

That evening the left bank of the river presented an unwonted spectacle in this usually so lifeless region, where the smoke from a shepherd's camp-fire was but rarely seen. Now no fewer than sixteen fires were burning in our immediate neighbourhood, like a string of pearls along the bank upstream. Turki merchants from Kucha and Turfan were encamped there. The brilliant illumination reminded one of the sea-front in some little sea-side town. Downstream only five fires were to be seen, round which our boatmen and servants were having their evening meal.

»River Bend in the Gravel Desert« — the very name shows that at this point the desert reaches the river, and that the stifling dry wilderness, over which the silence of death reigns supreme, stretches out its hands towards the life that is nourished by the waters of the Konche-darya. This was not the first time I had encamped at Sai-cheke. I had been there thirty-eight years earlier, on March 23rd, 1896; but then I had with me a small caravan of camels and horses. BERGMAN had also encamped here, in September 1928.

FINAL SPLITTING OF THE EXPEDITION

We remained at Sai-cheke for more than a day, to organize the expeditions that had been planned for the immediate future. Only CHEN and I were to go to Lop-nor. HUMMEL was travelling slowly, and wanted to stop at good places for his collections. KUNG stayed behind to take part in the motor convoy.

We had six double boats and ten paddlers. The baggage was packed and stowed away, and the boats prepared for a long voyage. The double canoe on which the bags of flour were loaded was decked over with planks. The two biggest canoes were bound firmly together, and in them were placed seven large petrol-drums, each containing 150 chin. This we were taking with us downstream to the future headquarters of the expedition near the longitude of the spring Yardang-bulaq, in order to reduce the load of the three motor-lorries.

The cooking apparatus, the cook, CHIA KUEI, and GAGARIN (one of the Russian soldiers) occupied the third double canoe; in the fourth we had sheep and provisions. The fifth and sixth were CHEN's and mine, and these remained unchanged.

On the morning of April 13th our two provision-boats together with the kitchen and petrol-boats went off ahead of us downstream. HUMMEL gave CHEN a little medicine-chest and some medical instructions. Finally, we all had coffee down at the landing-place, where all eight members of the expedition assembled to say good-bye. This was the last time we were all together.

The motor-convoy was to start for the Yardang-bulaq region the following day. It consisted of BERGMAN, KUNG, YEW, GEORG and EFFE, the Mongols, all the Chinese servants, except two, as well as two of the escort.