

Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #36N – Lobsang Tenpa
April 14, 2015

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INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #36N
2. Interviewee: Lobsang Tenpa
3. Age: 83
4. Date of Birth: 1933
5. Sex: Male
6. Birthplace: Rila
7. Province: Utsang
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1963
9. Date of Interview: April 14, 2015
10. Place of Interview: Paljorling Tibetan Settlement, Prithvi Chowk, Pokhara, Nepal
11. Length of Interview: 0 hr 37 min
12. Interviewer: Katharine Davies Samway
13. Interpreter: Palden Tsering
14. Videographer: Henry Tenenbaum
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

Biographical Information:

Lobsang Tenpa was born in Rila, a small village of about 40-50 families in Utsang Province. He lost his parents at a young age. Being poor, Lobsang Tenpa was engaged as a servant to a family before the age of 20. He looked after their sheep and yaks and spun wool. His employers provided him with poor food, a meager salary and used clothing.

When the family Lobsang Tenpa worked for fled to Nepal, he travelled with them bringing their animals. He shares his experience of being captured by Chinese soldiers on a mountain pass near Mustang and being taken back to Tibet. But after travelling for a whole night and day, he and his co-prisoner managed to escape from the Chinese troops when they were passing through a forest at night. He escaped once again to Mustang, Nepal.

Lobsang Tenpa and the other nomad men that were living in Mustang were asked to join the *Chushi Gangdrug* [Defend Tibet Volunteer Force] that was re-established in Mustang. He felt obligated to join and describes how food rations were very poor at that time.

Topics Discussed:

Utsang, herding, servitude, escape experiences, guerrillas in Mustang.

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Interview #36N

Interviewee: Lobsang Tenpa

Age: 83, Sex: Male

Interviewer: Katharine Davies Samway

Interview Date: April 14, 2015

Question: Please tell us your name.

00:00:08

Interviewee #36N: Lobsang Tenpa.

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 with which we work to use this interview?

#36N: Yes, yes.

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

#36N: Okay.

Q: If you do not wish to answer a question or talk about something, please also let us know.

#36N: Okay.

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

#36N: No, it will not be.

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

00:02:14

#36N: Okay.

Q: How old are you?

#36N: 83.

Q: And where did you grow up?

#36N: The place where [I] grew up is called Rila. [I] lived in the place called Rila for nearly 30-odd years.

Q: Is Rila a town or a village or just a little settlement?

#36N: It is a small village, a small one. For instance, the village has around 40-50 families.

Q: And about how many people lived in the village?

#36N: [I] do not know the population, but there could be over 100 people in the 40-50 families.

Q: You lived there for 30 years. So what kind of work did you do?

#36N: I spoke about the livelihood earlier. That is the one.

Q: Please say it again.

00:03:58

#36N: Okay. It was like this: At around the age of 20-odd one went to gather salt and to do trade. Most of the time one engaged in herding yaks or sheep, [as] yak herders and shepherds. [I] did that for many years.

Q: Did you have your own yaks?

#36N: My family did not own yaks but had a small number of sheep. [We] did not own yaks.

Q: How many sheep did you have?

#36N: There were 40-50 sheep.

Q: Did you have any other animals?

#36N: [We] owned just 3-4 yaks—did not own many, nor did [we] own horses.

As mentioned earlier, as a young person I was engaged as a servant to other people because I did not own wealth, did not own animals. There being no parents [I] was engaged as a servant to other people.

Q: How old were you when you began working as a servant?

00:06:05

#36N: [I] began working as a servant just before the age of 20.

Q: And how did you find this work?

#36N: The job entailed looking after animals, herding them and spinning. [I] liked herding animals.

Q: Can you tell us some of your memories about taking care of the animals?

#36N: During the day one herded in the hills and watched the animals and brought them back in the evening. That was it.

Q: And when you are up in the grasslands what were you doing?

#36N: One watched the animals during the day, followed them and spent the whole day. Then in the evening...At around 5 or 6 o'clock [in the morning] one left [home] and grazed [the animals] the whole day and returned home around 7 or 8 o'clock in the evening and put the animals in the enclosure. One had to sleep near the sheep and yaks at night because there were wolves.

Q: You took them up at 5 or 6 in the morning and then you brought them back about 7 or 8. So where did you bring them back?

00:08:48

#36N: There was the enclosure at home, a round enclosure in which they were enclosed.

Q: For the animals?

#36N: Yes, for the animals. That was for the sheep while there was no enclosure for the yaks. They were just left in the open.

I forgot to mention this earlier. Just prior to the arrival of the soldiers there [in the hometown], the Chinese came to the families [that had escaped]; the Chinese came in the night. The Chinese captured and took [me] away. [We] journeyed one whole night to another place on the other side where majority of the Chinese were housed. The soldiers took us there.

We were two men [captured]. The other person was not from my hometown. [We] were not assaulted during the journey but questioned. [We] did not know Chinese then. [The Chinese] asked questions but [we] could not understand. They ate during the course of the journey but we did not get anything to eat. Then night fell. When night fell—[to interpreter] you may not know—there was a *nag* ‘forest,’ a *nag*. Men fell here and there in the *nag*. In the melee both of us managed to escape.

Q: What’s the meaning of *nag*?

#36N: *Nag* is an area where such things like plants [points off camera] grow. You would not know.

Q: Like muddy?

#36N: There is no mud but the ground is uneven and there are plants like these [gestures off camera]. The ground is uneven. A *nag* is like that.

Q: Was that created on purpose?

00:10:53

#36N: It grows naturally. It grows naturally in that area. Everybody tripped this side and that side in this area. There were two nomads during the day that helped. They drove us from behind while they [Chinese?] went ahead armed with guns. [We] were to be taken to the Chinese camp but the two of us escaped. Everybody tripped this side and that side in the night. It was nighttime with no moon and no light. It was dark. When everyone went ahead, we got the chance to escape. [We] fled and reached home.

Q: How old were you when this happened?

00:12:30

#36N: [I] might have been 28 or 29 years old then.

Q: Why did the Chinese capture you?

#36N: [The Chinese] took away nomads to interrogate them. [They] could not question me because I escaped. Otherwise, they would imprison and interrogate [me], to ask about places and such. [The Chinese] could not question me as [I] escaped.

Q: So where did they keep you when they captured you?

#36N: [I] was taken along, trekking night and day for nearly two nights and days.

Q: When they took you, where did they...tie your hands? How did they keep you with them?

#36N: The Chinese did not tie the hands but carried guns and followed us. There were the nomads that led in front. [They] did not tie [our hands].

Q: How many Chinese soldiers were there?

00:14:35

#36N: There were many groups of soldiers. There were many soldiers. There were 40-50 on horses and 40-50 without horses. The ones without horses and the horsemen moved in different groups. Each of the groups consisted of 40-50.

Q: Fortunately you managed to escape. Given there were so many soldiers, I'm assuming they had guards, can you tell us in detail about your escape?

#36N: As I said earlier there were the forest and the grass where everybody slipped and fell in the night. The soldiers slipped and everybody kept slipping. During this time

everybody became scattered. Some moved ahead and some were left behind. In the meantime [we] escaped.

Q: I don't know this tall grass. How tall is it?

00:16:45

#36N: [Raises right hand two feet above ground]. The ground was uneven. It was bumpy. The ground was not even but bumpy.

Q: So what did...just you and your friend escaped?

#36N: Yes.

Q: Were there any other Tibetan prisoners with you with all of these Chinese soldiers?

#36N: There was another one, my colleague.

Q: Were three Tibetans captured?

#36N: There were two, I and another one.

Q: There were no other Tibetans captured except for the two of you?

#36N: There were other Tibetans that they [Chinese] knew who were like agents that helped translate. They had brought along such [as the translators] but none that had been captured.

Q: How did you feel about the Tibetans who were translating?

#36N: There was not any feeling. They did not speak to us---did not speak to us---nor was it allowed. The Chinese did not allow them to speak. So I cannot comment about them.

Q: Do you know where those Tibetans came from, which part of Tibet?

00:18:59

#36N: [I] do not know.

Q: Where did they come from?

#36N: I do not know where they came from, no.

Q: So when you...it took you...you had been walking for about two days and two nights. How long did it take you to get back to your home?

#36N: One could reach the place within a day but they had captured us at night. So [we] trekked the whole night—the whole night—and dawn broke the next morning. Then we

escaped. By then the sun was up. [We] had trekked a day to and a day back. [We] were taken along for one night and returned the next day to the place [I] lived.

Q: Can you tell us about that day and night when you made your way back to your village? What happened that day and night?

00:20:53

#36N: [I] felt a lot of fear then. In the morning I left the place where I had lived and reached Mustang—the place Mustang. This is a different country as we lived beyond the mountain pass. The family had fled driving the animals laden with the belongings. [They had] left for good and journeyed a day.

Q: And reached Mustang?

#36N: Yes.

Q: Did [you] escape then?

#36N: Yes.

[We] lived for long in Mustang.

Q: Could you tell us about going into exile? Tell us about that experience. Who went? What did you take? Any special experiences you have?

#36N: No, because we had fled a long time ago. People and animals had made the escape journey together. Then the Chinese captured and took me back to the hometown. The people and animals were in Mustang, in Mustang. It was in Mustang where we encountered the Chinese and [I] was captured and taken away. It was in Mustang where [we] had been living. Mustang was a separate country from ours. [We] were living in Mustang.

Q: Were you captured in Mustang?

#36N: [I] was captured on top of a mountain pass. It was atop a mountain pass when the Chinese captured [me].

Q: [You] weren't captured in Tibet?

00:22:55

#36N: It was not in Tibet but in Mustang. It was away from the village. The place was not my hometown. It was in another region.

Q: [The place] where the Chinese captured [you]?

#36N: Where the Chinese captured [me].

Q: So if you were all fleeing, if you were all fleeing and you were all ready for this, how come only you and your friend got captured?

#36N: There was our village and another village that were apart. When [I] went there, [I] encountered the Chinese along the way and was captured and taken away.

Q: I'm a little bit confused because I thought I understood that you were going into exile, you and your friend got captured by the Chinese and then you escaped back to your village. So were you going back into the places where the Chinese were?

00:25:18

#36N: [I] reached the hometown, reached home. [I] returned home, returned home.

Q: Were your family members also on flight?

#36N: The family members and all the villagers were in Mustang. [The other prisoner and I] encountered the Chinese while making trips back and forth. Then the Chinese took [us] along.

Q: When you were still in Tibet, were you involved with the Tibetan resistance movement?

#36N: No, [I] was not because [Chinese] soldiers had not come to our region [at that time]; the Chinese had not come. I encountered the Chinese [on a mountain pass near Mustang] and was taken away. Otherwise, Chinese soldiers had not come into our hometown. [I] encountered [the Chinese soldiers] who were moving here and there.

Q: The question is, there were [Tibetan] soldiers in Tibet. Were you in the army earlier?

#36N: [I] was not a soldier in Tibet. Then the army called *Chushi Gangdrug* [Defend Tibet Volunteer Force] was established.

Q: In exile?

#36N: Yes, established in Mustang. I became a soldier when it was established in Mustang.

Q: Could you tell us about joining the *Chushi Gangdrug*? What did you do in the *Chushi Gangdrug*?

00:27:48

#36N: There is not much to talk about it. All of us nomad men were taken to join the army. At that time there was only half a kilogram.

Q: Half a kilogram?

#36N: Half a kilogram of rice, which was the only food. Later a kilogram was issued. At that time the situation was very poorly, the soldiers lived poorly. It used to be said that the soldiers had consumed boiled yak hide earlier.

Q: Yak's what?

#36N: Yak's hide, the hide after skinning a yak. Soldiers boiled and ate it. We were among the younger ones and joined later. They were there earlier, perhaps half a year before.

Q: You said that you were taken away by the *Chushi Gangdrug*. Did you have a choice as to whether to join *Chushi Gangdrug* or not?

00:29:40

#36N: One was to join the army. The people of Kham arrived in Mustang. [They] reached India and then came to Mustang. A camp was set up in Mustang where [they] came. We, the nomads were there then. All the nomad men were taken to join the army saying, "You come and join the army. You come and join the army. You come and join the army." [We] were taken along. There were many.

Q: But did you have a choice?

#36N: One must go. One went. When there was an army unit and one was called, one must go. One could not refuse.

Time is passing and there is nothing more to say.

Q: Thank you. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

#36N: There is not anything to say. In the past [I] was always engaged outside, always in the mountains being a servant. So there is not much to say now. That is about all—the experience of taking care of animals.

Q: Thank you. Can I just ask you what it was like to be a servant as opposed to having your own land and your own lot of animals?

00:32:17

#36N: It was like this: The employer provided food. As a servant, food was provided for. One must do the work and the salary per month was a *pati* or two of grains. There was not anything else besides that. The salary was meager.

Q: How many kilograms is a *pati*?

#36N: A *pati* is four kilograms—four kilograms. That was not for one day but [after working] for many days.

Q: A *pati* of grain for a month?

#36N: Yes, one or two.

Q: Tell us about that family.

#36N: The family with whom I lived in the past did not have many children and the parents have passed away. The family does not exist.

Q: What were they like in Tibet?

#36N: [The family] was wealthy then and [I] was their servant. The parents passed away after reaching Mustang. [They] did not have children. So it is non-existent.

Q: Were you treated well by them?

00:34:27

#36N: It was so-so. Whoever it may be, a servant is given poor food and assigned more work. It was so-so. It was not just them but everybody.

Q: How did they treat you differently from if you were a son?

#36N: One was given food, wages, and used clothes—not new ones—at times. That was it.

Q: Did you love them?

#36N: Yes?

Q: Did you serve the employers well?

#36N: [I] served well and took good care of the animals. I took very good care of the animals.

Q: How did they treat you?

#36N: [I] had never been assaulted though. One was given a bellyful of food and assigned more work. That was the practice with servants.

Q: Were your parents servants too?

00:36:39

#36N: The parents also used to be servants long ago—used to be servants.

Q: For the same family?

#36N: For others—others, not the same.

Q: Thank you very much for your interview and for your time with us. I just have a couple more questions. If this interview were shown in Tibet or China, would there be a problem for you?

#36N: There will be no problems.

Q: May we use your real name?

#36N: Yes.

Q: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW