



NAZARBAYEV
AND THE MAKING OF **KAZAKHSTAN**

JONATHAN AITKEN

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To Elizabeth

With my love and gratitude for her encouragement and for her acceptance of my many absences from home on visits to Kazakhstan.

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JONATHAN AITKEN
London, April 2009

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Prologue – Understanding the Journey

Kazakhstan is colossal in size, complicated in its history, colourful in its culture and has a more compelling narrative as a modern nation state than most outsiders know. Much of that narrative revolves around the country's first President, Nursultan Nazarbayev, but his life can only be understood in the context of the land where he was born, raised and became a leader.

Geographically, Kazakhstan is greater than Western Europe. Its northern border with Russia is longer than that of Canada with the United States. Five times bigger than Texas, it is the ninth largest country in the world, beginning on the shores of the Caspian sea where Asia meets Europe and ending on the edge of Western China. From snow-clad mountains a little lower than Everest to grassland steppes larger than the American Mid-West, this is an extraordinary land mass of such space and soul that it transcends people, politics and the passing phases of time.

Until 1991, Kazakhstan was not a country. It had no legal frontiers with any of its regional neighbours, some of whom claimed territorial rights over its borders and resources. The history of such disputes was discouraging. For centuries the nomadic tribes of Kazakhstan had been plundered and conquered by foreign invaders. The most ruthless of these colonial masters were the 20th century leaders of the Soviet Union. Under Stalin, over two million Kazakhs died from starvation, epidemics and execution. Another million were driven off their lands and into exile or servitude under the yoke of Communism. These departures were matched by an inflow of ill-treated new arrivals. During World War II, Stalin ordered the deportation into Kazakhstan of half a million people. Most were from the Northern Caucasus and the Volga German areas, but they included Moscow intellectuals and political dissidents.

In the years of Nikita Khrushchev's rule, one and a half million more Soviet deportees were forcibly moved into collective farms in Kazakhstan. As a result, the Kazakh people became a minority in their own homeland. In later years vast areas of their traditional grazing grounds in the north-east were

contaminated by secret nuclear tests. The Kremlin's military leaders ordered over 450 thermonuclear explosions in the region around Semipalatinsk, with contemptuous disregard for the health consequences to the local population. Other Soviet experiments such as the draining of the Aral Sea and the Virgin lands scheme caused massive environmental damage. Yet, despite their mistreatment, the Kazakhs had an ancestral instinct for survival. They knew how to weather all storms.

Surviving meant learning to live by Moscow's rules. So the philosophical nomads became obedient communists while upholding their traditions as proud nationalists. No one played these ambivalent roles more skilfully than Nursultan Nazarbayev.

His journey began in a shepherd's yurt on the mountain meadows of the steppes. He grew up in a poverty-stricken nomad family which had been scarred by Stalin's terrors yet were shrewd enough to secure a good Russian education for their son. Nazarbayev's first job was as a blast-furnace worker in a steel plant which trained him as a metallurgist. His early career as a young Communist Party official ran through the eras of Nikita Khrushchev, Mikhail Suslov, Leonid Brezhnev and Yuri Andropov. At the age of 44, Nazarbayev was appointed Prime Minister of the Soviet Republic of Kazakhstan by the ailing Konstantin Chernenko. The next Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, saw Nazarbayev as a kindred spirit in the reforms of *perestroika* and *glasnost*, eventually offering to appoint him Prime Minister of the Soviet Union. Nazarbayev turned the offer down. By that time, the Soviet Union was in chaos and he had an eye for the future.

As one of the leading figures in the Soviet hierarchy after Gorbachev and Yeltsin, Nazarbayev knew that the end of communist domination was coming. Although he played a vital role in supporting Boris Yeltsin's stand against the Moscow coup plotters in August 1991, those days were the harbingers of political extinction for Gorbachev and for the Soviet Union, which broke up five months later. Without a drop of blood being shed in his own country during these upheavals, Nazarbayev emerged from the wreckage as President of the new nation state of Kazakhstan.

In the years immediately after independence, Nazarbayev had to wrestle with extraordinary crises. They included hyperinflation, the collapse of the currency, food shortages and the emigration of two million people, most of them skilled workers and managers. On the strategic front, his greatest challenge was the discovery that he had inherited ownership of the world's fourth largest arsenal of nuclear weapons. Rogue states were after them. Rejecting their offers, Nazarbayev opted for disarmament. He had delicate diplomatic dealings with Washington, took new initiatives with Beijing, and

hung on through a roller-coaster ride of turbulent relations with Moscow. He steered through the worst of the turbulence by relying on direct negotiations with his old friend President Yeltsin, whose cooperation was vital on many issues, particularly oil rights in the Caspian.

What kept Nazarbayev going through the darkest days of Kazakhstan's dramas was a combination of a steelworker's stamina and a reformer's vision. He never faltered in his ancestral man of the steppes belief that his people would yet again weather the storms. But, as a modern man of politics, he had difficulty in convincing older Kazakhstanis to accept free-market forces. His meeting in 1991 with Margaret Thatcher, when he was still the Communist Party leader in Kazakhstan, was pivotal in persuading Nazarbayev to embrace economic freedom and privatisation. He immersed himself in the study of these concepts, reaching out to a new generation of advisers and ministers to implement them. For a while, the results of his policies were chaotic, and many mistakes were made. But Nazarbayev persevered with his reforming agenda, and by the turn of the century Kazakhstan had become a largely free-market economy, growing at an annual rate of over 10 percent. This growth was dented by the Asian stockmarket crash of 1998 and devastated by the global economic crisis of 2008–2009. But by then Kazakhstan had built up over \$50 billion of reserves, mainly from surplus oil revenues, in a national fund which Nazarbayev used in late 2008 with other resources to inject over \$25 billion into banks, construction companies, pension funds and infrastructure projects. With this bailout from the public finances, and with the underlying strength of the oil and gas sectors of the economy, Kazakhstan today looks better placed than any other country in its region to weather the world recession.

Fifteen years earlier the outlook was far more pessimistic. In the early 1990s, the consensus of international opinion was that Kazakhstan could not survive as a nation state, nor would Nazarbayev last as its leader. Today both the President and the country seem to be secure. Nazarbayev's leadership skills are internationally recognised as successful and the long-term economic future looks bright. Even so there are international media criticisms about the governance of Kazakhstan.

The judiciary is not independent. The press is less than free. Recent elections have not reached the standards of a full and fair democratic process. There is widespread corruption at many levels of Kazakhstani society. The President's inner circle of friends and family members have sometimes been tarnished by allegations concerning oil revenues deposited in Swiss bank accounts, commissions paid on government contracts, violations of human rights and even the murder of a leading opposition politician. Nazarbayev

has managed to stay aloof from these scandals. However, at times his reputation has been indirectly damaged by his association with old cronies and former relatives whose misbehaviour has caused them to be exiled as black sheep.

When these subjects are covered in later chapters it will be seen that Nazarbayev has not disregarded the complaints of his critics. In particular he has been responsive to pressure coming from the OSCE (Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe) which Kazakhstan will chair from 2010. On progress towards religious freedom, press freedom, human rights and fair elections, Kazakhstan has done more than Russia, China and other states of the region put together. So it is fair to say that Nazarbayev is slowly travelling on the road from autocracy to democracy even though he has some distance to go. His argument, examined in later chapters, is that because there was no experience whatsoever of democratic politics or market economics in Kazakhstan history, the newly independent nation should not move too quickly in developing a programme of electoral reform. “The economy first, political restructuring next”, says Nazarbayev, adding that “Democracy in Kazakhstan is not the start of its journey but rather its destination”. Some international commentators have been critical of this approach, but domestic public opinion seems broadly supportive of the President’s pace of progress on the roadmap towards democracy.

No road in Kazakhstan is short. But in the two decades since Nazarbayev became the country’s President, important milestones have been passed. This is the most economically successful nation to emerge from the collapse of the Soviet republics, rich beyond computer projections in oil, gas, and other natural resources. Its constitution has created a stable system of government. It maintains good, if subliminally anxious, relations with Moscow, Beijing and Washington. Its 15.5 million population contains a growing middle class, increasingly prosperous and sophisticated thanks to the rising generation of educated young people. Their progress is symbolised by the brash new capital of Astana whose futuristic skyscrapers give it the image of being the most exotic and multi-ethnic seat of government in the 21st century world. These features of contemporary Kazakhstan are so little known that millions of international moviegoers actually believed that Borat might be real!

Few of Kazakhstan’s achievements would have been made without Nursultan Nazarbayev. His story has never before been told in the West, even though it is one of the most colourful and influential odysseys in modern times. But his journey can only be understood by starting in the heart of the steppes, the land from which he came.

1

Ancestry and Childhood

The journey began at a shepherd's hut in Ushkonyr, a remote, primitive yet magnificent grassland plateau on the steppes of the Alatau Mountains in Central Asia. It would be difficult to imagine a more symbolic birthplace for the nomad's son who was destined to become the first President of the newly independent nation of Kazakhstan.

To this day Ushkonyr can be identified with one part of the country's heritage on account of its scenic beauty, wide open spaces, snow-capped mountains, rock escarpments, streams, rivers, wild horses and huge flocks of sheep and cattle. An even more important part of the heritage is the character of the tribal families, handed down from the ancestors of whom they are so fiercely proud, for they tamed this vast wilderness.

Sometimes the land was conquered by their own nomadic spirit. At other times in their history the Kazakhs were themselves conquered and subjugated by oppressive foreign rulers. During one of these periods of oppression, when the country was called the Soviet Republic of Kazakhstan, a baby was born on 6th July 1940, named Nursultan Nazarbayev. His arrival into the world could scarcely have been a more obscure event. Yet to those familiar with the traditions and superstitions of the Shaprashti tribesmen from the area, the birth of this child seemed connected to promising portents of destiny and mysticism.

The destiny came from the warriors and tribal leaders that formed the hereditary chain of ancestors in the baby's lineage. The mysticism came from the answered prayers that had been offered nine months earlier by Nursultan's childless parents at the shrine of a local saint.

Ancestors are important to Kazakhs. In nomadic times they signified essential lines of demarcation between blood relatives and strangers, friend and foe, land owner and land predator. To this day, it is still expected that the son of an established Kazakh family should know the names and histories of his male antecedents for the previous seven generations. So before he was five years old the young Nursultan was taught to revere the patriarchal

figures in his ancestral heritage. The most famous of these was his great-great-great-great grandfather, Karasay Batyr (1703–1753), a legendary warrior who had protected his homeland from Jungar invaders in the 18th century. A more recent ancestor was the grandfather whose surname was taken by his modern descendants. He was Nazarbai, the builder and owner of a watermill in his village. He grew so prosperous as a result of selling water that around 1900 he became the local judge. He was elevated to this position after a secret ballot held among an electorate of 58 tribal elders, 30 of whom voted for him.* The seal of authority for Nazarbai’s judgeship, which he held until his death in the 1930s, survives in an Astana museum.

The family mentor who liked relating the tale of the judge’s narrow election victory was his widow Mirzabala Nazarbai. She was a doting if not domineering grandmother to her grandson, so much so that in modern terminology she might be called a control freak. One manifestation of her dominance within the family was that she insisted on taking possession of the infant Nursultan immediately after he was born, reluctantly handing him back to his mother only for breast feeding. Another feature of Mirzabala’s controlling nature was that when Nursultan started to make his first steps as a toddler, she knitted a sack for his lower body to stop him walking away from her. “My grandmother’s fear was that I would be struck by an evil eye”, recalled Nazarbayev; “so, in order to protect me she kept me beside her in this sack all day long, pretending to our neighbours that I could not walk.”

The third and perhaps most bizarre of Grandmother Mirzabala’s efforts to be the pivotal figure in her grandson’s life was that she made him address her as “mother”. This seemed strange to little Nursultan who has recalled:

My grandmother was a very authoritative person. She liked running things and as the oldest member of the family, we had a duty to respect her wishes. She often told me “I’m your mother”. And she said “Your mother is not your mother, she is your sister-in-law. Your father is not your father, he is your elder brother.” So out of obedience to my grandmother I went along with this, and for the first five years of my life I called my real mother “sister-in-law” and my father I called “elder brother”, even though my father was not at all happy about it.

Nursultan’s father, Abish, was by nature a conciliator but he could also be a stronger character than this anecdote suggests. In an earlier family drama he had defied Grandmother Mirzabala and many of his other relatives when they urged him to divorce his wife Aljan on the grounds that she was barren, having failed to produce any children in the first six years of their marriage. Although it was a stigma in a rural Kazakh community for a couple to be

* Telling the story of his grandfather’s election in an interview for this biography in 2007, President Nursultan Nazarbayev joked: “It shows how democratic we were over a hundred years ago! Who says we don’t know about democracy in Kazakhstan!”

childless, Abish loved Aljan and refused to divorce her. Instead, they made a pilgrimage together to the shrine of a local saint, Ata Raimbek. In accordance with the superstitions about Raimbek's miraculous powers, a sheep and a goat were sacrificed to the saint. Then Aljan and Abish walked round the shrine seven times holding a rope between them and praying to God for children. During the night of these prayerful perambulations, Aljan had a dream in which she was being followed by a blind dog which threatened to attack her. Suddenly, a woman in white appeared and shooed away the dog. The following morning the curator of the Raimbek shrine was asked to interpret Aljan's dream. He said: "An evil spirit has been following you but the woman in white has banished it forever. Now God will give you children."

Nine months later, on 6th July 1940, Aljan gave birth to her first child, Nursultan. It was the height of summer and almost the entire population of Chemolgan, the village where the Nazarbai family lived, had decamped to the *jailau* or upland grazing grounds of Ushkonyr.

The name Ushkonyr means three brown hills, a description that has to be magnified to the Kazakh scale of these pastures nestling in the foothills of the Alatau mountain range whose snow-tipped peaks, between 3,000 and 7,900 metres high, sparkle like an elongated diamond necklace that stretches across the 1,000 miles of border territory running from eastern Kazakhstan into western China. Since time immemorial the nomadic tribesmen of the region had regarded the *jailau* of Ushkonyr as fertile grasslands for feeding their flocks. In the summer of 1940, over half a million sheep and cattle were grazing at Ushkonyr but they were no longer owned by the nomads. They were the property of a Soviet collective farm administered by Communist Party officials based in the neighbouring town of Kaskelen, some 20 miles downhill from the upland pastures.

The agricultural workers of the collective were mainly shepherds and herdsmen. They and their families spent their summers around Ushkonyr living in *yurts*, the traditional peasant huts of rural Kazakhstan which in outward appearance look like a mixture of an Inuit igloo and a Native American tepee. During the first week of July 1940, in the Nazarbai *yurt* on the *jailau* of Ushkonyr, Abish's wife Aljan began her labour pains.

There is uncertainty as to the precise birthplace of the baby who 51 years later was to become the first President of the Independent Republic of Kazakhstan. When this author visited Ushkonyr and the surrounding district in 2007, there emerged a considerable conflict of evidence among local witnesses about the location and circumstances of Nursultan Nazarbayev's arrival into the world.

Some senior residents of the area were sure that the future president was born in a *yurt* on the hills of Ushkonyr. One of these witnesses pointed to a grassy knoll situated between an escarpment of rocks and a mountain stream, declaring confidently: "I know that Nazarbayev's birthplace was right there." Other contemporaries recalled reports of Aljan suffering from such agonising labour pains that the local midwife had to move the expectant mother by donkey cart nine miles downhill to the village of Chemolgan. Another variation of the story was that the birth complications became so problematic that Aljan had to be moved again to the small township of Kaskelen. There, aided by the area's only supply of hot running water and medical equipment, a senior midwife safely delivered the baby.

Wherever the birth actually took place, Abish Nazarbayev was miles away from it tending his sheep and cattle in the wide open spaces of Ushkonyr. When he eventually came down from the hills, he was given the news that he was the father of a baby boy by an old lady from Chemolgan, Madame Togaibayeva. Abish was so carried away with joy that he promptly presented Togaibayeva with one of his family's most precious possessions, a Singer sewing machine, quoting an old Kazakh proverb: "The one who brings good news deserves a good reward."

Although old Kazakh sayings, traditions and superstitions played an important part in the early years of Nursultan Nazarbayev, his childhood was moulded by a mixture of influences both ancient and modern. On the ancient side, he was brought up in the nomadic culture of reverence for ancestors, proximity to nature, and bonding with the extended family of relatives who were his tribal kinsmen. On the modern side, he was exposed to the new multi-ethnicity of races and religions that had been imported by the Soviets into 20th century Kazakhstan. He was also a beneficiary of a new emphasis on education which had never before been part of his family's lifestyle.

Chemolgan, a village on the banks of the Kaskelenka River 25 miles east of the city of Almaty, was in the 1940s a mixed community of some 900 inhabitants. Only 200 of them were native Kazakhs. The rest were a disparate collection of multi-national settlers who had been displaced or driven from their homes as a result of the Bolshevik revolution of 1917. These new arrivals, many of them victims of Stalin's purges, included Ukrainians, Poles, Chechens, Armenians, Mishetyin Turks, Kurds, Balkars, Germans and ethnic Russians.

Relations between these incoming groups and the Kazakh villagers were harmonious. This may have been something to do with the Kazakh tradition of friendliness and hospitality towards visitors. Or it may have been based on the shared imperatives of survival, as rural life for every Chemolgan

household of that period was hard under the iron but usually incompetent hand of Soviet collectivisation.

Chemolgan derives its name from the Kazakh word *chem* or candle. As there was no electricity in the area, the literal translation “village of candle-light” was an appropriate description for this community which was a centre for housing the local labourers of the Soviet collective farm. In the early 1940s most of these labourers were women because the able-bodied men had been drafted into the army for the war against Hitler’s Germany. However, Nursultan’s father Abish stayed at home because he had a withered arm damaged in a fire some years earlier. “What I remember most about my father during my childhood was that he did not stop working from dawn to dark”, recalls Nursultan Nazarbayev. “I don’t think he ever stood still. I think that is part of his legacy to me – a determination to work hard, to persevere in times of adversity and to accomplish his mission.”

Abish’s principal mission was to feed his family, which soon expanded to four young children, Nursultan, Satipaldi, Anipa and Bolat. Wages for labourers in the collective farm were inadequate, so survival depended on what could be grown or raised on the plot of private land allocated to each household. The Nazarbayevs were permitted to own one quarter of a hectare (0.6 of an acre) on which they kept 5 sheep, 20 chickens, a horse and a cow. The cow, which had to be milked by Aljan at 4 am every morning, was the most vital source of nutrition, providing a daily supply of butter, milk and Kurt – a regional Kazakh cheese. This livestock, together with the fruits and vegetables grown on the plot, provided enough food to keep the family well nourished. It was a considerable achievement due to Abish’s talents as a gardener combined with his skills as a multi-lingual bargainer and trader. “My father could grow anything”, recalled his youngest son Bolat. “Our land regularly produced two crops a year of potatoes and corn. His pride and joy were his apple trees which again produced an exceptional yield because he was so good at grafting and pruning. The surplus fruit and vegetables he sold off to our neighbours, trading with them in their own languages. Besides Kazakh, my father spoke fluent Russian, Turkish and Balkar. He also learned to communicate in other tongues because there were so many ethnic groups exiled to our area by Stalin’s cruelty.”

As a child, Nursultan absorbed from his father a facility for languages and a tolerance for other cultures. When he was five years old there were two important changes in his life. His grandmother died and he started preparing for school. The death of grandmother Mirzabala had the effect of introducing more normal child–parent relationships into the family. Nursultan became close to his mother Aljan, whom he describes as having “the strongest

influence on me, always showing me the very special love of a mother for a son. I can't put this into words; she just showed her love in the most powerful of ways. She was very romantic by nature and she caught my imagination as a child by her storytelling and beautiful singing.”

Nursultan's imagination was also caught by his first steps in education at the village school in Chemolgan. It had 70 pupils split up into three classes. Two of these classes were taught in the Russian language and one class was taught in Kazakh. Only seven children (6 boys and 1 girl) attended the Kazakh class, among them Nursultan who usually came top of it. One of his classmates was Esimbay Saduakas, who recalls:

We were well taught in our small class at Chemolgan and our teachers were very dedicated. Nursultan was a clever boy who worked hard and didn't seem to be as mischievous as the rest of us. His best subject was maths, where a strict old teacher Mr Karasayev was very rigid with us in lessons. Nursultan was also the best at reading aloud.

Reading aloud did not stop at the schoolroom door for young Nursultan. Although his parents were both illiterate, they took immense pride in their eldest son's educational progress. After discovering from his schoolteachers that the boy was a good reader, Abish started to invite the neighbours in to hear the legends of Kazakh history and literature, read aloud by 10-year-old Nursultan. He himself recalls these evenings with mixed feelings:

My father was so enthusiastic that on many evenings he called several friends to our house to listen to me reading. The light of a kerosene lamp was all we had at that time, so at the end of a long day at school and then after helping with the feeding of the animals my eyes grew tired. Sometimes I fell asleep with my face falling into the book. So I tried to avoid these reading evenings. But my father got upset with me and made me keep on reading aloud to all these old people.

Despite his resistance to these public sessions, Nursultan's enjoyment of private reading increased. By the time he was 12 years old, he was something of a bookworm. He read almost everything on the shelves of his school's small library. If he knew that one of his relatives was travelling to Almaty for shopping, he would ask if they could buy a book for him. Usually these were Kazakh classics by authors such as Abai, but as Nursultan's Russian improved he began reading authors such as Tolstoy, Chekhov and Pushkin. Later on in his schooldays he devoured Russian translations of European authors, particularly enjoying the novels of Honoré de Balzac, Victor Hugo and Jules Verne. Sometimes these literary interests seemed obsessive to other members of the Nazarbayev family. His younger brother Bolat remembers a scene in which their mother began shouting at the teenage Nursultan: “You are reading too much. Your brain will boil. Get out into the fresh air!” The maternal order was obeyed – but only briefly. A few minutes later Nursultan

stealthily climbed back into the house through a window and returned to his books.

As this anecdote suggests, there were occasional tensions in Nursultan's life between farm work and homework. He sometimes incurred his parent's anger if he became so immersed in his reading that he forgot to water the vegetables or failed to move the cow to a new piece of pasture. Yet despite the trouble he got into from these lapses, the boy understood that his family's greatest wish was that he should benefit from the new educational opportunities that previous generations of Kazakhs had missed. "My father was always telling me 'go and study, go and study', so I did", he has recalled.

The happiest times of Nursultan's early years were the summer vacations he spent in the high grazing country around Ushkonyr. "I always loved the mountains, walking in them with my father, helping him to cut grass with a scythe, and enjoying the wild nature up there", he says. To this day the Alatau range around Ushkonyr is populated by many more wolves, mountain goats, deer, occasional bears and snow leopards than human beings. Keeping such predators away from the collective farm's sheep and cattle was an important part of Abish's job as a herdsman. Nursultan remembers many idyllic moments of their father-son relationship when they were out in the wilderness together, watching over the flocks at night, sitting round a campfire singing songs to the music of a *dombra* – a traditional Kazakh lyre which the young boy learned to play.

Sometimes Abish and Nursultan climbed above the snow line of the mountains on hunting trips. The highest peak in the area became an object of fascination for the boy after his father told him that the panoramic view from its summit included Lake Balkash. This was an exaggeration for the lake lies some 150 miles west of Ushkonyr and can not be seen by the naked eye. However, Nursultan was determined to conquer the peak, so on a glorious summer's day in the early 1950s he made an ascent of it on his own. "This was one of the most spectacular moments of my childhood", he remembers. "When I reached the top it seemed as if I was flying on the wings of an aeroplane. I stood there on the roof of the world. As I gazed into the distance across the great plains and valleys of the steppes below me I was actually looking towards the site of Astana – the future capital of our country."

The leader who later founded Astana as the seat of government of independent Kazakhstan may be forgiven if his youthful memories of this view from the mountain top have grown in the telling over the last half century. Yet the anecdote offers a revealing glimpse of the forces of nature and scenic beauty that helped to shape the childhood of the future president. It may also offer an insight into the competitive and even visionary streaks that

were developing in the character of the young Nursultan Nazarbayev.

At his school in Chemolgan, Nursultan's competitive streak was bringing him to prominence. His report card for the sixth grade shows that he consistently received a score of 5 (the highest mark in the Soviet educational system, equivalent to an A*) in all his subjects, which were: Kazakh language and literature; Russian language and literature; History; Maths; Geometry; Algebra; Physics; Biology; Art; English and Music. "He was the brightest boy in our school, no question about it", recalls his classmate Esimbay Saduakas.

He was always asking questions of the teachers and he really tried hard at his homework too. I remember how he used to rehearse the answers to the questions we had been set. One day, I came unexpectedly into his house and found him practising his answers in front of a mirror. "What are you doing, Nursultan?", I asked him. "Are you trying to become a movie star or something?" "No", he replied. "I am just saying my homework over and over again because I want to be able to answer the teacher's questions clearly and confidently."

By the time he was 10 years old, Nursultan's confidence was growing as other boys deferred to him in and out of the classroom. He was the only one of his contemporaries trusted to drive a donkey cart to a nearby village where on certain days deliciously moist black bread was on sale at a baker's shop. This bakery was so popular that its queuing customers were rationed. They were only allowed to buy two slices of bread each time they came to the counter. As a small boy from another village, Nursultan was unfairly treated by the local shoppers. Often he was pushed to the back of the queue by aggressive housewives, impatient for their bread. He overcame this problem by bringing an escort group of friends with him in the donkey cart. These young Chemolgans were organised by Nursultan into a team who protected each other and had the persistence to keep going round in the queue all day long until they had each made several purchases of the two slices of bread quota.

On the homeward journey from one of these expeditions to the bread shop Nursultan experienced what he calls "the most frightening episode of my childhood". It was late in the evening and one of the boys in the donkey cart became afraid of the dark. Another boy decided to play a trick to raise the fear levels. This boy ran ahead and hid in a cemetery beside the road back to Chemolgan. As the donkey cart passed by the cemetery, a figure wrapped in a white blanket arose from one of the graves wailing and shrieking in an impersonation of a ghost. The startled donkey reared up and bolted. The boy on whom the trick was being played had a similar reaction, for he leapt out of the cart and ran off into the night screaming with terror. Ten-year-old Nursultan had to get the donkey under control and start a search for the boy, who had vanished. "When we found him he was unconscious", he has

recalled. “We could not bring him round, and I was afraid he was going to die. Even when he did regain consciousness he could not speak. For many years afterwards this poor boy had a bad stammer. It was a dramatic evening for everyone.”

There were not many dramas in the tranquil life of Chemolgan during the upbringing of Nursultan Nazarbayev. One historic event he remembers came in 1953 when loudspeakers were installed in the centre of the village so that Communist Party officials could announce the death of Stalin. A more enduring development was the connection of electricity to Chemolgan in 1954. This was a great leap forward in the quality of life for all the local families.

The Nazarbayevs had no home of their own in Nursultan’s early childhood. They moved around, like true nomads, from borrowed yurt to borrowed house. But in about 1945, Abish built a two-bedroom house for his expanding family on the edge of the village. In one corner of it stood a table where Nursultan sat every evening, doing his homework. “His mother used to bring him his meals to this table so he could continue at his studies without a break”, recalled his cousin and contemporary, Mrs Narjamal Ibirayqizi, the niece of Aljan. “We all knew from his earliest years that Nursultan was exceptionally hard working. His mother used to say that he was ‘one in a thousand.’”

This maternal perception of Nursultan’s uniqueness was enhanced by a childhood dream of her son when he was 13. According to family accounts of it, Nursultan dreamt that he was made to climb one of the highest peaks in Ushkonyr, Mount Alakeldi, carrying a heavy sack of salt on his back. When he finally struggled to the summit, he looked down to the bottom of the hill he had climbed and, far away in the distance, he saw his school classmates gazing up at him. Aljan’s interpretation of this dream was to tell her son that he would make greater achievements than any of them.

In 1956, Nursultan and his contemporaries were faced with a difficult decision when Chemolgan School announced that it could no longer continue to teach the small group of seven Kazakh pupils in their native language. The members of the class were offered a choice. Either they could stay in the village school and be given their lessons only in Russian, or they could move five miles away to a larger school in Kaskelen where they would continue to be taught in Kazakh.

Abish and Aljan Nazarbayev decided that their eldest son should stay in Chemolgan. Nursultan had other ideas. He argued against his parents until he eventually persuaded them to let him be transferred to Kaskelen School. His advocacy was so persuasive that the parents of the other six Kazakh

pupils followed suit. This early display of leadership was not rooted in fears of linguistic inadequacy. For the teenage Nazarbayev already spoke and read fluent Russian which, as he well knew, was the lingua franca of the Communist Party and therefore an essential ingredient in any ambitious young man's quest for advancement. What motivated the boy more in his choice of school was his deep-seated feeling of identity with his Kazakh roots and heritage.

From his parents and their circle of friends, the young Nazarbayev absorbed a colourful understanding of Kazakhstan from ancient times. In the traditional Kazakh story telling ways of oral history, the earliest legends he was taught included the first stirrings of the distinctive nomadic civilisation that had its roots in the Sak, Usun, Hun, Kanglys, Oguz and Kipchak peoples, who roamed across the steppes between the 5th century BCE and the 13th century CE. One tale that caught his childhood imagination was the story of how Queen Tomiris of the Saks led her people to victory against the invading Persian army of King Cyrus. At the end of the decisive battle, the Queen cut off the King of Persia's head and dumped it into a sack full of blood with the cry "You craved for blood – now quench your thirst!"

Other bloodthirsty invaders, among them Attila the Hun in the 4th century and Genghis Khan in the 13th, fared better in their attempts to conquer the nomads. Like every Kazakh schoolboy, Nazarbayev was taught that all Kazakh khans or kings were direct descendants of Genghis Khan's eldest son. He also learned the details of the khans' constant wars over three centuries against Junghar attackers from China, followed by the struggles against the Russian Imperial forces of the Tsars. These epics, rarely mentioned in Soviet classrooms but told over and over again round the family fireplace, left their mark on the young Nazarbayev. He grew up to be a proud Kazakh. He knew from history that his people could be subjugated but they would never be subservient. They might be conquered and crushed, but they remained courageous and capable. In that spirit of suppressed yet strong nationalism, he accepted what he was offered from the Soviet school system. This was one of the few aspects of Communism which worked. It certainly provided Nazarbayev with a good education.

In September 1957, Nursultan Nazarbayev enrolled at Kaskelen School. He was accompanied by his mother, who took one look at the boarding facilities for out of town pupils and decided they were not good enough for her son. So she located some distant relatives in the town and arranged for Nursultan to lodge with them in the hope that he would be better fed and supervised at their home.

First impressions of the new boy Nazarbayev on the teachers at Kaskelen School were favourable. He was interviewed at the end of his first week by

the deputy headmaster, Mr Seitkhan Issayev, who assessed him as able, intelligent, and unusually talented: "I could see at once that he was the smartest boy in the tenth grade" recalled Issayev. "I taught him ancient Greek history and modern European history. He had an unusual thirst for knowledge, asking me clever questions and often taking books away after class to read in the evenings. As often as not, these books went wider than the curriculum. He wanted to learn more than the syllabus offered."

Soviet secondary education in the 1950s set high standards. By any measurement, Nursultan Nazarbayev was well read and well taught. He formed a taste for French literature but a distaste for Shakespeare, which he later blamed on poor Russian translations. He showed such aptitude at maths and physics that his schoolmates predicted that he would become a scientist. Away from his schoolbooks he was a noted rifle shot and horseman. He had a good singing voice and became a competent player of the accordion and the *dombra*. "Nursultan was good company, gregarious by nature", said his classmate Kydyrgali Baybek. "Like his father, he was a conciliator rather than a confronter. If he did not like someone he would not quarrel with him openly, and only gradually allowed his feelings of dislike to become clear."

Perhaps these behaviour patterns were an early indication of the young Nazarbayev's future political skills. They were complemented by some signs that he might one day be good at diplomacy too. For the mixture of pupils at Kaskelen was so multi-ethnic that Nursultan grew up in a cosmopolitan atmosphere. He contributed to the harmony of it by becoming a useful solver of problems and settler of quarrels, getting noticed by the teachers for his willingness to sit down and mediate between protagonists rather than to encourage playground fights, the usual method for solving schoolboy disputes. He was trusted as a mediator because he seemed genuinely interested in the other cultures around him.

An example of this interest was shown when a surprising letter arrived at the school in 1957 from a Chinese student in Beijing, asking if anyone would like to become his pen friend. This seemed such an extraordinary request from an unknown correspondent in an unknown country (as China was, even to its neighbours, in the 1950s) that the letter was at first treated with considerable suspicion. Eventually, after checking with the regional headquarters of the Communist Party, the Headmaster pinned up a translation of the letter on the notice board, asking if anyone would like to reply to it. Nursultan Nazarbayev was the only one of Kaskelen School's 250 pupils to take up this offer, starting what became an exchange of several letters with his Beijing penfriend. When asked why he was bothering to do this, he told the deputy headmaster: "Because I am interested in learning about China."

Nursultan's intellectual curiosity gave him wider horizons than his contemporaries. He was also blessed with deeper family roots than were usual in the rootless local community of newly arrived immigrants. For although he had been raised in hardscrabble poverty, he took immense pride in his Kazakh ancestry. He felt secure in his home environment, honouring his parents Abish and Aljan with a love that was warmly reciprocated. So as he came towards the end of his schooldays in the summer of 1958, 18-year-old Nursultan was a well-rounded young man with academic abilities that he knew were good enough to win him a place at one of the Soviet Union's best universities. "In my last months before graduating from high school I had more or less decided to become a scientist specialising in chemistry", he has recalled. "That was partly because I was good at science and partly because I had been impressed by the speeches of the new Soviet leader, Nikita Krushchev, who often made broadcasts about the importance of chemistry in raising the productivity of agriculture. So that is what I planned to study at a top university in Moscow."

These plans turned out differently. For all his ambition, industry and talent, Nursultan Nazarbayev did not in the end go to Moscow or to university. Instead he stayed at home, earning his living in his local region by the strength of his body rather than by the thoughts of his brain. This was a deliberate choice. He took it because he had read a book from his school library which so inspired him that it changed his life. The title of the book was *How the Steel Was Forged*.

2

Student and Steelworker

The book *How the Steel Was Forged* was an important influence in the life of Nursultan Nazarbayev. However, it was only one factor in the decision-making process that made him alter the course of his projected career away from being a university scientist towards becoming a manual steelworker. The other elements in this change of plan were a loving concern for his overburdened parents; an inspirational conversation with a Ukrainian geologist; a local newspaper advertisement; and an intuitive sense of vocation, perhaps even of destiny, which so often throughout his life was to call him to make unexpected choices.

The book was pure Soviet propaganda but with a well-written and exciting narrative. Its author, Nikolai Ostrovsky, told the story of a young Komsomol or Communist Youth League member who was working in a steel making plant. He and his team of fellow steelmakers were given an assignment of great national importance. Their task was to build a railway line of extra-strength steel through difficult terrain within a tight timetable. The obstacles in the way of achieving this objective became horrendously difficult. They included steel production delays, sickness, terrible weather, landslides along the route of the line and an increasingly unattainable completion date. Yet by superhuman endeavours of body and mind, in the end the hero of the book led his fellow workers to victory and the accomplishment of their mission on time. “This book was a great inspiration to me,” recalled Nazarbayev. “It was not really about steel, it was about the human spirit. Its message was that by belief, commitment, and an eagerness to serve, a good team of men can achieve an almost impossible mission.”

Nazarbayev’s personal sense of mission as he approached his 18th birthday was tempered by worry about his parents. He had an exceptionally good relationship with them. He loved their high spirits, their sense of humour, their warmth of heart, and the wild streak of creative Kazakh romanticism that ran through their lives. Although they were illiterate they had other talents. Aljan composed beautiful songs which she sang to her own accompaniment

on the *dombra*. She also told her children stories of nomadic legends in the Kazakh tribal tradition, some of them lionising the family's most famous ancestor, the 18th century war lord Karasay Batyr.

Abish was a quieter character but out on the steppes with his eldest son he displayed an occasional gift for poetry. Orally he could compose his own verses, often in praise of the glory of nature, sometimes in loving adoration of Aljan, and occasionally for the entertainment of his son. Abish enjoyed creating witty rhyming caricatures about village personalities. Nursultan was amused by these satirical poems. But when he learned them by heart and recited them to his schoolmates, they caused trouble. Angry parents who had been the subject of these parodies came round to complain to Abish: "How dare your son make up such rude poems about me?"

Abish must have enjoyed seeing off these complainants, but he did not have much time in his life for humour. For he was a man crushed by the pressures of rural poverty. The painful accident that had crippled his right arm combined with the incessant demands of his double workload at the collective farm and on the family's small plot of land took their toll. By the time he had reached his early fifties he was not a fit man. "I was worried about the health of my father and mother", recalled Nursultan Nazarbayev. "They both worked far too hard. I did not like the idea of going off to Moscow for three or four years and leaving them to cope with all their burdens."

At the time of his graduation from high school when these concerns were much on his mind, Nazarbayev had an important conversation with a geologist. He was the son of a Ukrainian family in the village. One summer this young man came back to visit his parents wearing the black uniform and insignia of a geologist of the Soviet Union. His official attire gave him status in the eyes of the boys of Chemolgan who gathered round him in the evenings to listen to him describing his work. "I can remember him pointing to an iron water pipe and telling us 'I am the man responsible for it, because I found the iron ore from which it is made'", recalled Nazarbayev.

I was fascinated by him and by his great pride in being in the team of professionals who find the treasures of the earth. Then he told us about the technology that turned his iron ore discoveries into steel. He described in detail the process of how you melt the ore in a blast furnace until it becomes molten metal and is eventually shaped into a steel pipe. As I listened to him night after night I said to myself "one day I too will be a geologist".

The problem about becoming a geologist for Nazarbayev was that it would mean spending most of the next three years studying in Moscow. Having graduated from Kaskelen School with the highest honours, this was the route he was expected to take. But his nagging worries about his father's health made him pause to give equally serious consideration to the option of stay-