

# **Tibet Oral History Project**

Interview #19C – Tsewang Tenzin  
August 2, 2014

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# TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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## INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #19C
2. Interviewee: Tsewang Tenzin
3. Age: 64
4. Date of Birth: 1950
5. Sex: Male
6. Birthplace: Mukrum
7. Province: Utsang
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1960
9. Date of Interview: August 2, 2014
10. Place of Interview: Tibetan Association of Santa Fe Community Center, Santa Fe, New Mexico, USA
11. Length of Interview: 1 hr 09 min
12. Interviewer: Marcella Adamski
13. Interpreter:
14. Videographer: Tomas Haywood
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

### **Biographical Information:**

Tsewang Tenzin was born in Mukrum in Ngari. He lived with his extended, semi-nomadic family of over 16 members. His home belonged to his maternal grandparents who had not allowed his mother to marry his father. He talks about the various activities of the family members and how as a child listening to stories was one of the main sources of amusement.

Tsewang Tenzin enjoyed visiting monasteries on special occasions, when it was a joy to witness the dance performances by monks. He describes the spiritual practices followed by his family members, particularly during wintertime when there was less work to be done, which enabled his grandmother to go on retreat in a cave. He also explains how the villagers and monasteries were dependent on one another and the work the villagers would do for the local monastery.

As the Chinese occupation increased Tsewang Tenzin witnessed many *thamzing* 'struggle sessions.' He describes how they were organized, who did the *thamzing*, and the torture, humiliation, and false accusations. Even his own grandfather attempted suicide to avoid suffering under the Chinese. Tsewang Tenzin's family made plans to escape and he outlines how it was executed. He describes the journey, life after reaching India and the education he received in exile. He later became a teacher in the Tibetan settlements of southern India.

### **Topics Discussed:**

Utsang, childhood memories, farm life, festivals, customs/traditions, pilgrimage, *thamzing*, escape experiences, life as a refugee in India.

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## Interview #19C

**Interviewee: Tsewang Tenzin**

**Age: 64, Sex: Male**

**Interviewer: Marcella Adamski**

**Interview Date: August 2, 2014**

[Interviewee speaks in English. No interpreter required.]

Question: Please tell us your name.

00:00:7

**Interviewee #19C: My name is Tsewang Tenzin.**

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

**#19C: Sure.**

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

**#19C: I do.**

Q: Thank you for offering to share your story with us. During this interview if you wish to take a break or stop at any time, please let me know.

**#19C: Thank you.**

Q: If you do not wish to answer a question or talk about something, let me know.

**#19C: [Nods]**

Q: If this interview was shown in Tibet or China, would this be a problem for you?

00:00:54

**#19C: No problem.**

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

**#19C: You're welcome.**

Q: Thank you. Let us begin, Tsewang-*la*, by hearing a little bit about where you were born in Tibet.

**#19C: I was born in western Tibet and it's called Ngari, the province; Porang, the district and the proper village is Mukrum.**

Q: How far was it from the Nepal border?

**#19C: It's very close. It maybe overnight journey by foot. It's tri-junction, Tibet, Nepal and India.**

Q: Yes.

**#19C: And there's a lot of advantage and disadvantage being on the tri-border of the three countries.**

Q: Interesting. What were some of the advantages and disadvantages?

00:01:56

**#19C: Advantages were, people can go [to] either of the countries in a short time. Disadvantage is that you face some kind of hassle from the strangers from the other places.**

Q: Hostilities?

**#19C: Not hostilities. You may come across people asking for shelter and you give generous shelter to them and then sometimes things don't happen the way we want it. People might leave, people might take...steal some things or they may cause some disturbance to the family.**

Q: I see.

**#19C: So sometimes it may happen.**

Q: It was like a real crossroads?

**#19C: Right.**

Q: And so many travelers would come, sometimes causing a little bit of difficulty.

**#19C: Right.**

Q: How many people were in your family?

00:02:50

**#19C: We have a big family, maybe over 16 or some.**

Q: Sixteen?

**#19C: Sixteen.**

Q: And who did that include?

**#19C: It's a big joint semi-nomadic family. The elders, the grandparents and then the monks in the monasteries, and then there are uncles, they go for the animals, yaks and sheep. And then the other uncles, they work for the farm, for the field. So there maybe at least four different aspects of the family. Some are in...during wintertime elders take for the retreat and monks are in the monasteries and the kids are in the main home. And then the other uncles go for the...after...with the animals in the plains in Tibet.**

Q: When you say there were 16, were they living all in the same house or were there many little houses?

**#19C: It's a big house. They come across together in the summertime. Wintertime everybody has different...for example, my grand aunt, she go to retreat to the caves.**

Q: Oh, she did!

00:04:19

**#19C: And my other uncle, he's on the retreat and the kids are in the main home. And then the other ones are preparing...*tsampa* 'flour made from roasted barley' making is a whole process; they make it. And then the dressmaking is also another issue. Days together people make dress for the coming Losar 'Tibetan New Year' at least one or two pieces, everybody should have. So the tailors are called in and they make dresses for the coming Losar.**

Q: It sounds like it was a very lively homestead, very, many things happening.

**#19C: Yes, and then everybody has their own duties.**

Q: What are some of your favorite memories of your childhood in that large home?

**#19C: Most exciting were the...eve of the New Year. You have your dress that you're going to put on on the Losar and you keep it on your bed. You're so excited to put it on. That's another excitement. Then we get a lot of stories from the elder ones. Before going to bed you have to beg for stories to be told and then if you find some visiting uncles coming you get an expectation of new stories. You don't want to hear the same old story from the same old person. [Laughs]**

Q: What kind...can you remember any stories that you heard as a child?

00:05:59

**#19C: The stories normally go by the witches. Witches most common are... a witch's life is put in the pile of a bag.**

Q: Witches?

**#19C: Witches, yes, and then the...somebody's given a project to see the witches. And then the one who's taken the project is supposed to be killed by the witches but somehow he gets help. The witches may be there; you're going to give the message to the witches; witches will pretend to treat you well and then meantime you have to find the bag where the life of the...life source of all the witches are in the leather bag and you have to get it and throw it in the fire and then all the witches will run and anything running you have to put in the fire and they all die. You get destroyed those witches. That sort of story is very exciting.**

Q: Interesting. The task was to find the bag that contained the essence or spirit of the witches and to steal the bag and throw...

**#19C: ...in the fire.**

Q: ...throw it in the fire to destroy the witches and what was the reason why you wanted to destroy the witches?

**#19C: So that there will be no harm to the villages. They will be peaceful.**

Q: Were the witches men or women?

**#19C: Witches men...women.**

Q: They were women?

**#19C: Women.**

Q: What did they look like?

00:07:36

**#19C: Normally they say they pretend to be very nice, gentle in presence and outwardly they are very ugly and their inner actual appearance is very—what do you call this—scary.**

Q: Scary, their inner self but outside they looked...

**#19C: ...nice.**

Q: ...and normal.

**#19C: Right.**

Q: They could be very deceptive.

**#19C: Right.**

Q: Oh. That was quite a story. Were there any other kinds of stories that you remember as a child that were exciting to hear?

**#19C: I used to remember so many stories; now with the advance of age, I don't remember much. And then the story of Milarepa [great saint of Tibet, born 1052 A.D.], it's very commonly...**

Q: Could you tell us that story?

**#19C: Milarepa as a kid, hardships he faced and the challenges he took to fulfill the wishes of his mother and then later on he did horrible things and how much hard-working he was [doing] to purify his inner self, that sort of story.**

Q: Did you like that story?

**#19C: Oh, yeah.**

Q: What impressed you about that story?

00:09:05

**#19C: Normally the monks and the spiritual tasks...you see purity in it and then you wish to follow yourself. We don't realize actual hardship there. They are there. The very dress of the monks it appeals [to] you and you want to be a monk like them.**

Q: So you are drawn to want to be a monk.

**#19C: Right.**

Q: And you don't realize the hardship of that life?

**#19C: Yes.**

Q: The difficulty of that. Did you ever want to be a monk?

**#19C: When I was in high school I had some desire and then I did give my name to be ordained by the Dalai Lama and on the actual day the names are read out, my name is missing! Then I kept quite. Oh, it may be for good [laughs] or bad. And then I didn't become a monk.**

Q: You didn't. That's...

**#19C: Otherwise, I would have landed up in Dharamsala [India]. When they first started the Tibetan Buddhist School of Dialectics, the first started...director was my teacher and those students were my class friends.**

Q: Interesting. I wonder why your name wasn't on the list?



00:10:22

**#19C: I don't know how it...I gave it to my teacher and on the day the names were read out, "These students will come, have a hair cut by the Dalai Lama to be ordained monks." That time my name was missing. Then I thought, "Oh, maybe good or bad."**

Q: You didn't know.

**#19C: I didn't know. So I didn't pursue.**

Q: Well, we'll go back to your childhood story a little bit. In this family, wonderful family home with about 16 people and many levels of activity, what were some of your favorite memories? You said hearing stories from travelers. What other things did you do as a child when you were in this house?

**#19C: Going to the monasteries. There are certain occasions we can go to the monastery; it's very exciting. All the villagers come to the monasteries. There will be monk dance, lama dance and then there will be...very exciting people, lot of people come to the monastery in the best dress and you happen to see lot of relatives and they give you presents if your parents were known to those other relatives. You get presents and then you see the lama dances.**

**The most exciting are some...there are...what do you call...poles. And then in one of the dances, some four monks climb up the poles as fast as and then they like a...they burst a kind of balloons. We don't have balloons and they look like they use some animals' intestine...**

Q: Skin.

**#19C: Yeah, and then they burst it out, with the drums and all that.**

Q: Does something come out of the...?

**#19C: Noise.**

Q: Noise.

00:12:23

**#19C: Noise and those monks climbing up the poles, they are scary and they're fast.**

Q: Wow.

**#19C: And then the black hat dance. So many dances, it goes I think [for] two days.**

Q: Two days of dancing. You know, when the Chinese said they were liberating Tibet, they said they wanted to free people from the oppression of the monasteries and where people were mistreated by the monastic leaders. What was your experience of that? Did people, did your family or yourself or anybody feel oppressed by the monasteries or mistreated?

**#19C: Looks like to some extent. The family has to attend to the monasteries, like say removing their... We don't—what do you call—restrooms, it's all dry. Restroom is open. In the room there's a hole and then you do the restroom activities and then after that there's no water flushing; you throw dust. Then that piles up, fills up the whole room. And then in a year you've to remove all those. Those tasks are given to the villagers.**

Q: To the villagers.

**#19C: To remove it and then technically the villagers, they do farming. Many of those lands [were] owned by the monasteries.**

Q: Right.

00:13:59

**#19C: And then you have to serve the monasteries; in turn you get the land to be used and then you may have to have a...some return from the harvest. So, more big monasteries are there. They're trying to be self-sufficient but they're not self-sufficient, so interdependent. So ideally the villagers depend on the monasteries and the monasteries also depend on the villagers. So villagers need to be treated little more fairly in terms of providing some help. The monasteries, they tend to demand more help from the villagers than the other way round.**

Q: During your...well, you were a young child early up until 10; I guess you didn't see any changes coming about that was pretty much the same for those years of your childhood?

**#19C: Towards the end the monks tend to leave monasteries and then you have to have the monks permission from the Chinese to going to the monastery and coming out of monastery. So when we're planning to escape Tibet, my youngest uncle was in Sakya Monastery. So my mum is talking about how we're going to get him. She was suggesting [to] me, "You stay in the house. Then he will come from the monastery and you two come along the river and then get into India." Then I said, "No." And somehow...they were worried that he may be left behind because he's in the monastery.**

Q: And was he?

**#19C: And then later on, somehow he was able to come with us.**

Q: He was able to.

**#19C: That time it shows the Chinese control.**

Q: I see. Before the Chinese began to control the monasteries, was there any benefit that you feel the people, the farmers and the villagers got from the monasteries? Why? What was the part that helped them? Why did they even support the monasteries?

00:16:28

**#19C: Because their sons go to monasteries and then there may be lands, many of the lands may be owned by the monasteries. So in turn they might have agreements, written documentation that is—what do you call—mutually help each other in terms of services and then the monks, if the family monks get admission into monasteries, they get some teachings from the monasteries without, no actual fees and all that.**

Q: I see. So back to your family, were there any...tell me about your parents. What did your father do for a living?

**#19C: My parents were not married because my mom is the only daughter of her parents, who has eight brothers. So after five sons, my grandfather requested a daughter be granted. I don't know who, it is said to have [been] requested, maybe to the lamas or some deities...**

Q: Prayed...

**#19C: Prayed and then my mother was born. There's no way that he will give his only daughter in marriage. And then somehow I was conceived and my father's family...my father's family, they had recognition of me being their son. So there's called...some kind of paternity acknowledgement. In Tibet they do that. Though the parents are not married, the father's side offers a day's feast. Then also a day's prayers in cleansing of the new baby and in that way paternity recognition is established.**

**My father was the son of a doctor of the Tridhay Gyalwa and my grandfather, paternal grandfather was an *amchi*. *Amchi* means Tibetan medical doctor and they are quite a reputed family. And then later on they never get together as husband and wife and then before we departed Tibet, he died. Very young, he might have died very young.**

Q: Did you have...spent any time with him growing up?

00:19:25

**#19C: One time I remember that my mother gave me some money to go to see him, give it to him for...as treatment, gesture for his medical treatment. I stayed with him for some time and then he gave me some direction. He has some other relatives where he keeps some of his personal things and then he told [me] go to aunt's, some of the aunts' places and he has candies and stuff for me with them, to collect them. Then I went there and then they treat me very well and I got those presents, as he had directed to collect from those his relatives.**

Q: How far away did he live from you?

**#19C: In the Mukrum village we were in the central of the village and their house is at the end. It's very close.**

Q: And were you...so you lived with your mother?

**#19C: Yes.**

Q: Predominantly?

**#19C: Yes.**

Q: Your father was working as a doctor?

00:20:35

**19C: No, his father.**

Q: His father. So what was your father doing?

**#19C: He mainly worked for the family, taking care of the fields, animals and looks like he did not become a doctor like his father.**

Q: I see.

**#19C: So they may have some hardship. Otherwise, normally a father tries to make his son to be a doctor.**

Q: I know.

**#19C: That's a very common tradition and that did not happen. They may have some reasons.**

Q: And what about your...so your mother who was not allowed to marry by her father, so were you growing up in her father's home with your mother? Was that her father's establishment or family where you grew up?

**#19C: I grew up in my maternal grandfather's home.**

Q: Your maternal grandfather. Was that the big house?

00:21:36

**#19C: Big house, yes. And then her brother next to her was married. Married and they brought a...married and then the siblings...his children have the traditional inheritance for the ongoing man. So it's funny. If you are born to the...not to the central core of the family, the couple, others [on] the sidelines, you can stay in the home but you are not important. In the sense that the core family...**

Q: ...lineage.

**#19C: Lineage [holder] will be responsible in getting married.**

Q: Did you feel as a child, even though your birth was blessed and acknowledged, did you feel you were treated differently than the other children?

**#19C: No, my youngest uncle was same age, almost two or three years younger than me. We played together. The earliest memory is [when I was] maybe 3 or 4 years, in the morning when we get up I go to my grandfather's lap and he does *mani* [prayer] wheel and I have to sit there and when the sun rise, then we go up on the roof of the house and we stay in the sunshine. It's wintertime maybe I remember. And then we have to yell, "Hey, bring the food." [Laughs] Yeah.**

Q: "Bring me some food."

00:23:19

**#19C: Food, yes. We are sitting here and then you do get something to eat. Normally *tsampa* and tea is the morning traditional food.**

Q: So the servants would bring you some food.

**#19C: Yeah. Normally mum. Mum is very busy because she's attending to her father who's elderly.**

Q: Well, it sounds like it was pretty, very active life. Did you get any education before the age of 10?

**#19C: Yeah. My uncle, he started teaching me Tibetan alphabet. When he was in retreat and then he comes to the home and then he started teaching me the alphabets. And then it was a little surprise. My uncle, I have close affection. He's a lama and when he started teaching and then all affection is not there. There's sternness, seriousness there and I...it was shocking to me. [Laughs]**

Q: He became very strict.

00:24:32

**#19C: Yeah, he became little unusual. [Laughs]**

Q: You became a student.

**#19C: Yes.**

Q: What kind of a student were you?

**#19C: It was starting of the Tibetan alphabets at home.**

Q: At home, you were studying but did you find it hard or easy to learn?

**#19C: Oh yeah, it's not easy. It's confusing at the start.**

Q: At the start and besides the alphabets, were you given any other education when you were under 10 years old, any other classes?

**#19C: And there were also option of going to the day schools started by the Chinese at that time. I remember going one or two times and then somehow I dropped from attending the Chinese school. And then we have another estate on the mountain, in the mountain where my one of the grandmothers looking after the fields and then I was sent as her companion. Now I was a companion. She stayed all alone and I'm her companion during the summer month.**

Q: Why was she going to that place in the mountains?

00:25:56

**#19C: The field...**

Q: Yeah.

**#19C: ...harvested. Cultivation of the field, she's looking after the field.**

Q: She was...

**#19C: ...is from the...couple of miles from the main home. The main home has it's own field.**

Q: I see and she was supervising there.

**#19C: She's looking after, taking care of that.**

Q: You mentioned another person. Was it an aunt who lived in a cave as a...?

**#19C: That grandmother.**

Q: The same one?

**#19C: Wintertime after the harvest, then she come to the home and she collect her supplies and she goes to the cave.**

Q: Where was the cave?

00:26:33

**#19C: There's a river. There are a couple of, within the same village on the other side of Mukrum, other side of the...other side of the village. There are two caves, one cave where my uncle is in the retreat and other cave nearer to the home where grandmother goes to there.**

Q: Is that right? She took her supplies to the cave. Why was she going to the cave? What was she going to do?

**#19C: Maybe she's doing some practices. Maybe practices and she enjoys her own life independently.**

Q: To live independently...

**#19C: Yeah.**

Q: ...and do some spiritual practices.

**#19C: Yeah, that may be the purpose.**

Q: Was that a kind of a common tradition of some of the people in your family or in your village that they would spend some time?

00:27:35

**#19C: In the winter they do that. Winter they...**

Q: They would go in the winter?

**#19C: There's nothing much to do outside. Snow. And then winter they go to...even the younger people go in the retreat, do prostrations and some spiritual practices.**

Q: How did they live in the caves? Do you have any knowledge of...?

**#19C: I've been there. It's carved out and there will be a small kitchen area and then there will be a, maybe a...normally one sort of room. It should have doors and all that. It's similar to the...we have this...what do you call? The National Monument...**

Q: The Anasazi?

**#19C: Anasazi.**

Q: ...National Monument?

**#19C: One here near Los Alamos [but] much bigger.**

Q: Much bigger cave.

00:28:30

**#19C: And that...**

Q: Where the Indians live.

**#19C: The Indians, yeah.**

Q: The Native American Indians lived.

**#19C: [Nods]**

Q: I see. And was it, I mean it would be pretty cold in the winter. So how would she stay warm in the cave?

**#19C: Normally, maybe the fireplace, they keep fire always, constant little fire where they put the teapot. They stir the fire and it will remain there. And then warm clothes and then sustain, maybe the sustaining of the body with the diet and then warm blankets. Otherwise, no heating except a little fire.**

Q: Just the fire. So it was a meditation practice?

**#19C: It's a spiritual practice.**

Q: Spiritual practice, I see.

00:29:28

**#19C: May not be serious advanced kind of meditation but they do prostrations; they do *mani* 'mantra of Avalokiteshvara' mantras.**

Q: Okay. It sounds interesting. You actually visited her cave.

**#19C: Oh yeah, I visited my uncle's cave. His cave is sophisticated. There's a river flowing and then a little higher up and when you go to the...you have to knock. There's a stone, a flat stone and over it a little ball of stone. The stone rings like a bell.**

Q: Ahh...

**#19C: And you hit that and after sometime he will come out. He will open the door, open the door and then you go up stairs, stairs and then you get to his room.**

Q: What was that like?

**#19C: He's one of the elder sons of my grandfather. He's a Nyingmapa 'follower of the Nyingma sect of Tibetan Buddhism' and he's quite a...little well known in the village as a lama.**

Q: So he was considered a holy man.

00:30:42

**#19C: Yeah, yeah, a lama.**

Q: Would people go to him for advice or...?

**#19C: Advice. Normally they do...**

Q: Prayers?

**#19C: ...prayers, long life practices, long life blessings.**



Q: And how long would, say someone who did that as a regular tradition, how long would he live in that cave?

**#19C: He might have...maybe over 6-7 years. He had an interesting life. He was married, okay? Married and he has a wife and somehow how that happened, I don't know. Grandfather took care of his wife and he became mad and he ran away from the home. And he became a lama. He was disillusioned because father took his wife.**

Q: Wow.

00:31:38

**#19C: And then that time the tension might have happened. My grandfather, I don't know how that happened...my mum and her mum, they went out of the home because he has taken his son's wife as [his] wife and they had two sons from that new wife. Then he became a lama out of sort of desperation. It maybe a blessing in disguise [as] later on he became a lama. They look like [they] reconciled. Later he came back to the home and then he stays in the cave; in the village and then he came to home often. He was the one who did the, all the...what do you call...death rituals, practices, ritual *pooja* 'rituals of worship' when his father died after release from the Chinese prison.**

Q: I see. We'll get to that part. So your mother and your grandfather's wife were very upset.

**#19C: Yeah.**

Q: And they left him.

**#19C: They left him. They went again to that [place] where my grandmother was staying in the village.**

Q: They did.

**#19C: Later on it looks like they reconciled and he was back because that...after having a second son, she died.**

Q: I see.

**#19C: And then again they returned back to home and my mother took care of my youngest uncle as her child. That's why we were very...one or two years...maybe around two years gap.**

Q: Interesting, yeah. So it was not acceptable for grandfather to bring a new, not only a new woman but the wife of his son. That was very upsetting...

00:33:26

**#19C: Upsetting, yeah.**

Q: ...to the women.

**#19C: Looks like but there's nothing he...can be done. It looks like "my way or the highway." [Laughs]**

Q: He sounds like he was a pretty...

**#19C: Yes.**

Q: ...powerful guy. Was he the one that was arrested by the Chinese?

**#19C: Yes.**

Q: Since we're talking about him, tell me what happened? First of all, were you there when that happened, when he was arrested?

**#19C: I don't know, I don't remember what situation he was arrested. I remember he was in the Chinese military hospital. There were so many tubes tied up around him and he was hardly able to talk. He might have asked us to see him and we went there along with my youngest uncle.**

Q: He was dying.

00:34:14

**#19C: He was dying, most likely. And then after a long time the Chinese thought that he can be cured, treated and they released him saying, "No problem with him. Politically he is okay." And then he died on the way.**

Q: On the way home?

**#19C: On the way. It was winter, snowy day. All his sons and relatives went to the military hospital. They took [grandfather] on a stretcher. On the way they had a tough time. Lots of snow and there's no road, nothing. Everything has to be managed to bring [him] home. By the time he reached home, he's already dead.**

Q: You said he was arrested by the Chinese at one point. Do you know why?

**#19C: Maybe, normally they arrest all the elderly people. They asked questions and they said, "You may be hiding some weapons. You have to show it. You have not handed over enough information to us." And under suspicions and then he thought that this maybe, maybe not an easy one and then he managed to get a knife from some people and he tried to commit suicide by cutting his throat. That did not happen; he did not die and then the Chinese took him to the hospital.**

Q: After he cut his throat?

**#19C: Yes, and they tried to treat him. When that did not happen, he was released.**

Q: Wow. Maybe we could go back and say to when you were a child and we're talking...let's see...we're talking...you're born in 1950. So you are there. When you're growing up, are there Chinese in your village?

00:36:29

**#19C: Yes.**

Q: There are.

**#19C: Chinese military.**

Q: The military are there. So you were, you were kind of...you grew up with the Chinese.

**#19C: Not very close but from a distance we see them.**

Q: Oh, from a distance you see them.

**#19C: Yeah.**

Q: You mentioned that there was a Chinese school that you went to. Can you...?

**#19C: Not a Chinese...Chinese started the school.**

Q: Okay.

**#19C: And there I see that they do sing songs, kind of patriotic songs, kids play; not much of a teaching I see there. That [school] maybe starting, maybe some kind of an informal school in the villages.**

Q: Okay, and when you went...so you didn't stay long. Doesn't sound like it...

00:37:17

**#19C: I don't remember having learned anything except kids are playing.**

Q: And then after that when did...did things stay the same in the village or did the Chinese come closer into the village if they were often at a distance you said? Did they have military bases there or...?

**#19C: Yeah, military bases. And then...**

Q: Military bases.

**#19C: Being on the border of India and Tibet it may be crucial. Then they started interfering in the Tibetan life, calling for meetings and trying to [do] all sort of things, Youth Wings, this meeting and so many meetings. Meetings were more like harassment to the Tibetans. And then they...gradually they started horrible things...**

Q: Really? What...?

**#19C: ...as happened in the rest of Tibet.**

Q: What kind of horrible things?

00:38:16

**#19C: The rich families were targeted.**

Q: Did you...what did you see with your own eyes?

**#19C: In the public meetings...**

Q: You did.

**#19C: Okay, in the...nearby the Chinese military there's a big ground and then villagers were collected from different villages. They sit together in the order of the village they belong to. And then from the monasteries or the Porang District, then in the Chinese military [trucks] we saw the people are brought in from the prison.**

**So the monasteries and the district headquarter *dzong*; *dzong* is the district headquarters already taken by the Chinese. They were brought in and they were put up in a good dress and then in a...on a play...big ground groups of people from different villages sitting together. And then I saw...let's say a monk is passed onto one group of villagers and they accuse him [of] this and that, this and that. He was beaten up, public humiliation, pull, pluck his nose and cut...tear up his clothes, all kinds of accusation and then after that that person is passed on to another group from another village and they do the same thing. It starts from the morning. In the evening the person is almost dead.**

Q: Oh, my gosh!

00:39:54

**#19C: His ears were torn, bleeding and dress was torn and he's hardly able to walk. And then likewise there maybe dozens of people rotated, going to the...from one group to another and they accuse him. And they in the end, in the evening those people are more like dead persons and they're thrown in the military trucks. Their hands were behind their backs and bleeding. That's a horrible sight.**

Q: And these people were...were they village leaders? Who were they that were being so...?

**#19C: They maybe village leaders, some of the monastery abbots...**

Q: Abbots?

**#19C: Abbots and then the...some of the old officials of the Tibetan Government, some of the old VIPs.**

Q: And if...so then they passed them along from one set of villagers who were gathered to another set, to another set. So these villagers might not have even known some of these people.

**#19C: Yeah.**

Q: Right?

**#19C: So looks like many of the accusers are from the low...low families and they are trained by the Chinese.**

Q: They were trained to what?

00:41:19

**#19C: To abuse, to accuse him, “You were the official. You treated us bad and you were dishonest. You took our land. You persecuted us for nothing,” all kinds of false accusations.**

Q: So these certain groups of people were trained by the Chinese...

**#19C: Yes.**

Q: ...to actually inflict *thamzing* or public...

**#19C: *Thamzing* ‘struggle sessions,’ yes.**

Q: ...humiliation...

**#19C: Yeah.**

Q: ...on them. And what would have happened if those villagers who were trained like that if they said, “I’m not going to do it”? What do you think would’ve happened to them or what do you know would’ve happened to them?

00:42:01

**#19C: They may have been assured so many incentives. Normally they [the Chinese] say, “You are from this...your, your family is poor. You are poor because of this and that. So we’re going to do that and you’re going to tell, accuse this and that and you get rewarded. You get promotion.” Some kind of name and maybe monetary incentives because after many decades some of those people they spoke out. They were...“We were not doing voluntarily. We were forced to do it.”**

Q: Right.

**#19C: There were so many evidence from the people that they were forced to accuse.**

Q: They were intimidated.

**#19C: Yes.**

Q: Made to do that and you saw this with your own eyes when you were a little boy?

**#19C: Yes, I saw.**

Q: Do you remember how that left you feeling?

00:42:58

**#19C: Yeah, it's a strange feeling that we've never seen. One of the grandfathers was known to my family and he was in a very, very pathetic and sad situation.**

Q: Really? So you actually knew one of the people...

**#19C: Yeah, one of the...**

Q: ...personally...

**#19C: Yeah.**

Q: ...being beaten. Did you feel he deserved it in any way?

**#19C: No. Yeah, we have...shocking, yes.**

Q: It was shocking.

**#19C: Yeah, shocking and terrifying.**

Q: So you don't feel that he deserved to be punished?

**#19C: Yeah, yeah.**

Q: Right?

00:43:27

**#19C: He was our neighbor.**

Q: He was your neighbor.

**#19C: He was related and he went...originally he belongs to our family and he was given in marriage to other family. He used to I remember, he used to play with me, quite a close acquaintance.**

Q: What was that like to see somebody that you knew subjected to that kind of treatment? How was that for you?

**#19C: Yeah, it's very shocking and very...it's terrifying.**

Q: Terrifying, I imagine. Did you worry about anybody then in your family being treated like that?

**#19C: Yeah. No, never. My...that's why my grandfather might have, might have...he might have thought he may face similar sort of humiliation. So instead of going through that he thought better commit suicide.**

Q: That's why he attempted suicide.

**#19C: Yeah.**

Q: He thought he might be arrested and...

**#19C: Yes.**

Q: ...and treated to *thamzing*.

**#19C: Um...hm.**

Q: I see. So was this kind of treatment happening when you were closer to 10 because you remember it?

00:44:42

**#19C: Yeah, maybe 8, 9. Yeah.**

Q: So that would have been 1957, '58?

**#19C: Yeah, maybe around that.**

Q: Was this...?

**#19C: Maybe '59, very close.**

Q: Was it before the Dalai Lama escaped Tibet?

**#19C: Yeah, I think so. Before that, yeah.**

Q: It might have been happening before that?

**#19C: Yeah, we might have been in India...I remember in India when we went to school and writing the date, before class began date I remember writing 1961 in Hindi. '61 means then [we] might have been already in India. So we might have escaped. It might have taken a year or so going whole bunch of people, with animals, kids and disposing off the animals on the way.**

Q: Yeah, let's get into that kind of ending because you are...obviously things are getting very difficult in your village because you saw this happening in your village. Is that correct?

**#19C: Yes.**

Q: And if we say the village, that would have been in...

**#19C: Mukrum.**

Q: Mukrum. Okay, Mukrum. So what happens next in your family? Do you stay in your village?

00:46:04

**#19C: Then the family might have planned to escape. So planning...some of the uncles were with animals, maybe 5-6 miles from the main home in the mountain and they, and then my grandmother is in the estate with the farm and my mum, mother is in the main home and the youngest uncle is in the monastery.**

**So their plan is whole...all the group to escape and be there in India at a certain place. Those uncles in the mountain with the sheep and yaks, they found out different route through the mountains. Then me and my uncle, his wife and other uncle, his wife and kids and grandmother, they are suppose to start from the...from the estate, est...what do you call, estate. Then my mom is only in the home; grandfather [had] passed away and my two uncles are in different places.**

**So the problem is how we're going to get my youngest uncle who's in the monastery. So my mum suggested, "You stay in the home and he will be coming home. Then you come along the river and that will link to India." That doesn't seem to be very dangerous. I did not accept that. Then my mum, mother was trying to leave the home and she has other relatives, confident relatives to help her.**

**Then they saw some of the Tibetans watching the family. They expect that this family might escape and then one of the woman was there and my mother caught her, "Why you are here? You are suspecting us. You come here. Everything is intact. Nothing is unusual. We're not leaving." She came in and she was satisfied, she left.**

00:48:19

**Soon after that, that night my mother started from the main home, other group started from the mountain and then on the way my uncle, his wife and grandmother and me, they were coming. It's dark and it's wild and there's no proper trail. Then grandmother went ahead and she lost track of the other group. She yelled from the mountain. Then there's a river and on the other side there's a Chinese temporary camp, military camp.**

**My uncle was cursing, "Why she's yelling? She's inviting the Chinese to arrest us." She's also helpless in the dark. "Where are the groups?" she starting yelling in the mountain. And then somehow the next day before sunrise they reached the border. They were not, nothing, no harassment. They crossed the border and then next few days they all come to the same point.**



Q: Was grandmother found? Did she catch up with you?

**#19C: Yes. She was going ahead. She was asking for the uncles and others, “Where are you?” [Laughs]**

Q: She was ahead of the group.

**#19C: Yes, so she may walk slowly they asked her to go ahead.**

Q: Yeah, yeah.

**#19C: When it became dark, she was not able to pursue and [when] she was not able to see the other members, she started yelling.**

Q: She got scared.

**#19C: Scared, yeah.**

Q: Almost gave everybody away.

**#19C: Scared the other group.**

Q: You know you didn't have cell phones in Tibet. So how did you organize to tell all these four different groups to get together?

00:50:11

**#19C: They maybe sending people messages.**

Q: Messages.

**#19C: Going...yeah, they make...going...messengers saying that we're going to do this and that.**

Q: Do you have any...did your mother tell you why it was important for you to leave Tibet?

**#19C: Yeah, we saw some of the other families left before us and we saw some of our neighbors were caught and they returned back. And that's scary. Planning has to be done at proper time. They planned in the fall when the fields are ready to be harvested. They leave it intact. What normally people do is they harvest, try to make something out of that and then carry, sell or...try to make something, consolidation. They planned to [escape] at the time when the harvest was ready to be done and that way, they may not be suspected.**

Q: Right. The Chinese would think you will stay and harvest.

**#19C: Yeah, more than Chinese there are so many Tibetans, minor petty spies, agents.**

Q: Many agents for the Chinese?

00:51:23

**#19C: Spies, yes, spies. Those poor families who are poor and they are used by the Chinese, "You're going to watch. Give us a report." So much more than the Chinese, the Tibetans were more...**

Q: More dangerous.

**#19C: More dangerous.**

Q: They were watching out for the Chinese, yeah. Did your family leave because...was this before your grandfather died?

**#19C: After.**

Q: After he died. He died and then...did you leave because you thought your family would be arrested maybe or tortured?

**#19C: They might have been...they might have heard from other people coming from...we're nearby the Mt. Kailash. So many people from all part of Tibet come through our village and they go to India and Nepal. So they might have got a lot of information through the travelers or the escapees.**

Q: About?

**#19C: The whole situation.**

Q: About the whole situation. You know you mentioned you were near Mt. Kailash. How many days journey by foot?

00:52:34

**#19C: Maybe, those times maybe couple of days.**

Q: Couple of days and did you ever go to Mt. Kailash?

**#19C: Yeah, I did. Maybe little bit before we started leaving Tibet.**

Q: Really?

**#19C: Yeah.**

Q: What do you remember about the journey?

**#19C: Journey...the group of my mother and her relatives and then we carry...some donkeys to carry the luggage and then walking on foot. Normally...when we reached Mt. Kailash we rested couple of days and then do a circumambulation. That time start early in**

the morning, maybe very early, maybe, the stars are there, early in the morning and you are sleeping and walking together. You, maybe that's why I said you get dragged by them and then they...

Q: [Laughs] You were a little boy.

**#19C: At daybreak they take a rest and drink tea. Then around noon they take a break and then in the evening [we] came out on the road, on the trailside and all together, sit together, sleep together in a circular and then again start the next day early in the morning.**

Q: How many days did it take to go around?

00:54:01

**#19C: Maybe three days I think, yeah.**

Q: Do you know how many miles or kilometers?

**#19C: Oh, I heard somewhere around 22 miles.**

Q: Twenty-two miles.

**#19C: Healthy people can do within a day.**

Q: Some people.

**#19C: Yes.**

Q: If they're very strong.

**#19C: Yeah.**

Q: I know. I've heard that. For people who don't know, can you tell us why Mt. Kailash is so important to...?

**#19C: Mt. Kailash is a holy mountain for the Hindus; the Hindus, they consider it the abode of the Lord Shiva, Shiva and his consort Parvathi, their residence. To the ethnic religion of Bon—Bon is the ethnic religion of Tibet—Bon is...Mt. Kailash is the center of universe and to the Buddhists, that's the physical *mandala* 'circle [diagram representing the metaphysical universe].' In the Kalachakra 'Religious Initiation' text Mt. Kailash is the representation of the mandala offering. So for the Hindus, for the Buddhists, for the Bon, it's a very holy mountain and that's why much loved by different faiths.**

Q: Much loved.

00:55:21

**#19C: When they do circumambulations Buddhists do clockwise; Bon will do anti-clockwise.**

Q: Interesting.

**#19C: And there are people, they prostrate all the way through the mountain, about 22 miles with prostration. That's very extreme—what do you call—dedication to their practices.**

Q: Yes, it's very arduous but very special to people who can do that.

**#19C: Right.**

Q: In terms of our story, maybe it'd be interesting to hear what was the place that you picked in India to meet everybody? What place?

**#19C: That I don't remember. It's before the check post.**

Q: It was before the check post.

00:56:13

**#19C: There's a police check post and they won't [let] you pass beyond that. You get to stay there for many days together. They say, "We have to get permission, green signal from Delhi." And they stop it.**

Q: How did you...do you have any memory of how it felt to know you were leaving Tibet?

**#19C: Oh yeah, it's a little bit [of] excitement to see a new place. That is there. At the same time it's also horrible, no house. We're sleeping in the open air, in the tent and in the tent rain started, heavy rain and dripping from the tent. Then there are...some animals are there.**

**It's difficult, a bit. The kids and the elderly people, they miss their home. They expect to go back, return back to Tibet in a year or two. There was very high expectation then. We're temporarily going to India with the hope of returning back to Tibet with animals and the property; everything will be normal, back very soon.**

Q: So when you left you...many members of the family they had, they obviously had herds of yak and the house had some valuable possessions, I'm sure. What did the family bring with you on that journey? What did they bring?

00:57:48

**#19C: Little bit of rations, supplies, some food, some dry meat, some dry cheese, some *tsampa* and then other than that they may not have because it's not easy to carry on the back.**

Q: So the family had in that beautiful house that you grew up in they had to leave, they had to leave their entire belongings, yes?

**#19C: Right.**

Q: In order to look like they were not leaving, right?

**#19C: Yeah, everything intact.**

Q: Everything was intact. Do you know what happened to the herds of animals, the yaks?

00:58:26

**#19C: The animals we...from the mountain the uncles brought back to India and they gradually...those are sold to the Indians.**

Q: They were able to bring them?

**#19C: Yeah, and sold. That also Tibetans consider as a big, kind of sad [thing], selling your animals and all those animals go to butchers. So it's horrible.**

Q: It was horrible to think of that as their ending. Maybe we can get some idea just in general what happens. Your family escapes to...where do you land? What's the name of the place?

**#19C: We were put up in Sandeo where all the Tibetans from that part of Tibet, they're coming there. There maybe, maybe a couple of thousand, temporary camp and then there were schools, day schools. We might have stayed there until mid-60's.**

Q: Until the mid-60's?

**#19C: Mid-60's and then later on the people were sent from there to different parts of India.**

Q: And where did you go?

00:59:38

**#19C: I landed up in school in Dharamsala, nearby Dharamsala in 1966. From there we were sent to Mussoorie.**

Q: Did you go to school in Mussoorie?

**#19C: Yes.**

Q: I see and then what happens after that to you?

**#19C: In Sandeo my mother passed away. She was only 35.**

Q: Oh, my goodness!

**#19C: So many family [members] died. On the road construction another uncle died and that's why I become full orphan.**

Q: Your mother died doing road construction work?

**#19C: She might have...she died in the camp, first camp due to dysentery, diarrhea or some kind.**

Q: Yeah, many did. Your mother's name was Kalden Sangmo?

**#19C: Right.**

Q: Is that right?

**#19C: Right.**

Q: And she's the daughter of...what's her name?

01:00:45

**#19C: I've put there. May Penpa Bapa.**

Q: May Penpa Bapa, she's the daughter of...There was only one daughter and eight sons. And your father, why don't you tell us his full name again?

**#19C: Tsela Dorjee.**

Q: Tsela Dorjee.

**#19C: Son of Gyalwa Amji Wangdu.**

Q: Gyalwa...?

**#19C: Gyalwa...**

Q: Okay.

**#19C: His name is Wangdu. Amji means doctor.**

Q: Oh, I see. Oh, he was the son of Amji Wangdu.

**#19C: Wangdu.**

Q: Got it.

**#19C: And the family is Gyalwa.**

Q: The family is Gyalwa. G-Y-A-L-W-A.

**#19C: Yeah.**

Q: Thank you. I wanted to get the family background. So you wind...your mother dies, probably of dysentery in the camp. Then you are officially an orphan. What...maybe you could just give us a general idea. Can you give us an idea of what happens to you? Are you educated then in Dharamsala or where?

01:01:46

**#19C: In Dharamsala we were put up...they called [it] the Transit School.**

Q: Yes?

**#19C: Transit School and I was very good in Hindi and Tibetan at the first camp where we were taught.**

Q: You went to the first camp? Is that what you said? Where was that?

**#19C: In Sandeo.**

Q: In Sandeo?

**#19C: S-A-N-D-E-O.**

Q: Okay? What happened there?

**#19C: There temporary camps were set up; kids can go to day school.**

Q: Okay.

**#19C: Day school we get taught Eng...not English: Tibetan, Hindi and all other subjects in Hindi medium.**

Q: Wow.

**#19C: Science, history.**

Q: Good, and then when you...?

**#19C: And then that camp was—what do you call—from the camp people are sent to different settlements and I landed up [in the] temporary school; Transit, they call it Transit School in Dharamsala being a full orphan. After a year there we were selected to go to Mussoorie, Tibetan Homes Foundation. There I started my formal education with English as medium. Then I graduated high school in November '73.**

Q: What happens to you after that?

01:03:25

**#19C: After that I went to college [in] Chandigarh, India.**

Q: Chandigarh?

**#19C: Chandigarh; Chandigarh, India. Then I went [for] teacher training in Bangalore and I became a teacher.**

Q: Where? Where did you become a teacher?

**#19C: I taught [in] Bylakuppe; Bylakuppe, Mundgod and Orissa—some of the Tibetan settlements and the schools are being...all the schools, they're called C.S.T., Central School for Tibetans, managed by the Indian Government for the Tibetans. My wife [was] also a teacher.**

Q: Wonderful. What were you teaching?

**#19C: Mostly I taught mathematics and little English, and some science subjects.**

Q: That was quite a change from a little boy.

**#19C: Oh, yeah. [Hands over paper] You may link with that. That's some of the approximate dates, time and places in India.**

Q: Thank you. It's wonderful. When did you come to America?

**#19C: October '93.**

Q: October '93.

**#19C: '92, yeah, October '92.**

Q: Well, there's so much I could I ask you about all those experiences but because we are going to need to summarize now I would like to ask you, what are your hopes for Tibet? What do you wish would happen next?

01:05:25

**#19C: Historically, we were [an] independent country, and then we are very proud being independent in terms of language, culture, monetary, military. And then realistically I strongly agree with the Middle Way Approach of the Dalai Lama, and reconcile with the Chinese and the Chinese understand the Tibetan issues like culture, environmental preservation, and moderate development keeping the environment as an important factor for the future.**

**And then Tibetans should also realistically adopt and try to work with the Chinese Government because the economy is a big matter, and then realistically reconcile and live peacefully. Tibet has vast land; we can share with the Chinese. Chinese should also appreciate the Tibetan mindset for the sentient beings; we pray for the sentient beings that include Chinese. The only realistic approach is the Middle Way Policy adopted by the**



**Tibetan Administration for the Tibetans and also for the Chinese, and also for the peace of...for the world.**

**And then at the same time Tibetans have to keep the identity; identity in terms of language, culture and the spiritual practices and also be a modern educated technologist with the Tibetan identity, which are relevant. So be realistic for the future. That's it.**

Q: That's it. That sounds like a...

**#19C: Thank you very much for giving me opportunity.**

Q: Well, we want to thank you, and again I...just in conclusion reiterate my first question, if this interview was shown in Tibet or China would this be a problem for you?

**#19C: No problem. I've been to China. I've been to Tibet, Lhasa in 2006 and Chinese people are very nice people, smart, intelligent and only the government has to be realistic in keeping the Tibetan needs as for the sake of Chinese themselves because Tibetan part of the humanities and then Tibetan culture, and spiritual practice will be shared with the Chinese. That will be helpful for the better improvement of their life.**

**So many Chinese intellectuals [are] very supportive of the Tibetan issues, and Chinese dissidents and also many humanitarians, lawyers; they think that the government is not understanding the rule--what do you call—true issues that need to be tackled courageously for the future. How long they can put the pressure and that will not last long. It has a limit. So limit has [been] reached.**

Q: Thank you very much for those ideas...

**#19C: Thank you very much.**

Q: ... and for being a part of our project.

**#19C: Sure, sure.**

Q: Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW