

Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #18N – Thupten Choephel
April 11, 2015

The Tibet Oral History Project serves as a repository for the memories, testimonies and opinions of elderly Tibetan refugees. The oral history process records the words spoken by interviewees in response to questions from an interviewer. The interviewees' statements should not be considered verified or complete accounts of events and the Tibet Oral History Project expressly disclaims any liability for the inaccuracy of any information provided by the interviewees. The interviewees' statements do not necessarily represent the views of the Tibet Oral History Project or any of its officers, contractors or volunteers.

This translation and transcript is provided for individual research purposes only. For all other uses, including publication, reproduction and quotation beyond fair use, permission must be obtained in writing from: Tibet Oral History Project, P.O. Box 6464, Moraga, CA 94570-6464, United States.

Copyright © 2016 Tibet Oral History Project.



TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

www.TibetOralHistory.org

INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #18N
2. Interviewee: Thupten Choephel
3. Age: 78
4. Date of Birth: 1937
5. Sex: Male
6. Birthplace: Lhasa
7. Province: Utsang
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1959
9. Date of Interview: April 11, 2015
10. Place of Interview: Swayambhunath Old Age Home, Kathmandu, Nepal
11. Length of Interview: 1 hr 28 min
12. Interviewer: Katharine Davies Samway
13. Interpreter: Palden Tsering
14. Videographer: Henry Tenenbaum
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

Biographical Information:

Thupten Choephel was born in Lhasa at the Drapchi army base, since his father served as a *shelngo* ‘major’ in the Tibetan Army. Thupten Choephel explains the process of recruitment into the army. The government provided farmland to families, and depending upon the size of landholding, the family was then obliged to send family members or hired persons to serve in the army. Soldiers were not paid a regular salary and their food and clothing had to be supplied by a sponsor. The government did give the soldiers a grain allowance.

Thupten Choephel describes the games enjoyed by the soldiers’ children such as swimming in a *phakung*, where bricks are made, or plucking peas in the *wonga* ‘fields.’ He recalls that there were no schools for poor children, but reading and writing might be taught individually at home by the parents. His father knew how to write and often wrote letters on behalf of others who were illiterate.

Thupten Choephel had witnessed Chinese presence in Lhasa since the age of 5 or 6. Although the Chinese stated they had only come to help and would afterwards return to their own country, Thupten Choephel believed they came to deceive the Tibetans. At age 14 or 15 he was sent to work on his uncle’s farm, which he greatly enjoyed. But by age 18 he fled from Tibetan after the Chinese occupation in 1959 and eventually joined the Indian Army.

Topics Discussed:

Utsang, childhood memories, customs/traditions, education, Tibetan army, farm life.

TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

www.TibetOralHistory.org

Interview #18N

Interviewee: Thupten Choephel

Age: 78, Sex: Male

Interviewer: Katharine Davies Samway

Interview Date: April 11, 2015

Question: Please tell us your name.

00:00:06

Interviewee #18N: My name is Thupten Choephel.

Q: His Holiness the Dalai Lama has asked us to record your experiences, so that we can share your memories with many generations of Tibetans, the Chinese and people around the world. Your memories will help us to document the true history, culture and beliefs of the Tibetan people.

#18N: Okay.

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

#18N: Yes, you can.

Q: Thank you.

#18N: [Silent]

Q: During this interview if you need to take a break or stop for anything, let us know.

#18N: Okay. [I] will not need to take a break for anything but feel sad at times when [I] talk. At such times [I] may need a break.

Q: If you would like to take a break at those times, that's fine, just let us know.

#18N: Thank you.

Q: If there is ever a question that you do not want to answer or there is something you do not want to talk about, please also let us know.

00:02:13

#18N: Okay.

Q: If your interview were to be shown in Tibet or China, would it be a problem for you?

#18N: Not at all. [I] have no problems at all because I am alone. The parents and siblings are long gone and the young relatives, I will not recognize them and they will not recognize me. [I] have no problems at all. However, [I] request you not to ask questions that may be harmful to the cause of Tibet.

Q: What we'll do is at the end of the interview after you know what you have talked about we'll ask you the same question and then you can tell us if it's okay to use your interview.

#18N: Okay.

Q: Thank you. We're honored to record your story and appreciate your participation in the project.

#18N: Okay, okay.

Q: Thupten-*la*, how old are you?

#18N: I am 77 years old.

Q: Which year were you born?

#18N: When did [I] come from Tibet?

Q: No, your date of birth.

00:04:12

#18N: Around 1933.

Q: Do you remember the Tibetan calendar year in which you were born?

#18N: [I] do not.

Q: How old were you when you left Tibet?

#18N: [I] was 18 years old.

Q: What year was that?

#18N: 1959.

Q: Thank you. And where did you grow up? Where were you born? Where did you grow up?

#18N: [I] was born right in Lhasa. As mentioned earlier, before the Chinese appeared and when Tibet was independent, there was the military [unit] called Drapchi. My father was a soldier in it. He was a *shelngo* 'major' in the army.

Q: *Shelngo*? General?

#18N: *Shelngo* is like a *dhingpon* ‘major.’ There were 30 people under him.

Q: How many?

#18N: Thirty. Thirty people. [I] was born in the military camp.

At that time, prior to 1959 the custom in the Drapchi Army was that unlike armies in foreign countries they could keep wives and children together with them in the army. Others might see this as strange but this is a part of history.

Q: So you were born on the army base?

00:06:47

#18N: Yes, in the army base right in Lhasa.

Q: What memories do you have of being a child on the army base?

#18N: One cannot remember much about being a little child but when one was 12-13 the parents brought you up and took care. [I] went out to play. [I] cannot remember anything else.

Q: Could you tell us about playing around?

#18N: When playing around...behind our army base was a *phakung* channeled from a river. The place was called *phakung*. *Phakung* is a place where one makes bricks, which are called *eta* ‘bricks’ [in Hindi] here. Such a place where bricks are made is called *phakung*. All the little children went there together to swim and play about in the sand. [We] went to play there. During summertime, nearby were many fields or *wonga*—we call fields as *wonga*.

Q: *Wonga*.

#18N: Yes. Then [we] played about in the fields, and at times...pea pods are called *gangbu*—we call it *gangbu*—plucked and ate those. That was playing around as children.

Q: When you were in the farmlands what kinds of games or what kind of playing did you do?

00:09:09

#18N: [Children] went into the fields and there is a kind of pea that can be plucked. It was peas that were plucked during the pea season when the flowers faded and peas formed. [Children] plucked the peas and ate them. [We] removed some from the pods and brought home to give to the parents and siblings. It was like that.

Q: So that was peas in that farmlands. Did that belong to the military base or were you on somebody’s lands, somebody else’s lands?

#18N: It did not belong to the military base. It was not the military's. There were other farmlands. The village where the fields were located was called Sharong because it was located in the *shar* 'east' of our military base. It is called Sharong *wonga*. All farmlands together are called *wonga*. The proprietor was somebody else and it did not belong to the military base.

Q: Did you ever get into trouble for taking the peas?

00:10:52

#18N: There was someone that chided. There was a man that watched the *wonga*. The man that watched the *wonga* sat in the middle of the field on a raised platform. [He] sat there every day; he must not see you. Should he spot, he would catch and beat you and take away all the peas.

Q: Can you tell us about one time when you got into trouble?

#18N: I did not face any [trouble] but it could happen. When all the children went to play in the fields and plucked peas, [the watchman] cannot be blamed because the fields are being damaged. So everybody must be careful and avoid being seen. [The children] went stealthily.

Q: The children were play...How old were you when you're describing swimming where the bricks were made and picking the peas and playing with your friends in the fields?

#18N: Perhaps [I] was aged 8...around 7, 8 or 9.

Q: Did you have any toys as a child? If so, what kinds of toys?

00:12:48

#18N: There were no toys as such in particular. In those days in Tibet, unlike here where you have schools and can buy different kinds of toys, there were none like that. We made them ourselves by collecting earth and making it into clay. Then a game called *gopa* was played where a hole was made on a smooth surface and then [the clay] thrown in it. It cracked open. Such games were played. At that time there were no special toys like there are found here. I cannot think of any.

Q: What kinds of toys did you make?

#18N: [We] made *zama* 'earthen pots,' *zama* in which food is cooked.

Q: *Zama*.

#18N: We call them *zama*, like pots to cook food. In the olden days in Tibet food was mostly cooked in *zama*, in *zako*. There were not many aluminum pots in our days. When [I] reached the age of 11, 12, 13 a lot was brought from India. Otherwise, it was just *zako* or *zama* in the past. It was just *zama*. Whether for preparing *thukpa* 'noodle soup' or cooking vegetables, for everything it was *zako*.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: So what kinds of toys did he make?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: He made clay pots.

Q: So what would you do with the clay pots?

00:15:09

#18N: After making the toy [earthenware pot], it was destroyed, broken. One cannot make anything of use as a child. However, children just copied and sort of played at cooking in a kitchen. That was it.

Q: What other toys did you make?

#18N: [I] cannot recall what other toys were made.

Q: So when you were playing like here in the mud and clay, was it just boys or boys and girls?

#18N: Boys and girls came together.

Q: When you were playing, you know making the kitchen utensils and dismantling them, did boys have a special role and the girls another role or did you all do the same thing?

#18N: Everyone mostly played together. The roles were about the same.

Q: Did you play any sports?

#18N: [I] have never played any but just ran about and walked here and there. I cannot recall anything else. There were not any toys to play with.

Q: Did you have horses or did you have access to horses?

00:17:26

#18N: There was a horse. My father had a horse that was used when he traveled to and from Lhasa or when there were government tasks during which [he] rode the horse. There was a horse at home.

Q: Did you get to ride the horse?

#18N: There were opportunities to ride but [I] was small then and did not dare; [I] was scared. Horses in Tibet are not like horses here [in Nepal]. They are very aggressive and gallop very fast. [Horses] here are not like that. The ones here are not like Tibetan horses.

Q: So did the horse belong to your father or to the army?

#18N: It was [father's] personal horse, bought by him.

Q: You mentioned earlier that there were no toys in the schools but were there schools?

00:18:58

#18N: There were no schools. It was not like there were no schools at all. For instance, there was a school in Lhasa called Seshing Lapta in which children of wealthy families and children of those that worked for the government like the aristocrats studied. Schools were rare except for children of very wealthy families; there were no schools at all for poor children and such. It is not correct to say that there were never any.

However, one can at home...for instance father taught my elder brother and he was very good in Tibetan. There was not any other [subject] except Tibetan. [Elder brother] was very good in Tibetan. Except for studying at home, there was hardly any school where one could send little children to study.

Q: So your father taught your brother how to read and write Tibetan?

#18N: Yes, father taught.

Q: Where did your father learn to read and write Tibetan?

#18N: I do not know how he learned. He was very good in Tibetan; it was only Tibetan. He knew it well and at that time many people used to request him to write letters, as the majority were not literate. Many people used to request [father] to write letters to their homes and such. [Father] was good but [I] do not know from where [he] studied.

Q: Did he teach you to read and write?

00:21:35

#18N: [I] was taught the alphabet then, the alphabet as [I] was small then. [I] was more into playing and did not pay much attention.

Q: Did you get in trouble because you didn't pay attention?

#18N: [Father] chided. Not just father but elder brother also chided and beat me. However, I was a small child and acted authoritatively and did not listen much to elder brother. Otherwise, both elder brother and father were good in [Tibetan] script.

Q: So this was when you were what age?

#18N: That is from the time one can remember, maybe around the ages of 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 until around 11, 12.

Q: So did you learn to read and write eventually?

#18N: Yes.

Q: When and where did you learn to read and write?

00:23:17

#18N: [I] did not really get a teacher and learn a great deal as such. For instance, when [I] came from Tibet [I] knew the alphabet and could read too, but did not know how to write well. Then [we] lost [our] country in 1959. We lost the whole of Tibet and [I] lived in Ladakh for around two years. Then [I] joined the army in Dehradun [India] that still exists. [I] became a soldier there. In [the army] were Tibetans that were literate and [I] requested them to teach [me] during free time. [I] learned to write and am able to relay any message. I learned by myself and did not really study under a teacher.

I persevered in learning in the army and at times sought the help of others.

Q: It sounds like being able to read and write became important to you.

#18N: Yes, it did. For instance, in those we did not have telephones and such and everything had to be sent through letters. In order to write to your siblings, people you knew and friends, one may be forced to approach someone with paper and request to write for you. So [I] thought that it cannot be something I cannot learn if I studied. So I worked hard and learned.

Q: So your motivation...it sounds like your motivation for learning to read and write was so that you could communicate with friends and family members.

00:26:15

#18N: That is right. And also if one were to find a job later, this could be of use. It was a possibility.

Q: Your father was a General, which I think is a very important position in the army, no?

#18N: It was not a very high position. A *shelngo* is...When I was in the army at Dehradun; [the rank] used to be called *dhingpon* in Tibetan. There were 30 people; [father] was the leader of 30 people. It is a higher position than a *chupon* 'leader of 10.'

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Thirty army or 30 soldiers?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Thirty soldiers.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: So like a...would that be what? Like a battalion leader?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Yeah, captain or something like that. It's not a General.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Right.

Q: So could you tell us a little bit about how your father came into the army and how he rose in the army?

00:27:49

#18N: I do not remember each and everything but according to what I heard it was like this: Our army, the army in Tibet at that time...The government provided lands, gave farmlands [to people] and as per [the area] of farmland, a family was obliged to send one or two or one and half soldiers to the army. So in our family...my father's actual home was away from Lhasa called Lhoka. The village was called Lhoka Rong.

Q: Lhoka Rong?

#18N: Yes.

Q: Lhoka Rong?

#18N: Rong, Rong. [His home] was there, in that village. The government had provided farmland and house in the village [to father's family]. So the family was obliged to send one and half soldiers. The full soldier had to join the Drapchi Division and the half the Kusung Division, which was a unit located near Norbulingka where His Holiness the Dalai Lama lived.

Since the government had provided farmlands and everything, [the cost of] food and clothing of the soldier had to be borne by the *lapdhag* who was the soldier's owner. [The soldier] was sent to the army and the cost of the soldier's annual food and clothing expenses and everything was borne by the *lapdhag*. [He] was called *lapdhag*, the one that takes care of a soldier. Along with that was a salary from the government. The salary was not in the form of money like it is here but grains were given, grains for consumption. It was two and half *khel* of grains per month. Two and half *khel* is nearly 80 kilograms, altogether.

[Discontinuity in video]

Q: Can you please answer? The question is: How did your father join the army? How did he become a *shelngo*? You spoke about it and your father living in the village of Lhoka. Please repeat that.

00:30:02

#18N: Just as I mentioned earlier a Tibetan Government soldier is recruited by providing farmlands to individual families. Farmlands were given and according to the size of landholding, a family was required to send one soldier or one and half soldiers or in some cases two soldiers. So our family, my father's family was required to send one and half soldiers.

Q: What's half?

#18N: Half is *adha* 'half' [in Hindi].

Q: How can there be a half?

#18N: Half the food expenses of a soldier was borne by our family, by my father's family and the other half was paid by another family. My father's [expenses] had to be borne entirely by the family and our family also had to pay for half the expenses of another soldier. The other half was borne by another family. These two [families] together supported one soldier. That was it. The Tibetan tradition was such that the government did not need to pay salaries like it is done here but the yield from the farmlands was used to support the soldiers and also to meet the needs of the families [that farmed the lands]. It was sufficient to cover all expenses.

00:31:14

The family's name, my father's family name was Langdhue. The village was called Rong. It was located towards the south of Lhasa. All those regions to the south of Lhasa were called Lhoka. Well, that was how the soldiers were supported.

[You] asked earlier how [father] became a *shelngo*. How [father] became a *shelngo* was as mentioned...towards the north of Lhasa is the Changthang 'Northern Plateau.' There were only nomads; the majority were nomads. But for maybe a few farmlands where the weather was warmer most of the people were nomads. Among the nomads...they were Tibetans who were thieves and bandits. They did not let the nomads live in peace, killed and grabbed animals and stopped travelers from moving on roads. It seems the government sent soldiers to contain them. So troops were deployed and at that time perhaps [father] showed bravery and seems to have done a good job. Therefore, as a reward he became a *shelngo*. That is what I heard.

00:34:50

The meaning of half a soldier is like this. It is a soldier that has two patrons. One family did not need to support [the soldier] fully but another family bore half the expense. That is what is called half [a soldier].

Q: Let's see if I've got this straight. So the Tibetan Army does not pay a salary in money?

00:35:37

#18N: [The soldiers] might have been paid at times, like to buy tea and butter. In Tibet there used to be [a currency unit of] seven and half *ngulsang*—it is called *ngulsang*. There was a note called seven and half *ngulsang*. Our father brought such a note and said, "Today...this is the salary from the army." [I] have seen it and heard of it. [The soldiers] were paid at times but not regularly. [Usually] it was only grains.

Q: So a soldier would be given some land instead of salary?

#18N: Yes.

Q: And sometimes the army would say, "That piece of land is for you but also half the salary for another soldier."

#18N: Yes, it would be a fairly large piece of land. It wasn't just one piece of land but an area of land large enough to sow...*khel* of grains. Here it would be around 40 kilograms of

seeds. Two of such an area would be given. There is the piece of land provided by the government to support soldiers from which a part must be paid to support the other half soldier. We [father's family] could keep the yield meant for a full soldier. That was it.

Q: Half of it? Let's say this is the plot of land. Sometimes the family would get all of it and sometimes one family would only get half or two thirds and that went...

00:37:50

#18N: By half it was like this. I guess it was not like half the land has to be given. No, because a soldier has expenses in a year whatever it maybe. Half of that, whether the yield from the land was enough to cover it or not, the soldier's costs must be borne because his food and other expenses must be borne by the *lapdhag* and no one else while the soldier works for the government. Therefore, half his expenses...I don't know the exact cost of expense but half of the expense must be borne by the family.

Q: So did that soldier who got allocated half of it, did that soldier have to work the land also?

[Interpreter interprets as: The half soldier, did he have to work also?]

#18N: [He] must for [he] is a soldier like the others. He is a soldier supported by two families, one man being supported by two families. So he [performs the duty of] one soldier. He must do everything that a soldier has to do.

Q: His family worked the land?

#18N: The work of the family members...For example, I am a soldier and I have two patrons each meeting half [of my expenses]. One could be her [interviewer] and the other you [interpreter]. I do all the work [of a soldier] and you two collectively meet my expenses for the year.

Q: So who worked the land? Was it the women or the soldiers or both?

00:40:20

#18N: Those that worked the lands were...For instance, my father came [to the army] from his home. My father had parents and siblings that continued to live at home. For instance, if a family had three sons...if my father's family had three sons, one could be sent to the army because there are many sons. One son shouldered the responsibility of home and another son travelled on trade missions and such but lived in the family. They took care of the fields. It was not the soldier's wife that worked in the fields. My father's family, his parents cultivated the lands.

That is the case if there were two or three sons. If a family does not have any son but the land has already been allocated, [the family] must hire a person and sent him to the army and the family must bear all his expenses. If there were no sons, [the family] must hire somebody. If there were sons, one of them could be sent [to join the army].

Q: As you grew older, were you the son who looked after the land or went into the army or did business?

#18N: I was born in Lhasa. So Lhasa and the village...we used to call those areas in the Lhoka side as village. Lhasa was vast and lively and the village restrictive with many tasks. Since I was born in Lhasa, it was my parents' wish to keep me wherever they wanted. The family there [in the village] had no say in this. In case my father asked me to join the army, I should but it was not an obligation.

Q: So what did your father tell you to do?

00:43:44

#18N: I was like a carefree child at the ages of 12, 13, 14. So [father] did not say anything. Then at around the age of 14 or perhaps 15—[I] cannot remember correctly—there was a sibling of my mother, a maternal uncle. He had a lot of work and few people. I mentioned earlier about their estate. He was holding that and had a lot of work. I was sent to him to work there.

Q: What did you do on that estate?

#18N: The work was fieldwork, mostly fieldwork. There were just fields.

Q: It sounds like the life you had on the estate must have been very different from life you had on the base. In what ways was it different?

#18N: There was a great difference. As I mentioned earlier while living in the army my father, mother and all siblings lived together as one family. So one enjoyed freedom in terms of food and such when living with the parents. Having gone to maternal uncle, I was an outsider in the family and did not have the freedom to eat like when living in your own home. So there was a great difference. Then also in terms of work, there were not any responsibilities for children at the army base but having been sent there for the purpose of work, [I] had to engage in fieldwork and likewise help others as a group. [I] had to do all of that.

Q: What kind of work did you do on the farm?

00:47:41

#18N: Work was seasonal. This time of year is called spring when sowing activities begin. There were activities like plowing, channeling water, cleaning the fields and such that would have started. After the crops grew, there was the task of channeling water, weeding and maintaining the fields. Then during autumn, in the 8th or 9th lunar months it was time to harvest. Tasks happened successively according to season.

Q: And what would you do in the winter?

#18N: During winter...those that owned large flocks of goats and sheep; the family's clothing was mainly made from wool. There were no fabrics to buy when we were small. It

was scarce. So a lot of work connected to wool was done like spinning and weaving. Whether one was a servant, an employer or anybody, wool was woven to make clothing. Such tasks were carried out during wintertime because clothes must be made for the family to last a year. It was a different matter if a family did not possess any sheep. [They] did not have [the raw material]. [They] would gather firewood and go on business trips, go on business trips.

Q: So did your uncle have animals?

00:50:49

#18N: [He] did own a fairly large number of goats and sheep. There were around 100-200 goats and sheep altogether. Then there were *dzoo* ‘animal bred between a yak and a cow’ to plow the fields, and cows, oxen, horses and donkeys. There were many domestic animals. In Tibet if one did not own many domestic animals, [crops] did not grow well in the fields because the fields must be fertilized. The fertilizer came from animals.

Q: So you came from living on an army base near a city to working on a big estate as a farmer. How well prepared were you to do the farm work?

#18N: I did not think much of it because I used to often visit maternal uncle while living with my parents. [I] went there, did some work and spent a day or two in their home. I was familiar with the work at the time I was living at home. Therefore, it was not that difficult nor did [I] feel so.

Q: How often did you visit the farm before you went to work on the farm?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: His family?

[Interviewer to interpreter]: He said he would go before he went to work on the farm. How often he would go and visit? How often did he visit, once or twice a year?

00:53:18

#18N: As a child? [I] did not go often as a child. When the parents went to visit for any kind of work for a day or two [I] accompanied them. [I] mostly stayed home as a child. After [I] was left there at around the age of 13, 14 or 15, [I] lived there most of the time.

Q: Until what age?

#18N: [I] might have lived with maternal uncle for around three years, from the age of 15 to 18, maybe three or four.

Q: What caused you to stop working on the farm?

#18N: At the farm?

Q: What was the reason for leaving the farm after 3-4 years?

#18N: The reason for leaving was that the Chinese had come into Tibet. The Chinese had come and occupied the whole region. It was 1959 when I turned 18. The country fell under Chinese authority in '59 and there was no way we could remain there. His Holiness the Dalai Lama had left for India. Following that most of our soldiers were away fighting. [They] were required to guard the Potala Palace and Norbulingka and there was a shortage of soldiers and not otherwise.

Father and elder brother had left to fight. I was living at maternal uncle's home and there was no one home to go to. Mother had left for Lhasa. Mother had already passed away then; there was another wife [of father] but she had left for Lhasa. The house was empty. Going home would be to an empty house. In order to continue living with maternal uncle, he was an official in authority towards whom the Chinese were harsh. All the workers under him were sort of preparing to protest. Therefore, there was not any means of staying but try to flee.

Q: I'd like to come back to talking about when you left and the Chinese occupation, but before we do that I just have a couple of more questions about going to work on the estate.

#18N: Okay.

Q: Were you paid for your work or was your family paid for your work on the estate?

00:57:27

#18N: No, [I] wonder if there was any salary? [I] do not know. There was not any salary but it was like helping each other. At the time I went there it was when maternal uncle did not have a trustworthy person. I was 18 years old and quite grown up and was to oversee the workers that were many. [I] was to allocate work, go with them and supervise their work and such. There was not any salary in particular but [I] was left there to help maternal uncle. [I] do not know about any salary.

Q: So were you treated more like a son or like an employee?

#18N: [Maternal uncle] treated [me] like a son, like a family member.

Q: How far away was the farm from where your family lived on the base?

#18N: It was not very far. From the military base...the region is called Pari Tsenkhang. One went there through Dhodhi. The village of Pari Tsenkhang must be at a distance of one and half or two kilometers, perhaps two [kilometers] from Lhasa.

Q: It is very close. So how often did you see your family when you were living on...working on the estate?

00:59:54

#18N: [I] saw the family members often because it was close by. [I] visited home on the way to and from Lhasa. [We] had conversations and ate. [I] visited often.

Q: Did you enjoy working on the farm?

#18N: [I] liked it. Generally, [I] liked to work since a young age. [I] liked to work.

Q: What did you like about working on the farm?

#18N: In particular [I enjoyed] making the fields fertile. Crops did not grow well if there were a lot of rocks, less soil or if the ground was hard. One brought fresh soil from other places to add or one could make it [fertile] by digging up the ground. [I] liked doing such things because it would be useless if crops did not grow after sowing. So for the crops to grow soil had to be brought in. [I] did such.

Q: What about that work was so interesting to you?

01:01:50

#18N: Without land one cannot acquire food, drink, everything, without land. It was like that in Tibet. If one was a big businessman perhaps the revenue came from it. Otherwise, we consider land as very precious. Without land one cannot obtain food, drink and clothing. Since all these have to come from the land, it is considered precious.

Q: Very briefly about Lhasa. The army base was in Lhasa, right? Did you leave the base very often and go into the city when you were a child?

#18N: One did. The army base and Lhasa were in different directions. For instance, the army base was located to the north of Lhasa. The distance between them was about three kilometers, the distance between Lhasa city and the military base. So groceries like meat, butter and whatever supplies one needed were available in Lhasa and not in the army base. Therefore, one must go to Lhasa from the army base for purchases and for fun, and also to buy candies and such in Lhasa as a little child.

Q: Can you describe to us Lhasa in those days when you were a child?

01:04:24

#18N: When I was a little child...When Lhasa was administered by the Tibetan Government it was considered one of the best. Resources were plentiful and whatever provisions not available in other regions could be found in Lhasa. Everything in terms of food, drink, clothing and likewise fun places and different kinds of games were found in Lhasa. I considered Lhasa as a very enjoyable place; felt it was a good place.

Q: Can you describe it to us from what you saw with your own eyes?

#18N: What to describe about Lhasa...Generally Lhasa is the biggest city in Tibet; is the biggest. Not only that Lhasa is...In the past when the Tsuglakhang was constructed, according to the story one heard it was constructed during the time of Choegyial 'Dharma King' Songtsen Gampo. The Tsuglakhang is extraordinary. Perhaps they [interview team] might have visited Lhasa. For instance, unlike buildings constructed using technology these days, it was built by humans for there were no machineries then. Just look at the building.

One would wonder about the Tsuglakhang, “What technology was used to constructed this!”

Then the monasteries, for instance, are exquisitely done with strong foundations. They are incredibly good. The Potala Palace, for instance, though the construction was carried out in two, three or four parts, yet the foundations are stable and spacious even though it is located atop a hill with plenty of rooms, and moreover is lovely due to the elevation.

For instance in the year '59 although the Chinese fired thousands of shells, except for dents which is understandable, nothing was damaged. Hence, people of the past have really worked hard to construct such a structure that cannot be demolished. Such are the characteristics to put it in brief.

Q: Did you see the Chinese...the occupation?

01:08:42

#18N: [I] saw. The Chinese initially appeared when I was 5, 6 or 7 but [I] was a small child and did not take much notice. [I] have seen how the Chinese arrived from China.

Q: Chinese prisons?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Persons. The Chinese were already there.

Q: What do you remember of that time?

#18N: As a little child one did not take any notice. [I] did not notice anything. However, the older people remarked, “The Chinese are coming into Tibet. The Chinese will overpower.” One heard many bad things. However, what the Chinese said was...according to what I heard at age 12 or 13 was, “We, the Chinese have come to Tibet not to cause you suffering or to seize your land. We have come to help you in production, in the fields and everything. Once you are well established, we will return to China and not remain here.” [I] have heard that [the Chinese] said so.

That is how [the Chinese] came. For instance, when we were little children we used to go to play everywhere, go to various places and Lhasa. When the troops first arrived, they looked really poor with faces cracked, impoverished and clothes in tatters. Having come from a long distance that was expected of the troops.

Q: Chinese troops?

#18N: Yes, Chinese troops. I have seen such. However, being young [I] did not give it much attention. Later when [I] turned 16, 17 [I] thought, “The Chinese are not going to do any good.” Such came to [my] attention.

Q: What was their real motivation?

01:12:09

#18N: Their main objective was to deceive. For instance, when [the Chinese] initially arrived [they] said, “We have come to help you but will not remain in your country. Once you are well established we will go back.” Thus [the Chinese] spoke sweetly and later brought a large number of soldiers such that the whole of the city of Lhasa was filled with [Chinese] soldiers. There were Chinese military bases at the place called Northoelingka [park located in the upper part of Lhasa towards Gaden Monastery], at Dip and at Gongthang.

A large number of troops were brought in. Therefore, if their actual objective was to help the Tibetans there was no need to bring soldiers. Surely China has many others other than soldiers to extend help, right? Hence, if it was actually helping by providing training in cultivation or trade, if it was to benefit people, there was no need to bring soldiers. When the region’s surrounded by soldiers, it clearly reveals that it was not good.

Q: Did the Tibetan Government invite the Chinese in to help them or did the Chinese come totally uninvited?

#18N: It cannot be that the Tibetan Government invited [the Chinese]. That is not possible because you would want to be in authority in your own country. [I] do not think that is it though I cannot say because I’ am not knowledgeable about politics. It cannot be that [the Chinese] were invited. They came in audaciously. It says in history that the Chinese came many times, which I heard as a little child. It seems the Chinese had the intention of occupying Tibet since long ago. So as per their past plan they gradually...a change took place in China when it became Communist and when the objective of occupying Tibet struck they came in. [I] do not think the Tibetan Government invited [them].

Q: What was the response of Tibetans when the Chinese announced, “We have come to help you”?

01:16:35

#18N: The Tibetans...each person has a different way of thinking. Those whose living standard was poor and those that were needy found a lot of jobs because roads were being constructed. Roads, motor roads were being constructed right from China to Tibet. Likewise, many houses were constructed and, likewise there was trade. So [people] were benefitting in small ways. [I] do not think anybody knew the loss that would be suffered in the long run. However, one benefitted temporarily in small ways and [some people] might have liked [the Chinese.] Those that were in a position to understand, “Oh, eventually the Chinese will occupy Tibet,” might have been unhappy and had doubts. [I] think that.

Q: How did your family respond when they heard that the Chinese said they were coming to help?

#18N: I was small then and could not go towards Lhoka. I was small and could not go towards Lhoka. Then when I was living at the army base—[I] was living with soldiers—at that time everybody saw that the Chinese were not good because it was said, “Whatever it

is, the Chinese are going to attack. The Chinese are bound to occupy the land. The Chinese will seize power from the Tibetan Government.” It was a cause of worry for everyone.

Q: When [you] were at the army base?

#18N: When [I] was at the army base. Likewise, the whole family was together and such feelings came over.

Q: I understand that lunch is ready for you. Is there anything else that you would like to tell us about your life in Tibet? Were you in the army?

01:19:57

#18N: [I] became a soldier after coming to India.

Q: Well, I'm sorry we don't have time to continue to finish your story, but what you have told us today has been very, very interesting and I think important.

#18N: [I hope my story] will be beneficial. However, we are losing people who can tell Tibet's story. When I came from there [I] was 18 years old. Those people older than me have mostly passed away. When I was in the army at Dehradun, from my group of 100 co-soldiers almost all have passed away because they were all older than me. I was among the younger ones then. They would have told a better story. I was young when I left from there and did not take much interest and am not educated. [I] do not read books and know nothing nor have any interest. [My story] may not be beneficial but you came to interview [me]...I thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak what is in my heart.

Q: Thank you very much.

#18N: Thank you.

Q: I have to ask two questions again.

#18N: Okay.

Q: If your interview were to be shown in Tibet or China would that be a problem for you or your family?

01:22:30

#18N: There will be no problems whatsoever as mentioned earlier. I am alone here. Since the time I came here in 1959 I always had the hope that I would get to return to my country and had no other thought. [I] never thought about getting married or anything concrete. [I] always thought I would get to go back and do what I have to do there. [I] lived with this thought. Maybe there are [relatives] in Tibet but here [I] have no one; I am alone.

Q: So you have not been able to go back to Tibet?

#18N: [I] went once in '84. [I] visited Lhasa for a short while but was not allowed in other places. The Chinese did not issue me a permit except to visit Lhasa. So [I] was not allowed and returned from Lhasa after about a month.

Q: How was Lhasa different in 1984 than when you were there in 1959?

01:24:22

#18N: There was a big difference, incredibly so. For instance, if one went up the Potala Palace and looked down it is very different. Though it was the largest city in Tibet there were only several thousand families. When I visited in '84 every part of Lhasa was covered with Chinese houses. It was not the Tibetan type of building, but Chinese ones with metal sheet roofing. It was covered with Chinese houses and very extensive as well. All the empty spaces of the early days were lined with houses. There were no open spaces left.

Likewise, Chinese population was high. Earlier there were only Chinese soldiers and none else to be seen. However, when [I] visited in '84 there were Chinese merchants, prostitutes and a great many evil-doers. That is what I saw. There may be good people likewise but I did not get to visit such places nor was I allowed.

Q: In what way, in other ways how was it different in 1984?

#18N: For the Tibetans?

Q: Yes.

01:26:58

#18N: The difference was that it was very restrictive at that time. Generally, we were allowed to visit and [those in Tibet] could come on visits in '84. However, when I moved around with the relatives one was afraid to speak, dared not speak and I was told, "Do not talk. Keep quite." Likewise, when I was among a large number of Chinese [I] had to be careful about speaking. There was discomfort in the mind. [I] did not feel happy at all. Though I went to meet relatives and to be happy, yet [I] did not enjoy it.

Q: I think we have to finish. Can we use your real name?

#18N: Yes. Thupten Choephel is my real name.

Q: Thank you. Thank you.

#18N: [Joins palms] Thank you. Thank you.

Q: This has been an honor and very, very interesting and I really, really appreciate it very much that you spent this time with us and shared your story.

#18N: Thank you. Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW