

Tibet Oral History Project

**Interview #23N – DHINGO PEMBA GAPATSANG
April 9, 2015**

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INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #23N
2. Interviewee: Dhingo Pempa Gapatsang
3. Age: 83
4. Date of Birth: 1932
5. Sex: Male
6. Birthplace: Dema, Derge
7. Province: Dhotoe (Kham)
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1960
9. Date of Interview: April 9, 2015
10. Place of Interview: Hotel Norbu Sangpo, Boudha, Kathmandu, Nepal
11. Length of Interview: 2 hr 06 min
12. Interviewer: Katharine Davies Samway
13. Interpreter: Tenzin Yangchen
14. Videographer: Dhiraj Kafle
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

Biographical Information:

Dhingo Pempa Gapatsang was born in Derge Dema in Kham in 1932. His was a large family of 11 members that together managed both farming and nomadic activities. His father served as an assistant to a minister of the King of Derge. Dhingo Pempa Gapatsang describes his father's responsibilities, including the sale of lumber. His father took him and his brothers along on his tours of the district to perform various duties so they could learn how to do the job themselves. Dhingo Pempa Gapatsang explains how the system of governance functioned in Derge.

As the Chinese army advanced into Kham, Dhingo Pempa Gapatsang along with his father and brothers left their village to fight against the invaders. He became separated from his family as they fled from the Chinese and never saw them alive again. He feared the Chinese because they were appointing poor villagers as leaders and influencing them to conduct the *thamzing* 'struggle sessions' the wealthy, the leaders, lamas and monks.

Dhingo Pempa Gapatsang joined the *Chushi Gangdruk* Defend Tibet Volunteer Force and traveled all the way to Lhasa. He gives an exhaustive account of his 3-year resistance against the Chinese and how the *Chushi Gangdruk* organized His Holiness the Dalai Lama's escape from Lhasa. Dhingo Pempa Gapatsang and his horse were both hit by bullets during a Chinese attack, but he survived due to his protective amulet and he was rescued by another resistance fighter.

Topics Discussed:

Kham, childhood memories, customs/traditions, government/administration, invasion by Chinese army, resistance, Dalai Lama's escape, *Chushi Gangdrug* guerrillas, escape experiences.

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Interview #23N

Interviewee: DHINGO PEMBA GAPATSANG

Age: 83, Sex: Male

Interviewer: Katharine Davies Samway

Interview Date: April 9, 2015

Question: Please tell us your name.

00:00:11

Interviewee #23N: DHINGO PEMBA GAPATSANG.

Q: Thank you. His Holiness the Dalai Lama asked us to record your experiences, so that we can share your memories with many generations of Tibetans as well as 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 your interview?

#23N: Yes, of course.

Q: Thank you very much for sharing your story with us. If during this interview if you want to take a break or you want to stop at any time, please let us know.

#23N: Okay.

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

#23N: Okay.

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

#23N: There will be no problems at all.

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

#23N: Okay.

Q: I need to ask just a few questions that you've already answered. How old are you?

00:02:32

#23N: [I] am 83 years old.

Q: In what year were you born?

#23N: I cannot remember, perhaps its 1932 but [I] am not sure. Presently [I] am 83, perhaps it was '33 or '34.

Q: You don't look so old.

#23N: [Nods]

Q: Where did you grow up in Tibet? Where were you born and where did you grow up?

#23N: Derge Dema. D-E-M-A.

Q: Thank you. In which province was this?

#23N: Kham Province.

Q: How big was Dema?

#23N: Dema...the Yangtze flows down towards China. The regions on either side of the Yangtze are called Dema. It is very large.

Q: About how many people lived in Dema?

#23N: I am not able to say exactly. The area of Dema is such that one would not be able to cover the distance in a day on horseback. There must have been a large [population] on both the sides.

Q: In Dema, were there a lot of houses and were they close together?

#23N: Houses?

Q: Yes.

00:05:09

#23N: In the large town there were good houses, but there were those villages that lay scattered...in Dema the largest town was called Lochungno.

Q: What?

#23N: Lochungno.

Q: Lochungno.

#23N: Lochungno. That was the largest town. There were villages scattered around with 10, 15, 20, 30 [houses].

Q: So it sounds like Dema was more like a region?

#23N: It is a large region and as mentioned earlier it extends on both sides of the river and a day's journey on horseback is a long distance.

Q: Right. So where in this region did your family live? Did it live in the big town or in the village?

#23N: It was a fairly big village but [we] did not live in the large town. However, there were 50-60 families. We lived near the monastery.

Q: Which monastery was this?

00:07:10

#23N: The monastery is Sakar Gonpa. It was written earlier [on the pre-interview form]. The sect is Sakya.

Q: What is...for people who don't know about Buddhism, what are the special features of this sect of Buddhism?

#23N: Sakya is one among the four great sects. Since Sakya is my sect...there is not anyone, even children around 10-15 [years of age] in the region who do not know the Buddhist sects for there was great interest. Lamas gave teachings and [people] of the region took great interest in the dharma.

Q: This would be all children in the area whose families were part of this sect?

#23N: Yes, there was great interest.

Q: In order to receive the teachings of the lama, do you have to go to the monastery or maybe the lama came to your community?

#23N: Everybody must go to the monastery for that. There were specific periods for teachings and [we] go to the monastery on those days.

Q: How close was the monastery?

00:09:43

#23N: It was very, very close. The village where I lived was very close to the monastery.

Q: So could you walk there?

#23N: Yes?

Q: So could you walk there?

#23N: Yes, yes. The distance is from here to just outside Boudha [Kathmandu]. It was very close.

Q: That is close.

#23N: It is close.

Q: So what did your family do for a living?

#23N: The livelihood was both farming and nomadic activities. As nomads [we] owned animals and also lands. [We] made a good living.

Q: When you said you did well, what do you mean?

#23N: There was enough for our consumption and [for making offerings] to practice the dharma. [We] did not have to depend on anybody for food and were self-sufficient.

Q: What kind of farming and which animals did you raise?

00:11:41

#23N: Up in the mountains there were animals like *dri* ‘female yaks’ and yaks. Down in the fields [we] raised *dzo* ‘animal bred from a yak and a cow’ and *dzomo* ‘female animals bred from a yak and a cow.’ On the mountains were yaks, *dri* and many others. There was only one harvest in a year that was barley and wheat. Rice did not grow there. There was only one harvest of barley and wheat. [We] owned a large area of land that was good [fertile].

Q: So was your family considered very wealthy?

#23N: Yes?

Q: So was your family considered very wealthy?

#23N: It was fairly good. [We] were not among the best but among the good.

Q: About how much land did you have?

#23N: Fields?

Q: Yes.

#23N: [We] owned good farmlands and good [number of] animals.

Q: Who took care of the animals up in the mountains?

#23N: There were around 11 members in our family, both young and old. All the sons served as attendants to the leader and traveled everywhere. So the daughters and *nama*

‘daughters-in-law/sisters-in-law’ went to the nomadic site during summertime. There were no servants or maids. There was no such practice. It was the *nama* and daughters that did the work.

Q: What did you say the sons were?

00:13:53

#23N: All the sons had to travel everywhere as attendants of the leader Dhingotsang. [They] did not have much time to work around the house.

Q: So the girls and the women did they herd the animals up in the mountains?

#23N: Yes, one must stay on the mountains in *ba* ‘tent made from yak hair.’ [The animals] must be taken out in the morning and brought back in the evening. [The women] milked and churned butter. Then [the butter] must be delivered to the house from time to time. It was the women that did the work.

Q: Did you ever go up with the women and the girls to take care of the animals?

#23N: Yes, [I] did. When the boys were free, we went there. [I] have been there.

Q: Did the boys go there?

#23N: Yes, we did when there was free time from attending to the leader.

Q: Around what age did you start serving the leader?

00:16:08

#23N: It has been three generations, three generations of fathers. It began since then. There were six ministers under the leader, six families. [Ours] was one among them. It started many years ago. It did not happen during our period but before that. It started during the time of father’s father.

Q: There were six ministers and [your family] was one?

#23N: One was us, the Gapatsang. It began long ago, many years ago.

Q: Which family member was the minister?

#23N: The older son and...The leader in our family?

Q: Yes.

#23N: That was father.

Q: So your father was one of the ministers to the King of Derge?

#23N: Yes, [I] said that among the six families, one was ours, and that was father.

Q: Was one of the ministers?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Correct.

Q: One of the ministers to whom? Who was he minister to?

#23N: The family of Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche was a *dhunkor* ‘minister’ of the king of Derge. That was the leader, our leader.

Q: Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche?

#23N: Khyentse Rinpoche’s family. He was a lama. The family was a minister of the King of Derge. The term must be minister or some such thing. We were his attendants, serving him.

Q: In this responsibility what did your father have to do?

00:19:08

#23N: Father’s duties as a minister involved traveling to administer the district, settling disputes between people and taking the lead in case of conflicts. Whatever critical work was assigned, he had to do it.

Q: So in order to administer the district, what did he actually...what kinds of things did he have to do?

#23N: There was a large population in a district and [father] had to look after them. If there was any critical work in the district, like [I] mentioned there could be disputes among the people or frictions or any such issues, then it became the responsibility of the district administrator. There were duties to perform because of the large population in a district.

Q: Can you give us an example of some of the disputes that your father had to settle?

#23N: There were different kinds of districts. We were appointed as district administrator to one where there was a large forest. The woods must be protected well. When buyers came from the north to buy wood, [father] had to receive payment for the logs and then pay a percentage to the leader according to the fixed rate and you received a good income, too. A district administrator was appointed on the basis of the income.

Then there were frictions among the subjects like murders, arguments, family disputes and many such issues. The district administrator must look after all these and offer assistance. It was deemed very important to help those that were poor in the district.

Q: You were born around 1932 and I believe you left Tibet in 1960s. Is that correct?

00:23:05

#23N: Yes.

Q: So you were a man, you lived as a man in Tibet not just as a child. Is that correct?

#23N: [Nods]

Q: So did you ever accompany your father when he was settling a dispute?

#23N: I have.

Q: Please tell us about one of those incidents.

#23N: Okay. [I] have aged and it has been a long time. So [I] cannot remember all the little details. However, two families had had a very major fight. The reason was on account of land. "This is my land and you have encroached." "This is my land." A serious fight nearly erupted with knives being used but there were no deaths. Father had to settle such an issue. The older son and I used to be taken along to train [us] for the future. Talks went on for many days to settle this major issue. Finally it seemed to have been taken care of. Then an agreement was drawn and signed to the effect that they would not fight any longer. I can recall something like this.

Q: Was your father's role as an administrator a hereditary role?

00:26:06

#23N: The administrator's role was not permanent. The district administrator was appointed for three years as a source of revenue. It was changed in three years and then one among the six families would be appointed. It was not one that was passed on to the next generation.

Q: Where did the revenue come from?

#23N: To the administrator?

Q: Yes.

#23N: As mentioned earlier the revenue for the administrator came from the forest. However, there was not any revenue from the subjects like tax. In general for our district the revenue from [sale of] logs was huge. As mentioned earlier the leader must be offered a certain percentage and you received a share, which was like an income.

Q: Were the trees cut and sold?

#23N: Buyers came for the logs. Those that were constructing monasteries and such came to buy because there were not any forests in the north. So there were many buyers for the logs that were sold.

Q: Do you remember what kind of percentage it was?

00:28:24

#23N: [I] do not know for sure as [I] was young then. There was the forest and also lands. [We] also owned lands and there was good harvest of grains. An administrator earned a living from the lands. With the grains one could buy butter, meat...The administrator bought these with the grains from the fields.

Q: So the six families that administered the district, were these the same six families from one century to another century?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: One?

Q: So you had six families and they each served the three years. So if each family served for three years, at the end of 18 years what happened? Did the first family start again?

#23N: It is not just one district. There are many such districts. It is not just one district.

Q: Did the administrators have to go to all the districts on a rotation basis?

#23N: All had to go on rotation basis. It was supposed to be a source of income for the six. Not all [the districts] had forests. There were some with animals and lands and such. We happened to get the forested one. There were many districts.

Q: I'm sorry but I'm a little bit confused. So it wasn't just one district. So did the six families...how many districts were there?

00:30:40

#23N: [I] cannot remember much. There were five or six. There were smaller districts and the one [we spoke about] now was the largest.

Q: What I'm trying to understand is whether your father worked as an administrator all the time or just in 3-year slots?

#23N: It was kind of strange. If [he] was not an administrator there were other duties like [I] mentioned earlier about accompanying the leader when he had to travel long distances and also to attend meetings under the King of Derge. There were various responsibilities.

Q: Where would the senior leader be going when your father accompanied him?

#23N: [The senior leader] had to go to the district of Derge. [We] were under the King of Derge and [the leaders] had to attend meetings in two, three or four months. Every year all the leaders had to gather two or three times. [Father] had to go on such duties.

Q: What would these meetings be about?

00:33:03

#23N: I would not be able to say much because as a country...take Nepal for instance, meetings are held regarding the country's laws as to what is allowed and what is not allowed in the country, and what transpired in the country in a year are reported in a meeting. I would not know exactly but the meetings concerned the country and about orders regarding what can be done and what cannot be done and what is required for the country.

Q: Were these oral reports or written reports?

#23N: These might be written [reports]. Under the King there were many ministers, supervisors and secretaries. [The reports] may have to be offered [to the king] in writing. I cannot say exactly as [I] have not been there. It may have to be written and not just oral. [I] think all the happenings in a region during a year would have to be written.

Q: Was your father able to write, read and write?

#23N: He was not very good but could write. [He] could write.

Q: Where did he learn to read and write?

#23N: You must learn yourself. There were teachers in the monastery that taught children. There was not anyone that could not read Tibetan.

Q: All the village children could read and write?

00:35:51

#23N: There might be some who could not but even if there were only 2-3 families, there was the custom of older literate ones teaching others. So most knew Tibetan.

Q: So it didn't matter how rich or poor the children were? They all got taught how to read and write?

#23N: Yes, it was not a matter of wealth.

Q: And girls also learn to read and write?

#23N: It was difficult for girls in the region. They learned if [they] were nuns but the custom among the people of Kham was such that though there were literate girls, it was not as much as boys.

Q: Why was this?

#23N: Well, what to say? It was the custom of the region.

Q: Is this still the same amongst Kham people now?

#23N: Yes?

Q: Is this still the same amongst Kham people now?

#23N: No, no. It is not so these days. These days [the girls] go to school.

Q: Your father was a leader and an administrator. Did he hope that you would become an administrator and a leader?

00:38:22

#23N: [He] had the hope of [me] becoming a leader and it was a certainty because of one's entitlement. It was certain. However, there were chances of some children not listening to their parents and becoming wayward like some children do here. Otherwise, that was a certainty for the family. Leadership [for me] was a certainty and an entitlement.

Q: So did you receive...did your father or someone else prepare you to be a leader, teach you how to be a leader? If so, how did they do that?

#23N: Father taking [us] along was the training. When [he] traveled around [father] used to take along older brother, the next one and me in turns. That was training [us] in order to watch what father did, what he spoke, what [his] work entailed so that the children would understand. So father was taking [us] along.

Q: Perhaps at the end of the day after you had observed him administering the dispute, did he ever talk with you about what he hoped you'd learned?

00:40:34

#23N: Yes, [father] asked, "Did [you] follow? Did [you] understand what was spoken today? Did you understand what the other person said? You must keep this mind for something could happen in the future. Father will die and you will be given leadership responsibility." Father spoke a lot about such things.

Q: Can you give an example of one of those occasions of exactly what it was he wanted you to see or hear or learn?

#23N: In general the people of Kham are a little bit stupid but...“Whether you are the head of a district or of the people, one must be honest in discharging duties. One must not look down upon people thinking ‘I am a leader in authority’. One must not discriminate between influential people and common people but be cooperative and amicable. Interaction with people is very important,” he advised like that.

Q: Was your father considered a successful administrator?

00:43:04

#23N: Very much so. I am not just praising my father but he was honest, straightforward and wherever he was appointed, people liked him very much. He was not a man of many words but cared well for the subjects. Wherever [he] went, he was wanted. Wherever Gapatsang Tsering went, [he] was considered an honest and straightforward man.

Q: Did you ever have the opportunity to be an administrator yourself?

#23N: Yes, for a little while. [I] think it was in '55 that my older brother and I stayed at a district, together in one district.

Q: Could you please tell us about that situation that...yes?

#23N: The situation then was extremely bad. During the time [we] stayed at the fort, the Chinese had been [in Tibet] since long ago and there were rebellions in other regions. My older brother and I were at the fort and it was said that the Chinese would be coming. The Chinese had arrived at around 12 o'clock in the night. If we fell into Chinese hands it would be very difficult as we were leaders since long ago and district administrators as well.

It was wintertime, around the 10th or 11th Tibetan lunar month and the river had frozen, the Yangtze. I was the younger one and asleep at that time. He shook [me] gently, "The Chinese have come. We need to escape tonight for it is better to die than fall into Chinese hands. If [we] gently open the door of the fort and start out before dawn, [we] might make it." If [we] could reach the river, it was frozen. "If [we] can reach the frozen river before dawn, [we] might make it. Let's go for staying would mean falling into Chinese hands. It is better to die than let that happen."

Q: Did older brother say that?

00:45:55

#23N: Yes, older brother. [I] will continue the story. Then it was nearly 3 o'clock. [We] carried the rifles on the back and a pistol each in our hands. [We] opened the door and he screamed, 'Kee, hee, hee' and jumped. He had said, "You might get hit. Jump after me." It was quite close. Jumping down would mean reaching a forest and from the forest a little over a 100-foot drop brought one to the frozen river. Then one could manage to run away from there. "May God help us to succeed," he said.

Older brother ran first but I was very scared and could not see properly. [I] jumped after older brother. After [I] jumped the Chinese started to fire *rat, tat, tat*. Thank God, we had already jumped. It was not yet daylight when [we] reached the riverbank. He was worried about me, the younger brother, thinking that I might have been shot and had died. I was worried wondering what had happened to older brother. However, both of us had reached the riverbank.

[Older brother asked,] "Did you get shot?" "[I] do not know, older brother." He said, "[We] should not remain here. You wait awhile. I will go first. One should not walk straight across the ice but move in a zigzag manner." The other side of the river was forested. "Once I am on the other side, you should start." Then older brother ran. It was nighttime and raining heavily. There was a lot of gunfire. [I] did not know if he was shot but he reached the other side. Then I ran after him. Both of us were not hurt and succeeded in reaching the other side but the fort was lost.

Q: Were there other people with you on that day?

00:50:18

#23N: No, we were alone.

Q: That must have been a very frightening experience for you.

#23N: Oh, that was very frightening. It was said that if [we] fell into Chinese, we would be subjected to *thamzing* ‘struggle sessions.’ There were many that said [they would] eat [our] hearts and drink [our] blood.

Q: What?

#23N: Because [we] were leaders.

Q: What would be done?

#23N: The Chinese selected poor families and appointed them as leaders. The region’s leaders, ministers, rich families, lamas of the monastery and likewise the leaders were being subjected to *thamzing*. Should we be caught, there was a woman who claimed, “I will open them and eat the hearts.” So it was better to die than fall into [Chinese] hands. We jumped and thank God managed to flee. Even if we got shot and died, it was better than falling into their hands. The best was of course, succeeding in the flight. It was a very dangerous situation then.

Q: The lady who said this about opening up your heart and taking and killing you...

[Interpreter to interviewer]: ...eating the heart

Q: ...and eating your heart, was she a woman who lived in your village?

00:52:41

#23N: The woman was one of the subjects under the district. There were subjects under the district that was around 300 in that district. She was a poor one and the Chinese appointed all the poor as leaders. [They] were given *dhayen* ‘Chinese silver coins,’ money and clothes and told to subject so and so to *thamzing* and they believed [the Chinese]. We had never caused [her] any suffering. However, [she thought], “It is going to be good for me. I am appointed as a leader.” and conducted *thamzing* and did whatever was ordered.

Q: Did you meet...did you know any poor people who refused to follow the orders of the Chinese?

#23N: Yes, [I] have seen such. There was a girl that worked and cooked for us. She was very poor and had come from afar and had no parents. She was working at the fort since long ago and was treated like a family member, given clothes in winter and summer and eating whatever food we ate. She was an extremely good woman.

When the fort was lost, the Chinese subjected her to *thamzing* and bound [her] with ropes, “What are your leaders like?” She replied, “I do not have a word to speak [against them]. I am poor and have come from afar. They treated [me] well. [I] ate with them and got clothes when they did. I have no children, no parents. They are [my] parents. Kill me if you want but I have nothing to say [against them]. [They] have been very helpful.” She kept repeating that. [She] was imprisoned for many months but kept repeating that. There were many good ones.

Q: Were most people like that, most poor people like that that you knew?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Excuse me?

Q: Were most of the poor people in your village, did they respond in the same kind of way or did they follow the...?

00:57:03

#23N: [I] think most of them were good. There were one or so brave girls in every region that also charged at the Chinese, charged at the Chinese armed with axes. There were many such talks [we] heard. There were also bad ones that were appointed as leaders called *uyon* ‘committee members.’ The one that wanted to assault and eat us was appointed an *uyon* by the Chinese, which is a very senior leader.

Not just us, she had spoken against all the leaders and lamas of the region, “If they are brought I will subject them to *thamzing*. [They] are fake; the lamas are fake. The lamas bestow empowerments by giving urine. Likewise, the leaders collect taxes and take away all that we have.” This was what the Chinese wanted said. She said such and not just us; others wished to kill this woman if she could be caught for she was worse than the Chinese. She had said so much and was very bad.

Q: Was she a woman from your village?

#23N: Yes, she was from the district.

Q: Did you know her?

00:59:04

#23N: Of course, [I] know [her]. [She] was a subject of that district. I lived on the other side of the river and the fort was on the opposite side. I was running away to my region. I was angrier with this woman than the Chinese. [Swears] Long ago if I could have caught her, I would have really drunk her blood. I was that angry but helpless.

Q: Just going back to when your brother and you were at the fort and there were the Chinese there and you escaped into the forest. Was that your first encounter with the Chinese?

#23N: It was not the first time. There had been many times when [I] went to fight the Chinese. That was the most dangerous one. Otherwise, [I] had gone many times.

Q: So this was in 1955?

#23N: Yes, '55.

Q: Did things stay pretty much the same with regard to the Chinese occupation or did things get worse or better?

01:01:15

#23N: Then it got worse. Then gradually [we] walked through the forest and went back home where the Dhingotsang lived. As [I] told you earlier, the fort was lost and the Chinese numbers grew; many had already arrived. It was said that after crossing Derge, the Chinese were building a bridge at Kamthokdu. If that was so it meant that the Chinese were in the central part of Tibet. "Let us all, father and sons leave the wives and children and go to war for [we] cannot remain so. It is better to die than fall into Chinese hands." So the five of us father and sons went at the end of '55 for war, leaving behind the wives and children once and for all.

Q: In 1955?

#23N: Yes, '55. The fort was lost and later the Chinese numbers were growing. There was a lot of unrest going on in the lower regions and the Chinese had reached across Derge and was building a bridge to the central part of Tibet. "If [the Chinese] are constructing a bridge, it is better to die." So the five of us father and sons went to war; went to rebel against the Chinese.

Q: Who did you go to join in 1955?

#23N: It was at the end of '55.

Q: Where did [you] go?

01:03:33

#23N: [We] went into the forest and watched out for groups of Chinese as to which village they ventured into and attacked. Then [we] fled to other places and stayed in a forest or on the mountaintops. That was how...everyone was doing so. We father and sons did this too.

Q: Were you working with a group or just you five men?

#23N: Oh, there were many others. There were nearly 50-60 men in the group.

Q: Were these all from your settlement or did they come from other places?

#23N: Oh, [they] hailed from everywhere. All these men were undergoing the same suffering. There were many from our village, but there were also many from afar that had fled from across the rivers.

Q: Who led this group of 50-60 men if there was a leader?

01:05:16

#23N: The smarter people in a village had to form a group and take the lead for there was not anything like, “You are the leader” or “He is the leader.” Our father was someone who everybody knew. Hence, he was sort of the leader. Where should we go? What should [we] do? Spies were sent out.

There was a large town across the river. It came under Nyen but [I] cannot remember the name of the town. “In this town, the day after tomorrow...” [I] cannot remember whether it was a Monday or Wednesday “a red-haired woman from Russia who has accepted to liberate the whole of the region of Dema is coming. She will be coming to this town.” Spies had gathered this information. [We] went to launch an attack there.

Q: A person from Russia?

#23N: Yes, Russia. It was mentioned that [she] was a person from Russia, a woman. She was very famous. She had declared she would liberate the region of Dema and was very famous. “She is coming to this town the day after tomorrow.” We went to wait there, the 50-60 men. [We] went to await her having to cross to the other side of the river. [I] think ’55 had ended and it was the start of ’60.

Q: ’55?

#23N: ’55 had ended and...

Q: ’56.

01:06:49

#23N: It was the start of ’56. The ice in the river had melted. The ice had melted and [we] crossed by a boat and drove the horses into the river. [We] went into the town and stopped the movement of people while the spies watched. The horses were tethered at a distance and [we] lay in wait. “She is arriving at 10 o’clock tomorrow,” it was said. A little further away was a large town where...[not discernible] was coming.

Q: Did [you] say it was a woman?

#23N: It was said that the woman was coming. [She] was Chinese. All the men waited among the rocks in a field. [We] were waiting. As we lay in wait [the Chinese] appeared at around 10 or 11 o’clock. There were 30-odd Chinese. All of them came marching in a row. The Chinese are clever. Two men came in front. The two men walked ahead and looked around. If something was amiss, [they] did this [waves right hand] and everyone fell flat on the ground. If they did this [raises right hand] they rose and marched.

We lay in wait in a large field among rocks. There was a senior man among us who had joined [the group] after deserting the Chinese. He was from Ba. [We] did not trust him fully. If he did something strange, [we] were to shoot him. However, he happened to be a

very good man. [He] said, “Do not fire until I do.” Then we reached the spot and he fired *tat-tat*. Correctly [as per the information] there was the red-haired Russian woman who was not very tall. Everybody had aimed at her and fired. All the flesh and organs inside her were hit and yet [she] was not dead. I knew a little bit of Chinese. She asked for water. Two Chinese escaped by somersaulting. Otherwise, all the rest were killed there that day.

Q: The woman was killed?

#23N: The woman was killed for everyone had aimed at her.

Q: So how many Chinese were killed that day?

01:11:25

#23N: Nearly 26-27 was killed. There happened to be three Tibetans among them. Among the three Tibetans, two were killed and one happened to be from our district that had been sent to [a Chinese] school as a child. He could withstand ammunitions. He continued to shoot from a distance even after everyone had been killed or had escaped. A little further away was a man who was very courageous. He got up and rushed towards him. [The Chinese-schooled man] hurled a hand grenade.

We had no training and no knowledge of falling flat [on the ground]. Everything enveloped in dust. Everyone exclaimed, “What happened? What happened? Everyone’s been killed but two that has escaped. What’s happening now?” Everybody was thinking like this. When the dust settled down, the man was still standing. When he turned around, the hand grenade had blasted his back, our man’s.

Then everyone got up and rushed. He [Chinese-schooled man] stood near a boulder. [He] had around 200-300 rounds that [he] had used. [He] held his gun like this [holds up right hand] and pleaded, “Please, please, I am a Tibetan. I wish to surrender.” [I] looked at him and found he was from our region. “[Swears] If you wish to surrender you should have done so in the beginning. There was no need for you to shoot.” [He] said, “This is the Chinese rule. Please take me with you.” [We] replied, “[We] will not take you.”

The others asked if he should be killed. “Do not kill him. The other two Tibetans are dead. Let’s not kill a Tibetan but leave this bad man. [We will not take him.” Everyone said such and so did I. Father said, “Leave him.” [The Chinese-schooled Tibetan] pleaded, “Please tie [my] hands behind the back. If the Chinese find [me], I will face lesser punishment if the hands are tied at the back, please.” Nobody would do it. We suspected the Chinese might come. So [we] left immediately.

Q: Was [he] killed?

#23N: He was not killed but left behind.

Q: Left there?

#23N: He was left there. [We] would not take him along. It was said, “Kill him. He has come to kill us like a Chinese and fired so many ammunitions. Our man has been injured. Kill him.” “Please do not kill [him] for [he] is a Tibetan. Do not commit a sin. Let him do what he wants to do.” So he was left there. Then we fled immediately. The horses were there. [We] crossed the Yangtze. Then it became dark. [We] went into the forest. That’s how we struggled. It was like that.

Q: So what happened to that Tibetan?

01:15:34

#23N: He was...we had taken [his] gun and did not tie [his] hands behind the back. So he seems to have suffered according to the Chinese law, but [I] do not know for sure because he did not have a gun, [his] hands were not tied at the back and [he] did not have any injuries. The Chinese might have treated him badly according to the law. [I] did not hear clearly but heard the law is like that. Either he was killed or treated badly.

Q: So what happened after that?

#23N: Then after that...to make a guess it might have been around a month later in '56 that we advanced into a region like bandits. We were like bandits watching for Chinese, attacking and then fleeing. [We] dare not go home as the Chinese had arrived in the village. Then one day at around dawn as [we] stayed in the forest...there were many spies in the villages...then [the situation] became very grave. Troops had surrounded everywhere.

Q: Yes?

#23N: We were surrounded by Chinese troops. When surrounded by soldiers you try to take care of yourself, kill as many as you can and flee. [We] fled as [we] fired. That day all of us father and sons became scattered. The four of them were somewhere and I was alone somewhere. It became extremely pitiful. The five of us father and sons became separated.

Q: From there?

#23N: All four of them had fallen into Chinese hands. [They] fled but could not and tried to fight and were captured by the Chinese.

Q: [They] were caught?

#23N: And taken to the hometown. A great many of our men were killed there.

Q: What happened to your father and brothers when they were captured and taken to their hometown?

01:19:26

#23N: Father was immediately subjected to *thamzing* and did not live beyond two days. [He] passed away. Then the youngest among the three brothers was given “the hat”...

Q: Two days?

#23N: What?

Q: Did [you] say after two days?

#23N: [Father] did not seem to have survived beyond two days. [He] was subjected to *thamzing* and bound by a rope at the neck and dragged here and there. The Chinese assaulted and killed him.

The older brother and the two next to him...the three brothers had been classified among the serious offenders like leaders, ministers, the wealthy, the lamas, abbots and the business managers and were given what is called “the hat.” The older and younger brothers were thrown in prison straightaway. The younger brother, due to his young age was given “the hat” and left with *nama* ‘sister-in-law.’ There were two younger sisters who were both given “the hat” and imprisoned.

Having been continually subjected to physical assault since whichever month it was that [the two brothers] were jailed in ’56, older brother was alive in the year ’80 and was released from prison. [He] was home for around a month and then passed away. His health was poor at the time of release from prison and when he was given food, it could not be digested and [he] died. Hence, both the brothers survived imprisonment for that many years.

It is the same for the middle brother. It looks like he was released a year earlier [than older brother]. The younger one was not put in jail but was given “the hat” and left with *nama* who had two children. It was pathetic; father was killed, mother had died in prison, two brothers were in prison and the older one died in ’80 after release. [I] feel very sad that I could not meet any of them. It was my destiny that [I] managed to escape. That is what happened to all my family members. The Gapatsang family had altogether 11 members, both young and old, and I am the lone survivor.

01:21:46

This is in the case of one generation of the Gapatsang family and likewise how many were killed in Kham? On a high number, it can be said that only half the population of Kham survive. Such has been the suffering and struggle. Once the high lamas and leaders fell into [Chinese] hands, they would come to an end either by...[not discernible] or by struggle or through starvation in prison. The Chinese had...

Q: The three ways they’d be killed are lack of food in prison...

#23N: Lack of food in prison.

Q: And then?

#23N: Some were provided with a little [food] but those with more serious crimes had no food. Anybody would die without food. One cannot survive for months. Therefore, the

Chushi Gangdrug [Defend Tibet Volunteer Force] of Kham and Amdo could not withstand and rose up in their regions. There is a proverb in Kham, “*Rangta gachay, rangja khuma*” ‘Take your own horse and saddle, take your own weapons and food bag.’ You rode your own horse, saddled it yourself, carried your own food and went [to join the force]. There was not anyone that called you to join the force or paid salaries or issued orders.

You could not endure those that destroyed the dharma and politics, those that got you out of a warm bed and so you hoped to kill at least a Chinese or two. With that thought and aim the *Chushi Gangdrug* labored and managed to escort His Holiness the Dalai Lama [out of Tibet]. That is the result of the effort of the *Chushi Gangdrug*.

Q: You mentioned that your mother died; did she die at the same time?

01:26:17

#23N: [I] do not know for sure about Mother, but Father died immediately, killed immediately by *thamzing*. [I] do not know whether it was a year or a few months but mother did die fairly soon.

Q: So you never saw the rest of your family after you got separated from your two brothers and your father?

#23N: No, [I] did not. The separation was permanent. Later [I] heard what had happened to father and what had happened to the siblings. Other than that there was no knowing what had happened or whether [they] were alive or dead. I had no knowledge whether father was killed or not.

Q: So you didn’t try to go back to your village?

#23N: No, it was impossible for by then Tibet was overrun by Chinese. [We] continued to fight the Chinese until around the end of ’78...

Q: ’68?

#23N: What is it...1956, ’57...in ’57 [we] continued to fight the Chinese in and around Kham until around January or February of ’58 when [I] finally reached the central part of Tibet.

Q: At this point you were with the *Chushi Gangdrug*?

01:29:00

#23N: Yes. It can be called *Chushi Gangdrug* because every person that came from Kham came under the *chushi* and *gangdrug* ‘four rivers and six ranges.’ They were the ones resisting and that is why it was called *Chushi Gangdrug*.

Q: So when you reached the center of Tibet, how close to...were you close to Lhasa at this point?

#23N: Yes, yes, it was close to Lhasa. [I] reached the place called Phenpo at the beginning of '58. Phenpo is in the north of Lhasa.

Q: Could you tell us about your experiences with the *Chushi Gangdrug*?

#23N: The *Chushi Gangdrug*...I stayed in Phenpo for a while and then I...Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, his brother Nyenpa Rinpoche, the Dhingotsang's five sons, their mother and all had left for Lhasa much earlier. They were in Lhasa where I went and stayed for 5-6 days. Then [I] went to see Dilgo Khyentse and Nyenpa Rinpoche who were staying at the seat of the Karmapa at Tsurphu. [I] saw the Karmapa and then came to Lhasa for a while. Then I went to Lhoka where Andrug Gonpo Tashi and others had established the *Chushi Gangdrug*. [I] went there.

Q: So when you went to Lhasa to meet with the lamas, why did you go there?

01:32:10

#23N: It was more than two years since they had left and [I] had not seen them. For one, they were lamas and leaders as well. They had no knowledge whether we were dead or alive. So since they were there [I] had a desire to see them. Since they were my leaders and my lamas, [I] went quickly to Lhasa to see them and then proceeded to Tsurphu to see the lamas. That was the reason.

Q: When was it that you heard about the deaths of your family members?

#23N: That was much later when everything...that was when Tibet was opened in '81, '82, '83 and [I] visited. [I] had not heard until then. That was the first time [I] heard.

Q: That must have been a terrible shock for you when you heard this? Do you remember how you...your reaction, how you felt?

#23N: When such things happened to Tibet...the parents were old, but I had great hopes of seeing [my] brothers and sisters. However, having endured a lot of struggles and sufferings there was not much one could do though you did feel sad and [I] did.

Q: So sorry. I feel for you.

01:34:52

#23N: It was very sad. [I] had endured a great deal of sufferings and struggles. One shed tears but there was nothing to be done. Having reached there you offered prayers and that was it though it was very, very sad.

Q: Is it okay if we return to your life with the *Chushi Gangdrug*?

#23N: Yes, it is okay.

Q: Could you please tell us about what you remember about that time?

#23N: As mentioned earlier, after meeting the lamas, employers and leaders [I] went to where the *Chushi Gangdrug* camp was located in Lhoka. After reaching Lhoka...the camp was located near a large Sakya Monastery called Gongkar Choedhe Dzong. There were different divisions [in the *Chushi Gangdrug*] like Derge, Bawa, Lithang and such. I was left in the Derge Division. The leaders were Andrug Gonpo Tashi and Derge Chagoe Namgyal Dorjee, Sandho Lo Nyendak and Amdo Jinpa. They were the senior leaders and there were many other junior leaders, too.

They were engaged in fighting at Powo Tamo and in the northern direction from where the Chinese appeared. A week after I joined [I] was told to go to fight at Powo Tamo. I was in the Derge [Division] and chosen to go to fight. [I] assented and went to fight at Powo Tamo, which is in the region of Kongpo. The Derge group leader was a volunteer. The assistant group leader was also a volunteer.

Q: Volunteer?

01:37:06

#23N: Volunteer means [someone who asserts], “I am ready to die. I will take the lead. I will be in the front.” [They] pledge, sign and leave. The Derge group leader was very tall in stature. I did not know [him] then. That night the [Chinese] military camp was attacked. At that time the Chinese had not yet built houses and lived in tents. [I] think an incredible number of Chinese were killed. One launched an attack for 10, 15, 20 minutes or an hour and then retreated and fled. There was no way continuous fight. [I] fired many times but do not know in the night if any Chinese were killed. Later it was said that a huge number of Chinese had been killed. That was how the *Chushi Gangdrug* engaged. Only once did [I] go to fight in Powo Tamo. Other than that [I] did not get to fight after arriving in Utsang region.

Q: How did it feel to fight?

01:40:07

#23N: Generally, since one had fought many times and suffered much at the hands of the Chinese, there was not any fear as such. By the grace of God, it was good that [I] was not harmed by ammunitions. [I] never thought, “I dare not fight.” One was young and enthusiastic. There was not much fear. That could have been because of having fought the Chinese many times.

Q: We only have a few minutes left until it's too dark to, you know, continue. So why don't you tell us in the remaining time anything that you'd like to tell us about your life in Tibet?

#23N: The final part [of the story] is that the reason the *Chushi Gangdrug* force was established was the aim to escort His Holiness the Dalai Lama because the Chinese had occupied the land of Tibet. Though some attacks were being launched yet [the Chinese] could not be overcome.

After engaging in talks at the Norbulingka, notices were sent out to respective regions calling for security guards, “Those coming to Lhasa must do so on the pretext of pilgrimage

and converge at the Norbulingka before Losar ‘Tibetan New Year.’ Those in possession of weapons should conceal them well. If you do not possess weapons, it matters not for weapons will be provided.” When the message arrived, there were several sons of the Dhingotsang. Among them a younger son, an attendant, and I arrived at the Norbulingka on the second day of Losar. After arriving there, the Dhingotsang son was appointed as a *Derge gyapon* ‘leader of 100 men.’ Then we were given weapons.

01:42:22

It seemed His Holiness the Dalai Lama was to be escorted in the night of the 9th of March but nobody knew of it. Certain that His Holiness was there, the Chinese planned to capture him on the morning of the 10th but the *Chushi Gangdrug* had escorted him on the night of the 9th. On the morning of the 10th mortar shells and machine guns were fired from every direction and when dawn broke, one could not fathom where Lhasa was because of the dust and smoke.

I was in the Norbulingka. The *gyapon* was told to go across the river. [I] omitted to narrate this. He and an attendant...someone said the *gyapon* must go and [he] crossed over to the other side of the river in the night of the 8th. I was alone there though there were many from Derge. When the attack took place in the morning of the 10th, the *Chushi Gangdrug* had escorted His Holiness the Dalai Lama in the night of the 9th.

Then [I] kept running and at dawn, around 1 or 2 o’clock continued walking from the Potala Palace. Though many shots were fired, due to the grace of God, none hit my body. There were many people killed and there were many people dead. [I] continued and night fell when [I] reached Sera Monastery. [I] slowly climbed over the hill. There was no food that whole day and [I] carried many guns picking up those that other Tibetans had left behind, and also ammunitions.

[I] was very tired and the next morning as the sun rose I reached the top of the mountain in Phenpo. In the evening I reached the house where I had left my gun and horse. From there [I] wished to go to Lhoka through the place called Digung. However, many people, many fighters from Kham had arrived there. We had some discussion and it took quite a while. It was said that the Chinese had come and there was no route to Lhoka except through Kongpo. It took [us] many days in Kongpo as Chinese troops pursued, [we] resisted and then were pursued.

01:44:32

Just before reaching Kyimdong in Kongpo I was injured. There was a valley through which one had to pass. A machine gun fired four shots into my horse. One ricocheted and hit me and I fell off the horse. The horse ran after them [resistance fighters] after [I] fell. I had a wonderful colleague who looked back and said, “If my colleague is dead, I shall bring his corpse. If alive, I shall not leave him.” He returned on [his] horse amidst the heavy firing. He too could not be harmed by ammunition. I had fallen on the ground; he picked me up and bound [me] to the horse and took me away to a forest in the night. I was unconscious. Around twilight I could not understand what had happened to me. [My] whole body was numb. “Though you have been hit, the bullet has not penetrated. You need not worry,” I could hear him softly [saying].

Daylight began but one could not remain there, as the Chinese might arrive; the Chinese were in pursuit. "Try to walk a little," he said and led me away. He tied the horse some distance away in a forest. One dare not make a fire. He mixed some *tsampa* 'flour made from roasted barley' in water and gave it to me. A little later I asked, "Am I injured?" "You are injured but okay. The ammunition has not penetrated," [he] said. I did not have any sensation in my body. The whole body was numb. There was no place to rest or sleep. As dusk fell, we fled into the night and then arrived in Mustang [Nepal] through Tsari. That is my final story.

Q: From Tsari to?

01:46:18

#23N: Tsari, Tibet. Tsari is a great pilgrim site of Tibet. Pilgrimage takes place once in a 12-year cycle during the Year of the Horse or the Year of the Sheep. The land belonged to the tribal people; tribal people do not have clothes. [People] pay a lot to go on pilgrimage to this region where [we] had arrived. [We] had nowhere to go. The majority of the *Chushi Gangdrug* men had...once His Holiness the Dalai Lama left.

The tribal region was extremely hot with insects that bit. We had reached such a place yet [we] never realized that the country was lost. Once again [we] fought in Kongpo and killed a Chinese or two and entered houses looking for *tsampa*. Earlier [we] had never done so but now one was reduced to grabbing *tsampa* and animals. [We] killed animals and ate the meat and in this way fought from the border until the year '60.

Q: In which place did the attacks take place?

#23N: It was at the border in Tsari. On the other side of Tsari lay Kongpo. [We] went into Kongpo, attacked and then retreated. [We] tried to find *tsampa* or meat and killed Chinese. We were five men that remained so until '60. Then in '60 [we] could no longer put up any challenge nor find food and moved towards Indian Territory. One had to walk for 22 days. There were insects that bit, [our] physical condition was poor and a great many men died due to fever.

Q: Was it in Mon Tawang?

#23N: It was not in Mon Tawang. It was the tribal region.

Q: Was it Mustang?

#23N: What?

Q: Was it Mustang?

#23N: Yes, it was Mustang. It was Lo Mejething where Indians planes land. It is very hot and many people died from the heat. From there [we] gradually moved to Missamari in Assam.

Q: So the place inhabited by the tribal people—I got a little lost there—did you keep leaving Tibet and then coming back over the border to fight the Chinese or...?

01:53:08

#23N: No, no. Once [we] arrived in the tribal region, [we] had already surrendered to India, to those at the Indian border.

Q: Which place was this?

#23: This was in Tsari. The lower part of Tsari consists of the border between Tibet and India. Beyond this border is Indian Territory and once there you could not go to fight [in Tibet]. So [we] remained within the border in a forest and went to attack.

Q: I see. Where were you injured?

#23N: I was hit here [points to chest].

Q: In the chest?

#23N: Yeah, the chest. It moved up. Initially, the horse was hit. The gun was aimed low and then it must have moved up.

Q: Did the bullet come out of your body or did it stay in you?

#23N: Ammunitions could not penetrate me. However, at that point perhaps it was my destiny that the bullet nearly penetrated as the head of the bullet was in the clothes. I would have died had it penetrated. Later there was a slightly reddish [patch] and the flesh feels hard to the touch now.

Q: You were very lucky.

01:55:41

#23N: Yes, [I] was lucky. [I] fought for nearly two and half to three years but did not get hit. Then gradually it was becoming...though a bullet did not enter, a person fell with the force of the gun. Should a bullet enter, one would be dead. There are many such cases in Tibet where one has protective amulets.

Q: Did you carry a protective amulet?

#23N: [I] possessed a very fine protective amulet. Generally, one is protected by the amulet but one does have a certain nature of success, which makes a lot of difference. When one's nature of success is high, the protective amulet protects and bullets go whizzing by and none hits the person. If one's nature of success is low, even with a good protective amulet one gets hit.

Q: So when did you leave Tibet?

#23N: Yes?

Q: When did you leave Tibet for India?

01:57:40

#23N: In '56.

Q: When did you leave Tibetan Territory to enter India?

#23N: [I] reached Indian Territory in January or February of '60.

Q: You had obviously been a very dedicated resistance fighter. What caused you to decide to leave and go into exile?

#23N: That was because the land where you live...take for instance the Gapatsang family whose wealth, parents and siblings were destroyed and after the rebellion one has no choice but to come to India. Then the Dhokham *Chushi Gangdrug* succeeded in escorting His Holiness the Dalai Lama and since everybody had come here, that was the reason I decided to come to India. I could not live under the Chinese and left. That is the reason.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to share with us? This has been a very long and very, very interesting and important interview. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

02:00:03

#23N: There is not anything special. [I] do not have to talk about the kind of work [I] did after reaching India, right? Besides this, there is nothing special that I have to say.

Q: Okay. Have you ever told this story to other people?

#23N: No, [I] have not. Those that know of it, know it. [I] did not because there is no use talking about it.

Q: You have children?

#23N: [I] have children.

Q: And you have grandchildren?

#23N: [I] have grandchildren.

Q: Have you told them, the children and grandchildren?

#23N: Grandchildren...I have never been abroad where the children live. So what story should [I] tell?

Q: When your grandchildren lived with you earlier, did you tell them the story, your story in Tibet?

#23N: Yes, I told the children many times, “I have struggled so for the cause of Tibet and for the Gapatsang family. I have withstood bullets. What Dhokham *Chushi Gangdrug* has done for the cause of Tibet and the dharma, you three sons should continue after my death and think of the country in the future. You should tell your children about what happened in Tibet, what your father did and what the Chinese did to your father’s parents. Get an education and consider the cause of Tibet. Please advise your children and do not neglect to continue the work of your father.” I have told this many times and it depends upon them whether it has been beneficial or not. I have advised many times.

02:02:37

Just as I told you, I have put my story in writing starting from Tibet and given to my three sons. “Keep this like your protective amulet. Read it sometimes to see what father has done. Go through it well.” I have written [my] story and given it to them. When I die they would have to have consideration, consideration for Tibet.

Q: Would it be possible for us to have a copy of your written story?

#23N: [I] do not know if there is a copy or not. If there is I will give it to you.

Q: Thank you. That would be a great honor. I think you have shared an enormous gift with us today. It’s been an honor to be with you and to hear your life experience.

#23N: [Nods]

Q: And we hope through this work that Tibetans, the younger generation, Chinese, the world has a better understanding of what you experienced than the life of Tibet.

#23N: [Nods] Thank you. You are an American and yet you work so hard for the cause of Tibet. [I] would like to thank you from the depth of my heart. It is very good. In general, America is someone the six million Tibetans believe in because it has provided help in the past and in the future too [I] feel America is [our] hope. I, as an old man feel that [I] can hope America to provide what [we] need in the future and that there is American support behind us. When each [American] person is extending such help, of course, the government will provide help. [I] thank you from the depth of my heart.

Q: We will do whatever we can to support you.

02:05:58

#23N: Thank you and finally, I am a member of the Dhokham *Chushi Gangdrug* and would like to thank you, the Americans heartily on behalf of *Chushi Gangdrug*.

Q: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW