A FATHER'S DARING TREK - A TIBETAN MAN TAKES HIS SIX-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER ON A PERICOLOUS JOURNEY THROUGH THE WORLD'S HIGHEST, HARSHEST MOUNTAINS TO GIVE HER A FUTURE FREE FROM CHINESE RULE

Published by World Tibet Network News - Friday, January 05, 1996

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AFTER A WEEK'S MARCH IN THE bitter cold and whisper-thin air of the Himalayas, the Tibetan father and daughter, Kelsang and Yangdol (not their real names), thought they had reached freedom. From the top of the 5,716-m-high Nangapa La, a pass on the southern border of Chinese-occupied Tibet, a peaceful life in exile seemed mere steps away. But the long trip down from the pass would be just as difficult as the way up. Still they pressed on.

For Tibetans the path to freedom is fraught with barriers both physical and emotional. To escape Chinese rule they must decide that life as a refugee is better than life deprived of culture, language, religion--and most of all, independence. Only then can they embark on the more obviously arduous stage: the trek across the border patrolled by the Chinese military, through the Himalayas, into Nepal and finally to Dharamsala, the hill town in northern India where the Tibetan spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, set up a government-in-exile in 1959. Thousands of Tibetans choose to risk this path every year. This is the remarkable story--and photographic record--of one such journey.

Last March, when Swiss photographer Manuel Bauer first met Kelsang in Lhasa, Tibet's capital, the 46-year-old father had decided that his six-year-old daughter would be best educated in Dharmsala's Tibetan Children's Village, a school run by the Dalai Lama's sister. Though Bauer spoke no Tibetan, he used gestures to persuade Kelsang to let him join father and daughter on their trip across the mountains.

Carrying papers authorizing a visit only to western Tibet, the three left Lhasa one morning in late March, arranging a ride on the back of a truck. Delayed by snowstorms for six days at Shigatse, they then got a lift to Tingri, where they began the long march on foot across the Himalayas. To the south stood the peaks of Mount Everest and Cho Oyu; beside them was a huge notch in the sky: Nangapa La, the way to freedom.

Even on the barren tundra at the base of the mountains, dangers abounded. In the distance along the road the group could see--and perhaps be seen by--other human figures. Fearing they were Chinese soldiers who might ask too many questions, the three ducked into small depressions on the ground until the men passed. Already rattled by the constant hide-and-seek, the determined trio hiked higher and higher, battling frostbite and dehydration, plummeting temperatures and whipping winds. They trod the icy terrain in near silence, sometimes 14 hours a day, often too tired to stop and eat. "They kept me going," says Bauer, "their story, sacrifice and destiny." After 12 harrowing days the group had crossed Nangapa La and made it down to Namche Bazaar, a Nepalese village near Mount Everest. At last the worst was over.

They flew by helicopter to Katmandu, Nepal's capital, where expatriates at the Tibetan Reception Center arranged a bumpy three-day bus ride to Delhi, and then another bus to Dharamsala. Father and daughter celebrated the journey's end at a reception with some 50 other newly arrived refugees, many of whom had made much the same trek. Three long weeks after leaving Lhasa, Yangdol finally met the Dalai Lama and with his blessing began a new life--at home in exile.