

Tibet Oral History Project documents impact of Chinese invasion, occupation

By Marcella Adamski, Executive Director

I HAVE BEEN waiting my whole life to tell what happened in Tibet," said a relieved 82-year-old Sonam Gogyal at the end of his videotaped interview with the Tibet Oral History Project (TOHP). As one of the dwindling number of elderly Tibetan refugees, he fulfilled a longing to describe how peaceful life in his Himalayan homeland was forever shattered by the 1949 Chinese invasion and by the subsequent occupation still oppressing Tibetans today. During the Chinese Communist takeover 1.2 million Tibetans were killed, 6,000 monasteries destroyed and more than 120,000 people were forced to flee Tibet. These refugees, now 70, 80 and 90 years of age, are the elders interviewed by the Tibet Oral History Project.

TOHP was initiated in response to a request by His Holiness the XIV Dalai Lama. While conducting an investigation about human rights abuses of Tibetan children under Chinese occupation, Marcella Adamski met with the Dalai Lama and asked what else could be done to help the people of Tibet.

His Holiness urged that the Tibetan elders living in exile be interviewed before they died and their stories were lost forever. He urged that their eyewitness accounts be made available on the Internet for the world to understand the plight of the Tibetan people. He felt that these testimonies, if translated, would educate the next generation of Chinese who have no accurate information about Tibetan history because of their government's control of the media.

To fulfill this request by Tibet's spiritual leader and Nobel Peace Prize recipient, TOHP was founded in 2003 by Adamski as a nonprofit organization. It is dedicated to documenting the life stories of Tibet's exiled elderly generation and to disseminating their oral histories through print, broadcast media and the Internet.

Tibetan history

To appreciate the catastrophic impact of the Chinese invasion, the history of the Tibetan people must first be understood. For centuries, Tibet, a high altitude country located on the vast Himalayan plateau between China and India, remained isolated from the rest of the world. The widely dispersed population, in an area the size of Western Europe, included farmers, nomads, monks, traders, artisans and scholars. Tibet had its own national flag, its own currency, its own distinct culture and religion and its own government.

In 1949, following the foundation of the Chinese Communist state, the People's Liberation Army invaded Tibet and soon overpowered its poorly equipped army and guerrilla resistance. In March 1959, Tibetans rose up against the Chinese occupiers but were defeated. The Tibetan leader, His Holiness the XIV Dalai Lama, was forced to escape to India. More than 80,000 fleeing Tibetans followed him into exile enduring perilous journeys over the Himalayas.

Focus of the oral histories

To date, TOHP has videotaped 170 oral histories of this last generation to have lived in a free Tibet. The interviews offer fascinating recollections of early life in Tibet as far back as 80 years ago with descriptions of ancient customs and religious traditions. They provide eyewitness accounts of the devastating impact of the invasion on ordinary people and the dismantling of an age old way of life during the occupation that followed.



Marcella Adamski, executive director of the Tibet Oral History Project, is greeted by a Tibetan monk.

ALL PHOTOS: TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The narrators also reveal how unimaginable it was for Tibetans, who treasure their Buddhist religion, to watch revered lamas, ancient texts and beloved monasteries targeted for destruction. The elders, now in exile, describe the challenge of striving to follow their Buddhist ideals of compassion and non-violence, exemplified by the Dalai Lama, in the face of relentless Chinese control threatening cultural genocide and environmental destruction.

The urgent need of the effort

Creating such an oral history project seemed daunting but more critical than ever. Not only was time running out to interview these elderly survivors, but 60 years of Chinese occupation was eradicating the language, culture and spiritual practices of the Tibetan people.

The tyrannical rule has become so unbearable that at least 41 Tibetans have set themselves on fire since 2009 and 29 have died to bring world attention to the total lack of religious and political freedom in their country. The Tibetan elders, interviewed in May 2012, grieved over these self-sacrifices but understood the desperation behind them. They also recognized the importance of their stories to help preserve the memory of Tibet's language, cultural traditions and spiritual values embodied in their treasured Buddhist religion.

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Conducting the interviews

It took four years of volunteer time researching, planning and fundraising to conduct the first set of interviews. In the first and subsequent two missions, the team travelled to Tibetan settlements in India where large numbers of Tibetan elders reside in order to maximize the number of interviews that could be done in a limited amount of time. For each mission, the project's outreach director located and pre-interviewed 60 to 80 elders who wished to participate. Although many claimed they had little knowledge, they felt it was important to preserve their memories of Tibet for generations to come and were touched by the request of the Dalai Lama that they record their stories.

TOHP teams that recorded the elders' interviews were comprised of an experienced interviewer, translator and videographer. The American and Tibetan team members had a basic understanding of Tibetan history, which improved markedly as more elders were interviewed in each new mission. Interviews lasted approximately two to three hours per person with every question and answer requiring translation between English and Tibetan. Two to three oral histories were recorded each day over a 10- to 12-day period. Interviews were conducted in the elders' tiny dwellings, in monasteries, community centers, hotel rooms and gardens. The challenge was to find comfortable settings for the elders that were quiet enough for recording and light enough for videotaping.

A list of questions, researched and reviewed ahead of time, provided a general outline of topics to be covered. Release forms were signed prior to videotaping. If participants expressed any concern about endangering relatives still living in Tibet by giving the interview, they chose a pseudonym or had their image blurred. The video-taped recordings were uploaded onto hard drives and made into DVDs, which were later translated into English and transcribed. Elders were all given copies of their interviews to share with their families and to be assured that their stories were not lost but were going to be made available for generations to come.

Content of the interviews

The interviews first explored childhood memories of family life, livelihoods as farmers, traders, herders, housewives and civil servants. Respondents gave detailed accounts of the dynamics of family life and religious traditions. Descriptions of marriage customs, religious festivals, trade fairs, pilgrimages, sky burials and horse races provided a glimpse into centuries old customs and traditions. They recalled the hardships as well as the joys of their life tilling the fields, herding yaks, caring for large families, and studying as young monks in the local monasteries. Life was not always easy but the land was pristine, food was plentiful, the water pure and longevity was common.

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Pasang Dolkar, 71, was forced to flee from Tibet to Bhutan in 1959 with her husband, whose family were considered rebels for opposing the Chinese. "The story of my life will tell readers the true situation of my country then and now. How peacefully and happily we Tibetans used to live in our own country until the Chinese' forceful invasion."



Tashi, who spent his boyhood as a nomad in Tibet, was forced to flee from the Chinese in 1959. Born in 1912, Tashi was interviewed in 2007 in India.

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The elders were asked about Tibetan government taxes, their support of monasteries and their work as field hands for landowners. The Chinese cited these conditions as reasons to justify their liberation of Tibet. The respondents acknowledged that although their society was not perfect, they did not feel any need to be liberated. They were horrified when Chinese soldiers began firing on nomad gatherings, bombing monasteries in the middle of the night and imprisoning village leaders without cause.

Families fled their villages, hiding in the mountains for years foraging like animals until finally captured by the Chinese. Landowners, lamas and the families of resistance leaders were the first to be targeted, captured, imprisoned, tortured and killed. Many ordinary people were subjected to gruesome and humiliating public "struggle sessions" carried out by other Tibetans who were terrorized into beating their neighbors. Eyewitness accounts were given of starvation in prisons and labor camps, forced sterilization of entire villages and of children being abducted and sent to China for education.

Former resistance fighters gave detailed accounts of heroic attempts to ward off the invasion of the Chinese military. Monks, whose monasteries had been destroyed, recounted how they asked to be excused from their vows to defend their revered lamas and to prevent the destruction of treasured ancient Buddhist texts. Many elders described vivid memories of how the Chinese began to attack the capital of Lhasa. They were among the masses of people that surrounded the Norbulinka Palace to protect the Dalai Lama from being captured by the Chinese. They wept recalling their relief to learn His Holiness had escaped the invading forces.

In the final phase of the interviews, the elderly described how they fled in massive numbers or small family groups, often pursued by Chinese soldiers, as they made their way, children on their backs, over the perilous mountain passes. They expressed deep gratitude that they were able to have the presence of their spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, in India with them. This generation of Tibetans concluded by describing a wide range of reactions about the Chinese but most salient of all was their attitude to maintain a non-violent attitude and political commitment to refrain from violence in seeking freedom for Tibet through negotiations rather than force.

Accomplishments and plans

TOHP has thus far videotaped 170 oral histories of Tibetan elders living in exile. Interviews were conducted in three large Tibetan settlements in India: Bylakuppe in 2007 (64 interviews), Mundgod in 2009 (53 interviews) and Dharamsala in 2012 (50 interviews). Three initial interviews were conducted in California in 2006.

The Tibet Oral History Project is the first, and currently the only, oral history collection to provide complete transcripts of interviews with Tibetan elders translated into English and made accessible worldwide through the Internet. The first 67 interviews are now posted on the project's website:

www.tibetoralhistory.org. TOHP also provides DVDs of the interviews, and video edits from actual interviews are posted on international websites as well as on the project's own site.

The U.S. Library of Congress requested to serve as the archive for TOHP's current and future oral history collections of transcripts and DVD interviews because they provide extraordinary documentation of the language, culture and history of Tibet.

The first collection of 67 interviews conducted in Bylakuppe, was bound into four volumes and along with the DVDs, was delivered to the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in Dharamsala in May 2012. This is the only collection of oral history transcripts available in the library that have been translated into English and that are also available on DVDs. TOHP's collection has been sent to universities such as Stanford and the University of California Berkeley as well as other libraries and Tibetan community centers around the world.

Radio Free Asia's Tibetan Service is broadcasting TOHP's interviews on its weekly radio program "Life in Exile." The producer reports that Tibetans living in India, Nepal, China and Tibet are pleased to hear the elders' oral histories in a variety of dialects familiar to them.

A 30-minute film, "With My Own Eyes," which includes video clips from the interviews, provides a moving description of the period of Tibetan history lived by the elders. In addition to copies of the film with English subtitles, a new version with Chinese subtitles is being prepared for distribution to help educate a younger generation of Chinese about what happened in Tibet.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama on a visit to Stanford University in October 2009 met with TOHP's founder, Marcella Adamski, and expressed deep appreciation for the work of the Tibet Oral History Project. The Tibet Oral History Project is deeply honored to have the privilege of meeting these extraordinary elders and will strive to ensure that their stories inform and inspire generations to come. TOHP will continue to record their oral histories while these elders are still with us. Perhaps a book will be published or a documentary film made.

How the link to Tibetan refugees evolved

In addition to being in private practice as a psychologist, Marcella Adamski was the director of Survivors International, an organization that treated torture survivors from around the world who had suffered human rights abuses. Because of this expertise, the Tibet Justice Center, a legal organization working on Tibetan issues, asked if she would help interview recently escaped Tibetan women living in Dharamsala, India, in 1998. They planned to write a shadow report for the United Nations Committee to Eliminate Discrimination Against Women. China had signed on to this document and the aim of the investigation was to identify areas where China was not upholding its statutes.

A year later, the Tibet Justice Center asked Adamski to return to Dharamsala and interview 64 recently escaped Tibetan children so the center could write a shadow report for the U.N. Committee on the Rights of the Child. The aim was to confront the Chinese delegation to that committee about conditions for Tibetan children under Chinese rule.

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During that human rights investigation in 1999, Adamski attended a meeting with His Holiness the Dalai Lama and asked him what else could be done to help the Tibetan people. He told her that the elders should be interviewed before they died and their stories were lost forever, and Adamski vowed to try to find a way to do so. Hence, the Tibet Oral History Project was developed step by step, meeting by meeting, donation by donation over a four year period. Then, she said, "I decided to take a leap, travel to a large Tibetan settlement and just do it."

To Adamski, the project has been "a labor of love as well as an incredible privilege to interview these remarkable, courageous and loving Tibetan elders."

Facing translation challenges

The Tibet Oral History Project's most adept translator, Tenzin Yangchen, who is also project's Outreach Director, has faced challenges finding other highly skilled interpreters. It is difficult to find people with the necessary qualifications who are available because they are usually working or teaching. Another difficulty is that they may understand Tibetan but not the various dialects or the old Tibetan words because the translators often grew up in India as refugees.

To add to the challenge, even if they do understand the Tibetan, their English language skills may be limited. The project has tried to rectify this issue by having Tenzin Yangchen, who speaks several dialects and is proficient in English, review every interview word by word and provide an exact translation in the transcripts of what the elder said even when the interpreter did not convey it accurately during the interview. At times, some of the follow-up questions seem incongruous because the elders' statements were literally "lost in translation." ❖

A labor intensive project

The Tibet Oral History Project represents intensive work by several interview teams. The project's May 2012 mission to conduct interviews in India included four people who located and pre-interviewed 70 elders. Collectively, the following people produced a total of 50 interviews.

INTERVIEW TEAM 1

Interviewer: Marcella Adamski, Ph.D., Founder and Executive Director, Tibet Oral History Project
Interpreter: Tenzin Yangchen, Outreach Director, Tibet Oral History Project
Videographer: Pema Tashi

INTERVIEW TEAM 2

Interviewer: Rebecca Novick, Writer and Executive Producer of The Tibet Connection radio program
Interpreter: Thupten Kelsang Dakpa, Founder, Tibetan Art Collective
Videographer: Ronald Novick.

Project Administrator, Jennifer O'Boyle, coordinated all written documentation; managed and edited the video footage.

Liaison to Tibetan Government, Pema Delek, arranged meetings with Tibetan government officials for TOHP representatives.

Project photographer, Martin Newman, photographed all elders being interviewed for future publications and archival purposes.

Local Coordinator, Pasang Tsewang