

Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #44 – Sonam Gogyal
June 25, 2007

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INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #44
2. Interviewee: Sonam Gogyal
3. Age: 82
4. Date of Birth: 1925
5. Sex: Male
6. Birthplace: Re Yago
7. Province: Utsang
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1961
9. Date of Interview: June 25, 2007
10. Place of Interview: House No. 25, Old Camp No. 3, Lugsung Samdupling Settlement, Bylakuppe, Mysore District, Karnataka, India
11. Length of Interview: 0 hr 57 min
12. Interviewer: Martin Newman
13. Interpreter: Lhakpa Tsering
14. Videographer: Tsewang Dorjee
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

Biographical Information:

Sonam Gogyal was educated as a child and held the post of deputy leader of his village from age 22 to 36. He was responsible for collecting taxes from the villagers in the form of grains and animals.

Sonam Gogyal fled Tibet at the age of 36, leaving behind his wife and five children. He quickly chose to escape one night after hearing that the wealthy landowners, which included him, were to be arrested by the Chinese. In four days, he was able to reach Sikkim with a group of 12 others from his village.

Thus began the life of a refugee. Sonam Gogyal moved from Kalimpong to the Bylakkupe settlement, where he was paid to help clear the forests and build the settlement. Later he took up farming and sold sweaters in the Indian cities. Sonam re-married and built a new life with a new family, never seeing his first wife and family in Tibet again.

Topics Discussed:

First appearance of Chinese, life under Chinese rule, brutality/torture, escape experiences, life as a refugee in India, early life in Bylakuppe.

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Interview #44

Interviewee: Sonam Gogyal

Age: 82, Sex: Male

Interviewer: Martin Newman

Interview Date: June 25, 2007

Question: Hello. Please tell us your name?

Interviewee #44: Sonam Gogyal.

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

#44: Yes.

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

#44: Okay.

Q: If you do not wish to answer a question or discuss some issue, please tell me.

#44: Okay.

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

#44: No, there will be no problem.

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

#44: Okay.

Q: I'd like to begin by asking you a little bit about what your experience was growing up in Tibet.

#44: Okay.

Q: Can you tell us what your life was like when you lived in Tibet?

#44: We led our lives as farmers and nomads. We had farm land and also raised animals.

Q: Where did you grow up?

#44: It's called Re, in a district called Rinzin Zong, very close to Shigatse.

Q: What was the most important monastery where you lived?

#44: There were two monasteries; the Re Gyupa Gonpa and Chungoling, a subsidiary of the Tashi Lhunpo Monastery.

Q: How many people were in your family?

#44: There were seven members.

Q: What kind of work did your father do?

#44: Field work and cattle rearing.

Q: Your mother, did she work as well?

#44: She did the house work and milked the animals.

Q: What do you remember the most as a child? What is strongest in your memory as a child in Shigatse?

#44: I attended a school when I was young. Then I had the responsibility of the village until we came to India.

Q: What work?

#44: I worked as a *genchung*, next to the *genpo* 'leader.'

Q: What's *genchung*?

#44: It is the deputy leader. Other than that we did farming and dairying.

Q: As a leader, what did you do?

#44: We were taxpayers. We were tenants of the Tibetan Government land and had to pay taxes. I had to call meetings and direct the people.

Q: What type of taxes?

#44: Taxes were in the form of sheep and yaks. We had to pay a lot of taxes.

Q: How many years did you do that?

#44: From the age of 22 until I was 36. Then I came to India.

Q: What about before that, before you were working? As a child what were the favorite games you liked playing?

#44: Just throwing stones. We did not have many games; we were occupied with work, looking after the yaks and sheep. There was no playing games and being happy. It was a very isolated place.

Q: You did that with your friends?

#44: Yes.

Q: What year was this in?

#44: Until I was 22 I looked after the sheep and *dri* 'female yak.' After that I took responsibility for the village. I collected grains and animals for taxes. It was an isolated area.

Q: What year was that? I'm trying to understand the approximate year we are talking about?

#44: Perhaps around the 1940s.

Q: Can you describe the landscape and the scenery around where you lived? Do you remember the hills and the fields? What exactly do you remember about the place you lived and what it looked like?

#44: It was a very happy place. There were no forests but grasslands. It was an ideal place to raise animals.

Q: Do you still think of that place in your memory?

#44: Yes, I do.

Q: What do you remember the most?

#44: I remember the work I used to do. I remember my wife and parents who I left behind.

Q: When did you get married?

#44: At the age of 19.

Q: How many children do you have?

#44: Five children.

Q: From age 22 to 36, you worked in the monastery organizing meetings. What happened after that?

#44: At 36 I left [Tibet] to come to this settlement in India.

Q: Before that happened, what change told you that things were becoming difficult in your home? How did you know that? Who told you that?

#44: The Chinese had already arrived when I fled to India. It was in 1961, on the 17th day of the 11th month of the Tibetan calendar, that I left Tibet. The Chinese invaded Tibet in 1959 and then they came to our village.

Q: How could you tell things were changing when living at home before the Chinese came? What changed in your life that told you that things were getting bad?

#44: We had heard that the Chinese were coming. Then they came to Re.

Q: What did you hear from your friends about the Chinese?

#44: We heard things would not be good when the Chinese came. They came and arrested all the members of the wealthy families. Until I left, things were very difficult there. I had to flee one night when I was going to be captured.

Q: Did you hear this from people around you or saw this?

#44: I saw this myself. I saw people being caught. I went to attend the meetings and 10 or 11 of the wealthy families in our village were all arrested. They were captured and tortured.

Q: You saw that happen yourself?

#44: I saw the Chinese capturing, torturing, everything.

Q: Did you personally have an encounter with the Chinese?

#44: Not personally. When I learned that I was going to be arrested, I immediately escaped to India.

Q: Why did you think the Chinese would imprison you?

#44: I heard that after they have arrested the wealthy families, the next would be those rich landowners, and I was among those. So I left.

Q: So you thought it would only be a matter of time until they imprisoned you?

#44: Yes, I heard it. I left my wife and parents behind and escaped on my own.

Q: Why did you think the Chinese were coming to Tibet? What they wanted?

#44: I don't know. They just came.

Q: Did you have any ideas? Did you think they wanted to cause trouble or were they there for some other reason? Or did you have any idea?

#44: They caused a lot of suffering to the Tibetans, it's known. All the rich families were arrested and imprisoned. Everybody had to suffer. My family had to endure a lot of hardships.

Q: What would you like to tell us about that time when you had to leave your family? What would you like us to know about that time?

#44: When the Chinese captured and beat the people, I left in great urgency, leaving my family. I couldn't go back to bring them here.

Q: When did you make the decision that you must leave?

#44: I left when I learned that I would be captured. The Chinese tortured the others who were arrested earlier until they were almost dead. Fearing for my life, I had to leave behind everyone and flee.

Q: Which year was it?

#44: It was in the 11th Tibetan month of 1961.

Q: So the Chinese in '61 had already...you must have already seen what they were doing because they were there for already two years. Was there any one event that said, "It is impossible to stay here, I must go now?"

#44: Yes, by looking at the situation. The Chinese captured people and confiscated their properties; people once captured were imprisoned and never seen again. So because of fear, I left. The monks of the Re Gyupa Monastery, they were in a prayer assembly one morning and when they heard that Chinese were arriving, everyone immediately fled. Re faced an emergency situation.

Q: Because you saw the monks fleeing, you thought you must flee as well because it is very dangerous?

#44: Yes.

Q: How did it happen that only you could flee and the rest of your family could not?

#44: It was not possible to flee together. The Chinese were stationed at the Gampa Zong, there was no way. I took the mountain route to get to Gangtok.

Q: So your wife stayed behind?

#44: My wife, children and father. Now I heard my father is dead.

Q: Did they want to come with you when you left?

#44: Yes, they wanted to. But there was no way.

Q: How were you able to find the way out to leave? Were there other people who you went with or you had someone made a plan to do this? Can you tell us how that came about?

#44: I made the decision myself. There were 12 others who wanted to follow me. One morning 12 people from our village fled.

Q: Was there someone who knew a special way out—who was a leader who could show the route to India?

#44: There was someone—Sempa Bulu, who had come from Gangtok.

Q: How long did it take to get to Sikkim?

#44: About four days.

Q: Did you go with horses or mules, or was it only on foot with what you could carry? What kind of things could you leave with?

#44: We had a horse each.

Q: How much food did you take?

#44: A little bit of food to last until Gangtok. Then we went to Kalimpong. We had with us *tsampa* ‘roasted barley flour’ and meat, and nothing else.

Q: Did you encounter Chinese army on the journey?

#44: No. We heard there were many Chinese troops at Gampa Zong. We fled at night, so we didn't encounter them.

Q: At that time, did you think at any time that you would be captured?

#44: Yes I did, which was why I left my family and fled, seeing the circumstances there.

Q: You had enough food. Did you have enough clothes? I presume you went over the high mountain pass. Did you have enough clothes to keep you warm?

#44: Yes, we had enough clothes. It was the 11th month and very cold, so we had our fur clothes on until we reached Kalimpong.

Q: Did all of the people you escaped with, did they survive?

#44: Yes, everyone.

Q: Very good. When you arrived in Sikkim, how were you greeted by the people there?

#44: In Sikkim we found that many of our people who had escaped ahead of us were engaged in road construction. So we worked for two to three months at the road construction, and then went to Kalimpong. There were many people at the road construction site.

Q: And those were the first people you met in Sikkim?

#44: Yes.

Q: Can you tell what it was like when you arrived in Sikkim?

#44: When I first arrived in Sikkim, I found myself in the midst of a forest which was so unlike Tibet that I felt very sad.

Q: Who took care of you? Where did you go when you arrived there?

#44: We heard that people were being sent to settlement camps from Kalimpong by the Tibetan Government, so we went to Kalimpong from the road construction site and from there we came here.

Q: What were you feeling? You were feeling sad when you came to Sikkim; and when you were moving to this different place, what kind of thoughts were you thinking? What was going on in your mind?

#44: It was very sad because my wife, children and parents were left behind. We had nothing to eat except when the food rations were given in Kalimpong.

Q: How many people were there like you who just had escaped?

#44: We stayed one month in Kalimpong. There I met people I knew who helped me. I was the first person to arrive in this Camp Number 3.

[Question is repeated.]

#44: In Kalimpong there were many Tibetans. I don't know the number. There was a Tibetan Government office and when we were sent here, they gave us aid.

Q: What were the living conditions like there?

#44: Kalimpong was better.

Q: How long did you stay in Kalimpong?

#44: A little over a month.

Q: What did you do while you were there?

#44: In Kalimpong we had no work at all.

Q: Were you still with the friends that you had come out of Tibet with there? Were you together there as a group?

#44: I have contact with them. Six of them are dead and three are here [in Bylakuppe] in this camp. Some of them went to join the army and later came to the settlement. But now most of them are dead.

Q: Six of the twelve that came over? How did they die?

#44: Three of them fell sick and died here. Some died in the army. We are four of us here. One went back to Tibet.

Q: I'm a little confused. These were the people you came out of Tibet...you escaped Tibet with 12 people and then you came to Kalimpong and stayed one month. Then some of those people you'd come out with died? Is that what happened?

#44: Yes, those people.

Q: Six of them died. I'm trying to understand how they died within the period of one month after they'd successfully escaped.

#44: They died after coming to the settlement here, not during the journey. Some died after joining the army and about four died here. Now three to four are left here.

Q: Why was that?

#44: They died due to illness. One was my neighbor; two were my relatives. Some of them were younger than me but that is life.

Q: From an illness in Sikkim or in the camp? Was there an epidemic of some kind?

#44: No, not from an epidemic. They fell ill and died.

Q: How did you feel at that time?

#44: They were from my place and I helped them in whatever way was possible.

Q: After a month in Kalimpong, where did you go from there?

#44: We came to this settlement here.

Q: To Bylakuppe. Did you come by yourself or with anybody you knew to Bylakuppe?

#44: The government sent a great many people to the settlement and I was among them. It was the whole group of Camp Number 3.

Q: Did you come with friends or anybody you knew personally?

#44: No special friends but those from my place.

Q: This was in 1961?

#44: Yes.

Q: What was your first impression when you came into Bylakuppe from Kalimpong? What was your first thought that came to your mind when you saw Bylakuppe?

#44: The whole area was a jungle, and near the river there were about 70-80 blue tents put up for the people of Camp Number 3. The people of Camp Number 1 and 2 had already arrived. Here we were provided with rations for some time. Then we were paid two rupees per day to clear the jungle.

Q: Had you ever done work like that before?

#44: I did a lot of work.

[Question is repeated.]

#44: No. There were no trees to be seen in my place.

Q: Where did you find the strength to do this very hard work?

#44: There was no choice but to work. Areas to be cleared were divided among the workers and you had to do the work. Whether you were a man or a woman, you had to work clearing the jungle.

Q: Everybody was cutting the trees together?

#44: We cut all the trees, working in a row. Everybody was provided with knives and axes. Then the wood was set on fire. Next the bulldozers leveled the ground.

Q: During this time did you try to get news of your family?

#44: I never heard anything.

Q: Did you have a plan when you came to Bylakuppe that...did you think it would only be for a short time that you would be here and then you would return to Tibet? What did you think?

#44: At that everyone thought that we would go back soon. We thought Tibet would gain freedom and that we would be back soon. We never thought of a long-term stay.

Q: When did you realize that it was not for a short time?

#44: It is now that we realize, looking at the world situation. Forty-six years have passed and it seems like a flash.

Q: My question is you came here and thought, "I'll be here for a few years and then I will return to Tibet," but then a few years passed and then a few more years passed. When did you think, "I may not be able to go back to Tibet"?

#44: These days I pray that His Holiness the Dalai Lama will live long and that we will get a chance to go back. So many years have passed and the only thing is to pray that we will get the chance to go back during His Holiness' lifetime.

Q: What do you think is the source of your strength that allowed you to survive this very difficult ordeal? What inside you do you think allowed you to be able to have the strength to do all the things that you did?

#44: When we were told to cut the trees here, it was the daily survival. It is very difficult when you are in an unknown country and do not know the language. The government paid us two rupees daily. We did not know the language and it was very difficult.

Q: Have you been able to make contact with your family in Tibet since you've been here?

#44: No, I did not have any contacts. Two years back they sent a letter saying that my father was dead, but other than that there was no contact.

Q: How heartbreaking! And you had no word about your children?

#44: No, not at all.

Q: How did you receive word that your father died?

#44: They sent a letter through someone from the New Settlement [in Bylakuppe] that had been to Tibet.

Q: When you heard that news, what did you think and feel?

#44: When I read that my father was dead, I made the necessary offerings for the dead to His Holiness the Dalai Lama and other high lamas. I prayed for him, and other than that there was nothing to do.

Q: After you came here, did you marry again, here in Bylakuppe?

#44: Yes, I married here and I have two children.

Q: How old are your children here?

#44: I have two daughters. They are 32 years old. They are twins.

Q: How do you feel about your life here now in Bylakuppe?

#44: These days it is good by the grace of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. We have been given an acre of land each for cultivation. It is enough to survive.

Q: If you were to want to give advice to the younger generation of Tibetans, what would you tell them?

#44: I tell the children about how we lived in Tibet—what we did, what we ate, what we wore. But the times are such these days—the children are different, right from the way they dress.

Q: So you would like to keep the Tibetan tradition alive?

#44: Yes, I'd like to preserve that. It's important to teach the children the Tibetan script. Though even as an old man I know that English is very important, I constantly tell the children to learn Tibetan.

Q: If it were possible for you to go back to Tibet, what would you do?

#44: There will be no chance to go back. But in case it happens, it would be impossible to live in my village because it is so cold. If we return [to Tibet] we have to start all over again. Maybe [I will] live somewhere in Shigatse because having lived here [Bylakuppe] so long, it would not be possible to live in my village.

Q: That reminds me, how did you adjust to the heat here in Bylakuppe when you first came?

#44: It's very cold in Tibet; it's not cold here. Having lived here so long, it'll be unbearable for the old people who are used to staying here. For me it is not possible to go back as I'm in my 80's.

Q: When you came from Tibet there was no problem to adjust to the weather in Bylakuppe?

#44: No, there was no problem with the weather. In this place the Tibetans did not face such problems.

Q: Really? I'm surprised to hear that. After the trees were cut down and Bylakuppe was established, what kind of work did you do here?

#44: For our livelihood, we cultivated land and sold pullovers. Other than that there was nothing to do in this area.

Q: You sold pullovers, I heard about that.

#44: It's been some years since I sold pullovers, due to my age. Earlier I did that and also farming.

Q: When you were selling pullovers, did you travel out of Bylakuppe or did you do that here?

#44: I went outside [of Bylakuppe]. I went to Bangalore; I went to Ootacamund [in Tamil Nadu, India] and other places.

Q: How were you received by the Indians when you went on these sales trips?

#44: In the early days, it was quite easy to find sites to put up the stalls. It's been some years since I went, but these days shops are hard to find. The pullover business was good.

[Question is repeated.]

#44: The Indians are not bad in all places, as long as you do no harm. If you don't behave well, then it's not their fault. If you are good, they are okay.

Q: Before we end, is there anything that you think people should know about your experience that I haven't asked about and you would like people to know and remember?

#44: Except for my experiences as a farmer and nomad in Tibet, I do not have much to relate in terms of experience.

Q: We want to thank you very much for participating in this. I guess I would ask one more question. Was there anything in this interview that you felt was especially difficult to talk about?

#44: No, I didn't.

Q: Thank you very much. We wish to thank you again for your participation, in helping to preserve your story and the story of Tibet for generations to come.

END OF INTERVIEW