

**DRAFT**

## CHAPTER TWO

### KALMYKIA: BIRTHPLACE OF DAMBIJANTSAN?

The accounts of the Diluv Khutagt, Maisky, the Roerichs, and others who either knew Dambijantsan or gathered information from those who did provided the basic details of what is known about his life. The findings of later researchers who had access to Mongolian and Russian archives, including a biography of Dambijantsan by Russian historian Inessa Lomakina entitled *Golova Dja-Lamy* (Head of the Ja Lama) offered still more information. Armed with these sources, I was ready to begin my own investigations into the life of Dambijantsan. It was not, however, until after I had done considerable research of my own on the ground in Mongolia that I was able to visit the purported birthplace of Dambijantsan, the so-called Malo-Dörböt (Little Dörböt) ulus of what in the nineteenth-century was the province of Astrakhan, part of Czarist Russia. This region is now located in the Republic of Kalmykia, part of the Russian Federation, on the west side of the lower Volga River.

By an odd concatenation of circumstances I was able to visit Kalmykia under the auspices of the Kalmyk lama Telo Tulku Rinpoche, who is considered to be the current incarnation of the afore mentioned Diluv Khutagt, whose memoirs were my main written source of information about Dambijantsan. Telo Tulku Rinpoche, a.k.a. Eddy Ombadykow, was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1972, the child of Kalmyk immigrants who had settled in the United States after World War II. Ethnically he is a Dörböt, a sub-division of the Kalmyks, the same tribe to which Dambijantsan belonged. As a boy he became a monk and studied in a monastery in South India from the age of seven to twenty-one. Eventually he was recognized as the reincarnation of the Diluv Khutagt by

the 14th Dalai Lama himself. Although no longer an ordained monk—he now has a wife and child—he currently holds the title of Shajin Lama, the highest ranking Buddhist official in Kalmykia. In his role as the leader of Kalmykia's Buddhists he oversees the largest Buddhist temple in Europe, the magnificent Golden Süm, located in Elista, the capital of Kalmykia, and numerous other temples throughout Kalmykia.

He has also made several trips to Mongolia and is involved in various projects to promote Buddhism in the country of his previous incarnation. On his last day of his 2008 visit he hosted a small luncheon at the Indian restaurant in the Puma Imperial Hotel in Ulaan Baatar. Telo Tulku Rinpoche proved to be quite approachable and friendly, and he immediately recognized from my accent that we were fellow Pennsylvanians. At the first opportunity I questioned him about Dambijantsan. He said while he had heard various tales and legends of a fanciful nature about his putative fellow Dörböt he admitted that he knew very little if anything concrete about his life. Although he had paged through the DIluv Khutag's book in a library he had not read the whole thing and was unaware that his previous incarnation had written about Dambijantsan. The man sitting to my right, overhearing our conversation about Dambijantsan, now chose to introduce himself to me. His name was Khongor Badmaevich, and it turned out he was the Vice-Chairman of the People's Parliament of the Republic of Kalmykia. He is a Torgut, one of the other ethnic groups which make up the Kalmyk people. Somewhat to my surprise he seemed quite familiar with the basic outlines of the life of Dambijantsan. He even asked if I was a disciple of the Dambijantsan, the Ja Lama! I said no, I was not a disciple of Dambijantsan; I was unaware that Dambijantsan currently had disciples—he was of course dead—and that in any case I was approaching his life strictly from an historical point-of-view. I asked if it was possible to come to Kalmykia and continue these historical investigations. "No problem," said, Mr. Badmaevich, "I will have the Parliament of Kalmykia issue you an official invitation to visit Telo Tulku Rinpoche for the purpose of cultural exchange."

Thus armed with a Russian visa obtained with this invitation I winged westward from Ulaan Baatar to Moscow, where I caught a flight south to Volgograd, on the Volga River.

Stepping out into the main lobby of the Volgograd airport I was greeted by a young Kalmyk man holding a sign with my name on it. I quickly discovered that he does not speak English. He told me in Russian that his

name was Genan. He had been dispatched by Telo Tulku Rinpoche with orders to deliver me up in Elista, the capital of Kalmykia, 160 miles to the south. Outside in the parking lot we met another Kalmyk named Savr, a big, hulking guy who looks like a Mongolian wrestler, and we piled into his car, a new, spotlessly clean Toyota Corolla.

Volgograd is of course the former Stalingrad, where on the vast plains surrounding the city the Soviet Red Army had cornered the Germany army during World War II and dealt it a defeat from which Nazi Germany never recovered. The name of the city has been changed but no one has been allowed to forget what happened here. Billboards in the old—and now newly popular—Socialist Realism style proclaim the upcoming celebration of the anniversary of the Soviet victory. One large billboard announces: "Volgograd: City of Heroes." Apparently we missed the city center but the environs extend for miles. It took a good hour to drive through the suburbs and small villages surrounding the city. Beyond the villages lay vast cultivated fields, the horizon disappearing beyond the curvature of the earth. The road is straight, flat, and in reasonably good condition, and the lead-footed driver soon has the Corolla cruising along at ninety miles an hour. Almost imperceptibly the cultivated fields start grading into mixed farm lands and pasture until finally the countryside turns to uninterrupted grasslands.

Probably not by accident the border of Kalmykia is near where the steppe takes over completely. Russians are people of the plowed land; Kalmyks are people of the steppe. Just across the border, near Barmantsk Lake, is the small town of Malo-Dorbot, a reminder of the old Little Dörböt administrative district that existed here in Dambijantsan's day. For two hours we drive through the perfectly flat, now-green steppe, the monotonous view interrupted only by an occasional pond or small lake ringed with tall reeds. We see no gers, the tents of nomadic herders so common in Mongolia, and very little livestock. Except for few tiny villages we pass through the land seems deserted. Yet this region, known as the Pontic-Caspian Steppe, is steeped in history. According to historian Michael Khodarkovsky it is a "pastoral El Dorado, glorified in songs and epics of many nomadic people . . ."<sup>1</sup>

We are about a hundred miles west of the Volga, Europe's largest river by length, volume of water, and area of watershed, and the main artery leading into the very heart of Russia. The immense Pontic-Caspian Steppe, which flanks the lower Volga on either side, covering almost

400,000 square miles, an area two-thirds the size of Mongolia itself, is one of the cradles of Mankind. Four thousand years ago it was inhabited by the near-mythical Indo-Aryans, who according to some theories, admittedly controversial, went on to conquer and colonize the Indian sub-continent. Later came the Scythians, fierce tribesmen who with their fabulous hordes of golden jewelry and ornaments continue to excite imaginations up to the present day; then Sarmatians, Goths, Bugars, the Huns of Attila, and the Avars, proto-Mongols who had migrated west from their original homeland of what is now Mongolia in the fifth or sixth century. From the seventh to tenth centuries a.d. the steppe was dominated by the Khazars, a mostly Turkic people who founded an empire here and eventually embraced Judaism as a state religion. Then came the Magyars, forerunners of the Hungarian people, and the nomadic Pechenegs, Kipchaks, and Cumans. With the ascendancy of the Mongol Empire in the thirteenth century Chingis Khan's grandson Batu, leader of the Golden Horde, conquered the region, establishing his capital at Serai, on the Volga River southeast of current-day Volgograd, in the 1240s. Around this time the city of Xacitarxan was founded on the Volga Delta, near where it runs into the Caspian Sea, just a few miles north of the current city of Astrakhan.

In 1395 Tamurlane, the Sword of Islam, stormed through and burned the city of Xacitarxan to the ground. With the collapse of the Golden Horde in the mid-1400s the Astrakhan Khanate, founded by Qasim I and consisting of Tatar and Nogai tribesmen, was established on the lower Volga, with the rebuilt city of Xacitarxan as its capital. In 1556 Ivan the Terrible of Russia conquered the lower Volga valley and established a fortress, or kremlin, at the current site of Astrakhan city, just south of the old city of Xacitarxan. Armies of the Ottoman Empire invaded the lower Volga in the 1560s and in 1569 invested the city of Astrakhan. They were soon forced to retreat, and in 1570 the Ottoman Sultan acknowledged Russian control of the lower Volga River. From then on the Volga, the longest river in Europe, became an entirely Russian waterway. The last nomadic people to arrive on the Pontic-Caspian Steppes, then under the nominal control of Russia, were Oirats, or Western Mongolia, who then became known as Kalmyks. One sub-group of the Kalmyks, the Little Dörböts, lived here in these steppes which I was now barreling through at ninety miles an hour.

As we have seen, Pozdneev as far back as 1892 stated that Dambijantsan was a Kalmyk of the Little Dörböt tribe, a descendant of the Oriats who had originally migrated to the Caspian Steppe back in the early seventeenth century. But even this simple fact about Dambijantsan's life would later be obscured behind a welter of myths. In 1926 Owen Lattimore was told by caravan men on the Winding Road caravan route that Dambijantsan was variously a "a true Mongol" (i.e., Khalkh or Eastern Mongol), a Russian, or a Buryat from Siberia. "The most substantial story of all," opined Lattimore, "is that he a Chinese from Manchuria who had served in Mongolia as a herder of ponies for the princely firm of Ta Sheng K'uei."<sup>2</sup> He also relates that one of the things most remembered about Dambijantsan by those who had known or at least seen him was his habit of changing his dress every day or so from Russian to Mongolian to Chinese and back again. This constant changing of his clothes could only have added to the confusion about his origins.

Dambijantsan himself once told A. V. Burdukov that he was a Khalkh Mongol born at a place called Ashighkhorgyn Chuluu in the old Tüsheets Khan Aimag. That Burdukov, who spoke Mongolian, apparently believed this story was strange, since several other people who knew Dambijantsan commented that he spoke the Khalkh dialect of the Mongolian language very poorly. Even to this day people in Gov-Altai Aimag remember stories about Dambijantsan's poor command of the Khalkh dialect and his use of the words from the Kalmyk or Western Mongolian form of the Mongolian language. (The Diluv Khutagt dissented: "Although he came from the Volga, he spoke the Khalkh dialect very well."<sup>3</sup>) Later evidence, including letters written by Dambijantsan himself, would seem to confirm that he was indeed a Kalmyk. One source maintains that he was born near the town of Aidarkhan, somewhere on the west bank of the Volga. but again the origins of this information is unclear.<sup>4</sup>

Yet doubts persists. The Russian historian Inessa Lomakina, author of the Russian language biography of Dambijantsan, did extensive research in the archives of the Soviet Academy of Sciences about Dambijantsan and was able to locate a census of all Kalmyks living in the Malo-Dörböt district of the Astrakhan Gubernia in the mid-nineteenth century. Searching for all known variants of Dambijantsan's name she was unable to come up with any information about him or his family. "The conclusion which suggests itself," she wrote, "was that either Ja Lama (Dambijantsan) wasn't from this region or that he had changed his name."<sup>5</sup> She added that

in 1914, after Dambijantsan had been arrested in Mongolia, the governor of Astrakhan Gubernia had been ordered by Russian officials to find out if Dambijantsan was, as he was then claiming, a Dörböt from Russia, but even he had not been able to determine if the errant lama's story was true.

Of course, all the names which our subject used may have been aliases, which would account for why no trace of him or his family could be found in the Malo-Dörböt ulus. "Dambijantsan" is a Mongolian name said to be based on the Tibetan words for "standard-bearer." George Rorich claims this name was rendered from the Tibetan "Ten-pei Jal-tsen (bsTsan-pa'i rgyal-mtshan)" but goes on to say that Dambijantsan's real name was "Pal-den (dPal-den)"<sup>6</sup> It has been suggested that "Dambijantsan" was a monastic name, given to our subject after he began his monastic career.<sup>7</sup> Other sources state that his given name in Mongolian was Davaasambuu.<sup>8</sup> Dambijantsan himself told Burdukov that his real name was Dawa, which may be just a shortened version of Davaasambuu. But while Dambijantsan was ethnically Mongolian, he was born in Russia and was nominally a Russian citizen. Thus he reportedly also had the Russian, or at least semi-Russian, name of Amur Sanaev. This name would appear to be nothing more than a Russianized form of "Amarsanaa."

As we shall see, Amarsanaa was the Oirat chieftain who had led the last great Mongol revolt against the Qing Dynasty in the 1750s. Dambijantsan would eventually claim to be a descendant of Amarsanaa, and still later his reincarnation. That he was an actual lineal descendant of the Oirat chieftain seems highly unlikely, and a reincarnation a matter of speculation. If he was not related to Amarsanaa, it is really possible, as one Russian researcher maintains, that he was born into a family named Sanaev and given the name "Amur"?<sup>9</sup> The coincidence seems too great. Or was this just another alias chosen to further enhance his connection with the illustrious Amarsanaa, who according to legend would return and once again lead the Mongols in revolt against the Qing oppressors? In any case, both in the 1990s and as late as 1914 Dambijantsan was known to Russians in Mongolia as Amur Sanaev.<sup>10</sup> He also traveled under the Russian alias Ichinnorov and was said to use the Tibetan aliases of Dawa Shabrong, Shiret Lama, and She-rap Lama. After arriving in Mongolia in the early 1890s he would acquire a whole host of Mongolian aliases and nicknames.

Dambijantsan's age is also a matter of dispute. His contemporaries had no clear idea of how old he was. Like the notorious Count St. Germain of

eighteenth century Europe Dambijantsan had the curious trait of appearing ageless. The Diluv Khutagt, who knew him for a period of over thirty years, says simply, "No one knew his real age. No one knew the real truth about him."<sup>11</sup> A. M. Pozdneev, writing in 1892, noted that Dambijantsan "was about thirty or forty years old."<sup>12</sup> Yet A. V. Burdukov, who would become very well acquainted with Dambijantsan, stated that when he first met him, some twenty years later in 1912, "He looked a little over forty."<sup>13</sup> If we believe these accounts it would appear that Dambijantsan aged very little between 1891 and 1912. These discrepancies in his appearance would cause some to speculate that there was more than one Dambijantsan, and that some witnesses had confused the various characters who had assumed his name. Indeed, as we shall see several impostors did eventually appear in Mongolia, all claiming to be Dambijantsan.

After his death various researchers would claim that the Dambijantsan was born in 1860, although the actual source of this information is never quite clear.<sup>14</sup> One Mongolian scholar, apparently using a comment of Dambijantsan's on the astrological details of his birth, would claim he was born in 1862.<sup>15</sup> Lacking any more concrete information we will use 1860 as the probable date of his birth. This would make him thirty years old when he first arrived in Mongolia in 1890, fifty-two when he took part in the siege of Khovd in 1912, and sixty-two at the time of his assassination in 1922.

We arrive in Elista, the capital of Kalmykia, about three and a half hours after leaving Volgograd. The city is located in a depression in the otherwise level steppe. Its population is said to be just over 100,000. My first impression is of surprisingly clean, tidy, tree-lined streets backed by modest two and three story apartment houses. Telo Tulku Rinpoche's monastery has a guest apartment but at the moment it is unavailable, so I am taken to small three-story hotel on quiet side street lined with trees and lilac bushes in full bloom.

The next morning a young monk named Andzha whom I had met earlier in Mongolia called and said that Telo Rinpoche had been in India but he had just arrived yesterday with his teacher, the head of Drepung Gomang Monastery in southern India. At noon there will be a greeting ceremony for the Drepung Tripa, the official title of the lama from India, at the Golden Temple, but that the Rinpoche will be able to speak to me in his office beforehand. An hour later Andzha picks me up in his bat-

tered old Toyota and we proceed directly to the Golden Temple.

Buddhism had been largely stamped out in Kalmykia during the communist era, but in the 1990s there was a resurgence of interest among the Kalmyks. During his visit to Elista in 1998 the Fourteen Dalai Lama, hoping to revitalize Buddhism in Kalmykia and at the same time establish a beachhead in Europe, chose a location for a new temple not far from the city center. The six-story, lavishly appointed structure was finally opened in December of 2005. As noted it is the largest Buddhist temple in Europe.

Andzha drives in the private entrance at the back of the monastery and after removing our shoes in the first floor entry hall we take an elevator to the fourth floor where Telo Rinpoche has his residence and office. From the elevator we step into a large room which at first glance seems to contain an enormous Buddhist-oriented craps table. But no, it is in fact an immense conference table, seating twenty-four, with a mandala embedded in the middle of it. Andzha adds that the main temple hall is directly below this room, and that the bottom side of the mandala, painted with the same design, can be seen in the ceiling of the hall. All the prayers offered in the main temple ascend through the mandala, he says, and concentrate themselves here in this conference room. Telo Tulku Rinpoche's luxurious office is off to one side of this awe-inspiring conference room. The redolence odor of rancid butter, mutton fat, and juniper incense common to monasteries in Mongolia, some of which have not felt a broom since before the fall of the Qing Dynasty, is noticeably absent here.

The Telo Rinpoche, the latest in a line of incarnations going back to Mangala, one of the original disciples of the Buddha, and including the last Diluv Khutagt of Mongolia, greets me warmly. He must meet the Drepung Tripa shortly but he says that afterward he will give me a guided tour of the temple. In the meantime what can he do for me? I tell him that I would like to talk to historians who might know something about Dambijantsan, who was born here in Kalmykia and who, in some circles at least, is considered an incarnation of one the Eighty-Four Mahasiddhis of India, in Dambijantsan's case the mahasiddhi known as Güwari. One of Telo Tulku Rinpoche's previous incarnations, Tilopa, was also thought to be one of the original Eighty-Four Mahasiddhis. The Rinpoche summons his secretary and instructs her to call one of the local research institutes and track anyone who can shed some light on the up-until-now shadowy

existence of Dambijantsan here in Kalmykia.

We then take the elevator downstairs where the reception for the Drepung Tripa is just beginning. The Drepung Tripa, who appears to be in his sixties, enters the temple bestowing his blessings on all those who approach him. He is the head of Drepung Gomang Monastery in southern India, which was founded by Tibetans who fled Tibet after the Chinese invasion of 1959 and named after Drepung Monastery in Tibet. Gomang was one of the several colleges at Drepung in Lhasa and the one attended by most Mongolian monks who studied in Tibet. Zanabazar (1635–1723), the first of the eight Bogd Gegeen of Mongolia and a famed artist and polymath, stayed at Gomang during his visits to Mongolia. Many other famous Mongolian lamas studied here, including Agvan Dorzhiev, the Buryat Mongol who eventually became a tutor to the 13th Dalai and who accompanied the Dalai Lama to Mongolia in 1904 when the latter fled Tibet after the invasion of the Younghusband Expedition. Dambijantsan also reportedly attended Gomang College at Drepung, at which time he may have met Dorjiev. In any case, as we shall see Dambijantsan's stay at Drepung ended disasterously.

The next morning a young Kalmyk named Chogdor Sandjiev picks me up at my hotel and we proceed by car the Kalmyk Institute of Humanistic Studies. In the small library of the institute we are met by another Kalmyk in his twenties with a long ponytail and a mala wrapped around his wrist. His name is Bem. He is a student at the institute and is very fluent in English. He in turn introduces me to a short, stocky woman who must be in her seventies. She is in charge of research in the library, and she says the library has an extensive collection of materials about Dambijantsan. She is in the process of digging the relevant books out of stacks and will have them ready in half an hour.

Bem, Chogdor, and I proceed upstairs to the office of B. A. Bicheev, a professor at the institute. An stern looking man in this forties, he abruptly asks, "Why are you interested in Dambijantsan?" and without waiting for an answer adds, "Are you with the CIA?" Fifteen years ago, when I first lived in Russia, it was de rigueur to ask every American if they were CIA agents, but this has gotten a bit old hat by now. "No," I reply, "and in any case, I don't think the CIA is interested in Dambijantsan."

"Well, I don't think Dambijantsan was a Kalmyk anyhow," he says. I allow that Inessa Lomakina, author of the book *The Head of the Ja Lama*, had thoroughly searched local records and archives in Kalmykia and had

come up with nothing about Dambijantsan's family or birthplace, but add that there is a host of peripheral and anecdotal data indicating that he was a Kalmyk of the Dörböt tribe. Why do you think he was not a Kalmyk? I asked the professor.

"Well, it is well known that Dambijantsan lived in Astrakhan in 1917, after he was released from prison in Siberia," he says. "Astrakhan was a very difficult and dangerous place to live in at time. If he had relatives in the countryside he would have gone and stayed with them. But he didn't. So I don't think he had any relatives here, and therefore was not a Kalmyk."

This argument does not sound entirely convincing to me. Pointing out that Dambijantsan was allegedly born near a town or village named Aidarkhan, I ask the professor if he knows of any such place. Aidarkhan, he says, and Chogdor and Bem concur, is just the Kalmyk name for Astrakhan, the ancient city near the mouth of the Volga River. None of them are aware of any town named Aidarkhan in the current territory of Kalmykia. I suspect that the sources which say Dambijantsan was born in Aidarkhan (Astrakhan) meant that he was born in the province of Astrakhan, in which the Malo-Dörböt district was located in the nineteenth century. When I mention that I might go to the city of Astrakhan from Elista the professor exclaims, "Why do you want to go to Astrakhan? Do you work for the CIA?"

Changing the subject I ask him if he knows anything about Inessa Lomikina's current whereabouts. I had attempted to track down information about her on the internet but had been unable to find anything. He says she died two or three years ago. This was sad, but intriguing. How old was she, I wondered, and what did she die of? The professor did not know. I added that there was a legend in Mongolia that anyone who tried to write about the life of Dambijantsan either did not succeed or came to a bad end. "I know about this," said the professor. "Lomakina herself wrote in an article that she prayed that she would be allowed to finish her book without anything bad happening to her." Also, Lomakina told of a Russian who in the 1920s gathered masses of material about Dambijantsan in Mongolia in view of writing a biography only to be arrested and later perish in a GULAG. His research materials disappeared without a trace. Then there was the German guy who spent twenty years amassing material for a movie about Dambijantsan. In the end the movie was never made . . .

There seemed little point in pursuing the discussion with Professor Bi-

cheev. We went back down to the library where we were greeted by the elderly woman in charge who had said she would pull out all the materials about Dambijantsan. I had visions of a mass of unpublished manuscripts, records, and other virgin documents and was somewhat deflated when I saw the pile of books she had gathered together. Most them were well known sources which I had already studied. There was Burdukov's *Old and New Mongolia*, one of the best sources of material about Dambijantsan, but which I have in my own Scriptorium in Mongolian as well as the original Russian edition; Maisky's 1919 *Modern Mongolia*, which I have in English translation; Pozdnee's *Mongolia and the Mongols*, which I also have in English translation; several scholarly journals with articles by Lomakina, and a few other items, most of which I had either seen or was aware of. It's soon clear that there is nothing really new here. I thanked the kindly old woman for digging out the materials and we made our exit.

The doubts of Professor Bicheev and the lack of collaborative information in the nineteenth century census reports notwithstanding, it would appear from most other available materials that Dambijantsan was a Kalmyk from what is now Kalmykia. At the very least, the people who knew him best, including Diluv Khutagt, believed he was a Kalmyk from the Volga region. Since by the time he was born Russia had asserted full control over the area he also would have been a Russian citizen, a factor which was to play a crucial role in his life. Yet he always identified with the Oirats, or Western Mongols, from whom the Kalmyks had originated, and would eventually assert that his real homeland, the land of his ancestors, was the traditional territories of the Oirats in western Mongolia and northwest China.