

### III. Punsalmaagiin Ochirbat, First President of Mongolia : Interview conducted on June 12, 2005

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### III. Punsalmaagiin Ochirbat, First President of Mongolia

[Interview conducted on June 12, 2005]

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#### 1. My Birth Place

**Yuki Konagaya (YK):** We are very pleased to meet with the former first President of Mongolia, Punsalmaagiin Ochirbat. Could you speak about your early years and tell us when and where you were born, about your father, mother, brothers, and sisters?

**Punsalmaagiin Ochirbat (PO):** I was born in 1942 in Zavkhan *aimag*, Tudevtei *sum* in the so-called Bunkhant area, so named because there were seven or eight burial mounds from the thirteenth century found there.

My father was a man called Gonsin Gendenjav. He was a major lama in the Galuutain (Goose) lamasery and was learned in astrology, but he married my mother as a layman. My mother was called Tsogtin Punsalmaa, and she came from a very large family with thirteen children. I was the eldest son, and my father died when I was five years old, and my younger brother was about a year old. We lived in the countryside with my mother for three years, and then she and I moved to Ulaanbaatar because it was difficult in that faraway place with two small children. My younger brother was then adopted by my

father's younger brother who was also a lama at the Galuutain lamasery, and I have not seen my brother since then. Before my father died, he instructed me to become educated, and the only place to become book-learned was at the Bogd lamasery which, at that time, was the name for Ulaanbaatar.

**YK:** How did you move to Bogd Khüree (or Ulaanbaatar)? Was such a move easy?

**PO:** Yes, we went by camel caravan. Two families went with us when we moved to Bogd Khüree. We had many herds, a *ger*, and all sorts of stuff to load onto a camel along with food for the road. We also needed money to go to Ulaanbaatar. Thus, we had to drive many sheep to the area. I rode in the basket on the camel.

**YK:** Did you sit on top of the basket?

**PO:** Of course. Someone always sat on top of the baskets. At the time, I was eight years old. We spent July in the area for Naadam, and at the beginning of September, we went on to Ulaanbaatar. My mother's youngest brother, to whom at the time my mother was close, went on to Ulaanbaatar first, and we were on the road for more than a month. I was so young at the time that I had no idea what was going on. To get to Ulaanbaatar, one went through Zavkhan *aimag* and the Khangai ridge, and then we had to cross the famous, raging Chulootin River in Arkhangai *aimag*. Forging this river, with its raging current, was an unforgettable feat in part because camels do not like water. Our camel left the shore and just about reached the middle of the river when it made a terrific noise, and we knew it was straining. My mother rode the horse across, and I shouted in fear: "Mother is riding the horse!" Then the loaded camel stopped with me on top, and I could see mother faraway crossing the river. She called out to me to stay atop the basket, and though I was worried about her, small as I was, I concentrated on the camel if only for my mother's sake. But we made it and went on to Ulaanbaatar. And henceforth, we crossed many of life's rivers worrying about each other.

Our mother was a young woman of thirty-three. My brother and I used to sleep in my father's *deel*, and I told him not to pee in it. Several years later, my mother remarried, and I had five brothers. Dondovsambuu lived in the country as a herder. When my favorite brother reached thirteen, he fell off a horse and was killed while pole-catching horses for a rich family. Another brother, Ulaankhuu, now serves as the director of the Blood Center. Another brother, Jargal, is the central manager of "Sky Plaza," (a shopping center—trans), and my youngest brother, Ochirkhuag, is a driver for the "Boroo Gold" company and the Japanese firm "Komatsu." That's the story with my brothers!

## 2. Ulaanbaatar

**YK:** What was Ulaanbaatar like when you first arrived?

**PO:** When I first arrived in Ulaanbaatar from the countryside, I was like a lost child. There were so many people and cars, which I had hardly ever seen, since we had no cars in the countryside. And in Ulaanbaatar, you could be run over by a car. And the herds were terrified by the cars—it was hard to imagine all of this. School had already begun in Ulaanbaatar when we arrived, but I did not go to school that year. I entered the primary school at the age of nine. During that time, some children started the first grade at age fifteen. Our *ger* was in the “high compound” to the northwest, which is now where the Fine Arts Museum is located. On the east side was an apothecary shop and behind this was a fine bakery. Nearby were some *khoshoos* and our *ger*.

At the time, the so-called radio was a black circular dish which sort of talked. When we children first heard it, we kept looking around and behind our backs to see who was talking. I couldn’t eat the potatoes in Ulaanbaatar since they were either sickly sweet or tasted of the soil. The vegetables also included radishes and carrots, which were the sweetest, and we children ate them raw. I had a friend who did that as well. In 1932, a school, with eight classes, was set up in Amgalanbaatar city, and I was in the first grade there in 1951.

**YK:** Did you know people at that time?

**PO:** Here is how I knew some people. My mother lived among people, and I started school with children on August 25th when mother and I went to register. Generally, a father took his child to school, with the child holding a flower and a leaf, wearing new clothes, and looking very smart. However, those happy days had gone. My mother and I both went to enroll me in school. Many children assembled in front of a long table, with a bookkeeper and several teachers. One teacher came close to me, and I said “We have come to register!” Another teacher, with a serious look, said “Give me your family name! Can you tell us your family name?” I was silent when asked my father’s name, so I was asked if I had a mother and what was her name. I responded “Punsalmaa,” so I was “Punsalmaagiin Ochirbat” when I registered for primary school. There were two reasons for registering in the name of Punsalmaa, which included that my father had been a lama, and that it was forbidden to mention his name after his death. I wondered to myself why I could not speak my father’s name to my teacher, even though tradition held that one cannot mention a dead person’s name. It was difficult to tell children the truth concerning a lama since it was said that the so-called “yellow feudals” or the clerical nobility were regarded as the class enemy. In sum, as I understood those times, there was not a free cultural atmosphere during the socialist era. Then we went off to school where the children were to be well-

behaved and where it was considered “special” to study.

**YK:** Were you a bit undisciplined?

**PO:** Yes, a bit—a bit. How could I be otherwise?

**YK:** What was Amgalanbaatar city like at that time?

**PO:** Amgalanbaatar city was located on the south side of Ulaanbaatar as you know and was called the “Amgalanbaatar Settlement.” Some time ago, Chinese traders lived there, and there are several nice temples. General Sükhbaatar was born there; his father, “The White *Deel*” Damdin lived there, and Sükhbaatar worked at the so-called “People’s Model Club.” There was also a Mongolian theater from which many celebrities arose, making Amgalanbaatar a very interesting place within Ulaanbaatar. On the east side of Ulaanbaatar was another interesting place, “The Red Barracks,” where the military leader lived. At that time, however, my biggest dream was to grow up, finish school by fifteen or sixteen, have a profession, and take care of my mother. Such thoughts never left me. It is clear, then, that as a boy I loved and respected my mother dearly.

There was generally a test given to advance from seventh to eighth grade, but our class missed out on that and did not take the test. So the eighth and ninth grades were given a test to move into the tenth class. Therefore, I finished high school in 1960 at school no.14. From there, I went to Leningrad in the USSR to study at the Mining Institute.

### **3. “A Son of a Nation Returns with Knowledge from Distant Lands which even the Wild Geese Cannot Reach.”**

**YK:** Did you choose to go to that school?

**PO:** I did not choose to go to that school and had hoped to become a journalist and to take the journalism course at Moscow’s Lomonosov State University. But that was not to be. At the time, the Central Committee of the Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Party (hereafter CC/MPRP) made it clear that “male students had to study hard and become educated professionals who had a mastery of mining.” Thus, I went to Leningrad to study mining. At that time, children took the exams for the “special schools” which would enable them to study abroad, particularly in the USSR. Many youths hoped that they would be lucky enough to study at a Russian university and become proficient in a profession. The children of the ordinary herder or worker had a greater possibility to study in the USSR without payment during socialist times.

My mining school was founded in 1773 and was one of the world’s first technical schools. And it was a very good school. In 1965, I completed my education there as an engineer and returned in 1990 to do research for my doctorate in science. The Russian engineers had the highest level of education

in the world, although the number now studying there has decreased. Leningrad has a long and unique history and is a beautiful city. For me, it is the finest of all Russian cities with friendly people of good character who are quite unlike the Muscovites. There are many places to go in Leningrad with its lovely streets and squares, huge harbor, and historic buildings. Tsar Peter the Great made his base there and called it his “window on the west.” After the October 1917 Revolution, V. I. Lenin moved the capital to Moscow, but Leningrad kept its title as “the northern capital.”

When I was a student in 1965, my wedding feast was held there. My wife, Sh. Tselvelmaa, and I had attended the same middle school; when I was in the eighth class she was in the fifth class. We now have two daughters—the oldest, Ochirmaa, went to middle school in Moscow and is now an engineer/economist who lives in Moscow where she works as a secretary to the Mongolian Ambassador managing issues relating to trade. Our younger daughter, Oyuma Beejingiin, has finished university and works as a director at the Ivanhoe Mining Company.

#### **4. The Chief Engineer Reaches a Government Ministry Step by Step**

**I. Lkhagvasuren (IL):** Where did you first work after you graduated?

**PO:** When I graduated, I went to the Ministry of Heavy Industry where I was responsible for issues related to the specialized work of mining. At the time, Paavangiin Damdin was the Minister who directed the Ministry of Heavy Industry. In 1960, P. Damdin had been appointed to that Ministry at the age of twenty-nine. Until that time, there had been few professionals and the Sharyn Gol coal mine, which was active, was staffed primarily by Soviet professionals. Mongolian engineers were, therefore, needed. In January, 1967, I was appointed the chief engineer and worked with Michael Adamovich Navasardiants who was the Russian mining engineer.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Mongolian mining became increasingly active. Nalaikh was modernized as a coal mining area. Aduun Chuluun developed as an open-cast coal mine, and coal mines were developed in nearly all of the *aimags*. I worked at Sharyn Gol for almost six years, and then at the Tulsh energy industry in 1972, where I was appointed Deputy Minister of Geology. At the time, Mr. Miatav Peljay was the Minister. I then left the Tulsh industrial ministry to take over the whole energy industry and organize its geology department.

**YK:** At that time, were certain regulations followed in appointing the Deputy Minister? Were issues raised by the CC/MPRP?

**PO:** Yes. People certainly spoke up at the meeting of the Politburo and the

deputy members directed by the General Secretary leader Yu. Tsedenbal. A deputy member was put in charge of us, and Mr. Yu Tsedenbal, having become acquainted with everyone, said: “So, give us your autobiography in Russian!” And as I have given you my autobiography, I did then as well—but in Russian!

I first met Mr. Tsedenbal in 1971. I was the chief engineer at the Sharyn Gol coal mine and was a representative to the Sixteenth Great Khural. The industrial authorities selected the best workers as representatives, and those who were chosen commanded great respect. I was a Party representative from Darkhan city, and I took my appointment very seriously. Mr. Yu. Tsedenbal had, at that time, a very good reputation, and those of us who worked in industry were fortunate to meet him. At the same time, such encounters could be frightening, and meeting such a famous person could make one anxious. Not just for me but for everyone.

**YK:** How many years did you work at Tulsh as a Geology Minister?

**PO:** For four years as Deputy, though in 1976 I divided my time at Tulsh between the energy and geology ministries, both of which had been newly organized. I was responsible for issues relating to electrical energy, geological expeditions, non-ferrous metals, and the coal industry. In the mid-1970s, Mongolian industry made great progress and as our needs for electricity grew, more power stations were built, and mining became more productive. Darkhan and Ulaanbaatar were connected by a high tension electrical current network and provided heat for many apartments in Ulaanbaatar. Each *aimag* began to increase its demand for energy. Ulaanbaatar developed a new source of energy which was connected to the Soviet Siberian system and required quick decisions regarding the trading of this energy.

On the other hand, the work of a geological expedition took on a different quality, including the exploration for Mongolia’s raw materials, as well as the identification of the stocks of the nation’s resources for the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, where members of countries worked together in presenting their demands to the USSR. I was responsible for expeditions that searched for minerals, and I was ultimately appointed the Minister of the Joint Ministries of Energy and Fuel, and once again I attended meetings of the Politburo.

**YK:** Did you offer your biography in Russian once again?

**PO:** No, I didn’t. Mr. Yu. Tsedenbal had come to know each member of the Politburo. Then Ambassador M. Peljee and I went to Mr. Yu. Tsedenbal’s office where D. Molomjamts, the Secretary of the Politburo/CC/MPRP, was sitting. I was not very important, so I sat quite far away from them until Mr. Yu. Tsedenbal said: “sit over here” and beckoned me toward a free chair. I had

no choice but to sit down near Mr. Peljee. One had to be careful not to make a mistake in official decorum.

Mr. Yu. Tsedenbal then discussed the need for a new ministry and said, shortly: “Mr. Ochirbat, I wish to discuss appointing you Minister of the Fuel and Energy Ministry. What are your thoughts about this?”

I raised questions about many urgent issues I knew little about and went on to say that organizing an energy ministry was the right thing to do, but that I did not think that I was qualified to take such an important post, since I was a mining man, and neither that knowledgeable nor a professional in the field of energy. Mr. Yu. Tsedenbal answered: “You may not know one particular branch of an assignment, but you know the general area well. In addition, you are a young man and what you do not know you can learn quickly. Just get to work—I will tell the Politburo, which is about to meet, about your appointment. Can you wait?”

Twenty to thirty minutes later, the Politburo began its meeting. Mr. Yu. Tsedenbal opened the meeting and began to set up the new ministries. He said: “I propose Comrade P. Ochirbat from the Fuel Ministry to also be the Minister of Energy. Are there any questions?” There were none from the assembled members, as all hands were raised in confirmation. However, Mr. Peljee asked a lot of questions, mentioning that at the time the socialist countries in the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance had the goal of encouraging exploration in new areas including Erdenet. Then, we were both confirmed.

## 5. The Energy Ministry Is Developed

**YK:** Henceforth, you were received as a genuine Minister. Was the work of thoroughly organizing your new Ministry difficult?

**PO:** Yes, it was because there was always something new that had to be done. I was the first Mongolian general engineer in the Sharyn Gol coal mine, which had a capacity of one million tons of coal and had at its disposal the “Belaz” machines, capable of carrying forty-two tons, and a railroad which the industry could also use. But Mongolian industry was quite undeveloped so everything from the technology to the workers was new. No professional with mining experience had mastered the technology. One driver, a powerful man, had taken a brief course and mastered, with difficulty, the curriculum, but it was essential that he could also repair any equipment that was defective or damaged. The workers and their bosses, as well as the technical engineers, were all young and inexperienced, as they had recently finished school. So, it took a great deal of effort by the people directing the work to provide the necessary coal to the central region.

The government paid special attention to this project, and disputes arose

if we were behind schedule. The deputy minister handled such problems, and although he had been to university, there was always someone higher up the chain of command. The Minister was not a bad person but this deputy minister did the “real” work. It was difficult setting up this new Ministry, but I worked on it for nine years and was most experienced. Later, I was made Director of the Foreign Economic Committee.

**YK:** What was this work all about? Was this quite a separate department?

**PO:** Yes, it was a different department, and there was a reason for this. I had given leader Yu. Tsendenbal a petition at the end of 1982 pointing out that a Minister must have some freedom, which in my case meant completing my doctorate at the Leadership Institute in Moscow, which was run by the Council of Mutual Economic Assistance.

**IL:** Did you raise the issue yourself? Did holding the position of a Minister prevent further study?

**PO:** Oh, there were all sorts of reasons for this opposition. Anyway, Mr. Yu. Tsendenbal refused to grant my request and asked me if I was concerned with my health. If that was the case, he told me to take care of myself and continue my work. Then, in 1985, my request was approved, and I celebrated the New Year with a new work appointment.

**YK:** Was a new committee organized?

**PO:** “No, it was not a new one. B. Saldan was the leader but, for reasons of health, he could not continue working and was sent to Hungary as an Ambassador. I was relieved of my job in Energy and moved further up the social-political ladder, spending most of my time abroad rather than in the coal mines or in the electric power stations. In the mines, a person could not wear a white shirt, so I was teased as I left my blue collar job for a white collar position.

## **6. The Events of August, 1984**

**IL:** Did you participate in the extraordinary work of the Eighth All Khural when the issues were raised against Mr. Yu. Tsendenbal and when he was relieved of his position on the CC/MPRP? Could you please clarify these events?

**PO:** I took part in all of the above. In 1984, I was working as a Minister in the Ministry of Fuel and Energy and was a member of the CC/MPRP and a deputy to the People’s Great Khural. I had been appointed Minister by the government and had been selected deputy three times by the People’s Great Khural. At the time there were no democratic elections. My name was put forth in the Sixtieth District for CC/MPRP, and I was one of two people nominated and was opposed by a “lobbyist.” I was the second nomination, but

the two of us were praised to the skies, and it was said that “P. Ochirbat is the best man!” because our district had not nominated the other fellow who really was not my rival. So everyone in my district participated in the election and voted for me. Each district had to report that 99.9% of the people had participated in the election, and if only 97.9% had voted, punishments were to be had and the government demanded to know “why there wasn’t full participation in the election.” In fact, the simple answer was that so many possible voters were herders. Still, some districts did research on the question. Some people went to the *gers*, urgently saying “You are in your *ger* on election day! Go out and participate in the election!” In some areas the government was not particularly active or there was a lot of drinking. On election day you were invited in to the *gers* to encourage people to go out and vote but often folks would say “The election does not matter!” as they went about their lives. However, the law stated that everyone over eighteen had to vote, which is the case nowadays. In special cases, the right to vote could be revoked. Sometimes there were not enough pens or pencils to go around. On a sheet of paper the name, for example, Punsalmaagiin Ochirbat, would be written, and the voter had to circle my name and fold the ballot and put it in the box. If someone did not wish to vote for a particular candidate, the name was crossed out. My name was not crossed out and received 99.99% or, really, 100% of the votes. Our system of voting was quite easy and because of that I was elected to the People’s Great Khural three times, and by 1990, four times.

The 1990 election was more focused and competitive than previous ones. At the time, seventy-eight people competed for seats in the MPRP and the government. In earlier times socialist lobbyists were praised, but such was not the case in democratic times when more competitive elections were more highly regarded. Not to enter an election was looked down upon, and the candidates praised themselves with such words as “I am really a fine candidate, no one is better; I am really an outstanding person; I do such good work and am a very serious person!” and so on concluding with “So you should choose me!”

In 1990, I competed in an election to the People’s Great Khural from Sharyn Gol, although my name was put forward from the market terrace district in Ulaanbaatar. I ran from the Social Democratic Party. I heard all sorts of things from various groups like “Get out of the way!” “Go away!” “We have worked hard here, and there is a good chance that we will be elected and those from our group will win!” So, I went off to Sharyn Gol and introduced myself saying “Hi there. I am P. Ochirbat. Elect me.” I won seventy per cent of the vote. Not bad.

**IL:** How were members selected for the CC/MPRP at that time?

**PO:** They were selected at the Party's Great Khural following electoral policy, which meant that the CC/MPRP had to approve a list of names, which was then passed with few difficult questions asked. Then the Party's Great Khural gave its approval. Generally, at this time, important issues and decisions relating to the Party and the Government began in the Politburo of the CC/MPRP. If issues were not resolved, no decision could be reached. All the leaders were members of the CC. I was a member of the CC and the People's Great Khural. Any member of the government and the Party could not be a major Minister. In 1985, I was the Director of the State Committee for Foreign Economic Communication.

My attention was then focused on how our economy was dependent on aid from the Soviet Union. Before we were granted aid, however, we had to develop a plan to deal with issues of an economic and social nature. What sort of plan could be drawn up without money? Who knows? The USSR arranged everything according to Five Year Plans. In April, 1985, I was sent to Moscow to work out our plans. Members from the countries in the Council of Mutual Economic Assistance were holding an economic meeting in which I participated and became acquainted with leaders and ministers from the other socialist countries. I tried to make contact and hoped to work together with them. Mr. Gorbachev, the Soviet leader, proclaimed his policy of *perestroika* for the USSR, and attitudes were certainly changing. And what was happening in the socialist countries of Eastern Europe? Hungary and Yugoslavia had the closest economic relations with the Western capitalist countries. Neither side was bad. Poland acted quite independently. In 1956 in Hungary and in 1968 in Czechoslovakia, there was strong opposition to the governments in power. The Eastern European socialist countries were quite successful and spoke to that point. I was new to all of this, and thus was rather brave in speaking out when I said: "Excuse me! I know a lot about all of this," but I had an idea which I wished to explore.

At that time, there were two forms of economic assistance given by the USSR. The first type was called "taking the key" which meant that the Soviets built and commanded the entire project, paid for it, and handed it over to us. We did not participate in the work at all. We merely held the keys to this new industry or project. We favored a different form of aid from the Soviet Union, which meant that we would do the building, but the Russians would provide the technical know-how. We, Mongolians, favored this second type of assistance. We also needed to limit expenses and asked the Soviet professionals to help us, but their advice was expensive.

**IL:** Did foreign professionals add to your costs?

**PO:** We were responsible for all their expenses because the foreign professionals

regarded all expenses as a capital loan. When the Soviets gave us a loan, the remuneration of the professionals came out of it, leaving us with less. These specialists asked a lot of money for their expertise. So this sort of economic arrangement was not very profitable for us. In addition, the supervision we received was poor. The Soviets would say “here is a six hundred million ruble loan!” But there was no budget analysis or breakdown of expenses. We were just given an account of our overall expenses, but there was no discussion of our debt. Therefore, I introduced bookkeeping and account books for these six hundred million rubles, which I had to reckon in *tugriks*. Thus, in Ulaanbaatar, we set about working to build trust with the Soviets so that we could use more Mongol workers who at the time were involved in building three big Soviet companies. We knew that the times were changing, so we used every opportunity to work with the Soviets on foreign economic matters. New arrangements were worked out in 1987 that led to several committees uniting with the Ministry of Foreign Trade to work on supply, foreign trade, loans, and assistance and foreign economic relations, and I was appointed to this Ministry. It was in that capacity that I greeted the democratic revolution of 1990. In March of that year, the CC/MPRP and the All Khural met, and all members of the Politburo of CC/MPRP were relieved of their posts to the approval of the CC/MPRP and the All Khural. Gombojav Ochirbat was elected General Secretary of the CC/MPRP, and all the members of the Politburo were new. Since my name was the same as that of the leader of the Presidium of the People’s Great Khural, there was talk about which of us would be promoted to Prime Minister. There was also the possibility that I would be on the Presidium of the People’s Great Khural, but I didn’t ask anyone about this. Then the newly composed Politburo of the CC/MPRP met, and Sh. Gungaadorj was appointed leader to serve on the Council of Ministers, and my name was put forward as leader of the Presidium of the People’s Great Khural. Both of us were confirmed. In December, 1990 the meeting began, and the leader of the Presidium of the Mongolian People’s Democratic Assembly was selected. The MPRP followed earlier rules, and the Politburo/MPRP made decisions on issues of State that related to the duties of government bureaucracy.

**YK:** At that time was the head of the government the President?

**PO:** Yes, at that time the head of the government was not really an appointment since the MPRP made all the decisions. As in previous times, the General Secretary of the MPRP seemed to direct the CC/MPRP and the Politburo. The Presidium of the People’s Great Khural and the People’s Great Khural had the opportunity to hold onto State power. The Presidium of the People’s Great Khural had nine members who, following the rules, convened to make collective decisions.

I was appointed leader of the Presidium, but I didn't make any appointments. At the time, we met every day, but there was little time to do real work. Once we had a meeting that lasted for three days, and on the fourth the leader of the Presidium, Mr. J. Batmünkh, gave us assignments.

## **7. Mr. J. Batmünkh**

**YK:** How did Mr. J. Batmünkh actually perform in this position?

**PO:** Mr. J. Batmünkh had worked with the Soviet leaders from 1974 until August, 1984. He had handled questions raised about Mr. Yu. Tsedenbal in the Politburo of the CC/MPRP. At the time Mr. Yu. Tsedenbal was not in Ulaanbaatar but was vacationing in Moscow where he remained for about two weeks. At the end of August, there was a celebration of the victory at Khalkh Gol, for which Mr. Yu Tsedenbal was preparing during his period of rest. He was also planning his future work. Many people from the USSR were going to participate in this celebration. Mr. Yu. Tsedenbal was in Moscow when the Politburo met and decided to replace him. Also at that meeting was the Kremlin doctor Evgenii Chazov. Then, D. Molomjamts, T. Ragchaa, and Ts. Namsrai went to Moscow to meet with Mr. Yu. Tsedenbal and inform him of the Politburo's decisions. They told Mr. Yu. Tsedenbal that he was being replaced but they had to get him to "agree." In fact, there was little agreement as Tsedenbal said that he had to go to Ulaanbaatar to take part in the All Khural and express his appreciation of the Party activists. On August 23, 1984, Mr. Yu. Tsedenbal was questioned about his service, and the decision was made to replace him. He had worked as the leader of the Council of Ministers from 1952 to 1974 when he was appointed the leader of the People's Great Khural. In addition, in 1940 he had started his tenure as General Secretary of the MPRP. From 1954 to 1958 Mr. D. Damba acted as General Secretary. In August, 1984, Mr. Yu. Tsedenbal was the General Secretary of the MPRP and the leader of the People's Great Khural. It was difficult to ask Mr. Yu. Tsedenbal all these questions at the meeting of the Politburo CC/MPRP and the All Khural. At that All Khural meeting, J. Batmünkh was elected General Secretary of the CC/MPRP. At the meeting of the People's Khural in December, 1984, Mr. J. Batmünkh was elected leader of the People's Khural. I was a member of the CC/MPRP and the All Khural when Mr. Yu. Tsedenbal was questioned. This was how the meetings of the People's Khural went.

The Democratic movement originated in 1990 with hunger strikes in Sükhbaatar Square, and there were demands for the resignation of the Politburo CC/MPRP which were met. Mr. J. Batmünkh was dismissed from his post as General Secretary, and the CC/MPRP of the All Khural elected leader Gombojaviin Ochirbat as the General Secretary. With leader J. Batmünkh's

dismissal in December, 1990, the work of the People's Democratic government began.

### **8. Mr. Yu. Tsedenbal**

**PO:** Mr. Yu. Tsedenbal was very well-read and was a very hard worker. It was very hard to arrange protection for him. He was a rather strange, even difficult person and had a tough Russian wife and few close friends. He worked all night and was alone during the day. When he met a friend during the day he might joke around a bit but did not enjoy a “100 grams” (liquor—trans.). Everyone realized this.

**YK:** Did you meet with him often?

**PO:** Many times. Yes, we did meet often, and I was even scolded by him. One Sunday I went with D. Khurtztai to his home for boiled mutton and milk spirits. We both open-heartedly told stories, and then we met with the head of security who said: “Ah, Minister P. Ochirbat, leader Yu. Tsedenbal is urgently calling you for an important talk. You must go!” Unfortunately, I smelled of liquor, even though I tried to wash the smell away with a bit of water. Fortunately, I had a dark complexion so I didn't blush very much, but I was in rather a confused state as I knew I had to meet with leader Yu. Tsedenbal. Then he brought up the recent fire at the “Bayangol Children's Camp” in which one building burned down. He mentioned to me that the cause of the fire had not yet been determined, but faulty electric wiring may have been responsible. He said he felt the heavy burden of responsibility for this fire and that emergency measures had to be taken to prevent future fires which endangered our children.

In the mid-1970s, the General Secretary of the Chiling CP/CC, Louis Korvalon, visited Mongolia, and leader Yu. Tsedenbal gave a dinner for him. That evening the electricity went off so leader Yu. Tsedenbal called P. Ochirbat.

**YK:** At such times like this how did Mr. Yu. Tsedenbal treat people? Was he tough on those he considered irresponsible or at fault?

**PO:** No, not really. Although the leader Yu. Tsedenbal could get very angry and be severe with some people, he did not have bad relations with many. When he reprimanded someone or gave instructions, he did so in writing, not verbally. He was quite a gentle person—not quarrelsome, argumentative or a scold. Nor was he a person of bad character. Such was his way. Personally Mr. Yu. Tsedenbal was a very fine man with a fine mind. He could recite the names of all the Russian generals—Ivan Ivanovich and all the other Ivans.

## 9. The Innovations of Mongolian Democracy

**IL:** Were you scolded by the CC/MPRP for your book, “The Time of the Heavens”?

**PO:** Of course I was yelled at. At the time, the channel of the Darkhan electric station which served to transmit energy exploded, resulting in further explosions south of Ulaanbaatar. I was reprimanded because it was said that “no one was in charge of this energy facility and though Mr. Ochirbat did not cause the explosions, he took no precautions to safeguard against them. Thus, his work was poor.” If a person was negligent about his responsibilities, he was “reprimanded” by the Party CC at the All Khural. Such a “Party reprimand” was very frightening and was almost tantamount to expulsion. Even so, one could not just up and leave one’s work.

**YK:** How was the reprimand abandoned?

**PO:** Well, because I had done such good work, the CC/MPRP later rescinded their decision to reprimand me.

**YK:** And then you were elected the leader of the People’s Great Khural. Did this position become a new part of your work?

**PO:** Yes. All this was new and special work. Mongolia was trying to develop and modernize. In 1990 alone, there were about 270-280 new coalitions that were registered, including the Socialists, the Mongolian industrial coalitions, the Mongolian Revolutionary Youth coalitions, the Mongolian Red Cross, and the Mongolian-Soviet Friendship Union. In 1990, there was the first Democratic Union, the People’s Socialist movement, the New Progressive Union, the *Negdel* Union, the Food Union, the Transport Workers Union, etc. Each of these groups began to make their demands known. All of these groups were organized outside the government parties, and they set off the popular revolution.

The government parties and the MPRP competed with them and as we all were about equal in size and authority it was interesting who would control the power. Thus, began the inter-party struggles with the main theme for all of them being “Win the power for Mongolia.” Cries of “Is everybody crazy?”, or “Who will get what?”, “Dismiss the MPRP”, or “Get rid of the others” were heard. Thus, it was essential to meet and discuss the situation among these groups for the ultimate good of Mongolia. At the meeting, much was discussed and some sort of mutual agreement was reached, in spite of the many different opinions. The various groups stubbornly defended themselves, making it very hard to settle their differences. However, they tried to find a peaceful solution.

At that time one group was called the “Indecisive Ochirbat” Party. Although liberalization was not thought about very much, it was necessary to stress that everyone had a right to his own opinion so everyone said “I speak

the truth!” I was called “Indecisive Ochirbat” and went off to the MPRP where it was said: “P Ochirbat is an unprincipled member of the MPRP who does not support the Party’s policies. What is this Comrade doing? Is he opposed to democracy?” That was tough for me so I stayed away and did my work in my room. Still, as leader of the People’s All Khural, I had to settle disputes so we would talk until two or three in the morning.

**IL:** It hit the headlines that “being a leader is a profession.”

**PO:** Yes, I would say so. But I was also severely criticized by the Party. I was “The Manager” with the expertise and a diploma. The word “manager” is, of course, English since we use the word *darga*. What was all the fuss or criticism about? The word “manager” does imply professionalism but doesn’t the Mongolian term *darga* do the same? I asked my critics but they could not answer. The Press was also full of criticism.

**IL:** Did you continue to work as the leader of the People’s All Khural?

**PO:** Someone had to have the managerial skills. Recently, I have revised a book that I wrote in 1980 entitled “The Skills of Directing”. Now, in democratic times, management theory and strong market relations are important. We also need smart leadership regarding the principles of private property. We need intelligent management, without an iron hand, which is based on personal responsibility and development, individual labor, good organization, education, culture, morality, and character to produce intelligent and good human beings. Over time, science and technology could help us master those skills needed to achieve this goal.

**YK:** How many years did you work as leader of the People’s All Khural?

**PO:** For several months—from March, 1990 through September. I introduced changes to the leadership pertaining to the Constitution of the People’s All Khural. In 1960, the Constitution was completely changed by a group called “Concerning the Government Structure,” and the Small Khural, the Great Khural, the government and the President confirmed this new governmental structure. But when the multi-party system took us in another direction, the Constitution which stated that “the MPRP is the leader of the people and the government” was invalid. Electoral changes were introduced by the new election law of July, 1990, and there are now elections to the People’s All Khural. At first the Small Khural acted as a parliament, and the President was elected by the members of the People’s All Khural. In September, 1990 the new government and the President of the Mongolian People’s Republic were elected.

## 10. The Presidential Election

**YK:** Were you nominated to be President of Mongolia?

**PO:** Yes, I was nominated as was Tsogt-Ochir Lokhuuz. Punsalmaagiin was a member of the MPRP, and since it was decided that only one person from one party should be nominated, Ts. Lokhuuz was chosen.

**IL:** Did you know Ts. Lokhuuz before?

**PO:** I did not know him before but I came to know him. Ts. Lokhuuz was a very clever and hard-working man with a great deal of endurance. He freely expressed his own ideas and position and was straight, honest, and direct as opposed to those who wavered and were two-faced.

**IL:** In December, 1964 the Sixth All Khural meeting of the MPRP took place at which Mr. Yu. Tsedenbal criticized Ts. Lokhuuz. What was the reason for this criticism?

**PO:** Yes. The leader of the State Farm in Ömnögov *aimag* was Ts. Lokhuuz; the First Secretary of the MPRP committee was B. Nyambuu, and the leader of the statistical center was B. Surmaajav. All of them were criticized. B. Surmaajav said that the Mongolian economy had not really prospered but the MPRP and the All Khural saw otherwise and proclaimed that the economy was developing well. Thus, B. Surmaajav was accused of speaking falsely.

Mr. Baldandorjiin Nyambuu said that Mr. Yu. Tsedenbal's methods lagged behind and the cadres had made mistakes. He went on to say that all the appointments to the CC/MPRP had been filled with people from Uvs who surrounded Yu. Tsedenbal and prevented progress.

Then Tsogt-Ochir Lokhuuz spoke up and said: "The basic policy of the Mongolian economy is flawed. It would help us if we looked at other countries for practical advice. We need to study how we do things and evaluate our own resources. Yu. Tsedenbal, your work is based on erroneous thinking and needs to be corrected immediately. The Politburo of the CC/MPRP must bring itself up-to-date! Winds from abroad are blowing across our country, and they will not go away. We do not make up these ideas nor can we stop them! The policies of the MPRP are wrong!" The response to Ts. Lokhuuz was that he was a slanderer and a conspirator in the anti-Party group. These titles stuck to him, and he was exiled. Yu. Tsedenbal criticized this opposition, though at the time the MPRP did not deal with the oppositionists. Then, the CC/MPRP called someone before the All Khural with B. Demid, the First Secretary of the Bayan-Olgii MPRP, the Interior Minister, the leader of the CC/MPRP Control Committee and a member of the Politburo of the CC/MPRP to decide what action to take. Demid quoted Lenin's words from the Russian in defense of Yu. Tsedenbal: "I, Lenin, am the Party! The Party is named for Lenin!" So, at that time, the Party became Yu. Tsedenbal, and Ts. Lokhuuz, with his mistaken attitude, was harshly criticized. I was a student in the USSR when all of this happened.

**YK:** As a student, did you hear about all of that?

**PO:** I certainly did. In any case, students are keenly aware of new things. It was said that “criticism is necessary to correct mistakes!” and so the students were alert to new events and were right in the middle of all the noise and chatter that was everywhere. In addition, we were angry about the great imbalance between our two nations, exemplified by a Mongolian goat which produced cashmere having the same value as a Russian rubber goat toy!

At that time, many nationalists were called “national supporters.” If, for example, you talked about Chinggis Khan or announced that you were using the “Mongolian script,” you were a “national supporter,” and measures were taken against these “conscious misconceptions.” Some of the books of Byamba Renchin, Mongolia’s most learned man, were burned, and he spent time in prison. How could a “national supporter” create a national race? How can a “national supporter” create a nationality? One had to be a nationalist first. It is said that “The Aryans illustrated this too well when they destroyed the nucleus of the Jews.” This was truly a nationalist policy, which is dangerous and should never intensify. The Mongols are a proud people, so how can nationalism be prevented? Why should such nationalism be prevented? Why have a country at all? Why not unite with China, or Russia or Japan? No way. This is what the students and intellectuals talked about. It was time for each Mongolian to be nationalistic, although it is perfectly acceptable to learn about foreign ideas and teachings if they are living phantoms. “We must be Mongolians—we can’t talk and think like Russians.”

## 11. My Wife

**YK:** Mr. Yu. Tsendenbal spoke good Russian, didn’t he?

**PO:** Yes, very good. Mr. Yu. Tsendenbal scorned this “national policy” and criticized it. He wrote the Mongolian script beautifully and wrote his notes in the script during the day. He was a true Mongolian, but he also knew that Soviet aid and support were needed, so why did this Mongolian “national policy” prevail? Could I achieve success? To do so, one had to be alert. Yet it was the Mongolian wives who had the money because the men handed over their salaries to them and had none themselves. So if a man wished to have “100 grams” (i.e. a shot of vodka—trans.), he had to beg his wife for money. Such was his affliction. There was a similar relationship between the USSR and Mongolia.

**IL:** Mrs. Sh. Tsevelmaa spoke freely to the press and said that “once P. Ochirbat went to bed hungry!” Can you explain that?

**PO:** There was a time in Sharyn Gol when the chief engineer of the coal mine received 1,100 *tugriks* a month. In 1960 when the plan of the mine was

fulfilled, money was given as a reward. Thus, for a month, I had an income of 1200 to 1500 *tugriks* but sometimes we had no money, leading me to ask Sh. Tselvelmaa what she had done with it. She answered “Ochirbat, you try handling the money! I have to keep the family budget.” So I kept much of my salary, even though my wife and the children had to buy things at the store. One day after working hard at the mine, I was very tired, very cold, and very hungry. There was neither meat nor vegetables, and I asked my wife very gruffly “What is there to eat?” She answered that she did not know since I had all the cash. She went on to point out that I could have bought the meat and vegetables on the family budget if I hadn’t spent it all. She was sure that I was hiding some money somewhere. Thus, for a day or so we had nothing to eat and were very hungry. In short, it is easy to spend money but hard to manage a budget.

**IL:** Did Mr. Yu. Tsedenbal’s wife have an influence over him?

**PO:** Certainly. Mr. Yu. Tsedenbal was an aloof and solitary man with few friends who was influenced by his Russian wife. Every now and then he would have “100 grams,” and she would get angry and scold members of the Politburo saying “You gave Yu. Tsedenbal spirits! Are you trying make him a drunkard?” She went on complaining that her husband knew no personal happiness because he struggled alone in his service to the State. His life was circumscribed and limited and though he had certain privileges, the power he enjoyed offered him neither freedom nor privacy. She pointed out that a person should have free time to relax, see friends, go to the countryside or sit along the bank of a stream but there is no freedom in his life, and none of this was possible for her husband.

Mongolian families traditionally liked to entertain over milk tea. Mr. Yu. Tsedenbal, however, was confined to a specially protected place for his tea. On visiting a herding family, the master of the family would serve a person abundant spirits distilled from milk. Mr. Yu. Tsedenbal, however, would be offered “fortified spirits” which, in fact, were mostly water. Wasn’t that strange!

Such strange things didn’t happen when I was President. The wife of the herding family offered tea and food, and the husband offered milk spirits. We would spend the night in the *ger* and enjoy the wife, the husband, and the children. I slept in the *khoimor* (the honored part of the tent—trans.) For doing all that, I got the name “free and easy” Ochirbat. People were generally quite relaxed and open-hearted. A bit later however, Mongol women sometimes did not follow the custom of offering tea. If one isn’t offered tea by the woman of the *ger*, one knows that something isn’t quite right, and there is little good feeling. In addition, it is considered bad form if the woman offers a

bowl of tea without tasting or drinking it first. Mongolian people are, by and large, good-hearted, open, and trustworthy. They are not deceitful or two-faced and regarding them as the enemy is offensive.

The Mongols live between Russia and Chinese Inner Mongolia, Buryat Mongolia, Kalmyk Mongolia, and Tuva. Yet, all Mongols are the same. The 830th anniversary of Chinggis Khan was celebrated in the hall of the People's Great Khural at which I gave a speech. But people were suspicious because such a celebration had been forbidden for so many years. Now, however, they begin to see that this was alright and acceptable.

The Mongols have a great respect for tradition and have known for hundreds of years that China has chipped away at pieces of their country. On the other hand, Mongolia also prevented a united China. Many hundreds of years ago, we were the master of China, and Khubilai Khan established the great historic Yuan dynasty. This is all part of Mongolian history. Ancient Russia was known to the Mongols, and the offspring of Chinggis Khan established the "Golden Horde," which lasted for several hundred years, and its descendants lived on in Russia even though so many Russians rebelled against the Golden Horde. Subsequently, the Mongols moved on to construct their own history. But do we talk about all of this? Certainly, every vigilant, clever, and courageous Mongolian hoped to sweep away all the mercilessness of the fading socialist period with its enforced dependency. Many people were pessimistic, but they were generally right.

For some time the decline and break-up of the country was suppressed because the themes of "national admiration" and the "national idea" were emphasized. How, then did that system collapse creating such great mental harm? I decided to build on the theme of nationalism as people tried to rebuild their lives. In addition, I followed the Mongolian philosophy which made clear that those who had suffered in the past should now enjoy human rights.

In 1962, the people who participated in festivities celebrating the 800th birthday of Chinggis Khan were punished. Mr. Ts. Damdinsuren gave a scientific paper and his book dealing with a thousand years of history was burned behind an industrial barrier. Mr. Byambin Renchin wrote in a similar vein, and many great scholars and authors were exiled. Even a member of the Academy of Sciences who worked in a chemical laboratory in an electric station was framed—just another example of the "nationalist view."

I went to my first Naadam as leader of the Great Khural in 1990. Naadam was Mongolia's great national festival and holiday. The water and the grass were in balance, and it was time for the *airagh* to overflow and for people to relax and think of a pleasant and prosperous summer. It is said that someone who has legs walks to Naadam and someone who has no legs crawls to

Naadam. I wore my Mongolian *deel* and walked across white felt laid out on the grass. The tradition was to stand before white flags, sing a song, and address the crowd which joined in to create a warm feeling. 15,000 people could be seated in the Naadam field, and P. Ochirbat was very moved to see all those people. Mongolians are very excited during Naadam and, traditionally, return to those places they are attached to.

**YK:** Did Mr. Yu. Tsedenbal speak about not wearing a *deel* to Naadam?

**PO:** Mr. Yu. Tsedenbal had always prohibited the Mongolian *deel*, and he always wore a suit and gave a brief speech in a tent. But people thought that a suit was out of place on a Naadam field, and I certainly participated in those scenes captured by D. Baljinnian (a photographer—trans.) Things had changed and people had to know that.

People have reflected on Mongolia's seemingly easy nomadic tradition. My grandmother and grandfather had memorized and could recite many legends which they told to the children and young people. We didn't know the authors of these rich tales which are passed down from generation to generation. There was a lot of talk about all of this and now the changes in our lives are written about. I have written a book entitled "The Time of the Heavens" about my time as President. It is clear that suppression of the "national view" led to a decline and now, after all this suffering, we must wake up.

I thought to myself that I must be the first government leader who makes a mistake, corrects it, errs again, and then writes about it. People are not aware of such things and can only guess about them.

In 1990, it was the rare person who understood the economics of the market because of all the rumors and suspicions connected with some of my words. I once met with some workers who said that the State puts on an iron mask (or poker face—trans.) In a democracy, the markets must be watched to make sure everything is in order and on the up and up. If a person had been accused of an impropriety but was innocent, he had to be issued a pardon. However, some of these ideas were quite volatile and were met with strong reactions like "P. Ochirbat is a strict and cruel comrade!"

People needed to understand what salaries they would receive in this new market situation and that their smaller salaries were based on the market. But in 1990, there was little effort to explain these concepts. In socialist times, people wore Soviet made clothes and women's boots sold for forty-five *tugriks* and were cheap, comfortable, and of good quality. Everyone liked them and wore them. During socialist times, not only in Mongolia but in all the socialist countries, there was very little choice of consumer goods, and everything was the same. Then in 1990, we began to import women's boots

from Austria. They were very well-made and sold for seven hundred *tugriks* which was not the real price. There was a lot of talk about these expensive and much admired boots and over time, the desire and demand for such goods increased. However, I told the workers that they could not afford seven hundred *tugrik* boots and had to be content with the less expensive forty-five *tugrik* boots. But then it was said of me: “P. Ochirbat judges people and discriminates against them. Things that are useful and necessary should be cheap, and the market should not determine prices.” In socialist times, the attitude was that “all people were equal” and this opinion was strictly followed. Such were the issues encountered at that time.

## 12. Tsedenbal and “those who surround him”

**IL:** In 1990, the CC/MPRP held its regular All Khural, and there were many questions connected to Yu. Tsedenbal. What was actually said?

**PO:** In March, 1990, the entire Politburo of the CC/MPRP resigned. People might ask why the government resigned. What mistakes had all these people committed while working for the Mongolian people? Most people felt it was usual to dismiss those who made mistakes, and they considered it a mistake if a person shirked his responsibility. Something had to be done about this. In April, 1990, a special Ikh Khural met, including members of the Politburo of the CC/MPRP, the leader of the Council of Ministers, and deputy leaders who had worked for Yu. Tsedenbal for many years and illustrated the phrase Yu. Tsedenbal “and those who surround him.” A decision was made to set up a commission to look into the suffering of those years. It would examine forty-one people. So in June, 1990 the CC/MPRP met with the All Khural and put forth the resolution to study the issues connected to Yu. Tsedenbal “and those who surround him.” There was a resolution to dismiss the seven people from the MPRP who had been under Yu. Tsedenbal’s influence and had accused the intellectuals of poor work, misuse of State property and funds, and the prevention of harmonious relations with the leadership. Their victims were awarded concessions and received a reduction of their sentences and an end to their suffering. Finally, Yu. Tsedenbal was criticized as well.

On April 6, 1990 the Politburo of the CC/MPRP at the All Khural demanded new membership and also invalidated fifteen titles for Yu. Tsedenbal, including Mongolian Hero, The Labor Hero, The Mongolian Marshal, as well as The 5-pointed Gold Star, The Mongolian Labor Hero, The Golden Soyombo, The Marshal Star, and The Second Sühbaatar Star. These orders were initiated by the Politburo and carried out by the leader of the People’s Great Khural. The Politburo of the CC/MPRP, rather than myself as the leader of the People’s Great Khural, took the initiative in legally revoking these awards

although some titles and star medals remained. Only the People's Great Khural can reverse such decisions.

**YK:** Yes. Thank you for this interesting discussion, but we are out of time.

**PO:** Yes, of course.