alive wants to give up on life. 'Alive', that is, in terms of your inner essence, your soul, your inner mobilisation.² Some people lie down and die helplessly, others don't — they haul themselves out of the situation. As it turns out, our people was particularly rich in that inner strength. That's why I can't agree with the hurtful things Solzhenitsyn said. In *The Gulag Archipelago*, he wrote this about us: '*the Kalmyks didn't make a stand, they died in misery.*' Then in brackets, he puts: '*Not that I saw any of this myself.*'

¹ Usually the diminutive of 'Konstantin', but in the present case a Russified pet name for Kötjärjä. (See also below.) [Editor].

² Note the piquant combination of the metaphysical (essence, soul) and the purely Soviet political (mobilisation) here. [Editor].

But we Kalmyks didn't die in misery. I won't stand for generalisations like that — Stalin was the same, judging a whole people on a small group when he'd not seen anything for himself. The statistics show that there were more Kalmyk refugees than Chechens, but he [Solzhenitsyn] praises the Chechens to the skies. The Chechens were exiled to Kazakhstan in groups of 300 to 400 families — in whole villages. So they could be settled, they cleared out lots of Kazakh auls. But Kalmyks were settled in groups of a few families, each to one entire village.

I started going to school from Class 3, and I finished secondary school in four years, as an 'over-ager'.¹ The teachers treated me fine. The only trouble I had with school was in my first year, in Class 3 — with humanities subjects. I was good at maths, and I gradually caught up in humanities as well. I graduated from the seven-year school with 'excellent' across the board. We wrote a treatise in Class 7, and I was the only one who got marked 4, borderline 5.

Even though no-one gave me trouble myself, I did have a sense of the status of Kalmyks generally. When we arrived, everyone in the village was convinced that cannibals were arriving. There was this girl called Masha Ritter in my school, she was a German girl. Whenever I appeared on the village street, she'd walk miles to avoid coming near me. Later, when I got a bit older, I asked her straight out: *'Masha, what was eating you?'* She said: *'Well they told us cannibals were being brought in.'* Those Germans had been brought here in 1941 themselves, and yet they believed that stuff. The chairman of the collective farm liked to rub our position in — he liked to pull rank over my uncles. But fortunately for me, the head of the secret police archive in Novosibirsk, Captain Tsegelnikov, turned out to be a real human being. In '92, I went there specially to collect my files — I waited in a queue to see the head of the Directorate² so I could get permission to see them. His secretary asked me: *'What exactly is it you want? You'd be better seeing the head of the archive, he's a very nice person.'* I arrived on 19 October, and he said to me: *'You know, there are requests pouring in from everywhere to get people who were executed and imprisoned rehabilitated, because of the new law, and I'm not even up with the April cases yet.'* And he took me into the archive, took my application, and said: *'Come back at so-and-so time.'* The first thing I did was to look through my uncle's files. In one of my uncle's files, I found a memo from the chairman of the collective farm, Ivan Frantsevich Rekruc, to Com-

¹ i.e. someone older than the official age of the class. At times of overcrowding, such children might be removed from schools in order to make room for others and left to catch up on their education through adult education schemes etc. later on. [Editor].

² i.e. the Provincial Directorate of the Internal Ministry, a branch of the organs of surveillance and police control. [Editor].

mandant Yugov: 'on so-and-so date Ochkaev Boktan,¹ a Kalmyk special settler, swore at me in front of witnesses. Such behaviour is quite unforgivable, and I request that steps be taken.' I burst out laughing when I read that, because my uncle never let a swearword pass his lips, whereas the complainant himself never used less than three to every five words he spoke. Yugov was the overseer of the Kalmyks, Estonians, and Germans, they put him there in '48, when the Estonians were brought in. He'd fought at the Front, and he was a strapping figure of a man, but decent. He'd check that steps were being taken and work done, but he didn't punish anyone himself. If he'd sent the case file up the line, though, to Selivanov, the District Commandant, who oversaw several other villages as well as ours, their cases could have gone badly for uncle.

I was accepted into the Pioneers when I was in Class 4.² There weren't many pupils in the school at all, let alone good ones. They let the pupils with good marks in first. In Class 3, I'd been a bit up and down, but I started working steadily in Class 4. I even got 'excellent' for singing. Our teacher, Aleksandra Ivanovna Pinegina, made us all sing a solo, and assigned the mark for the term on that. The local boys were naughty and behaved rather badly, but I'd always been kept well disciplined. When they got me up to sing — I didn't know any Russian songs in Class 3 — I sang 'Katyusha'³ in Kalmyk. I sang out boldly — I was good at it, that had been clear at home too. The door opened and the pupils arriving for the second shift⁴ started looking in too. I'd arranged a little concert for them.

From 1952 onwards, I started having to sign on at the military command. This was because I'd started putting my date of birth down as 1936 — I'd begun doing that before we left home. In 1942, when the Germans took Elista and made their thrust further east, there was the most dreadful panic. Rumours started flying round our little village on the coast that the Germans were rounding up young people and sending them off to Krautland.⁵ Everyone in the village

¹ Surname-first name order was common in the Soviet Union, particularly in official contexts. [Editor].

² Children were enrolled (the official term, as for the Komsomol, was 'accepted') into the Pioneers from the age of nine or ten upwards. Pupils who got top marks in all subjects and who were generally considered a 'good thing' by their teachers were enrolled first, later on other pupils in descending order of merit. Really hard cases might not be admitted at all. It was common for children of special settlers to be refused enrolment. [Editor].

³ The famous war song (1938) about Katyusha by Mikhail Isakovsky (words) and Matvei Blanter (music), where the heroine goes out on the high steep river bank and sings about her beloved at the Front. [Editor]

⁴ Throughout the Soviet period, but especially during and after the War, when teaching staff and buildings were short, schools taught in two, and sometimes even in three, shifts, running early morning to early afternoon, early afternoon to late afternoon, and late afternoon to evening. [Editor].

⁵ The word used in the original, *nemetchina*, has a contemptuous intonation. [Editor].

started trying to change their age. People ran from house to house with the idea of erasing their original date of birth and putting in another one. That was when my date of birth got altered to 1936. So I started having to sign on in 1952, because that was when I counted as sixteen. Two of my girl cousins had also officially been born in 1936, but they were a year older than me, in fact. Their files are preserved in the archives, and they were actually born in 1932, so I must have been born in 1933.

So I started signing on, but the commandant kept picking on me. When I got to the end of Class 6, the chairman of the collective farm sent for me and started trying to bully me into working in the accounts department, even though I wasn't yet down on the special list. I said that I'd be happy to work there during the summer holidays. But in the summer, as it happened, I was put to work as the tally clerk of the field brigade. And the tally clerk's a big boss, the second most important person after the brigade leader, and everyone does what you says, and you tot up what they've done, how many labour days they're entitled to, and then you send in the lot to the collective farm office. They depended on me for everything. The Commandant started bullying me and saying, you know what you are, you're a Kalmyk special settler, you'd better do what I say. And the chairman of the collective farm explained that he'd send me on an accountancy course and then I'd work as an accountant in the collective farm. For some reason, this idea didn't attract me, and uncle said, '*avrjan uhal*' [decide for yourself].

So I did decide — I wanted to go on with my studies. And that led to conflict with the chairman of the collective farm, and with the commandant. When I got added to the special list, the commandant never stopped breathing down my neck. In the archive, I came across a document specifying there should be a check twice a month on the flat in the district centre where I was living to see whether I was there or not. That made our relations even worse. When I got to Class 9, I had problems two months running: I came along to sign up, but he packed me off, and then when I came along again, he still wouldn't let me sign. And then he sent in a report to the local public prosecutor that Godaev hadn't signed up in September and October, got me arrested and sent to custody. I was in for 5 days, and then they let me out on 23 October at 9 a.m. When he began arresting me, he said: '*Take off your Komsomol badge and your belt, turn out your pockets, now off to the cells.*' I refused to play along. And while he was coming round the long table, unstrapping his holster on the way, and saying: '*I'll show you...*' I grabbed the table and lifted it up — can't think what got into me — and moved towards him and said, using the same foul language he'd been using to me: '*I'll break your... head open.*' He turned on his heel right away and called up the sentry: '*Send the guards over here.*'

That was how I ended up with five days in clink. But I won my fight with him. Lieutenant Nazarov, the boss of the Special Military Command, took my side. He was much cleverer and more humane {than the local commandant}, and better educated too. Why make fun of the boy {he said}, he's got no parents after all. Nazarov used to turn up for big sports competitions in our district. He'd always bring his wife along. And I was in the school teams for light athletics, ski racing, and juggling two-pood weights, despite weighing only 50 kilos and looking like a skeleton. I'd done sport since Class 5. The lieutenant would always come up to me and say: '*Godaev, you're to remember I'm a big fan of yours.*' It was this sort of thing that made me emphasise in my first book that my well-wishers included people in official positions.

My Kalmyk name was Googa Elta, and that was the one always used in our villages and in the villages round us. It was only at school that anyone knew I was also called Pavel. But in Siberia everyone called me Pavel, or Pasha for short. And uncle Kötjärej turned into Kostya.

I always felt that I wasn't on the same rung as everyone else in society. When I was through with the four-year primary school, I got enrolled in Class 5 at a school in a village 20 kilometres away. But in fact I couldn't go, because no-one would have me as a lodger. That brought things home to me. I stayed on in the collective farm working for my uncle, he worked as a shepherd in the summer as well, and in winter he'd look after the animals when they were indoors. I helped him look after the stock and did work for him at home, and I didn't study at all. Then, during the second term, Anna Kalamis, the local schoolteacher, arrived. She came from our village, and she'd just started working as a teacher, right after New Year. She said: '*Why should Pasha sit at home? He should repeat Class 4, so he doesn't end up forgetting it, and then he can go on studying later.*'

So, from January, I started attending Class 4 again, and it was only later that my brother and I got to go to Chany, the district centre, 37 kilometres away. He was in Class 9, and I was in Class 5. At first, we lived with a classmate of his for a term. Then we were turfed out of there, and we moved in with a Kalmyk family — they were some kind of distant cousins of ours. In Class 6, I went to study in a neighbouring village — officially it was in the next district along too — but it wasn't far away and about 13 children in all from our village went to study there. They'd just opened a seven-year school, and I was in the first batch of graduates, with 'excellent' across the board. I was one of the first two Komsomol members in the school too. I had the right to go to any higher education institution in the country without having to sit an exam. I even wrote a note for the school newspaper¹ — I was

¹ Probably a 'wall newspaper', or bulletin board about current political topics and news of local interest. [Editor].

the editor — about how I wanted to be a riverboat captain. There was a river navigation college in Irkutsk, for some reason I decided I might get a place there. But I had to kiss that dream goodbye. In Class 8 and Class 9 I went on with my studies at Chanovsk Secondary School. At first I lived in the school hostel — they had a hostel in the district centre with 40 beds, and I was given a place there, only in Class 10 I lived in a rented flat instead.

By now, people were delighted to have me as a lodger, given that I was grown up and could help around the house and so on. I earned money to keep myself in the summer and by doing odd jobs in the winter — all that started in Class 5. The line used for transporting coal from east to west went through Chany, our local station. Anthracite from the Kuzbass. The trains would always make a halt. A few of us lads would go along. As soon as the train started moving, we'd leap into the wagons. If it was a flat one, that was fine, a high-sided one caused more trouble. You'd either chuck down big bits of it or pack them in a sack and then chuck that down. Once you'd collected them, you'd cart them off on your own back, then stash them somewhere, and then off to private buyers, there was always a demand. We knew ourselves who we should take it to. Sometimes we got paid in cash, sometimes in food. That's how we got by. Or I'd walk to my uncle's in the village and carry back bread and frozen milk. I'd go the whole 37 kilometres on foot, and I could make it faster than a horse. A few times I even did the whole 37 kilometres in three and a half hours. But that was a personal best.

Once, when I was just about to go home for the November holidays,¹ I found I had no warm socks and boots, only summer socks and summer shoes. If you go out like that you're finished. That's when I set my personal best. I didn't have my own watch — you'd just look at the clock when you left and then again when you arrived. Lessons were over by one, and by the time you'd packed up and had your dinner it would usually be nearly three. Even so, once, when I was in the top classes, I even managed to go out dancing after I'd got back and had my supper. I spent the night {at home}, then I went back in the morning. I don't want to brag, but my dancing was as good as anything you'd see on stage. The dance I liked best was the waltz, but I could do anything, really — Russian, Ukrainian dances, the *gopak* — whatever.

When I finished school, in 1955, things had calmed down. We no longer had to sign up once a month. But when I got my passport,²

¹ i.e. 7 November, the anniversary of the Great October [Bolshevik] Revolution, which took place on 25 October 1917, Old Style. [Editor].

² The national identity card, which was normally issued at the age of 16, and which contained information about where the holder was entitled to live as well as personal details (name, DOB, nationality, names of wife/husband and children, etc.). [Editor].

I found it had a note in it saying I only had the right to travel within Novosibirsk Province. Rather, I could move away without asking permission, but I'd have to go on the special list again when I reached my destination {and keep signing up}.

All my classmates were sure, for whatever reason, I'd end up a historian. We had quite a good history teacher, Medvedeva: she had a nice, kind, attentive manner that made you like her, and I contributed a lot in her classes. But I should really have been a mathematician. We had Zoya Grigorievna Evdokimova for that. She's still alive — only yesterday, I gave her my best wishes for International Teachers' Day. She really had a God-given talent for teaching. I only once didn't prepare something all the time she was teaching us — and that was because I'd got stuck in a blizzard on the way back and missed a day of school, so I arrived on a Thursday not a Wednesday. So when she called me to the blackboard, I couldn't repeat our homework. In six weeks, she asked me again: '*Pasha, now what was it you should have told us about that time?*' And I rattled it straight off, like a poem. That was her style. If a pupil had messed up a homework assignment, she'd get them to repeat it a week or two later. So we'd all mug up specially for her classes. Anyone who had any flair at all for maths would get fives, people who weren't all that good would still manage solid fours, and it was only the ones who were really hopeless who ended up with threes.¹

In time, I went off to the pedagogical institute, following my brother. When my brother finished school in 1951, we sneaked him off to apply for higher education.² Luckily, we weren't intimidated — scared, yes, but not intimidated. He passed all the exams for the civil engineering college and he was formally accepted, only then he was struck off the list just before the academic year started, when they worked out he was a Kalmyk. They handed him back his exam scripts and said: '*With these marks you can get a place at any institute in the city.*' So he went round every institute in Novosibirsk — there were eleven of them at the time — only to be turned down everywhere because the admissions were already finished. The last place he got to was the Pedagogical Institute, and he went to the Rector — Ivan Vasilievich Sinitsyn was running the place then — and put his exam paper down in front of him and told his story. Sinitsyn looked through the stuff, heard my brother out, and said: '*Young man, you can go and tell that director* (at the time, heads of institutes were called directors, not rectors) *this: you thought I couldn't be trusted to build*

¹ In Soviet schools, assigned homework usually consisted of topics from the textbook which were supposed to be prepared (i.e. learned by heart) and then repeated in class. A mark, ranging from 1 (appalling) up to 5 (excellent) would be awarded for the results of this oral test. In practice, 3 (satisfactory) was the lowest mark usually awarded. [Editor].

² i.e. without clearing permission from the military command post first. [Editor].

*a public toilet (my brother had applied for civil engineering, you see), but now I'm trusting you to educate the new generation.*¹ And with these words, and the original set of marks, Ivan Vasilievich accepted my brother as a student on the maths and physics faculty of the Novosibirsk Pedagogical Institute. And he said: *'You're an orphan, life's tough, and so I'll put you down in the primary education section. You'll get a qualification in two years, officially it'll be 'incomplete secondary education'. Then I'll transfer you to the distance-learning section without you having to do any more exams, and you can graduate from the Institute as an external student.'*

Although the admissions panel had stopped work, he re-convened one in maths the very next day, and they arranged an entrance exam in maths specially for my brother. That was how he got to be a student.

As for me, I was dying to attend the Communications Institute, that is, the Institute of Electro-Technical Communications on ulitsa Kirova, at number 56. They gave you a grant of 490 roubles a month at that place, whereas in the Pedagogical Institute you only got 220. I knew you had to be good at maths to get in, and the size of the grant was really important so far as I was concerned. Unfortunately, though, I got put off, I was worried I might go through the same hassles as my brother. So I hummed and ha'ed, and ended up applying for the Pedagogical Institute instead.

The first exam was in maths, and it was an oral one. I arrived, and I couldn't find my written test anywhere. I looked for it three times — still nothing. The teacher had a look himself — still no sign. *'What's your name?' 'Godaev?' 'Why didn't you tell me earlier? I've got your test right here in my briefcase. Put it here specially.'* And then he gave me a 5 on the oral exam, and he said: *'That makes two fives. So don't you dare sign up with the physicists: you've got to study maths.'* I had four exams left. When they divvied the candidates up at the end, I found I had indeed been put down for maths. But I wanted to do physics. The girls on the other hand, all the girls who were down for physics, or most of them, were wanting to do maths. So I swapped with one of them. In the Institute, I finished the first set of exams with just one four, but after that my marks were only middling.

There was one other Kalmyk doing maths and physics — Vera Arashaeva, in the year above me — and one doing history, Vladimir Uburshaev, and one doing geography, Lyubov Buchurginova. Sometimes we'd meet up for a special event, we'd all rush along.

¹ Sic. To put it more clearly: 'you thought I couldn't be trusted... but the director of the Pedagogical Institute says he's trusting me to educate...' [Editor].

Even before the decree got published in *Pravda*, in 1956... or maybe in 1957... I read that story, *Sunflower*, by Vitaly Zakrutkin, the writer from Rostov-on-Don.¹ I was stunned to find it was about a Kalmyk, Badma. I rushed round everywhere with that story, I showed it to all the lads in the hostel. Then another time I heard them playing some Kalmyk music on the radio, and I went rushing round the hostel as well. And we were politically active too. In 1955, when I was still in my first year at the institute, in December 1955, I was one of the main movers behind a letter we sent to the Central Committee of the Communist Party to take up the issue of the stamp in our passports saying, '*Free movement permitted only within Novosibirsk Province*'. Ivan Myonkubashaev, a friend of mine, and a student at the building college, was the one who had the idea in the first place, he was a couple of years older than me and he'd had more contact with older {Kalmyks} as well. He brought the idea up, but it was me that had to draft the letter, and then redraft it, and then polish up the final version. I was deputed to go and see one of the commandants in the central district {of Novosibirsk}, Egorov — he was a Kalmyk himself, as it happened — and ask his advice. But when he'd read the letter, he didn't say a word, just stared at me without saying anything, handed me back the letter, turned on his heel, and walked out. At first, I was flabbergasted, and didn't understand what on earth was going on. What was this — I'd asked his advice, and he'd said nothing? It took me a while to realise he was just dead scared.

What we said in the letter was that the Kalmyk students should have the restrictions on travelling round removed, it was discriminatory, morally oppressive.

There was another lad on my course, called Sasha Moszhenin. His father was the captain of a riverboat. He never got to the first lecture on time, because he lived on the far river bank, in Krivoshchekovo, and today there was a practical, so he was even more likely to be late. But suddenly he turned up much earlier than everyone else. In a real state — ears flapping, eyes wide, mouth open. He said: '*Lads, get this: dad came home late from work last night because they'd read them out this speech. It turns out Stalin was a major criminal.*' Then he says to me: '*Pasha, it turns out it was wrong to send you Kalmyks away.*' He went on talking in bursts, fragments, fighting for breath: he says, '*They read Khrushchev's speech to dad at work, the speech he made at the Twentieth Congress, he said in that speech tons of people were*

¹ Vitaly Zakrutkin (1908–1984), was a prominent Socialist Realist writer. His novel *Plavuchaya stantsiya* [The Floating Station] was awarded a Stalin Prize in 1950, and later work was also honoured with state prizes. He held numerous positions in the Writers' Union, and was also a member of the editorial board of the newspaper *Literaturnaya Rossiya*. The publication of a pro-Kalmyk story by an official figure of this kind would have been no accident, but a clear indication of changing official policy. [Editor].

punished and executed unjustly, and it was all Stalin's fault.' — Our group was in a state of total shock. We all worshipped Stalin. And now suddenly this. And I was all the more shattered — to hear what I just had {about the Kalmyks}! I got up from my seat, went up to him and said: '*Sasha, be honest now, you know how much this matters to me.*' *It's quite true! It's a very long speech, they were reading it for hours.*' And then my friends came running up — first of all my old mate Sasha Chernyavsky — they started hugging me, then passing me from row to row and congratulating me, and then the girls came up too, especially Nina Nikolaeva, she was such a sensitive person, took everything to heart. And everyone came to congratulate me. Later they read that speech to us students too. So by March 1956, I was ready for it all.

I got back to Kalmykia in 1958, to Ulan-khol station. The first night, I felt really mixed up. I'd arrived at Ulan-khol station from Novosibirsk after changing trains twice, in Syzran and in Astrakhan. I was so wet behind the ears I was expecting a big station, especially as its name hadn't changed. The train got in at 4 a.m. It was summer, so it was already late. And then the station in Ulan-khol turned out to look more like a grain-store in a Siberian village. So I felt a bit mixed up. But not let down, oh no.

Those years of exile did their damage, but you can't say they were wasted, because our people lived through those thirteen years without losing its dignity. At this point, I'd like to remember what Nekrics¹ said about us, it makes me so grateful. He spoke about the Kalmyks with such amazing warmth, those words about how the Kalmyks got home after 14 years with their numbers reduced, but their sense of wholeness intact. I admire Oleg Volkov too, for his warm, humane attitude to the Kalmyks. His novel *Plunging into Darkness* has a Kalmyk woman character in. He writes with such respect, though the story ends tragically. It's not at all like Solzhenitsyn. I just can't forgive Solzhenitsyn that phrase, '*The Kalmyks didn't make a stand and they died in misery.*'

Afterword

The texts published here record discourses taking place at four different levels: the level of the Kalmyks experiencing deportation; the level of the representatives of state power, such as the military commanders, officers, and soldiers; the level of the representatives of local communities in Kalmykia and Siberia — neighbours, teachers, classmates, fellow students — and the level, finally, of the informants themselves, looking back to the past from the year 2004.

Notable in the texts is the widespread use of impersonal grammatical

¹ A. Nekrich, *Nakazannye narody* [Punished Peoples]. New York, 1978. [EG].

forms, which point to the fact that people considered themselves part of a collective 'we' being subjected to repression, sharing a single indictment, punishment, and more generally, fate. Also highly characteristic is the dominant use of passives: we were exiled, we were sent off, we were told. As we know, language is a vessel of the symbolic order, a reflection of social norms and laws.¹ When recalling the distant past, the narrators subconsciously returned to the mental world of Stalinist society, and replicated their former, dependent status as people whose lot was to suffer what other people foisted on them, to be the victims of decisions made by others. Thus, the dependant, passive role of the individual and the ethnic group is underlined, and with it the nature of their subjectivity in the social life of the period.

Sometimes, language reveals more than the narrator wants it to, reflecting reality more harshly. The text published here omits a verbal slip made by the informant in Interview 1: Studebakers *invaded* the village. She is referring to the transport the Kalmyks were taken away in. The significance of the slip is that the vehicles were employed by sections of the NKVD that regarded the Kalmyks as enemies — for this reason, we find slippage at the linguistic level into a lexicon used for enemy action. Another example from this informant's narrative that was excluded from the final version was, '*he wasn't just any old traitor*', meaning, not just any old Kalmyk, he fought at the Front. 'Traitor' slipped out instead of 'Kalmyk' because the narrator, in returning to the events of those years, continued her internal dialogue with those who considered that any Kalmyk was automatically also a traitor. Something else probably played a role here too: Soviet authoritarianism ingrained itself into people's minds, they were ground down by it and ended up by adopting its terminology automatically. The narrator later rejected the phrase because it expressed an unconscious submission to authority that she found unacceptable at a conscious level.

It's notable that the word *deportatsiya* practically doesn't figure in these oral narratives. The word is relatively speaking a neologism, having first been used in the 1980s to describe the mass repressions of the Stalin era, and hasn't yet been lived or struggled through. What is more, the word has a very public flavour, and these discussions took place in private. It is other words that have fixed themselves in people's consciousness: *ssylka* [political exile], *vysylka* [resettlement], and especially the word *vysylenie* [life in resettlement], which refers not so much to a process as to its result, the status of the repressed people. These words suggest something less complete than *deportatsiya*, and as native Russian words, they also feel less alien.

¹ J. Kristeva. *Revolution in Poetic Language*. New York, 1984. Pp.47–48. [EG].

In fact, readers will note how technical terms tended to be avoided generally, creating a kind of Aesopian language for experience.

A topic that often comes up in both texts is that of gratitude to the ‘best Russians’, the Siberians. In its private manifestation,¹ this is a natural human reaction, a recognition of help received at a difficult time, help of a quite concrete kind, from concrete individuals. Such gestures only acquired symbolic significance as acts of support and solidarity later on, when they had been digested by the informants’ consciousness; in turn, the symbolic transformation came to be seen as having the force of reality in its own right.

In the Stalin years, the repression of reality was a cultural norm, and hence people stopped paying attention to it. This explains why informants will, even while enumerating vivid instances of discrimination, often deny that they were subject to discrimination of any kind. It’s in any case likely that people who have enjoyed career success and personal well-being will feel they don’t have the right to complain; in circumstances like those our informants lived through, this applies all the more:

I wasn’t discriminated against. After all, I could have been refused entry to the Komsomol. OK, never mind the Komsomol — suppose my application to medical school had been turned down? After all, we’re talking about 1952. I’d got top marks for everything. I should have qualified for a gold medal — mind you, I don’t know whether they actually had those then. Still, I could have got a certificate of congratulation, after all, they gave me one when I left Kornilovsk village school. And even though I got top marks {I didn’t get one}. Must have been because I was a Kalmyk or something. No-one said a word to me, but they must have fixed it all up at a staff meeting [draft text of Interview 1].

Both the informants here had a strong sense of social context, and even sixty years later (an entire age, according to the Buddhist calendar), were not inclined to romanticise the difficulties they had endured under the deportation, or credit these with some sort of instrumental force in their lives. According to them, it was tough for everyone — Russians as well as Kalmyks, Poles and Estonians, Red Army soldiers, even soldiers from the Wehrmacht. Their ‘them and us’ opposition polarises not the Kalmyks and Soviet society generally, but Kalmyks and the faceless state system, and the people blindly working to support this — Kalmyks as well as Russians.

It is common for accounts of 28 December 1943 to emphasise that the soldiers sent in to repress the Kalmyks actually helped them out. These good soldiers acted as symbols of the Soviet people — the army

¹ As opposed to its public manifestation, where gratitude became the ritualised expression of a political relationship of dependence and subordination. [Editor].

and the people as one. The Red Army soldiers were greeted like long-lost relatives, and the parting from them was like that too — in fact, the emotional ties characteristic of family life were transferred to them. This is why the female narrator refers to the soldiers who came to move out her family as 'guards' — they were protecting the family from disaster by helping them. On the other hand, a soldier behaving badly came to signify the totalitarian regime, acting as its weapon in the struggle with the people.

Both biographies illustrate the Kalmyks' strategies for integrating themselves into the new society. They studied diligently, anyone who didn't know Russian quickly learned this, and they were politically active — leaders in the schoolroom and in student life, editors of newspapers, group organisers, sportsmen. They even outdanced everyone else. But at the same time, the stigma of ethnicity forced them to adapt to dominant conditions. One notes, for instance, that ethnic markers such as personal names shifted. Kalmyk names acquired an association with the older generation and life before the deportation. In Siberia, Googa Elta became Paul, and Kötjärjä — Konstantin. In the interviews, Kalmyk is used to describe the private sphere, especially intimate areas of this such as domestic religious practices, or other such ethnically coloured elements of culture. The language is indispensable also for describing various concrete elements of the repression, which are, as it were, represented as comprehensible only to Kalmyks. The narrators also switch language to Kalmyk when they need to say something confidential, secret, something other people aren't supposed to understand.

Remarkable is the very restricted use of kinship terms. Apart from the term *kurgn ah*, all others are cited in Russian, even though translations are not accurate in conveying the complex bifurcatory-collateral kinship system of the Kalmyks. But perhaps this came about because of the anticipated audience — young people or cultural outsiders.

When an unfamiliar situation is described, a classic association between cleanliness and safety makes itself felt. The house was very clean — the visitors got a warm welcome; the neighbours were told, they're so clean, and immediately became very friendly. And the most dangerous place, where lots of different people died, was the train — where it was dark, where you couldn't wash, and where people ate, slept, and satisfied their natural needs all in one place.

The idea of the Kalmyks' national distinctiveness is not directly verbalised, but it is present by implication in both stories. Their atypical looks were sometimes a help. Roza Chumatova's little brother appealed to their Siberian neighbours because of his big eyes, and the German batman took pity on the child for the same reason. The possession of an alien phenotype made it possible to turn

difference to advantage, if circumstances allowed: when Roza Chumatova applies for university, her abilities stand out all the more because of her non-Russian appearance.¹

The remembered discussions about Soviet society have participants from many different nationalities: a Tatar, a Pole, a German woman, an Estonian, a Latvian. In each case, the person's nationality is mentioned immediately after their name is introduced. In the Stalin era, ethnic identity had crucial significance, in many ways defining a person's social status.

Running through the narratives is the idea of the value of blood ties. It was almost impossible to survive without relations. An orphaned girl had much more difficulty in surviving than a child with both parents, even if she had an older brother or uncles. A boy with no parents would be referred to by everyone as *'the fatherless boy'* or *'the orphan'*, as though that were his only distinguishing feature. In a harmonious family, on the other hand, labour could be shared: one person would support the family now, while another one studied so as to be able to help out later on.

If one compares these two narratives from the point of view of gender, it emerges that, for the female narrator, personal surroundings played a crucial role. The impact of the machinery of state was not so immediate or painful as it was for the male narrator. The male narrative was also more reserved in character, and pauses occurred more often. The female narrative, on the other hand, expressed a range of different emotions — anxiety and fear above all. It was accompanied by tears, but also by humour, a weapon in overcoming fear.

Strictly patriarchal relations were traditional in Kalmyk society, and lasted into the period under discussion. When talking about the 1940s and 1950s, the narrators involuntarily replicated the gender asymmetry according to which men took the decisions and controlled their family's relationship with the outside world, the main point of contact with which was the military command post. On the other hand, women who had no men coped perfectly well: they took jobs in industry and made decisions on family matters. All the same, the male narrator here describes a family with no men in it as a family with 'no-one' in it. Indeed, in these extreme situations, men sometimes had more power simply on grounds of their physical strength.

¹ In other words, the Kalmyks were sometimes able to exploit what is known in Russian as *sniskhozhdenie k menshei bratii*, or patronising attitudes, to their advantage. It is worth bearing in mind also that anyone senior enough to be making administrative decisions in Soviet universities in the late 1940s and early 1950s would have passed their formative years during the 1920s and early 1930s, when a policy of 'positive discrimination' for members of ethnic minorities was in place. [Editor].

As we see from the narratives here, they doled out food and decided on who sat in the main places in the train, even though there were older and wiser people around — but these were women and elderly men.

Both narratives provide food for thought about the construction of masculinity and femininity among the Kalmyks in those years. The male narrative emphasises physical strength, daring, the defence of personal honour: I juggled with weights, I walked 37 kilometres, I always gave as good as I got, fear never got the better of us. The female narrator underlines femininity by reference to her neat and elegant clothing — cf. the account of laundering the same white embroidered dress every day, or to modest behaviour in relation to male friends, to taking care of relations, and so on. Yet at the same time, it is notable that, in the circumstances of the deportation, higher education became more important for this girl and her parents than romantic feelings, or getting married and having children. This was the primary manifestation of a survival strategy that depended above all on professional education and economic independence for women. The advantages of such an approach were illustrated on the ground in Siberia, since specialists were the first to find work and could support their families more easily.

Both narrators went on to achieve intellectual and professional success. The goals they set themselves were ambitious. They often got involved in psychological duels — for instance, when being defined by the status of a repressed person undercut their freedom of choice, or when they were taking exams that were supposed to give them access to full participation in society, but taking these as Kalmyks. They devoted themselves completely to work and became highly qualified specialists. Accordingly, also overtly present in these interviews is a sense of professional identity. The doctor's narrative not only includes medical terminology, but is imbued by a sense of medical ethics.¹ The experienced journalist, on the other hand, reveals an excellent memory for names and dates, and his speech comes more hesitantly. The pauses that are characteristic of all male oral narrative last longer than average in the case of this professional writer.²

The extent of state pressure on the individual or on the entire Kalmyk people, as expressed in everyday deprivation of freedom, is illustrated in these narratives, but so too are the strategies of resistance to such pressure. As Elena Meshcherkina has remarked, it is precisely

¹ This emerges, for example, in the informant's conviction of the benefits of medical treatment. (My thanks to Elza-Bair Guchinova for this clarification.) [Editor]

² These features are not really evident in the transcription, but the translation attempts to hint at them by preferring short, choppy syntax. [Editor].

the forms of personal resistance that above all colour micro-histories, since knowledge about socially acquired strategies of resistance to the totalitarian regime could by definition be communicated only orally.¹ Hence, every oral history of the deportation is not only of value in its own right, but contains far more information about Russian history generally than might at first seem apparent.

Translated by Catriona Kelly

¹ E. Meshcherkina. 'Ustnaya istoriya i biografiya: zhenskii vzglyad' // E. Meshcherkina (ed.), *Ustnaya istoriya i biografiya: zhenskii vzglyad*. M., 2004. Pp. 13–37. [EG]. [The background to this argument is the comprehensive surveillance aimed at written texts, including not just censorship of printed materials, but perustration of private letters, house searches, and so on.] [Editor].