

Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #19N – Choeden Sangmo
April 11, 2015

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INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #19N
2. Interviewee: Choeden Sangmo
3. Age: 82
4. Date of Birth: 1933
5. Sex: Female
6. Birthplace: Shigatse
7. Province: Utsang
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1960
9. Date of Interview: April 11, 2015
10. Place of Interview: Swayambhu Old Age Home, Kathmandu, Nepal
11. Length of Interview: 0 hr 47 min
12. Interviewer: Marcella Adamski
13. Interpreter: Tenzin Yangchen
14. Videographer: Dhiraj Kafle
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

Biographical Information:

Choeden Sangmo was born in Shigatse into a large family with eight children. She describes Shigatse as a large town with people engaged in various types of work like farming, trading and shop keeping, feeling carefree and happy. She describes her parents and their brick house. Choeden Sangmo's family was engaged in farming but her father also did carpentry. She talks about various things her father made to supplement their income. Half of the grains they cultivated were given to the government as tax.

Choeden Sangmo recalls how life changed completely after the Chinese appeared in her hometown. She talks about how the Chinese targeted the wealthy families through arrests, imprisonment and torture. The Chinese confiscated their possessions and even killed them. Choeden Sangmo's grandfather suffered imprisonment and torture at the hands of the Chinese because he had been wealthy. The Chinese forced his servants to denounce him and he was publicly executed.

Choeden Sangmo got married without her parents' permission when a trader promised to take her to India. She and her husband built roads for Chinese vehicles while saving money to escape to India. When they finally did leave Tibet, journeying through the snow left her with frostbite and Choeden Sangmo was hospitalized for a month after reaching India.

Topics Discussed:

Utsang, childhood memories, taxes, oppression under Chinese, forced labor, escape experiences.

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Interview #19N

Interviewee: Choeden Sangmo

Age: 82, Sex: Female

Interviewer: Marcella Adamski

Interview Date: April 11, 2015

Question: Please tell us your name.

00:00:11

Interviewee #19N: Choeden Sangmo. Choeden Sangmo.

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?

#19N: Yes.

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

#19N: Okay.

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

#19N: There will be no problems. There will be no problems.

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

#19N: Thank you.

Q: Can you please tell me where you were born?

00:02:17

#19N: Shigatse.

Q: Shigatse. How old are you now, *ama-la* 'respectful term for mother'?

#19N: 82.

Q: When you were born in Shigatse, when you were a little girl how many people lived in your family?

#19N: There were around 13 children and family members.

Q: Thirteen children?

#19N: Children and adults.

Q: What kind of a business or occupation did your family have?

#19N: The livelihood was farming, and father was a carpenter. [Father] engaged in carpentry.

Q: Was your family in middle income or very well off? What was your socio economic status?

#19N: We were not very well off nor very poor but middle class. We did not have to borrow from others and was self sufficient through farming and father's carpentry work. [He] made water carriers that were sold, water carriers [indicates carrying on back] and tables like these.

Q: In your family...how many children were there in your immediate family?

00:04:38

#19N: We were eight children.

Q: Eight children. *Ama-la*, where were you in that order of children?

#19N: [Speaks before question is translated] There were five sons and three daughters.

Q: Where were you among the five sons and three daughters?

#19N: I am the last but three.

Q: Can you tell me a little bit about your father? What kind of a man was he?

#19N: Father was tall with a sharp nose. I look like father.

Q: And your mother, what was she like?

#19N: [Speaks before question is translated] [Father] was tall like I am.

Q: What was mother like?

#19N: Mother was short in stature and roundish.

Q: What kind of a little girl were you growing up? What were you like, *ama-la*?

#19N: As a little one?

Q: Yes.

#19N: [Laughs]

Q: Were you a naughty little girl or very good girl?

00:06:27

#19N: I was not naughty but very good and did not speak much. When sent to school, [I] flunked and now do not know anything. How many beatings [I] have endured by not remaining in school!

Q: Tell me about school. What kind of a school did you go to?

#19N: There was a Tibetan school, a Tibetan Government school. There was a Tibetan school in the past. After the Chinese appeared, the Tibetan school did not exist. Before the Chinese appeared, there was a Tibetan school.

Q: Tell me how many years did you go to school and what did you study?

#19N: [I] did not go more than a year. [I] did not attend school but kept playing. How many beatings [I] have endured!

Q: [You] attended school for around a year?

#19N: Around a year.

Q: *Ama-la*, why do you think you ran away from school?

00:08:07

#19N: Children do not like to study. [I] did not wish to study and kept playing.

Q: At what age were you sent to school?

#19N: [I] might have been 12-13 when sent to school.

Q: Just for one year, *ama-la*?

#19N: Yes, perhaps not even a year.

Q: In your family what kind of a house did you live in? Were you in town in Shigatse or a little further out of the city? Can you describe what kind of a house?

#19N: [My house] was in the town, a little further away from the monastery. It was right in the town, as one call it here.

Q: What was the name of the monastery?

#19N: Tashi Lhunpo. Tashi Lhunpo of Shigatse. Tashi Lhunpo of Shigatse.

Q: You had many children, eight children and parents. Did you have a large house in the city?

#19N: The house had 5-6 rooms. Tibetan houses are small in size. There were 5-6 [rooms].

Q: What was the house like?

#19N: The house was made of bricks. There was not anything but bricks in Tibet.

Q: Can you tell us a little bit about like everyday life? What would happen on a typical day, say when you were 12 or 13? What would happen in your family?

00:10:39

#19N: [I] was a child and there were not many responsibilities. It was just playing and running here and there. When the time came for cultivation [I] helped take food to the workers.

Q: How far away was the field and who did the field belong to?

#19N: The field belonged to the government, the Tibetan Government. We cultivated on a fifty-fifty basis. Half the grain was given and half retained.

Q: Was there...if you had to give half to the Tibetan Government, was there enough food left for the family?

#19N: It was sufficient for father was a carpenter and sold tables and chairs, and also went to work for others.

Q: So if you didn't have enough of crop you could supplement it with money?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: You mean from father's trade?

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Yes.

00:12:31

#19N: Yes, it is like that.

Q: When you gave half of the grain to the Tibetan Government, *ama-la*...how much...can you give us some idea, like the size of a cartful or a wagonful, what size would the grain be? What amount would it be?

#19N: Half. You could retain half.

Q: How much is the half?

#19N: The half must be given in sacks.

Q: How many sacks?

#19N: Whatever the quantity harvested from the field, like 30 or 40 sacks, half must be given [to the Tibetan Government].

Q: What did the Tibetan Government do with that food?

#19N: The Tibetan Government loaned the grain to others, to the poor.

Q: This grain?

#19N: Yes, the grain. The government gave loans and also there were many monks. Offerings were made to the monks in the monasteries. The monks must be provided with *tsampa* ‘flour made from roasted barley.’ The government had many expenses.

Q: So some grains went to the poor people and some went to the monastery. Were there many poor people in Shigatse, *ama-la*?

00:14:48

#19N: There were not many poor people because [people] could work. There were many, what one would call as beggars that did not do any work.

Q: Those that didn’t work? Beggars?

#19N: Beggars.

Q: [You] mean there were many beggars?

#19N: There were.

Q: Why were these people so poor?

#19N: [I] wonder why they were so poor. [They] came to beg and were given a spoonful of *tsampa*. [I] do not know why they were poor.

Q: Was there any place for beggars to go and live or stay inside at night when it was cold?

#19N: Yes, there were many small houses. There were small houses built of stones nearby the monastery and beside roads. [The beggars] stayed in houses. They had built small houses.

Q: When you were born many years ago, 82 years ago Shigatse must have been a very different place. So can you give us a description of what was Shigatse like when you were like, say a teenager, when you were growing up? What did the town look like? Was it busy, crowded or quiet? What was it...how would it look? What would we see if we looked there?

00:17:07

#19N: Shigatse then was *changsa dhepo* [?] and the people carefree.

Q: *Changsa*...?

#19N: All the people sang songs, as [they] were happy.

Q: And then? Was it busy, crowded? How was it?

#19N: When there was work to do they worked and were busy. When it was time to enjoy, [they] enjoyed, and worked when it was time to work. Everybody was happy. There was laughter.

Q: What would be the major, like occupations of the people in Shigatse? What kind of things...did they produce things or farming or what was the main commerce?

#19N: The artists did painting, the farmers did farming, the merchants traded and shopkeepers maintained shops similar to what it is like here.

Q: What about farmers?

#19N: There were farmers that cultivated lands. Some maintained shops; some went to trade, and some maintained shops. There were artists and many that sold goods. Each one sold things produced according to one's skill.

Q: Was Shigatse known for any special kind of crafts?

00:19:23

#19N: There were items for monasteries and there were clothes. Tailors were called home to sew. Various goods and items like children's candies and breads used to be sold.

Some were butchers.

Q: Yes?

#19N: Some sold meat. Traders traded in various goods in order to earn a living.

Q: And your mother, she had many children. So what did she spend her day doing most of the time?

#19N: Mother engaged in weaving *nambu* 'woolen cloth,' weaving *nambu* that was used to make clothes. [She] wove and sold *nambu*.

Q: What kind of things did she weave, *ama-la*?

#19N: *Nambu. Nambu.*

Q: *Nambu*?

#19N: [Mother] wove *nambu*. In Tibet clothes were made from *nambu*.

Q: Do you have any favorite memories of your childhood when you think back of growing up in your family, any special times that you liked or memories of something that happened to you?

00:21:34

#19N: The happy times were when [I] lived with the parents. There was no happiness after the Chinese appeared. Then [I] fled. That is it.

Q: Can you tell me about that time? What happened, *ama-la*?

#19N: Yes?

Q: You mentioned being happy living with the parents and that it was no longer so after the Chinese appeared.

#19N: When the Chinese appeared [they] reformed the rich families, confiscated all the belongings, killed and assaulted people. We went to construct roads for the Chinese. Otherwise, my husband being a Khampa ‘a person from Kham,’ he would be captured. [Khampa] were called reactionaries. [We] were building roads for more than a year, building roads, building roads for the Chinese.

Q: Wouldn't [your husband] be captured while building roads?

#19N: Yes?

Q: [Your husband] wasn't captured while building roads?

#19N: [We] lived under the Chinese. [We] accepted the Chinese and build roads for them. [We] served them.

Q: You mentioned a husband. How old were you when you were married and is this someone that you knew that you married?

00:23:35

#19N: I was 25 years old.

Q: Did you know the husband?

#19N: He was a trader and traveled about on trade. [He] was a Khampa.

Q: Did you know [him]?

#19N: I knew [him]. They had a shop in Shigatse at the monastery. [He] traveled between India and Tibet on trade.

Q: How did you meet him, *ama-la*?

#19N: The [future] husband came to Shigatse and said, “It will be good [for you] to come with me as the Chinese will do no good. I will take you to India.” “Okay, please take me to India,” [I] replied and left with him. [We] built roads for the Chinese for a year and then fled from there. [I] fled without the knowledge of the parents.

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

00:25:15

#19N: One had to construct paved roads, and dump soil and rocks. One must carry soil and rocks on the back and dump.

Q: Soil and rocks?

#19N: Yes, soil and rocks. [We] were constructing roads for vehicles to pass.

Q: To flatten the surface?

#19N: To construct paved roads, construct paved roads by demolishing houses.

Q: Demolishing houses?

#19N: Old houses had to be demolished to make way for motor roads. Motor roads had to be made through hills, as there were no existing roads.

Q: Was this...how was this work for you because you mostly worked I gather in housework or things like that? What was it like for you to do this work?

#19N: It was difficult but there was no choice. One was forced to do it. Without earning a living one would remain hungry. There was nothing to eat and then there was the added worry that the husband might be arrested.

Q: If you were doing the work of road building, was the danger less because he was busy engaged in work? What made him less in danger?

00:27:23

#19N: The danger from the Chinese was less because it was easier to escape. The escape route to India was easier.

Q: What made it easier?

#19N: We fled to India through the pass called Nathula and hid in the snow for three days fearing Chinese pursuit. Then trekked through the snow and reached India, reached Gangtok [Sikkim].

Q: When the Chinese were in Shigatse, what changed in everybody's life? What was different than before they came?

#19N: Initially, the Chinese treated well and later caused a great deal of suffering, killing people, beating and confiscating belongings of the rich families, imprisoning [them], imprisoning [them] for years and years.

Q: Did anything happen to your parents?

00:29:09

#19N: My grandfather was from a rich family. My mother's father, he was imprisoned. The Chinese put [him] in prison and assaulted [him]. [He] died in prison. My grandfather died in prison. The Chinese beat [him]; the Chinese beat [him]. [Cries]

Q: Was there anyone else in the family...?

#19N: [Interrupts] Grandfather loved us very much when we were little. He was very beneficial to the family. Grandfather hailed from a good family and had servants and maids. So the Chinese did that.

[He] was in prison for a year and then was brought out at gunpoint and then killed.

Q: Was that a public execution, *ama-la*?

#19N: The people were called to gather, called to a meeting and announced, "This man has suppressed [his] servants and maids in the past. He has not fed the servants and maids well but suppressed by forcing [them] to work. [He] must be destroyed this very day. He shall be killed this very day." A bamboo was pressed here [indicates back] and a rope tied at the waist. Then [he] was led away and shot in the back. The people were called to gather.

Everybody was called to watch.

Q: Did any of the servants have to bear witness against him?

00:31:50

#19N: [The Chinese] forced [the servants and maids] to lie against him, "When we were servants and maids [our employer] did not provide food and beat [us]." The Chinese distributed grandfather's belongings to the servants.

Q: What is your understanding of why the servants would say such things if they weren't true?

#19N: If [they] did not say so, the Chinese...the Chinese thought these were true. Such things were not done but they lied. The servants and maids lied. They had collaborated with the Chinese.

Q: I'm trying to remember, what did your husband do for a living?

#19N: Yes?

Q: What did your husband do for a living?

#19N: He was a trader, one that drove horses and mules. He traveled from Tibet on trade. There were many horses and mules. The horses and mules belonged to [his] employer. [Husband] was a *delpa* ‘muleteer’; we call [such a person] as *delpa* in Tibet.

Q: Which countries did he go to?

00:33:50

#19N: [He] was from Kham.

Q: Where did he go to trade?

#19N: Kalimpong, India and Lhasa.

Q: What kind of goods did he take?

#19N: Things like fabrics, utensils and Indian goods were brought to Tibet, brought to Tibet.

Q: When the oppression started, your grandfather was picked on by the Chinese and ultimately killed but what about your father? Did anything happen to him, *ama-la*?

#19N: Nothing happened to Father because we were a humble family. He worked as a carpenter. Grandfather was from another region and hailed from a good family. Nothing happened to us.

Q: When your husband and you chose to work in...Did you have a choice to work on the road construction and were you...? First of all, did you have a choice and if you were, did you get paid for it?

00:35:45

#19N: Wages were paid and also *tsampa* ‘flour made from roasted barley.’ Wages were paid. A small salary was paid though it was not much.

Q: Did the wages...was that something you were saving to escape?

#19N: Yes, that was it. [We] deceived the Chinese by doing road construction work and obeying orders and kept saving little amounts of money and then fled through Dromo. [We] journeyed during nighttime and were three days in snow. I fell sick from frostbite and was hospitalized in India for a month. It was frostbite.

Q: Tell me more about the journey.

#19N: [We] journeyed through Dromo and reached Bibithang, from Bibithang to Nathula where [we] were in the snow for three days. There was an elderly man [we] knew who we paid to watch out for Chinese. [He] was a spy that watched out for Chinese and informed [us], “You should not go for there are Chinese around.” The next day he informed, “Do not go today for a great number of Chinese has arrived.” That night [he] came and said, “You should leave early tomorrow morning. There are no Chinese around.” So, after three days in the snow [we] left through Nathula.

Q: How many people were in your group that escaped?

00:38:22

#19N: We were around four people, four people. There were five people.

Q: Who were they?

#19N: There were other Khampa whom we did not know and had met up along the way. There were people coming from different regions. At that time there were many people on flight. There were many people escaping from Tibet.

Q: Really? Did you go in groups or small groups? I mean larger groups or smaller groups?

#19N: Not in large groups. Those that knew the way through the forest were in groups of five, six, seven or eight. We were two with three other colleagues. So we were five people.

Q: You mentioned that you didn't tell your parents that you were going to escape with your husband and so, why didn't you tell them?

#19N: Because the parents will not allow [me] to leave. The parents will say, “Do not go.” The parents will not allow [me] to leave. They will not allow [me] to tell them about having a husband.

Q: Oh, you mean your parents didn't know you had a husband?

00:40:18

#19N: [The parents] had no knowledge. [I] ran away. He brought [me] secretly. [Laughs]

Q: Your parents had no knowledge that you were married. I see. Why do you think you wanted to go to India?

#19N: [I] did not wish to live under the Chinese and came to India because many people were being captured and subjected to suffering. He was a Khampa and many Khampa had been arrested. So [I] wished to come to India. His Holiness the Dalai Lama had left. The country became empty after His Holiness left.

Q: Became empty. And so just tell us a little bit about the actual journey. How long did it take and...from Shigatse to India, how long did it take and what happened along the way?

#19N: [We] came from Shigatse to Dromo where [we] were for two days. Then three days in Shasimha. It took 5-6 days.

Q: How many days in Shasimha?

#19N: [We] were three days there.

Q: Then where did [you] go?

#19N: Nathula is close to Shasimha.

Q: And then what...so were you walking or did you have mules or other animals? I mean, sheep or something?

00:42:40

#19N: There were no mules. We walked all the way through. There were no mules. [We] were on foot. [I] was young then and did not feel tired. [Driving] mules would alert the Chinese.

Q: You mentioned though that when you got there you had to be in hospital for a month. What happened along the way?

#19N: [We] faced problems in the snow along the way. Then [we] reached Kalimpong, from Gangtok to Kalimpong. The Tibetan Government provided supplies for the sick on a weekly basis, provided food rations on which [we] survived.

Q: What did you feel when you got to India? How...aside from being sick and needing to go to the hospital, what were you feeling about that?

#19N: [I] was happy and it was simple to see His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the Buddha if you had the means. [I] was happy then.

Q: [You] felt happy?

#19N: [I] felt happy to have reached this country. One felt happy as one could see the Buddha; His Holiness the Dalai Lama had arrived.

Q: *Ama-la*, you were happy to reach India. Did you get a chance to see His Holiness the Dalai Lama?

00:44:58

#19N: Yes, [I] did.

Q: What was that like?

#19N: [I] saw the Buddha many times during our pilgrimage to Bodh Gaya. Then [I] also got a private audience of His Holiness in Dharamsala.

Q: That sounds very, very special. *Ama-la*, what is your prayer for Tibet these days? What would be your wish for Tibet?

#19N: [Joins palms] “May Tibet regain freedom. May the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara [His Holiness the Dalai Lama] live for tens of thousands of years.” [Becomes emotional] “May the Buddha live for tens of thousands of years. May we get Tibet that belong to us. May the Chinese go back,” [I] pray like this. “May the Buddha live for tens of thousands of years. May the Buddha live for tens of thousands of years. May Tibet regain freedom immediately.”

Q: *Ama-la*, we join you in your prayer and I thank you for doing this interview with us and I want to...

00:46:48

#19N: [Interrupts] [I] am happy here because of the benevolence of the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara. Without the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara we will remain hungry, will become beggars. Because of the benevolence of the Buddha everything is good here. Without the Buddha we will not exist.

Q: So we share your appreciation of His Holiness and we are honored to record your story and thank you for spending time with us in recording your story.

#19N: [Joins palms] Okay. Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW