

Tibet Oral History Project

**Interview #25C – Tsering Choden (alias)
November 14, 2014**

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INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #25C
2. Interviewee: Tsering Choden (alias)
3. Age: 68
4. Date of Birth: 1946
5. Sex: Female
6. Birthplace: Lhasa
7. Province: Utsang
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1956
9. Date of Interview: November 14, 2014
10. Place of Interview: Sakya Monastery, Seattle, Washington, USA
11. Length of Interview: 1 hr 00 min
12. Interviewer: Marcella Adamski
13. Interpreter:
14. Videographer: Tony Sondag
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

Biographical Information:

Tsering Choden was born in a well-to-do family in Lhasa. Her father was in the import-export business and she fondly remembers when her father brought bubble gum and hair ribbons as gifts from his trade missions to India. She describes their spacious house, inhabited by many relatives and tenants, and the meals they enjoyed. She recalls the silk and brocade dresses and explains the aprons worn by the women and the *patu*—a girl's coming of age ceremony. She enjoyed visiting the nearby Jokhang Temple and learning about the Buddha's life. Her family was known for their gifts to the great monasteries near Lhasa.

Tsering Choden talks about her schooling in Lhasa and her talent in performing song and dance. Her Chinese teachers advised her parents to send her to Beijing for further education. When her parents were unable to continue making excuses to avoid sending her to China, they took her instead to India in 1956 and left her in a boarding school in West Bengal.

Tsering Choden was fortunate to be reunited with both of her parents after nearly three years. She didn't learn until later that her father was one of the leaders in the *Chushi Gangdrug* Defend Tibet Volunteer Force and had been declared dead. Although injured, he managed to escape to India at the same time as His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

Topics Discussed:

Utsang, childhood memories, education, trade, customs/traditions, pilgrimage, festivals, life under Chinese rule, Chushi Gangdrug guerrillas, life as a refugee in India.

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Interview #25C

Interviewee: Tsering Choden [alias]

Age: 68, Sex: Female

Interviewer: Marcella Adamski

Interview Date: November 14, 2014

[Interviewee speaks in English. No interpreter required.]

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?

#25C: Yes, of course.

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

#25C: You're welcome.

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

00:00:38

#25C: Okay.

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

#25C: Okay.

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

#25C: No.

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

00:00:56

#25C: Thank you.

Q: How old are you now, Tsering?

#25C: I just turned 68.

Q: And so what was your date of birth?

#25C: October 17th, 1946.

Q: That was the Tibetan calendar year of...?

#25C: It was the year of the dog.

Q: The dog.

00:01:16

#25C: I don't remember the element.

Q: Where are you from in Tibet?

#25C: From Lhasa.

Q: Really? So what was the nearest temple?

#25C: The Jokhang was the nearest temple to us, very close to my home, actually.

Q: So the province was then?

#25C: U, yes.

Q: Utsang.

[Discontinuity in video]

Q: How many people were in your family when you were growing up besides you and your parents?

00:01:41

#25C: Oh, my goodness!

Q: How many children?

#25C: There were three of us.

Q: Three?

#25C: I'm the oldest and I have two younger sisters.

Q: Were there other people living in your household?

#25C: Yes, my uncles, I...my father's elder brother who was the head of our household and then my father's younger brother and then there were many cousins and I had many aunts and others who lived in the same home with us.

Q: Really? It sounds like you had a rather large home in Lhasa.

#25C: Yes, a very large home.

Q: Very large home. And what kind of family business were your parents in?

00:02:21

#25C: My father was in the import-export business. He imported goods from China and India, and then exported wool, musk, herbs and other things, I guess. You know, I can't remember all of them.

Q: Tsering-*la*, did you have any remembrance of him bringing things back from his trading journeys?

#25C: Oh, yes.

Q: Really? What was that like? What would he bring?

#25C: [Laughs] Bubble gum. When he came back from India, he always brought things for us, us children. Of course, he brought presents for everybody but for us, I remember getting ribbons—hair ribbons because you know, the Tibetan ribbons are very different from the Western ribbons and so...

Q: How were they different?

#25C: Well, the Tibetan ribbons are woven. They're silk threads that are woven and you weave that into your braid but the Western ribbons, you know square, well not square, long rectangular kind...you know, ribbons that we normally use here. So he would bring them for me, hair clips, jewelry but my favorite I think, I always remember was bubble gum. He brought so much bubble gum and I was very popular in school when I had bubble gum to share. [Laughs]

Q: Was a real unusual treat.

#25C: Yes.

Q: Did you make...did you blow bubbles with it?

#25C: Yes.

Q: And this was coming from India?

#25C: India.

Q: From India.

#25C: [Nods]

Q: I'm sure it had some effect on Tibetan tea...

#25C: [Laughs] I'm sure.

Q: ...for years to come. When your father went on these journeys, was he gone a long time?

00:04:16

#25C: Yes.

Q: Really, like about...give some idea.

#25C: Months.

Q: He'd be gone for months?

#25C: Yes because you know, you're going by on horseback and just to come from Kham, you know, my father used to...when he imported things, merchandise from China, he would travel down to eastern Tibet, to Dhartsedo to bring in tea and you know, other manufactured goods, from silk, brocade and...

Q: So he would go from Lhasa to Kham?

#25C: Yes.

Q: Did he go into China then?

#25C: No.

Q: He didn't? He got...?

#25C: Dhartsedo.

Q: What kind of things, again did he bring in?

#25C: Tea, silk, brocade, manufactured goods like thermoses—what else? Food stuffs too.

Q: Thermoses, ah?

#25C: Thermos, hot water thermos.

Q: Thermoses.

#25C: Yes, you know, things, and bowls, porcelain cups, bowls, jade...

Q: Were there items that were specially treasured by the Tibetans that came from China that they didn't have access to on their own, like certain goods that were really useful to Tibetans that came from China?

00:05:37

#25C: Well tea, of course, you know. I mean, how can we live without tea? [Laughs] And silk and brocade, because you know, I mean all of our formal wear, you know all the blouses are made of silk, the *chupas* 'traditional dresses' are made of brocade for formal wear. So those came from China.

Q: Tibetans never learned...because they use silk so much and brocade, did they never learn how to manage or grow silkworms themselves?

#25C: No, and I don't think that we would have.

Q: Why not?

#25C: Because that would be killing so many worms. So that would not...

Q: ...appeal?

#25C: No, no.

Q: Why not the brocade? Why would that be hard?

#25C: I really don't know but I know that we have, you know, we always had woolen clothing, cloth, fabric of you know, beautiful wool. The silks you know, it just came from abroad, you know mostly from China.

Q: What did the Chinese appreciate that your father could bring from Tibet?

00:06:45

#25C: Herbs.

Q: Really?

#25C: Oh, yes.

Q: Do you remember the names of any?

#25C: I...

Q: Type of herbs?

#25C: I know the name in Tibetan...

Q: Please, say it.

#25C: *Yartsa gunbu* ‘caterpillar fungus’ [*cordyceps sinensis*] is one of them, which means ‘summer grass, winter worm.’ And I know its some kind of a fungus. It’s just extremely expensive. It’s very, very difficult to get.

Q: It looks like a worm at a certain point?

#25C: Yes.

Q: In it’s development?

#25C: Yes. And there is some story about how it becomes that way but I can’t quite remember the...you know.

Q: That was very appreciated by the Chinese?

#25C: Oh, yes absolutely. Of course, yes. Musk too.

Q: And musk.

#25C: [Nods]

Q: For people who don’t know where does musk come from?

00:07:40

#25C: Deer.

Q: Deer. How do they get the musk?

#25C: Antlers, I think. You know, I never asked these questions when I was a child. [Laughs]

Q: No, you probably didn’t. But it’s fascinating that you do remember, you know, some of the things that delighted you and that your father was able to trade. Did...it sounds like he made a pretty good living as a trader.

#25C: He did.

Q: He did? So were you...would you consider your family like middle class or upper middle class? What...?

#25C: Upper middle class.

Q: You were upper middle class.

#25C: [Nods]

Q: Had they been traders for other generations in your family like your grandfather or his father?

#25C: My grandfather...I really don't know because I didn't know them.

Q: Right.

#25C: Yeah, by the time I came along both my grandparents, actually all my grandparents were already gone.

Q: Oh, I see.

#25C: So I didn't meet any of my grandparents.

Q: But your father's family were traders?

00:08:41

#25C: My father's family was from Kham, from Lithang, yes. And they moved to Lhasa when my grandmother was still alive because the situation in Lithang was very precarious trying to, you know, deal with the Chinese and so he moved to, actually my uncle did, moved the whole family to Lhasa.

Q: Really? Do you remember what year that would've been?

#25C: No, I don't.

Q: Were you even born then?

#25C: No. It was long before.

Q: So the problem in Lithang was probably coming from the Nationalist Party of China?

#25C: I don't know which. Of course, at that time it was the Nationalist government but in some areas, you know in the Sichuan and all that, there were warlords.

Q: Yes.

#25C: So I don't know who, which Chinese, they were dealing with but, you know, basically what I have heard from my father was that it was becoming more and more difficult and so they decided to get further away from the border, so to speak, and so that's how they moved to Lhasa.

Q: And was your mother from Lhasa herself?

00:9:55

#25C: No, my mother's from Shigatse.

Q: Really? Did you know anything about her family?

#25C: Yes. Well, I have not...I've met one of my uncles, my mother's younger brother and then his children who are in Lhasa, but I haven't met any other of my mother's relatives.

Q: So you said your family home was in Lhasa and that certainly some of your parents' siblings, your brother...father's siblings lived with him and other relatives would come and go. How large was your house would you say? How many rooms did it have about?

#25C: Oh, my gosh! I have no idea. You know, we had many tenants, also.

Q: Oh, you did?

#25C: This was very common in the larger homes in Lhasa. I'm sure not only in Lhasa, must be other cities in Tibet also. I don't know, but in Lhasa the larger homes, the families live in certain quarters and then there are tenants. We had many, many tenants.

Q: Would they be travelers or just people needing a home or spiritual...?

00:11:15

#25C: No, they were renters.

Q: They were just regular renters who live there.

#25C: Yes.

Q: Interesting. And can you describe any rooms in the house that were held special appeal to you or you remember fondly?

#25C: It's really interesting that you are asking me this because I was talking to my son last night, younger son, reminiscing and really telling him about, you know, things that I remembered. I don't know how the conversation started, but I was describing to him my parents' bedroom and next to the bedroom they had another very large room and one side of the wall was filled with wardrobes. These wardrobes were made in India in Kalimpong and brought piecemeal to Lhasa and then put together. So you know, it's very interesting.

Anyway, the reason I was telling my son this—now I remember—and there was a very large desk, my father's desk. It had green felt and then a mirror...a glass on the top and in between there were many photographs. So I remember distinctly this picture, this photo of this beautiful woman with long hair and puffed [moves right hand to right side of head] you know, like I think it was very popular during that time and I remember asking my mother, "Who is this?" And she said, "Who do you think?" I said, "Well, I don't know. Who is it?" I was very little. She said, "That was me." It was my mother. The photo was taken in Calcutta in a studio and, you know, so it's...thinking of remembering the room.

So my mother had a dressing table with three mirrors and a little cushion seat and on the wall behind were two portraits, one of my mother and one of my father. I was telling my

son of my father's portrait. In the portrait he was going [purses lips] like he was whistling. My son said, "Why did he do that?" And I said, "I don't know. I never asked." But yes, the memory of that room...

Q: Were the clothing in the wardrobe, were they to be made up in Lhasa for the family or were they to be sold as products?

00:13:40

#25C: The clothing?

Q: Yeah, that was hanging in the wardrobe.

#25C: Oh, they were not hanging. They were folded. There were no hangers. Yeah, all the *chupas*, the blouses, the *pangdens*, you know the aprons, and jackets and then we have winter clothing. You know winter *chupas* have long sleeves and then fur-lined for the winter and then summer, of course, sleeveless. So all the clothing were, you know stored in these wardrobes.

Q: I see. So they were for the family?

#25C: Yes.

Q: They were for the family. What's a fur-lined *chupa* like? First of all, tell us what a *chupa* is, the dress?

#25C: A *chupa* is the dress like the one I'm wearing and I'm wearing a sleeveless one. [Lifts sweater to show sleeveless *chupa*]

Q: Yeah, I see. I see.

#25C: This is a summer dress.

Q: I see.

00:14:26

#25C: *Chupa* actually means clothes, you know, and so the male *chupa*, woman's *chupa*. It doesn't necessarily mean dress. And then we wear...it's like a wraparound, almost like a Japanese kimono and then we wear a blouse underneath, and then the *pangden* is a sign of a married woman, the apron.

Q: The apron is quite beautiful.

#25C: Thank you.

Q: How is that apron made?

#2C: It's woven.

Q: It's all woven. Looks like silk.

#25C: [Camera focuses on striped apron worn by interviewee] This one is silk. It can be cotton. It can be wool. The wool ones are, you know very, very expensive now-a-days because it used to be made in Tibet. Although now a days I think that they are making some in Nepal. I think they are, you know, with imported wool from Tibet.

Q: I see. I notice that they are in three pieces. So are they woven like down...

#25C: Yes.

Q: ...you know, a long strip and then cut and then are they sewed together?

#25C: Yes. Yes, they're sewn.

Q: And then they're sewn together very carefully. They're quite beautiful. Are there any meanings to different colors or is it just preference?

#25C: No, it's just preference.

Q: It's just preference.

#25C: Yes.

Q: I see.

#25C: It's very, always very colorful.

Q: Right. So it's only a married woman that wears?

00:15:45

#25C: Well, yes and no. It depends on whether we're talking about pre-'59 or post-'59. Pre-'59 a young woman...It's very much like a coming of age, you know, like you have in the West. So when a young woman is ready for, you know, she's come of age or ready for marriage, the family will have a ceremony and that ceremony is called *patu yok*, which means wearing the headdress. And along with the headdress, prior to...

During my mother's generation, before a girl had the ceremony she couldn't wear two pigtailed, two braids. She only had one braid at the back and after the *patu* ceremony, then a young girl could now wear two braids and start wearing the apron. I think this is a way of announcing to the society that "Here we have a young lady who is ready for marriage." And I suppose then the matchmakers would get very busy.

But post-'59, of course, none of us have the wealth or the capabilities to have a *patu* ceremony for our daughters and so I think it's now become the married woman...after you get married then you wear the apron.

Q: Then you wear it.

#25C: Yes.

Q: Do you know what age were the *patu* ceremonies?

#25C: During my mother's generation it would be like 14, 15.

Q: Really?

#25C: Yes, because they got married very young. You know, people didn't live very long and so, you know...but in my generation probably older. I would say 17, 18.

Q: Seventeen, 18.

#25C: Yes.

Q: Now growing up in this large family and since you were well off, there must be some wonderful memories of food and kinds of food that you ate together as a family, did you? Can you tell us little bit about morning, afternoon, evening, what typical food you had? This is in Lhasa now. You're in a well off family of traders who can barter and bartered. What kinds of foodstuffs were in the house?

00:18:13

#25C: I think in the breakfast, you know, I think it's pretty much the same for most Tibetans. We had *chamdu*, *chamdu*, which is made from *tsampa* 'flour made from roasted barley.' You mix *tsampa* with some tea and then if you can afford it, you put butter and especially for children, sugar, some dry cheese. So you would have a hot cereal of *tsampa* with butter, cheese and sugar, and it's delicious. [Laughs] In fact, to this day it's the only way I can eat *tsampa*.

Q: The sugar made it go down very easily.

#25C: Oh, and the butter and the cheese, you know.

Q: So healthy for you, wasn't it?

#25C: Well, *tsampa* is very healthy for you. Yes, absolutely.

Q: What would happen around lunchtime?

00:19:05

#25C: Lunch would usually be *pa*. *Pa* is again *tsampa* but it's not a liquid like porridge form. It's dry. So you would mix the *tsampa* with some little bit of tea and then you know, you knead it into a dough-like, you know and then you have pieces, and to go with that you would have some meat and vegetables or soup.

Q: And would anything change at dinnertime, evening meal?

#25C: Yes, dinnertime would be beef noodles, *momos* ‘dumplings,’ rice-currries, vegetables, you know stir-fries...

Q: Because your family was well off, did your mother actually do the cooking or did she...?

#25C: No, no.

Q: She didn’t.

#25C: No.

Q: I wondered about that. How would she spend her days? I’m curious, you know how a family...a prosperous family, how the woman would spend her days.

#25C: My mother used to tell me that she was so busy, so exhausted that [laughs]...but I don’t know what she did. But well, you know she had to oversee a huge household.

Q: A huge household.

#25C: Yes, and we had many, many servants, and you know, then...and I’m sure that she saw some aspects of the business although probably not a lot, but you know...

Q: What did...I mean your father was a trader, was there anything that he did around the house that you were aware of? Was he doing accounting or had meeting with people? What kind of...?

00:20:43

#25C: He was always meeting with people but I’ve never seen him actually like sitting there doing accounting or something like that, no. I remember, you know, he was a wonderful gentleman.

Q: Was he? Tell me more about him. Describe your father for me.

#25C: Oh, he loved playing games with us. Yes, and we used to tease him, you know. He would play all kinds of games with us. I mean even into his very old age, you know, with my children...they would, my grandson would...I mean my son would ride on him like and go “horsey” kind of, you know. So my father was always, always very playful.

Q: He horsed around.

#25C: He horsed around and when he used to...in fact when he used to tell me to sing or dance and I used to be shy and say, “Oh, no, no, no, no.” He used to always tell us, “To have fun you don’t have to be shy and embarrassed. To play you don’t have to be shy and embarrassed. Be embarrassed and be shameful if you tell lies, if you steal, if you cheat. Then you have to be embarrassed. But to play you don’t have to be.”

Q: Very wise advice.

#25C: Yes.

Q: And speaking of which, did you get to sing and dance as a little girl?

#25C: [Laughs] Yes, I did.

Q: Did you? Tell us about that. How did you learn to sing and dance?

00:22:07

#25C: First my mother, she was a self-taught musician. She played all kinds of Tibetan instruments and she just loved it. And my father loved to sing and dance as well. So I got that, you know, enjoyed it very much but when I started school, apparently I was a good singer and dancer and so instead of attending regular school—this was after the Chinese came—I was actually sent off to school where, you know basically the focus was dancing and singing.

Q: Performance school.

#25C: Yeah.

Q: Performing arts kind of school.

#25C: Yeah.

Q: Is that right after the Chinese came?

#25C: Yes.

Q: Can you remember like how old you were when you went to that school?

#25C: I don't know how old I was. I started...my first school was actually a Chinese school. I don't mean a Chinese school. I mean a Tibetan school; it's called Seshen Lapta started by the Chinese. And so that was my first school and then from...I didn't stay there very long and then from there I was sent to Chitsok Lapta, which is another school that, you know, it was usually for older kids but I was sent there to be part of the performing, you know, art school.

Q: I recognize that the Chinese did open a lot of schools in Lhasa for...I don't know, was it just for wealthy families or was it for anyone?

00:23:47

#25C: No, it was for anyone.

Q: Anyone? Do you remember what subjects they taught?

#25C: No.

Q: You can't remember?

#25C: I just remember learning the Tibetan alphabet and just learning, memorizing, you know, words and memorizing scriptures but actually I don't... Oh, we did learn math because I remember memorizing multiplication tables, you know.

Q: You do?

#25C: Yes.

Q: And were they Tibetans teaching in the schools or Chinese?

#25C: Well, my time teachers were Tibetans, but there were some Chinese teachers, too. I don't know exactly what they taught because I didn't have any Chinese teachers.

Q: We're kind of...if we...some of your earliest memories, can you tell us what they might have been when you were really little in your family or experiences? Is there anything you can recall as a baby or a young child, not baby but a young child growing up?

00:24:51

#25C: As a young child, I think the...one of my favorite pastimes so to speak was going, making circle...you know, circling around the Jokhang Temple. Not on the outside but inside. There's another route inside the temple. I mean, not the outside walls but inside there's another route. And so because...the reason is there would be murals on the wall telling the whole story about the Buddha's birth and his, you know, what he went through in his life. So I would always be accompanied by either my father or my uncle, one of my uncles and then they would tell me stories through the mural, you know, "here is...this is what the Buddha was doing when he was...he taught this," and you know. So I remember the pictures very vividly and the stories that went with it. So it was like getting a Buddhist study except not from a book but from the...

Q: ...from the murals.

#25C: ...murals on the wall. I remember that and I enjoyed it very much.

Q: It sounds like that's how they...why they were there.

#25C: Yes.

Q: To educate the people, here is the story of the Buddha.

#25C: Yes.

Q: Did your family engage in any Buddhist practices in the family life?

#25C: Oh, yes.

Q: Oh, really?

#25C: Oh, very much so.

Q: Like what kind? Like prayers in the morning, at night?

00:26:23

#25C: Prayers. My father got up at 4 o'clock every morning. Until 7 o'clock he read his scriptures until the end of his life, and making offerings, of course. My family in Lhasa was known for making really extraordinary offerings to, you know, the three great monasteries, Sera, Drepung, Gaden, His Holiness. So...

Q: Say that for people who may not know. Say the names of the three great monasteries in Lhasa.

#25C: Oh, okay. Sera, and then there's Gaden, and then there is Drepung. Those are the three great monasteries.

Q: And what sect were they?

#25C: Gelugpas.

Q: Were there any other sects practicing or with monasteries in Lhasa besides the Gelugpa sect?

#25C: Oh, I'm sure there were but...I mean, we...prior to 1959 until we came abroad and then all of a sudden the sectarian thing became somewhat prominent, unfortunately—my point of view. But before when we were in...when I was growing up in Lhasa I have never heard anybody, my family members or...who say, "I'm a Gelugpa and you are what and what?" You know, never. It was always, "We're Buddhists." I remember my father telling me that he took his mother, my grandmother, on a pilgrimage to Sakya and then I remember going to Tsurphu—Tsurphu is the seat of the Karmapa—and I remember before we left Tibet going on a pilgrimage to Tsurphu with my family. So I never knew that we were...there was a difference. It was, you know we were all Buddhists.

Q: You're all Buddhists.

#25C: Yes.

Q: Did you have any understanding then or as you grew up that...was there a different emphasis of the Buddhist teaching in the various, in the different sects?

00:28:53

#25C: No, I did not.

Q: You didn't know about it that time.

#25C: No.

Q: I see. Why did you...I think you said a few minutes ago, it's more secular now and I'm grateful for that.

#25C: Sectarian, you know separation of the sects?

Q: Yeah.

#25C: ...which I think is...I don't think that's...I wish it wasn't because I think we are one.

Q: Oh, I see. You...so you said you wished that there wasn't such a separation?

#25C: Yes, I wish that we were as we were in the old days; we were Buddhists.

Q: Right.

#25C: Now a days I find people who say, "I'm Nyingma; I'm Sakya; I'm Kagyu; I'm..." and I've never heard that before in Tibet, you know. So that's my personal...

Q: And teachers went from one sect to another to learn from some of the masters.

#25C: Yes, absolutely.

Q: There are many stories about that. I understand that. How interesting. So what is your...what were some of...what made your family's offerings extraordinary that you made to the monasteries? What were some of the things that they would offer?

00:30:05

#25C: Well, there is...I don't know what you call. I don't know what it's called in English. I don't know that there's even a translation but we call it a *tsophay*. It's, you know offering that we make, I mean my parents. And you know it's very common for people to offer tea to the monasteries.

Q: Yes.

#25C: And that would be a cup of tea for each of the monks and this is just one example of the offerings that we made.

Q: Got it.

#25C: My family made an offering to each monk in all the monasteries one brick tea per monk.

Q: Wow, that's expensive.

#25C: Yes.

Q: One brick tea because how long would one brick tea last say a monk? How many months or weeks or what do you think?

#25C: I would think...well, it depends on, you know how strong you want your tea, I assume. But I'm sure it will last at least a couple of months.

Q: Couple of months. So they would take...they would just break off part...

#25C: Break off, yes.

Q: ...part of the...and then boil that...

#25C: Yes.

Q: ...tea leaves. Were there...were there...You mentioned how much people liked tea that they brought from China. What kinds of tea did the Tibetans like to drink? Were there any flavors or types of...?

00:31:28

#25C: It's black tea and then we like to churn it like you churn butter, with butter and salt.

Q: And salt.

#25C: Yes.

Q: Butter, salt and the black tea...

#25C: Yes.

Q: And any...

#25C: And milk.

Q: And milk.

#25C: Yes.

Q: And that was called what?

#25C: *Bhoecha*.

Q: *Bhoecha*.

#25C: Well, *bhoecha* means Tibetan tea. You know, so this is something, I mean most Tibetans, you know, in the old days drink that from morning until evening.

Q: Speaking of drinking, what about *chang* ‘home-brewed beer’?

#25C: [Laughs]

Q: What do you know? I read many stories where people in different parts of Tibet really drank *chang* a lot; made their own, they did it in the village; they bought it for different ceremonies. What about...what’s your understanding of *chang* because you lived in maybe a very fancy home with also like a nice boudoirs and things like that. So how much was *chang* a part of the daily life?

#25C: You know, I really don’t know. I know that during parties, of course, there was plenty of *chang*; Losar ‘Tibetan New Year,’ wedding ceremonies, any kind of a festivity, there would always be lots of *chang*.

Q: Was the *chang* very strong?

00:32:54

#25C: I don’t know. I never had any.

Q: You never had any.

#25C: No.

Q: Some people didn’t and some people enjoyed it. So what are...I want to ask about was there an obligation to give to monasteries because somebody had to support these. The monks were praying and studying. So who supported all these incredible big, especially these large...?

#25C: Everybody did.

Q: Everybody did.

#25C: There was no obligation at all.

Q: No obligation?

#25C: No. It didn’t matter, you know, if you offered a spoon of butter if that was all you could afford. That was fine.

Q: But what about taxes? Didn’t people have to pay taxes to the Tibetan Government? Then the government...was that to support the government or to support the monasteries?

#25C: Both, I’m sure. But people, I mean the citizens or the people who lived in the cities and villages; they made offerings to the monasteries all the time.

Q: Why do you think they did that?

00:33:57

#25C: Because you earn merits.

Q: To earn merit?

#25C: Yes, you make an offering, you know, and whether it's to build a statue or whether it's to build a *thangka* 'traditional Tibetan Buddhist painting' or whatever, or to have prayers, special prayers said for yourself or for just for the...just for offering. I remember in Shigatse, we went on a pilgrimage to Shigatse and we were at the Tashi Lhunpo Monastery and I was probably 8 or 9 at the time. You know, there's a huge multi story statue of the Maitreya Buddha there and I remember seeing these villagers coming and taking their rings off the woman and throwing it, you know, on the statue, taking earrings off and throwing it at the statue. There's no obligation. Nobody says you have to do this. We do it because we believe that it's a good thing to do and making an offering. It is just an offering.

Q: I bring this up because the Chinese often stated that the Tibetans were forced to support their monasteries and got nothing back in return, you know that was of any use or value. What do you think about that kind of accusation?

#25C: Nonsense. Nobody was forced to make offerings. Nobody. We did it because we wanted to. Because we felt that it would earn merits. Because we felt it was a good thing to do and sharing your wealth however little it might be. It always generates goodwill.

Q: So your father as a trader wasn't required to give a certain percentage or anything of his salary to the monasteries?

00:35:58

#25C: Not at all.

Q: But there must have been some taxation by the government.

#25C: Oh, I'm sure there was but I haven't really...

Q: You were too young.

#25C: I have no idea.

Q: I understand that. Are there any other childhood memories that you're especially aware of?

#25C: Losar.

Q: Tell me about...

#25C: Losar is the Tibetan New Year and I often explain to my non-Tibetan friends that for us it's a combination of New Year and Christmas. I remember not being able to sleep on New Year's Eve, Losar Eve and I could see my beautiful new dress laid out, my blouse laid out, my belt, my ribbons, shoes, all. Everything is new. And you know, the excitement and then of course, we would get gifts.

Usually gifts are money, you know relatives, when people who came, you know, everybody would be gifting everybody. I remember my mother saying that she would get exhausted preparing gifts for everybody, and then just making sure it's the appropriate gift for, you know, the families. But for us, of course, there were no such worries. It was just a matter of getting the gifts, you know. So the excitement, I remember very vividly being unable to go to sleep because of the excitement.

Q: What would happen in the morning if you...?

00:37:19

#25C: You get up very early in the morning and then the first thing we would do after having tea, you know, we would go to the Jokhang Temple to make our offerings and to pray and then we would come back home and then...the first day of Losar actually is a very quiet day. It's just family and then you would offer the *khatas* 'ceremonial scarves,' you know children would offer *khatas* to their parents; servants would come and offer *khatas* to the masters, etc. etc.—very quiet. It is only, you know, then the next day that you would go out and then have parties and what not.

Q: How long would Losar celebrations last?

#25C: Fifteen days.

Q: Was there no work during that time really?

#25C: Oh, I'm sure somebody had to work.

Q: So now...I understand that you left Tibet in 1956. What was going on that made your family want to leave at that time?

#25C: It was me.

Q: Oh!

#25C: And I...[laughs].

Q: You were going on? What were you up to?

#25C: Well, I...as I had mentioned earlier I was a good dancer, Tibetan dancing, you know. So the teachers from the school kept coming to my parents to tell them that they wanted to send me to Beijing because I would have better opportunities because there was...I had...I was talented and you know, etc. etc., and that it would be so much better for

me to go to Beijing. And my parents kept coming out with excuses, “She’s too young. She’s not very healthy.” Which was true; I was not a very healthy child, that you know... “Just give us another couple of years”...and so they were starting to run out of excuses.

In 1956 when His Holiness and Panchen Rinpoche went to India for the Buddha Jayanti, my family decided to go for a pilgrimage and we basically did. We went on a pilgrimage for three months all over India and Nepal. And then at the end of the trip my parents left me...I was not quite 10 yet. I was, you know, about 9.5 and my younger sister who was 4, we were left at boarding school. My parents returned with my youngest sister who was 1 at the time.

Q: Where was the boarding school?

00:40:03

#25C: In Kalimpong [India].

Q: Kalimpong?

#25C: Yes.

Q: Who was running it?

#25C: West Bengal. It’s a convent actually. It’s called St. Joseph’s Convent.

Q: Do you know what order of Christians were running it? Was it Catholic or Methodist?

#25C: Catholic.

Q: Was Catholic?

#25C: Catholic school, yeah.

Q: So you were...boy! What was that like to be left behind when your parents go back home?

#25C: It was very difficult, of course, but I knew a lot of people at the school.

Q: How come?

#25C: Because there were friends’ children, you know, my parents’ because we spent a lot of time in my childhood traveling back and forth between India and Tibet.

Q: I see.

#25C: We had actually a home in Kalimpong and so going back and forth, I also knew people, families in Kalimpong whose children attended the school. So I did know, you know. I think it obviously would have been more difficult for my sister who was so young. So I kind of became her...

Q: Mother?

#25C: Surrogate mother.

Q: You know this story about the Chinese, “Oh, your daughter’s so good in dancing. Let’s send her to Beijing”...Were your parents, even if you didn’t understand at the time, did you come to understand what was the motivation behind them wanting you to go? Was it just for dancing or could there be other motivations?

00:41:36

#25C: I don’t know. All I know is that my parents did not want me to go.

Q: Why not?

#25C: Because they believed that...they told me, of course, later that they were afraid they would never see me again.

Q: Were you aware that some...that Chinese were taking children to Beijing?

#25C: Yes, I was. My parents told me that they were.

Q: Do you have any idea like say out of a 100 families, how many families’ children were taken to Beijing? Do you have any idea?

#25C: I don’t know.

Q: You’ve no idea.

#25C: No.

Q: Do you know why they were taken? Was it for education?

#25C: For education and I think that maybe some...you know, poorer families it was an opportunity.

Q: Do you think it had anything to do also with in a way trying to educate them in Chinese values...?

#25C: Yes, of course.

Q: ...and then to bring them back into Tibet...?

#25C: Absolutely.

Q: ...to support, you know the goals.

#25C: Yes.

Q: I would imagine that would be part of it.

#25C: Yes.

Q: So that was quite an exit. Before you went on that pilgrimage, was there any vibe, any tension, any sensitivity about the Chinese, the growing strength of the Chinese in Lhasa that you can remember or was it too...you were too young to know?

00:42:57

#25C: I think I was too young to know but, you know, you can't help but... There was always, my father was always meeting with people and there was some tension, some talk that you know, you hear bits and pieces of, you know... "The Chinese are doing this," you know, "They are getting too powerful now. They're now trying to..." You know, "too many regulations about what we can and cannot do." I mean I remember hearing things like that.

Q: When your parents left you at school they came back to Lhasa with your youngest sister.

#25C: Yes.

Q: Correct? Because there were three girls?

#25C: Yes.

Q: Three girls!

#25C: Yes.

Q: All dancers! Wow! Just you? You were the only dancer?

#25C: At that time, yes.

Q: Interesting. When they came back to Lhasa and given the fact that they were maybe a more notable family, prestigious given their earnings and status, what happened to them?

00:43:59

#25C: Well, I really don't know as far as anything happening to them per se.

Q: How long did they stay in Lhasa?

#25C: Well, I kept writing two years after we were left in school. I kept writing to my parents saying, "Please come and at least spend Losar with us because it's been two years since we have seen you." So in '58 my mother actually came with my youngest sister and her plan was to spend Losar with us and then she was going to return to Lhasa. Then she came and then we had Losar together and it was in fact when I was waiting in line to go to

the monastery on Losar day in Kalimpong—there's a monastery that we go to—one of my friends said, "Do you know where your father is?" And I said, "Yeah, he's in Lhasa." She said, "No, he's not. He's fighting the Chinese." And I thought, "What?" You know, so when I came home I asked my mother and she said, "Oh, such nonsense children say." But she was shielding us. She knew.

Q: So she came to visit you from Lhasa in Kalimpong at your school and one of the other children had heard a rumor about your father.

#25C: Yes.

Q: Do you know...subsequently did you find out who he was...who...how he had joined or who he was with?

00:45:36

#25C: Yes. He was actually one of the leaders of the *Chushi Gangdrug* [Defend Tibet Volunteer Force].

Q: He was.

#25C: Yes.

Q: What happened to him?

#25C: He was hit with a Chinese mortar, thrown off his horse and one of his men picked him up and, you know, I remember my father telling us that he told him to leave him, that "Don't wait for me. Just go..." because you know, everybody was leaving and this man refused to leave my father. So he put him on a horse and just brought him out. And he ...my father escaped in '59 with His Holiness when they were coming out together, you know.

Q: He was in that party?

#25C: Yes.

Q: How did he get to be in that party, in that group? I mean, thousands of people are...?

#25C: *Chushi Gangdrug*, yes. Well, he was, you know one of the leaders of the *Chushi Gangdrug*.

Q: So they were in that...?

#25C: They were coming out at the same time.

Q: They escorted him out?

#25C: Pardon?

Q: Was he in the party escorting out the...?

#25C: No, my uncle was.

Q: That was your uncle who was in that party. I see.

#25C: Yes.

Q: But your father came out when the *Chushi Gangdrug* in 1959 were escaping...

#25C: Yes.

Q: ...along with many thousands of Tibetans.

#25C: Oh, yes.

Q: Was he badly injured?

00:46:45

#25C: He was badly injured, his kidney and you know, in fact, he died of kidney problems, you know. It was never...and they took actually shot him out of his arms and legs, too.

Q: How long did he live after '59?

#25C: He passed away in '72.

Q: Okay. That's...I understand that. That's like you know, 12 years maybe after that. If he left in '59...

#25C: Yeah.

Q: ...and then '72 is when he passed away?

#25C: Yes.

Q: Okay. So you got to see him again.

#25C: Oh, yes, yes.

Q: Did your mother...when your mother came to visit for Losar and that was only in '58, did she stay then?

00:47:33

#25C: She did stay but she was going to go back after Losar. But then she couldn't go back because the problems had already, you know...

Q: ...escalated.

#25C: Escalated and she couldn't go back, but I didn't know any of this.

Q: Of course.

#25C: So, and then what I learned from my mother later on, much, much later on was somebody told her that my father was killed. And so she went into deep depression. I didn't know that it was depression. I knew something was wrong, but I didn't know exactly what. So we kind of, you know I...

Q: She just was probably dysfunctional at some point.

#25C: Yes.

Q: She could hardly care for you?

#25C: Yes, she just had a really hard time. You know, she was...but she didn't tell us anything. When in '59, when all the refugees are coming out and my father asked for leave of absence to...because he needed medical attention, so he was given, you know, time to leave and come to Kalimpong.

Q: Leave of absence from the military or something?

00:48:51

#25C: Well, he informed the government, you know, he had to take a leave of absence. So he came to Kalimpong and the first...none of us knew he was coming and the first stop he made was at the school. I was in class and my sister was in kindergarten now. I remember one of the nuns came to my class and said, "You have a visitor in the parlor." So I went...I thought, "Who in the world would be visiting me in the middle of the day?" I went and there was a man standing there and I didn't know who he was and he said, "Your father is here and waiting for you in the driveway." And so, yeah...

Q: What did you do?

#25C: [Becomes emotional] I went to get my sister and the two of us ran down the driveway and my...there was a land rover and my father was standing outside of...you know, standing there. And my sister, you know, she was so shy she hid behind me because it had been two years since she'd seen her father. Actually now going on three years almost and of course, you know, he pulled us in his arms.

Then we all got in the jeep and then we, you know, went to our home. I jumped out of the car and ran up the stairs because we lived upstairs and I said, "*Ama-la, ama-la* 'mother.'" I'm screaming, you know. "*Pa-la* 'father' is here. Father is here." She said, "Are you crazy? Why are you screaming like that?" I said, "No, he's really here. He's here." Then she came down the stairs.

Q: She thought he was dead.

00:50:48

#25C: [Nods] She thought he was dead, except none of us knew that. The children didn't know that.

Q: How did she react?

#25C: Tears, crying.

Q: They were very young even at that point.

#25C: Yeah.

Q: Were they in their 30's maybe? Thirties, 40's?

#25C: Must be in their 40's, I really don't know.

Q: The 40's maybe. So all that time, for a couple of years she thought he was dead.

#25C: One year at least.

Q: One whole year.

#25C: One year.

Q: What a very heartwarming story...

#25C: [Nods]

Q: ...that there was such a beautiful reunion like that and then he came to the school, and then you got to tell him.

#25C: Yes.

Q: Thank you. That's a beautiful...one of the more heartwarming...

#25C: Thank you.

Q: ...stories that we get to hear around the fall of...

#25C: We were very, very fortunate.

Q: You were fortunate, weren't you?

#25C: Very fortunate. So blessed.

Q: Yeah. I guess one of the things I want to ask because we have to end in a little bit is you had such a happy life in Lhasa. What happened to all those, to the house, to all those belongings, to your wealth? What happened?

00:52:08

#25C: They are there. [Laughs] I mean, left for the Chinese.

Q: The Chinese took them?

#25C: Well, I assume because you know, there was nobody left. When my father left there was no family member left because both my uncles had passed away long before.

Q: I see.

#25C: And my aunts had passed away. So there was really nobody, no family member left.

Q: So the Chinese took over your house and all your belongings.

#25C: It was very interesting because in 1992 I went to Lhasa.

Q: You did?

#25C: Yes, I went with my husband and I went to...the house was still there. The other houses were whitewashed and really well kept and our home was not. It was really looking sad. So I asked one of my friends who lived in Lhasa. I said, "Why is it?" I said, "Why is the difference between this home and...?" She said because that house was bought by the Chinese from the Tibetan owners before '59. So the Chinese owned it. Our home was not owned by anybody.

Q: It just got left.

00:53:20

#25C: It just got left but in 2001 when I went back with my mother who was 80 at that time...it was her last wish. She said she wanted to see Lhasa once [becomes emotional] before she passed away. So we did. In 2001 we went and we were looking for our house and we couldn't find it anywhere. So we asked this elderly woman who was coming by where the house was and she said, "This is it." They had torn it down and built a multi-story building. So that's why we didn't recognize.

Q: A new reincarnation.

#25C: Yes.

Q: It was new if it'd been...

#25C: Yes. I guess after a certain period of time when there's no owner coming up, you know, then they just...

Q: They just let it go. Well, that is not by a long any means the end of your story. There's so much more we could ask but I think for today we're going to have to end at that part of the story. But maybe in closing ask you, you know when you think back on your childhood growing up in Lhasa and I don't know, the joy of the family life and everything like that, what are some of the values of that experience that you wish the next generation of Tibetans could carry forward in their lives? What are some of the values you've tried to carry forward?

#25C: Well, I mean I can't...you know, speaking for my own children, you know, I always make sure that spirituality is a very important aspect of our lives. I make sure that we do all the traditional celebrations, for example, food. My children are very fond of all the Tibetan foods including my grandchildren.

Q: How many children do you have?

#25C: I have three.

Q: Three children and how many grandchildren?

#25C: Three grandsons.

Q: Three grandsons.

00:55:35

#25C: Yes. You know, even though sometimes I think, "Oh, it's so difficult to make this." Then I make, make you know, like for example, the Losar cookies, you know. So hard to make but I've taught all my children how to make it including my grandchildren. You know it's just...if we don't do it, who's going to teach them?

Q: When you said the spirituality that you wish that would continue, can you say what you mean by that, like what is it about the spirituality that you think people should live that comes from your Tibetan Buddhist...?

#25C: To being kind, compassionate towards all beings. I always tell the children what I have learned from His Holiness. I remember in one of his teachings he said, "You don't have to be a hermit and live in a cave to be a good Buddhist. If you don't know a great deal about the spiritual aspects of Buddhism, you just have to remember to be kind, to be compassionate to all beings. If you can't help anybody, don't hurt anybody." And that's what I try to teach my children.

Q: You know and as a mother, you know that children don't always...they have to learn from adults but if you could speak to the children of China, this generation coming up, what would you want to tell them about Tibet, since you know, they only have government versions of what Tibet was like. What would you want to tell the next generation of Chinese about Tibet?

00:57:24

#25C: That we are different, that we are not the same. Our language is not the same. Our culture is not the same. Yes, we have borrowed from each other, foods for example. You know, tea, but we are entirely two different nations. That we have always been independent and we've always...One of the examples, I have many Chinese friends, you know, and I always tell them I don't have a fight with the Chinese people. It's the Chinese Government. They themselves have had very difficult lives under the Chinese Government but we are indeed separate nations. People of two different nations and I think that if we could learn to mutually respect each other, I think that would be lovely.

Q: I hope that your wish and your prayer comes true.

#25C: I hope so, too. Thank you.

Q: Thank you so much, Tsering-*la* for this very wonderful interview...

#25C: You're welcome.

Q: ...and I'm just going to check one more time. If this interview was shown in Tibet or China would this be a problem for you?

00:58:53

#25C: I don't think that—am I being recorded right now? Okay—I think it'll be fine simply because I've never told anybody who my relatives are.

Q: So it would be okay. And maybe I can ask, what was it like to tell your story? What was it like to share your experiences to do this kind of oral history? How did it feel to you?

#25C: Joyful and emotional.

Q: Yeah?

#25C: Yeah.

Q: Why do you think it's useful to record these stories of Tibetan elders?

#25C: Well, I think for the children. I mean, you know, not only my children but their children. You know because most of the children, you know, born outside of Tibet, in India, in Nepal, in the U.S., wherever, they only know a small aspect of the whole picture, the aspect from your family, but if you could hear all the others, you know, bits and pieces from everybody else then you get the whole picture.

Q: Thank you. Well, thank you for this beautiful, beautiful piece of the history of Tibet that you've given to the Tibet Oral History Project, and we wish you well...

#25C: Thank you.

Q: ...and your family, too.

#25: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW