

Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #35D – Tsering Chonphel
May 14, 2012

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INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #35D
2. Interviewee: Tsering Chonphel
3. Age: 77
4. Date of Birth: 1935
5. Sex: Male
6. Birthplace: Shungpa
7. Province: Utsang
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1959
9. Date of Interview: May 14, 2012
10. Place of Interview: Hotel Tibet, Mcleod Ganj, Dharamsala, Himachal Pradesh, India
11. Length of Interview: 1 hr 25 min
12. Interviewer: Marcella Adamski
13. Interpreter: Tenzin Yangchen
14. Videographer: Pema Tashi
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

Biographical Information:

Tsering Chonphel fondly remembers his “blissful life” in a beautiful land of snow-covered mountains, huge pasturelands and rivers. He came from a nomadic family with a large number of sheep, goats, yaks and horses. He gives us a glimpse of a nomad’s life which required the family to move three times in winter and three times in summer. They lived in a tent made of yak hair and spent their days herding the animals. Tsering Chonphel learned many songs as a child and exhibits a sample by singing a song in praise of the sky, earth and home. He proudly says that he has taught many songs at the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts in Dharamsala, India.

Tsering Chonphel describes the gathering of wool, which was then traded for sugar, apricots and other goods brought by Indian traders. His older brothers also harvested salt and borax from a large lake. The salt was traded in India, while the borax was sent to China. They paid three forms of tax to the Tibetan government, including “tax for cuisine on the table” of the Dalai Lama.

Tsering Chonphel recalls the Chinese first appeared in his region from Xinjiang in 1950. He describes their poor condition and the premonitions of the elders that something bad was going to happen. The Chinese demand on the Tibetans to surrender their weapons prompted the district official to take flight and were joined by the villagers. Tsering Chonphel gives a detailed account the group’s difficult journey through the snow to Nepal.

Topics Discussed:

Childhood memories, herding, nomadic life, trade, taxes, first appearance of Chinese, escape experiences, life as a refugee in Nepal.

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Interview #35D

Interviewee: Tsering Chonphel

Age: 77, Sex: Male

Interviewer: Marcella Adamski

Interview Date: May 14, 2012

Question: Please tell us your name.

00:00:13

Interviewee #35D: I am Tsering Chonphel.

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?

#35D: Yes, I give [my] permission.

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

#35D: Okay.

Q: 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.

#35D: Okay.

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

00:02:14

#35D: There will be no particular problem because I am old. I should go to visit my relatives in the village but [I] may not be able to. So, there should not be any problem though I cannot say for certain. [My] sibling has arrived here, but there are maternal uncles, paternal uncles, aunts and numerous relatives left behind in Tibet. However, it should not be a problem because I do not have any plans to go there. [I] have been there twice and have relatives there.

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

#35D: Okay.

Q: *Ashang-la* ‘respectful term for maternal uncle,’ can you please tell me where were you born in Tibet and what year was that?

#35D: I was born in the place called Shungpa Matsen in Ngari.

Q: When were you born?

#35D: I cannot say the year for certain but am 77 years old now and my birth sign is the pig. It is similar to the year His Holiness the Dalai Lama [was born].

Q: What kind of work did your mother and father do in Tibet?

00:04:32

#35D: Both my parents were nomads. They worked as nomads.

Q: How many people were in your family?

#35D: Though a few passed away later, at that time there were eight [children] with five brothers and two sisters.

Q: Seven.

#35D: Yes, there were seven.

Q: Then there were father and mother.

#35D: Yes, father and mother too.

Q: Can you describe what your life was like growing up as a nomad son of a nomad family?

#35D: [We] were living in a nomadic region. The place was clean and very vast. As a child one felt blissful because during summertime there was good grass in the pastures. There was no forest cover. Likewise, there was a large river in the region. The mountains were covered with snow at the top, rocks around the middle and huge pasturelands at the base. It was most blissful.

Q: As a nomad family, how many times a year would your family move to other places?

00:06:52

#35D: Oh, one must move many times, three times during summertime and three times during the winter. One moved as the grass depleted.

Q: Can you tell us what kinds of animals did you have and how many were in your herds?

#35D: We possessed yaks, sheep, goats and horses.

Q: How many?

#35D: [We] were among the middle class families. There were around 1,500 goats and sheep, around 20-odd yaks, perhaps 27 or 28, and around six horses.

Q: What were your responsibilities as a child when you were like 6, 7, 8 and 10? What did you do?

#35D: There were no particular responsibilities as such but [I] was old enough to herd yaks and sheep. [I] used to do that, but there were no other particular heavy responsibilities, as those were carried out by the elders.

Q: What are some of your favorite memories when you were a little boy?

00:09:01

#35D: I was the youngest at that time, the youngest among the seven siblings. I, being the youngest was loved the most and it was a very happy time. [I] was blissful and was given the best clothes and the best food. [I] was given the tastiest food and treats and was very happy.

[I] wish to say something about that time. We called the youngest among the siblings as Nowo. At home in Tibet I was not called Tsering Chonphel but Nowo, being the youngest. [My] name was Nowo. The oldest was called Phowo.

Q: Phowo?

#35D: Yes. Since I was the youngest [I] was always called Nowo. If you went to Tibet, since my family members called me that, most of the people called me Nowo. Hardly anyone called [me] Tsering Chonphel. Here, one must register one's name.

Q: What kind of a house did you live in? What was your, I mean your living quarters? What were they like?

#35D: Ours was not a house but a tent, a *ba*.

Q: A *ba*?

#35D: Yes. It was called a *ba*. We [also] called it a *gur* 'tent.'

Q: Describe the *ba*.

00:10:56

#35D: Our *ba* was among the smaller ones and there were two pillars. There were four pillars outside and two inside. The bigger ones had three pillars and the very big *ba* were with four pillars [inside]. These were very big. [They] were made from yak hair.

Q: What kind of education did you have, if any?

#35D: There were no schools or any kind of education that was given. One learned to dance, sing and chant prayers naturally from one's parents, relatives and neighbors. There was no education as such. There were no schools.

Q: Are there any mantras that you can still remember that you learned as a child?

#35D: When [I] was there, [I] could chant very well but these days [I] have forgotten some of them. [I] did know as [I] had memorized them.

Q: Can you remember any songs that you used to sing as a child?

00:13:32

#35D: [My] voice is not good now though [I] used to sing and have taught many [songs] at the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts [Dharamsala].

Q: Really? Even if your voice is not good, would it be possible just to sing a little part of one? We would love to hear it.

#35D: There are many types. Where should [I] begin? [Laughs]

Q: Pick one. Your favorite, something easy that you like.

#35D: There is one about the sky, earth and home. [I] will sing a short one.

Q: The sky, earth and home?

#35D: About home, like a house or tent. It describes such and is called a *yanglu*.

00:14:52 [Sings]

Gungo khayi chechung
Tinpay khorgya korsung
Gungla kartin yeru dichung
Sernyidhi samdhon dupsong
Samdhon dupay shapdo
Sumthayala lema sum sum

Sashi khashing chechung
Tsala tsithok khorgya korsung
Lugla yarmo samdhon dupsong
Samdhon dupay shapdo
Sumthayala lema sum sum
Korayala yekor korlo

Mashing serkyi khangpa
Madhung chedak yeru dichung
Poedhang marmay khorgya korsung

*Lhalu samdhon dupsong
Samdhon dupay shapdo
Sumthayala lema sum sum
Korayala yekor korlo*

*Phuru zamsha ngonkar
Choechang zima nangla luksong
Gyangul kherma thendrel diksong
Thendel dikpay shapdo
Sumthayala lema sum sum*

*Karyul thakzam durik
Rimoyala lokhor chunyi
Gyachang yoma nangla luksong
Dewar sikpa thendel diksong
Thendel dikpay shapdo
Sumthayala lema sum sum
Korayala yekor korlo*

Let us leave it at that.

Q: Beautiful. Thank you.

#35D: [I] have taught it at the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts.

Q: Basically it's about the sky and the mountains?

#35D: Yes, it is. The first [stanza]

*Gungo khayi chechung
Tinpay khorgya korchung
Gung karu yerma dimchung
Sernyidhi samdhon dupsong
Samdhon dupay shapdo dapkyiyin*

The sky is vast and boundless
Surrounded by endless clouds
Brilliant stars shine in the sky
The sun and the moon are triumphant
Let us rejoice with the dance of success!

That is the description about the sky.

*Sashi khashing chechung
Dhi nagla zepo pangyen methok
Tsala tsithok khorgya korsung*

Lugla yarmo samdhon dupsong
Samdhon dupay shapdo

The earth is immense and lush
Decked by flowers that bloom
The sheep in the meadows eat and thrive
The sheep are surely triumphant
Let us rejoice with the dance of success!

Mashing serkyi khangpa
Madhung chedak yeru dichung
Poedhang marmay khorgya korsung
Lhalu samdhon dupsong
Samdhon dupay shapdo

The tent needs no building yet makes a home
Within it are pillars and beams that hold
Incense and butter lamps are faithfully offered
The deities and nagas are triumphant
Let us rejoice with the dance of success!

Phuru zamsha ngonkar
Choechang zima nangla luksong
Gyangul kherma thendrel diksong
Thendel dikpay shapdo, Sumthayala lema sum sum

The cup that is white and blue
Is filled with delicious *chang* ‘home-brewed beer’
The cup is decorated with silver
Let us rejoice with the dance of success!’

Karyul thakzam durik
Rimoyala lokhor chunyi
Gyachang yoma nangla luksong
Dimar sikpa thendel diksong
Thendel dikpay shapdo, Sumthayala lema sum sum
Korayala yekor korlo

The cup is adorned with designs
Of the twelve birth signs
It is overflowing with tea
Flavored with butter from the *dri*
Let us rejoice with the dance of success!
Let us swirl round and round!’

Q: Beautiful song. Thank you. When was the song sung?

#35D: This can be sung anytime. There are [songs that are] sung at certain times, but this can be sung anytime.

Q: When you were a young boy and you took the herds out sometimes, how many days did you stay out or did you come home at night?

#35D: When it was wintertime, in the morning around this time—it would be spring now—if it was winter, [the animals] must be taken to graze around 7 o'clock or 7:30. [They] are allowed to graze the whole day and were brought in the evening to the enclosure at 5 o'clock. There were enclosures for the sheep. [We] stayed the whole day with the sheep.

Q: Was it to the *ba* that [you] came back?

#35D: Near the *ba* were *lhera* 'enclosures,' huge pens for the sheep that were constructed with stones. [The sheep] were enclosed in it. The shepherds took *doka*, which was *tsampa* 'flour made from roasted barley' and buttermilk that [he] ate on the mountain.

During summertime, the mother sheep and goats were taken to the grasslands before daybreak. [We] left around the break of dawn and then brought [them] back to the pen around 9 o'clock.

Q: Morning?

00:23:12

#35D: [We] left very early and let [them] graze. And then the mother sheep and goats must be milked. After milking [they] were once again sent to graze.

Q: Who did the milking?

#35D: Mother and her sisters did the milking. Boys did not engage much in milking. However, since I was the youngest and of my two sisters, one had passed away earlier and the other had been given away in marriage, I helped mother with the milking.

The *dri* 'female yak' were milked early around 7 o'clock and then were left to graze in the mountains. The *dri* were not taken back and forth for milking.

Q: You said that when you went to do herding, you would take food with you and have a lot of fun. What fun did you have?

#35D: The regular [food] one took was buttermilk and *tsampa*, but the wealthier ones took ingredients to prepare tea as well as *tsampa*. One ate the buttermilk and *tsampa* on the mountaintop. The mountains were expansive and there were rabbits, numerous birds that sang, flowing waters, snowy mountains and one stayed there happily. One spent the day with the sheep unmindful of time. One was very happy.

[Discontinuity in video]

Q: When did your life, this beautiful happy life begin to change?

00:26:38

#35D: It started when the Chinese initially appeared.

Q: And about how old were you when that happened?

#35D: How old was I? I am 77 now. [The Chinese] arrived in our region from Xinjiang in '50. Chinese soldiers first appeared there with stuff loaded on horses and camels. It was almost wintertime, the 11th lunar month of '50. They were stopped there for around a year.

Q: In your village?

#35D: Not exactly in our village, but in [the place] called Ripithangkung, which was in Gerze territory. It was actually in the territory of Sengo, called Ripithangkung. [They] came from Xinjiang. The Chinese that appeared in Ngari arrived from Xinjiang. The district official of our region and an assistant had to go to receive them, as informed by the Governor General of Ngari. [They] had to go to receive the Chinese. "There will be no happiness. The ones called Chinese are coming." All the people showed signs of sadness then. I was a child and was not aware much. Well, not a child but a teenager.

Q: What did the Governor General say?

00:28:23

#35D: "The Chinese have arrived at Ripithangkung." There were many clusters of nomads and [the District Governor and assistant] were to sort of receive them. This was the order given by the Governor General of Ngari. So, our district official along with an assistant, 5-6 horses and three men left. [They] returned that winter in the 12th lunar month. The Chinese were at Ripithangkung and the one called Gerze Rikyam had ordered that [the Chinese soldiers] not leave. [They] were stopped there.

It seemed like they had scarce food. It used to be said that [they] killed Tibetan wild asses, Tibetan antelopes and other wild animals. There were heaps of meat on which were bird droppings, some parts [of the meat] devoured by wolves but [the troops] consumed [the meat]. The Chinese first appeared in the year '50. I must have been around 14 or 15 years old.

Q: Was there any concerns about the Chinese coming into your country?

#35D: There were not any fears initially because the announcement said that [they] were the Meser Dolmag 'Liberation Army' and no one knew what Meser Dolmag was. When the [Chinese] army stayed at Ripithangkung, [they were called] Meser Dolmag. As [I] look back now, it was the one called *chingdol* 'liberation.' [They] were called the Meser Dolmag and did not do anything [adverse] then.

Then in the 4th month of '51 there were two groups [of Chinese troops]. One proceeded to Ngari Gathok through Ruthok. So, there was one group based at Ngari Gathok and another Chinese army camp near the Indus River. Then another group left through our region of Shungpa to Porang through Chuktsang. The [group] that went to Porang journeyed through our village. I saw this with [my] eyes in the year '51. [They] were travelling with [their] stuff loaded on camels and horses.

Q: What were your thoughts when you saw them?

00:32:17

#35D: All the older [people] remarked that it was a bad omen but I did not know anything. The men looked terrible, what should [I] say...whether made from feathers or cotton, [their] clothes were puffed up and lips cracked. [They] looked very poorly. The men's faces were hairless and reddish. That was the first time we had seen Chinese. The old ones remarked that this was a bad sign. All the elders became sad and we too were not happy. It was like that.

Q: Were you afraid of them?

#35D: I did not dare get close to them because it was said that they were bad and [I] thought they would do bad things. [I] looked from afar to observe how they were. There were many things that they had left behind, but the parents did not allow [us] to touch the things saying, "These are Chinese things. [They] are bad."

Q: Why do you think your parents thought they were bad people?

#35D: Even at that time, the ones called Chinese...Tibet was an independent country since long ago. They knew that numerous Chinese had arrived [in Tibet] in the past and the Tibetans had invaded [China too]. [I] do not know the entire story but [my parents] said, "They have come to invade us. They claim to be the liberation army but ultimately will cause us suffering. They are very bad people."

Q: When you first saw them, were you still taking your animals to the hills? Were you shearing the animals, shearing them for wool? Was that one of your jobs or what were you doing?

00:35:22

#35D: Yes, at that time during summer the sheep were sheared; yak hair, pashmina wool and goat hair were sheared. All these were sold to merchants from India in the summer. They came to our region from Ladhak, Garsha, Khunnu and Spiti. It was close to the border.

The older siblings took loads of salt to sell in Uttar Pradesh [India]. Salt. Both salt and borax were available in our region.

Q: You took the wool and yak hair to get salt?

#35D: No, salt was available on the ground. It was available for picking in our region at no cost. The payment for the wool was [in the form of] sugar candy, brown sugar cubes, apricot, and others like copper, brass or whatever. There was a huge fair called Gya Nyima Tsongra where all these goods were exchanged. The salt and borax must be taken to sell in the valley.

Q: Can you just tell us the process of how did you take the wool off of the yak and off of the sheep? Were they the same technique or were they different?

#35D: The *tsipa* ‘hair’ of the yak is found on the lower [part of the body] while the *khulu* was on the top [indicates shoulders]. The *khulu* fell off naturally during summertime, which was plucked and then sold. However, the *tsipa* was not sold much since [they] were used to make tents. After tying up the four limbs of the sheep, the wool was sheared using a sharp knife. The *lena* of the goat known as pashmina was very expensive if sold through Kashmir. Sheep’s wool was also expensive. If not bartered, they could be sold for cash and then goods purchased using the cash. The currency was Indian *rupees*. Tibetan currency was not valid in our region, except for the *tanka* [a coin] of the Tibetan Government. None of the red and paper notes were valid. Only Indian currency was in circulation.

Q: Did you as a nomad take these to Kashmir and other places or did other people come in and buy it from you?

00:39:39

#35D: The Ladhakis were the middlemen. They came from Ladakh bearing apricots and things [for exchange] and also paid cash for *lena* and sold [them] in Kashmir. They were people of Ladakh. [Merchants] of Khunnu, Spiti and Garsha bought the wool to be dispatched to the plains for manufacturing *gonam* ‘machine-made woolen cloth.’ Khunnu is known as Kinnar.

Q: When did your life begin to change under the Chinese, your life, your personal experience?

#35D: The worst change for me came about...until then my older brothers engaged in trade and we also paid taxes to the Tibetan Government since we were tax payers. [We] were living happily. We were extremely happy prior to ’59. [We] paid taxes to the Tibetan Government and carried on with [our] lives in that way. [We] exchanged salt and borax that were available in our region for rice and grains. There were also things to sell like yak and sheep’s wool, *lena*, butter and cheese. The Chinese became worse and worse after ’59 and times became terrible then. That was the worst.

Q: One thing that you mentioned was there was salt in your area. How did you gather the salt? How did you prepare it for trade?

#35D: There was a large lake, a large salt lake. When a wave washed ashore, salt was deposited [on the bank] and then the water rolled back. The salt was as thick as this [gestures off camera] and then it was beaten. One could gather as much salt as the sheep could carry. The yaks were used to perform labor tax for the Tibetan Government. Borax must be obtained from the lake by stirring the water.

Q: Borax?

#35D: Yes, borax. These days borax is not obtained from water but from digging the soil. Presently the Chinese carry away 40-50 truckloads of it.

Q: What is this mineral used for?

00:44:23

#35D: It is said that it is one of the main ingredients used in the manufacture of the world's machinery. We had no knowledge. It is transported to Xinjiang and also to Gormo. A [route] followed is from Thoe through Nagchu avoiding Lhasa and to Gormo where the railway station is located.

Q: Through Lhasa?

#35D: No, not through Lhasa but directly from Nagchu to...

Q: China?

#35D: China. [I] do not know whether it goes to Siting or elsewhere in China. It is taken in that direction. Goods were brought to Ngari directly from Gormo to the Chinese stalls located at the biggest military camp near the Indus River in Ngari. Presently it is located at Tunchu. Ten to 15 trucks arrived together. The goods were brought and sold there, and on the way back they carried borax.

One part [of the borax loads] was taken to Xinjiang and another to [China]. A greater quantity left for Xinjiang. A huge quantity of borax was moved. It was mined in Gerge District. It was called Gerge but actually it is Shungpa territory. We fled while a large number of Gerge [people] was left behind. It was in Gerge District.

Q: How far was your region from Ladakh? How many days by trekking?

00:46:36

#35D: It is very [far] from Ladakh. Presently it is close if one traveled by vehicle. However, in those days the merchants of Ladakh took around 10 days driving donkeys and sheep. It did not take more than 10 days or 12-13 days from Ladakh. It was close from the Changthang 'Northern Plateau.'

Q: And how long to the Chinese border from your area?

#35D: [Laughs] It is three days journey by vehicle from the [place] called Ngari Tunchu, the town near Indus River to Lhasa. We were located in the uppermost western part of Ngari.

Q: But from his home where he mostly lived, how long to the Chinese border?

#35D: [I] wonder how far it is to China. One traveled through Ruthok to go to Xinjiang. It is around two days journey by vehicle to the Xinjiang border. It would take around 4-5 days in a vehicle to Urumqi.

Q: Where?

00:48:13

#35D: To Xinjiang. Until 1979 the whole of Ngari was under Xinjiang Autonomous Region. It was not under Lhasa. The Chinese called it Ari Tichue ‘Prefecture.’ [They] said ‘Ari’ and not ‘Ngari.’ If you look up books, [you] will find Ari. There was ‘A’ but no ‘Nga.’ Ari Tichue.

Q: You also mentioned that you paid taxes to the Tibetan Government. How did you feel about those taxes? Did they seem fair or were they not seeming fair?

#35D: Though [I] cannot say for certain, [I] think there were no taxes or law in our region under the Tibetan Government until the time of His Holiness the 5th Dalai Lama. Roads were constructed and taxes levied on all from the reign of the Great Fifth Dalai Lama. One must pay taxes anywhere in the world and we paid taxes to the Tibetan Government with joy and did not resent it. Taxes had to be paid to the Ngari District and the Tibetan Government. [We] had to pay a gold tax too. There were three types [of taxes].

Q: What was the gold tax?

#35D: The name of the gold tax was *soljok kyi shel dhoe* ‘tax for cuisine on the table’ of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. A *serpon* ‘person in charge of gold’ came to collect gold and our region was obliged to pay 50 *tola* [grams?] of gold annually.

Q: How did [you] say? His Holiness the Dalai Lama’s...?

00:51:19

#35D: *Soljok kyi shel dhoe*.

Q: What’s *shel dhoe*?

#35D: *Shel dhoe* is what we would describe as “tax for cuisine on the table.” However, it was not an order but offered voluntarily by us.

I did not bring it today but the standard [weight of measurement] was the weight of a *rupee* [Indian], a *rupee* during the British rule. I shall show you tomorrow. A *rupee* was placed on one side [of a scale] and the gold on the other.

Q: When did your life begin to change under the Chinese that it became difficult for you?

#35D: The most difficult [time] was in the year ’59 when His Holiness the Dalai Lama left and Tibet was lost and the six leaders of the four districts of Ngari were captured within a day. [They] were captured towards the end of the 3rd or in the 4th lunar month of ’59.

Q: What were you doing in your own life when that was happening? What was happening in your life experience?

00:53:36

#35D: We were living as nomads in the region. There was our district official besides the six leaders of the four districts. All those areas connected to the main roads had a district official. We had a District official to whom the Chinese wrote, “Surrender all weapons that you own, whether guns or knives. It is imperative to do so.” The Chinese sent a letter but our district official played safe by saying—at that time there was the Defend Dharma Volunteer Force. They were the Defend Dharma Volunteer Force for us but rebels for the Chinese—“There are numerous rebels around. Therefore, please permit us to retain [the weapons] to defend ourselves for the time being. [We] shall offer them as time goes by.” Two children were sent on horseback to deliver the letter. Permission was granted for the time being.

Our district official and a few of his people said that [they] were leaving. “[We] shall not live under the Chinese and are leaving. Whoever wishes to come can come.” The *Chushi Gangdrug* [Defend Tibet Volunteer Force] was at the Lo Dhopo area, but at that time it was known as Tensung Dhanglang Maga ‘Defend Dharma Volunteer Force.’ [The district official said,] “If you wish to stay, it is fine but I am leaving.” So all of us [fled] together. It [Indian border] was close had we taken the Ladakh route. [However], Chinese soldiers had blocked all the mountain passes and there was no pathway so [we] went towards Lo Dhopo on the Nepal border. [We] went towards the south.

Q: Can you describe the journey? How old were you? How many people went with you? Tell me what happened on the journey?

00:56:58

#35D: There were innumerable [people]. At that time there were different groups from various villages. There was a group from Gerze, the Gerze Rikyam’s [group] that was enormous. However, the group of Gerze Pon ‘Chieftain’ did not leave. Then there were the government taxpayers like Sengor, Rundhor, Shungpa, Bongpa, Tsurgu, Shungru, Bawa, Hor, Singthoe, Singmay, all of whom fled.

When [we] reached the base of the mountain pass of Lo Dhopo, there was still a long way to go to the south. Around 60 families were able to cross the mountain pass first. The rest could not for it started to snow on the pass. And in the 4th lunar month of the year ’60 Xinjiang troops pursued us. The Shigatse Regiment arrived through the Brahmaputra River. They clashed and the path on the mountain pass of Lo Dhopo was blocked. Those of us managed to cross the pass and the rest splintered into two groups. The Xinjiang army chased one group to Ngari and the Shigatse Regiment took one group that merged in two districts of Shigatse.

I left all my belongings and animals and along with my mother and two brothers—[I] had three older brothers but one was not there then—crossed the mountain pass in the snow.

[Our] provisions were loaded onto four horses. [We] left behind our animals, tents, belongings and fled.

00:59:40

The one that started the escape was the district official of Shungpa named Sitham. He was the father of Jola Dakpo. Jola Dakpo is here now but he was small then and would not know much. Everybody fled. Those of us that fled did not surrender any weapons to the Chinese.

After the escape, some [of the weapons] were given to the *Chushi Gangdrug* at Mustang and some at the Nepali Check Post. Some [people] were killed during encounters with the Chinese. It was impossible to fight due to [us] being outnumbered and many got killed. From our village, Yakra Chakdhor—he was not killed but captured. However, Ponzing, three members consisting of father and sons of Garwi Chabgye, Bhu Tsering’s wife, Lhago, all of them were slain during cross firing.

Q: With the Chinese?

#35D: The Chinese. There was one called Singdhoe Lama and Bongpa Dinchung who fought. The *chanzoe* ‘business manager’ of the Singdhoe lama was either killed or lost during the encounter. They managed to escape by firing [their] guns as [they] fled. We threw away our guns while some of the Tibetan rifles were buried. [We] escaped carrying the pistols. There was no chance of a fight as the region was surrounded. Most of those with us were from Yukro and Yakra.

Q: How long did it take to go over the pass?

01:02:36

#35D: We had all reached the base of the pass and it was just a night’s journey to cross it. However, it was difficult to traverse over the snow.

Q: How deep was the snow and were you on foot or horseback?

#35D: The snow was as high as this house and one walked over it. The Chinese had blocked all routes on the pass. The older people knew of a passage from earlier times and that is how [we] were able to come through it into Nepalese territory. We arrived in the valley of Mukhum, under the reign of the Zumla King.

Q: [The snow was] as tall as this room?

#35D: It could be but one could not see the ground. However, there were cracks in the snow and these were covered with *chara* ‘shawls’ the horses to walk over. Otherwise, the horses could slip. Two or three people on the either sides [of the crack] held [the covering] and let it jump. One could leap over but the crack was this size [gestures off camera] and if a horse fell through, it would fall way down.

Q: How is the *chara* covered?

#35D: If this is the crack, over it a *chara* that is made from yak hair [places a cloth bag over legs]...

Q: What's *chara*?

#35D: It is like a large shawl made from the hair of yak and tough, which was placed like this [stretches cloth bag over legs]. Two people held here and two here [points to ends of the cloth bag] and led the horse across [points to center of cloth bag]. The horse placed its foot on the *chara* and did not fall through. There were just a few [cracks] and not many. The cracks in the snow are very deep.

Q: Do you remember how it felt to you that night to be making that escape? What were you feeling in your heart as you left Tibet?

01:05:30

#35D: [I] felt sad that [I] was leaving this happy village. However, mother was with me and she said, "If [we] could see His Holiness the Dalai Lama once, [we] can leave our wealth, animals and everything behind. It would be beneficial if you younger ones could return. I will be dead soon but [you] must pray that [you] can return." So, when [we] reached the top of the mountain, we [prayed] to our village, "Farewell, we are leaving now." [We] prayed and left.

Q: Your mother was with you and you were about 15 years old or...no...when you left, when you escaped?

#35D: I was 22, 23 or 24, perhaps 22 or 23. I am not certain.

Q: Were you married at the time?

#35D: I never married, never. One of our siblings was a lama and he had left earlier with the district official. When I left there were [members of the] *ladang* 'grand lama's residence' with us. We brought four very precious idols that belonged to the *ladang* on horseback and left everything else behind. The idols were small in size and we brought them and a little quantity of provisions.

Q: Where did you land when you went over that pass? What country were you in?

01:08:06

#35D: After crossing the pass, initially it was very difficult to traverse over rocks and stones. It was difficult to lead the horses. Moving down the slopes were beautiful pastures and then forests.

Q: Which country was it?

#35D: It was not exactly Mukhum but Khawa. [They] understood Tibetan.

Q: Nepal?

#35D: Yes, Nepal. It was actually in the direction of Mukhum called Karma Rongpa, not exactly Karma but the pass we crossed was called Kagyu.

[The people of] Mukhum and Karma understood Tibetan. Beyond those was the region of the Zumla King. There were many that understood Nepali. [We] spent the summer and spring there. It was in the 5th lunar month.

Q: Could you tell us what happened a little bit after your new life in Nepal? What happened?

#35D: It was hardly any life. [We] had a little Indian money but not much. However, all the animals and belongings were left behind. There were traders that we knew. Then we went begging in Mukhum and Karma Rong. There were 12 clusters of Karma Rong who understood Tibetan. Whichever door [we] approached, [they] said, “Poor things. Come in for food. Drink tea. Take this.” [They] gave very well—rice, wheat flour—there was not much grain—potatoes and whatever vegetables [we] required. [They] gave very well.

01:10:57

In that way, we begged our way through and were over the pass in the year '60 and stayed there. My mother was old and [we] could not bring her further. My older brother, I and a group left on pilgrimage while mother and two older brothers stayed in Karma Rong.

We were numerous people on the pilgrimage. At that time there were many from Derge that had escaped and we traveled together. We were on foot and went to the hills to beg and had no trouble over our daily food requirements. The Nepalese stopped [us] on the India-Nepal border; the Indians stopped us. We stayed there for around a month and then were released. [We] then arrived in Manali [Himachal Pradesh] along with the Derge [group].

There were around 60 people that we had traveled together from Ngari. During the summer of that year we went from Manali to Spiti and worked as road crew. [We] were not allowed back. The daily wage was only 2 rupees. [Laughs] [We] returned in autumn, in the 9th month to fetch mother and older brothers who were left behind.

Q: Because of the Chinese you had to leave your homeland. So, I'm wondering what do you think and what do you feel about the Chinese these days?

01:13:38

#35D: [I] feel it must be [our] destiny. Otherwise, we have no relationship that even the parents can talk about because it is never in our history that we were under the Chinese and when they occupied the whole of Tibet, it must be our karma from our previous lives. Some of our co-villagers are left behind but one is helpless. Except for believing that it must be our karma from our past lives, there is nothing that can be done. The best thing to happen would be if His Holiness the Dalai Lama could go [to Tibet]. Though I have grown old now, I do have the hope of returning. Whether the Chinese return [Tibet] or not, it is up to them and nothing can be done. Even after negotiations, they become worse.

Q: When you say it was part of our destiny, are you talking about karma as it being a karmic destiny?

#35D: It must be our destiny. We must have committed sins in the past to suffer its effect. We are bearing the fruit of the “cause and effect.” The place of “effect” has been good in that we can see His Holiness the Dalai Lama and have arrived in a free country here. One must die anywhere and suffering the “effect” here and not under the Chinese where there is torment and gunfire, perhaps my [bad] karma, if it can be washed away, would be cleansed by now for my having struggled much and having left all the animals and belongings.

Furthermore, by the grace of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the 150,000-160,000 Tibetans are in a position to go abroad. On one hand, due to one’s bad “cause” of the past, one had to leave behind one’s belongings, but in order to cleanse the bad “effect” one struggled and is extremely happy now due to the grace of His Holiness and [I] have no regrets as [I] am in a country with freedom. [My] only thoughts are for His Holiness to go [to Tibet] and for Tibet to be returned but there is nothing to be done.

Q: What do you want the next generation of Tibetans to preserve about Tibet?

01:17:45

#35D: It would be futile for them [the younger generation] to go to war. In the first place, there should be support from another country by way of weapons, food grains and everything. Likewise, there should be weapons, so war would be futile. [They] must gain knowledge through education and in addition to that [they] must talk to the world and gain the support of the United Nations. Besides that, the Chinese...However much the youth may raise [their] voice for independence, the word independence cannot be uttered for them [the Chinese]. Hence, if they [the younger generation] went [to Tibet] with this [word, they] would not be allowed to proceed from the base of the pass. So [I] hope for assistance from the United Nations and [for the younger generation] to gain knowledge and education. Those are [my] thoughts. We elders do not know the language [English] and are weak and helpless. [Our] time is ending.

For example, enthusiastic young people are immolating themselves these days in Tibet. They are immolating themselves without using knives and weapons. However, the Chinese announce otherwise to the world saying that they were unstable. [The Chinese] speak such things. So it is extremely difficult to get through to someone who knows no “cause and effect.”

Q: So your concern is if the young people...

#35D: [Interrupts] They [the Chinese] give such descriptions.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Who’s unstable? The children?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: The Chinese people portray to the world those youngsters who immolated themselves are not stable in mind, that they are crazy to do such things.

Q: Do you think that these self-immolations are going to prevent possible negotiations with the Chinese or impede negotiations?

#35D: This will not pose a problem, but the Chinese are issuing a contrary account. Though it is not a problem for us, yet it is a factor and [they] are issuing such bad statements to deceive the world. The world will not believe it but instead of giving correct replies, [the Chinese] said, “The one that commits suicide is a great sinner.”

Q: What has it been like for you to tell your story today?

01:21:37

#35D: I cannot say now but it would be excellent if this could be shown to the United Nations and if it benefits [the Tibetan cause]. And if it does not, [I] have related what I heard and witnessed honestly. There is nothing more that can be done. [I] can only relate the problems we faced and what [we] did. If it bears fruit, it is good and [I] thank you. That will be excellent. However, the world will see the struggle [we] have undergone. And the people of the world can stand as witness to the truth. It has to be seen if the Chinese who are shameless and without “cause and effect” will accept.

Take the Chinese for instance, there are said to be 1.3 billion Chinese. Presently 9-10 or around 20 people of the Communist Party are in control and deceive the world. In the past, [the Chinese] classified the community and captured all the businessmen, rich nomads and landowners. [They] were given “the hat” [symbolic] and made to suffer. Presently, the leaders of the Communist Party have become businessmen and carry out business deals. The wealth of the nation is being used by the Communist Party, by one single organization.

Q: I think we’re going to have to conclude our interview for now and I want to, just one more time ask if this interview, now that you’ve given this interview, if it was shown in Tibet or China or anywhere else in the world, would this be a problem for you?

#35D: I do not think there will be any problems. However, one cannot speak about the future if there will be any sudden problems that is in my destiny.

Q: Well, thank you for sharing your story with us. We appreciate it.

#35D: Okay. Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW