

Sources

Great Famine of 1931–1933 in Kazakhstan: A Contemporary's Reminiscences

NAZIRA NURTAZINA

FOREWORD BY UYAMA TOMOHIKO

The famine that occurred in Kazakhstan in the early 1930s because of grain and meat procurement campaigns, collectivization, and forced sedentarization is a tragic page in Soviet history, and a number of scholars have written on this subject since the perestroika period.¹ The causes and consequences of the famine have been much studied, although researchers' opinions differ on various issues, especially on the scale of the victims. Meanwhile, the famine is still remembered by the older generations of Kazakhs, and it is important to study their memories and experiences while they are still with us.

In this section, we publish the reminiscences of Nūrziya Qajıbaeva (Kazhibaeva), who witnessed the famine in Eastern Kazakhstan when she was around six years old. Although she did not experience extreme famine herself, she witnessed the severe living conditions of that period with her own eyes and through her husband's accounts. The description of her temporary emigration to China (Xinjiang) is of special interest. For her community, this was a second-time emigration, as her father's family went to Xinjiang during the revolt of 1916, and came back to Kazakhstan after losing all their livestock and many family members. In 1933, the emigration of her family was more successful, as they carefully chose the route for crossing the border, received help from the Kazakhs who went to China before them (they emigrated in a later phase of the famine) as well as local Uyghurs, and were able to exchange their ornaments for food. However, they soon returned; they did not perceive Chinese Xinjiang to be their "home," despite its sizable Kazakh population.

Her account also contains a number of interesting observations and pieces of information concerning topics other than the famine. Contrary to the general image of the Kazakhs as people not strictly observing Islamic practices, her family and surrounding people were devout Muslims, and recited poems on Islamic subjects even during World War II. Up until the early 1930s, people were not familiar with the Soviet ideology, and "activists" from among the poor Kazakhs used their position to marry

1 To cite some examples of research conducted by Western scholars: Niccolò Pianciola, "Famine in the Steppe: The Collectivisation of Agriculture and the Kazak Herdsmen 1928–1934," *Cahiers du Monde russe* 45, nos. 1–2 (2004), pp. 137–192; Isabelle Ohayon, *La sédentarisation des Kazakhs dans l'URSS de Staline: Collectivisation et changement social (1928–1945)* (Paris: 2006); Matthew J. Payne, "Seeing Like a Soviet State: Settlement of Nomadic Kazakhs, 1928–1934," in Golfo Alexopoulos, Julie Hessler, and Kiril Tomoff, eds., *Writing the Stalin Era: Sheila Fitzpatrick and Soviet Historiography* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 59–86. For research conducted in Kazakhstan, see the introduction below.

the former second wives of wealthy people without paying a bride price. After the famine, however, people seemed to have internalized Soviet social norms: Qajibaeva's father became a winner of a "socialist competition," and she herself was an active participant of the children's communist organizations, although remaining pious Muslims and never forgetting the cruelty of Soviet power that created a large number of victims of famine and war. Her reminiscences also include interesting (though subjective) observations of the interethnic relations between the Kazakhs and other peoples (especially Russians and Tatars).

Overall, Qajibaeva's account is touching and lively, presenting a micro-historical view of both tragic events and everyday life in the Soviet period. Compared with the voluminous memoirs of Mukhamet Shayakhmetov, whose family was repressed as wealthy people and who also witnessed the famine in Eastern Kazakhstan,² Qajibaeva's memoirs are less systematic and contextualized in Soviet political history, but more vivid and impressive, summarizing the atmosphere of the era and the individual fates of people familiar to her. These reminiscences have been recorded and annotated by Qajibaeva's daughter, Nazira Nurtazina, a scholar who specializes in the history of Islam in Kazakhstan.³

INTRODUCTION

The history of the twentieth century hasn't yet been fully written. The twentieth century, which saw so much incredible disaster in our nation, should be evaluated in Kazakhstan's history as a true "cruel century" overshadowing all past misdeeds, including the slaughterous crusades of Genghis Khan or the Zunghars. Sooner or later, the whole truth about the Great Famine of 1931–1933 (in Kazakh, *Asharshiliq*) will be totally revealed and it will create scientific and documentary foundations for an objective political assessment of this historical event. In this mass famine, unprecedented both in national and world history, almost half of the Kazakhs died. It was a humanitarian catastrophe of the twentieth century, when the very existence of a nation called "Kazakh" was put at threat.

The famine was caused by Stalin's collectivization of agriculture along with a cruel and frankly cynical campaign for the collection of meat, proceeding by way of an absolute exemption of livestock from Kazakh cattlemen by the state. Having lost their only source of food, the population of the *auls*⁴ (90 percent of Kazakhs were mainly rural at that time) was doomed to death.

Such issues as forced collectivization and the famine as its result were not investigated in Kazakhstan because they were carefully concealed up to the

2 Mukhamet Shayakhmetov, *The Silent Steppe: The Memoir of a Kazakh Nomad under Stalin* (New York: Overlook/Rookery, 2007).

3 Nazira Nurtazina, *Narody Turkestana: Problemy islama, integratsii, modernizatsii i dekolonizatsii (na rubezhe XIX–XX vekov)* (Almaty, 2008).

4 Aul (Kaz. *awıl*) – a small community of nomads, or their settlement.

beginning of the democratization of Soviet society in the late 1980s. It is proved by the fact that in reputable collections of documents of the Soviet time devoted to collectivization, there was not a single word said about the famine.⁵ In the late 1960s to early 1980s, there were some historians who wrote on the subject of the agrarian history of Soviet Kazakhstan. They were G. Dakhshleiger, S. Koval'skii, A. Tursunbaev, B. Tulepbaev, N. Alimbaev, K. Nurpeisov, etc. However, these authors could not provide an objective history in their works due to the tough censorship in the country at that time. Therefore, the works worthy of attention are only those that have been published from the late 1980s to the present time. These are by Zh. Abylkhozhin, M. Kozybayev, K. Aldazhumanov, M. Tatimov, V. Mikhailov, T. Omarbekov, M. Koigeldiev, and others. What made it possible to tell the truth about the Stalin era and the famine in the 1930s was access to previously secret archival documents, impartial use of various sources, including memoirs, letters from the Kazakh politician T. Ryskulov to Stalin, etc., investigations by foreign researchers, and objective analysis of the socio-demographic processes.

The authors mentioned above uncovered various aspects of Stalin's collectivization in Kazakhstan and proved the anti-human nature and tragic consequences of these experiments for the people. The "Kazakhstan tragedy" was the name given to what happened during the thirties by Zh. Abylkhozhin, M. Kozybaev, and M. Tatimov in their article published on the pages of the All-Soviet-Union journal *Voprosy istorii* in 1989, in which the loss of the Kazakh population was estimated to be about 2 million people, or 49 percent of the population, and the "direct victims of hunger," in their opinion, comprised 1,750,000 people that made up 42 percent of the Kazakh ethnic group.⁶ B. Tolepbaev and V. Osipov claimed that the number of Kazakhs who died from starvation was between about 1,050,000 and 1,100,000 people; of other ethnic groups of the republic, the figure was between 200,000 and 250,000.⁷ Later, these numbers were continuously checked as a result of a more detailed investigation into the problem. Moreover, since 1991, when the USSR collapsed and the political independence of the Republic of Kazakhstan was declared, scholars of Kazakhstan have been able to speak more openly about the real scale and depth of that tragedy and give it an objective political assessment.

The Great Famine in the 1930s has been referred to by Kazakh researchers as "Goloshchekin's Genocide,"⁸ "ethnocide,"⁹ "Holodomor," "ethnic genocide,"¹⁰

5 *Kollektivizatsiia sel'skogo khoziaistva Kazakhstana, 1926-1941* (Alma-Ata, 1967).

6 Zh. Abylkhozhin, M. Kozybaev, and M. Tatimov, "Kazakhstanskaia tragediia," *Voprosy istorii*, 1989, no. 7, p. 67.

7 B. Tolepbaev and V. Osipov, "Asirmay da jasirmay da aytilar shündiq," *Sotsialistik Qazaqstan*, January 14, 1989.

8 M. Qoygeldiev and T. Omarbekov, *Tarikh taghlimi ne deydi?* (Almaty, 1993).

9 J. Äbilkhözhin and Q. Aldajūmanov, "Etnotsid," *Egemendi Qazaqstan*, May 30, 1992.

10 M. Tatimov and M. Tatimova, "Tragediia Velikoi Stepi," *Mysl'*, 2009, no. 6. pp. 55-60.

and “national catastrophe” of the Kazakhs.¹¹ According to T. Omarbekov, the term “Kazakhcide” is also justified.¹² Some Kazakh researchers who have studied the issue truly believe that 49 percent of the Kazakh ethnic group died of hunger.¹³ V. Mikhailov, the author of the documentary narrative *Chronicle of Great Jut* in his interview with Radio Azattyq on December 9, 2008, gave a figure of 40 percent.¹⁴ The latest estimation made by the Kazakh demographer M. Tatimov was that 2,137,500 Kazakhs died of hunger and disease,¹⁵ and that the number of refugees from Kazakhstan leaving the country forever was 616,000 people (about 205,000 people left for China, Afghanistan, and Iran). Thus, the loss of the indigenous population in Kazakhstan was 2,635,000 people or 64 percent of the ethnic group. The previous number of Kazakhs in the republic was recovered only forty years later in 1972.¹⁶

However, there are still different figures for the victims of famine given in works of Kazakh and foreign authors. More often than not, it is 1,750,000. There are also the following numbers that appear in foreign historiographies: 1,000,000 (R. Conquest) and 2,000,000 (M. Olcott). According to T. Omarbekov, some Russian authors tend to overstate the number of Kazakhs migrating to China and other countries (up to 1,300,000). And the aim of this as he believes is to understate the extent of ethnic deaths to induce the idea that quite a lot of the nomads managed to survive. The researcher claims that it is obvious that only those Kazakhs who lived in the border areas could go to China, and in these areas, only 334,268 people lived, or 7.33 percent of the population of the republic.¹⁷ In addition, thousands of people were killed on the way by Soviet border guards, who were given orders to shoot refugees for illegally crossing the Soviet-Chinese border. Since November 1931, border control from both sides, the Soviet Union and China, was greatly strengthened. The governors of Urumchi and Chuguchak were ordered to capture and return all the Soviet refugees. In fact, according to T. Omarbekov, the end of 1932 we can say was the termination of migration to China due to making it impossible to cross the border. Furthermore, if a million or even half a million Kazakhs had appeared in Xinjiang, it would not have remained unnoticed by the Chinese authorities,

11 K. Nürpeýis and B. Qoyshıbaev, “Ülttiq apattı ärdäyım este üstau mangızdı,” in *Tragediia kazakhskogo naroda (sbornik dokumentov i materialov: golod 20kh, 30kh XX veka v Kazakhstane)* (Almaty, 2010).

12 T. Omarbekov, *Golodomor v Kazakhstane: prichiny, masshtaby i itogi (1930–1933 gg.)* (Almaty, 2011), p. 5.

13 Tatimov and Tatimova, “Tragediia Velikoi Stepi,” p. 59; Omarbekov, *Golodomor v Kazakhstane*, p. 5.

14 Valerii Mikhailov, “Vo vremia goloda v Kazakhstane pogiblo 40 protsentov naseleniia,” <http://www.rus.azattyq.org/content/Valery_Mikhailov/1357347.html>.

15 Tatimov and Tatimova, “Tragediia Velikoi Stepi,” p. 59.

16 *Ibid.*, pp. 59–60.

17 T. Omarbekov, *20–30 jıldardaghı Qazaqstan qasıretı* (Almaty, 1997), p. 275.

and would at once have had an impact on the ethno-demographic situation in the province, but this did not happen. The author concludes that the number of Kazakhs migrating to western China in the 1930s could be around 70,000 people.¹⁸

M. Tatimov draws attention to the obstacles that people faced on their long journey covered on foot and starving. Many of them were seriously ill. Epidemics, especially of typhoid fever, were common at that time. As a result, “for one surviving refugee, there were two deaths of mainly children, women, or the elderly who died during the journey. All the witnesses say that all the great roads were strewn with the bones of the dead.”¹⁹ The chronological framework of the famine in Kazakhstan is defined as the period of 1930–1933. There is also an opinion that this ultrahigh mortality rate was rampant in the country in 1928–1934, and the year of 1934 should be considered as the final year of famine.²⁰

There are still many contradictions and controversial and questionable aspects related to the issue of famine in Kazakhstan during the Stalin era. The question of the number of deaths and refugees is certainly still open and awaits its final resolution. It is necessary to reveal concrete facts relating to the tragic fate of the people affected by famine as well as spontaneous migration to China and other regions. In recent years in Kazakhstan, memoirs about *Asharshiliq* have been published by eyewitnesses and are being studied. For instance, memories of the inhabitants of Almaty Oblast are presented in the book *The Tragedy of the Kazakh People*.²¹ Talks with respected older-aged Kazakh writers were included by V. Mikhailov in his book published in 1990.²²

We believe that the reminiscences of people – witnesses and contemporaries of the tragedy – have to be considered the most objective and valid source for reconstructing the Kazakh Holodomor history for the following reasons. First, there is the well-known bias of official information provided by the Soviet authorities at that time when even the word “hunger” was never mentioned in the documents of the local authorities in 1931–1934.²³ Professor T. Omarbekov provides many facts of the falsification of data on refugees in the documents of the OGPU (*Ob"edinennoe gosudarstvennoe politicheskoe upravlenie*), false statements of Party leaders (for example, a letter from F. Goloshchekin to Stalin in December 1931, where it was unfoundedly claimed that the flight of hungry Kazakhs from the country was supported by China, although it conflicted with the testimony of the Soviet consul in Kuldzha, a certain Kolosov²⁴). In

18 *Ibid.*, p. 280.

19 Tatimov and Tatimova, “Tragediia Velikoi Stepi,” p. 59.

20 M. Tatimov and K. Sarkenova, *Naselenie Kazakhstana v 20–30-e gg. XX v.*, vol. 1, *Demografiia Kazakhstana po materialam perepisi naseleniia 20–30-kh gg. XX v.* (Aktobe, 2002), p. 137.

21 *Tragediia kazakhskogo naroda* (op. cit.).

22 V. Mikhailov, *Khronika velikogo dzhuta: Dokumental'noe povestvovanie* (Alma-Ata, 1990).

23 Tatimov and Sarkenova, *Naselenie Kazakhstana*, p. 128.

other words, it is clear that the official documents of the Soviet period cannot be considered as the sole or a reliable source.

Secondly, the authorities of the USSR were indifferent to how the Kazakhs were living or whether they would survive in remote villages and steppes as well as to the fact that the situation was progressively worsening and was clearly a terrible tragedy. True information can only be provided by those who lived in the remote villages that were affected by collectivization, family members, or descendants of victims. It is at least undeniable that the witnesses' memories are extremely important in the uncovering of certain aspects of the social history of an era that had previously slipped beyond the sight of the authorities. As Valery Mikhailov said, "Any living witness's account is a document of supreme importance."²⁵ It does not have to be the memories of only the Kazakhs but also of those of other ethnic groups who witnessed the tragedy. Take the example of a horrifying picture of Kazakh people dying in the steppe described in the poems by Tat'iana Gavrilovna Nevadovskaia, the daughter of a professor who was repressed and exiled to Kazakhstan.²⁶ In general, the value of these sources of oral history is that, as a rule, they show a micro-history and help to reconstruct the daily life and mentality of the "common person," the individuals or families that are traditionally lost to macro-historical sight.

Guided by the above-mentioned motives, I put down everything my mother remembers, which she witnessed herself and heard from her parents and relatives about the Kazakh Holodomor of 1931–1933, as well as preceding events and the consequences of Communist tyranny. The reminiscences of my mother Nürziya Qajibaeva in the form of free autobiographical narration is the information of a woman who has a genetic gift of phenomenal memory inherent to nomads, common wisdom, and knowledge of *shejire* (genealogy or history of ancestors); at the same time, she is literate and well read, having been trained at a Soviet school. The reminiscences of the Kazakh woman Nürziya Qajibaeva are of great value not only because they provide facts and events from a witness's life; it is a first-hand, sincere, and truthful account of the tragedy of the 1930s in the history of Kazakhstan, made by an ordinary person, an experienced elderly woman, a custodian, and transferor of traditional knowledge.

Nürziya Qajibaeva, born in 1926, is currently retired and residing in the Almaly district of Almaty City, Kazakhstan. I also made some notes to the memories (Kazakh terms and some historical circumstances that need to be clarified). N. Qajibaeva's story was translated from Kazakh into English by Güljan Isenghalieva, an English teacher at al-Farabi Kazakh National University.²⁷

24 Omarbekov, *20–30 jildardaghi*, pp. 276, 278.

25 Mikhailov, "Vo vremia goloda."

26 Z. I. Boranbaeva, "Golod nachala 30-kh godov v Kazakhstane – glazami ochevidtsev," in *Tragediia kazakhskogo naroda*, p. 371.

27 The Russian version of the memoir has been published as Nazira Nurtazina, "Stalinskii golodomor v Kazakhstane: vospominaniia sovremennikov," *Qazaq tarihi*, 2011, no. 2 (107), pp. 31–35; no. 3 (108), pp. 25–28.

* * *

I was born in 1926 in a village called Bighash, Kökpektı raion (district), Semipalatinsk Oblast (now East Kazakhstan Oblast). My parents – Qajıbay Qalmaqbay-üli (b. 1891) and Bibatima Matriya-qızı (b. 1896) – are Kazakhs from the Middle Juz,²⁸ Naiman tribe, Qarakerey clan. We are representatives of the sub-clan Mürin (Sarı-mırza) of the Qarakerey clan and of the Bayıs generation. From time immemorial, our ancestors led a nomadic life in the East Kazakhstan steppes near the Chinese border. In summer, they lived at the foot of the Qalba Mountains (today’s Jarma district of East Kazakhstan Oblast), in winter – at the foot of the Tarbaghatay Mountains. Among our distant ancestors there were the famed *batırs*²⁹



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and *bis*,³⁰ soothsayers-*äulie*, and owners of enormous herds of horses – *bays* (the rich and propertied). Our distant ancestor Bayıs-bi (Sarı-mırza’s father) was a person of high authority in the Kazakh Steppe, and he had intermarried relations with Băydıbek-bi, an eminent representative of the Senior Juz, having matched his son with the latter’s daughter. One of our ancestors (*babamız*), the holy Jolimbet, was born of that marriage, who, according to a legend, had several meetings and conversations with the mystic Khizr (Qidır-ata). Among our honored ancestors, there were heroes of the struggle with the Zunghars: Qarakerey Qabanbay, a military commander under Abılay-Khan; the famous Boranbay-bi, our ninth ancestor; the glorified Nazar batır, to whom Esım-Khan presented one of Türsın Khan’s daughters, a noblewoman, Janbike, as a trophy.³¹

As to our later ancestors, they didn’t have the fame and enormous wealth of their predecessors, but they were rather well off, led a nomadic life, followed their ancestors’ customs and traditions, and did their best to overcome the difficulties faced by the Kazakhs. Our great-grandfather Ibraim was an educated Muslim and ran a large nomad farm. During the tsarist period, trying to escape religious persecution and military service in the Russian Empire, Tatar families moved into our region, where they were given a warm welcome and shelter. So, our great-grandfather Ibraim who lived in the second half of the nineteenth century was taught to read and studied the Quran by those devout and enlightened Tatars, and was married to one of their daughters (she is said to have been a blond blue-eyed woman). My mother Bi-Batima is a descendant of a

28 Jüz – tribal union of the Kazakhs; the Kazakhs were divided into three juz (from Arab. *juz'* meaning “part”).

29 Batır – a hero having military and political merit.

30 Bi – a skillful and knowledgeable expert in the field of traditional rights and customs; a judge.

31 Türsın Khan was killed by Esım Khan in 1627.

powerful local clan (a subdivision within the tribe), the Bayteke, who produced many *bays*, volost (district) rulers, and Hajjis. My mother's grandfather Saqqūli Mazibay-ūli, my *naghashi*,³² went on a pilgrimage – a long journey from East Kazakhstan to Mecca – in 1901. Hajji-ata died in 1924 at the age of ninety-seven. It should be noted that our ancestors had a happy life in the sense understood by Kazakh nomads; they had fertile pastures, great herds, and a peaceful life according to Kazakh customs and laws.

Although Russia's influence on the history of our region had been experienced long before, aggravation of our families' and clans' living conditions is considered to have been caused by the uprisings of 1916. The Tsar's decree on the Kazakhs' mobilization for World War I (they had to dig trenches in the rear area) was accepted by the Kazakhs with fear and perturbation. Nobody wanted to send their sons to death. In East Kazakhstan, the people protested against the Tsar's decree by civil disobedience to authority and migrating from Kazakhstan. My grandfather Qalmaqbay and his family (his wife Jangil, sons Qajibay (my father), Eshenghazı, and Shaykhghazı, and daughter Zübäyza) were among the first migrants.

Migration of our ancestors was headed by Mürsälım-bolis³³ who stood in opposition to authority. He was a talented person who wrote poems and loved his country. Everybody whose age or whose children's age fitted the Tsar's decree on mobilization (nineteen to forty-three) preferred migrating to sacrificing their lives for the Russian Tsar. But in China, they underwent serious hardships: most Kazakhs failed to find fertile pastures; they were accepted by the local Muslims as unbidden guests, and they felt homesick for their native land. According to my father's reminiscences (he died in 1982 before which I had repeatedly heard these memories from his own mouth), "we – our aul – lost our whole livestock and on the instant became have-nots, because not knowing the geography of an alien country, we found ourselves in infertile deserts – 'Qūbining qūmı' (Gobi Desert). If anybody had shown us the right way, we would have come to the foothills of Eren Qabırgha (eastern Tien-Shan) with its good climate and fertile pastures. We could have saved our livestock and might have found a better destiny. There was nobody to help us. My parents died there. The climate might not have suited them. I had to bury them. It was difficult to dig a grave for my mother who died in the desert: the soil was sandy and quickly fell, and, tears streaming down my face, I had to dig again and again..."

So, the remains of my grandparents are in an alien land, on the territory of present-day western China (Xinjiang). Having experienced much deprivation and sorrow, my father, his brothers, sister, and other relatives soon returned to their motherland. This happened as soon as they received pleasant news of the Tsar's downfall (February Revolution of 1917). Inspired with the news

32 *Naghashi* – relatives from the mother's side.

33 *Bolis* – head of the volost (district) administration in Kazakhstan during the tsarist period.

about the collapse of the former regime (which also meant the end of the decree of June 25, 1916), great masses of Kazakhs who had had to migrate to China started returning to their motherland where they were met by their weeping relatives. Everybody hoped for a better, happier life.

But after returning to the motherland, these long-suffering people faced new hardships. My parents, as well as most other Kazakhs, had no clear idea about the October Revolution of 1917, the new Soviet authority, or the war between the “Whites” and the “Reds.” Common Kazakhs accepted them as the internal, complex problems of the Russians. There was alarming talk about the new authority (*ökímet*) based on rumors coming from the main centers – cities, villages, and regions densely populated by the Russians. Undoubtedly, the Kazakhs were partly involved in these processes, which had negative consequences. It should be admitted that some of the poor, particularly those who lived from hand to mouth (those who couldn’t even get married, being unable to pay *qalǵıng mal* (kalym) for the bride) started supporting the Soviet power, as it promised them material welfare, power, jobs, and annulment of the kalym. Some Kazakhs were misled by Soviet policy; others accepted the new authority out of fear. There were people who joined the Red Army troops guarding the border. They sang revolutionary songs in Kazakh; I remember some lines of those songs: “Our mountain is Tarbaghatay, our enemy is Kolchak” (“Tarbaghatay tawımız, Kolchak bızdıng jawımız”).

Nonetheless, till the 1930s, the Russian (Soviet) power didn’t much interfere with the everyday life and customs of remote nomads, particularly those who lived in the easternmost region. In the remote auls, most Kazakhs, especially women and children, never saw the Russians. The word “Russian” was used to frighten children when they misbehaved or disobeyed, the adults saying, “The Russians will come!” (“Orıs keledı!”). The Russians were looked at with unconcealed curiosity. But a sense of fear prevailed; the most popular saying of those days was that “if you make friends with a Russian, then keep an axe with you” (“Orıspen joldas bolsang, baltang janıngda bolsın”). Of course, the names of our countrymen Biakhmet Särsenov, who joined the movement Alash Orda, and the intellectual Kölbay Tögısov, who founded the party Üsh Jüz, were well known in the auls. They were frequent visitors to the cities (Semipalatinsk and Omsk) and were educated in Russian schools. But their ideas and way of life were incomprehensible to the common nomad Kazakhs.

The ordinary people followed the old traditions and customs, observed *adat*³⁴ and Muslim laws. Even during World War II, the people who remained on the home front (the aged, women, and children) used to get together and recite *qissa* – poems on Islam, religious subjects, the Prophet Muhammad, Caliph Ali, stories about the sacred, *shejıre* (genealogy), excerpts from *Shakh-nama*, and even folk fairytales. Religious and oriental *qissa*-poems were very popular, and

34 Adat – traditional unwritten laws and customs of some nations confessing Islam: blood feud, marriage and wedding ceremony, etc.

children were given the names of characters from these poems. So, my *naghashi* (uncles from my mother's side) were called Säyfölmälík, Khaydar, Mumin-Jamin (Mínäy), and Mälík-Ajdar (Malghajdar). And the names of relatives from my father's side have the ending "-ghazi" (a Muslim warrior, a participant of *ghazavat* (jihad): Shaykhghazi, Qūmarghazi, Mūkhametghazi (Mūqash), and others). Some of our countrymen were called Ghabdülmütälíb (nicknamed Mütash, Mütan), Khamza, and others. In some auls, religiosity and the Muslim canon were highly appreciated. My *naghashi* taught all their sons to read and to study the Quran; nobody in their aul used bad language or cursed.

My father Qajıbay was by nature an active, hardworking, brave, independent, and at the same time, religious person. Hardships and a severe struggle for existence, which took the most part of his life, must have strengthened his temper and willpower. Despite destitution and difficulties, my father always recited *namaz* (prayers) and observed fasting. He used to regret that he couldn't have got a decent Muslim education because of his inexorable fate to wander (through forced migration and escapes). But thanks to his strong desire to gain knowledge, he learned to read and write in the Arabic script: he was a self-taught person, and sometimes he took private lessons from literate people (a certain İşqak-mullah and others). He inherited his copy of the Quran from his ancestors, and it was the most valuable thing to him. It was wrapped in a white cloth and kept over his bed. From time to time, my father used to open the Quran, turn over its pages and read *ayats*. Nowadays, I think if it were not for Soviet power and hardships, and if my father had lived in another time, he would have become a mullah, a teacher, and maybe a scholar. He also possessed the qualities of a *batır* and was a strong man: in his youth, he participated in competitions of *paluans*.³⁵

Until around the thirties, my parents and relatives had a more or less calm life. Of course, the people were deeply impoverished: years of wandering, loss of livestock in China, despoliation by the Kolchak troops retreating to the east during the Civil War (in our region, they were called *Aqting joli* - "the road of the Whites") had their impact on the Kazakhs' life. Kolchak troops plundered and despoiled livestock, shot at people, and fired on auls. In 1921, my father and several families made a decision to leave their native place (the present-day village of Kökjira, Tarbaghatay district of East Kazakhstan Oblast) and move to a more favorable land - the village of Bighash, Kökpektı region of East Kazakhstan Oblast. This land was convenient for rain-fed agriculture, growing wheat, and pasturing.

This shows that my father was one of the advanced people, who, realizing that a historical situation was drawing to a conclusion, saw that it was necessary to settle and deal with agriculture even before the mass sedentarization of the Kazakhs. In fact, according to my parents, their life changed for the bet-

35 Paluan - a strong man and a wrestler, a participant in traditional wrestling competitions.

ter; working hard, growing wheat, and breeding livestock (sheep, horse, and cows), our family became well off. In winter, my father and his brothers used to sell wheat in the bazaars of Kökpekti (fifteen kilometers from the village) and buy tea, sugar, cloth, and clothes. Friendship with the Tatars, whose language and religion was close to the Kazakhs, was useful for them: they taught our mothers and women to bake bread in the oven and cook pelmenis. One rich Tatar had a separator to make butter and everybody used it. When my father's younger brother Eshenghazı married, my father paid a high kalym for the bride – twelve head of cattle – though it was formally forbidden by the Soviet power.

I was born in the village of Bighash. According to my parents and uncle, on the day of my birth, there was much snow. Everything was white. At first, they gave me the name "Nürzada." But after a few days, one of my father's acquaintances, who was a wise and dignified person, visited us. Having heard the name of the newborn baby, he suggested giving her the name "Nürziya." It is an Arabic name: *nūr* means "light," *ziya* – also "light."

This relatively happy life in Bighash lasted only nine years. In 1930, a great number of Russian migrants came to our region: they were very rude and violent, with unkind eyes and speaking an unknown language. A state farm (or sovkhöz) was expected to be set up in our region. Fear of the Russians and the new power's strange actions was great. My father particularly feared for the religion: he was afraid that the Kazakhs might be baptized ("shoqınshı bolamız"). The fact that the Kazakhs didn't understand or speak the Russian language aggravated the situation. My father and his close relatives again decided to return to the Tarbaghatay foothills. They left, leaving behind everything they had: the house they had constructed, and some of their property. Sometimes, I think that it might have been better not to have been afraid of the hardships and stayed there. Anyway, there was no escape from the Russians and the Soviet power, because even at the Chinese border, collectivization, famine, and Communist propaganda caught up with us after all.

We returned to our aul where our ancestors were buried and joined our relatives. But the living conditions had already become tough there. In 1928, the confiscation campaign of the rich started. Among those who suffered from confiscation and the Soviet power, there was the famous Äbdıldabek-bolis, an enlightened volost ruler, and innovator and rich (in his youth, he was famous as a *paluan* or wrestler). Some well-off families managed to immigrate to China. This emigration differed from that of 1932–1933, because the auls were left by the rich, whose emigration was well planned: escaping from the Soviet power, they took all their livestock, horse herds, property, and even gold ingots with them. They rode good horses and some of them were armed.

The emigrants, people who had to leave their native land in order to survive, were persecuted by the representatives of the revolutionary power, and there occurred exchanges of fire on the border. But they left their motherland, not for a good life. Some emigrants composed farewell poems that were lat-

er conveyed from mouth to mouth; in Mürsälím-bolís's farewell poem, there were such lines as "Sary-Arka steppes, cool Kalba, Kyzyl Bulak, listen to my farewell words to my native land" ("Sarı Arqa, Salqın Qalba, Qızıl Būlaq, Jersugha qoshtasayın salsang qūlaq"). This second wave of emigration involved not only the rich but partly also poor nomads. This is because, first, people sensed something evil in the new power's policy. Second, the Kazakhs' tribal social structure played an important role: close relatives of the rich followed their patron and influential tribesmen (although not always). Third, because of worsening material conditions, the poor sometimes stole livestock, which put them under threat of arrest. The Soviet power and the activity of the State Political Directorate (GPU) provoked a class struggle (that is, acts of violence that the poor committed against the rich, former illiterate farm laborers being attracted to the side of the revolutionary government and to being armed); there were cases of persecution and execution. Under these adverse circumstances, some Kazakhs preferred to leave the country for China.

From year to year, life in the auls was becoming more and more difficult. So-called activists (*belsendiler*), consisting of poverty-stricken and illiterate men, were befuddled and disposed against the rich and the mullahs; they were given horses. Mother told how those boastful "activists" used to ride in the auls and severely beat the dogs barking at them for all to see. Later, when the "activists" appeared in the auls, the dogs instinctively hid themselves or ran away. According to my parents and relatives, the villagers were shocked by the shameless behavior of the "activists" who lured young girls and women into "red yurtas" (tents for agitation). Representatives of the local power held meetings in these "red yurtas" and "emancipated" women, asking them whether they were happy with their husbands. If a woman had been forced to marry an old man, then she was persuaded to divorce him; they criticized the kalym. Some young women, *toqals* (second wives) were happy about this and agitated each other to follow the activists' advice: they left their old husbands and married young activists. As to the activists, former agricultural laborers, they were happy to marry a young woman without paying kalym.

The people of our auls just had a vague idea about Lenin and Stalin; only a few Kazakhs had heard these names. But the Kazakhs experienced the real power of the Bolsheviks' bloody government when they were deprived of their whole livestock. This was the time of the Great Famine (*Asharshılıq*) in Kazakhstan, which took the lives of millions of Kazakhs. According to my parents, nobody knew for what purposes our livestock was taken away: it may have been sent to big centers, cities, or workers. They were told that it was on the authorities' order. There was no information about kolkhozy (or collective farms); only afterwards did the people find out what it meant. The only thing the Kazakhs could do was to shed tears over the livestock of which they were deprived: "My God, shall I ever see at least my sheep's droppings?" ("Qūdayim-au, qoiding qūmalaghın köretin künimiz bolar ma eken?").

I have to confess that neither me personally (a child of six), nor my parents or close relatives experienced severe starvation. Firstly, till March 1933, we had a supply of food left (our family wasn't large and I was the only child in the family); my father and uncles did their best to provide their families with food; sometimes they managed to exchange things and warm clothes for a bucket of wheat. Besides, traditionally, the Kazakhs never left each other in misfortune; they helped each other overcome any difficulties. So, during the famine, they shared their food with their relatives. Sometimes, in the initial period, the "activists" who helped the authorities butcher the confiscated livestock managed to steal some bones or offal and share them with their relatives or acquaintances.

Secondly, when the situation started worsening, we managed to leave for China with a group of refugees. I am grateful first of all to God, then to my parents and relatives for saving me, a helpless child, from death by starvation. My parents, the Kazakhs of that period, were true heroes. They suffered so much hardship and they spent their lives struggling to survive. Cursed be that system and those people who invented and brought it to bear! Let my father, mother, and uncles who faced all those incredible hardships be blessed and abide in eternal paradise (*jannat*)! I always read the Quran in their honor. May God bless the millions of our brothers and sisters who died in the years of *Asharshiliq*!

According to my parents, wheat supplies, the main food of the Kazakhs in those years, were growing less and less. People didn't eat enough, lost weight, were in poor health; they worried about their future. Nobody cared about the starving people; here, there, and everywhere, along the roads, one could find dead bodies, and there was nobody to bury them. Being a child, I didn't realize many things, but soon, my parents said they were leaving for Shäueshek (the city of Chuguchak in China). It was the March of 1933. Our relatives – *naghashi* – Qaydar with his family, my father's brothers Eshenghazi and Shaykhghazi, and my aunt Zübäyza went with us.

As I have mentioned earlier, compared to the previous emigration, which was a migration of the rich, in 1932–33, it was the poor, starving, barefooted, and sick who emigrated to China. It was a real makeshift escape (not *köshu*, but *qashu* – a refugee's move), a tragic exodus. They were scared to death and famished, and the majority of them died on the way. They had nothing: neither livestock nor even a hen. Nowadays, some people, especially representatives of other nationalities and the youth in our country have a low opinion of the *oralmans* (repatriates), considering them to be offspring of the rich who left their motherland to avoid problems and save their property. Though personally, I and my relatives stayed in the territory of China for less than half a year (from March till September 1933) and we had nothing to do with the *oralmans*, for the sake of justice, I would say that it's a great sin to say such things. What should a person do if his family and children are in grave danger? What should he do when everywhere there are heaps of dead bodies? There were no weap-

ons or power to oppose the authorities. Those on whom people pinned their hopes, and I mean the former representatives of Alash Orda, had been imprisoned. The only thing to do was to use every opportunity to save the family and children. The Kazakhs have a saying that “it’s better to be poor in your own motherland than a sultan in a foreign land.” Only unbearable hardships and the extreme situation must have made the Kazakhs, who are so devoted to their motherland,³⁶ leave it. One should accept that there is a great difference between poverty and death by starvation.

So, my parents and relatives took the bare essentials, warm clothes, blankets, and remaining food supplies such as grated wheat (*talqan*). Women’s adornments, rings, earrings, bracelets, silver necklaces, and several fox-fur coats (*ishik*) were also taken in order to exchange them for food or maybe livestock. A group of between fifteen and twenty people (three or four families) decided to cross the border by a roundabout route, through the range of the Tarbaghatay Mountains, because the direct road was dangerous: the Soviet border patrol forced refugees to return or shot them. Very few people knew that pass. A man who didn’t have any food agreed to show us the way provided we would feed him and his sick son. There were few children among us: our guide’s son, who was ten years old, one of our relatives – a boy of eight – and I (I was only six then). I remember a young pregnant woman joining us, her husband having left for China a bit earlier. She didn’t have any food, and she asked us not to leave her. We gave her food; she carried on her back our relative’s sewing machine. Later, I heard that the poor woman was lucky enough to find her husband in Shäueshek on the day of her arrival.

We walked for about fifteen days. Father said that if we had taken the direct route, it would have taken us eight or nine days, but we had to choose the roundabout route. For safety, we moved only at night; in the daytime, we slept, hiding ourselves in ravines. It was very difficult to walk as the road was bumpy, so we had sharp pain in our legs. To relieve the pain, we kept our legs in a raised position when we slept. I covered the whole distance myself, like the adults, walking without anybody’s help – Allah gave me the strength. Later, my parents reminisced with a smile how at the beginning of the route, I would whimper that it was difficult for me to walk. But as soon as my father said that he would leave the heavy load and instead carry me on his back, I begged him, crying: “Please, don’t leave any load; I’ll walk myself.” From then, I stopped complaining.

It was very cold and windy in the mountains. I was dressed like a boy: I wore a *tımaq* (a fox-fur cap) on my head, a belted *chapan* (a quilted dressing gown), a warm jacket underneath, and handmade shoes. I remember very clearly one episode when we had to pass through a dangerous place in the mountains: the mountain slope was covered with thick ice. The men had to break the ice with an addice (or a *shotbalta* in Kazakh) making foot-sized cuts.

36 In Kazakh, *tughan jer*, literally meaning “native land” or “ancestors’ nomad camp.”

For safety, I was fastened to my uncle Eshen's belt with a rope so as not to fall off. It was very difficult for the fatigued and hungry people to cross the Tarbaghatay Range at night by an unfamiliar route.

The scant food supply was strictly rationed in order to hold out till the end of the route. We ate only once a day, in the evening, before setting off. Our meager meal consisted of *talqan* mixed with water and salt; instead of tea we took hot water. As we were reaching China, our food supply came to an end, so only the children and women were fed a little. Suddenly, my uncle Qaydar's daughter found a *shūghiniq* (a kind of root plant, like a wild potato that we used to grub up, bake in ash, and then eat) in her pocket. She appeared to have saved some of them for an emergency. When her father was exhausted and couldn't move, she gave it to him, and we were able to continue on our route. At last, we reached the town of Shäueshek. Descending the mountain, we noticed that the climate in the territory of China was warmer.

On the outskirts of the town, we found a shabby shelter next to *mazars* (tombs). Some of our adults left for the town to buy some food, explore the situation, rent a dwelling, or meet some compatriots. They ordered us not to leave the shelter because if the Chinese authorities saw a big crowd, they might arrest us. My father took my silver sheath amulet (*tūmar*) to sell. Soon, when they came back, they brought some rolls. I was surprised to see those big rolls made of white flour, and they were so delicious. So, my ornament – the silver sheath – “turned into” white and delicious “Chinese” rolls. In the town, the adults met some compatriots who had emigrated there earlier. Most of those Kazakhs were working for the Sarts³⁷ as farm laborers or servants. We and our close relatives settled in a barn belonging to a local Sart. There was only one big room. My parents and relatives were very happy that they reached their destination safe and sound; at the first *dastarqan* (meaning table or meal), Uncle Qaydar recited the Quran thanking Allah and the *aruaqs* (the spirits of our ancestors).

We stayed in the town of Chuguchak for about a month. All this time, the adults were thinking about how to survive. They accepted any job offered, sold things, clothes, and adornments in the local bazaar. My mother was a good seamstress, and my aunt had a sewing machine. So, Mother made some money making clothes to sell. Uncle Qaydar met the father of his son-in-law (they had promised to marry their children when they were small), and soon he betrothed Qaydar-naghashi's daughter, Shäken, to his own son.

Having realized that it would be difficult to settle in the town, my parents and relatives joined the Kazakhs who were raising stock nearby. Working hard, we managed to save some money. I remember very well my mother's luxurious silver jewelry (she was the daughter of a well-off *bay*), big beautiful earrings, and several massive bracelets. They were also exchanged for livestock. As a result, we had two cows and seven or eight goats. This way, we

37 In this case, Uyghurs.

survived and found our feet. Father's sister married a local Kazakh from the Kerey tribe. They were said to be good and generous people.

Unfortunately, my father very soon fell sick with a grave form of pyrexia (*bezgek*). The bouts of fever were unbearable. A healer who examined him said that the disease was not fatal, but he would suffer a lot. My father thought that China didn't suit him ("Qıtay jaqpaydı") and didn't bring him luck: the first time they emigrated there, his parents lost all their livestock and passed away; this time – he himself fell sick. He dreamt of his motherland, and considered that every person should be buried in his ancestors' land. Soon, we received information that the situation in the motherland was improving, the peak of famine having passed. The authorities confessed their fault and started supplying the people with food, planting wheat, etc. Then, Father decided to return to our homeland. Many people tried to dissuade him from doing so. Mother's relatives wavered; they wanted to stay for a while. At first, Father sent his two brothers: Eshen with his wife and the unmarried Shaykhghazı. After them, as soon as Father recovered, we (Father, Mother, and I) left for our native aul Kökjıra, to join our kinsmen. It was late August or early September of 1933. Of course, it was risky to start out for a long journey alone, and besides, we took some sheep and goats with us. We were unaware of what to expect in our homeland. But my father was a resolute and brave person (*täuekelshıl*); he just put his trust in Allah. He used to say: "Don't be afraid of anything, just say 'Bismillah,' and Allah will protect you." While returning, we took the shortest route, and it took us several days to reach the frontier post. We were met by border guards with guns. One was a Russian, while the other was a Tatar who interpreted. Father said: "We have decided to come back to our homeland. We had to leave it when it was very difficult to live without food. Now, we have heard that the authorities are allowing us to return home as the situation has improved. We have brought some livestock with us, and want to live and work in the homeland." They appreciated our decision, saying, "You are right," tapped my father on his shoulder, and let us pass the post. So, that was the end of our journey to China.

My parents were very happy to return to their home aul. It was very surprising: when we came home, the fever didn't disturb my father any more. In the aul, everybody was busy harvesting wheat. Those who survived little by little started getting their second wind. Every family was given a calf and two sheep to raise and it was forbidden to butcher them for meat. Meat was a rarity then. Soon, small kolkhozy were set up. Our kolkhoz was called "Aqtoghan" and my father joined it in 1935. There were some others nearby: "Jastılek," "Serıktes," and "Qosköl." It was very difficult to work on the kolkhoz as there were neither tractors nor ploughs. Everybody – both men and women – worked up a sweat without days off. They wrote down their workdays, because they were not paid any salary. Only at the end of every year did the kolkhoz members receive some food, flour, etc.

The villagers would get up very early, with the singing of the early sparrows. Working until late, collective farmers had to attend the so-called *qizil bürish*.³⁸ Some arrangements for entertainment were made there. Collective farmers were made to compete in various games (for example, *körshí*, which means neighbor), the loser having to perform a song or dance, etc. It was necessary to create the impression that the Soviet people had fun. Exhausted people were forced to come to *qizil bürish* with their sleepy children (I also attended it with my parents). Once, a loser of a competition recited his own poem, “Kündíz jümis bolghanda, tünde - ‘qizil bürish,’ Qu jangha bolmadı ghoy bír kün tinish” (“The whole day - work, at night - ‘qizil bürish,’ our poor souls have no time to rest”). Everybody laughed. Every time he went to the *qizil bürish* and putting his crying, sleepy daughter on his back, our neighbor Läm-bek-agma damned and cursed the Soviet power, beseeching God. When preparations for the elections to the Supreme Soviet began, the authorities tormented the people, training them for a whole year, holding meetings, instructing them how to vote, how to take the voting paper, where to go, how to put the ballot into the ballot-box. At one of these “rehearsals,” an old woman was asked how she would vote, and she was so confused that instead of “konvert” (an envelope with a ballot, or in Kazakh, *kämpert*) she said “confiscation” (in Kazakh, *kämpeske*), a word she knew very well. When she came home, her son was angry and admonished her, saying “Qüday-au, kämpeskege äli toymay jürsing be?” (“Isn’t one confiscation enough for you?”). Her parents were of the rich whose property had been confiscated.

My father was a very firm and patient person. He worked hard in the kolkhoz fields. Despite exhausting and servile labor, he prayed twice a day: in the morning and in the evening (he couldn’t pray five times a day as he worked). I still remember his *azan* - a call to prayer: “*Allahu akbar! Allahu akbar!*” As soon as I heard it, I woke up immediately, and stayed in bed happy to hear those sacred words. I liked my father very much; I was proud of him. He became a super-productive worker (*udarnik*) and winner of a “socialist competition.” His work was held in high esteem: he was awarded certificates, and he was even presented with a bull (though he had to use it to plough the kolkhoz field, as the bull was given labor days as well). Soon, my father was appointed as head of a sheep farm. By that time, the livestock number had increased, and the authorities agitated the people to sell their livestock at a low price to the farm.

Stalin’s regime kept everybody in tension and fear, even if you were a common person and didn’t have anything to do with politics. Cases of unjust denunciation and calumny became more frequent. In 1937, there was a population census: the officials registered everybody and collected all the information about everybody. One of the items was about religion. I remember very well my father’s answer to this question. He said: “We are Muslims; our

38 *Qizil bürish* - a special propaganda room (in Russian, *krasnyi ugolok*).

religion is Islam" ("Müsilmanbüz; dínímíz – islam"). The census takers put everything down and didn't say anything. In those days, everybody disguised their religious affiliation; everybody denied and answered: "We don't know any god, or religion" because they were afraid of being persecuted. My father apprehended that he might be repressed any time. That's why, like many other families, we kept a *khurdzhun*³⁹ with food at the door buck (the police could arrest and take people away unexpectedly, giving no time to collect the necessary things). People were repressed without any reason. Once, an old man who could hardly walk was declared "an enemy of the people," arrested, and taken to prison in a vehicle. (It was witnessed by my husband. He, then a young boy, was seeing off his uncle, a simple nomad, who was incautious enough to say something bad about Stalin and was arrested.)

I started going to a Soviet Kazakh school in 1934. My first school was situated about two kilometers from our aul (in the kolkhoz "Seríktes"). From the fifth grade, I had to go to a school located approximately seven or eight kilometers from the aul. Once, I was so exhausted that I fell sick and had to miss lessons. We got up at the break of dawn, and a group of pupils walked to school. Like many others of our generation, I had a longing for knowledge. In our class, there were pupils of various ages, even seventeen and eighteen-year-olds. (Parents wanted their children to learn at least to write and count.) There was no uniform or ribbon: everybody wore whatever they could afford, mostly ragged and patched clothes and shoes. As for me, I didn't have many problems with clothes, as my mother made dresses herself and my father could make shoes. I remember a classmate of mine who was always wearing old torn shoes. She made old bones (I met her later at the funeral of one of our relatives), but never had any children; I think it was the consequence of the shortage of food and cold she experienced in her childhood.

At the beginning, in 1934, we were taught the Latin alphabet, but soon, in the academic year of 1939/1940, the Kazakh language transferred to the Russian (Cyrillic) alphabet, so we had to master a new writing system. It should be noted that the teachers in those days were real mentors and imparted sound knowledge. We looked at them with admiration, calling them *mūghalím* (teacher). I was a pupil with straight As, and an Octobrist and Pioneer.⁴⁰ I participated in various *slyots* (Pioneers' festivals) and was awarded prizes and certificates. My favorite subjects were geography and literature. My dream was to become a teacher. Like some boys and girls from our aul who were studying at a teacher training college in Zaysan. I was planning to join them. (The town of Zaysan was a kind of a beacon for us.) My parents approved of my decision, but my plans were ruined by the war that began in 1941.

³⁹ *Khurdzhun* – a bag or a bundle.

⁴⁰ Octobrist, Pioneer – a member of children's organizations for disseminating Communist ideology.

That war brought overpowering grief to the Kazakhs. Though my father was a middle-aged man, according to Soviet law, he was subject to the “labor army” (it was drudgery in faraway mines and plants). However, thanks to his position as head of the farm and his impeccable reputation as a top worker and leader, my father was granted a so-called *bron'*, and was exempted from the “labor army.” The home front also needed people for livestock breeding. My parents faced hardships in the early years of their life, and now God had saved them and granted them a long and quiet life at their hoary age (my father died at the age of ninety-two, my mother – ninety-seven). In 1938, their long-desired son – my brother Qūmarghazī – was born. He is an educated person who worked as a chief engineer in a sovkhos. Now he lives with his family in the city of Semipalatinsk.

Not many families were as lucky as my parents. So many young lives were destroyed; so many destinies were devastated; there are endless tragic stories! My uncles Eshen and Qaydar, who surrounded me with love in my childhood, didn't experience any happiness in their lives: they were conscripted into the “labor army” and went missing. Later, they were announced to have died in one of the mines or plants of Kuzbass. We sobbed our hearts out. Who could ever have thought that my uncle, who was called “Qaydar-mırza” for his aristocratic manners, would suffer starvation, humiliation, then become a kolkhoz *udarnik*, and finally, die in Russian drudgery. Mother grieved for her dead brother for many years. My uncle and foster-father of my husband, Köshkín-ata, convicted in 1937, was taken to Siberia where he died from some illness. My husband's young cousins Bergenbek and Qayrolla died in World War II defending Belorussia and Stalingrad. Many of my schoolmates, our young teachers, and even our aged relatives and neighbors (around fifty years old) went missing or died at war. Could they have imagined that having survived the starvation of the thirties, they would again find themselves in the pit of hell and face such an unfair death?

I often recall an extraordinary person who lived in our aul. His name was Nazarkhan-töre. His ancestors were *töre*⁴¹ and was Äbılpeyız (Abulfeiz) Khan's direct offspring. Äbılpeyız was the son of Äbilmämbet Khan, the ruler of the Middle Juz. During Abılay Khan's time, he was at the head of all the Naymans and supported Abılay Khan's course towards the East.⁴² Father made friends with this man during the war; every day, he was invited for supper to our home, and we listened to his wonderful stories. Nazarkhan-töre was

41 Töre – Genghis Khan's offspring in Kazakh society.

42 In the official history of Kazakhstan, Äbılpeyız is referred to as Sultan but not Khan. In the eighteenth century, he was mentioned in connection with diplomatic relations between the Kazakhs and the Qing Empire. See *Tsinskaiia imperiia i kazakhskie khanstoa* (Almaty, 1989), p. 143, document no. 83: “1757, November, Letter of Emperor Qianlong to both Abılay and Äbılpeyız.” Äbılpeyız is also regarded by the Chinese as “Abılay's little brother” (see *ibid.*, p. 129).

a real expert in poems – *qissa* – reciting them by heart, and was well versed in religion, history, and his genealogy. He had a very unusual appearance: tall and slender with noble facial features. When he was talking about Islam, about his ancestor-khans buried in the mausoleum “Azret Sultan” in Turkistan (he distinctly remembered his grandfather, saying that it took eleven days to transport Khan Äbílpeyíz’s body in a specially made leather sarcophagus from Eastern Kazakhstan to Turkistan town), about his grandfather Tüsíp-töre, and others, one could see an unusual light in his eyes. After my parents, this person became my spiritual advisor. But what had time and the Soviet power done with the khan’s offspring? He had survived starvation and various humiliations. By that time, he was a very poor, lonely elderly man living from hand to mouth and pasturing the kolkhoz livestock. His only son was called up to war. I used to read aloud to him his son’s letters from the war, because he read only in Arabic. Later he received a “killed in battle” notice (*qara qaghaz*) about his son’s death...

I got married in 1944. I and my husband Däwítbek Nürtazin come from the same district. My husband also experienced all the burdens of the Stalin era. He lost his parents at a very early age and was brought up in a Soviet orphanage. In 1944, he was a young teacher. After graduating from teacher training college in Zaysan at the age of nineteen, he was conscripted and sent to the war front. As he spoke Russian well, he was enrolled for short-term officers’ courses. However, he was not given an opportunity to complete the courses and was sent as infantry soldier to the bloody Battle of Stalingrad. In the war, he was wounded in his left arm and hospitalized. Since then, he could never hold a gun. When the decree on recalling teachers to the home front was declared, he returned home. Later, he earned a higher education diploma (from the Kazakh Pedagogical Institute), worked as a headmaster, the head of a district education authority, and an inspector of an oblast education authority. His whole life was devoted to schools and education. My husband’s relatives both from his father’s and his mother’s sides had been educated people and mullahs. His grandfather Asilimbek was a mullah in our region, and he knew Arabic and the Quran very well. Out of all his children, only his younger son Nürtaza became a mullah. According to their countrymen, both my parents-in-law were highly educated people: they received a Muslim education and liked reading books. But their talent was killed by the unfavorable conditions of that period.

In 1916, like my kinsmen, they had to hide themselves in China and returned home after the February Revolution of 1917. After that, they became extremely poor. My husband’s parents died at the beginning of the famine, around the autumn of 1932. It’d be wrong to say that they died of starvation, because by that time they had one horse and one camel left. I don’t know how they avoided being confiscated by the authorities. There may have been several reasons for it. They lived in a remote place; maybe that’s why the famine was not as severe as in the central and other steppe regions of Kazakhstan, where there were cases of cannibalism. For instance, later, we heard that these things

had happened in the Shūbartau region.⁴³ There is even a mocking expression that can still be heard from the Kazakhs, “Kísí etín jegen shūbartaulıqtar,” which means “Shūbartau people – cannibals.” The other reason might have been even the “activists” were afraid of damnation: everybody in the district knew that in Nūrtaza-mullah’s place, there was a weird book that was bought by his father Asılimbek-mullah from an Arab. It was said to tell fortunes, etc.

Nevertheless, my husband’s family was on the margins of poverty and they were often all miserably famished. Nūrtaza-ata sold his horse for 250 rubles, put the harness on his old camel, and, with his brother-in-law, went to the bazaar of Kōkpektı to buy some wheat. The prices were said to be very high and there was not much wheat, so they only managed to collect a handful. On the way back, Nūrtaza-ata caught a cold as in the late autumn he was wearing only a thin *chapan*. After coming home, he fell sick and died in six days.

A bit later, his wife Rım-apa passed away. She was said to be a wonderful woman. Her grandfather Düysen and father Aman were well-known rich people in the region; they even had bars of gold. At the same time, they were very religious, kind, and generous people. Everybody knew about it. They hired good Tatar mullahs to teach the children of their aul. That’s why my husband’s relatives from his mother’s side also were educated. They gave their only daughter Rıman education. When she got married, they gave her a dowry of beautiful carpets and a silver saddle and many other things. She was talented, read a lot, and even learnt spoken Russian (one of our countrymen, an *aqsaqal*,⁴⁴ said that he used to take Russian lessons from my mother-in-law). She was said to have had a strong love of books, not for the household, or anything material. (In that period, this was considered to be odd for a Kazakh woman). However, this intelligent and furthermore religious and generous woman wasn’t happy; she wasn’t able to withstand the increasing poverty, suffered a lot, and died at the age of thirty-five. Her three younger children were left orphans (by that time, her elder daughter was married). My husband’s parents – Nūrtaza Asılimbek-ulı (b. 1889) and Rım Aman-qızı (b. 1897) – were typical victims of the famine effected by the Communists and Stalin’s regime. Remembering his parents, my husband used to say: “My parents might have been lucky to pass away from illness and hardship at an early age, because they died in their own beds and were buried humanely in their motherland. If they had been alive in 1937, they would have been arrested: Father as a former mullah and Mother – as a *bay*’s daughter; besides, she was a mullah as well.” (By the way, my husband had always been accused of being a mullah’s son and having relatives in China.)

So, my future husband Dāwıtbek Nūrtazin was a full orphan; at first, he and his younger brother and sister (they later passed away) were given shelter

43 Shūbartau – southwestern area of East Kazakhstan Oblast (now part of the Ayaköz district).

44 *Aqsaqal* – an elder, literally “white beard.”

by their uncle's family, but later, because of the hard circumstances, he was sent to an orphanage set up in Aqsuat.⁴⁵ Food in the orphanage was poor: some soup, a slice of bread, and a cup of tea. According to hearsay, to make the bread heavier, the bakers put clay in it. There were cases of children dying because of malnutrition and low-grade food. After an inspection, the situation improved a bit, but food still wasn't sufficient. Fortunately, Uncle Köshkín-ata would send him *talqan*, and once, he even sent shoes. One episode gave him a severe shock: it happened when at the height of the famine his grandfather from his mother's side – Aman-ata – visited him in the orphanage.

My husband told me the following story about that visit: Grandparents Aman and Īrghaysha-apa couldn't leave for China because of their old age, and they stayed in the motherland with their younger son Jūbanīsh, just placing their trust in God. It was difficult to recognize his grandfather, whose aul we used to visit and where we would eat to overflowing. But now, there was in front of me an old man in rags, poorly fleshed, hardly keeping his legs. In utter despair, he had been looking for me, his grandson, hoping to find a slice of bread in a state orphanage. He asked me directly: "Dāwítbek, my grandson, have you got anything to eat, a slice of bread?" My heart ached when I realized that I wasn't able to help my grandfather. I answered tearfully: "I've got nothing, Grandpa. What can I do? I've got nothing." He just turned and followed his nose.

It was a great shock for him to see how a once rich, happy, and esteemed man, an aul's head, who had flocks of horses and coined gold, who had hired the best teachers for his children, now turned into a hungry beggar. Later, we found out that when Aman-ata and Granny were dying of hunger, their former horse-wrangler Qapas met them on the road and took them to his home. Aman-ata, unlike other *bays*, was very generous and merciful; he never committed any injustice against his workers. That's why Qapas, for whom Aman-ata had done so much good, felt compassion for his former master and gave him shelter. Qapas's living conditions were a bit better. He washed these old people and gave them food. Unfortunately, the food they took didn't help them and they soon passed away. Qapas-aga buried them and prayed...

As to the famine – *Asharshiliq* – I can say the following. There were cases when starving Kazakh refugees had to sell their children to the Chinese for slavery or exchange them for food. For example, a group of Kazakhs, among them my relatives or *naghashi*, reached China enervated and having nothing. In full despair, my mother's cousin Khalel had to sell his younger daughter Zipash to the Chinese for a bag of flour. She was about six or seven years old, and I remember playing with her. Who could imagine that anything like that might happen to the offspring of the famous Saqqūli-hajji! The Chinese⁴⁶ used to buy children for slavery, raise them, use them for hard work, and marry them to

45 Aqsuat – regional center of the Tarbaghatay region, East Kazakhstan Oblast.

46 Maybe Dungans.

one another. Later, Zipash's parents found her, but unfortunately, when he wanted to take his daughter away, he was severely punished by the Chinese authorities and imprisoned.

According to witnesses and my parents in those years of 1932–1933, many Kazakhs survived thanks to the charity activity (*sawapti is*) of one wealthy Uyghur Muslim. Having heard about the crowds of starving people arriving in China, about the deaths they met on the way, this man arranged a kind of first-aid camp or station on the frontier with Kazakhstan, on the Tarbaghatay mountain pass. His people delivered an uninterrupted supply of food there. Tired and exhausted refugees were provided with hot food, assistance, and peace there. Unfortunately, nobody remembers that man's name. Refugees used to beseech God to give them the strength to reach *Müräwít* safe and sound. Nobody knows what the word *Müräwít* meant – it might have been a name of the person⁴⁷ or it might have been a name of a locality. Whatever it had been, that person, a real Muslim who took pity on the Kazakhs, deserved great admiration and reverence. May Allah bless him! Inshallah, I think his soul is resting in the center of paradise (*Jannatting törinde shighar*).

Of course, there was profound shock caused by starvation, undermined health, lost relatives and children – all these misfortunes can never be forgotten and the adults used to talk about those severe hardships and events at the family table. It wasn't safe to speak about the famine openly; the Party and the authorities disapproved of it. Newspapers, books, schools, and institutes never touched upon this problem. That's why the younger generation, even the children of those who had experienced the famine, didn't have any clear idea about it, and they didn't take seriously their parents' and grandparents' recollections. So, the grandson of the earlier-mentioned Aman-ata (the famine victim), a "Soviet" Kazakh, a Komsomol member, a student of a medical institute, and our relative Khamit once said to his parents: "Why do you keep harping on about that famine? Why didn't you eat at least some bread?!" Later, it turned into an anecdote based on a real story. In fact, it's not a subject for reproach or reproof. How elusive the memory is! Or have our descendants become *mankurts*?⁴⁸

I had a tenacious memory; besides, I could listen to people, the elderly. That's why I remember some facts and stories. In fact, of course, I have also missed most of the information. It's right that historians collect materials about the past and restore the tragic history of those years. I watched the film *Titanic* on TV. The catastrophe experienced in the thirties in Kazakhstan reminds me of that hair-raising shipwreck in which very few people were rescued. My destiny, like those of my contemporaries (*zamandastar*), bears a strong resemblance to the fate of that American film character – the woman – who managed to survive, reached old age, and told people everything she had witnessed.

47 This may be misspelled "Murauddin."

48 Mankurts – human beings without memory. From the legend used by the Kyrgyz writer Chingiz Aitmatov in his novel *Burannyi polustanok* (**Buran Wayside Station**).

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him!) said in a hadith that longevity was Allah's gift for reconsidering your actions, praying a lot, expressing regret for the mistakes you've made, etc. Despite my old age, illness, and other problems, I was given an opportunity to pray to Allah, recite Namaz, and beg for Allah's mercy for the souls of our ancestors, relatives, husband, and lost compatriots. I beg Allah to bestow his blessing on our descendants, the nation, and all Muslims. Like other old people, I live on my memories. I particularly value the happy (in my opinion) episodes of my childhood and adolescence: white snowdrifts of Bighash village, our small kolkhoz "Aqtoghan," the green mountain *jäyläu* (meaning summer pasture), the Bazar stream, my parents' caring eyes...

I sometimes hear or read in newspapers various arguments in favor of and against the Soviet power. In my opinion, any sensible and honest person would admit that the Soviet power caused much more harm than good. What is more precious than human life? Millions of human lives were ruined! What is the consequence of atheism and religions interdiction? Even my husband, though his father and grandfather were mullahs, abjured religion, and tried to persuade me to do the same thing. He had become addicted to Communism. A trip to the Lenin Mausoleum in Moscow became a "hajj" (pilgrimage to Mecca) for him, literature on Party activities – his "Quran." Fortunately, in his older age, he started realizing his mistakes. What else can be said? It is necessary to remember the Famine and other catastrophes. One should thank Allah that the new generation of Kazakhs live in peace and abundance, that in our independent country we have a president who is respected all over the world. As to Russia and the Russians, of course, everybody is well aware of the evil done by them. But we shouldn't hold grievances against them; only Allah can judge. Let bygones be bygones. The past should be forgiven. Among the Russians, there are a lot of good and kind people. My late father would say that it was wrong to call all the Russians unfaithful (*kafirs*), because the human soul is a mystery; moreover, it is a nation with its own Sacred Writings (*kitabiya khaliq*). In my husband Däwítbek's life, there was an extraordinary episode: during the Battle of Stalingrad under the whiz of bullets and bomb explosions, running by a wounded soldier, he heard an appeal for help: "Water, water..." Having found that there was no water in his own bowl, my husband ran back for water and gave it to the wounded soldier. Then, the dying Russian soldier thanked him and said: "If it ever happens, I wish you to be lightly wounded in your left hand." It was a miracle: my husband was in fact lightly wounded in his left hand and was soon demobilized.

I myself was fond of Russian literature – Pushkin, Tolstoy, Sholokhov, and others (I worked in a school library as a librarian, and later as an accountant in a district savings bank). In Aqsuat, there lived the Vishniakov family. They had good and friendly relations with the Kazakhs and spoke fluent Kazakh. Their mother, Ekaterina Vishniakova, taught me sewing and cooking, and shared her various recipes. We were good friends; I liked her and even called her "mama."

In the early seventies, we left the village in East Kazakhstan Oblast for the town of Taldıqorghan (the older children studied in Almaty and they didn't want to return; besides, it was my husband's dream to move to a town). In Taldıqorghan, our neighbors were of various nationalities. Our neighbor Liuba was a Korean, a very kind and sympathetic woman. I also communicated with an Uzbek mullah's family. Kari-aka (his surname was Rasulov) was a highly respected mullah in Taldıqorghan. He was a wonderful and sacred person, and I considered him to be my spiritual advisor during the Soviet era. His wife Sara was an Uyghur, a kind and generous woman.

Kari-aka received a higher religious education in Bukhara. In 1937, he was repressed as a mullah and a son of a famous Uzbek *ishan*.⁴⁹ Having been imprisoned for ten years in the far north, he was exiled to Kazakhstan. The mullah used to tell his close friends that being exiled to Jetısu,⁵⁰ he once heard from old Kazakhs that the sacred Eskeldı-ata and Balpiq-ata had been buried in that land. After a hard working day, pressing the Quran to his heart, he went alone to Eskeldı-ata's *mazar* (tomb). He recited the Quran, prayed to Allah, and fell asleep. Here, he interrupted his story. But it was clear that holy spirits supported him and Allah blessed him, as he became a highly respected and well-to-do person in an alien land. He was visited secretly even by regional Party committee heads asking for favors. When he died, a lot of people attended his funeral ceremony in order to pay their respects to him. In spite of the fact that he was an Uzbek, not a Kazakh, there were so many people that the traffic was blocked. Neither Allah nor *aruaqs* divide people according to their nationality. That's why one should be fair. However, it is a must for everybody to love the Kazakh land, know the Kazakh language, and remember and revere their ancestors. The Kazakhs shouldn't be presumptuous; they should always remember the grief and destitution of the past; they shouldn't transgress or squander. This may be the lesson of our history.

January 2011, Almaty

49 *Ishan* – a religious teacher in Central Asia and follower of Sufism (Islamic mysticism and asceticism).

50 *Jetısu* – Semirechie, or southeast Kazakhstan (now Almaty Oblast with its center, Taldıqorghan).