

Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #46N – Tsering Dekyi
April 15, 2015

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INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #46N
2. Interviewee: Tsering Dekyi
3. Age: 73
4. Date of Birth: 1942
5. Sex: Female
6. Birthplace: Nakyaling
7. Province: Utsang
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1959
9. Date of Interview: April 15, 2015
10. Place of Interview: Lodrik Old Age Home, Jampaling Tibetan Refugee Settlement, Dulegaunda, Tanahun, Nepal
11. Length of Interview: 0 hr 48 min
12. Interviewer: Katharine Davies Samway
13. Interpreter: Tenzin Yangchen
14. Videographer: Henry Tenenbaum
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

Biographical Information:

Tsering Dekyi was born in a nomadic family with seven children in Utsang Province. As nomads her family depended upon the sheep and yaks for their livelihood. Her father travelled twice each year to trade dairy products for grain in order to provide food for his family. Her mother stayed at home and the older children went out each day to graze the animals.

Tsering Dekyi recounts how they used the animals coloring and sometimes attached prayer flags on the animals in order to identify them. Occasionally wolves attacked the flock of sheep, but the children were powerless to stop them.

Tsering Dekyi's family heard about the invading Chinese army which prompted them to flee to Nepal. It took them 15-20 days to reach Dolpa. Many of their animals died along the way due to snowfall and lack of fodder and the family themselves had very little food. After reaching Nepal Tsering Dekyi begged for food and worked as a farm hand for local landowners.

Topics Discussed:

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

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Interview #46N

Interviewee: Tsering Dekyi

Age: 73, Sex: Female

Interviewer: Katharine Davies Samway

Interview Date: April 15, 2015

Question: Please tell us your name.

00:00:09

Interviewee #46N: Yes?

Q: What is your name?

#46N: It is Tsering Dekyi.

Q: His Holiness the Dalai Lama has 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 permission for the Tibet Oral History Project to use this interview?

#46N: [Joins palms]

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

#46N: Okay.

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

#46N: Will answer what [I] know but if [I] do not know, [I] cannot answer.

Q: Thank you.

If the interview were to be shown in Tibet or China, would that be a problem for you?

00:01:56

#46N: I do not think there will be any problem. [I] do not speak of what I have not seen nor do I speak lies. [I] talk about my suffering.

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

#46N: Thank you.

Q: *Ama-la* ‘respectful term for mother,’ could you please tell us about what your parents did for a living?

#46N: [Our] livelihood depended on animals for [we] were nomads. It was milking the animals and grazing them. There was not anything else to do for the nomads.

Father went to trade and Mother churned milk and took care of the children.

Q: Father traded...

#46N: Yes. [We] must buy food supplies from outside.

Q: What did your father trade?

#46N: The trade was buying food supplies by taking the cheese and selling in the region of Dolpa. [He] brought back grain to be made into *tsampa* ‘flour made from roasted barley.’ Tibetans cannot survive without *tsampa*. That was it. Otherwise, there was no work.

Q: How far did he have to go to barter?

#46N: It took around 15 days.

Q: How far away did he have to go?

00:04:12

#46N: It was to the place called Dolpa and in winter [Father] went to the place called Mustang to get rice and wheat. Without buying these, there was not anything to eat for [we] did not own farmlands.

Q: Did not own farmlands?

#46N: No, [we] were solely nomads.

Q: So how many times did your father leave in a year to barter for food?

#46N: [Father] went around twice, once in summer and again during winter to procure grain. It was only twice [a year].

Q: So in the winter, when he went in winter, did he have to go through a lot of cold and snow?

#46N: [Laughs] Yes, [Father] had to. There was no other choice but to go and obtain food. There were difficulties along the journey.

Q: What kinds of difficulties did he encounter?

#46N: There were difficulties on the journey but [I] would not know for he did not tell the children.

Q: Did your father enjoy going out on these trading trips?

00:06:31

#46N: There was not any other option but to enjoy for one must feed the children. There were no supplies available to feed the children. There were no stores to buy things like here. One must go irrespective of the hardships.

Q: So where was the first time you saw a shop?

#46N: There were no shops even in Dolpa. [I] saw a shop after coming to Mustang.

Q: Mustang?

#46N: Yes, Mustang. There was a shop below the road in Mustang on the way to see the Muktinath Temple. [I] saw a shop at Zong Sarpa. That was it.

Q: What was your reaction when you saw the shop?

#46N: [I] did not have money to buy the things I wanted. It was just gazing.

Q: Were there things in the shop that you would have liked to be able to buy?

#46N: Could be, there could be many, but if you did not have money, nobody will give it. I had to beg for food.

[To interpreter] Did you follow?

[Interpreter to interviewee]: Yes.

Q: What kinds of things did you see in the shop that if you had money that you would have loved to get?

00:08:44

#46N: There were clothes and eatables. [I] was young then. There were beautiful things that girls wear. One desired such but there was no money. One had to beg from others.

Q: What kinds of things that girls would like to wear did you see?

#46N: [Laughs] [I] might have seen beautiful clothes made of fabric. One did desire such things, but when you do not have the money, you just gaze and go away.

Q: What else?

#46N: There was not anything else.

Q: When your father came back from trading, did he ever bring back little gifts for the children or for your mother?

#46N: [Father] did not bring any gifts except for the food supplies. There was no such custom.

Q: Was this true for all families in your community or was it just certain people...did people who have a lot of wealth, did they bring little gifts?

#46N: That could be but we were not rich.

Q: What animals did your family have?

00:11:05

#46N: Sheep and yaks. [The animals] called sheep and yaks.

Q: Only sheep and yaks?

#46N: Yes.

Q: How many sheep and yaks did you have?

#46N: [I] cannot recall much for I was young then and not responsible. The parents took care.

Q: Did your parents own the animals?

#46N: Yes.

Q: Could you tell us about what your mother had to do, what her daily routine and jobs were?

#46N: During summer [Mother] did the milking and churning curd. In winter [she] stayed home and cooked for the children.

Q: In summertime it was milking and...?

#46N: Yes, and churning curd. Those of us older children had to take the animals to the hills.

Q: What did she do in winter?

#46N: It was the same in winter.

Q: What did your mother do during the winter, stayed home?

#46N: Stayed home. Mother stayed home while Father went out if there was trade and if not, stayed back.

Q: Your father went out to do what?

00:13:13

#46N: Out where? There was not any other work but to procure grain. Other than that [Father] went after the animals.

Q: After the animals to do what?

#46N: To graze the animals and we, the little children went to help.

Q: So your mother didn't go to graze the animals?

#46N: [Mother] did not, as there were chores at home and children to be looked after. If many children were born...

Q: How many children were in your family?

[Interpreter interprets as: How many children did your mother have?]

#46N: My mother?

Q: Yes.

#46N: Eight children.

Q: And how many daughters...how many sisters and how many brothers did you have?

#46N: Two brothers died when [they] were little and two elder brothers died later. Now we are only three sisters that survive.

Q: Three sisters survive?

#46N: Three sisters survive. The sister younger than me lives in Dharamsala [India].

Q: The sister younger than you?

#46N: Yes, in Dharamsala.

Q: How many brothers were there?

#46N: Two little brothers and two elder ones that passed away. [They] are no more.

Q: Two sisters? How many sisters?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Three sisters.

Q: Are your sisters older than you or younger than you?

00:15:43

#46N: One is older than me, and the youngest lives in Dharamsala.

Q: In your family, did the boys and the girls have different jobs to do?

#46N: No, there were not. In general, except for grazing animals, there was not any work. Nomads did not have much work. Should one own land, there would be much work to do but that was not so.

Q: If you'd had farmlands how would it be different?

#46N: I would not know about that.

Q: So you went to graze the animals, did you?

#46N: Yes, I did. When [I] was 15 years old [we] lost Tibet and then fled to an alien land. [I] grew up in an alien land.

Q: Could you tell us please about grazing the animals? What did you have to do?

00:17:40

#46N: One must [lead the animals] wherever the grass is good on the mountains. One left [home] at 4 or 5 o'clock in the morning and returned around 5 in the evening. One must graze the animals wherever there is good grass and water for [they] are animals and humans must...

Q: And how did you know where the good grass was?

#46N: The parents will tell the children where to go. Nevertheless, one must go wherever the animals go.

Q: So after you left the animals there, what would you do?

#46N: [The children] must do the herding. Animals do not remain in one spot but move everywhere. One must keep moving.

Q: So what would you do?

#46N: The children must drive [the animals] here and there.

Q: There are many people who will hear your interview who have never, never herded animals. So can you tell us how you herd the animals that wander away?

00:19:54

#46N: One must go in search [of the animal] wherever it has gone. How can one leave it without looking for it?

Q: And then?

#46N: One might be able to locate it and if not, there was nothing to be done.

Q: Where would you find the animals? Would they go hiding?

#46N: There was not any hiding place, but we were a large number of nomads and the animals could get mixed up. Other than that there was not any place to go.

Q: How did you know which were your animals and which were your neighbor's animals?

#46N: One was intelligent enough to recognize the animals. Unlike now, as a child one was intelligent and recognized the things that belonged to you. [The animals] ran away...

Q: So there were no special markings on the animals to say "this belongs to my family"?

#46N: There were no markings. So one looked at the color of the animals. Animals have different colors. Otherwise, one marked [an animal] by tying a [piece of] prayer flag or applying some color.

Q: Prayer flag?

00:21:44

#46N: Some color is applied and also a prayer flag or a piece of cloth. Markings were also made on the ears.

Q: In those days did you ever lose any of your animals?

#46N: [I] may have lost but cannot recall. It would be lying if [I] said no.

Q: So if you lost an animal, what happened?

#46N: One would have to give it up. Nothing else happened. If it could be found, it was good and if not...

Q: Did you ever have to...did you ever have to watch out for wild animals?

#46N: Wild animals?

Q: Yes, wild animals while watching the sheep?

#46N: No.

Q: Were there no wild animals?

#46N: There were wild animals but did not watch...

Q: It wasn't necessary to watch out for wild animals from attacking your animals?

00:23:25

#46N: One had to keep watch for wolves. Not wild animals but wolves. [Wolves] caused a lot of suffering by taking away lambs.

Q: And when did these attacks occur?

#46N: [Wolves] came whenever they were hungry. How can there be a particular time?

Q: So you actually saw wolves attacking your animals?

#46N: Yes, [I] have seen them attack the animals. As a child one could not overcome them. [The children] just watched.

Q: How did you react when you saw the wolf attacking?

#46N: One screamed. There was not anything else to do.

Q: Yes?

#46N: One screamed. There was not anything else to do when [wolves] attacked.

Q: Did you scream...

#46N: [Interrupts] They are wild animals and you screamed.

Q: When you screamed, did they ever run away?

#46N: [Wolves] do not run away easily. [They] ran away when an older person appeared. We were children and [the wolves] bullied us.

So leaving the one behind, you went home driving the rest.

Q: So if a wolf attacked one of your sheep, you would scream and then you would go and collect all the rest of the sheep. Did the wolf take the sheep carcass away with it?

00:26:14

#46N: The wolf would devour it, but if an adult went, [he/she] could snatch it away. Otherwise, it was to be given up.

Q: If an adult went [he/she] got [the carcass] back?

#46N: Yes. [Wolves] bullied the children.

Q: And what would the adult do with the carcass?

#46N: There were dogs at home. [The carcass] was considered unclean and not consumed. It was fed to the dogs at home.

Q: How many dogs did you have?

#46N: There would be 2-3 dogs. Nomads kept dogs due to fear of their animals being attacked.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about herding, grazing the animals?

#46N: [I] do not have much to describe.

Q: You didn't go back to the same places, did you? How far away did you go?

00:28:22

#46N: [We] did not go back.

Q: How far away did you go?

#46N: One must go quite far because one herded the whole day from 5-6 o'clock in the morning until around 5 o'clock in the evening.

Q: You spent your childhood herding your animals. Did you help your mother in any of her jobs?

#46N: What help could I give? After losing the country, everyone fled. Parents took care of the children while the children were not in a position to help the parents.

Q: Your mother engaged in household chores. Have you ever helped mother in her chores?

#46N: Those older to me may have done so. I have not.

Q: Did you ever watch your mother making butter?

#46N: [I] cannot recall. How will one retain so in memory? I have been ill and have undergone many surgeries. So the memory is not good.

Q: I hope you are feeling okay now.

00:30:16

#46N: Not so well. [I] have leg pain and have undergone two surgeries in the eyes, which is why [I] joined this Home for the Aged. Otherwise, [I] was living in Paljorling in Pokhara.

[I] came as a sick person having undergone two surgeries.

Q: How did you hear about this settlement?

#46N: One did not hear about it but the Nepalese drove the Khampa, the soldiers and so [we] arrived in Pokhara. One did not know about the settlement.

Q: Could you tell us about hearing about the Chinese entering Tibet?

#46N: The parents heard about it. [They] may have heard from visiting officials. [News] passed from one to the other. So [we] fled without seeing [the Chinese].

Q: What was the news that you heard?

00:32:09

#46N: [The parents] may have heard that Tibet was lost and that people were being killed. I do not know exactly but all the elders fled and so did my parents and everyone.

Q: So tell us about your journey from your nomadic settlement to Nepal...oh, no...yeah to Nepal.

#46N: I do not have many things to say except that there was great hardship. It was a long distance and one was on foot for there were no vehicles and such.

Q: What kind of hardships did you experience?

#46N: There was hardship due to lack of food. One knew when there was hunger. Other than that children do not know much.

Q: So what did your parents do to solve your hunger?

00:34:20

#46N: [The parents] gave whatever was available and if not, nothing can be done. One could beg after reaching another country. Otherwise, there was nothing to feed the children for everything was left behind. Nomads possess nothing but animals and they were left behind or finished.

Q: So you took your animals with you?

#46N: [We] drove a small number of animals. Then it snowed during springtime and some got left behind or died. The people just about managed to escape.

Q: Did [the animals] got left behind or die in the snow?

#46N: Died.

Q: Why did you leave some of the animals behind?

#46N: Where?

Q: You mentioned about not driving all the animals...

#46N: The animals were driven along but died. Some were too weak to walk and there was no choice but to leave them behind on the hills. [I] do not know whether [they] died or not.

Q: Why were they unable to walk?

00:36:20

#46N: Due to hunger. Even animals cannot walk on empty stomach. There was no grass along the route but snow.

Q: Did your family ever kill any of the animals so you would have something to eat?

#46N: One was forced to kill for consumption. The parents may have done so but we were children. Animals are beneficial. Whether one was happy or otherwise, it is animals that [nomads] depend upon and may have been killed for consumption. Really, I have no knowledge.

Q: So how long did it take for you to go from your homeland to Nepal, the border?

#46N: [We] did not come through Nepal but Dolpa. It may have taken 15-20 days walking over mountain passes.

Q: And when you got to Dolpa, what was your reaction?

00:38:11

#46N: There were *sashing dhagpo* 'landowners' and nothing else in Dolpa.

Q: Yes?

#46N: We were begging from *sashing dhagpo*.

Q: What's *sashing*?

#46N: They had cultivated lands and were landowners.

Q: And how did that go? Were you able to get food or money?

#46N: For food [the farmers] gave *tsampa*. There was nothing but *tsampa*, which [the landowners] gave. As for money, they themselves did not have it. So how can we be given any?

Q: So did you stay in one place begging or did you move around and go and, you know...?

#46N: They had a group [of houses] like a settlement. There were houses in rows that one had to visit. [We] begged and also worked when there was work to be done. Being farmers they had work.

Q: What kind of work did you do?

00:40:02

#46N: After sowing there was weeding to be done and then harvesting and thrashing. However, being nomads one did not know much of farm work.

Q: How did you learn how to do these very different jobs?

#46N: That was it. There was nothing to learn about working in the fields as servants. I do not have more to say.

Q: Did they show you how to do it or...?

#46N: The one that did the job...[not discernible].

Q: When you didn't know how to harvest, did they show how?

#46N: Yes.

Q: Were you hired for just one day at a time or would you be hired for a longer period of time?

#46N: It depended upon the volume of work in the fields. If the work got over, there was nothing to do.

Q: But for how long were you hired, several days, one day?

#46N: It took many days; it took many days, that is if [the employer] gave work until the end. Otherwise, there was no work.

Q: And were you paid well?

00:42:22

#46N: The pay was not much.

Q: Yes?

#46N: [The employer] gave only a small *dey* 'unit of measurement' of grain a day.

Q: Is it called *dey*?

#46N: Yes, they call it *dey*. [The employer] also provided food.

Q: Was this enough for you to live on?

#46N: Yes, just about.

Q: Who were you living with at this time?

#46N: When the parents were there I lived with [them]. When [they] were not...

Q: After reaching Dolpa, you worked in fields and such. Who were you living with at this time, the parents?

#46N: The parents were there. [I] worked and then returned to the parents.

Q: Who were there in the family? The parents and...?

#46N: There were Father, Mother and my four siblings then.

Q: So you're still living with you family at this time?

#46N: Yes, with the family.

Q: What else can you tell us about life in Tibet and going into exile?

00:44:11

#46N: Nothing more. [I] have not had much experience. Had one attended school, there would be some experience but [I] did not and spent life working.

Q: Why would school have made it better for you and able to tell your story?

#46N: By [attending school] one would understand the experience, be it anywhere. What can a person that was a load-carrying coolie talk about?

Q: I think a lot.

#46N: No.

Q: What do you think will happen to Tibet?

#46N: There is nothing much to think about but that [I] will die here without seeing Tibet.

Q: Yes?

#46N: [I] feel that [I] will not get the chance to go back.

Q: And you would like to?

#46N: It is your country and you would want to go back to your country whether it is good or bad. It looks like [I] will die here.

Q: What do you miss most about Tibet?

00:46:18

#46N: [I] miss the animals. That is what nomads have. [I] can imagine the animals and the place but cannot recall the names.

Q: Are there any animals in the settlement?

#46N: No.

Q: None here?

#46N: No.

Q: Would you like to have animals in the settlement?

#46N: [I] like the animals of Tibet but not the buffalos and such found here.

Q: Why don't you want the buffalos?

#46N: [I] do not like [the buffalos] but do not know why.

Q: What don't you like about them?

#46N: [I] do not know...[not discernible].

Q: Well, thank you very much. It's been a pleasure talking with you.

#46N: Thank you.

Q: There are a couple of questions I have to ask you. If this interview were shown in Tibet or China, would it be a problem for you?

#46N: There will be no problems. You can show it anywhere. Except talking about my experiences, [I] have not badmouthed anyone.

Q: And can we use your real name?

00:48:18

#46N: Yes, it is okay. There are no risks involved whatsoever.

Q: Okay. Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

