

Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #32N – Yeshe Kunga
April 13, 2015

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TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #32N
2. Interviewee: Yeshi Kunga
3. Age: 78
4. Date of Birth: 1937
5. Sex: Male
6. Birthplace: Kyadroe
7. Province: Utsang
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1959
9. Date of Interview: April 13, 2015
10. Place of Interview: Tashiling Tibetan Refugee Settlement, Chhorepatan, Pokhara, Nepal
11. Length of Interview: 0 hr 52 min
12. Interviewer: Marcella Adamski
13. Interpreter: Palden Tsering
14. Videographer: Henry Tenenbaum
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

Biographical Information:

Yeshi Kunga was born in Kyadroe in Utsang Province. Life was very difficult for the nomadic families like his and for the salt collectors. His mother and the siblings looked after cows, sheep and yaks while his father went to gather salt. The salt was transported on yaks to Dolpa in Nepal to exchange it for grain. Yeshi Kunga explains the hardships like the freezing cold and heavy snowfall that he experienced when he accompanied his father on a salt gathering mission.

During the winter months, herding was also challenging because there was no grass for the animals and all the water was frozen. Some days they spent 2-4 hours searching for water sources. Yeshi Kunga liked the 6th and 7th months of the Tibetan calendar year best because warmer temperatures meant easier work. In addition to herding, the family also engaged in spinning wool, sewing and making cheese and butter. Some of the children also worked for others just to get enough food, which was the only form of payment.

When news of the Chinese invasion came to their region, Yeshi Kunga's parents became worried and the family fled their hometown. They escaped "without even a cup," and left all their animals behind. After arriving in Nepal they worked as servants in Dolpa, and Yeshi Kunga helped build the foundation for the present Tibetan settlement in Pokhara.

Topics Discussed:

Utsang, nomadic life, trade, escape experiences, life as a refugee in Nepal.

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Interview #32N

Interviewee: Yeshe Kunga

Age: 78, Sex: Male

Interviewer: Marcella Adamski

Interview Date: April 13, 2015

Question: Please tell us your name.

00:00:08

Interviewee #32N: Yeshe Kunga. Yeshe Kunga.

Q: His Holiness the Dalai Lama asked us to record your experiences, so 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?

#32N: Yes, it can be used.

Q: Thank you for offering to share your story with us. During this interview if you wish to take a break or stop at any time, please let me know. If you do not wish to answer a question or talk about something, let me know.

#32N: Okay.

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

#32N: I would not be able to say for sure. One would not know for certain.

Q: Okay. So may we continue with the interview?

#32N: Yes, why not?

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

#32N: Okay.

Q: *Pa-la* 'respectful term for father,' please tell me how old you are.

00:02:49

#32N: Seventy-eight.

Q: And where were you born, *pa-la*?

#32N: The birthplace is Kyadroe in Tibet. The hometown is called Kyadroe.

Q: What province is that in, Utsang, Kham?

#32N: Utsang.

Q: Was there a monastery nearby that you could remember the name of?

#32N: There were two small monasteries called Gangjong Gonpa and Goyar Gonpa.

Q: Gangjong?

#32N: Gangjong Gonpa and Goyar Gonpa.

Q: *Pa-la*, in your...what did your parents do for a living?

#32N: Mother took care of the cows and such while Father traveled on business.

Q: What kind of business, *pa-la*?

#32N: Father went to the north to collect salt and then to Dolpa to exchange for grain.

Q: How often did your father go to collect salt?

#32N: It took around two weeks to collect salt, around two weeks, two weeks; one week to go and one week to come. And then [Father] must go to Dolpa for around a week.

Q: How many times a year?

00:04:58

#32N: Around twice a year.

Q: *Pa-la*, you went with your father?

#32N: Yes?

Q: Did you go with your father on business?

#32N: Yes, yes, [I] went twice.

Q: *Pa-la*, what age did you start traveling with your father to collect the salt?

#32N: Father would have been around 40 years old then.

Q: And you?

#32N: I might have been around 15 years old.

Q: Can you tell us what was that journey like for you? Was it hard? Did you like going? Was it a lot of work? Describe what you did when you went.

#32N: It was very difficult. At times it snowed and one was stranded for 2-3 weeks. It was hard—hard, extremely hard.

Q: So if it would snow for two weeks, would you be in the mountains or would that prevent you from going? If it was a heavy snowfall, would that be when you are gathering the salt?

00:07:07

#32N: It was at the time of gathering salt.

Q: So what did you do for protection in the snow and the wind?

#32N: [We] made tents from the hair of yaks.

Q: *Pa-la*, were you ever in danger of freezing and dying from cold?

#32N: It was not very dangerous but nearly so. Father was there to take care. I did feel the extreme cold. However, it was important to go to work from the early age of 13-14 because survival was tough.

Q: Were the yaks ever in danger because of the snowfall, the amount of snow and the amount of cold?

#32N: Oh, the yaks suffered a lot of hardship. There was no grass for the yaks to feed but the sheep did. The sheep dug with its feet and found grass to eat.

Q: How many...how's the journey like how many yaks did you take and how much weight did they carry? Did you take anything with you or was it empty and then when you came back how much weight were they carrying each yak?

00:09:49

#32N: There were two bags on each yak. Except for two yaks, the bags of the rest were empty, while on the return journey every yak was laden with salt. With each bag of salt weighing 10 *pathi*, a yak carried round 20 *pathi*.

Q: How many kilograms is a *pathi*?

#32N: [I] wonder how many kilograms it is.

Q: Two and half?

#32N: We called it as *pathi* in Tibet.

Q: How many yaks?

#32N: Each person drove around seven yaks.

Q: How many did your family drive?

#32N: We had 10-11 yaks.

[Interpreter describes one *pathi* as equivalent to 2.5 kilograms]

Q: *Pa-la*, when you would sell the salt and...you brought it back home, who would buy it from you? Would it be individuals or traders? Who bought the salt?

#32N: There were traders from Dolpa that bought it.

Q: Yes?

#32N: After gathering the salt from the north, it was brought to the south where they bought it. The salt trade took place there. There were people that said, "Bring and [we] shall buy it."

Q: It was in the south?

#32N: Yes, the southern area.

Q: Were there Tibetan people in the community? Did they need salt and what did they use it for?

00:12:37

#32N: Yes, everybody went to gather salt.

Q: The whole region did?

#32N: Everyone did. You, me, everyone went to gather salt, gathered salt and left for the valley and procured grain.

Q: Did you provide salt to the people of the region?

#32N: No, they could gather it. There was a large lake at the saltpan from which salt was brought. There was not any need to pay tax on this.

Q: It was in the north, right?

#32N: Yes, one could gather it freely. One need not pay anything.

Q: Trade salt to the...would this be southern traders who gave grain? What about Ladakh or is it far away from Ladakh?

#32N: It was the south and at Dolpa. There were two high regions.

Q: Was it sold in Ladakh?

#32N: We did not go towards Ladakh.

Q: *Pa-la*, when you were not gathering salt with your father, what else did you do as a young boy? What kind of chores or activities did you do?

00:14:49

#32N: The other job was grazing animals, herding sheep. One went the whole day from 5 in the morning until 6 in the evening. It was very difficult in Tibet.

Q: Tell us the story of what the life of a shepherd is like from beginning to end. When you get up what do you have to do? When you go...how do you take care of the sheep all day long?

#32N: In the morning one went wherever the grass was good. During winter the sheep had water only on alternate days. It was hard. It was very hard. There was no food during the day until 5 in the evening. There was no food from 6 in the morning until 5 in the evening.

Q: If there was no water, would you have to move the herd somewhere else and how large was this herd?

00:16:54

#32N: There was a large number of sheep. Each person took care of around 100 or 200 sheep.

Q: And when there was no water...?

#32N: When there was no water some stayed the whole day on the mountain while we went in search of water.

Q: *Pa-la*, when you said that you didn't have food all day, why was that? I'm not sure why you didn't bring food from home?

#32N: [We] never took food. One ate at home in the morning and then set out.

Q: So how far away do you have to take the sheep to get more water if there is no water?

#32N: During winter one must travel for 3-4 hours [in search of] water. One kept looking out for water sources. At times one traveled for two hours and at times three hours.

Q: Are you taking care of the sheep by yourself? Do you have other people helping you from the family and are there any dogs, shepherd dogs?

00:19:03

#32N: There were dogs, dogs called *ziki*, that one took along.

Q: Was it a female dog?

#32N: One took a dog along. I took a dog while herding.

Q: Didn't you have anyone from your family helping?

#32N: There was not anyone. I was the only one herding.

Q: *Pa-la*, speaking of going alone, did you have other siblings in your family? What ages were they and where were you in the lineup of siblings?

#32N: I am the eldest. There were other children besides me but some must herd the yaks.

Q: How many children were there?

#32N: There were five children.

Q: Some went to herd yaks and...?

#32N: Some went to herd yaks and some went to work for others. It was very hard because except for food there was not any payment working for others.

Q: When your father wasn't gathering salt, what was he doing for a livelihood?

00:21:00

#32N: There was not any other business except salt trade. We did not have any goods to sell. The only business was salt trade.

Q: Did your father ever take care of the sheep or the yaks?

#32N: He did, and wove the hair of yak and made tents, and also worked with wool. There were many jobs to do.

Q: So much work to do. That's an interesting...important fact, much work to do. Tell us about some of the work in a family. So you were shepherders of the family. Tell us all the jobs that shepherders have to do because you said you wanted to tell us about your livelihood in Tibet. So please tell us all the jobs that a shepherd, and yak herder has to do.

#32N: One did those kinds of things, but normally there was not much work because there was no farmland.

Q: And then?

#32N: There was no farmland. Some went to herd sheep and some went to herd yaks while some worked for others. Besides that there were no schools in Tibet.

Q: Anything else?

#32N: That is about it. There is not anything much to say.

Q: Were there times of the year when you did shore...take all the wool off the sheep, every year, was that happening?

00:23:51

#32N: It was in the 6th lunar month when the sheep were shorn. It was in the 6th lunar month.

Q: Tibetan month?

#32N: Yes, 6th Tibetan lunar month. Wool was shorn in the 6th lunar month and then spun and made into clothes like *chupa* 'traditional dress' while some made shoes. We used to make shoes in our hometown. That was how wool was used. Then there was milking to do. Butter was sold and cheese consumed. It was hard in Tibet.

Q: *Pa-la*, the life sounds, you know, very hard. Everybody had a job and you worked all the time. Would you say...was there any enjoyment in your life as a nomad?

#32N: The enjoyable times were in the 6th and 7th lunar months. There was plenty of grass and the animals became fat and there was plenty to eat and drink. It was in the 6th and 7th lunar months.

Q: What were some of the things that...there was a lot of food. You didn't have to take the animals far. Were there any activities that you liked to do as a young man?

00:26:07

#32N: Oh, there was plenty of green, tasty and good grass available. Then the 11th and 12th lunar months were hard with no grass and no water.

Q: You didn't have a lot of work when grass for the animals became plenty. What did you do then?

#32N: During such times one watched the animals and rested for there was not much to do. There was not much work in the 6th and 7th lunar months. Except for working with wool, there was not much to do with the animals for the grass was lush and water available.

Q: *Pa-la*, you were a nomad and you had your family with you. Were there any other nomad families right in your area that were part of your group?

#32N: Other families?

Q: Were there many other nomad families?

#32N: There were. There were 15-20 families.

Q: What happens in your life besides being a nomad? Do you get married? Do you have a family of your own? What happened?

00:28:09

#32N: There was not much to do besides being a shepherd in Tibet. One gathered salt to sell and went to Dolpa to get grain. There was not much to do besides these.

Q: Did you marry in Tibet?

#32N: I got married here.

Q: How old were you when you reached exile?

#32N: When I got here?

Q: Yes.

#32N: [I] might have been around 25 years old, around 25.

Q: *Pa-la*, at what age do nomad young boys usually marry or young men marry?

#32N: Me?

Q: Among nomads in general?

#32N: [Nomads] married between 25 and 30.

Q: In your land...did anything begin to change in your land? Was it always peaceful or did things begin to change?

00:30:20

#32N: [I] noticed a big change. Just before the Chinese appeared there were no grass and no water. Various things happened in the region and it was very bad. That happened just before the Chinese came.

Q: Really? *Pa-la*, how old were you when that happened in your memory?

#32N: [I] must have been around 13 years old then.

Q: Was that something unusual in the weather? What do you think caused that, *pa-la*?

#32N: Whether it was the weather or it was times that changed... nearby us was a high snowy mountain and during a snowfall, there was an avalanche that brought the snow down into the valley. Then one saw strange things around the region, which was followed by the appearance of the Chinese. [We] fled when the Chinese appeared.

Q: Did it seem like these signs were foretelling something bad that was going to happen to you?

#32N: It was some sort of sign foretelling the coming of the Chinese.

Q: A bad omen?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Yeah, like a bad omen.

Q: So *pa-la*, when did you first know about the Chinese in your life? How did that come about?

00:32:52

#32N: [We] fled in the night, fled in the night and saw lights being flashed in the sky. The whole region filled with the light and then [we] lay on the ground. When the lights went off, [we] continued.

Q: The Chinese flashed light?

#32N: [The Chinese] flashed lights in the sky. [The Chinese] flashed lights in the sky and the region became white. Then we lay on the ground. And when the light went off [we] fled. [We] faced great hardship for 2-3 weeks.

Q: Why did your family begin to leave their grasslands at all? Why did they start to leave?

#32N: [We] did not want to surrender to the Chinese. The parents said, “[We] cannot live under the Chinese. Let us flee.” Then [we] fled.

Q: Did the Tibetan Government say that?

#32N: The parents said, “It is futile remaining here in our land. We should run away.” All of us fled without anything, empty-handed.

Q: Empty-handed. *Pa-la*, what happened to all the sheep?

00:34:59

#32N: All were left behind. We came away without even a cup, with not even a cup. We just escaped in the night.

Q: But what was happening in your area that made you so afraid of the Chinese? Did your parents tell you something? Did people tell you they were coming? It seems like you were escaping and there were flares. Nothing happened before that that would make your parents so frightened?

#32N: [We] did not see any Chinese but hid from them and fled. The Chinese had arrived and blocked many mountain passes but [we] hid and fled through different regions.

Q: I didn't ask you this before, but did you have any animals or favorite sheep that you called by name that were very special to you?

00:36:53

#32N: There were marks on the ears. Some put tags on the ears; some made cuts on the ears while others made marks on the horns.

Q: Were names given?

#32N: Names were not given. There were no names but marks.

Q: So when this incredible departure happened, *pa-la*, how many people came with you when you escaped in the middle of the night?

#32N: Oh, there were many people, hundreds. There was a crowd of people on the road.

Q: More than hundred?

#32N: Yes, more than a hundred. Many fled. There were people on flight and people that had died. Oh, to speak about it! There was a valley in which were dead yaks, dead horses and dead people. [Shakes head]

Q: Had His Holiness the Dalai Lama already escaped into India?

#32N: His Holiness the Dalai Lama had left by then.

Q: [His Holiness] had already left?

#32N: [His Holiness] had already left.

Q: I wanted to ask, before you escaped were your family very religious? Did they say their prayers everyday go to the monastery? Did they follow the Dalai Lama?

00:39:17

#32N: Yes, very pious.

Q: Had [the family] seen His Holiness the Dalai Lama?

#32N: Yes, [we] had faith in His Holiness the Dalai Lama and through the government [people of] the hometown dispatched butter and cheese to His Holiness the Dalai Lama as tax.

Q: Butter, cheese...

#32N: Butter, cheese and many tents made from the hair of yaks were dispatched as tax to the three monasteries of Sera, Drepung and Gaden.

Q: Sera, Gaden and Drepung?

#32N: Yes.

Q: *Pa-la*, when you think back about your homeland, your life as a herder, are there anything that you think backward that you miss that you really have a nice memory of when you were growing up in your area?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Asking about memory?

Q: Any favorite...what do you think of when you think of Tibet these days? What are some nice memories?

00:41:09

#32N: [I] have dreams about grazing sheep and grazing yaks in my homeland that wake me up. Such things happen.

Q: Are those pleasant memories?

#32N: Yes, but when that happens [I] do not feel happy for a day or two because [I] miss the homeland.

Q: And why?

#32N: One misses the homeland, but there is no way one can go back and that makes you feel very sad.

Q: Would you like to go back to Tibet?

#32N: Yes, if [I] could go back. It is a good opportunity if one can go back.

Q: Just to conclude, *pa-la*, tell us the journey. You said it was very difficult with many people, with so many dying or dead people, many yaks dead. Tell us more about the journey. Did you have enough food to eat and how long again did it take?

00:43:15

#32N: We were six or seven people and could eat only once a day.

Q: Please give some details.

#32N: And then when [we] reached Dolpa there was something to eat and [we] were happy. There was not anything to eat before that.

Q: How long did it take?

#32N: It took 10-11 days.

Q: And Dolpa is in Tibet?

#32N: It is not in Tibet. It is in Nepal but [the people] can speak Tibetan.

Q: Right on the border?

#32N: Yes.

Q: Who was in...you said 6-7 people. Who were the people who escaped with you very closely?

#32N: My siblings and elder sister's children. We were members of the same family.

Q: Did your parents come too?

#32N: Yes, [my parents] reached here.

Q: Did you come together?

#32N: Yes.

Q: Along with the 6-7 people?

#32N: Yes. Both the parents passed away in Pokhara, both Father and Mother.

Q: What did you do when you got to Dolpa in Nepal?

00:45:20

#32N: At Dolpa one worked as a servant to other people and received food. [The employers] gave a *pathi* or two each day as wages.

Q: Rice? What was given? Grain?

#32N: Yes, one must dig, transport manure and cut wood and such.

Q: Who hired you to do this work?

#32N: Yes?

Q: Who were the employers?

#32N: The employers were the people of Dolpa. We worked at Dolpa. Without knowing the language one would not get work. [We] worked there and then went to Zumla to beg when there was no work.

It used to be very difficult. We prayed to His Holiness the Dalai Lama and then the parents wanted to follow the Tibetan Government. So from Zumla, [I] had to carry the parents and children and just about managed to reach here.

Q: Did you have to carry the parents?

#32N: Yes, the parents were old.

Q: And did it ever get easier? So what happened? Did your family begin to prosper or grow or did you get help from the Tibetan Government?

00:47:47

#32N: After coming here? After coming here...

Q: Did the family prosper and did you get help from the Tibetan Government?

#32N: There was help from the beneficial foreigners and [my] daughter. Compared to the past, to be frank, presently [I] am much happier. There were foreign organizations that were helpful and due to the benevolence of His Holiness the Dalai Lama [I] am happy now. It is not like the past. It was very bad in the past.

Q: When you said “we reached Pokhara,” did you come and live in this settlement? Was that the first place that you came?

#32N: Me? [I] came here.

Q: Do you remember what year that was?

#32N: Yes, [I] do remember. We were the ones that raised the foundations for the houses. There were no houses then and the land was empty. [We] built the houses and carried rocks from that hill there. [Points]

Q: Which year was it?

#32N: Yes?

Q: When was it? Nineteen hundred and...?

#32N: Perhaps 1960. [We] struggled very much.

00:49:42

We were the ones that dug the earth and built the houses. Now most of the people of that generation are no more.

One did not know the Nepalese language then. [We] struggled a lot.

Q: You were the founders of a whole new Tibetan family, for a new generation of children.

#32N: Now those men are no more.

Q: Your generation was the one that built the settlement and the houses.

#32N: Yes. Name?

Q: Not name. It was your generation that founded the settlement and dug the earth and did most of the work.

#32N: I do not have the colleagues, only two or three. [The rest] are gone. Perhaps only two are left from those that built the houses. The rest are dead. There is Ngawang from my generation and perhaps there are five or six others. The rest of those that did the work are no more. Maybe two or three...

Q: *Pa-la*, we are honored to have heard your story both as a nomad and as a man who survived many hardships, and we will share your story with many other people.

00:51:56

#32N: Okay.

Q: And if this interview—I would like to ask again—was shown in Tibet or China, would this be a problem for you?

#32N: It cannot cause any problem because you belong to an aid organization. There should not be any problems.

Q: Thank you very, very much.

#32N: [Joins palms]

END OF INTERVIEW