

Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #19M – Tenzin Namgyal (alias)
April 13, 2010

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INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #19M
2. Interviewee: Tenzin Namgyal (alias)
3. Age: 75
4. Date of Birth: 1935
5. Sex: Male
6. Birthplace: Lhasa Shol
7. Province: Utsang
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1959
9. Date of Interview: April 13, 2010
10. Place of Interview: H. H. the Dalai Lama's Palace, Camp Number 3, Doeguling Settlement, Mundgod, Karwar District, Karnataka, India
11. Length of Interview: 2 hr 17 min
12. Interviewer: Marcella Adamski
13. Interpreter: Tenzin Yangchen
14. Videographer: Pema Tashi
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

Biographical Information:

Tenzin Namgyal attended school at Shol in Lhasa for two years where he learned basic reading and writing. Then he joined the Mentsekhang 'Medical Center' and studied astrology for nine years. He talks about the two forms of astrology called *kartse* and *nagtse*, which had their uses in the daily life predicting auspicious dates and marriage compatibility.

Tenzin Namgyal decided to leave his studies and join a monastery because two of his brothers were already monks and his mother thought it would be better life for him. He became a monk at the age of 20 at Gaden Monastery and describes the daily routine. He explains that some monks faced the difficulties due to the lack of food because they were too far from home to receive enough rations from family and had to go work in the fields.

Tenzin Namgyal depicts the turmoil in Lhasa in 1959 when thousands of Tibetan people gathered to protect His Holiness the Dalai Lama. The event culminated in the stoning to death of a Tibetan man believed to be a Chinese informer, which his mother witnessed. Tenzin Namgyal continues his story with his leaving the monastery and joining the guerrillas of the *Chushi Gangdrug* [Defend Tibet Volunteer Force]. Despite several encounters his unit had with Chinese soldiers, he was able to reach Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh, India through the Mangola Pass.

Topics Discussed:

Childhood memories, education, monastic life, invasion by Chinese army, Norbulingka, March 10th Uprising, Chushi Gangdrug guerrillas, escape experiences.

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Interview #19M

Interviewee: Tenzin Namgyal [alias]

Age: 75, Sex: Male

Interviewer: Marcella Adamski

Interview Date: April 13, 2010

Question: Please tell us your name.

00:00:15

Interviewee #19M: Tenzin Namgyal.

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

#19M: Yes, you can use it.

Q: Thank you for offering to share your story with us.

00:01:12

#19M: Okay.

Q: During this interview if you wish to take a break or stop at anytime, please let me know.

#19M: Okay.

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

00:01:35

#19M: Okay.

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

#19M: There will be no problems.

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

00:01:58

#19M: Thank you.

Q: *Gen-la* 'respectful term for teacher,' can you please tell us how old you are?

#19M: I am 75 years old.

Q: How many members were there in your family?

00:02:20

#19M: When I was a small child, there were my two parents, two older brothers, myself and my younger sibling. There was also my older brother's wife.

Q: What kind of livelihood was your family engaged in?

#19M: My father worked for the security office. He was in charge of the store. The key to the armory was with him. When the office started, he escorted the two officials in and opened the lock. He was working for the security office.

Q: *Gen-la*, what security office of what department?

00:03:56

#19M: It was the Samdup Phodang. [Over the years] many store keepers have changed. Samdup Phodang. That was the name of the estate.

Q: As a child, before 12 years old, what kinds of activities were you involved in?

#19M: When I reached the age of 8, I joined the school at Shol for two years. At around 9 or 10, I went on a pilgrimage and then on my return, I joined the Mentsekhang 'Medical Center.'

Q: Can you describe a little bit about the Shol school? What was the daily schedule like and what did the students study?

00:05:43

#19M: The name of the school in Shol was Kyikhor School. The teacher was Apa Yonta, who was one of those engaged in writing the characters on the Tibetan currency notes. I studied there for two years.

Q: What did the children do in the school?

#19M: The students read in the morning and then we wrote the alphabet and practiced handwriting. In the evening, we memorized the multiplication tables and grammar verses.

Q: How many hours a day did the children go to school and how many children in your classroom?

00:07:29

#19M: We left for school around 8 in the morning. We remained in the classroom from 8 to 11:30 and lunch was at noon. We returned to school at 1:30 and would be sent home at 4:30. At the time I studied at the school, there were 60-70 students.

Q: *Gen-la*, how did you like school? Did you find it interesting? Did you feel you learned a lot?

#19M: I liked going to school.

Q: What kind of a student were you?

00:08:43

#19M: I was an average student. I was neither good nor bad.

Q: You mentioned that your teacher, she wrote the script on the Tibet currency notes. Could you explain what that involves?

[Interpreter clarifies that the teacher was a male.]

#19M: He wrote on the currency notes and was also engaged in writing out the orders of the government. He was a Tibetan government staff.

Q: When he wrote on the currency notes, was it that they used his handwriting and they printed it or did he write on every note?

00:10:15

#19M: The currency notes already had characters written on them. The paper notes had to be polished with the help of a *dzi* 'special beads made of agate stone' and when they were cleaned like this, they had to be packed and forwarded to the government. [The notes] were made of Tibetan paper, which was of fine quality. They were polished with the *dzi* and when smoothened, they were forwarded to the government in boxes. Then the government sent them to where they were printed. He was not exactly writing on the currency notes. He was engaged in smoothening out the notes. They were called *apa*. Most of them came from A-Lhagyari.

Q: You mean the papers [for the currency]?

#19M: No, not the papers, but all those engaged in the work [of smoothening out the currency notes]. They were different and had a particular name. He [the teacher] was called Apa Yonta. [To the interpreter] I do not blame you [for taking time to understand] as I am talking about the events of the olden days.

Q: Is the work of cleaning the paper known as Apa?

00:11:28

#19M: His family was engaged in this work. However, his actual work was at the Potala Palace.

Q: Did he himself do the polishing?

#19M: He did not do the polishing himself. His servants did it. Have you seen the big letters on the offering [envelopes] to His Holiness the Dalai Lama? Apa Yonta was one of

the main people who used to excel in writing that script. He was responsible for writing out the government orders and agreements. The script is called *duktse*.

Q: Can you please write one?

00:12:52

#19M: [Writes out the characters] This is called *duktse*. He [the teacher] used to write such characters in different sizes. [Spells out the word *duktse* in Tibetan]

Q: Can you tell us the denominations of the money? Were there different denominations or were they of the same?

#19M: The notes were of different sizes. The 100 note was the largest. I cannot remember if we had a 50 denomination. There was one of 25 and a 10, which was quite small. There was also a 5 *sang* denomination, a small note.

Q: Were these notes respected in other countries if you took and try to change them, for instance could you take them to China and get *yuan* from this or to Nepal and get an exchange rate? Was it respected as an independent country's currency?

00:15:43

#19M: No, it was not accepted.

Q: I mean during the time when you were young.

#19M: Whether then or now, it is not accepted. I think even earlier, it was not accepted in outside countries.

Q: Was it because people did not travel outside or the money was not accepted?

00:15:59

#19M: The money was not accepted.

Q: So you couldn't exchange the *sang* for *rupee* in India?

#19M: That was the work of the traders, who went to Kalimpong [West Bengal, India] and bought goods from India with the money. I do not have any experience in trading and so do not know how the traders did their business.

Q: *Gen-la*, you mentioned after attending school, you went on a pilgrimage. How old were you when you went on that pilgrimage and where did you go?

00:17:21

#19M: It was between my [9th and] 10th year. I joined the Medical Center when I was 10. I went to Lhoka on the pilgrimage.

Q: What was important about going to Lhoka for pilgrimage?

#19M: My father's home was in Lhoka. There were many pilgrim sites around Lhoka. I cannot explain one and all.

Q: Was that typical for a child to go on pilgrimage and for how long would a child go?

00:18:29

#19M: [A child] would be taken along by his parents. A young child would not be able to embark on a pilgrimage if he was not with his parents. The Tibetan custom was such that even at that age, children would be taken along on pilgrimage or to circumambulate the temples. That was a good custom but it is absent these days.

Q: After the pilgrimage, you mentioned joining another school. Can you tell us where that school was and what you learned there?

#19M: That was the Mentsekhang. It was located in Lhasa.

Q: *Gen-la*, what kind of subjects did students learn in the Mentsekhang and how many years did you attend that school?

00:19:59

#19M: I was there for about nine years. The regular subjects were medicine and astrology. There were also grammar lessons like *rignay, sumtak, nyen-nga, da*.

Q: Did you study Tibetan astrology or medicine?

#19M: I gave my examination in astrology. In astrology, there are two kinds, *kartse* and *nagtse*. I studied the *nagtse*. When a person dies we do a certain calculation as well as to chart a particular date, etc.

Q: So the *nagtse* form of astrology only focuses around after someone passes away and what did the *kartse* focus on?

00:21:36

#19M: Astrological calculations were made after someone passed away and it [*nagtse*] also focused on charting an [auspicious] date for marriage as well as finding out if the match was a good one and so on. One can also predict if a particular house was suitable or not. The *kartse* was a separate and a special kind of lesson.

Q: What is the *kartse* about?

#19M: In general they are similar. However it [*kartse*] is more in detail.

Q: Did they derive from different schools or parts of the country or different teachers—these two different forms?

00:22:43

#19M: They originated from Jamphelyang.

Q: How did it originate?

#19M: Jamphelyang is the God of knowledge. If I have to relate the story, it is a long one. Moreover, if I have to explain about the astrological calculations originating from Jamphelyang, I would not be able to do it well. That will be difficult. Regarding the *rignay* subject, there are five major groups and five minor groups. The five minor groups consist of medicine, astrology and so on.

Q: If someone was going to look up their good day for a marriage, what would be the factors that you would look for?

00:24:55

#19M: One must find out if their elements match. For example, if the boy's element is fire and the girl's is water, the match is not a suitable one. The boy's being fire and the girl's water—the enemy of fire is water—so their elements do not match. Also if the girl is older and the boy is younger, calculations are charted to check if they match and so on.

Q: When you were studying this, what age were you learning this very complex information? What were the years you were in this school?

#19M: I was nine years in the school.

Q: So from what age to what age was that?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: From 10 to 19.

Q: How did you find it studying this subject of astrology?

0026:56:

#19M: From studying astrology, one can learn about the outcome of one's bad deeds in this life through divination and astrological calculations. Therefore, I feel that knowledge of astrology is very important and helpful for the public as well as for oneself.

Q: Can you tell us about some experiences of where you did a chart for somebody's marriage or birth of a child and how it proved to be true? And sometimes if they went against your advice, did it prove to be difficult?

#19M: I have not heard of any such incidents.

Q: Did you do astrology charts for people yourself in those years of study?

00:28:40

#19M: While we were at the Mentsekhang, we did not do the charts. That used to be done by the Center itself. After one completed his studies and passed out of the Center, then he had to practice astrological calculations wherever he settled. However, I did not exactly pass my studies; I ran away from the school and joined the monastery. All those years of astrology studies became useless.

Q: Did something happen that caused you to run away?

#19M: I was a student at the school on account of my being a [future] soldier. My younger and older brothers were monks at Gaden Monastery. My mother advised me, "It is not right for you to remain like this. Life will be very difficult for you this way. I would prefer all three of you to be monks at the monastery. You must decide to become a monk." So after discussion with my parents, I ran away from the school. That was how I joined the monastery.

Q: *Gen-la*, when you say you ran away, was it without asking permission or something? Because it seems its ordinary that young boys want to become monks.

00:31:12

#19M: I did not seek permission from the school and ran away to join the monastery as a monk.

Q: *Gen-la*, did you want to join the monastery or were you following your mother's wish?

#19M: I had the desire to become a monk. My two brothers were also there.

Q: Did you have any ideas whether you wanted to study astrology in the monastery to continue these studies or were you going to drop that and study the scriptures?

00:32:29

#19M: You could not learn astrology at the monastery. One had to learn philosophical debate in the monastery. So, for the time being I had to drop [the astrological studies].

Q: What was it that made you want to join the monastery? What appealed to you about becoming a monk?

#19M: When I had the desire to become a monk, I was a child. My brothers were there [at the monastery], and other than that, I did not dwell upon the benefits it would have on my future.

Q: Before you joined the monastery, were you allowed to go visit your brothers and could you stay with them for a little while? How frequently were you having access to the monastery before you joined?

00:34:09

#19M: My mother visited them often.

Q: Did you go to the monastery?

#19M: You mean before I became a monk?

Q: Yes.

00:34:17

#19M: I have been there twice or thrice.

Q: Did you then begin your studies in a regular course of events? Did anything happen while you were studying at the monastery?

#19M: You mean a change in my heart?

Q: No, not in your heart, but what changes occurred in the monastery while you were there; whether in the country or anywhere else?

00:35:09

#19M: While I was a monk at the monastery, the Chinese were doing many things. Since 1959; since they came to our country—I was already at the monastery then—they were preventing us from practicing our religion, starting from the Kham region. When I heard such news, I used to feel terrified.

Q: *Gen-la*, you joined the monastery at age 20. Is that a typical age or do monks tend to join when they are younger?

#19M: I was about 19, not yet 20 at that time. In general, boys became monks at age 18 or 19 or 20. Actually in those days in Tibet, a boy became a monk only when he had reached his 20th year. However, an 18 or 19 year old was admitted as a monk.

Q: Did one have to reach his 20th year to become a monk?

00:37:00

#19M: He had to reach his 20th year.

Q: You mean [for admission] in the three great monasteries [of Sera, Drepung and Gaden]?

#19M: Yes, at the great monasteries.

Q: When you first went, how did you find the discipline and the schedule of the monastery? Did it suit you or was it strange? Can you tell us about that?

00:37:44

#19M: If one abided by the rules of the monastery and attended the prayer assemblies, it was a happy life.

Q: Can you tell us about your daily schedule in the monastery? What did you do in the morning, afternoon and evening?

#19M: In the morning, we had the *mangja* 'assembly session of both *datsang* [divisions] of a monastery,' which was followed by the *choera* 'debate session.' After that we gathered for the *daja* 'assembly session of a *datsang*.' At 3, we studied the scriptures from our teachers.

After 5 in the evening, we attended the *dondhon* 'assembly to recite Dolma or Tara prayers,' which lasted until 7 or 8 o'clock.

Q: Before you went to the monastery, had you found a teacher to work with or did you find a teacher there and what was he like?

00:39:48

#19M: One must locate a teacher and then join the monastery. You could not stay at the monastery without finding a teacher. My older brother was there and he had a teacher [who became my teacher also].

Q: What kind of a teacher was he? Was he strict or informative or easy?

#19M: He was not strict. He was a loving teacher.

Q: When a young man enters the monastery at 20, does the family have to make an offering to the teacher every year or just the first time? How does that work?

00:41:05

#19M: That [offering] depended on what you were capable of. If you were wealthy, you made a large offering and if you were economically poor, you could not offer anything.

Q: *Gen-la*, how was the amount of food in the monastery? Was there enough to eat? Was there enough warm clothing? Can you tell us about the physical conditions?

#19M: The staple food was *pa* 'dough made from *tsampa* 'flour made from roasted barley' and tea.'

Q: Was there plenty of food?

00:41:50

#19M: Since our parents were living, we were okay. However, it was difficult for the majority of the monks. It was really difficult.

Q: Why was it difficult, *gen-la*?

#19M: The difficulty was that they had come a long distance from their village; some were from Kham and Amdo. After they joined Gaden Monastery, though they received a food ration, it would not last them a whole year.

Q: What amount would they give for the year? How much?

00:43:15

#19M: There was not much, only about five or six *khel* 'measurements.' There was not much.

Q: Five or six *khel*?

#19M: *Khel* of grains.

Q: Was it grains?

00:43:32

#19M: It was grains. We had to [go to] make *tsampa* from the grains. The *tsampa* was then taken to the monastery. Perhaps we received about 20 kilograms.

Q: Was it [20 kilograms] per *khel*?

#19M: Yes.

Q: What did people do to supplement?

00:44:33

#19M: Then they [the monks] went to seek alms during autumn. Some went to the villages to seek alms. Some had sponsors to bring [grains] for them.

Q: Did any monk actually go out and work in the fields to get funds or to have a trade or something like that?

#19M: Yes, there were some [who worked in the fields] during autumn. During autumn, they went to harvest the crops and received grains, which they made into *tsampa*. It is a fact that that [monks working in the fields] happened.

Q: When you were 20 and you went to Gaden, about how many monks were living there? Do you have any idea?

00:46:12

#19M: The figure stated at that time was 3,300 in Gaden.

Q: At any given time would you say a certain number of them were off working or trading and not living in the monastery? I'm trying to understand how many monks were actually studying scripture and how many were doing other jobs to support themselves?

#19M: I would say the majority was engaged in studying the scriptures. Some went out on trade while some were engaged in working for the monastery.

Q: You mentioned earlier that you began to hear that there were problems in Kham. Can you tell us what rumors were reaching your ears and how you heard?

00:48:17

#19M: We heard that they [the Chinese] were restricting the practice of religion and making it difficult for the people. We clearly heard such things. At that time, many people feared living in Kham and had fled [to Lhasa].

Q: You mean monks?

#19M: Yes, monks.

Q: Did you hear what kinds of restrictions had they experienced?

00:49:12

#19M: They did not allow people to practice the dharma. Mao Zedong had said that religion was poison.

Q: Who were preventing the monks from practicing their dharma and how were they doing that? Who was doing that and how were they doing it?

#19M: They were the Chinese.

Q: How did they restrict them from practicing?

00:49:52

#19M: How can I explain that? They said, "You must not practice the dharma as religion is poison and there is no benefit in practicing it. Making offerings of *tsampa* is a waste. When you offer a butter lamp, it is a waste of butter. One must consume them."

Q: But did they do anything physically to prevent them or just tell them that it was a waste of time?

#19M: At that time there was no oppression.

Q: What happens next in terms of what you hear about the conditions in Tibet and the Chinese? What happens next?

00:51:38

#19M: We lived in constant fear and then the Chinese arrived in Tibet [Lhasa] in '59. Then they gradually tightened their grip and the situation became grave and finally the '59 event happened.

Q: What kind of pressure were you living in Gaden?

#19M: We were fully concerned with our studies and did not engage in any political meetings or other activities. We concentrated only in our studies.

Q: You said that you lived under pressure or problems or fear. What was causing the fear for the monks?

00:53:10

#19M: There was fear and panic, as we wondered what was going to happen.

Q: Why don't you tell us what happened?

#19M: And then the turmoil of '59 happened.

Q: Could you tell us about it?

00:53:57

#19M: Then the Chinese came into Tibet. [Looks at notes] I have here the story about my school.

Q: You mentioned that there was the turmoil in '59. Could you please tell us about the time when the Chinese came into Tibet?

#19M: Okay. I was living in the monastery at that time. It was a time of great crisis. There were rumors abounding then that there was going to be a war.

Q: Where was the war going to be?

00:56:55

#19M: In Lhasa. It was a very critical time and we were living in the monastery. We three brothers were at the monastery. One day my older brother said, "Let us go home and get some lay-man's dresses. It's going to be very difficult if we are in monks' robes. I fear we can no longer remain here." We sort of planned to go towards Lhoka and put up an effort at resistance. With that decision, I left for Lhasa.

When I went to my home in Lhasa, I found that unlike earlier times, there were hardly any people walking on the roads, although the population was large. When I reached home, my mother was very surprised and said, "Why did you come to Lhasa during this most critical time when you should have stayed at the monastery? Just a few days back, the Chamdo Phakpala's brother, while coming to the Norbulingka [summer palace of the Dalai Lama], was stoned to death by the people who believed him to be a spy for the Chinese. There was blood smears on my waist band, which I did not see until I reached home."

Q: *Gen-la*, you said that your mother witnessed the killing of Chamdo Phakpala's brother at Norbulingka and that his blood was smeared on her waist band, she noticed. Can we go back and can you please tell me who was Chamdo Phakpala? Who was this person?

#19M: Chamdo Phakpa was a much esteemed lama, a lama of high position. His business manager was the one [killed].

Q: What was the family relationship between the person who was killed and Chamdo Phakpala?

00:59:19

#19M: Chamdo Phakpala was a lama. [The one killed] was the one who was responsible for doing whatever was needed to be done [for the lama].

Q: What other relationship was between them? Some people say that they were brothers.

#19M: I do not know if they were brothers. They were otherwise related. He [the one killed] was known by the name "Chamdo Phakpala's *tседung*" because he was the lama's business manager. He was also an official of the government.

Q: Your mother had just come back from Lhasa and what did she see that led up to the death of the *tседung*?

01:01:00

#19M: The cause was that the military officials were inviting His Holiness the Dalai Lama to the army camp.

Q: The Chinese [military officials]?

#19M: Yes, the Chinese. So that was why the people had gathered at the Norbulingka to request His Holiness not to attend.

Q: Where was the army camp and why did the people not want him to go?

01:01:41

#19M: The army camp was in Lhasa.

Q: Was it in proper Lhasa?

#19M: It was located on the outskirts of Lhasa.

Q: Why did the people request His Holiness not to go?

01:01:58

#19M: Had His Holiness gone there, the Chinese would have done something to him. So the people gathered to request him not to go and to remain in the Norbulingka.

Q: What would the Chinese have done had His Holiness gone there?

#19M: They would have either killed him or arrested him and taken him away, which our people knew.

Q: What does your mother see next?

01:02:55

#19M: After they killed the man, taking the corpse along, they started shouting, "Chinese, go away from Tibet. Tibet is an independent country." They held this demonstration.

Q: Before we get to the corpse being dragged back, what palace were the people surrounding? And who was inside the palace?

#19M: They were all around the boundary wall of the palace of His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

Q: Which palace?

01:03:51

#19M: The Norbulingka. All the people surrounded the boundary wall of the Norbulingka.

Q: Was His Holiness inside the Norbulingka palace?

#19M: Yes, he was. He was inside at that time.

Q: Do you have any idea of how many people came to surround the palace?

01:04:26

#19M: Oh, the number of people must exceed 10,000. There must be over 10,000 people.

Q: Where did they come from, these 10,000 people and what were they hoping to do?

#19M: They came from Lhasa and different places. They were there to request His Holiness not to go and were determined to fight if the Chinese came their way.

Q: They would have fought the Chinese rather than have what happen?

01:05:47

#19M: They were determined [to fight the Chinese]. The people went there like protective guards.

Q: How does the story develop after this person was killed? What happens? If your mother saw it with her own eyes, what did she see this person do that he got killed? What was he doing?

#19M: The reason for his getting killed was caused by his suspicious action. In the morning while attending the government function, he was dressed in his regular monk's robes. Later after his office hours, he came riding on a motorbike with a white scarf over his mouth and wearing a *chupa* 'traditional coat.' Moreover during that time, there were rumors floating in Lhasa that Chamdo Phakpala was a Chinese spy. So that was one of the reasons he was stoned.

Q: Do you remember your mother telling you what was he wearing besides having a cover on his face? Was it to disguise him or protect him from the dust?

01:08:37

#19M: He was dressed in lay-man's clothes. He came wearing a *chupa* and riding on a motorbike. He had removed his monk's robes. I wonder why he had his mouth covered.

Q: This person was a monk?

#19M: Yes, he was a monk.

Q: He came back and he was wearing a *chupa*. The crowd sees him and they thought he was a spy. Is that correct? He was on his bicycle. Where was he going on his bike?

01:09:39

#19M: He was coming to the Norbulingka [on his motorbike].

Q: Did the people think he was doing something harmful or dangerous?

#19M: Since they used to hear rumors about him, they deduced this was not a good sign and stoned him.

Q: Was your mother very close to this experience of stoning this man?

01:10:40

#19M: It can be assumed that she was close to the incident. When there were blood smeared on her, it's a certainty that she was close.

Q: Do you know if she threw any stones?

#19M: My mother did not specifically tell me that she threw any stones.

Q: Was the attempt to kill this person or was he just injured?

01:11:25

#19M: I am not able to take a guess.

Q: In the end, was this person killed or was he still alive?

#19M: He died and his body was dragged and people yelled at the Chinese to go back.

Q: What kind of slogans would people shout in those days?

01:12:19

#19M: They shouted, "Tibet is an independent country. Chinese, go away from Tibet."

Q: *Gen-la*, do you know what was happening to His Holiness? Was he inside Norbulingka? What happens to him next?

#19M: Yes, he was definitely inside the Norbulingka. The people knew. The Cabinet knew since they came there at that time. Then the people dragged the corpse around Lhasa. I do not know what happened after that.

Q: Do you have any memory of what the effect of this incident had on your mother? What was her emotional reaction or her feelings or her thoughts?

01:13:45

#19M: My mother was filled with fear and panic. She was anxious about what would happen to His Holiness and neglected the responsibility of our livelihood. She wondered aloud as to what terrible things the Chinese would do next.

Q: You had left Gaden Monastery with your brothers because you said you wanted to join the army to fight the Chinese. What did the other monks in the monastery, what were they thinking?

#19M: We left the monastery and went towards Lhoka.

Q: Initially you went to your home in Lhasa.

01:15:01

#19M: I came home, but not my brothers.

Q: So you came back to your home. What were the other monks in Gaden Monastery thinking?

#19M: They felt the danger and lived in terror over the imminent attack.

Q: When you left your school where you were studying astrology at Mentsekhang, you said that you didn't tell them you were leaving. Was there an obligation to stay in that school and finish your studies and do something with those studies? Would they have stopped you from leaving?

01:16:25

#19M: Had I applied for permission to leave, they [Mentsekhang] would not have granted the request.

Q: Why?

#19M: The reason why they would not grant me permission to leave was that the school was a government school. So without permission from the government, the school had no authority to grant leave.

Q: Had you completed your full 10-year school term, what would you have to do after that?

01:16:55

#19M: I was attending the school as an army recruit, so I would have to return to my division. The government would award me a rank, a salary and a certificate. I would then return to the army division. At the army unit, one who was trained as a doctor served as a doctor and an astrologer served as an astrologer. One could then continue to live happily in the army as he possessed a rank.

Q: What kind of work would an astrologer in the army do?

#19M: It was the general work that everyone did in the army. There was no special kind of work. Besides if one wished to start a school, one could do it.

Q: If there was going to be a battle or something, would there be an astrology reading about what's the best day to go?

01:19:07

#19M: Yes, it used to be done to set a date. The charting is called *yangjar* and comes under the *kartse* section of astrology.

Q: Astrology was used to match couples or the names of children or things like that. Would astrology be used for selecting a general or an authority person, to head a division or troop?

#19M: If a general was selected, astrology would help in finding the auspicious time and day for the ceremony to take place.

Q: I went back to your school days because if you had finished your school, you would have had to be a soldier. Now you are telling us you left the monastery alone—your brothers stayed there—and you were going to be a soldier. In the end it looks like you are going to be a soldier which you hadn't planned. Is that so and can you tell us about your plans?

01:21:28

#19M: I came to Lhasa and then went back to the monastery. After a day or two at the monastery, I left along with the majority of the monks.

Q: How long did you stay with your mother in Lhasa before you went back to the monastery?

#19M: I stayed for only two days.

Q: And then when you returned to the monastery, what was the condition of the monks? What were they saying and doing?

01:22:27

#19M: By then they knew about the happenings.

Q: Did you tell them?

#19M: I told them but they knew about it already.

Q: About the happenings in Lhasa?

01:22:38

#19M: Yes.

Q: And then?

#19M: Everybody was upset and wondered what would happen next and that was it.

Q: And then what did you do?

01:22:50

#19M: We were helpless.

Q: You went back to Gaden after spending two days in Lhasa. How long did you stay in Gaden?

#19M: I stayed just a few days in Gaden.

Q: And then where did you go?

01:23:08

#19M: We traveled towards Lhoka from Gaden. We were escaping. All the monks of Gaden were fleeing; almost the entire Gaden was leaving.

Q: You mean 3,300 monks fled?

#19M: Almost everyone. There were not many left in the monastery. Perhaps not even 30 or 40 were left behind.

Q: What caused them to flee?

01:24:10

#19M: Now I understand [remember] the events. After I returned to the monastery from visiting Lhasa—prior to that, on the 11th or the 12th [of the lunar calendar] they [the Chinese] had attacked Lhasa and Norbulingka had fallen—I will tell you now. [Referring to notes] Listen, it was around 5 o'clock in the evening of the 13th day of the 2nd Tibetan lunar month of 1959.

Q: Did you flee that night?

#19M: Just now I mentioned “around 5 o'clock in the evening of the 13th day of the 2nd Tibetan lunar month of 1959.” That was the time when about eight officials of the government, including *Tsedung* 'monk official of the Tibetan government' Ngawang Tenkyok and *Tsedung* Jampa Tsondue—who later served in the Tibetan Settlement in Bylakuppe [India]—arrived in Gaden Monastery from Lhasa. They fled from Norbulingka and came to Gaden. I do not know whether they came through Phenpo or took another route. They reached the monastery around 5 o'clock. They approached the office of Gaden Monastery and said, "Now you should no longer stay back. Norbulingka has fallen. His Holiness the Dalai Lama has already left for abroad." The officials came to the monastery to give us the information.

However, the monastery authorities could not believe the news and suspected them to be Chinese spies. They were caught and locked up in a room. A person was sent immediately towards Lhasa to Norbulingka. However, before he could reach Lhasa, he met the monks who were protecting the Norbulingka fleeing towards the monastery. So all of them came to the monastery and reported that what the officials had informed were true. "The Potala Palace, Lhasa Tsuglakhang 'Central Cathedral,' Chakpori and all the rest have been

surrounded and taken over by the Chinese. His Holiness the Dalai Lama has already left for a foreign country and is no longer at the Norbulingka. Everything is true."

Such were the messages brought by the monks. When this message was received, the monk authorities approached the government officials who were interned and begged forgiveness, "We did not put trust in your integrity, which is because of the critical time we are living in. We have found that whatever you have told us are true. So please forgive us." They were released from the room and offered tea. Then, they too left along with the monks towards Lhoka.

Q: That's a very interesting account of how difficult communication was. *Gen-la*, may I ask what is the book you are holding in your hand and what are the notes that you are looking at?

01:31:47

#19M: I have written here the incident I told you about. I am telling it to you by referring to the notes.

Q: Are a lot of these notes from your own memory or from looking up? A lot of them are very personal accounts, so they are from your own memory or looking up historical accounts?

#19M: I have not looked up any historical books. These are what I have experienced myself. I wrote them from memory. First I wrote on a rough paper and then checked and wrote it again and again. I wrote it three or four times. Since I met you [to the interpreter], I spent five or six days jogging my memory and making notes.

Q: *Gen-la*, thank you. We appreciate your sharing these important memories with us.

01:33:39

#19M: Thank you. It is very good of you to give me the opportunity to share my experiences. However, I feel sorry I have not been able to relate a complete story about Mentsekhang, like how did the Mentsekhang begin, how did the school start, what was it like, how did the studies go on, what happens after the examinations. I have written a short account here in my book putting in a lot of effort and time. I hoped I would be able to talk about Mentsekhang, which will later make people realize what it was like. I have the account on a page here, but I could not relate it. However, it is equally fine with me to speak about the Chinese' arrival.

Q: At this moment, I want to ask why do you think it is important for us to record this personal histories and eye witness accounts of the Tibetan people?

#19M: In this day what a person has, whether to show outside or for oneself, is to bring about a change of heart. In order to bring about a change of heart, one must study the Buddha dharma. After studying the Buddha dharma, one should practice it. Practicing it will bring about a change in the heart. If one constructs a beautiful house, but cannot change his heart, he is not happy. Even if one does not have anything to eat or drink, or is poor, but if he overlooks that and recites his prayers well and lights the butter lamp in the morning, he finds happiness. That is the main essence of the Buddha dharma.

Q: Are you saying that the most important thing to study about Tibet and Tibet's culture is the dharma of Tibet, the teachings of Tibet?

01:37:58

#19M: Yes.

Q: Would you like to continue with your story? What happens next after the officials are released from the room and the monks apologize and then all the monks flee the monastery? And then what happens to you next?

#19M: After leaving the monastery, we took the route through Lamo towards the direction of Lhoka. The majority of the monks and lay people were there.

[Reading from the note] In the evening of the 14th day of the 2nd Tibetan lunar month of 1959, we three brothers left the monastery towards Lhoka.

Q: And continue the story. If you could paint a picture for us, what happens to you next?

01:40:04

#19M: There was the Gonpori [a mountain] in Tsethang. We traveled along the base of the Tsethang Gonpori to Lhoka. If Tsethang Gonpori was located here [gestures], the village of Tsethang was situated on this side [facing the mountain]. The Chinese were camped in the village. As we descended from the mountain pass, the Chinese started shelling us, blocking our way. However, no one was harmed. Though they were firing at us and blocking our way, nevertheless we descended in the hail of fire and went on to Lhoka.

Q: What did your brothers and you feel when you were leaving Gaden? What were your thoughts about you return? What were the feelings of emotion of leaving such a precious place?

#19M: It was a most miserable time when we had to leave behind our parents and older sibling. We could not go to Lhasa as the road was blocked.

Q: What made it impossible or dangerous to go to Lhasa?

01:42:20

#19M: If one went to Lhasa, there was no way one could go to India as the road was cut-off.

Q: Did your mother and brother choose to stay or what were their circumstances?

#19M: It was difficult for them to leave. The entire Tibetan population was still there and nobody could find a way to escape. My brother had a child and wife.

Q: On your journey, what happens next?

01:43:42

#19M: My brothers and I went to Lhoka. At Lhoka, there was the Yarlung Phodang [an ancient palace], where we found the *Chushi Gangdrug* [Defend Tibet Volunteer Force] army camp. There was one division of Gaden Monastery and two divisions of Taopon Rinchen Tsering being readied at the camp. The Taopon divisions and the Gaden Monastery division had 64 horsemen between them, 32 each. The Bapa division of Gaden Monastery was equipped with a new artillery and 20 shells, which had been [air] dropped [by the U.S.A.] at Digu for the *Chushi Gangdrug*. The others were armed with different types of guns, like short-barrel rifles, which were made in England and a gun called Tashi Tsering. Such were the weapons. There were also Chinese-made larger guns. These were the arms for the 64 horsemen.

As I could write Tibetan at that time, the Gaden division took me along with them as their letter writer. I told you that we were three brothers. Now I became separated. My older brother who owned a gun went one way and the youngest, another way. The brothers separated at this point.

Q: Did all three of you join the army?

#19M: Both of us joined the army, but the youngest was just 17 years old. He continued the journey along with the older monks. There was no choice of whether we liked to enlist or not, because it was a critical time.

Q: Continue with the story, please.

01:47:24

#19M: Then we started out from Yarlung Phodang. Andrug Jindha [Andrug Gonpo Tashi, founder of *Chushi Gangdrug*] was returning from Dhakpo and the *Chushi Gangdrug* sent us to receive him. We traveled for five or six days and reached the place called Woega. We spent two or three restful days at Woega. The reason being that the artillery dropped by the United States of America was new and the person who could operate it was a bodyguard called Mertsu Gyawu. He dismantled, cleaned the parts and reassembled the artillery. There were 20 shells of which three were used to test the artillery. That's how we could relax for a few days.

Q: Continue.

#19M: After three days, Andrug Jindha had arrived close by because a person arrived on horseback with the message that he was arriving shortly. We had to make preparations for Andrug Jindha's arrival. So we moved to Woega proper from the outskirts of Woega, where we had been stationed. There was a monastery in Woega and we made preparations for Andrug Jindha's stay there.

Q: And then what happened?

01:50:11

#19M: When Andrug Jindha arrived, he was accompanied by men and horses amounting to about 1,000.

Q: What was that like for you to see so many animals and people?

#19M: They had with them arms seized from the Chinese, their own guns and provisions for the men of *Chushi Gangdrug*. In order to reach Lhoka, it would take seven or eight days for 1,000 people and animals to cross by one boat.

Q: Where was the river?

01:51:36

#19M: It was close by—a big river. There were two docks called Lukhang Dukha and Tsa Dukha. The men and animals were divided, 500 for each boat. I was to go by Tsa Dukha. Crossing from this point, we reached A-Lhagyari on the other side.

Q: So everybody crossed the river.

#19M: One must cross the river. There is no other way except crossing the river to get to the other side. After crossing in the boat, we walked for sometime to get there. So we reached A-Lhagyari. Andrug Jindha continued on his journey ahead of us from A-Lhagyari.

Q: Each boat with many trips, not all fitting into one. *Gen-la*, I forgot to ask. When you and your brothers left the monastery, did you disrobe? Was there any ceremony or were you continuing to be a monk?

01:54:06

#19M: We could not [get the time to] renounce our vows. We had clothes [layman's dresses] which I had brought from home.

Q: Were you dressed in the ordinary clothes?

#19M: We were in ordinary clothes until we reached India. Even after reaching India, we were in ordinary clothes for a year or two.

Q: What was the reason that you did go home? Was it to change cloths or some other reason?

01:54:55

#19M: I went to fetch clothes. At the monastery we only had monks' robes.

Q: What is the procedure if there is no time to renounce your vows and if you are engaged in war? What is the understanding of what happens to those vows?

#19M: There is nothing else to do but say prayers of repentance during the *somjong* on the full moon days. There was special dispensation in times of war.

Q: What happens next?

01:56:25

#19M: The Taopon division and ours left A-Lhagyari. We journeyed over a high mountain pass and reached Chumdhagya. Close to Chumdhagya was a pass which led to Phodang. We were 64 in the cavalry as I told you earlier. The Bapa division numbered about 700 including men, horses and mules carrying arms. They camped at a huge house at the base of the mountain pass. Because of the large number of horses and mules, they stopped there for the good grass. We made our way to Chumdhagya. An airplane flew overhead but it did not fire on us.

[To the interpreter] Do you know of one Chonphel who now lives in Switzerland? He was brought along by Kyabje Phara Rinpoche and left at A-Lhagyari. He was now entrusted to me and a colleague. We traveled slowly down the pass. We could hear the sound of gunfire, but we did not know if they were Chinese or Tibetans. Then we met a Tibetan in fine clothes and riding on a wonderful horse. We asked this man who was an ordinary person [not a monk], "We can hear the sounds of gunfire at Chumdhagya. Have the Chinese arrived there?" He replied, "No, the *Chushi Gangdrug* arrived at Chumdhagya a few days back and it is they who are firing. The Chinese have not arrived there except at Tsakhadawo." We believed him but he was an informer. He went along on his horse. My colleague, I and the young child, Chonphel, were all on horses and as we rode on, we saw the *Chushi Gangdrug* guerrillas being ejected from Chumdhagya by the Chinese.

Q: Continue the story.

02:00:54

#19M: As we continued on our way, only then did they start firing at us. The bullets fell close to us. I had on a *chupa*, which I got from home. It had an inner lining of warm material. The *chupa* had holes at the hem in the front as well as back from the bullets. Only then did we realize that they were the Chinese and there was nothing we could do at this juncture. The three of us, including the child were alone.

The other men had gone ahead while the Bapa division was way back there. We were stranded in the middle. However, if we retreated, our division was ahead of us. So with a prayer on our lips, we rushed through the hail of Chinese bullets and reached a nook in the pass. Then we were gradually able to catch up with the men. Though many shots were fired at us, they did not hit us or the child. However, we lost a lot of our things. We were forced to drop our things, like guns and other things that we had been carrying.

Q: Continue.

#19M: We found our division at a lower region of the pass and the Taopon division was at a higher position. We fought the Chinese from that position. Both the sides were on [opposite] mountain passes. The encounter started a little after 1 o'clock in the afternoon and went on until around dusk. Chinese reinforcements arrived and blocked our way by occupying the pass at Yangjuthangla. They also blocked the pass at Nyen, which we could

have taken. So we took the route through Dhakpo. From there we journeyed through a valley and reached proper Nyen, though it was our plan to arrive on the outskirts of Nyen. The encounter continued for about four to five hours.

However, the reason we could escape was due to the Bapa division which possessed the artillery. As we climbed up the pass, the Bapa division was being attacked by a group of Chinese. Their [the Chinese army's] strategy was like this: first a group [of soldiers] lay down and fired and then another took their place and so on. We could see it clearly from the pass. Then the Bapa division fired the artillery. It was very simple to use. It could either be fired holding it up or by setting it on the ground. They were able to completely wipe out the Chinese soldiers who attacked them. So they were able to pass through and joined us at around dusk.

Q: Then?

02:05:49

#19M: That night we walked through excessive heavy snow, driving the animals and reached proper Nyen. We found a big house—all the villagers had fled—and stayed there for the night. Close by was a monastery. We made camp for the night and went in search of food as we had dropped our provisions on the way. We went to the monastery of Nyen in search of *tsampa* and saw that its things were thrown about by people who had passed by earlier. We found a good amount of *tsampa* there. At last that night we prepared tea and had something to eat. For almost a month we did not get the chance to untie our waistbands and go to sleep.

We spent the night there and the weather was very disturbing with a strong gale that night. Before dawn the next morning, a local person knocked on the door. When the door was opened he said, "Please, I beg you, do not stay here. Last night a group of Chinese went from central Nyen to the outskirts of Nyen. Do not stay here but please go away." As soon as we received the message, we hurriedly ate our food, which was *tsampa*. And by twilight we could see a multitude of fleeing people as the Chinese were blocking the route on the outskirts of Nyen.

Q: *Gen-la*, can you please tell us what happened after the storm experience?

#19M: As the route from Nyen was cut-off, we crossed over the mountain pass of Nyen. Then we came to a crossroad, one leading to Tsona and the other to Khata. At the crossroad, we camped and made some tea. Some *Chushi Gangdrug* guerrillas came there and said, "The Chinese have reached Tsona. Their strength is increasing and we will not be able to overpower them." They [the guerrillas] were retracing their steps. We did not even get the chance to drink the tea we had prepared lest they [the Chinese] arrive immediately. Throwing the tea away, we hurried towards Jora Khata. We traveled for sometime and reached a place with good water and grass. The weather was also good. It was around noon and we made some tea and ate our food. And then I met my younger brother there.

Q: How far are we from the Indian border at this point?

02:11:56

#19M: We were close to the Indian border. We reached Khata and so did my younger brother. After having our food, we went to the monastery of Jora. We received food there and that very night, the Chinese arrived at the monastery of Jora. They fired artillery towards our direction, but they could not reach us. With numerous people, it was a most tumultuous situation at this place. Then after crossing over one mountain pass, you reached India. From Jora Khata, you did not have to go far. By crossing the mountain pass, you landed in Tawang [Arunachal Pradesh, India].

Q: What's the final reach?

#19M: Then we reached Tawang. It was a place called Mangola, which is a high snow covered mountain pass. Once you crossed Mangola, you found the Indian border police post. At Mangola, we met representatives of the *Chushi Gangdrug* and the Tibetan government and the entire public was camped there. The Chinese did not come there. That was at Mangola in the direction of Assam in India.

Q: So how did it feel to finally reach India?

#19M: People escaping from every direction gathered at Mangola and I learned that my older brother had been killed by the Chinese on a mountain pass at Tsona.

Q: That was difficult. *Gen-la*, this is a very important story about the history of Tibet. Do you think it's important for people to know about the history of Tibet, the next generation?

02:15:34

#19M: Because that is so important, I, at 75 years old, make this effort to sit here talking to you for two to three hours. [Laughs]

Q: Why do you think it's important that people know it?

#19M: Our story [should be heard] by the world. The Communist Chinese government deludes her people by telling them exclusively about developments they have brought [in Tibet], but the true happenings in our country are never heard by them. Now your project is making it known to the world and that is the reason I relate my story to you with joy.

Q: Thank you. You have told us so much history, so I want to just check again. If this interview were shown in Tibet or China, would this be a problem for you?

02:17:34

#19M: I told you earlier that there will be no problem for me.

Q: Thank you for sharing your story with us.

#19M: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW