

Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #33N – Dawa Palmo
April 13, 2015

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INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #33N
2. Interviewee: Dawa Palmo
3. Age: 73
4. Date of Birth: 1942
5. Sex: Female
6. Birthplace: Tathun
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 35 min
12. Interviewer: Katharine Davies Samway
13. Interpreter: Palden Tsering
14. Videographer: Henry Tenenbaum
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

Biographical Information:

Dawa Palmo grew up in a place called Tathun with around 10-15 nomadic families. Their livelihood was herding animals, milking and making various dairy products and selling them to procure grain and rice. She loved the animals because the nomads depended upon them for food and clothing.

Dawa Palmo describes how her house was built of mud with only a cloth to cover the floor and cooking stove with a chimney, fueled by yak dung. They slept on raised platforms covered with sheepskins. Her mother did the cooking and her father went to trade dairy products for grains, while Dawa Palmo tended the animals.

A Chinese man came to Dawa Palmo's village and he stayed by himself for a month. Later when her parents heard about the next appearance of the Chinese, they fled their home in fear and left everything behind. Dawa Palmo recounts the escape journey to Nepal and how she had to work as farmhand.

Topics Discussed:

Utsang, childhood memories, nomadic life, first appearance of Chinese, life as a refugee in Nepal.

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Interview #33N

Interviewee: Dawa Palmo

Age: 73, Sex: Female

Interviewer: Katharine Davies Samway

Interview Date: April 13, 2015

Question: Please tell us your name.

00:00:10

Interviewee #33N: Dawa Palmo.

Q: His Holiness the Dalai Lama has asked us to record your experiences, so that we can share your memories with 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 with which we are working to use this interview?

#33N: Yes.

Q: Thank you. During the interview if you want to take a break or stop at any time, please let us know.

#33N: Okay.

Q: And if you do not want to answer a question or talk about something, would you please let us know?

#33N: Okay.

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

#33N: There should not be.

Q: Thank you very much for agreeing and we're honored to record your story.

#33N: Okay.

Q: *Ama-la* 'respectful term for mother,' could you please tell us where you grew up in Tibet?

00:02:24

#33N: [I] grew up in the place called Tathun.

Q: Was that a village or settlement?

#33N: It was a large village with houses and a monastery.

Q: About how many people lived there?

#33N: There were 10-15 families.

Q: And you lived in a house?

#33N: Yes.

Q: What was the house made from?

#33N: [We] did not have tin sheets for the roof like here. [The roof] was covered with a dark colored grass called *pema* and then soil spread atop it.

Q: And the walls, what were the walls made of?

#33N: The walls were made of stones.

Q: And the floor inside, what was the floor?

#33N: There was no floor like this. In Tibet there was no cement.

Q: What was it like?

#33N: It was just mud.

Q: Did your family cover the floor with anything?

00:04:17

#33N: Yes.

Q: What was used?

#33N: *Chata* and such but there were no carpets.

Q: What's *chata*?

#33N: A cloth was spread.

Q: So how did you keep the floor clean if you...?

#33N: [The floor] was cleaned by sprinkling water and then sweeping.

Q: And did you have any furniture in the house?

#33N: There were no beds but a raised platform was made of clay. There were no beds and such.

Q: Like a stage, like a platform.

What did you put on top of the platform?

#33N: A sheepskin is spread on the platform. One slept on a sheepskin.

Q: And then did you sleep under something or...what did you sleep under?

#33N: For a blanket the wool of sheep was woven into *tsukduk* 'winter blanket with long hairs.' It was woven in strips, then stitched and worn.

Q: It's called *tsukduk*?

#33N: *Tsukduk* has scruffy furs.

Q: How many rooms were in your house?

00:06:25

#33N: Parents and everyone slept in one room, and there was a kitchen. There were no individual rooms like here.

Q: There were two rooms?

#33N: Yes.

Q: And your kitchen, could you describe your kitchen?

#33N: There were no shelves and such in the kitchen. There was a fireplace called *zala* and another made of mud.

Q: Is *zala* made of metal?

#33N: Yes.

Q: So the first fireplace in the center, the *zala*, what is that made from?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: It's metal.

Q: And what was that for?

#33N: It was made of metal.

Q: It's made of metal.

#33N: It was made of metal.

Q: What was it used for?

#33N: It was for the purpose of lighting a fire.

Q: Was that to keep you warm or was that to be able to cook?

#33N: It was for the purpose of cooking, for cooking.

Q: And the second fireplace was made from wood, I mean mud?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: And stone.

Q: Mud and stone. And what was that for?

#33N: The one made of mud was the same, for lighting fire.

Q: And used for cooking?

#33N: Yes.

Q: So why were there two different kinds of fire, the metal one and then the mud and stone one?

00:08:29

#33N: There was only one.

Q: In your home?

#33N: Only one.

Q: Which one?

#33N: [We] used only the mud one.

Q: And what did you use for fuel?

#33N: The fuel was the dung of yaks. Yak dung was dried and used to make fire.

Q: Did you have a hole in the roof to let the smoke out?

#33N: A chimney was created to let the smoke out.

Q: A chimney and not just a hole? What was it made from?

#33N: When a house is being built, a metal piece was used to make the chimney.

Q: This metal chimney, did it go straight up or did it go up and then turn?

#33N: No, it was straight up.

Q: So when it rained, what would happen?

#33N: When someone has a cold, one took blessed pills from a lama or saw a doctor for medicines.

Q: Not *champa* 'cold' but *charpa* 'rain.'

#33N: When it rained?

Q: Yes.

#33N: One stayed inside the house when it rained and there was no problem.

Q: Did it not rain through the chimney?

#33N: No, it did not.

Q: Oh, it didn't? I wonder why? In my home it comes down through the chimney.

00:10:42

#33N: The chimney is not open-mouthed but has a cover.

Q: If I had visited your home and I walked into your kitchen, what would I have seen? Could you describe it, please?

#33N: The roof of the house was flat with a chimney to let the smoke out. On top of the chimney was a metal with holes through which to let out the smoke. The house was square-shaped.

Q: So you were about 15 when you left Tibet.

#33N: Yes.

Q: So when you were 15, what responsibilities did you have?

#33N: At around the age of 15?

Q: Yes.

#33N: The responsibilities were herding animals and taking care of them. That was the only duty.

Q: Just herding the animals?

#33N: Yes.

Q: You didn't have to do any cooking or cleaning or washing clothes?

00:12:43

#33N: Washing clothes and such...we did not need to wash clothes much in Tibet.

Q: Why is that?

#33N: One went to herd the animals and did not wash the clothes much. One continued to wear that dress whether there was dirt on it or not.

Q: Why was that?

#33N: There was no practice of washing clothes. One always wore woolen clothes and not cotton ones like these [indicates shirt].

Q: What about cooking?

#33N: [I] did not cook then.

Q: Who cooked for your family?

#33N: Yes?

Q: Who did the cooking at home?

#33N: Mother did the cooking at home in the village. I had to cook after coming to exile.

Q: How did you learn how to cook?

#33N: There was no need to learn cooking. One cooked under the guidance of the parents.

Q: Did you enjoy taking care of the animals?

00:14:51

#33N: [I] enjoyed it. I liked taking care of the animals.

Q: What did you like about it, about taking care of the animals?

#33N: We milked. [The animals] are the source of our food and drink. In the hometown [the animals] are milked and the milk turned into curd and then churned to make butter and cheese that are sold to procure grain and rice.

Q: Did you love it because it was familiar or did you love it because...I mean, what reason other than that's what you did?

#33N: The reason for loving [the animals] was because we got our food from the animals. The animals are milked, the milk turned to curd to make cheese and butter, which are taken to the south to be sold in exchange for grain and rice that were brought back. Without animals, it was difficult to survive.

Q: Did you go with your family to sell curd and butter and cheese in order to get grain?

00:16:53

#33N: No, father went to trade. Mother did the milking and made butter and such while we the children herded the animals. Father went to trade.

Q: Did you ever go to school?

#33N: No, [I] never did.

Q: So can you tell us about when your family left Tibet? What were the circumstances when you left Tibet?

#33N: Afraid that the Chinese would come, [we] fled. [We] fled leaving all the things in the house.

Q: How did you hear that the Chinese were coming?

#33N: [I] do not know how but the parents said [we] should go and [we] left.

Q: Heard from the parents?

#33N: Yes. The parents said the Chinese were coming and all of us left.

Q: Can you remember the moment when your parents told you you would have to leave? How was it? What did they say? How did you hear?

#33N: Being a child I did not feel anything, did not feel anything.

Q: Did your parents seem very anxious or afraid?

00:19:12

#33N: Yes, exactly. The parents were scared and said, "Let's go, go." Then [we] left.

Q: So how many days did you have between your parents saying you have to leave and actually leaving?

#33N: [We] fled immediately.

Q: So did your parents, had they already packed your household goods?

#33N: There was no time to pack. [We] left everything in the house.

Q: Did you actually see the Chinese?

#33N: I did not see [the Chinese] come. The parents said that [they] were coming. So [we] fled.

Q: When they said...had you met Chinese at this point?

#33N: [I] saw the Chinese come once but he did not treat us badly. [He] stayed for around a month and went back. [I] wonder what strategy [the Chinese] formed after going back but they were coming [again] and we fled.

Q: Was it one Chinese that came?

#33N: Yes.

Q: So this...Chinese man, right? When this Chinese man came to your village for 1-2 months, what was he doing in the village?

00:21:22

#33N: He just stayed by himself and did not treat [us] badly. He just stayed and then went back.

Q: But whereas your father was doing business and your mother was milking and you were herding animals, what did he do during the day?

#33N: No, [he] did not give any problem. He did not give any problem. He stayed and then went back.

Q: Did [the Chinese man] stay in your house or...?

#33N: No, he stayed in another house.

Q: Did he rent a house?

#33N: There were houses. We had other houses in which...there were houses that belonged to the government where one could stay. [He] stayed in one.

Q: The Tibetan Government?

#33N: Yes.

Q: So the government houses were they Tibetan Government houses or were they Chinese Government houses?

#33N: No, [the houses] did not belong to the Chinese. [They] were ours.

Q: Did it not belong to the Tibetan Government also?

#33N: No, [the houses] were not built by the Tibetan Government but by those of us that lived there.

Q: Residents of the village?

#33N: Yes. There were houses that Tibetan people that traveled towards Ngari could stay.

Q: Who was the owner?

#33N: The owners were the people themselves.

Q: Did they pay you anything to stay there?

00:23:37

#33N: There was not any need to pay.

Q: I'm just thinking if I were living in the village and somebody came into the village that none of us knew and they didn't work, didn't do any work, I think that we would be talking amongst ourselves and wondering why are they here? Was there any kind of conversation like that?

#33N: In order to have a conversation he did not understand our language and we did not understand [Chinese]. [We] just stayed like animals.

Q: But how did he know to go and stay in that village house?

#33N: [I] do not know how he knew but he had come there and stayed in that house.

Q: How many days travel was it to get to Lo Menthang?

#33N: It took around six days from my hometown to Lo Menthang [Upper Mustang] carrying packs on the back.

Q: And then?

#33N: Yes?

Q: Did anything happen during the journey?

00:25:37

#33N: During the journey one carried the packs and stayed wherever [we] found a place to stay.

Q: There were no particular hardships...

#33N: [We] did not face much hardship.

Q: ...like encountering Chinese?

#33N: [We] did not encounter any Chinese and along the way we worked in the fields of the people of Upper Mustang and survived on the wages.

Q: So it sounds...I imagine that life was very difficult once you got to Nepal, once you went into exile that you said earlier.

#33N: It was a lot of struggle when [I] first arrived due to lack of food. It was very difficult. I had a life, had children and it was very difficult to earn a living.

Q: Had children?

#33N: Yes. Presently due to the benevolence of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, [I] am very happy. There is no problem with food and there is aid coming in. There is help if children attend school. Due to the benevolence of the Buddha [I] am happy presently.

Q: You mentioned that when you went into exile you had lot of problems. Can you tell us in some detail about what those problems were?

00:28:17

#33N: [I] lived in Upper Mustang for around two years and then moved to the place called Jar for a year.

Q: What kind of work did you do?

#33N: [We] continued to work in the fields during the journey, work in the fields of the people of Upper Mustang.

Q: Other people's fields, right?

#33N: Yes. From there [we] lived in Manang, lived in the place called Manang for two years, and then moved here from Manang.

Q: The field work that you did when you worked for other people, what were some hard factor?

#33N: At that time one had reached a certain age and the body was strong. So one did not feel very tired when working. There was harvesting grain and harvesting millet and

turning over [the crops] but it was not very hard. After coming here [I] carried rocks and such but whatever one did the body was strong and [I] was not tired.

Q: When you were in Mustang, did you encounter any kind of discrimination?

00:31:09

#33N: There was no discrimination for during the day one went to work for the family. [We] ate breakfast and lunch there and brought the dinner back home to the parents. [We] worked the whole day and returned to the parents to sleep. [We] did not have to live with the family.

Q: Was food brought home from them?

#33N: One can bring back *tsampa* ‘flour made from roasted barley’ and millet. It was okay to say, “[I] do not wish to eat it but take it home.”

Q: What else do you remember about the time when you came into exile?

#33N: I have struggled in order to survive working in fields and weaving carpets. [I] wove carpets after coming here and also spinning wool and carrying rocks. That is how [I] survived. Now [I] have aged and can no longer work.

Q: It sounds like it was very different work from what you had when you were living in Tibet.

#33N: Yes?

Q: Your work in the hometown was very different from the work you had to do in exile.

00:33:35

#33N: Yes. While I was living in the hometown there was not much work except taking care of animals but after coming here I had to do everything to survive.

Q: Is there anything else that you would like to tell us about your life?

#33N: [I] do not have anything to say. [Laughs]

Q: We just want to be sure that you’ve been able to share what you indicated earlier that you wanted to share.

#33N: Yes.

Q: Is it okay to stop?

#33N: It is enough.

Q: Well, thank you very much for the interview. I have to ask you a couple of questions again. If the interview were to be shown in Tibet or China, would you or your family have a problem...would there be a problem for you or your family?

#33N: There will be no problem. What problem will I face?

Q: So can we use your real name?

#33N: Yes.

Q: Great. Thank you very much for spending time with us and sharing your story. It was very interesting.

#33N: [Nods]

END OF INTERVIEW