When I had my first *darshan* of Maharajji, K.K. Sah was my translator—the first person I met from Maharajji’s family of devotees. My first impression of him was how familiar he was with Maharajji, so free with him, not holding anything back.

When Maharajji sent me to stay with K.K. at his house, I began to see his spiritual side. I saw all the pictures of holy people on his wall and in his altar room, as well as the books he had and the way he turned our discussions to spiritual topics. K.K. was so at ease talking about spirit.
FOREWORD

He lived in an old house with many floors and narrow staircases. I was used to considerably more comfort back in America. Maharajji told K.K. to feed me “double roti” (toast). I thought I was being punished. On the physical plane it was all very unfamiliar, but after some time we got to laughing about the cultural differences around food. They took great joy in feeding me, and distracting me while they piled more food on my plate. With that feeding and loving care, I started to feel like part of the family, a familiar family.

That family feeling made my discomfort vanish and my perceptions shifted. I began to understand the Hindu aphorism, “A guest in the home is God.” I was going from middle class professor to family member. I had missed the feeling of this type of family love when I grew up.

I was reminded of what Maharajji said, “I feed the Westerners
love through food.”

K.K. behaved no differently with me than with Maharajji. He treated him like a regular human, yet he knew at the same time that Maharajji was not a regular person. K.K.’s humor, warmth, fearlessness, and honesty were infectious. When Maharajji had K.K. take me into his home, he also had him take me into his heart. K.K. became my brother. I truly felt the bond beyond this lifetime with K.K., something I had never before felt. He was never impressed with my western credentials. Instead, we had unconditional love.

He was drawn to my father and step-mother as they were familiar to him. He was so happy that my Dad treated him like family. Actually he brought out that quality in my father. In fact K.K.’s siddhi (spiritual power) is that he is able to make everyone feel like family.

His child-like quality is so infectious. I was not surprised when I heard that Maharajji gave him the blessing that he would always remain child-like.

Whenever I have been at K.K.’s house in his family temple room, I can feel the legacy of the siddhas (perfected ones) that permeates the room. This book represents K.K.’s persona—his love of the siddhas, from Hairakhan Baba to Neem Karoli Baba.

I can hear K.K. speaking to me when I read this book, which is an introduction to the bhav (spiritual feeling) we all got when we spent time living with his family in India.

Many people say to me that I was so lucky to be with Maharajji. The revelation of this book is that it transmits his love and spirit and, in fact, the soul of the entire Kumaon area, or Deva Bhumi, the abode of the gods, as it’s called.

When you read this book, you will understand why K.K. Sah is my deepest friend and brother.
Ram Dass, George Alpert (Ram Dass's father),
K.K., Phyllis (George's wife)
In 1970, I traveled to India after meeting Ram Dass. I had asked him to connect me with his guru, Neem Karoli Baba. Little did I know that not only would I meet Maharajji, as we called him, but I’d also meet a family of his devotees who were to become as dear to me as my own blood family. Before that fateful trip to the East, I could only think of family as a broken part of my life. Not that my parents did not care for me, but they were too wounded from their own history and cultural boundaries to provide that space of unconditional acceptance and love.

Soon after I arrived in India, I met up with Ram Dass at Swami Muktananda’s ashram. Ram Dass told me that he had found Maharajji’s whereabouts; he tucked a note into my pocket with the address of a hotel in the foothills of the Himalayas.

Two days later, I arrived in Nainital and was ushered into the hands of M.L. Sah, one of the two brothers who owned the hotel. I had no idea what to expect from this perfect stranger, and I certainly was not familiar with Indian customs. I was promptly served a cup of chai and M.L. welcomed me as if I were a long lost relative. He regaled me with stories of Maharajji and the other saints who had walked this sacred land for so many centuries. It was as if I had entered a dream world, at least until the next day when I met Maharajji for the first time and realized I had, in fact, come home. The dream was real.

Next I was introduced to M.L.’s cousin, K.K. Sah, and their
large extended family, through whom all of us Westerners were brought into a new reality: unconditional family love. At K.K.’s house, we were fed in a temple room where Hairakhan Baba, Bal Brahmachari Maharaj, Neem Karoli Baba, and other saints had all been fed. Their family tradition included living with the saints! And guests were treated as if they were God. We learned to be like children, demanding food and comfort from our parents.

I remember at one point thinking that this felt more like home than the home I had left on the other side of the world. That feeling has persisted for all these decades. Maharajji left his body in 1973, but the unconditional love that we received from him, and which was extended to us from his Indian family, has spread like a benevolent virus through our Western community. As Meher Baba said, “Love is like a disease. Those who have it give it to those who don’t.”

Deva Bhumi, this book from K.K. Sah, is a gift from the immense heart of the region in northern India known as the Kumaon. It’s K.K.’s story of growing up in the lap of the siddhas. K.K.’s father traveled yearly the narrow trails on horseback to the sacred temple of Badrinath and encountered many of these realized beings along the way. Stories about them graced the lives of his family. This book is primarily the story of one of these siddhas, Sombari Baba, whose tale has never before been told.

Above all, this book is permeated with the highest spiritual emotion, or bhav as it’s called in India, that leaves us with the feeling of unconditional love and the possibility for our own realization of true kindness and compassion.
Introduction

Deva Bhumi is a region in the Northwest foothills of the Himalayas (Uttaranchal), where gods and saints have lived for thousands of years, where they performed their leelas (divine play) and inspired their devotees along the path of bhakti, dharma, and karma. (Bhakti is the path of devotion, dharma is the principle of cosmic order and righteousness, and karma is the spiritual principle of cause and effect that influences the future of a person.) I have always lived in Nainital, in the Kumaon hills, and grew up inclined towards the spiritual path, mainly through listening to the stories of the saints of this region since childhood. It is my hope that through this book Westerners can feel and understand the glory of the saints and siddhas. And that future generations in India will maintain the tradition of love and bhakti and the glory of the saints.

The Kurmanchal mountains have been blessed with the presence of many amazing siddhas over the centuries. However, their stories are not always known, and often get forgotten. Especially with the fast pace of modern life, the younger generation is not fully aware of the wonderful heritage, life, and teachings of these siddha masters. The intention behind this book is to make them aware of the lives of the great masters who have lived in this very area.

The stories in this book have been collected from eyewitnesses and first-hand accounts. Most of those people are now very old (and many have passed away since the articles were collected), so there may be some discrepancies in dates. However, I have tried to be as faithful as possible to exact facts. It is my hope that readers may get
to know a little (a drop in the ocean) about the qualities of the siddhas who shower unconditional grace on us.

The root message of the saints is to love and serve and remember the Divine, but in the presence of unconditional grace, a devotee does not need to do even that! Simply by being in the presence of these saints, all the work is done. It is my hope that reading about these saints in this book will bring exactly that blessing to readers: that of being in the blessed presence of these great masters.

In the past, people in this area of the Himalayas were not very educated. They were simple, god-fearing people, sharing the stories of saints and siddhas among themselves. Going to see these beings (having darshan) was to pray for prosperity, to solve family problems, to get their children married—all worldly desires. No one wrote down anything about the saints of Deva Bhumi. For their part, the saints never encouraged crowds; they had no desire for name and fame. Their teachings were indirect. Sometimes there were miracles. In other parts of India, where the devotees were well-educated and could understand the glory of the saints, books were written about them, such as those about Ramakrishna, Ramana Maharshi, and Shirdi Sai Baba. But nothing was ever written about the saints of the Himalayas.

Even the early Westerners who lived in the region did not write about their experiences. For example, Jim Corbett (who was born in Nainital), the legendary British hunter of man-eating tigers, went to Tanakpur, where the Purnagiri Temple sits on the banks of the Sarda River in the Kumaon district. There he saw the lights of the Goddess. The temple priest fell at his feet and said, “We have been here for the last fifty years and do worship every day, but we could never see that light. You, who are a hunter, you could see that light.” After that, Corbett never fired on tigers again and became a noted
conservationist and naturalist, who spoke out about protecting India's wildlife. He created a reserve for the endangered Bengal tiger, which was renamed Jim Corbett National Park in his honor. But he never wrote about his spiritual experiences.
INTRODUCTION

Even in today’s materialistic world, a trip through the Himalayas brings great peace and inspires the heart. Those who are in search of truth and inner peace are always attracted to these mountains.

The Himalayas extend over thousands of miles, from Kashmir in the Northwest to Arunachal Pradesh in the Northeast. The area of Uttarakhand (formerly Uttaranchal) is a state in northern India that has special significance in the heart of Indians, especially in the Kumaon division. Many holy shrines such as Gangotri, Yamnotri, Badrinath, Kedarnath and Bageshwar—varying from the very famous to the almost unknown—lie in this area, which attracts saints, spiritual teachers, and seekers from all over India.

SADHUS, SAINTS, AND SIDDHAS

From the times of Adi Shankaracharya in the early 8th century to Swami Vivekananda and Swami Ram Tirtha in the 19th century and Neem Karoli Baba in the 20th century, many great beings have come to Uttarakhand. (The great follower of truth and the “father of the Nation,” Mahatma Gandhi, wrote his book Anasakti Yoga while staying in Kausani in Uttarakhand.)

What is the difference between a saint, a sadhu, and a siddha? A sadhu or sadhaka is a renunciate, one who has been initiated in a particular sect and does his sadhana (spiritual practices). Anyone can be called a sadhu. Even I have been known as a sadhu because of my devotion and spiritual practices. If someone is living in a family, if he is leading a very simple life based on spiritual values, he will be known as a sadhu type of person.

In India, when you go to the Kumbha mela—a great gathering of more than 80-90 million people—there are millions upon millions of sadhus. Not all of them have holy aspirations, but they are
practicing a lifestyle that is encouraged and protected by their sect at the mela. The heads of these sects, or *mahants*, may be wearing garlands of flowers, holding big malas, and be carried in palanquins in procession, but their self-realization may be limited.

An advanced sadhu may be called a saint—someone who has a certain level of attainment—while a sadhu can be either just beginning on the path or far along it. Someone who is living a simple life of devotion and spiritual practice, doing their morning and evening prayers, may be called a saint—treading the path towards God. You may receive wonderful teachings from these saints. They may even do so-called miracles. But siddhas, perfected beings, are above and beyond sadhus and saints. (Often, the terms saint and siddha are used interchangeably, which does create some confusion.) Siddhas use their power not for name or fame, as some saints do, but as a form of teaching for their devotees. The ways of a real siddha cannot be known, but their devotees will experience their grace and love. If we have love, we can conquer everything.

The stage of siddha is attained after a long, long process. I have heard a siddha comes along once in thousands of saints. A sadhu or saint has to do many *pujas* (rituals/ceremonies) to attain God. He will have to maintain all the standards of a saintly person, taking his bath, doing *japa* (reciting a mantra on a mala), doing sadhana, doing rituals. But when the saint is fully cooked, he reaches the stage of *purna siddha*. He may take a bath, or not. He doesn't do any puja or go to temples. His life is now lived for others, not for himself. Neem Karoli Baba only needed one *dhoti* (cloth wrapped around the waist), one blanket. He passed the stage of doing sadhana; he had attained perfection. Maharajji (Neem Karoli Baba) used to say: “What’s the use of doing rituals when people are dying of hunger? Feed people, then do puja.”
INTRODUCTION

A siddha can do anything, but a sadhu or beginner on the path has to maintain the niyam, the laws of nature. That is the difference between a siddha and an ordinary saint. An ordinary saint will put on the sacred thread and vibhuti (sacred ash) and do japa, but Maharajji was never seen wearing the thread or doing puja in his adult life. During his earlier tapasya time, he would pass through temples and often pranaam to the murtis (statues of deities) because he was always one with all the gods.

Those who understand the stage of a real siddha know so only when the siddha allows the devotee to understand these things. That is the problem in the West: everyone that comes there from India is treated as if they were on the same level—a sadhu, a saint, or a siddha. A saint may lecture and preach, but a siddha can be silent. It is the vibration of his presence, a look that can change your whole being without anything seeming to be done. A devotee came to Bal Brahmachari Maharaj who had many problems in his mind. As he sat in front of Brahmachari, he received answers to each of his questions without asking a single one out loud. That is the power of a siddha.

A siddha might do a miracle for the sake of instilling faith in his devotees, while a saint might do a miracle to attract a crowd. The siddha will generally avoid a crowd. The siddha knows who is deserving and who is not, so he will act according to his devotee’s karma (sanskaras, the history and traits that influence that person). Whenever Neem Karoli Maharaj did a miracle, he always said, “I am nobody. God did it.”

If you visit the places where the siddhas have lived, you can feel the intense vibrations that are still there. Places like Padampuri, Kainchi, Khairna, Kakrighat—where saints stayed and performed their leelas—if you go there with a pure heart, you can feel the siddha’s ananda (bliss).
Sitting in front of a siddha, even if he doesn’t talk, you will realize a kind of joy. Your mind and heart are the best judge. In the Ramayana it talks about the four yugas, the vast ages of the past. We are in the Kali Yuga, the lowest vibratory age. The Ramayana says that in the Kali Yuga, only those persons with good sanskaras will be able to have darshan of a siddha, for they are hidden nowadays.

IN THIS BOOK

I am taking you on an exploration of the saints and siddhas of the Kumaon region, going back over a hundred years. From family stories, I learned that my father had a special connection, love, and devotion for Sombari Baba. My Uncle Hubba told me many stories, and I read others from a monthly magazine that was published in Almora in the 1930s. I started by soliciting accounts from his original devotees and translated many of them from the Pahari hill dialect.

No one can claim that he or she can write about the saints. Writing about them is just like a drop of the ocean—an indescribable experience of grace. As Tulsi Das has said in the Ramayana: “Vidhi Hari Har Kavi Kovid Bani, Kahat Sadhu Mahima Sakuchani.” “Even the speech of deities like Brahma, Vishnu, and Mahesh, poets and men of wisdom, falters in depicting the glory of pious souls (saints).”

True devotees like nothing better than to sit together and hear stories of those who have inspired them along the path to God. May these recollections, many from people who have since passed on, inspire your path.
When Neem Karoli Baba was teaching the mysteries of life in the sacred Kumaon hills, K.K. Sah was at the center of this magic, so he knows what he is speaking about when he writes about other saints, mystics, and masters who have lived in this storied land. Treasure the tales of these great beings in this holy place!

— Dr. Larry Brilliant, physician, epidemiologist, Chairman of the Board of the Skoll Global Threats Fund, and author of Sometimes Brilliant

For anyone interested in a delightful tour of the saints and siddhas of the Kumaon region, which reaches beyond the bounds of our ordinary lives, this book will be a joy, full of mystery and wisdom.

— Sharon Salzberg, New York Times best-selling author of Real Happiness, Faith, and A Heart as Wide as the World

Reading about the Grace, Wisdom, and Compassion of the Saints and Siddhas who wandered the foothills of the Himalayas opens the heart and gives us a connection to our own deeper being. It is a rare pleasure to travel back in time with K.K. to the days when Sombari Maharaj shared his Presence and Love with all who came to him.

— Krishna Das, kirtan master (with 14 albums and a documentary film), and author of Chants of a Lifetime

K.K. Sah has had a lifelong affinity for the great saints and yogis of the Himalayan hills. These stories point to the reality of Spirit, beyond space and time. Deva Bhumi is a transmission from a world of love without limit where human and Divine merge.

— Rameshwar Das, co-author with Ram Dass of Be Love Now and Polishing the Mirror