

## Yesön Züil

THE FOG AND CLOUDS OF EARLY MORNING have dissipated completely by the time we recross the Dongod, or the Jargalant, or whatever river it is, and under a vault of immaculate blue sky we follow a faint track which according to our informants leads to the sum center of Bürd about twenty miles to the southwest. We soon find ourselves in a broad basin with a maze of jeep tracks going in all directions. Several of the more well-traveled paths which we follow soon head off in the wrong direction and we end up bearing southwest across the trackless steppe. For ten or fifteen miles we don't see any gers where we can ask directions, even though the grass here is quite plentiful and we cross several tiny streams which could provide water for people and livestock. Finally we happen upon a good dirt road which takes us into the tiny village of Bürd.

According to the man at the gas station in Bürd the geographical center of Mongolia is about eight miles to the south of here. In the early 1990s local people built a big stupa on the site and now Mongolians on countryside excursions and the odd van of tourists show up here looking for it. They reach Bürd from the main road between Ulaan Baatar and Arvaikheer, however, and not the way we have come. Tömör assumes of course that I will have to visit this place and starts asking directions. I tell him to forget it. I am not interested in contemporary monuments and don't want to get sidetracked on my way to Yesön Züil. The gas guy points out the road to the sum center of Yesön Züil and advises us to ask for further directions to Zanabazar's birthplace, also known as Yesön Züil, from there.

Again we head off to the southwest. After crossing some ridges outside of Bürd we enter a vast tableland. It's perhaps fitting that here, near the geographical center of the country, the countryside resembles what I, and I suppose many other people, have in mind

when we think of the great steppes of Mongolia, an impression which in my case was garnered from descriptions and photographs in books consumed when I was a school boy. There are no mountains or ridges on the horizon. The gently undulating hills, mantled with short but verdant grass, roll on for miles in all directions before dropping off beyond the curvature of the earth. White gers sprout up like mushrooms, flocks of sheep flow over the wavy hills like a single living creature, and herds of chestnut, ginger, gray, white, and black horses speckle the green sward. By the gers along our track are tied strings of twenty or more mares being milked by women in brightly colored deels. Tömör allows that this is prime airag country, and we stop half a dozen times at gers where we are always welcomed in and given as much airag as we want to drink for free. This hospitality is the unalterable rule of the countryside. Badmaa, who gives me a lengthy—for her—dissertation on the health benefits of airag, polishes off at least a pint at every stop, as does Tömör, but I am a bit more constrained. Airag has unpredictable consequences on the digestive tracts of many visitors to Mongolia and I don't want to over-indulge. (As it turned out, I never had any ill effects from airag.)

Eventually some ridges do appear to the southwest. Nestled among them is a small huddle of cabins, shacks and gers. This is the sum center of Yesön Züil. In front of the largest building, which appears to be a sort of community center, are half a dozen men and women making felts. Beside them are big piles of crude wool which they are pounding into a thin felt stretched out on the ground. When the felt is thick enough it will be used to line gers. We ask for directions to Zanabazar's birthplace, but the guy who seems to be in charge, apparently welcoming a diversion, has to slowly load and light his pipe and ask all the standard questions—where are we coming from; how many days have we been traveling; where did we spend last night; how do we find the airag; where is the foreigner from and what is he doing here? etc.—before proffering that to get to Yesön Züil, which is about thirty miles away; we should take the only road out of town to the south but that this road forks many times and we'd best stop and ask for more directions every chance we get.

For the first three or four miles this is a perfectly good dirt road.

Then, as the man had noted, it starts branching off until finally there is no track at all and again we are driving cross-country. We also seem to be climbing ever-higher into some fairly lofty mountains. After wending our way among boulders up one particularly steep slope we find ourselves on a high pass with spectacular views for thirty or more miles in all directions. Off to the west is a high peak, which if I am reading my Mongolian map correctly—by no means a certain assumption—is 7,874-foot Züün Khairkhan Uul, the highest summit in this small range of mountains. Dropping down from this pass we find ourselves amid barren, desiccated desert-like ridges. There is not a trace of a trail or any gers or livestock in sight. Tömör is becoming more and more perplexed. It would be very easy to spend a day, or even a couple of days, in this country futilely driving up dead-end valleys. We skid and spin up over loose, slaty rock to a high summit in an attempt to see a way out of this jumble of ridges, but even from this vantage point we appear hemmed in on all sides.

Finally topping yet another ridge we espy two lone gers by the base of some high cliffs. There are no horses by the gers and no livestock visible anywhere nearby, but as we approach an immense black dog, bigger than the average St. Bernard and with a head the size of a beer keg, bounds out to meet us. This beast actually tries to bite the front tires of our truck, then jumps up at the front window and with long streams of saliva dripping from its jaws, barks ferociously at Tömör. Presently, two men, perhaps in their sixties, with shaved heads and dressed in tattered deels, come out of one of the gers and yell at the dog. Five kids tumble out of the other ger and grabbing the dog by the collar pull it aside and force it to lie down. Then all of them actually sit on the dog's front quarters, holding it down on the ground. From the safety of the jeep Tömör yells that we need directions to Yesön Züil. One of the men motions to us to get out and we hesitantly make our way to the ger. The dog barks venomously and tries to get up on its front legs but the kids pull it back down. In the ger an elderly woman and two young girls sit on the bed to the right and stare at us wide-eyed. I get the impression they don't see a lot of visitors here in this isolated nook. There's a big leather bag of airag by the doorway and the taller of the old men offers us some in a wooden bowl. It is cool and creamy, sour and sweet at the same

time—to my taste the best we've had yet. All the horses, one of the men explains, are out at pasture and the young men of the encampment are looking after them.

Of course they wonder what has brought us here. By now Badmaa has her story down pat. I am an American who is interested in the life of Zanabazar. Earlier I had been to Amarbayasgalant Monastery, where the body of Zanabazar had been kept, and just last night we had camped at Shireet Tsagaan Nuur, where Zanabazar was named the first Bogd Gegeen. Now we are looking for the place where Zanabazar was born but seem to have strayed off the beaten path. If any of these people think it odd that an American—I am obviously the first one any of them has met—should suddenly appear on their doorstep looking for traces of Zanabazar, none of them reveal it by word or gesture. Both of the men have been to Shireet Tsagaan Nuur and Yesön Züil themselves—though not Amarbayasgalant—and think it only natural that a foreigner, a visitor to their country, should also want to visit these places connected with the life of the great Zanabazar. Do all Americans know about Zanabazar? they wonder. No, not many, but maybe in the future more will, I reply. Both nod solemnly, as if this is a foregone conclusion. Then the shorter one roots under the bed in the back of the ger and produces a bottle of clear arkhi, milk vodka. The two men and Tömör and I each drink a bowl full. Soon it's time to go.

Outside the kids hold the dog down while one of the men gives directions. Head through that gap in the hills, he says, pointing to the southwest, and soon you'll come to a jeep trail which leads to a broad valley. Yesön Züil is not far down the valley. Then he wonders if we have any razors with us. Both men had just recently shaved their scalps, as they do every summer to "let their heads breathe," but their razor was dull and didn't do a good job. Indeed their bare heads are covered with nicks and scrapes. Tömör pulls out a first aid kit from under the seat and gives them a disposable razor. As an afterthought he hands the two young girls a string of safety pins. Surely even in this remote spot people must have seen safety pins before, but these two girls hold them up and examine them as if they are artifacts which have just dropped out of a passing UFO. Now it's difficult to say exactly what impression these people have gotten during

our short stay, but the men must have gathered that I am some sort of pilgrim, because as we pull away in the jeep both of them put their hands together in front of their chests and bow deeply to me.

We pass through a narrow defile which soon opens into a small valley flanked by grass-covered ridges. On the slopes of these ridges are a large flock of sheep and several herds of horses which apparently belong to the people at the ger we just visited. Suddenly the hills and ridges disappear altogether and we enter a valley bottom ten or more miles wide. We pick up a good jeep track but this soon peters out to nothing and again we're driving cross-country. Off to our right, to the southwest, we see smoke and thinking that it is coming from a ger we go to ask directions. Instead we discover three men lying around a campfire of cow dung drinking tea. Nearby are three camels with saddles and seven more camels loaded with heavy packs. They tell us they are from Bayankhongor province. They had gone to Ulaan Baatar to sell wool and other commodities and then used the money to buy these camels and various supplies. Now they are on their way back to their homes in the Gobi Desert of southern Bayankhongor. They have already been traveling for ten days, covering about 200 miles, and they have another 300 miles to go. They say they aren't in any great hurry and are taking their time. They want the camels to arrive in good shape. Of course they aren't from this area but they know that Yesön Züil is not far away, maybe about ten miles to the south. Leaving them to their tea we drive on. Twenty minutes later we spot a small white building on a slight elevation to the right of the valley bottom.

This turns out to be a temple built in the early 1990s on the site of the Övgön Monastery, which was destroyed during the antireligious campaigns of the 1930s. Now all that remains of the old monastery are some jagged sections of stone wall and heaps of rubble. It was here, I had been told earlier, that Zanabazar was born in 1635. Nearby is a ger with smoke coming out of the chimney. Badmaa goes to see who is in the ger while Tömör and I rustle up some tea on a camp stove and lay out a picnic lunch. Upon returning Badmaa says that there is a very old sickly woman in the ger who was married to a lama who served here at the old Övgön Monastery. (What is



New temple and stupa on the site of the old Övgön Monastery

with these monks, Badmaa interjects, so many of them seem to have been married!) The woman remembers when the monastery was destroyed. She would like to talk to the foreigner and tell him about it but she doesn't feel well enough. Her granddaughter will be returning shortly and she can open up the new temple for us. And no, Zanabazar wasn't born right here at the location of this monastery. He was born nearby and her granddaughter can show us where.

The granddaughter appears while we are lunching. To welcome us she has brought a teapot full of clear arkhi. She opens up the temple but admits there isn't much to see. Inside is a plain altar with some small bronzes and a couple of thangkas of the kind that can be bought in tourist shops. About half a dozen monks come here occasionally to hold services but there is no one in residence. Maybe later a real monastery will be built here, but now who knows? Outside she points to a barely visible ovoo along the creek bottom about a mile away. "That is where Zanabazar was born. You can drive there. Now I must go. I hope you find what you are looking for."

Just as we arrive at the ovoo an elderly man in a purple deel and carrying an uurga rides on up horseback. He says that there was another monastery on this spot but it too was destroyed in the 1930s. It was called the Eight Stupas Monastery because it was surrounded by eight stupas. The stone bases of at least three of the stupas can still

be seen in the ground, along with the foundation stones of the main temple. People have since heaped up the broken bricks and building stones of the demolished temple into a big *ovoo*. Nearby are nine mineral springs which never freeze over in winter, and it is these which give the place its name (*yesön* = nine; *züül* = types, or kinds).

It was Zanabazar's great-grandfather Avtai Khan who in 1585 declared that Tibeto-Mongolian Buddhism would henceforth be the ruling religion of Khalkh Mongolia. A year later he founded the great monastery of Erdene Zuu on the site of the old Mongolian capital of Kharkhorum in the Orkhon Valley. Soon thereafter Avtai made the lengthy journey to Tibet to meet Sönam Gyatso, the third Dalai Lama. ". . . I wish to invite a good lama," Avtai told the Dalai Lama, "who will be of advantage to the faith which is revered for ever, and to install the most blessed shrines."<sup>13</sup> The Dalai Lama told him, "Look among all the lamas for one and invite him yourself." Attracted one day to a lama sitting by himself, Avtai Khan asked him to come to Mongolia. "At the present time I am not able to, but later I will come," replied the lama.<sup>14</sup> This lama was named Taranatha. A teacher who was also known as a great humorist, Taranatha had once made a joke to his students about where he would be reborn. A young Mongolian studying under him cried out, "Oh, please come to Mongolia next time!"<sup>15</sup> This request was fulfilled: Zanabazar was believed to be a reincarnation of Taranatha.

Avtai also wanted the Dalai Lama to come to Erdene Zuu in Mongolia. "There is a temple which I have erected on our lands," he told the Dalai Lama, "I should like to invite you and have the full inauguration performed there."<sup>16</sup> The Dalai Lama, however, told Avtai that he could not go back to Mongolia with him to perform the inauguration of Erdene Zuu: "Though I cannot go now, later I will meet you in your own place," he said.<sup>17</sup>

Avtai returned to Mongolia. A few years later, while out hunting with his retinue, he saw smoke from a campfire out on the steppe and sent his servants to investigate. Returning, they reported that they had found a strange, poor-looking man sitting by his campfire eating some thin gruel. He was dressed in a dark blue gown and seemed to be a layman but nevertheless had his hair shorn like a

monk. Avtai went to meet this man and much to the astonishment of his servants bowed down in front of him. "How blessed is this khan, having offered a bow at a time when all others do not think to bow," said the strange man, and added, "This place of our meeting will be remarkable in the highest degree; put some sort of sign on it!"<sup>18</sup> After sharing some of his gruel with Avtai the man suddenly disappeared. Avtai came to believe that the stranger was the Dalai Lama, who as promised had come to meet him in Mongolia. Avtai ordered that an ovoo be constructed on the spot, and he named the place Yesön Züil.

Another story recounts that some fifty years later the Tüsheet Khan Gombodorj, Zanabazar's future father, was riding by this ovoo when he spotted a monk sitting nearby. Asked what he was doing there, the monk replied that he was honoring the spot with sacrifices. Then the monk suddenly disappeared and a rainbow appeared in the sky. Gombodorj considered this a good omen and indeed not long after his wife Khandu-jamstso became pregnant.

When the Gegeen-Setsen Khan, like the Tüsheet Khan, one of the three rulers of Khalkh Mongolia, heard that Khandjamts was with child he wrote a letter to the Gombodorj:

. . . the thought continually comes to me that through the power of the former good prayers of the kings, princes and dignitaries of the Khalkha there will be born to you a fine boy of the golden family of Chinggis Khan, who has the majesty of heaven, and that this boy will be our leader . . .<sup>19</sup>

Wishing to acclaim this happy occurrence, the Gegeen-Setsen Khan came with his retinue to the camp of the Tüsheet Khan and for several days they celebrated with games, contests, and fetes. Eventually the Gegeen-Setsen Khan went home. There followed, in the words of Zanabazar's biography:

. . . a splendid time, a time when there were no periods of great heat, no droughts, no epidemics, and no sickness; there were rain and water in abundance, the forests and steppes were luxuriant with flowers, and great numbers of birds sang merrily new and beautiful songs; everyone had dreams of good omen, particularly the khan and khansha [Gombodorj and his wife], now and then dreaming of burkhans, hearing the words of the

sacred writings, and a rainbow descended above them so low that it seemed as though one could grasp it in one's hand.<sup>20</sup>

When the time came for Gombodorj to move his family to their winter camp he again passed by the ovoos set up by his grandfather Avtai. A white dog had recently given birth to pups nearby and he considered this another auspicious sign. Deciding to establish a winter camp here he ordered that a ger be set up. As soon as it was erected a white flower sprang up in the middle of the ger, even though it was already the ninth month of the year and there was snow on the ground. The morning of the twenty-fifth day of the month came and Khandjamts suddenly felt birth pangs. A little while later a baby boy was born. He was given the name Zanabazar, a combination of the word zana, which is derived from a Sanskrit word meaning "knowledge" or "wisdom," and the word bazar, meaning "thunderbolt." Thus in English his name might be rendered "thunderbolt of wisdom."

According to the old man who has come to meet us the ovoos built from the rubble of the Eight Stupas Monastery marks the spot where Avtai built his ovoos after meeting the mysterious stranger whom he believed was the Dalai Lama. The ger in which Zanabazar was born was located, if not exactly here, then close by. I am satisfied that I have found the birthplace of Zanabazar. The little boy born here in 1635 on the steppe of this broad valley bottom would later be named the Bogd Gegeen at Shireet Tsagaan Nuur; he would travel to Tibet and study with the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama; he would become the most revered leader in all of Khalkh Mongolia, founding many monasteries and creating great works of art; he would spend over a decade of his life in the Chinese capital of Beijing as a guest of the great Kangxi, emperor of the Qing Dynasty, and his fame as a miracle worker would spread throughout China; he would eventually die in Beijing and the magnificent monastery of Amarbayasgalant would be built in his honor and serve as the final resting place of his remains; and in 1937 those remains would be destroyed in a bonfire by Mongolian and Soviet soldiers under the orders of a communist government goaded on by Joseph Stalin.



Current ovoo marking the alleged site of Avtai's original ovoo and according to tradition the birthplace of Zanabazar



The story has a beginning and end, but there is a lot missing in between. In order to fill in some of the blank spaces I want to visit next the Tövkhön Monastery in the Orkhon Valley, which was Zanabazar's personal retreat and workplace where he reportedly created his famous statues, and then the great monastery of Erdene Zuu, created by Zanabazar's great-grandfather, Avtai Khan. With this in mind, Tömör announces that we should try to reach the spa resort of Khujirt on the edge of the Orkhon Valley by evening. The spring on one of the back wheels of his jeep—Badmaa insists on calling it a “bridge,” as a spring is called in Russian—is going out and he thinks he can get it repaired there. There's a ger camp there where we can stay—it has hot water and showers, adds Badmaa—and we can visit the famous Khujirt hot springs. So we ask the old man on horseback for directions back to main road, which is supposedly about forty miles to the northwest. The trail is patchy out of Yesön Züil but soon we find a fairly decent dirt road and make good time to Ölziiit, a no-account village of perhaps a thousand. From here an even better dirt road leads to the highway between Ulaan Baatar and Arvaikheer which we had left the day before. Just before the junction with the main road, off to the left, is a small lake

named Sangiyn Dalai Nuur. Badmaa relates that long ago a man tried to take a caravan of camels carrying salt across this lake in the winter time. The ice broke and the man and all the camels drowned. The salt all belonged to the government, which had a monopoly on salt at the time, and thus the lake became known as *Sangiyn* (state) *Dalai* (ocean) *Nuur*.

Back on the hard-topped highway we stop at a *ganz*—a tiny roadside restaurant located in a *ger*—and ask direction for the shortcut to Khujirt. Six miles south on the main road we cut off to the right on a jeep track we are told goes to Khujirt, about thirty miles to the northwest. This track soon turns into a passable dirt road through hard, level steppe and we cruise along at thirty or forty miles an hour. The sky, which had been perfectly clear since morning, now clouds over and we drive on through heavy showers. Suddenly the skies clear again and rainbows arc across the sky in all directions. At one point I count eight at once, most of them with both ends touching the green steppe. We drive on through the cool evening air, scoured clean by the rain and scented with the fresh smell of sage, and soon pull into the resort town of Khujirt.