

# THE ORAL HISTORY OF TWENTIETH CENTURY MONGOLIA



## Davaasambuu

### Basic information

Interviewee ID: 990074  
Name: Davaasambuu  
Parent's name: Ööldöh  
Ovog: Achit  
Sex: m  
Year of Birth: 1958  
Ethnicity: Dörvöd

### Additional Information

Education: incomplete secondary  
Notes on education: This most likely means 7 years of schooling.  
Work: НХХЯ-ны харьяа "Тарни" амралтын наряв  
Belief: Buddhist  
Born in: Böhмөрön sum, Uvs aimag  
Lives in: Mandal sum sum (or part of UB), Selenge aimag  
Mother's profession: herder  
Father's profession: herder

### Themes for this interview are:

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**[new technologies](#); [military](#); [authority](#); [work](#);**

**Alternative keywords suggested by readers for this interview are:** (Please click on a keyword to see more interviews, if any, on that topic)

**[forestation](#); [prison](#);**

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### Translation:

*Khishigsüren -*

Today we begin the second interview with Davaasambuu guai. You worked with Czech construction specialists at military construction unit. You wanted to talk about what you learned about the new technical equipments of the Czech construction specialists. What kind of new equipments were introduced? Where were the construction sites where you worked?

*Davaasambuu -*

I didn't volunteer for the repair division, you know. But I was working on something nice.

*Khishigsüren -*

In the military, right?

*Davaasambuu -*

Yes, in the military. I did welding and plumbing with the Czech specialists. It was really nice, sophisticated equipment. I assisted them for 12 month, and after that I wasn't able to work anymore. One of the jobs we did was building a shoe factory. We built the factory building. The foundations of the factory buildings were massive. It took us two to three months to lay them. When I was in the military I worked for the first time with such specialists, so I had many things to learn.

*Khishigsüren -*

How many specialists were there?

*Davaasambuu -*

I think there were 20 to 30 people. There was one specialist for every branch. And there were many engineers and technicians behind the scenes, you know. One squadron had 100 soldiers, and one squad had 15 soldiers. Every squad was led by a specialist. There was one for mixing the cement, one for the reinforcement, one for the plumbing and one for electricity. I worked in all of them.

*Khishigsüren -*

What equipment did they bring?

*Davaasambuu -*

There was the welding apparatus that we use now. They are different depending on the country they are made in. The people who worked here brought the equipment from their own country.

*Khishigsüren -*

Were the relations with the Czech specialists different from those with the Mongolian superiors?

*Davaasambuu -*

Well, of course foreigners would have never had bad relations with us. They were different. We didn't know the language, so they instructed us through gestures. And they kicked us when we didn't do as we were told. Our clothes and shoes were awesome, you know. We had working boots with soles and heels. Some were like that and others joked with us and were very friendly. Maybe they were friendly because we were soldiers. At that time we didn't know what chewing gums were, you know. They were sold only in Russian shops, so we didn't have access to them. I guess they were rationed. Sometimes they would give us one. They were all sorts of chewing gums. Some were flat and some were like cigarettes. We were really surprised at that time. At that time we only had clothes and food that were allocated to us according to the quota.

*Khishigsüren -*

For how many years, how long did the Czechs stay?

*Davaasambuu -*

As far as I know they stayed for three years. They had come before we did, I think that they had been there already for five years. I heard that they built all these factories. They checked everything that was being built very thoroughly before accepting it. So we showed everything that we did to the specialists for approval. We mixed the cement in a special machine, and I used to cast the foundations. They would check that very carefully. When we brought the cement on the truck, they would check it before unloading it. They checked the mixture. And they carefully checked the metal reinforcement. The sanitary materials would always come from Russia. They came by train. They were unloaded at the so-called technical base, and we used to fetch them from there. Beautiful things were coming and I worked with them.



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*Khishigsüren -*

Did you work only in the military construction unit during your military service?

*Davaasambuу -*

Yes, I was in the military construction unit for three years.

*Khishigsüren -*

Besides the industrial combine and the shoe factory, what other buildings did the military construction unit build while you were doing your military service?

*Davaasambuу -*

I worked on the construction of a leather factory, a shoe factory and a goatskin leather factory. I'm not sure what happened to them later. Besides that, I worked on the construction of a liquor and beer factory. The Bulgarians built an extension of the liquor and beer factory. Moreover, we built what today is the Lenin Museum. And a really tall building, the Foreign Trade...

*Khishigsüren -*

The Chamber of Commerce...

*Davaasambuу -*

Actually it was called the Ministry of Foreign Trade. Or maybe the Ministry of Trade...

*Khishigsüren -*

The Ministry of Foreign Trade.

*Davaasambuу -*

Yes, we used to call it the Ministry of Trade. Also that was built by the Czechs. They built very beautiful buildings. But I didn't work there for very long, maybe two or three months. Where I really worked were those factory buildings.

*Khishigsüren -*

Did you live on the construction site, or did you go there in the morning and leave in the evening?

*Davaasambuу -*

We went there in the morning. We had lunch and dinner there. We worked until 5 pm and then went back to the barracks. We were brought there on a truck in the morning and brought back on a truck in the evening.

*Khishigsüren -*

When you got involved in that criminal case, did you leave the military or was it time for your discharge anyway?

*Davaasambuу -*

I left the military. At that time I didn't know anything. Many things had happened in relation to construction... Many soldiers were involved in it, but only those who were caught left the military. Maybe two or three left. They were sentenced to two or three years. And they had to pay a fine, a small one, because only small things had disappeared from the storage. Through the provincial court and the public prosecution the money was taken from my parents. I was sentenced to prison, and I was released after a year.

*Khishigsüren -*

What were the sessions of the court-martial like then?

*Davaasambuу -*

Well...

*Khishigsüren -*

What I'm trying to ask is how did it happen that many people were involved but only those who had been caught were put on trial?

*Davaasambuу -*

It all began like this. When I was working at the construction site, a person in civilian clothes came and took me away. How did it happen.... the guard had told them that he had seen such and such a soldier. So this man in civilian clothes came and took me away. I didn't know he was a policeman. He left me in a waiting room. They interrogated me a lot there, asking what the soldiers did and so on. Where we were, there used to be a storage room of the leather factory. It wasn't actually a storage, but a fenced place. And it was full of materials piled up on stalls and covered. Those were all things that were used in the leather and in the shoe factories. They were covered with canvas cloth so stealing wasn't very difficult. They would simply lift the canvas from the ground and take things. They asked me a lot about it, and I told them a few names, when they asked me who had taken things and how. Many soldiers were interrogated, and quite a few were arrested. Some of the soldiers were still here and some had already been discharged. I joined the military in 1976, and the soldiers of 1975 had been discharged before my arrival. So those who were convicted based on the evidence came from among those who were still there. They interrogated me and then they took me and put me into the... how do you call it? I stayed there overnight. It was the '72'. I stayed there for two days and then they put me directly into the Gants Hudag. I had taken only one thing. Some senior soldiers had told me to take it for them and I did. This is how I got involved. I stayed in the Gants Hudag for three months. I experienced things there that I had never experienced before. In there, besides thinking about what I had done I thought about my parents. And I thought about how I had done what I had done. There were four prisoners besides me. They maltreated me in various ways. I didn't eat nor drink. In the morning they gave us a cup of black tea and a piece of bread. For lunch there was a bowl of soup and a cup of tea in the evening. The others ate one third of the bread that I was given in the morning. They would even drink half of the tea. I was unable to think of home, I only thought about food. It was that difficult and distressing. In the end there was a young man. A child, poor thing. There had been the four of us and one had left. Then another cute little boy came. He behaved like that, too, as soon as he came. He would eat the food of the two of us. He wouldn't even get up from his bed. In the end we found out that he was a chronic thief. His interrogator wouldn't come for a long time. Then in the end he came and took him away. So I told the other guy 'If he takes our bread tomorrow let's beat this disgusting thief!' The next morning they opened the locked door, said 'Take this' and left. The two of us were the first ones to get up in the morning. We would take the food and then give it away. But that morning we didn't give it to the others, but we ate it straight away. That other guy got up and came over, saying 'You thieves! You have gone too far, we gonna kill you!' But we grabbed him together and the three of us got into a fight. After that things became all right. I was there for three months, and that's how I experienced suffering.

*Khishigsüren -*

Did you have a lawyer then?

*Davaasambuу -*

Yes, I did.

*Khishigsüren -*

Could he defend you?

*Davaasambuу -*

Yes, he could. I was a soldier so I didn't pay him. Then we got acquainted. The main reason for my conviction was that Avhar said had become Minister of Defense that spring. He had studied in Russia, and he said that he would clean the defense sector. He said that the army was out of control and he filled the Gants Hudag with soldiers and officers. That's how I got involved. My name was included and then erased.

*Khishigsüren -*

How was the trial?

*Davaasambuу -*

I was there with another soldier of my year. We had been put on trial together and we were convicted. We were summoned when we were at our unit. In the morning at dawn we took a bus from the unit. And then the trial took place. The lawyer was a woman. At that time no payment had been made. My father had been transferring money through the provincial court in the countryside, because they had said that they would take the money from the families. That judge had probably sent it on by bank transfer, but I was unaware of all of that. I guess that if I had pursued this harder I could have been released on probation. But I had no idea of that method. It seems that the number of years people were sentenced to depended on whether the fee had been paid or not. I had nobody who would make an appeal on my behalf. So I was convicted and taken straight to the Gants Hudag.

*Khishigsüren -*

Where were you transferred to after the Gants Hudag?

*Davaasambu -*

To Züünharaa.

*Khishigsüren -*

And that's where you worked so well?

*Davaasambu -*

Yes, I worked well there. Since I had been in prison for many months, I was exhausted and haggard. Because I hadn't eaten, my whole body had become worn out and thin. I staggered and almost fell at the slightest effort. They let us in straight away and gave us tea and bread. The prisoners were very hungry, but we couldn't gobble the food, because it might cause constipation. One got it and I don't know whether he died or not. He was taken away. We were let into a dining hall and seated there. The cook was also a prisoner. He was rolling out the dough, lit a fire, and fried it in a 200-litre cooking vessel. He cut the dough into noodles and served us a meal. But that guy stole and ate the noodles that the cook was frying. He stuffed the almost raw noodles into his pocket and ate them, and then he got constipated. Poor thing, he was so hungry. Then he felt so bad and they brought him away. I heard that he died, that his intestine broke, but I'm not sure what happened to him. I stayed in that 'zone' for seven days. Then they took me, familiarized me with the materials, and assigned me to the prison workers who decided what work I should do and where. That's when destiny intervened. The person who registered the prisoners and allocated them to work tasks was an old woman from my place of origin. Maybe because I was coming from the same place, that lady was really sweet and allocated me to a very decent place. It was a newly established work place. They told us that first we would have to cut wood in the mountains, but that after that we would do very light and pleasant work. Our prison warden took us outside and there were five or six people ready to go. He said 'This is what you have to do. Can you do it?' I was the youngest, and I said 'I can't. Just recently my eyes were watering and my head was spinning, and I still can't walk. I can't do this kind of work.' So he took me back inside to that lady and said 'This one apparently can't walk.' And she chased me away saying 'Don't talk nonsense! I gave you such a nice job, don't you search for an easy job, you won't find anything better than this!' We were given blankets and mats from the prison, which we took to the valley where we cut wood. They told us to put the mats and blankets on the ground and sent us to the forest to cut wood straight away. We worked until the evening. Then they called us back. Somewhere we found three wooden planks, which we put into the cotton tents as beds, and that's how we slept in the beginning.

*Khishigsüren -*

Was it completely different from the conditions in the Gants Hudag?

*Davaasambu -*

Yes, it was totally different beginning from the meals. There were mainly old people. There were three or four young people, who had arrived with me. We were given good food. They fed us slowly so that our stomachs would get used to it. In prison we were always given nutritious food like horsemeat.

*Khishigsüren -*

It was healthy meat, right?

*Davaasambu -*

The food was sufficient and also the bread. I stayed there for a month and I think I was happy there. When we were there, the warden was a guy who drank a lot. One day he called me and I hurried over to him. He gave me a yellow ten-liter bucket and said 'Take this!' I took it and followed him. There was a road where many timber trucks passed. We followed it for three, four kilometers until we came to a river where many people stayed in tents and they had lots of tasty food and drinks. Those people were enjoying their time and collecting berries in the forest. That guy drank only alcohol there. Maybe he was acquainted with them. They ate terribly nice things. Then he said 'He is a new thief, you know. Don't let him alone, he might get lost'. Then we went to collect berries in the mountains. I had never seen blackberries. However, he sent me with those people to collect berries. We ate some nice food and left. They showed me the berries because I didn't know them. I immediately filled a bucket and gave it to them, and then I collected another 10-litre bucket for them. In the evening they gave me plenty of bread and other things, thanked and kissed me and sent me away. It was evening, but the warden had disappeared. Maybe he had got on a truck and gone back to the Haraa, I don't know. The next day he came early in the morning and told me again to take the 10-litre bucket and go to collect berries. I did that for about ten days. And then your brains begin to work, you know. When I walked along the road with a bucket full of berries, people asked me to give them to them. At that time I needed sugar, toothpaste and a toothbrush, so I bartered the berries for these things. I drank black tea with sugar and in this way my life began. But the people, who were with me, got angry. 'This thief bastard comes here and goes immediately over the top', they said. Then we finished the timber work and started to plough. And the berry season was over because it was already September. In that period I had gotten some money and I bought the things that I needed. And I used them. I got acquainted with the other people and I got to know them. They was a young warden. Our wardens had been changed three times. Maybe they didn't get along with each other. In the end there was this young man. He beat one man and one of us went immediately to the big boss to tell him. He was immediately taken away. So we talked to each other and decided to write a petition to ask the prison management to let us work without any warden. We wrote that we would work independently under the supervision of one of us. The prison management gave us permission and we worked without any warden. In the end, a technician who was responsible for us came. He was a specialist in forestation and taught us how to plant and grow trees. We collected pinecones and larch cones, and he loaded them on a truck. He came on a truck with a trailer from the prison, and brought them to other places to reforest them. We did this kind of work. Because I worked well I was rewarded with reductions of sixty, thirty and forty days. All together, it amounted to a reduction of six months of work. And therefore I was released after little more than a year. Also my fee had been paid. Maybe because I was working well or because I had come from the military, they released me immediately. And they gave us a bit of money for the work we did, maybe it was ten Tögrög, something like that. There were these incentives and awards, and it seems that they put it into an account. When I was released I got 600 Tögrögs and I was really surprised. I got my prison release papers, I gave back my mat and my blanket and my laissez-passer. When I went in, all our 'though nuts' came out. The treasurer was sitting next to a big iron box, he made me sign and gave me the money straight away. They were all sitting outside in a row. I handed over the blanket and the mat, took the money and left straight away. Then I went to the people I had been working together with, gave each of them five or three Tögrög and left.

*Khishigsüren -*

Did prisoners have the possibility to buy something with that money?

*Davaasambu -*

Well, at that time we bought only food. We used to buy sugar and that kind of stuff. There was no alcohol or wine then. The smokers bought tobacco. And we bought condensed milk, toothbrushes and other items of daily use.

*Khishigsüren -*

It seems that the conditions weren't so bad, right?

*Davaasambu -*

It was hard for a while. It was terribly hard, you know. We were full of lice. When we left Ulaanbaatar for the Gants Hudag, there was no space there. Further away from the Gants Hudag there was a transit place. We were gathered there and then sent to the appropriate places. Because there was no space for the convicts, we were squeezed into this huge transit place. We were waiting there without knowing where we would go. Then we were brought to the Môngönmorit and the Avdrant prisons. If the trucks didn't come we had to stay, you know. We were bitten by lice and bugs until we were swollen and red. I was there for seven days. It was terrible. People have to shoulder such things, you know.

*Khishigsüren -*

But in the end this one mistake in your life later had a positive impact, right? Because you had seen things, you became very prudent and careful not to make any mistakes, right?

*Davaasambu -*

People tell me that I am very suspicious. But I think it's not that I am suspicious, but rather that I lead a cautious life. It's not that I have bad thoughts or that I am stingy or that I don't give to others. I cannot not give to people, I do give. I'm not stingy, I give. And nevertheless people call me that. I worked as storekeeper responsible for the food supplies for about ten years. When people came and told me to give them some salt or that they had run out of food, I would always give them what they asked for. And still they say that I foster bad thoughts. I don't know why. Maybe I look like that to people. They take my cautious attitude for bad thoughts. When I look at other people, there is nobody who has really good thoughts. There is nobody who would call and say 'Take this and eat and drink. I have prepared a meal for you, eat.' It doesn't happen that someone says 'I have this' and I take and eat it. This is how it seems to be when you think about it.

*Khishigsüren -*

What event influenced your life very deeply?

*Davaasambu* -

Well, I worked from when I was little, but I lost many of those skills. The most important event was that I went to prison from the military, that's why I couldn't foster them. And after I was released I didn't have many opportunities to acquire skills.

*Khishigsüren* -

Are you talking about the building profession?

*Davaasambu* -

No, besides the building profession. I had the possibility to become a professional builder, there was the possibility to study at the technical college in Nalaih. But I just didn't know how to pursue it. Therefore I came here and started to work straight away. And here there was this ah called Jürmed. His parents lived in Darhan. I had never been to Darhan. During Tsagaan Sar I went there and got acquainted with them. He was in charge of the skilled staff at the 31st base. I got acquainted with his children and we used to visit each other occasionally. Then one day he said 'Come and get a job at our base, we will take you as a plumber. You work as a plumber for three months and then we send you to do a driving course. I agreed and wanted to quit my job here, but I couldn't. And I wasn't interested in the driving course. If I had gone I would have become a professional driver. Someone would have taught me. I regret that very much. If I had learned how to drive, I would have had a car. But I wasn't interested. People here buy tractors and cars, it would have been really nice. I have the money to buy one. Not money, but livestock. I could sell a few animals and buy one. But unfortunately I am not interested in these technical things.

*Khishigsüren* -

Is your life special or remarkable compared to other people's lives? Is there anything special and interesting in your life?

*Davaasambu* -

No, there isn't. I started to work here on the 20th of April 1981. And I have been working here ever since. So now I am a senior worker, who has always worked here. And all the darga ask me about the history of this place, you know.

*Khishigsüren* -

So you are the one who knows the history of the 'Tarni' resort and has worked here for the longest time, right? Let's finish the interview. Thank you for taking the time to give this extensive interview.

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