

Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #25M – Sonam
April 14, 2010

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INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #25M
2. Interviewee: Sonam
3. Age: 75
4. Date of Birth: 1935
5. Sex: Male
6. Birthplace: Gerze
7. Province: Utsang
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1960
9. Date of Interview: April 14, 2010
10. Place of Interview: Kalachakra Hall, Camp Number 3, Doeguling Settlement, Mundgod, Karwar District, Karnataka, India
11. Length of Interview: 1 hr 05 min
12. Interviewer: Rebecca Novick
13. Interpreter: Namgyal Tsering
14. Videographer: Ronny Novick
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

Biographical Information:

Sonam was born in Gerze near Changthang ‘Northern Plateau’ in the Ngari region. He was the eldest of seven children of his parents. His family was nomadic and reared yaks and sheep. They also engaged in salt trade. He talks about the mountains of salt and how salt was gathered and packed in woolen bags called *luka*. The bags were loaded on to the sheep to be transported to the trading locations. Sonam describes accompanying his father many times on these trade missions to places such as Gya Nyima, Sharlo and Kotey near the Indian border. He also recalls the long and arduous journey which took about 30 days. Sonam explains the tax system and why they did not remit salt tax.

Sonam recounts how the people of nearby Gerze chose to resist the Chinese occupation while the leader of Gerze instead agreed to surrender the villagers’ arms to the Chinese. All automatic weapons were given up, but Tibetan-made guns were kept until a later time when even those had to be surrendered. Sonam’s uncle, a deputy leader of Gerze, was arrested simply for being a leader and the rest of the family awaited his release before planning their escape to India. His uncle was released after three years. Although they tried to take their herds with them as they fled, most of the animals died before reaching the border.

Topics Discussed:

Trade, taxes, life under Chinese rule, imprisonment, oppression under Chinese, escape experiences.

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Interview #25M

Interviewee: Sonam

Age: 75, Sex: Male

Interviewer: Rebecca Novick

Interview Date: April 14, 2010

Question: First of all, please tell us your name.

00:00:18

Interviewee #25M: Sonam.

Q: His Holiness the Dalai Lama asked us to record the experiences of older Tibetans, to share with the younger generation of Tibetans, with Chinese people and people of the rest of the world. And your memories of your life are going to help us to probably document the true history and experience of the Tibetan people.

#25M: That is right.

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

00:01:12

#25M: Yes.

Q: Thank you very much.

#25M: [Nods]

Q: During the interview if you want to take a break or at any time you need to go to the bathroom, stop or take a drink, just let us know.

00:01:29

#25M: Okay.

Q: If there is any question you'd rather not answer, you can say so.

#25M: That is right.

Q: If this interview were shown in Tibet or China, would it make any kind of problem for you?

00:02:09

#25M: There will be no problem.

Q: Is it okay to use your real name?

#25M: Yes.

Q: Thank you very much. I really appreciate your coming to talk to us today.

#25M: [Joins hands in thanks]

Q: First of all I really want to ask you: the hat that you are wearing, is this traditional back in Tibet?

00:02:45

#25M: I used to wear one in Tibet. It is called an Indian hat and was popular.

Q: Where did they come from?

#25M: From Gashar.

Q: Where is Gashar?

00:03:00

#25M: Gashar is quite far away. It took about a month's journey during the trade mission. It is a place at the Indian border.

Q: Can you tell us little bit about what your parents did for their livelihood?

#25M: They reared animals like yak and sheep. Then we traveled to places like Gya Nyima, Shaho and Kotey on salt trade.

Q: How many brothers and sisters did you have back then?

00:04:06

#25M: There were eight children, some of who are now dead. Two brothers died here [Mundgod, India].

Q: How many brothers were there?

#25M: There were four brothers.

Q: How many sisters?

00:04:21

#25M: There were three sisters.

Q: That's seven.

#25M: Right.

Q: Where are you in the boys?

00:04:47

#25M: I am the eldest. One daughter had died long ago.

Q: Would you then go with your father when he went on to get the salt?

#25M: I went on trade many times. We used to travel to Gya Nyima to barter salt for grains. I have been to Gya Nyima and Shaho. Then there was Kotey, which was very far away and all the mountains were covered in snow. The mountains were rocky. A fair used to be held and I have been there. They are on the Indian border.

Q: You used to go and trade salt for grains. Whom would you trade with?

00:06:04

#25M: We took salt and wool with us and traded them at Gya Nyima. The salt was exchanged for grains and the wool for cloth, *buram* ‘brown sugar cubes,’ sugar candy and such.

Q: Would you actually go and get the salt from the salt pans?

#25M: We got salt from the region of Gerze.

Q: Were there plenty of salt to gather?

00:06:54

#25M: Yes, there was plenty.

Q: Didn't you have to pay for it?

#25M: No, we did not.

Q: One could gather and take it away?

00:07:01

#25M: One was free to gather and take it away.

Q: So you lived very near where the salt was?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Yes.

Q: Was it very cold in your region?

00:07:23

#25M: Gerze was not very cold in summer, but the winters were very cold. It snowed.

Q: Are you from the Changthang ‘Northern Plateau’?

#25M: It's near Changthang. There were mountains of salt.

Q: When you went to collect the salt, how did you collect it? Did you use a shovel?

00:08:02

#25M: It's just like you use spades to gather the corn here.

Q: In what did you pack it?

#25M: We used *luka* 'wool bags' or *gye* 'sacks.'

Q: What is *luka*?

00:08:17

#25: Wool is spun and *luka* is stitched using this.

Q: So the salt is completely exposed and it is very easy to get it?

#25M: It's not very difficult to gather salt. However, it is difficult journeying along with the sheep carrying the salt. One must load the sheep day and night. At a certain place, we removed the bags from the sheep, beat and powdered the salt and then set off for Gya Nyima or Shaho. We remained for around 20-30 days bartering salt for grains. The wool we brought was exchanged for *buram* and cloth [points to shirt] and then we make our return journey.

Q: You used sheep to carry the salt. Why didn't you use a hardier animal like a yak?

00:10:20

#25M: We only used sheep in Gerze and Gerge while in Amdo, they used yaks. Each sheep was loaded with three kilograms of salt. Bigger animals need more grass to eat, which was why we did not use them. Gya Nyima and Shaho did not have good grasslands. Sheep did not require much to eat.

Q: How many days journey was your village from where you would go to get the salt?

#25M: It took about ten days. And it took almost a month to reach Gya Nyima with the salt.

Q: When you traveled, did you travel on horses or yaks or just walked?

00:12:30

#25M: We went walking. There were no vehicles, nothing then.

Q: You didn't have any horses?

#25M: The leader of the trade group had a horse while the rest did not. Everyone walked. There was no sleep day and night.

Q: Not even at night?

00:13:09

#25M: At night we must keep watch over the sheep. If it rained the salt would get wet. For almost a month we had no sleep.

Q: How much wheat can you get for one kilo of salt?

#25M: We exchanged a kilo of salt for two kilograms of wheat. There was no salt in that region.

Q: Did you eat a lot of salt?

00:14:32

#25M: Food has no taste without salt. One need not eat a lot of salt, just a pinch in your food, without which the food has no taste. The regions of Gya Nyima and Shaho did not have any salt. That's how we traded salt. Give them a *de* of salt and they give you two *de* of grains. *De* is not like a scale; it is a wooden container in which you measured the grains.

Q: Your family had no shortage of salt. You could have as much as you wanted.

#25M: Gerze and Gerge have no shortage of salt. My region Gerze is surrounded with salt.

Q: What do you think, like today, everyone is being told to eat less salt? Are you eating less salt?

00:16:00

#25M: Only as much as it is needed to give food taste. We are accustomed to it.

Q: Were you taxed on the salt?

#25M: We did not have to pay tax on the salt. There was a salt tax in Gerze and Gerge, but that was not so in other regions.

Q: How were you able to avoid the taxes?

00:17:03

#25M: There was no tax. The leaders of Gerze and Gerge were very stubborn. The leader of Gerze was very strict. We did not pay tax and believed that if one collected salt from one's own region, there was no need to pay tax.

Q: So you were suppose to technically pay the tax but the leader just was like, "No, we are not going to do that"?

#25M: [We did not pay tax because] that was our land. If it was India, that was a foreign land and we would have to pay tax. Why should one pay tax in our own land? We did not have to pay tax on any amount of salt that we gathered. We paid a tax to Sera [Monastery].

Q: Why?

00:18:16

#25M: We paid a wool tax. We paid a tax on animals but not on the salt. Those who raised sheep and other animals paid a tax.

Q: There was a tax on salt in other regions?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: In other regions they paid a tax but not in his region.

Q: Is it because the people in your village were particularly independent or was it because of the personality of this leader that you didn't pay tax?

#25M: Yes [it was on account of the leader]. Normally one did have to pay a salt tax and a wool tax. Salt traders had to remit a tax to the Tibetan government. For all others, there was no salt tax or wool tax. The leader of Gerze was a very stern person. Long time ago, a leader called *Pon* 'Leader' Gyechung took a lawsuit up to China.

Q: Can you tell us a little bit about that case?

00:19:49

#25M: *Pon* Kyilo [Gyechung?], who was the leader of Gerze a long time ago, went to China on account of a case relating to a land dispute. He did not return for two to three years and people believed him to be either dead or lost. When he did return after winning the case, he had been awarded a *thok* on his hat and a *tham* for his horse. The leader of Gerze was the only person entitled to a *thok* and a *tham*.

Q: What does *thok* mean?

#25M: It is a raised point on the top of the hat. [Places fist on top of head.] The *tham* is a bell tied to the neck of the horse. He was awarded these.

Q: What was the name of this guy?

00:21:10

#25M: He was called *Pon* Kyilo.

Q: What happened to him?

#25M: Since then Gerze did not have to pay tax on salt and remit wool tax.

Q: What happened to *Pon* Kyilo?

00:21:48

#25M: And then *Pon* Kyilo passed away. He was succeeded by his son Sonam Paljor.

Q: Why did he die?

#25M: He must have fallen sick.

Q: How did he die?

00:22:09

#25M: He died due to illness. He traveled to Lhasa to file a case against Semkha *Pon* of the Tibetan government, over a land dispute. The case dragged on for two to three years. *Pon Kyilo* had a bad dream and the next day he went to see Semkha *Pon* and told him, “I stayed here until I have spent an amount equaling two to three kilograms of gold. That should be enough to bring the case to an end. I am going away.” The protective deities of the two men were the same and the leader of Gerze passed away. And within a month of his death, Semkha *Pon* also passed away. The deaths were brought on by the conflict arising in the protective deity as both the men worshiped the same deity. Gerze *Pon*’s son Sonam Paljor succeeded him.

Q: Was his son a similar kind of personality?

#25M: Sonam Paljor was also active. The son passed away due to illness. At the time of “the change” [Tibet’s invasion], the leader was *Pon Gonpo Dhondup*. Sonam Paljor was poisoned to death by the Chinese. On the day following the fall of Lhasa, Gerze *Pon* was told to hand over all the weapons of Gerze. Later the leader of Gerze was invited to a party where his food was poisoned. *Pon* Sonam Paljor died.

Q: When the Chinese Communists came into Gerze and asked the people to surrender their weapons, do you remember this incident?

00:26:14

#25M: Yes, of course I do. I might have been about 20 years old then.

Q: Can you describe exactly what happened in as much detail as you can tell us about when the Chinese came in and asked your village to surrender.

#25M: They [the Chinese] lived in Gerze for three years. Their provisions were transported on our yaks. We left in the 1st month [of the Tibetan lunar calendar] and reached the region of Athang Paksha only in the 7th month.

About a year later, a *genpo* ‘village leader’ said, “We cannot trust them [the Chinese]. Let us run away before we surrender our weapons. They [the Chinese] cannot be trusted.” But the leader of Gerze replied, “Gerze has many families and we cannot do that.” To this the *genpo* said, “I am not surrendering [my weapon].”

He went to Gerge and asked them if they would join him to fight the Chinese. The Gerge [leader] said, “Just as you say, as of now both Gerge and Gerze have not surrendered their arms. Let us resist [the Chinese] as much as we can.” But the leader of Gerze thought

otherwise and said, “It is not possible. The Chinese are in large numbers. It is futile to resist them.” Then the *genpo* escaped. The day after his escape, Lhasa was conquered.

Q: So the people of Gerge, they decided to stand and fight? And the people of Gerze under the leadership of *Pon Kyilo*’s son decided to surrender their weapons. Did you think that was a good decision for *Pon Kyilo*’s son to give up the weapons?

00:30:51

#25M: That was better because there was no way we could resist them [the Chinese].

Q: When your village of Gerze surrendered your weapons, how did that happen? What did you actually do?

#25M: At the time when Lhasa was conquered, they [the Chinese] shelled Sera [Monastery]. Gerze *Pon* was on the verge of being killed in the bombing in Lhasa. Countless people were killed. Many were found dead under the trees. Blood was everywhere. Gerze *Pon* climbed atop a house and a woman advised him to tie a *khata* ‘ceremonial scarf’ to a stick and wave it and he would not be killed. So that was what he did and after sometime the shelling stopped. Gerze *Pon* was then seized and told to surrender his weapons. There was no way he could avoid that as Lhasa was occupied and countless people were killed.

The Chenrezig [His Holiness the Dalai Lama] had to flee. He had to cross a huge river and escaped. The Gerze *Pon* returned in the 3rd month and said [to his people], “I have lost my weapons to the Chinese. People of Gerze must surrender your weapons. However, you need not give up your Tibetan-made guns. You must hand over your automatic guns.” So all the automatic guns of Gerze were handed over to the *pon* and taking two men with him, he went to give them to the Chinese. They [the Chinese] took the weapons and then invited Gerze *Pon* to a party. They poisoned his food and killed him.

Q: What happened after that?

00:35:03

#25M: After the Gerze *Pon* was killed, all the families fled. Our escape route was blocked by the Chinese at Chawang, where we spent about a year. My uncle, the father of Karma Sonam was captured here. He was the junior leader under the Gerze *Pon*. He was beaten and imprisoned for three years. He was released later.

Q: Did he die under the Chinese torture?

#25M: He did not die under the Chinese but here [in India].

Q: What happened to your uncle while he was in custody?

00:37:16

#25M: He was set free [after three years in prison]. After his release, we made our way towards India.

[Question is repeated.]

#25M: I do not know how much he was beaten. Our people rose against him and beat him. The women dragged him about.

Q: When he [uncle] came out, how was his health?

00:38:31

#25M: He was sickly then. He was ill while we were three years in Ladakh. Then we traveled here [Mundgod, India] and he passed away about a month later. He was my junior father.

Q: Did he ever talk about the conditions he faced in prison?

#25M: He said that he was provided just enough *tsampa* ‘flour made from roasted barley’ to keep him from starving. He was put in fetters and kept under a porch. He was in fetters for three years. When he was released, he could walk only with the help of a cane.

Q: He was tied in iron?

00:39:57

#25M: [Makes sign of handcuffs and shackles on feet].

Q: You said that your uncle was captured when your family was trying to escape. Why was he the only one captured?

#25M: He was the leader of Gerze and we were fleeing along with the Khampas ‘people of Kham.’ The Chinese called the Khampas and the Amdowas ‘people of Amdo’ rebels. Those who escaped with the Khampas were also considered rebels. We were questioned [by the Chinese], “Who is your leader?” and he, my junior father said, “I am the leader.” “In that case you are a rebel,” they said. He replied, “But I went with them out of desperation.”

Then gradually their [the Chinese] grip became tighter and tighter until one day they did it. They set up tents and stayed in them for two days. One day they announced that the people must oppose him [uncle] and put him down. Everyone rose up against him and the women beat and dragged him. He was then kept for around 20 days at Lakha and then on to Rirapla for a month. From Rirapla he was taken and imprisoned at Ga.

Q: Where were you and your immediate family, your father and your mother?

00:42:25

#25M: My father had already passed away. It was at the place called Sharokpa where we had camped that my uncle was captured. The Chinese imprisoned my uncle for a few months there. My uncle was with the Khampas who managed to escape, leaving all their things behind. My uncle was captured. We remained at the place for a year and then fled.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: So my question and the reason I asked it in the particular way, there was a certain reason that I asked it the way I asked it and I know you said why was the uncle caught. My actual question was more like, they were traveling together, so why was it only the uncle who was caught? Why didn't they send them back to exile because they are all traveling with Khampa, right? So why did he get away with the rest of his family and his uncle was the only one who was caught? Do you understand the question?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: I understood. They waited until the uncle was released by the Chinese. Uncle and they all came together to exile. When the Chinese caught uncle, they were there itself. They hadn't run.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: They actually didn't even go.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: They didn't do anything.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: So they were sent back.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Not sent back. They were staying there itself.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Oh, they didn't even get out of Gerze?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: They were running towards the exile.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: They were all stopped.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Uncle was taken by the Chinese authority. Many Khampa tried to escape but they [the interviewee and family] stayed because uncle was caught. They waited until he was released or sent by the Chinese.

Q: After he was released, you made your escape?

#25M: That is right.

Q: How long was he in the custody of the Chinese?

#25M: He was three years with them.

Q: When the village was asked to surrender the weapons, did some people kind of, secretly keep one gun back? Were there some people who just didn't want to surrender everything because then they realize that they were going to exile without their gun, which was pretty dangerous?

00:45:35

#25M: All were surrendered. We had already handed over our automatic guns through the Gerze *Pon* earlier. All we had were the Tibetan-made guns, which were also taken away.

Q: You surrendered your guns a first time and then a second time?

#25M: Yes. Earlier it was the automatic weapons that were handed over by the Gerze Pon. During that time he was poisoned to death. Later the Chinese demanded that we surrender all our arms. So we were forced to do that.

Q: When you say weapons, are we just talking about guns or were there other kinds of weapons?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Only guns.

Q: You were a 20-year old young man at that time. Did you have a gun?

00:47:07

#25M: Yes, I did. The Chinese caught me while I was sleeping at night. Carrying the weapons, they took me a long way. The Chinese set up tents, but did not allow me to sleep at night. When dawn broke the next day, I saw that the Chinese were like ants everywhere. We remained at this place for a few years and then gradually made our escape. The wife of Gerze Pon was forced to carry stones for construction of buildings until she died. The younger son was said to have been taken to China. The daughter Dolha, sons Norbu and Tseyang Gonpo's whereabouts were not known.

Q: How did your father die?

#25M: My father fell ill and died. At that time everything was fine in Gerze. Gerze was not occupied and there were no Chinese then. He died due to sickness.

Q: You said that the leader of your village asked to surrender weapons, said you would suffer less than your neighbors. The people of Gerze [Gerge] decided not to surrender their weapons, so was it true that the village of Gerze suffered less because they had surrendered? Did they suffer less under the Chinese?

00:49:45

#25M: The [people of] Gerge suffered. They suffered a lot. In Gerze, not all the influential people were captured while in Gerge all of them were captured. The fathers of Sonam Gonpo and Chogyal Tinlay were captured along with their animals. Nobody knows where Sonam Gonpo's father, Sok Lhundup, and other influential people were taken or whether they were killed.

Q: The higher authorities faced more suffering from the Chinese. What about the ordinary people?

#25M: The ordinary people did not suffer much. The influential people were told, "Earlier you have lived your life forcing the poor people to work for you. Now you have to become one with them. And the poor will be raised [laughs] to high positions." Nobody knows where the influential people were taken. Their lands were divided during the Reformation and thus the wealthy of Gerge suffered in many ways.

Q: Did anyone else in your family suffer under the Chinese apart from your uncle, the administrator?

00:51:50

#25M: I suffered in their custody for a day or two, but they subjected my uncle to immense suffering in prison. They poisoned Gerze *Pon* to death and no one can tell where they took his son Tseyang Gonpo.

Q: Why were you put in custody for two days?

#25M: What would I know about the reason for their keeping me in custody? They made the two of us carry all the Tibetan-made guns of Gerze, which they had collected. We could not return for two to three days nor were we allowed to sleep. We sat in one position and could hardly move in the two days. Then we went to Athang Paksha. We were not provided any food but some stale *tsampa*. It was almost three days.

Q: When you were in custody for two days, were you treated quite okay?

00:53:47

#25M: We suffered because we could not move and were not provided food.

Q: They didn't provide water and food?

#25M: They did not give us water and food. We could not even go to answer nature's call.

Q: Did they physically harm you?

00:54:23

#25M: They did not physically beat us. The problem was that we could not sleep nor move. They did not beat us, as such.

Q: How did you respond to the guards? Were you the kind of person who would argue with them or were you just kind of like go along with everything very nicely?

#25M: No, I was not [aggressive]. I did not argue with them.

Q: When you came out after your uncle was released from prison, after he'd been in prison for three years, then your family decided to go into exile. Did you face any difficulty coming into exile the second time?

00:55:20

#25M: It was difficult as we fled day and night and had to leave behind our animals at various stages of the journey. We spent two years at the Rimshi region and three years in Ladakh. Then the Chenrezig [His Holiness the Dalai Lama] sent us here to this settlement. During my stay in Ladakh I worked as a cook for the soldiers.

Q: How many animals died?

#25M: Many of our animals died. In every region we crossed, we had to leave behind 20 to 30 animals: around 20 goats and sheep and 3-4 yaks.

Q: How many animals did you have in total?

00:56:26

#25M: When I left my village, we had around 50-60 yaks, 100 goats and 100 sheep. We had to leave behind everything else.

Q: Why did you spend a year at the border without crossing the border [Rimshi region]?

[Interpreter clarifies that the region was inside India.]

Q: I want to ask you about the salt again. Did you use salt for anything else other than eating?

#25M: There is nothing else apart from that. We bartered salt for grains at Gya Nyima and besides that there is nothing special [to do with salt].

Q: There is nothing special that you used the salt for?

00:57:58

#25M: Mediums and lamas bless the salt, which can be eaten when one is ill. Other than that, salt was used to exchange for grains. We obtained wool from sheep, which we sold at Ladakh or used it for many things like making bags. Yaks' hair was woven and stitched into tents. We made things like *gye* 'sacks,' *shara* 'blankets,' *luka* 'wool bags,' etc. The bags we used for packing salt were made using wool.

Q: How did life in your village change after the Chinese came?

#25M: Changes took place but the land remained as it is. People left the village taking away their animals. Now the animal owners were no longer living on their lands and I suppose the fields became overgrown with weeds.

[Question is repeated.]

01:00:11

#25M: When the Chinese initially arrived, for two years we lived side by side. Some of us transported their provisions to different places. They moved about in Gerze and at that time, people were deceived and used to say, "The Chinese will do us no harm, if not beneficial." They [the Chinese] told the people, "Your ways are strange. Those who are rich are forcing the poor to work for them and are oppressing them. There must be equality. Everyone is equal. There should be no discrimination."

They moved about the country and Lhasa. The Chinese deceived the noble people by giving them a lot of *dhayen* 'Chinese silver coins.' Later people realized and said, "The Chinese

are not good.” They used to hold meetings at night. And then one day, they started bombing. Sera [Monastery] was shelled. People’s weapons were taken away. When his life was at stake, Gerze *Pon* took the advice of the woman and waved a *khata* from the window and he was saved. Thousands of people were killed.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: What did he mean by everything changed?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: The Chinese were doing very badly. Everywhere people were running here and there. You find many people dead under the trees.

Q: How did these people die?

#25M: When the Chinese started firing, the people might have been hiding under the trees. The shells fell on them and 20-30 people were found dead under the trees.

Q: Is there anything else you want to tell us?

01:04:01

#25M: I do not have anything else to say.

Q: It is really interesting to hear your story. Thank you so much. I just need to ask you, first of all what was it like for you to talk to us?

#25M: I feel it has been splendid.

Q: Why?

#25M: I had the chance to talk about Tibet and I thank you for your help. It is very helpful for us to have the experiences of the Tibetans on paper and I am grateful to you.

Q: Thank you very much. I appreciate it.

01:05:09

#25M: [Joins palms in thanks]

Q: I just need to ask you one more time because you have told us some stuff. If this interview were shown in Tibet or China, would it be a problem for you?

#25M: No, no.

Q: I can use your real name?

#25M: Yes, definitely.

Q: Thanks again.

END OF INTERVIEW