

# FRONTIER EMBASSY

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**WANTED:** Ambassador. Must enjoy minus 40-degree weather. Ability to do electrical wiring, fix plumbing, repair computers, operate communications equipment also useful. Benefits include a small apartment sometimes lacking heat or electricity and extensive travel in four-wheel-drive vehicle.

**N**

ot a job description to attract the eye of the average Foreign Service officer, but a good portrait of the duties of an ambassador in Mongolia. Four years before a wave of new embassies opened in the former Soviet Union, Embassy Ulaanbaatar became the first embassy on the frontiers of American diplomacy. Mongolia, the home of Genghis Khan, the land of steppes and nomads, is a vast country stretching from New York to Denver and Minneapolis to Dallas. With only 2 million people, it has the same population as Northern Virginia.

In early 1921 Mongolian revolutionaries, assisted by the Red Army, took over the country. In 1924, after the death of the last theocratic ruler of Mongolia, the Communists formally proclaimed the Mongolian People's Republic—creating the first Soviet satellite. Sixty-six years later, following a series of peaceful demonstrations during the winter of 1989-1990, Mongolia became the first Asian communist country to abandon Marxism.

During its years under Soviet domination Mongolia became an extension of the Soviet Union—its life and society were totally dominated by the USSR Events in the

USSR from Stalin's purges of the 1930s to the first glimmerings of *perestroika* were mirrored in Mongolian society. Its knowledge of the West was through the distorted prism of Moscow. A classic colonial society, Mongolia fed raw materials to the Soviet economy and received finished products in return. Everything—from window glass to peak-use electricity—was imported.

In the summer of 1990, Mongolia had many advantages as it faced a transition to a democratic society: a relatively simple economy with a strong animal husbandry foundation, an extremely well-educated population—the literacy rate is in excess of 90 percent, and a tremendous, essentially untapped natural resource base to sustain long-term development.

## **Soviet ties broken**

But on January 1, 1991 an economic barrier suddenly came down between Mongolia and the Soviet Union, tearing apart their unified economy. Suddenly, Mongolia had to use hard currency to pay for Soviet imports. Soviet aid, which had averaged 30 percent of GNP annually

BY JOSEPH LAKE

during the last 30 years, came to an end. The international donor community came forward to support Mongolia in its transition to a free-market economy. However, no one anticipated the collapse of the Soviet economy and eventually the Soviet Union itself. The

ripple effects of these dramatic changes were particularly acute in Mongolia—a country where more than 90 percent of its foreign trade was with the Soviet Union.

Last year foreign trade fell 40 percent and continues a downward spiral this year. Unemployment is likely to rise to over 10 percent by the end of the year. Inflation, which was more than 100 percent last year, is running at approximately 12 percent a month this year. With the winter approaching, Mongolia's power stations and coal mines are teetering on the brink of disaster. In January, when the temperature is minus 40 degrees, the power system could fail leaving an estimated 200,000 people without any source of heat.

Today, Mongolia faces a crisis that threatens to destroy the infrastructure it has created, and its efforts to firmly establish democracy and a free market economy are trapped in a crisis brought on by the economic and political collapse of the Soviet Union.

### Embassy pioneers

In January 1987, the United States recognized Mongolia. And in the spring of 1988, Steve Mann and Toria Nuland were the Foreign Service pioneers who arrived to open Embassy Ulaanbaatar. Symbolic of Mongolia's modern history and prophetic of future problems, the first telex sent to the new U.S. embassy was delivered to the Embassy of the USSR—the post office had never heard of the Americans!

As planned, Mann and Nuland departed that fall after Dick Williams, our first, non-resident ambassador, presented his credentials. Mike Senko and Ted Nist reopened the embassy on a full-time basis in the summer of 1989. They and their families, including the Senko children aged 2 and 16, had the distinction of being the first Americans in recent



Picnic at 20 below—Left to right are embassy families Sharon Senko, Dita Senko, Sally Nist, Mike Senko, Ted Nist and the Nist's dog, Shannon.

history to winter in Ulaanbaatar. Among their winter activities were Sunday picnics in sub-zero cold.

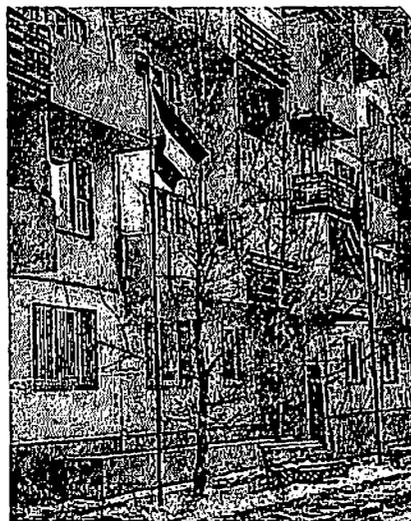
During the 1989-90 revolution, demonstrations in sub-zero weather challenged the demonstrators, as well as those reporting on the demonstrations.

Many Foreign Service officers have witnessed dramatic turns in history—but few have spent so many chilly hours doing it. An unreliable telex connection through Moscow continued as the only channel of communication. A Cyrillic keyboard on the telex machine added to the challenge of drafting an English-language message as desired by the Department of State.

There was no ambassadorial office, apartment, or furniture before my arrival in July 1990. Fortunately, someone vacated a fifth floor walkup in the same building as the embassy, and the Nists moved upstairs from their second-floor apartment, providing office space for the new ambassador in the living room and a communications office in the kitchen. A temporary-duty apartment next door became the "residence." Japanese furniture discards provided a dining room table and a desk for the new ambassador. There was one minor problem with the dining room table—the extended leaves fell off the end of the table—encouraging small representational events.

The furniture problem was solved when Embassy

Beijing donated one apartment of furniture for the ambassador in Ulaanbaatar. However, unloading the furniture from the train and bringing it to the apartment was another challenge. The driver of the only forklift available had gone on vacation and taken the keys with him. Ultimately my wife went to the rail yards, climbed into the box car, and personally supervised the unloading of lift vans. Tools were one of many things the embassy did not have—I put the furniture together using a screwdriver and pliers from one of the two embassy vehicles.



First American embassy building in Ulaanbaatar.

### Expanded embassy

Even though the expanded

embassy now occupied two apartments, space was still at a premium: the copying machine was kept on a board on the bathtub, the telex, which now had an English-language keyboard, was housed in the closet. However, my favorite space story concerned the interview I did for an American television team. It proved extremely difficult to fit the camera, the interviewer, and myself in the small office. Finally, the camera remained in the doorway. After the interview, the cameraman commented that he had never before filmed an interview in a closet.

The two weeks after my arrival were hectic: the embassy provided an observer team for the first democratic elections in Mongolian history and prepared for the secretary of State's visit to Ulaanbaatar. With the elections—a giant step toward democracy—and Secretary Baker's visit, the U.S.-Mongolian relationship changed dramatically. Over the next year, U.S. foreign assistance to Mongolia grew from zero to over \$20 million. As the relationship exploded, our tiny embassy of three people was swamped with a flood of visitors from almost every agency in the foreign affairs community. One week the permanent staff was outnumbered seven to one by temporary-duty personnel.

At the time of my arrival, the new building selected for the location of our embassy was under construction. To a cynical Foreign Service officer who had served in the Communist bloc before, this building looked like a poor hope for the future. As a matter of fact, the building is still under construction as of October 1992. I immediately began a search for a different site. After extensive and frustrating efforts, I finally went to President Ochirbat and said that if we could not find an embassy site, we could not do our job. That afternoon we were offered the building an Foreign Building Operation's team had turned down three years earlier. They were probably right, but it was the



Ambassador Lake serves mutton as Administrative Staff Director Luvsanjav looks on.

a group that did not eat vegetables or fish—presenting a unique culinary challenge for the staff.

Winter was far from over when I returned to Ulaanbaatar. We moved into our new building on April Fools Day in 1991. While it did provide more space for our growing staff and visitors, we faced new problems. I missed the 50 degree office temperatures—in my new office the temperature was frequently in the 40s. But snows stopped as usual in May, and the summer brought us some welcome relief.

### Improvise or do without

In Ulaanbaatar, everything we need—from fresh fruit and vegetables to nails and paper is brought in from Beijing. When one of our vehicles was involved in an accident, there were no spare parts to repair the grill or frame. However, my driver is very creative. I suspect we had the only embassy vehicle in the world with a two by four as part of the frame and animal hide painted to match the vehicle for a grill.

We developed interesting skills to cope with the frequent absence of electricity. A candle placed in front of a mirror provides enough light to read by when the power is off. A refrigerator must be used to keep food warm enough to eat. One of our winter arrivals was in his apartment for a week before he realized the refrigerator was not plugged in.



The staff of Embassy Ulaanbaatar:—Sally Nist, Kharnuden, Ted Nist, Dunkerjav, Mike Senko, and Luvsanjav.

We also needed to be creative to plan for visitors. Late one Saturday night we received word that Secretary Baker was going to make his second visit the following Thursday. Four days of preparation for a four-day visit by the secretary of state was one of the more interesting roller coaster rides of my Foreign Service career. Fortunately, by the time of the visit we had upgraded communications and had a telex with a computer terminal and an INMARSAT satellite telephone. Now it only took us five minutes to receive a one-page cable.

A cold night spent by candlelight may not be the same as a cocktail party in Western Europe, but there are rewards. The challenge facing the Americans who serve in Mongolia is how to transfer 200 years of experience with democracy and free enterprise to a people who lack that experience. The 50 Peace Corps volunteers and staff, the small USAID staff and contractors, and the State officers who serve there are all making a difference.



Shannon, the Nist's dog is immortalized on a Mongolian stamp.

Mongolia has shown that it is crucial to have reliable communications, adequate funding, and flexibility in management to allow the embassy to focus on key issues.

By the way, in October 1991, we finally established regular unclassified communications with the department. However, when the frozen ground melts in the spring, or it rains in the summer, communications fail for a few days at a time. It is still the frontier. ■

*Joseph Lake has been U.S. ambassador to Mongolia since July 1990. The views expressed are solely the author's and do not necessarily represent those of the U.S. government. (Photos by Sally Nist and Karen Enstrom.)*

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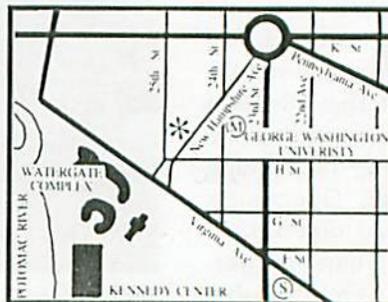
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