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THE KALMYKS IN AMERICA 1952-62

By ARASH BORMANSHINOV

AMERICA has admirably fulfilled its traditional rôle as a land of hope and promise, a haven to those who seek an escape from oppression or homelessness, in the case of the Kalmyks who, this year, celebrate the tenth anniversary of their arrival. In 1951 the first group of Kalmyk refugees were brought to America through the collective efforts of the United States Government and private agencies. These families were followed by others who had spent the years since the war in various displaced persons' camps in West Germany and elsewhere in Europe.

But this is the end of a long Odyssey, the origins of which go back to the heart of Inner Asia and the early seventeenth century. The ancestors of the Kalmyks were originally part of the Oirat people, a West Mongolian group who lived as nomadic shepherds in the Dzungarian steppes of the Inner Asian heartland between the Altai and Tien Shan Mountains. Their language is a West Mongolian dialect which together with Khalkha Mongolian and Buriat forms the Mongolian branch of the Altaic language family. They are Lamaists, adhering to a form of Buddhism which is also practised by the Tibetans. They recognize the Dalai Lama as their spiritual leader. Thus through language, religion and also many traditions they are related to other Mongolian peoples in Outer and Inner Mongolia and Sinkiang, the extreme north-western province of China.

In the early part of the seventeenth century, an expansion of the Oirat peoples occurred when several of the component tribes moved westward, reaching the Lower Volga region of south Russia in the 1630s. Later, other Oirat groups joined them and the entire group became known as the Kalmyks. The flight of a large portion of this group back to their original homeland occurred in the latter part of the eighteenth century; but after a disastrous trek, only a fraction reached Dzungaria. Those who remained recognized the authority of the central Russian government. Gradually, their way of life began to change. While retaining their language, religion and customs and their national identity as a people, many Kalmyks began to settle on the land and became agriculturalists. Many learned Russian as a second language and attended Russian schools as well as sharing in many of the customs of their Russian and other neighbours. Some served in the Imperial Army with distinction. It is well known that two Kalmyk cavalry regiments with the Imperial Army entered Paris triumphantly after the defeat of Napoleon.

During the Russian Revolution and the Civil War which followed, the majority of the Kalmyk people actively participated on the side of the anti-Communist Russian armies. The defeat of these armies in 1920 caused some of the Kalmyks together with thousands of other people to flee Russia. After a brief sojourn in Turkey, they dispersed into Yugoslavia, Bulgaria,

France and Czechoslovakia to set up new homes. In November, 1920, the majority of the Kalmyk population, who had remained in Russia, were allowed like other non-Russian nationalities to form their own autonomous region; and in October, 1935, this region became the Kalmyk Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. During World War II their land was occupied by the invading German armies. After their retreat, the Kalmyks were accused of collaboration with the Germans; their Republic was dissolved and on December 28, 1943, the entire population was forcibly exiled to the underdeveloped areas of Siberia and Soviet Central Asia. This exile, which was the cause of much misery and many losses, was terminated early in 1957 when virtually all Kalmyks were allowed to return and regain the status of an autonomous province (*oblast'*). In July of the following year it was elevated for the second time to the status of an A.S.S.R. (autonomous Soviet socialist republic).

Towards the end of World War II many Kalmyks, for reasons beyond their control, found themselves in the southern part of what is now the German Federal Republic. Some had been forcibly deported from Russia to Germany and compelled to work there as manual labourers or farm workers; others had fled to Germany from the advancing Soviet armies in Eastern Europe.

When the war ended these Kalmyks, together with numerous other national groups, were taken under the care of U.N.R.R.A. and later of I.R.O., and located in displaced persons' camps in Bavaria. After many countries had refused to accept them as immigrants, on the grounds that they were representatives of an Asian race, the United States Congress finally passed a bill in 1951 allowing the immigration of the Kalmyk people to America. Consequently, the International Refugee Organization in Geneva allocated a large fund to finance the immigration and subsequent resettlement of the Kalmyks. The entire procedure was carried out by two American charitable and church organizations, which agreed to co-sponsor this enormous undertaking—namely, the Church World Service of the National Council of the Churches of Christ and the Tolstoy Foundation, both of which have headquarters in New York City.

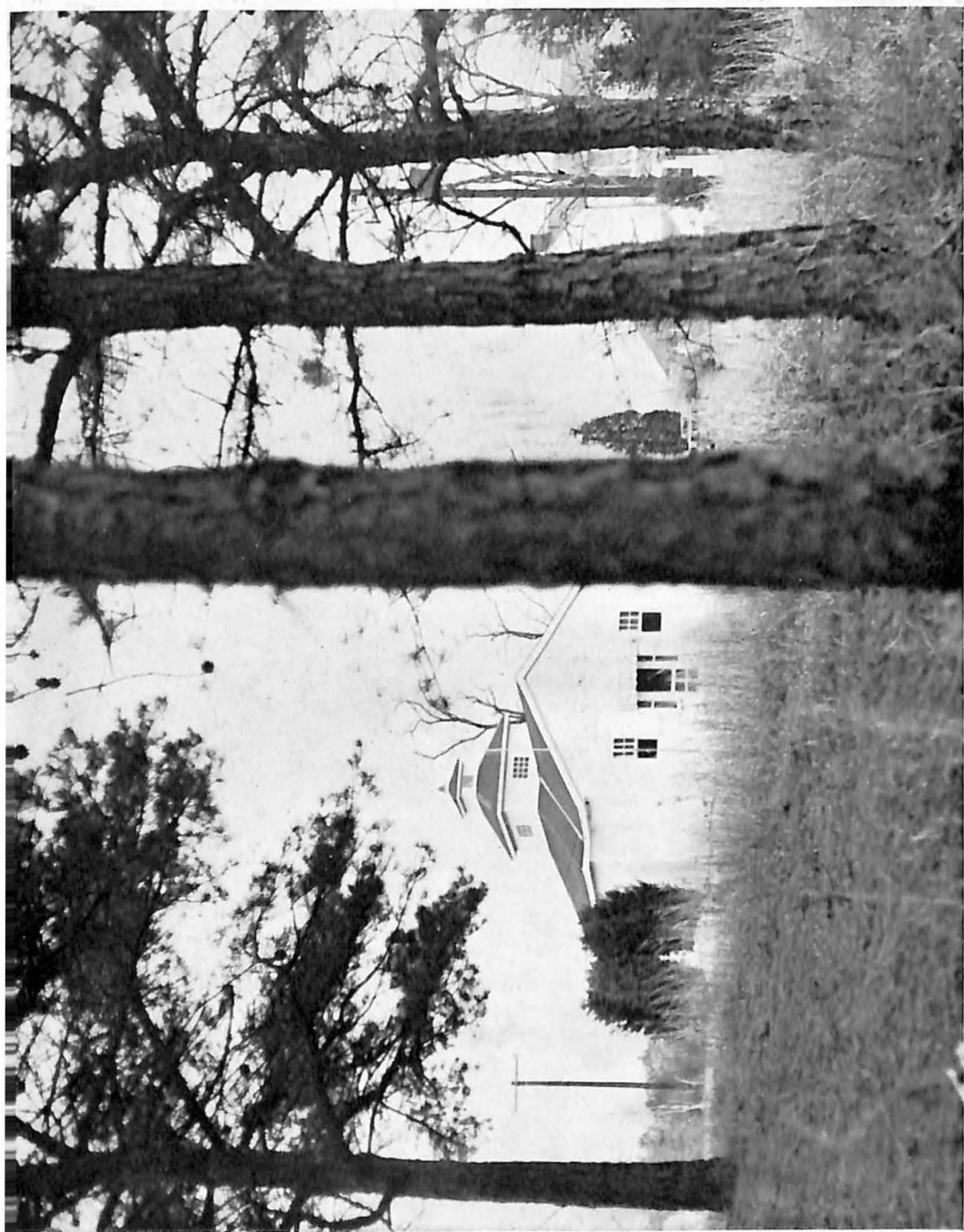
As a result of this co-operation the Kalmyks were able to settle down in Philadelphia and in New Jersey in the following locations: Freewood Acres, near Farmingdale (a small rural community some seventy miles north-east of Philadelphia), Paterson and New Brunswick. They number in all some 700 to 750 persons. The majority of them are in Philadelphia, in the low-income north-eastern section.

During the past ten years, the Kalmyks have been gradually adapting themselves to their new homeland, its way of life, its culture and its traditions, and at the same time they have been able to maintain many of their own traditions. They have built three Buddhist churches in New Jersey in addition to one in Philadelphia. These churches are the centres for the celebration of the three major religious festivals of the year: *Tsagan Sar*, the New Year, *Ürüs-Ova* and *Zul*, the Feast of Lights, as well as other religious occasions.

The Kalmyks have continued to celebrate marriage in the traditional way, which involves a complex of ceremonies and formal visits. First there



NEAR LAKEWOOD, N.J., LAMASERY. BAKSHA ZODBA BURULDINOV, ONE OF ITS TWO PRIESTS, SITS AND PRAYS



KALMYK BUDDHIST TEMPLE NEAR LAKEWOOD, NEW JERSEY, U.S.A. ON THE RIGHT IS THE COMMUNITY CENTRE
OF THE KALMYK SOCIETY

is a series of visits by the groom's relatives to the house of the bride for formal discussion of the suitability of the proposed marriage and then later a discussion of the preparations for the wedding day, the necessary food items, drinks and gifts to be brought by the groom's relatives to the bride's house, etc. Then on the wedding day, determined by the priests as the most propitious for the couple, two celebrations take place. The first one is at the home of the bride. Then the bride and all the wedding presents are brought to the house of the groom. Some time later the bride's relatives—except for her father, who must traditionally remain at home—arrive, and a second celebration takes place, at which time the bride has her hair braided into two plaits and she puts on the traditional Kalmyk dress for a married woman, the *tsegdig*, and is now recognized as being married in the true Kalmyk tradition. A formal reception, given by the bride's relatives in her honour, usually takes place the evening before the wedding day. A short time after the wedding, on a day determined by the priests, formal visits by the parents and relatives of the bride to the groom's house and then by the groom's relatives to the house of the bride end the cycle. These occasions are a time of much gaiety and happiness. Friends and relatives join together to celebrate the happy occasion. The Kalmyk bride comes to her new home with every kind of household item, including complete sets of furniture, dishes, linens and appliances. All her relatives and friends have given these items as gifts, for it is important to help the new couple get established.

The extent of these gifts is a reflection of the prosperity which the Kalmyks have achieved through their industriousness and hard work in the short period of their settlement in America. They are employed in a rather wide range of industries, mostly as labourers and assembly-line workers. Only a few of them are skilled or professional people. The women, in most cases, are absorbed by the vast garment industry. Many men have been active in New Jersey's housing construction. Others, however, bought chicken farms in the Lakewood-Rova Farms area in New Jersey and seem to be successful in their new business enterprise. The Kalmyks own their own homes, which in many cases have been built by the owners with the help of friends and relatives. Automobiles, new furniture, television sets, washing machines, etc., belong to practically every Kalmyk family now. The Kalmyk people recognize the importance of education. A number of their youngsters have graduated from high school and have gone on to college. A few post-graduate students have obtained advanced degrees at leading universities and are now engaged in teaching and research.

In order to maintain the Kalmyk language and Buddhist Lamaist teachings, a Sunday school has been set up in Philadelphia, under the guidance of the Society for the Promotion of Kalmyk Culture. This society, organized in 1954 to promote interest and research in Kalmyk studies by Kalmyks and Americans as well, also maintains a library of Kalmyk materials in Philadelphia which now contains rich collections of literature on Kalmyk subjects.

The Kalmyks are very happy to have been able to find a haven where they can enjoy freedom and equality of rights and be able to combine the good things of Kalmyk and American culture into a satisfactory life for themselves.

