

Onon Hot Springs

Shadows are falling across the Onon valley by the time we see the huge ovoo of logs and brush that marks the location of the Onon Hot Springs. Hurrying on we cross the river at the ford just below the steaming springs and ride up a high bank to the large log cabin that serves as a guesthouse. The cabin has doors at each end and is divided into two separate parts. Along the walls are sleeping platforms of roughly planed logs. A dozen or more people could easily sleep in each compartment. There are stoves in each section, stacks of firewood, and a hodgepodge of pots, skillets, plates, and utensils, but it doesn't appear that anyone has been here recently. Zevgee explains that nowadays most people visit here only in the wintertime. When the river and ground are frozen solid it's possible to drive here in big all-terrain-four-wheel-drive Soviet army trucks (GAZ) from the villages far downstream on the Onon which are linked to the road system.

While Bagi tends to the horses, Zevgee, Tuya, and I walk down the high bank to the hot springs complex, which consists of at least fourteen different springs spaced out for about one hundred and fifty feet along the riverbank. Two of the springs, holes in the ground the size of a small cooking pot, are boiling hot. Another, the size of a large wash basin, has water in it hot enough to be uncomfortable to the touch. Nine of the springs are enclosed in small log bathhouses. Inside these huts pits have been dug around the springs and lined with boards and logs. Most of the bath pits are three or four feet deep and a couple are big enough to hold several people at once. Some of the bathhouses have collapsed and the pits have fallen in, but about half a dozen are in fairly good shape and appear to be used regularly. At the lower end of the complex are two bathhouses in better condition than the rest. On the door of one is a carved wooden sign reading *Ikh Tsenkher* (Big Blue) and on the other a sign



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reading *Baga Tsenkher* (Little Blue). These, says Zevgee, were the favorite baths of Zanabazar, the first Bogd Gegeen of Mongolia, and he himself named them. Zanabazar, an indefatigable polymath, was very interested in the medicinal properties of hot springs. I knew that Zanabazar regularly visited hot springs—Yestiin Rashaan, elsewhere in the Khentii Mountain, the now well-known complex at Khujirt in the Orkhon valley, and others—and studied their composition, but as I mentioned before nowhere in my researches had I encountered any references to these springs.

Zevgee says that the springs here are famous for treating diseases and afflictions of the lower body: knees (mud packs taken from near the springs are especially good for knee joints), lower back pain, kidney and liver problems and also rheumatism and sore muscles in general. In fact, according to a wooden sign on a nearby bathhouse, the springs can cure 404 different ailments. (It will be remembered that this is exactly the number of medicinal plants that supposedly grow on Davaatyn Uul; as mentioned, this number has a symbolic significance in Tibeto-Mongolian Buddhism.) If you want the full effect of the springs you should take a complete course of baths over a period of about ten days. The bathhouses are numbered and there are prescribed series of baths for the treatment of various ailments.

A few hundred feet from the hot springs is a small log Buddhist temple which had been built just two or three years ago by people from one of the villages on down the Onon. The inside of the temple is sparsely furnished. On a rough plank which serves as an altar is an assortment of offerings: moldering cookies, small jars of grain, bowls of rancid butter, cigarettes, coins and bills, and other ephemera. Above the altar are several small thangkhas, the kind you can buy in any tourist shop, and two pictorial reproductions, apparently torn from books, of Zanabazar's famous White Tara.

Zevgee and Tuya wander back to the guesthouse but I remain behind. Of course I must take baths in Zanabazar's favorite springs. I test the water in Ikh Tsenkher with my hand and it doesn't seem too hot, but after stripping off my clothes I find that I have to ease my way into the bath very slowly. I sit up to my neck for fifteen minutes, fresh water from the spring bubbling up between my legs, then move over to Baga Tsenkher, which is just pleasantly warm. The soothing water does indeed seem to be soaking away the aches and pains accumulated over three days of horseback riding.

Back in the guesthouse, Tuya, who up until now has not demonstrated any great enthusiasm for culinary endeavors, is rolling out dough for homemade noodles. Bagi is cutting up mutton into bite-sized pieces. Would I help cut up the mutton? he asks. I reach for my knife, which I keep in my coat pocket, and find nothing. Both snaps on the pocket are open and the sheath knife is gone. Bagi stares at me for a few moments, then smiles and hands me my knife. "When I was riding behind you on the trail I saw your knife on the ground. It fell out of your pocket," he explains, and adds chidingly, "No Mongol would ever lose his knife." I thanked Bagi profusely. A Siberian girlfriend of mine had given me that knife and I had carried it for five years. I had lost it on three other occasions and it had always come back to me. I consider it my lucky knife.

Over our candlelight dinner of fried mutton and noodles Zevgee spins yarns. One concerns a man named Red Mountain Tsend, a Mongolian Mountain Man who lived alone here in the mountains at the headwaters of the Onon. The story begins around the turn of the century when a Japanese monk came to Mongolia and became very interested in the Mongolian form of Buddhism.

He learned the Mongolian language and assumed the Mongolian name of Damdinbazar. He was considered a very holy man and eventually gathered around him a flock of Mongolian acolytes. One of them was named Tsend. Then came the revolution in Russia, which soon spread to Mongolia. At first religion was tolerated, but Damdinbazar warned his followers that the day would come when Buddhism would be ruthlessly stamped out by the atheistic communists. Finally the authorities did come to the monastery where Damdinbazar and his followers lived. Some were seized on the spot; others fled into the hills where they were eventually tracked down and arrested. Some were sent to prison camps in Mongolia and Siberia and others were executed. What happened to Damdinbazar is unknown. His disciple Tsend hid in the remote mountains at the headwaters of the Onon. Living here by himself at a place called Red Mountain he managed to elude the authorities. Assuming the life of a hermit, he avoided contact with civilization and eventually the government lost interest in him.

He became a skilled hunter and fashioned his own clothes from the furs and hides of wild animals. Occasionally he came out of the mountains and approached the local herders. They were happy to take his furs and wild meat in exchange for dairy products, flour, and other essentials. He was also able to trade an amazingly strong glue he made from the hooves of elk and other secret ingredients for what other supplies the mountains did not provide. Zevgee says that even now there are saddles and other leather goods in M \ddot{o} ng \ddot{o} nmort made with this glue. No one has ever been able to duplicate it.

Red Mountain Tsend lived into the 1950s. He had been married in his early life and had a son. Not wanting to get this son in trouble with the authorities he had avoided contact with him, but sensing the approach of death he sent a message asking the son to come to him. Tsend died before the son arrived. Another legend was spawned. The monastery of Damdinbazar and his followers supposedly had many gold and silver statues and other valuable works of art. Most of this treasure trove disappeared before the communists came and destroyed the monastery. Some said it was hidden in the mountains at the headwaters of the Onon and that only Red Mountain Tsend knew where it was. He had summoned his son to tell him where the

treasure was located, but his secret died with him. The treasure, if it indeed existed, is still hidden somewhere in the mountains around here. Even today hunters and plant gatherers who wander into this area keep an eye out for it, but no one has ever found anything, or so they say.

Zevgee goes on to say that these mountains used to also harbor bands of Russian prisoners who had escaped from communist labor camps in Siberia, the border of which he says is only about thirty miles away. In fact, just before I left Ulaan Baatar a Mongolian acquaintance had warned me that even now Russian escapees were hiding out the Khentii Mountains near the border and strongly advised me to stay out of this area. These Russians, he claimed, were cutthroats who would kill you for the clothes off your back. When I tell Zevgee this story Tuya pipes up and says that the jeep driver who had driven us to the Kherlen River had told her exactly the same story. He had assured her that she was crazy to go into these mountains so close to the Russian border. Zevgee shakes his head and laughs. "Fifteen or twenty years ago that may have been true, but I haven't heard about any escapees in this area recently," he says. By now I trust Zevgee implicitly, but I notice that before we blow out the candles Bagi puts his loaded rifle right beside him on the sleeping platform, whether out of fear of bears, or of Russian desperadoes, or of the spirit of Red Mountain Tsend, I don't know.

After awakening in the gray predawn morning I tiptoe out of the guest house where my companions are still sleeping and walk a hundred yards up the hill to the huge log and brush ovoo which honors the hot springs. Directly to the south across the valley of the Onon, here at least five miles wide, is a long ridge which Zevgee had called Tüshlegt Yan Uul. The crown of Burkhan Khaldun is hidden somewhere behind this massif. I sit by the ovoo and watch as the rising sun floods the Onon Valley with pellucid light. For the present-day traveler it's a peaceful scene of heart-rending beauty. For Temüjin, the future World Conqueror, the upper Onon was the merciless stage on which was played out his struggle for survival as a young man.

Temüjin's father was Yesükhei, the nephew of Khutula Khan,

who had led the Mongol attacks against the Tartars in the 1150s. Khutula Khan belonged to the Borjigin clan founded by Bodonchar, the son of Alan-goo. During an internal struggle for power among the various Mongol tribes Khutula was killed. A tribe known as the Taichuud attempted to assume leadership of the Mongol people but failed and, as we have seen, the Tartars and Jurchens were eventually able to defeat the dissension-torn Mongols. At that point the Mongols had no real leader, but Yesükhei was to provide them with one.

Yesükhei was out hunting with hawks one day somewhere on the upper Onon when he saw a beautiful young woman in a cart being led by her husband, Chiledü, a member of the Merkit tribe that lived in the lower Selenga Valley to the south of Lake Baikal. Yesükhei was immediately attracted to the young woman. He went home, got his two brothers, and came back for her. Realizing that she was about to be kidnapped she herself advised Chiledü to flee for his life. The young woman's name was Ögelün. She came from a tribe of Mongols known as the Khongirad that dwelt around the lakes Dalai and Buir to the east. Ögelün resigned herself to her fate and became Yesükhei's wife. Just after Yesükhei returned home from a campaign against the Tartars their first son was born. According to tradition the boy was born clutching a clot of blood the size of a knuckle bone in his right hand. While fighting the Tartars Yesükhei had captured a Tartar chieftain named Temüjin-uge, and in accordance with a Mongol tradition he named his son after the enemy he had defeated. The year of Temüjin's birth is uncertain. Dates from 1155 to 1167 have been put forth, but several recent publications, including an almanac published in Mongolia, favor the year 1162.

When the boy, Temüjin, was nine years old Yesükhei took him to visit Ögelün's tribe, the Khongirad, in hopes of making a marriage alliance. The Khongirad was famous for their beautiful women, and the Borjigin clan frequently sought wives among them. While traveling to the Khongirad camps to the east of Lake Buir they met up with the Khongirad chief Dai-sechen. He took a liking to Temüjin. "That boy of yours has fire in his eyes and light in his face," he told Yesükhei. Dai-sechen led Yesükhei to his ger and showed him his daughter, Börte, who was a year older than Temüjin. She too "had

light in her face and fire in her eyes,” and Yesükhei liked her immediately.⁸ (The *Secret History* does not comment on Temüjin’s opinion, which in any event was unimportant.) It was decided to leave Temüjin with Dai-sechen as a future son-in-law. On the way back, however, Yesükhei met some Tartars he had robbed earlier. Remembering the insult, they feigned friendliness but gave him poisoned food. Yesükhei was able to return to his ger but died not long after. Before dying he gave instructions that his friend, Mönglik, should go and bring Temüjin back so he could look after Mother Ögelün and the rest of the family.

At this time some members of the Borjigin clan were camped with the Taichuud tribe. The Taichuud scorned Mother Ögelün’s family, whose oldest male member, Temüjin, was a mere boy. When the Taichuud moved their camp, they decided to leave Mother Ögelün and her family behind. Members of her own clan, bereft of a leader, chose to throw their lot with the Taichuud. When they left, Mother Ögelün rode after them on horseback and managed to persuade some of them to return. But soon they too drifted away and followed the Taichuud. Mother Ögelün was left alone with her family—Temüjin, his three brothers and a sister, and his two half-brothers, Begter and Belgütei, sons of Yesükhei’s other wife.

They came to the upper Onon and eked out a living as best they could. Mother Ögelün dug up roots and wild onions with a stick of juniper. “Her cap firmly on her head and dress girt around her knees, she ran up and down the Onon River collecting rowans and bird cherries, feeding her chicks night and day,” according to one version of the *Secret History*.⁹ The boys shot marmots, steppe rats, and birds with their bows and caught fish from the Onon. And so the family managed to survive.

But even within this little group there were dissensions. One day Temüjin and his brother Khasar caught a fish, and Begter and Belgütei snatched it away from them. Temüjin and Khasar complained to Mother Ögelün. Scolding the boys, Mother Ögelün reminded them of what Alan-goo had told her five sons: they were like arrows that separately could be broken quite easily, but united they would be unbreakable. If they ever wanted to gain revenge against the Taichuud who had deserted them they must cooperate,

she told the boys. Temüjin and Khasar didn't listen. After Begter and Belgütei snatched from them a lark they had shot they made their move. Sneaking up on Begter while he was watching their horses they shot him dead with arrows.

"You destroyers!" Mother Ögelün screamed, then voiced her famous lament: "Apart from our shadows we have no friends. Apart from our tails we have no fat."¹⁰ But if the family was to survive Mother Ögelün had to make peace with her boys. The other half-brother, Belgütei, reconciled himself with Temüjin, and later he would become one of the World Conqueror's greatest generals.

Temüjin was probably fourteen or fifteen when he killed his half-brother Begter. Not long afterward the Taichuud came looking for him. Despite the impoverishment of his family he was still a descendant of the great chieftains like Khabul Khan who had united the Mongol people under the banner of the Borjigin clan. He was on the verge of manhood and he might attempt to regain the positions of leadership held by his father and his ancestors. As such he posed a threat to the Taichuud, and they decided to eliminate him.

There are several different versions of Temüjin's capture by the Taichuud. According to the most prevalent, when a band of Taichuud led by the chieftain, Tarkutai, came for Temüjin the family hid in the forest and the brothers tried to fight them off. The Taichuud announced that they wanted only Temüjin; if he surrendered the rest could go free. Temüjin escaped on horseback and the Taichuud followed him. Hiding in the thickets on a hilltop, he managed to evade the encircling Taichuud for nine days, but finally hunger forced him out and he was captured.

Temüjin was imprisoned—according to some versions, in a wooden cage—and he was forced to wear a large wooden cangue around his neck. But then while the Taichuud were busy feasting on the sixteenth day of the fourth lunar month—the time when the steppe again turns green—Temüjin managed to escape. He was discovered hiding up to his neck in the waters of the Onon by Sorkhon Shar, a member of the Suldu tribe who was living with the Taichuud. Sorkhon Shar was so impressed by Temüjin's cleverness and will to survive that he helped the young man elude his pursuers and return to his family. Sorkhon Shar was one of the first, but certainly not

the last, to succumb to Temüjin's charismatic spell. He eventually deserted the Taichuud and became a follower of Temüjin.

By then Temüjin was sixteen or so. His thoughts turned to women, specifically to Börte, the beautiful Khongirad girl to whom he had been betrothed five or six years earlier, and he set off down the Kherlen River to look for her. Dai-sechen, Börte's father, had almost given up hope that Yesükhei's son—the one with light in his face and fire in his eyes—would ever return, and he was overjoyed when Temüjin appeared in the Khongirad camp to claim his bride. With Dai-sechen's approval the marriage was consummated. Temüjin brought his new bride back with him to the Onon, and in accordance with tradition Börte presented her mother-in-law with a gift—a magnificent black sable coat.

Temüjin soon moved his camp, which at that point included his wife, mother, brothers, sister, and several followers, including Boorchu and Zelme, to a place called Bürgi Ereg (Muddy Banks) on the upper Kherlen. (This place, still well known today, is on the Kherlen River between Baganuur and Mōngönmort. Zevgee says Tuya and I drove right by it on the way to Mōngönmort, although of course I was not aware of it at the time.) Here they were attacked by the Merkits. It will be remembered that Temüjin's father, Yesükhei, had kidnapped Mother Ögelün from her first husband, the Merkit Chiledü. The Merkit chieftains, including Togtoga, heard that Temüjin had taken a wife, and now they and three hundred of their men came seeking revenge for the insult suffered by Chiledü, who had since died. It was early morning when the Merkits struck. Temüjin and most of the camp escaped on horseback, but inexplicably Börte was left behind. How was it that Temüjin abandoned his new wife? The *Secret History* says that there was no horse for her, a seemingly insufficient excuse. After capturing Börte, who had hidden under a pile of wool on a cart, the Merkits picked up Temüjin's trail and chased him up the Kherlen valley. He finally sought refuge on the mountain known as Burkhan Khaldun.