In New Mongolia

Even in new Mongolia they know the reality of Shambhala.

N. Roerich, Altai – Himalaya.

The Roerichs arrived in the capital of Mongolia in two Dodges on September 12. The city known to Russians and other foreigners as Urga arose in the 17th century as the Khan’s Camp or Residence (Örgöö), although Mongolians called it invariably Ih-Kure (Great Monastery), until the name was changed, in November 1924, to Ulan Bator Khoto – the City of the Red Warrior.

Ulan Bator Khoto (Mong. Ulaanbaatar), situated in the valley of the Tola River (Tuul Gol), was surrounded by a rather scenic mountain chain called Bogdo Khan Uul (the Holy King Mountain), or Bogdo Ula, in Russian. The mountains were known for their forest reserves, a sacred site and a totally restricted area in those days as it is today, accessible only to practitioners of Buddhism. (Bogdo Uul is actually one of the peaks or spurs of the Khentei mountain range stretching from NE to SW along the left bank of Tola.) This mountain used to excite an awesome admiration in Western travelers, one of whom, Petr Ko­zlov, called it “the precious gem” of Mongolia. Roerich too would come under the spell of Bogdo Ula, depicting it in six of his paintings executed in 1927.

In his scholarly travelogue Trails to Inmost Asia (1931) Yuri (George) Roerich gave a detailed description of Ulan-Bator, a city of “deep contrasts”, typical of a country going through “a period of fundamental changes”. As a Western visitor and a scholar he immediately noticed its peculiar semi-settled, semi-nomadic character. There were actually two cities. The old Urga had its temples, monasteries (xürees), Bogdo Gegen’s palaces, a market place (around which clustered “innumerable houses and hovels”, harbouring most of its population), and packs of hungry stray dogs – “the scavengers of the city” – roaming in the streets. Yet side by side with the old city a new one was quickly emerging and its contours were already visible. One of the signs of new Urga and new Mongolia as well was the Mongolian Central Cooperative Society (Montsecoop), numbering 26 major branches and 102 minor ones across the country plus four foreign agencies in Moscow, Tientsin, Kalgan and Khailar. It came into being as a result of the cooperative movement which was started in 1922 and was financially
assisted by the Mongolian government. Other signs of recent changes were a Mongolian daily newspaper, manuals for secondary schools printed by the Mongolian Scientific Committee (“Uchkom”), electricity in the yurtas of educated Mongols and new stone buildings. One of these was the building of the Mongolian national theatre and the People’s Club, still under construction. It was an odd structure – a huge dome supported by low walls, outwardly reminiscent of a gigantic Mongol felt yurta.

Yuri also described minutely Ulan Bator’s major Buddhist shrines by making a point that some of the mystical teachings taught in the monastic schools there, such as the Kalachakra doctrine and the knowledge of kar-tsi (Buddhist astronomy), originated in Shambhala, a kingdom to the north of Tibet proper, and were later disseminated in Tibet, India and Mongolia. “The doctrine of Shambhala is the hidden doctrine of Tibet and Mongolia, and His Holiness the Tashi Lama is regarded as the chief expounder of the doctrine in the world”, he asserted laconically while showing his profound reverence for the Buddhist hierarch.

Since the departure of the present Tashi Lama in 1923, the doctrine has received a powerful new impulse, and numerous Kalachakra colleges have been established by His Holiness himself in inner Mongolia and Buddhist China. Even in distant Buryatia is to be observed the same movement. <...> Shambhala is not only considered to be the abode of hidden Buddhist learning, it is the guiding principle of the coming kalpa or cosmic age. Learned abbots and meditating lamas are said to be in constant communication with this mystic fraternity that guides the destinies of the Buddhist world.

The name of Shambhala, according to Yuri, possessed “a terrific force” among the masses of Buddhists of High Asia – “in the course of history it has not only inspired religious movements, but even moved armies, whose war cry was the name of Shambhala”. This was the case with the Mongol soldiers of Sukhe Bator, Mongolia’s national hero, who banished from the country (in 1919) the troops of the Chinese warlord General Hsü. It was these soldiers who composed a marching song of their own, still sung by Mongol cavalry. The song began with the words “Jang Shambal-in dayin” or ‘The War of northern Shambhala’ which called upon the warriors of Mongolia to rise up for the Holy War of liberating the country from oppressing enemies. “Let us all die in this war and be reborn as warriors of Shambal-in Khan” went the song.1

1 Roerich, G. 1931, 156–157.