

Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #14D – Tsering Norbu
May 20, 2012

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INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #14D
2. Interviewee: Tsering Norbu
3. Age: 78
4. Date of Birth: 1934
5. Sex: Male
6. Birthplace: Phenpo
7. Province: Utsang
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1959
9. Date of Interview: May 20, 2012
10. Place of Interview: Hotel Tibet, Mcleod Ganj, Dharamsala, Himachal Pradesh, India
11. Length of Interview: 0 hr 42 min
12. Interviewer: Rebecca Novick
13. Interpreter: Thupten Kelsang Dakpa
14. Videographer: Ronny Novick
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

Biographical Information:

Tsering Norbu is from a very small family from Phenpo in Utsang Province. His family engaged in farming and also raised animals. At the age of 18, Tsering Norbu came to Lhasa as a servant to a monastery called Gyurmey Datsang.

Tsering Norbu talks about his life at the monastery where he served for 15-16 years of service. He had a huge range of duties and responsibilities, as he was required to do whatever was asked of him. He received no wages, but was provided with a room, food and clothing. He was able to see His Holiness the Dalai Lama several times while living in Lhasa.

Tsering Norbu escaped to India along with the monks of Gyurmey Monastery after the Chinese attacked. He recalls their journey in the footsteps of the Dalai Lama through different regions in Tibet and finally arriving in Mon Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh, India. After first serving as a coolie, he then joined a special unit of the Indian Army and spent 12 years stationed as a secret soldier at the border between India and Nepal.

Topics Discussed:

Childhood memories, servitude, first appearance of Chinese, Dalai Lama's escape, escape experiences, life as a refugee in India.

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Interview #14D

Interviewee: Tsering Norbu

Age: 78, Sex: Male

Interviewer: Rebecca Novick

Interview Date: May 20, 2012

Question: Could you tell us your name, please?

00:00:10

Interviewee #14D: My name is Tsering Norbu.

Q: Where are you from in Tibet?

#14D: [I] am from Phenpo Shol.

Q: His Holiness the Dalai Lama asked us to record your experiences, so that we can share your memories with many generations of Tibetans, Chinese and the rest of the world.

#14D: [Nods]

Q: Your memories will help us to document the true history, culture and beliefs of the Tibetan people.

#14D: [Nods]

Q: Do you give your permission for the Tibet Oral History Project to use this interview?

#14D: Yes?

Q: Do you give permission to film [the interview]?

#14D: Yes, if it would be of help. If it will help the cause of Tibet, [I] do.

Q: Thank you. During the interview if you want to take a break, go to the bathroom or anything, just let us know.

#14D: Okay.

Q: If there's any question that you would rather not answer, that's perfectly fine.

#14D: Okay.

Q: If this interview was shown in Tibet or China or anywhere else, would it create a problem for you?

00:01:52

#14D: I have no problems.

Q: *Pa-la* ‘respectful term for father,’ can you just start by giving us a little bit about your family background?

#14D: My family members are members of the family I was born into. My father had passed away when I was little. Father was no more since [I] was little. Father had passed away when I was around 5 or 6 years of age. Mother was alive [then] but my maternal grandmother had expired.

Q: Maternal grandmother?

#14D: Yes, maternal grandmother had passed away as also my mother. [They] are no more. My mother expired in the 80’s.

Q: Who were the members in your family when you were growing up?

#14D: When I was growing up...

Q: Father had passed away.

#14D: Father had passed away but mother was alive then. I have a brother.

Q: Only one?

00:03:132

#14D: Only one brother. He is a monk.

Q: So you were raised more or less by yourself a lot of the time?

#14D: Yes?

Q: You were alone while growing up?

#14D: [I] was sort of alone at home because though there were relatives...they are not here. I am the only one here. Most of my relatives in Tibet are no more. [I] heard that all my relatives have expired. My mother has also passed away. There is only the monk sibling who has survived.

Q: We are talking about the period when you were little.

#14D: When I was little and living at home, [I] was a farmer’s child. As is the custom in Phenpo, [we] plowed the fields with yak and *dzo* ‘animal bred from a yak and a cow’ and

cultivated lands. There were a few goats and sheep at home that I was sent to herd as a little one. [I] lived at home in this way until the age of 11 or 12. At the age of 12, I went to Lhasa as a servant to a monastery. There was [a monastery] called Gyurmey Datsang in Lhasa.

Q: Gyurmey...?

#14D: Gyurmey Datsang.

Q: Drumey?

00:05:14

#14D: Gyurmey Datsang. [I] came to serve the Gyurmey Datsang. [I] lived for 15-16 years in Lhasa and was 25 years old when I came here. [We] lost [our] country then. [We] lost [our] land and [I] came to India.

Q: Did you work for 15-16 years in Gyurmey Datsang?

#14D: [I] lived for 15-16 years serving [Gyurmey Datsang].

Q: Was that the same monastery that your brother was at?

#14D: The sibling was at our home in the village, at Phenpo. [He] was not at the Gyurmey Datsang. I was a servant of the monastery.

Q: Why did you leave home at such a young age to go and work in Lhasa? What was the reason for that?

#14D: The reason was that mine was a poor family. It was a poor family, so children were sent to work.

Q: How much money could you make working in Gyurmey Monastery?

#14D: There was no payment. There was not money but food was provided.

Q: You weren't making any money to send home and you couldn't help your mother in the fields. So was your mother then left alone? Who was helping her?

00:08:28

#14D: My mother and siblings worked on the farm.

Q: Did you have other siblings?

#14D: I have one sibling that is younger to me. My mother had only two children, two sons. I am the older one and there is a younger one who was a monk in the monastery. Mother had older sisters who had children. Having left for Lhasa at a young age, I do not

have much knowledge about the relatives. I have never seen them and now they have passed away.

Q: Who helped with fieldwork?

#14D: There were mother, mother's older sister and her husband at home. They cultivated the lands together and earned a living.

Q: What kind of work were you doing in Gyurmey Monastery?

#14D: [I] was given all kinds of tasks. There were no specific tasks that one was allotted. We had to carry out any tasks that were there. [We] must do all kinds of work that came up within the Gyurmey Monastery building.

Q: Did you ever consider becoming a monk like your brother, seeing as you weren't getting paid anyway?

00:10:29

#14D: [Speaks before question is interpreted] There was no money. Food and clothes were provided.

Q: Didn't it cross your mind that it would have been better to become a monk?

#14D: Nothing such crossed [my] mind.

Q: [Your] sibling was a monk.

#14D: [My] sibling was a monk.

Q: You were working at Gyurmey Monastery and I think this is around 1946. The first time you went to Lhasa, were there any Chinese in Lhasa at that time?

#14D: There were no Chinese when I went to Lhasa. There were no Chinese at all. The Chinese arrived in 1945 or 46. There were no Chinese until then.

Q: How old were you when you went to Lhasa? Which year was it?

#14D: I did not know the year then. [I] was around 12 years old.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Yeah. He got there in '44-'45. That would actually be '46 or '45. So they came very shortly after he arrived then because he was born in 1934. So they must have arrived right around that time.

Q: Did the Chinese arrive immediately? How many years after you got there did they arrive?

#14D: [The Chinese] arrived around 10 years after I did.

Q: After 10 years?

#14D: Yes, 10 year, after 10 years.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: That would make sense, one year.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: After 10 years. He said 10 years.

Q: Was it 10 years?

#14D: Yes.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: He's saying '55.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Yeah

[Interviewer to interpreter]: He's saying like '55.

Q: Then [the Chinese] must've arrived in 1955. You mentioned that the Chinese first arrived in Lhasa in 1945.

00:12:40

#14D: It was around that time. I was a child and do not know the years well.

Q: You were born in 1934.

#14D: My birth year?

Q: Yes.

#14D: It must be around that time.

Q: So upon calculation, you arrived in Lhasa in 1945.

#14D: In Lhasa?

Q: Yes, [you] arrived in 1945. So 10 years after that would be 1955 that the Chinese appeared.

#14D: 1955? The Chinese arrived before '55.

Q: Did [they] arrive before '55?

#14D: [They] arrived before '55. It was 8-9 years after the Chinese appeared that [we] fled here.

Q: Why did you stop this work? You said you worked for 15-16 years, a long time in the monastery. So can you tell us what happened during that time? What changes happened in your life during that time?

00:14:07

#14D: As a child I lived with my parents who were poor. Parents said that it was good to be of service to our monastery and hence [I] was sent there. On my part I served the monastery sincerely. I felt in my heart that I got the chance to serve the monastery.

Q: What changes did you see in Lhasa during that time?

#14D: Lhasa at that time...Take my family for instance, [we] lived a poor life. When I was serving the monastery in Lhasa, [my] living was satisfactory. In general, though we did not have the power to do anything politically in the country, but people used to say many things, "It is not going to be fine for our country. Chinese are appearing in the Kham regions. It will not be fine in Lhasa." [People] made such talk. Such changes happened when [I] was young. A year or two later the Chinese arrived in Lhasa.

When the Chinese arrived in Lhasa, it seemed as though the Tibetan Government did not have any authority. Whatever the Chinese said was followed. That is what I felt. Elders used to say, "Perhaps the Tibetan Government will come under the control of the Chinese in the future. It is not going to be good for us. Once the Chinese arrive, perhaps we will lose our land." I thought, "Will [we] not be able to live in Tibet when [we] are old? Will a time come when [we] have to live under the Chinese?" Such was the change in the mind. Finally when [I] turned 25, [the Chinese] actually attacked and expelled [us].

Q: During the time of working in the monastery, how did the monks treat you?

#14D: Yes?

Q: How did the monks treat you?

00:18:36

#14D: The monks treated me well because I believed that [I] was serving a monastery and worked sincerely, which was why the monks treated [me] well. Because [I] worked well, I could remain in the monastery for 15-16 years. If I did not do my work well, the monastery would not retain me; [they] would ask [me] to leave. Nothing such happened. The monks treated me well.

Q: Can you just give me a couple of examples of the kind of work that you did? Just a couple of different examples, different kinds of work?

#14D: In the monastery there were four people appointed called *chanzo* 'treasurer/business manager' to take care of the offerings for the monk population and to keep in their safe custody the assets of the monastery. They assigned various tasks. I cannot pinpoint the exact nature of the tasks as I told you earlier. It could be any job that came up that we had to do, like [assisting] the cooks, cleaning rooms, putting things in their

respective places and keeping things safely in our custody. The monastery entrusted the keys [to me]. If new things arrived, one would be told to put it in such a place or retain it for safekeeping. [The monastery officials] trusted [me] with the keys. One could not say, “I will only complete this task today.” One must put this here or put this there and do any work that came up. For instance, you could not say that your work for the day was done and relax. You ate, slept and lived there. So when work came up whether it was day or night, one did it automatically. You could not say your work was done and relax. You did whatever work came up.

Q: Did you ever get any time off?

#14D: Yes?

Q: Were there holidays?

00:21:58

#14D: We did not have any holidays. That was the practice in general in Tibet. Here, one has a day off, a Sunday in a week. In the old Tibetan system there never existed the tradition of days off. So a farmer does not sit idle saying that it is the day off; one continued to carry on farming. From the time of sowing to the time of harvest, there was work to do. However, until the next sowing season, there is a gap with no work in the fields. That is like a holiday but in general we never had holidays like you have here.

Q: So during these 15-16 years then, did you get to see your family at all?

#14D: [I] got to see [them]. [I] got to see [them].

Q: So you got some time off to visit your family?

#14D: [Speaks before question is interpreted] I got to see my mother and my relatives.

Q: Did you take time off from the monastery to go there or how did you do it? Did [they] come to see [you]?

#14D: [They] came to see [me] and at times I went to see [them].

Q: Oh, so the monastery did allow you to go and visit them. You didn't have to kind of sneak away in the night.

#14D: [Speaks before question is interpreted] You might call it a holiday. It was a sort of holiday. [I] went on a sort of holiday. There wasn't the expression 'it's a holiday.'

Q: So you would ask permission and say, “I want to visit my family now” and you would get permission. Is that how it worked?

#14D: One must seek permission. I could not go on my free will, without permission. One must say, “I need to go on this purpose. Kindly allow me.”

Q: What happened when you came to the end of this time working for Gyurmey Monastery?
What happened then?

#14D: Yes?

Q: [You] worked for 15-16 years for the monastery, what was the reason for leaving the work after 15-16 years?

00:24:55

#14D: I did not leave [by choice]. The Chinese attacked while I was working there. Not just me, even the monks of the monastery were forced to flee. Everyone was forced to flee. It was not that I left the job and went away. I fled along with the monks while I was working at the monastery.

Q: You ran away with the monks.

#14D: Yes. Though we fled in groups, however [we] got scattered along the way.

Q: So you came to India at that time.

#14D: [I] came to India.

Q: Can you explain a little bit about your journey to India, your escape to India?

#14D: I left Lhasa and reached Phenpo. [We] were forced to flee day and night because we did not possess the power to face the might of the Chinese. Numerous people fled together and we reached [a place] called Won.

Q: Won?

#14D: [A place] called Won. The Chinese were pursuing us but we did not have the might to fight the Chinese.

Q: Were they shooting from behind?

00:27:02

#14D: They were following [us]. We fled and reached Tsethang. The main army was based at Tsethang. [They] were staying at [a place] called Phodang. We stayed there for three days. We were 30 people that formed a cooking unit. We were allowed to rest for three days at the army camp. Then [we] were told, "A hundred people..."

Q: Which army was it?

#14D: They were not soldiers. The Chinese were pursuing the fleeing [people]. Here soldiers and common people, should they encounter...

Q: You mentioned that [you] were three days at Tsethang...

#14D: They were the Tibetan Government soldiers.

Q: Were they Tibetan government soldiers?

#14D: The *Chushi Gangdrug* [Defend Tibet Volunteer Force] was put up there.

Q: And then?

#14D: And then a hundred people...[I] forget the name of the place...“You must go to Danag as soldiers.” [We] were sent there. On the way to Danag we passed the place called Chongya. After crossing over the Chongya mountain pass, [we] spent a night there. That night Danag was lost and [people] came fleeing. So we did not reach [Danag]. All of us fled for good to Digung. When [we] reached Digung, His Holiness the Dalai Lama had left for Lhunze. We said, “It is useless for us to stay at Digung. Let us go to Lhunze where His Holiness is.” While we crossed a mountain pass, His Holiness had left Lhunze for Tsona.

Q: Where?

00:29:12

#14D: To [a place] called Tsona. [We] arrived two days after His Holiness had left. We did not see His Holiness. When [we] reached Lhunze His Holiness had left. Everybody was escaping as [we] had lost the country. Everybody fled and so did we to Tsona. When we reached Tsona, His Holiness had left for Tawang [Arunachal Pradesh, India]. Then we too came straight to Tawang, to India, to Mon Tawang. I stayed a week at Mon Tawang. I was a week there without food so I went to beg in the village. Then the Indians dispatched people in groups of 100 to Assam once a week. [We] were sent to Missamari in Assam.

Q: By the Indian Army?

#14D: Yes?

Q: Dispatched by the Indian Army?

#14D: Yes, by the Indian Army. I stayed a little over two months in Assam. Then I was sent to Gangtok [Sikkim] as a coolie. I worked as a coolie in Gangtok for two years. I lived as a coolie for two years. And then the Tibetan Government set up the 22 Regiment. When the 22 Regiment was established, I joined the army.

Q: The Indian Army?

#14D: It was not the Indian Army. It was the Tibetan Government army at Dehradun [Uttaranchal]. [I] joined the 22 [Regiment]. I joined the army in '62. Training was given for a year at Dehradun. We joined in '62 and were sent to the border in October '63.

Q: Which border?

00:31:52

#14D: The Nepali border.

Q: The border between Nepal and India?

#14D: The Nepali and Indian border. We crossed into Nepalese territory from the Indian border. It was in the direction of Thoe Gampazong in Tibet.

Q: Thoe Gampazong?

#14D: Yes, Gampazong. We were secret soldiers and were not in uniform, secret soldiers. I was there at the border for 12 years.

Q: It was part of the Indian Army...

#14D: You could say it was part of the Indian Army but actually [we] were soldiers of the Tibetan Government, the 22 [Regiment] in Chakrata [Uttaranchal] that everyone knows. There are Tibetan soldiers in the 22 [Regiment]. It was part of that. We were a division consisting of 130 men. The 130 [men] could not don army fatigues but were in civilian clothes. [I] was there at the border for 12 years.

Q: I just want to ask you a couple of things from your time in Lhasa, just going back a little bit. During the 15-16 years you were in Lhasa, did you ever see any non-Tibetans there, I mean apart from Chinese obviously?

00:36:20

#14D: There were not many people of other races. There was an Indian hospital. There was an Indian hospital.

Q: Were there Indian people?

#14D: [They] were Indians. Then there were Bhutanese. There were no other...

Q: Weren't there Nepalese?

#14D: I have not heard about Nepalese when I lived there.

Q: So there was an Indian hospital. Do you mean...

#14D: [Interrupts] Since [I] was not politically aware, I cannot say much. Had [I] been involved in politics or was a government authority, I would know about people from other countries. I cannot say clearly about this.

It was not impossible that Nepalese were not there. They could have been present. There might have been representatives but I cannot say for sure that there were Nepalese present. There was an Indian hospital. There was a hospital called Dickeylinka.

Q: Dickeyling?

#14D: It was called Dickeylinka.

Q: Dickeylinka?

#14D: It was Dickeylinka, an Indian hospital.

Q: When you say an Indian hospital, you mean it was run by Indians? What do you mean exactly by Indian hospital?

00:38:04

#14D: [The staff] were Indians. I have been there only once to have a tooth extracted. It used to be said that the Dickeylinka was an Indian hospital. The one that extracted [my] tooth was a Tibetan. I did not see any Indian people. The hospital was said to be an Indian hospital. Dickeylinka Hospital was an Indian hospital. A Tibetan extracted my tooth. The hospital was an Indian hospital.

Q: [You] didn't see any Indians?

#14D: [I] did not see any Indians.

Q: And also during your rest of the time in Lhasa, did you ever see His Holiness the Dalai Lama?

#14D: Yes, [I] have. His Holiness visited our monastery a number of times. I have seen [His Holiness] at such times. [I] have seen [His Holiness] many times. Every year during the Gaden Ngachoe 'Anniversary of the death of Tsongkhapa' all the monks of Gyurmey Datsang went to the Potala Palace. At this time everyone including workers of the monastery went there for an audience. Hence, I got to see His Holiness every year.

Q: When you were in the monastery, were you able to take any teachings, any Buddhist teachings?

#14D: I cannot talk about Buddhist teachings. [I] did not take classes in dharma teachings...

Q: [You] didn't get any lessons? In the 15-16 years, did you hear about...

00:40:18

#14D: There never was...After coming here, lessons in Buddha dharma are given, but there [in Tibet] every monastery and monks carried out their respective ritual practices and there was not the practice of imparting lessons in Buddha dharma as we do here.

Q: All right, well, thank you so much. It was really good to talk to you and how would you like to handle this interview? Would you like us to change your name? Would you like us to disguise your face? What would you like us to do? I mean, how comfortable are you with what you said?

#14D: I do not think [my] face needs to be disguised.

Q: A change in name?

#14D: Is it not okay not to change the name?

Q: Is it fine?

#14D: It is fine as there is no issue. I have not said anything about politics. [I] have only spoken about my life and livelihood to [your] questions. I do not have anything to say about the Tibetan Government's policies nor have I expressed any such things. There is no issue and it is okay not to change.

Q: *Pa-la*, we have a small gift for you from the organization to thank you for coming in today.

END OF INTERVIEW