

Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #27 – Dorji Phuntsok
June 27, 2007

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INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #27
2. Interviewee: Dorji Phuntsok
3. Age: 88
4. Date of Birth: 1919
5. Sex: Male
6. Birthplace: Kyima
7. Province: Utsang
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1959
9. Date of Interview: June 27, 2007
10. Place of Interview: Temple of Old Camp No. 2, Lugsung Samdupling Settlement, Bylakuppe, Mysore District, Karnataka, India
11. Length of Interview: 0 hr 59 min
12. Interviewer: Marcella Adamski
13. Interpreter: Tenzin Yangchen
14. Videographer: Jeff Loda
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

Biographical Information:

Dorji Phuntsok describes his childhood days as very happy because they had plenty of *tsampa* ‘roasted barley flour’ to eat and *chang* ‘home-brewed beer’ to drink. His family was a tenant and tilled the land belonging to Nyazong Monastery. His father was a blacksmith who made agricultural tools. Dorji Phuntsok traveled with his father from village to village and helped him with his work. He explains how the barter system was used because they did not use money.

When Dorji Phuntsok was around 28 years old, the Chinese came to his area of Tibet. They attempted to bribe him to report on the movements of his landlord. Rather than be an informant for the Chinese, Dorji Phuntsok remained loyal to his landlord and told him the Chinese were planning to capture him and suggested that he flee. Later, Dorji Phuntsok helped five Khampa men and women escape by showing them the way to India. He also eventually escaped from Tibet with his wife and two young children.

Dorji Phuntsok and his family came to Bylakuppe, India,, where he worked extremely hard during the initial years of the settlement. He tells a story of how the braying of his donkey, which he put in his field, would frighten away the elephants that came to eat his crops.

Topics Discussed:

Childhood memories, first appearance of Chinese, escape experiences, early life in Bylakuppe, life as a refugee in India.

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Interview #27

Interviewee: Dorji Phuntsok

Age: 88, Sex: Male

Interviewer: Marcella Adamski

Interview Date: June 27, 2007

Question: Please tell us your name.

Interviewee #27: When I was in Tibet I used to be called Sonam Topgyal, but now it is Dorji Phuntsok. Sonam Topgyal alias Dorji Phuntsok.

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

#27: Use where?

Q: On the radio, on TV and anywhere. Can we use it?

#27: Yes, definitely. You can use it. There's no problem at all. You can use it for anything.

Q: Dorji Phuntok-la, could you please tell us where did you grow up in Tibet?

#27: Until I was about 27, I lived in Naythong Kyima.

Q: What did your parents do for a living?

#27: They had a small agricultural land which belonged to the monastery and also my father used to make ploughs, spades, and agricultural tools.

Q: How many children were in your family?

#27: Only two children. Just before I left Tibet, my sister died. So I am the only one surviving now.

Q: What was your childhood like in Tibet?

#27: Very happy. We used to cultivate seven to eight acres of land belonging to the Nayzong Monastery and gave back grains in return. And since I was 13 years old, I used to harvest the crops.

Q: What made you say your childhood was very happy? What made it happy for you?

#27: We had plenty to eat; *tsampa* ‘roasted barley flour,’ brewed beer, and meat—especially plenty of *tsampa* and *chang* ‘home-brewed beer’. We had a storage of grains in our house but when the Chinese came, they took away all the grains.

Q: How old were you when the Chinese came?

#27: I was about 28 or 29 when the Chinese came.

Q: Before the Chinese came, did you work on the farm or did you ever go to school?

#27: There were no schools. I used to work on the farm. When my father was working on the anvil, I had to blow the bellows. When I grew older I had to use the hammer to beat the iron.

Q: What kind of ...[discontinuity in tape]

#27: My father used to make ploughs, spades, and sickles. And he spent about three to four days at one family to make all these things.

Q: And how did the people pay you for your services?

#27: Since there was no money, the families would pay us in the form of grains. The person who worked on the bellows was paid two measures and the smith was paid four measures.

Q: How big was a measure?

#27: It's called a *bo*. It is so big and so high [shows with his hands]. So my father and I traveled to different villages and worked for 20 days or a month in each village.

Q: How did you travel, by what?

#27: We had a donkey on which we loaded our things and we used to walk. If you started out when the rooster crowed, you reached the next village at sunrise.

Q: Did you do that all year long or just at the summertime?

#27: We traveled twice a year. Once before the sowing season when the tools had to be made, and once during the harvesting season when they also needed tools.

Q: What did your mother do?

#27: My mother, my younger sister and a half sister would stay at home and do the housework and also worked on the farm.

Q: What was your village like?

#27: My village had 18 families. It was situated on the slope of a hill and if you looked up from the other side, your hat would fall off; it was that high. The monastery was still higher up on the summit. When it rained in summer, the water would gush on the roofs. It was very steep and if somebody slipped and fell, he would fall three to four floors down the rocky surface.

Q: Why was it built so high?

#27: It was built a long time back. I have seen that in the monastery on the hilltop, there was a huge water tank built by the English. It was made of cement. They have left behind some broken guns in the monastery. That was why the monastery was labeled a rebel monastery and destroyed [by the Chinese].

Q: Later the village came into being?

#27: When I went back, there was no village on the slopes of the hill. The village had moved down.

Q: You mentioned that the family would make *chang*. Could you drink *chang* when you were a teenager or a kid or did you had to wait to grow up?

#27: From the age of 11-12, the children were given *chang*. But you had to work hard. You had to go out into the fields to look for pieces of firewood and carry them on your back.

Q: What are some of your happiest or favorite memories from your childhood? When you think about your childhood, what do you think about?

#27: The earliest happy memories I remember are my loving parents who—fearing that my sister and I would fall off the cliff—would tie us to a loom on which my mother used to weave aprons. We would be given *chang* and *tsampa* and sing songs. If one fell it would be like falling off 5 or 6 stories onto the rocks.

Q: You were like a year, two years?

#27: Until I was 7, 8 or 9 years old. [They were] very good parents.

Q: What did you do there when you were sitting around the loom?

#27: We used to play with little stones, just playing.

Q: Do you have any memories of your childhood that were sad or upsetting or scary?

#27: I do not remember any unhappy incidents. Here too I am [happy] by the grace of His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

Q: You went around with your father to the villages and when did you marry? When did you get to adulthood?

#27: I was about 40 years old when I met my wife. That was when I used to trade in knick-knacks, like mirrors and dyes and on one of my trips to Gangtok I met my wife. She was working in a neighbor's house spinning wool.

Q: What made you interested in her when you saw her?

#27: What can I say? It is destiny. The destiny was that we would have a child. That is fate or destiny.

Q: What did she look like?

#27: She was young at that time. Now she cannot move, not even to go to the toilet, though she is six years younger than me.

Q: Did you have to ask permission to marry her?

#27: At that time I spoke to my mother about it but my father was dead. My wife had already become pregnant. I told my mother that my wife was pregnant and that I had to live with her, and that I would come and see her often.

Q: A love child. How old were you and how old was your wife about that time?

#27: I was about 22 years old and my wife was six years younger than me.

Q: What did your mother say when she heard you had a wife and you were going to go live with her?

#27: She said, "You have to go, but you must come and see me."

Q: And you had a baby?

#27: A daughter was born and she lives with me here. After coming to the settlement, we had a miscarriage and three children died. I have two daughters living now; the rest are dead. I have seen a lot after coming here. In those days we used to have a lot of elephants that destroyed the crops.

Q: I will come back to that. After you had the baby girl and she is still living here, in Bylakuppe, did you stay in that area for a long time where you were with your wife?

#27: In Gempa, my wife and I had three children; two girls and one son, with a difference of two years apart. My oldest daughter was 15 years old. After coming here three children died; one daughter and two sons. That was when we faced some difficulties.

Q: When you lived in Tibet, what kind of work did you do when you were married?

#27: I worked as a smith and I also purchased knick-knacks and sold them.

Q: Did you like your work?

#27: Yes, even in exile, I did the same thing. I made things for the Tibetan Children's Village and Sera Monastery.

Q: What kind of things?

#27: Initially I made ploughs and hoes, and ladles and sickles. I did farm work and also supplied these things everywhere. I have done a lot of hard work.

Q: You did it in Bylakuppe?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Yes.

Q: How did you leave Tibet?

#27: I left my place, Gempa, because I heard about the torture sessions by the Chinese. One night two Chinese in green army dress came to my house. They brought me gifts of about two measures of rice, a little *dhal* and two pieces of fish to make curry. They told me to watch my landlord, Domay Toe, and report to them if he went out. They said they would give me the house. I replied yes but why should I report to them? I immediately went to my landlord and told him that the Chinese were planning to capture him and that he should flee. So two days later they pretended to take manure to the fields on their donkeys and fled that night.

Q: Why were you afraid to stay?

#27: When the Chinese were going to arrest my landlord, what is the house to me? They were a wealthy family. There was a monastery and one monk called Gen Lungtok and he had previously told me to bring him news if anything happened to Domay Toe. So after their escape I went to the monastery and told Gen Lungtok what the Chinese had told me and about the escape of Domay Toe. The next day Gen Lungtok fled with about 5 or 6 monks of the monastery. Gen Lungtok lived in a monastery here until his death.

Q: Who was Gen Lungtok?

#27: He was one of the senior monks of the Uze Monastery in Gempa.

Q: What had you heard up before you ran away or before you escaped? What have you heard that the Chinese were doing?

#27: I have heard that members of the wealthy families were hung to the ceilings by their hands with their toes just touching the ground and about the beatings.

Q: Anything else?

#27: Sometime before my escape, one day near a sheep shed, I found three Khampa [region in eastern Tibetan] women—an old lady and two young ones. They were trying to tell the future by using a boot lace. I guessed they were escapees and felt sorry for them. I asked where they were headed for and they ran away. I told them not to run away and asked them where they were going. They said to India and I told them they could stay the night in my house and that I would show them the way the next day. The next day I helped them reach Dungku, an Indian place. Another time I helped two Khampa men reach Dungku.

Q: Where is Dungku?

#27: It is in India. It is across a mountain pass from my place. Because I was so close to the border, I stayed until then; otherwise I would have escaped much earlier.

Q: What year was this when you escaped?

#27: I'm not sure about the year. It's been about 44 years since coming here.

Q: When you left, it was with the wife and donkey and what else?

#27: There were two daughters, one toddler and a baby on the back. Only two daughters are surviving, while the sons died.

Q: Did they die on the trip?

#27: They died here.

Q: Can you tell about the journey from Tibet to India?

#27: It is two days' walk from Gempa to Lachen. In Lachen we met an Indian officer who helped us over into Lachen. It was snowing heavily. I had a tent and lit a fire in my portable stove and invited him to join us in the warmth.

Q: What was your feeling in leaving Tibet?

#27: In Lachen I presented the Indian officer with a pair of animal horns. He gave me a letter in which he had mentioned that I was to be sent to Kalimpong. On arriving at Gangtok, when I showed this letter, I was told to go to Kalimpong. I thought, "Why was I being sent to Kalimpong when I had done no wrong here?" In Kalimpong I met a Tibetan officer, Kungo Khenchung. He asked, "Where have you come from?" I said, "I have come from Gempa." He said, "Come to Enchung Monastery and you will get food rations." I was

supplied with about two kilos of rice, a little bit of *dhal*, and oil. Two days later, at Enchung Monastery, they gave us five cans of tinned meat each. In Kalimpong the Tibetan officer was so kind as to give full shares of the rations, even to the children.

We were then sent to Bylakuppe and given an acre of land each. I labored hard, digging a full acre manually, with a hoe. The farmers helped each other plough the fields. After coming to the settlement, I was wondering how I could earn a livelihood. I purchased two hens and a rooster. Fortunately, most of the chicks that hatched were hens and only two turned out to be roosters. Selling the hens, I was able to purchase a goat. Next, I bought a cow by selling the goat. That's how I lived my life, working hard.

Q: Wonderful!

#27: The goats multiplied to 25 and when they were sent out to graze, the Indians would kill one or two. So I sold 11 of the goats and was able to buy two cows. And then I fed my children with milk and I could eat butter. That's how I led my life.

Q: How did you like Bylakuppe?

#27: Initially when we came to Bylakuppe it was just a hamlet. Kushalnagar [the nearby town] was the size of just a fraction of Kalimpong.

Q: Was it very different than Tibet?

#27: It was different from Tibet, because when you looked up you only saw the sky. There was no proper road; it was just a path where only one vehicle could pass at a time. The water you see there [gestures] was just a little stream with a bamboo bridge over it.

My field is very near the forest and a lot of elephants used to come and destroy the maize crops. Then I thought of a plan and bought a donkey. I tied it right in the corn fields. When the elephants came to the field, they would start trumpeting and the donkey would bray from within the field. This noise scared the elephants away and my corn fields were safe from then on. I was so fortunate.

I had left a part of my field for the grass to grow so that my donkey could graze there. The Indian official who came to check the land demanded to know as to why I had not cultivated the entire field. I didn't know the language, so an interpreter was brought in. I told the officer that that area was for my donkey to graze. I said the donkey did a lot of work for me; it guarded the fields against elephants, wild boars, and humans. The official said that it may guard the fields against elephants and wild boars, but how does it guard against humans? I told the officer to just walk closer to the donkey and when he did this, the donkey brayed so loudly that the officer ran away with his hands in the air! So in this way I have thought of a lot of means and ways. If an elephant entered the field, it destroyed and ate a big portion of the crops. Thanks to the donkey, I was able to enjoy the harvest.

Q: A happy donkey and a happy farmer.

#27: The donkey would even come home straight from the fields if you left the gate open. And once it neared the house, it would bray to show that he was home. After the donkey came home, my wife fed him with food and water. Then it went back to guard the field.

Q: Smart donkey. Is there anything else that you would like to tell us for our interview?

#27: No, I do not have anything else.

Q: Do you have any advice or message that you would like to give the next generation of young Tibetans?

#27: I hope that with the grace of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Tibet will gain independence. I advise the younger generation to study hard. My great granddaughter will start her schooling soon.

Q: What do you hope will be preserved about Tibet for the future generations?

#27: The older generation has nowhere else to go except the local cremation ground, near the Sakya Monastery. But the youngsters have a hope of returning. If Tibet were to gain independence, I would have no regrets even if I died the next day after reaching it.

Q: I hope it becomes possible.

#27: Thank you.

[The interviewee is presented with a gift and signs the release form.]

END OF INTERVIEW