

Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #48D – Norga
May 18, 2012

The Tibet Oral History Project serves as a repository for the memories, testimonies and opinions of elderly Tibetan refugees. The oral history process records the words spoken by interviewees in response to questions from an interviewer. The interviewees' statements should not be considered verified or complete accounts of events and the Tibet Oral History Project expressly disclaims any liability for the inaccuracy of any information provided by the interviewees. The interviewees' statements do not necessarily represent the views of the Tibet Oral History Project or any of its officers, contractors or volunteers.

This translation and transcript is provided for individual research purposes only. For all other uses, including publication, reproduction and quotation beyond fair use, permission must be obtained in writing from: Tibet Oral History Project, P.O. Box 6464, Moraga, CA 94570-6464, United States.

Copyright © 2014 Tibet Oral History Project.



TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

www.TibetOralHistory.org

INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #48D
2. Interviewee: Norga
3. Age: 77
4. Date of Birth: 1935
5. Sex: Male
6. Birthplace: Tsawa Gokyamthang
7. Province: Dhotoe (Kham)
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1959
9. Date of Interview: May 18, 2012
10. Place of Interview: Community Hall, Tashi Jong, Himachal Pradesh, India
11. Length of Interview: 1 hr 46 min
12. Interviewer: Marcella Adamski
13. Interpreter: Tenzin Yangchen
14. Videographer: Pema Tashi
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

Biographical Information:

Norga's was a nomadic family that led a happy and contented life living in the mountains. He talks about the daily life of the nomads: how they spent their time taking the animals to graze, changing locations in summer and winter, and moving between tents and houses. Norga recalls being given the responsibility of grazing young animals at the age of 6 or 7 when a child was considered old enough to work.

Norga's mother was married to three brothers. He explains the many advantages the system of polygamy. He also describes how the entire village was organized and the various levels of authorities who decided when to move, settled disputes and awarded punishments to criminals. Norga sings a love song and talks about how songs were a part of courtship in Tibet.

Norga recounts that battles with the Chinese in other parts of Kham did not affect his community, but he decided to leave for Lhasa to join three of his brothers there. Soon after, he volunteered to join the *Chushi Gangdrug* Defend Tibet Volunteer Force. He gives an account of his active participation in resisting the Chinese army and details his two battles during which some men were killed despite their protective amulets. Many of the *Chushi Gangdrug* were finally forced to flee, unable to match the Chinese in number and weapons. They were often without food on the dangerous escape as they made their way through tribal jungles of India.

Topics Discussed:

Kham, childhood memories, herding, nomadic life, government/administration, customs/traditions, taxes, first appearance of Chinese, *Chushi Gangdrug*, escape experiences.

TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

www.TibetOralHistory.org

Interview #48D

Interviewee: Norga

Age: 77, Sex: Male

Interviewer: Marcella Adamski

Interview Date: May 18, 2012

Question: Please tell us your name.

00:00:13

Interviewee #48D: Norga.

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?

#48D: Yes.

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

#48D: Okay.

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

#48D: Okay.

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

#48D: Okay.

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

00:01:56

#48D: There will be no problems for me as I am going to speak the truth.

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

#48D: Okay.

Q: *Aku-la* 'respectful term for paternal uncle,' I'd like to begin by asking you to tell us where you were born and who was in your family?

#48D: The place I was born is Tsawa Gokyam; it's called Tsawa Gokyamthang. My home was called Bongchongnang.

Q: Tsawa Gokyamthang?

#48D: Yes.

Q: Tsawa Gokyamthang. How many family members were there?

#48D: I do not have any sisters but six brothers. I have no sisters. Mother did not have any daughters. Do you want the family name? The family name is Bhiwutsang. My father was Bhiwu Rinchen.

Q: Where is your town located or your village located?

#48D: Tsawa Gokyamthang is located in the south and a little towards the north. It was like that.

Q: Between the south and north?

00:03:40

#48D: In general the people of Lho 'South' Tsawagang...in the *Chushi Gangdrug* [Defend Tibet Volunteer Force], there are *chu shi* 'four rivers' and *gang drug* 'six ranges' and Tsawagang is one of the ranges. One of the four rivers is the Gyamo Ngulchu 'Salween River.' I am a person from that region.

Q: What did your family do for a living?

#48D: We were a family of nomads, nomads that raised animals, milked, made butter and sold meat and butter. [We] raised animals.

Q: What kind of childhood did you have, in the sense of what tasks did you do as a child? What games did you play?

#48D: I used to herd the lambs and calves when I was 6-7 years old. I stayed home earlier to that because little children under the age of 6 need not go to work. Then as you grew to be 7 or 8 years old, you went to graze the kids, lambs and calves. Little children were sent on such duties and I have undertaken such tasks.

Q: Do you have any memories of your childhood that was special or fun that you could describe?

00:06:15

#48D: Happy times were when parents allowed [little children] up the mountains where there were plenty of flowers and [we] spent a night or two there, ate good food and sang songs. Those were enjoyable times, but besides that we did not have anything much in Tibet. Then parents took us along to the prayer assemblies of the lamas, to receive

empowerments and watch the *cham* ‘religious dance performance by monks,’ which was enjoyable. And when one was a little child, there would be *dodheku* that was cooking with others and I have enjoyed it. [The children] were 2-3 years old and below the age of 6. There were such delights.

Q: *Dodheku*?

#48D: *Dodhe* means to have a party like the young people enjoy here [India]. We did that in our region too. It is also practiced in Lhasa. I have done it a few times.

Q: When you had parties and used to sing, do you remember any of those songs?

#48D: Yes, I do. I remember.

Q: We would be very happy to hear you sing some songs.

#48D: Yes, I will sing a song. Will it be recorded?

Q: Yes.

00:08:20-00:09:35

#48D: [Sings a song]

Q: Beautiful. Could you please tell us what the words of the song mean?

#48D: The first stanza means this—there is a certain type of cap called the *washa* ‘fox skin cap’:

[I] walk upon the mountain in a *washa*
As [I] come down wearing it
The *washa* and the wind keeps playing
The *washa* is playful and so is the wind

It actually refers to the flirting between a man and a woman.

The latter stanza “*Tse ngaya sung dhayang sung, Dhue yangyang zompay monlam sung*” means:

Today we have met
And [I] pray that
We will meet again
And again

That is the meaning of the last words of the song.

Q: So it’s a very romantic song.

#48D: Yes, that is when a woman and man are in love. In the olden days in Tibet boys and girls used to sing songs to each other, understood the meaning and then got into a relationship. Nowadays there is nothing like that except for speaking over the telephone. Such practices do not exist today. That was the practice in Tibet [Utsang Province] as well as Kham [Province] in the olden days.

Q: You mentioned the fox. Were foxes captured and killed to make beautiful hats during your childhood?

00:12:05

#48D: There were certain people that did the slaughtering. There were the *ngopa* that killed and [people] bought the skin of the fox and made *washa*.

Q: Were there separate people that did the killing?

#48D: Yes, there were other people. Not everyone, not every Tibetan did the killing. There were certain people that killed fox, deer, Tibetan gazelle, blue sheep, *tsinya* and lynx. [Skins] had to be purchased from them.

Q: Could you describe what a fox hat looks like because I think I've seen one and the fur is very long and it blows very easily, is that right?

#48D: Some make *washa* using only the back part of a fox with a circular brocade lining. Others, after killing a fox, skinned it full length including the legs and hands, stuffed it with straw and left it to dry. After drying, some wear this kind of *washa* that has the entire skin of the animal with its head, legs, hands and tail.

Q: Is it a special sign of a special status to wear a fox skin hat among the nomads or is it just preference, personal preference?

00:14:32

#48D: There was no significance. Hats like *washa* and *tsering shamo* [type of hat worn by people from Utsang Province] were worn during festivals, religious empowerments, and gatherings of large number of people for festivities and games. We had different kinds of hats in Tibet. You just wore one and it did not denote status. However, in the case of the Tibetan Government, hats of the aristocrats have great connotations. It was not so in Kham. If you possessed one, you could wear a *washa* irrespective of wealth or caste status.

Q: Were there levels of authority within the nomad community and can you explain how that worked? Who was maybe a director or a chief? How was that system worked? How did that system work?

#48D: Yes, there were different levels among leaders like *samzu* [?], *donyer* 'attendants' and *nyerchen* 'supervisors.' Just like there are various levels of authority in the Indian army like captain, lieutenant, colonel and brigadier, we had the same in Tibet. In Lhasa too there were various levels with the highest being the *sawang* 'ruler.' Then below it were the

***dungkhor* ‘lay official,’ *khenchung* ‘rank of clergy’ and *tsedung* ‘monk official.’ That was in the case of Tibet [Lhasa]. In Kham also we had different levels.**

Q: Were there likewise among the nomads?

#48D: There were.

Q: Could you just tell us the names of those leaders that you just named and what they were in charge of?

00:17:15

#48D: The highest authority in our district of Pashu was called Pashu *samzu*.

Q: What was he?

#48D: He was the highest [authority]. Above him was none else but the Tibetan Government. He could collect taxes or do whatever he wanted. He was the Pashu *samzu* and below him were the *nyerchen*. They too did it [collected tax] and next to the *nyerchen* were the *donyer*. They also collected tax but in case a problem arose, it was taken to the *nyerchen* and an unsolved case was referred to the Pashu *samzu*. Among us nomads were the *demkho*, a leader for every 5,000-6,000 villages. In case of internal quarrels or thefts in their respective villages, they had the authority to arrest, chain and whip the offenders. In case a case could not be solved, it was referred to the Pashu district. In our village there were various leaders.

Q: Who decided...If the 5-6,000 families were nomads, how is it decided where they moved from one place to another to graze their animals?

#48D: [Speaks before translation is completed] There was a *demkho* for every 5-6,000 [villages]. Take us for instance. There were [villages] called Thoemapong, Gyerpong and Maymapong among the nomads. The village I belonged to was called Gyerpong where there were around 5,000 families. The others consisted of 3,000-3,500 families. Each one of these had a leader and other subordinates like *gyapon* ‘leader of 100 men’ and *chupon* ‘leader of 10 men’ that dealt with the people.

Q: The many nomad families had to move from place to place.

#48D: [They] had to move.

Q: Who made the decision when to move?

00:19:58

#48D: The village heads made the announcements. For instance, the 3rd Tibetan lunar month has gone by now. By the end of the 4th Tibetan lunar month, one was not allowed to remain in the winter location but must move to distant locations at higher altitude on the mountaintops along with laden yaks. Nowadays instead of yaks, Chinese vehicles transport [the belongings] while yaks had been the only means in the past.

The next camp was set up at a distance of 2-3 days' journey. One stayed for 3-4 months and then came lower down. Then [we] repaired the winter dwelling, removed grass and weeds and prepared a place for the animals.

Q: How many people were actually in each of those moves?

#48D: Four to five families lived together with each family consisting of six, seven, five or four members. They moved together. We had one that is called a yak that was laden. Then a *ba* 'tent made from yak hair' was set up, a huge *ba* made of yak hair in which [we] lived.

Q: Were the yaks laden with belongings?

#48D: The yaks were saddled and loaded.

Q: What animals did you herd?

00:21:58

#48D: There were animals like *sok* 'buffalo' and sheep. Some possessed goats though not in large numbers. These were driven together.

Q: Sheep and what else?

#48D: Sheep, and the yaks were laden with packs whereas *dri* 'female yak' could be milked. Wealthy families owned 100 or 150-160 black *sok* while poor families possessed the least number of 60-70 or 20-30. There were some that owned 1,000-2,000 sheep and four or five or two horses depending upon the economic status of the family.

Q: What does *sok* mean?

#48D: *Sok* is like the buffalo in Tibet.

Q: Is it *dri* or *dzo* 'animal bred between a yak and a cow'?

#48D: *Dri* that could be milked.

Q: What were some of the things that were really in your memory—happy memories about being a nomad and what were some of the things that were difficult in that life? I would like to hear about the challenges of that life and the pleasurable parts?

00:23:55

#48D: Happiness was when the animals survived well. Many animals perished during heavy snowfall when there was no grass to feed. Nomads became poor when animals died. Once the animals died there was not much wealth left. And such were bad times. However, when the animals had plenty of grass and the sheep and cattle had offspring, there would be abundance of milk. Then there was plenty of butter to consume as well as to give in exchange for grains.

Nomads gave butter, cheese and wool [in exchange for grains]. The nomads were happy. One was happy then because there were not any worries about food. There was enough to eat. Should the cattle become weak and not calve, then there was not much milk and the nomads faced great difficulties because one would not be able to acquire grains. One would have nothing to eat and that was a great problem.

Q: If you did run out of food, was there any place that you could turn to get some help if there wasn't grain for the animals and then you couldn't have butter? Where could you go or how long would that suffering last?

#48D: There was none that extended help. The Tibetan Government did not extend any help but it is embarrassing to mention it. There was not many [people] to approach except to borrow grains from the better off. But it is not correct to say such things.

Q: In your family where were you in that lineup of children? Were you younger, older...?

00:26:53

#48D: I am the fourth one. There is one younger to me and the rest are older.

Q: Were there any special duties that you were assigned to as a young man, a young teenager?

#48D: I went on a few trading missions when I was 16, 17 or around 20. In the region of Pasho were farming areas like Ngaden and Ralu from where one could acquire huge quantities of grains, very fine quality grains, and wheat. Many of us travelled together in a caravan of around a hundred yaks with each person driving 12-13. I went on a few trade missions. [I] have also visited Chamdo, and [went] down to Dhartsedo to buy tea. I went once or twice on such missions at the age of 20 or 21. I left my village when I was 23 years old. My father and mother passed away, but some of my relatives were living there then.

Q: Did both your parents expire?

00:28:05

#48D: Actually I had two fathers who were brothers. My senior father...the Chinese...the junior father passed away early. The senior father was living when my mother expired when I was 19 years old. My oldest brother married and was looking after the home. My other brother was living in Lhasa. I met him and then I joined the *Chushi Gangdrug* [Defend Tibet Volunteer Force].

Q: Before we talk about the *Chushi Gangdrug*, I would just like to understand for people who don't understand, what was the purpose or the helpfulness of a woman marrying two brothers in the same family?

#48D: [Smiles] In our region there were not just two but three brothers living with one wife. That was a normal practice. Perhaps it could be to avoid difficulties. If each son married a different woman, the family would have to give away many things; would have

to give away many animals and things. In order to avoid that if one bride was brought home, there would be only one marriage celebration.

If the brothers were cordial and the woman was good like the pillar of the house, all the brothers lived [together] and [the family] prospered. Some [brothers] went to trade, some to herd animals and some took care of the home. Only a small number of children are born because there is only one wife for the many brothers. It was on account of that, but these days it is not so; each brother takes a wife.

When I went to Kham in 1985-86, where there used to be only 4-5 families in a village, it had increased to 8, 9 or 10-20 families. When [I] enquired why there was such an increase compared to the past, the answer was, “These days people follow the Chinese tradition and each brother marries a different woman. Each brother has a wife; hence, there are many families.”

The population has increased because each brother marries a woman and a woman gives birth to at least 3-4 children; some even have 8, 9 or 10. Population increases. That was the practice earlier but now it is different due to the Chinese presence. There are many brothers around us here in India, but each one takes a wife. In my neighborhood, there are three families where each brother has married a wife. [Laughs]

Q: In that earlier tradition when maybe three brothers...Would they then share the same *ba* or would they have their own separate *ba* and would the brother know which child was his or not?

00:34:00

#48D: [You] mean a case of one brother with one wife?

Q: No.

#48D: Together?

Q: In case three brothers married one wife, would [they] live together in one *ba* or in three separate *ba*?

#48D: All the members of the family lived in one *ba*, but they had separate sleeping areas. A couple had separate sleeping areas.

Q: Within one *ba*?

#48D: The daughter-in-law slept separately and the boys, what should [I] say...took turns. [Laughs] Really [I] am speaking the truth. [Laughs] Is it not so? It was like that.

Q: There was one *ba* and where did the daughter-in-law sleep?

#48D: The daughter-in-law slept in a corner of the *ba* and the boys took turns whether it was once in two days or a week. It was like that. That was the practice. [Laughs]

Q: Did you know which of the brothers was your father?

00:35:32

#48D: The older brother was called father and the younger ones were called paternal uncles. They could all be fathers, but the oldest among the brothers was called father and the two younger ones were called paternal uncles. That was how [they] were called.

Q: So it didn't matter who was the actual genetic father?

#48D: [It] is the same. They are brothers from the same flesh and blood. So it was the same if one was called paternal uncle. By sharing a wife, all could be fathers, but the practice was to call the oldest as father.

Q: *Aku-la*, how was the health of the family? You mentioned that your mother had died. Was there some illness or was it just old age that caused her death?

#48D: Mother was 55 or 54 years old; 55 or 54 when she passed away. Mother suffered frequently from headache, gastritis and vomiting. It became serious and mother passed away.

Q: Was that a young age for a woman to die?

00:37:15

#48D: [It] was a young age. In [my] region that was quite an old age but here it is young. Men and women are like youth at age 54—quite old in [my] region.

Q: Were there any sort of typical illnesses that people endured and then often died from? Could you explain them? I'm trying to understand like the general health of the family and the community.

#48D: There were doctors. There were doctors in Tibet. We rode on horseback for half a day from our village to avail medicine from a doctor. A urine sample would be taken along for diagnose and medicine dispensed. Maintaining health meant wearing warm clothes and abstaining from eating greasy food. There was not much else in regard to a healthy lifestyle. Though doctors were present, there were no allopathic drugs like the ones here.

Q: In the wintertime if the snow was too deep to move the animals, what would you do and how long would that last that you would be in the *ba*?

00:39:33

#48D: When it snowed heavily for 5-6 days in the wintertime, there would be no grass for the animals atop the mountains. Snow buried the grass. However, in the nearby areas a day or two's snowfall melted and [the animals] could find grass.

After breakfast the herder drove his animals out and returned just around dusk, at around 6 o'clock. There was an enclosure outside where the bigger animals were secured while the calves were tied inside the house.

Q: Were there houses?

#48D: Yes, houses were constructed. The weaker animals were covered with square-shaped cloth made from wool. [Laughs]. It was extremely cold.

Q: If you were snow bound for four or five days and as a family, what kind of activities or what would you do inside the *ba*?

00:41:28

#48D: Houses had been constructed for the winter when it snowed. *Ba* need not be set up because houses were built for the people where they could live. The weaker animals were tied within the house and the rest outside. Inside the house was a huge stock of grass and weeds that had been gathered in autumn. These were fed [to the animals]. The weaker animals were also fed gruel made with grain flour. Without any of these the animals would die. However, there was enough stock inside the house to last in case the animals could not graze for 4-5 days. A lot of turnips were also fed.

Q: Was this the house that belonged to you all the time and you just went back in the winter, or was it a house that you would find in your journeys of feeding the flock, the animals?

#48D: No, a family of 5-6 people must construct their own house. Each [family] built its house with stones and square-shaped sods and put up a roof. You could retain it. Every family owned 2-3 houses of quite large sizes.

Q: I'm not sure I understand.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Cut up the pastures.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: And put walls, rocks around them?

Q: Pastures were cut to build houses...

#48D: Pastures [sod] were cut into square shapes and stacked together with stones that made a good wall. Any holes were closed with animal dung. [Laughs]

Q: And these walls were to keep the animals enclosed?

#48D: People lived in the good houses and the inferior ones with a few holes were used to tether animals in.

Q: You mentioned that there were...some people...that if there were any problems or difficulties between people they would solve it. Were there...What would be typical problems or fights that the people would get into in the nomad community?

00:45:21

#48D: Disputes would arise from one accusing another of gathering grass from the area between houses or when grazing areas were encroached upon by others' animals. There were disputes on account of such issues. Then [the people] clashed.

Q: How were they settled?

#48D: A small fight would entail pulling hair and boxing each other while in a grave fight there would be stabbing and killing. There would be knifing.

Q: Oh, there were cases of stabbing.

#48D: Such things took place. There would be minor ones like punching and pulling hair.

Q: Would someone come in and judge who was right, who was wrong and give a punishment?

#48D: [The case] would be brought before the leaders of the village. They would first probe and determine who started the fight and find out the truth. Then a punishment would be meted out. [The offender's] hands were tied at the back and [he was] suspended on a peg for an hour or 15-20 minutes and then there would be lashings. These were for the serious criminals. Some [disputes] were settled by paying money.

Q: The hands...

00:47:22

#48D: The hands were tied at the back and [the offender] hung on a tree near a river for around half an hour. As the head fell forward, the shoulders dislocated. Then [he] would be given around 100 lashings. In case [the parties involved] did not accept [the verdict], the case was referred to the district of Pasho, the district of Pasho. Here very bad punishments were awarded. There were prisons of three-storied buildings with the ground floor filled with water and mud. The grave offenders were thrown in them. Though I have not been to the prison, I heard that fishes and frogs in the water devoured [the prisoners]. Such were there in our [region].

Q: And these were run by the nomad communities, government officials or was it from Lhasa? I'm not sure.

#48D: [Ours] was a territory of Tibet. Kham in Tibet...Derge and the regions lying to this side [western side] of the Yangtse River fell under the territory of Tibet. Ours was a territory of Tibet since long ago and [the administration structure] was formed by the Tibetan Government. Much of the areas of Kham that lie [in the eastern] side of the Yangtse River...that was how it was in Tibet. That was how it was during the time of the past leaders. In the future our [region] would become a part of Tibet. It was a part of Tibet and [we] had to pay a lot of taxes. These days the Chinese do not issue passes to us [people of Tsawa Gokyamthang] saying, "You are a part of Tibet Autonomous Region and must seek permits in Tibet." [People] are not issued papers to come here.

Markham, Tsarongpa—it is the same as Tsawagang—Gonjo, Dayab, Chamdo, Lhadhok, Ruwuche all came under Tibet long ago. When the Tibetan army arrived, it could travel until here and not further. It was like that.

Q: What was the feeling about having to pay taxes to the Tibetan Government?

00:51:16

#48D: The taxes were butter, wool, yak hair and money. [Representatives of] the Tibetan Government came annually to collect taxes. One must pay then. Numerous soldiers of the Tibetan Government passed through. The Tibetan Government army consisted of units named according to the 30 alphabets, like Kadhang Unit, Chadhang Unit, Thadhang Unit, etc. We had to organize everything when they arrived. Areas covering a distance of 30 miles were allocated [to every village] and you were obliged to organize everything within your jurisdiction. All men and women [of the village] must go to attend [to the army].

Q: What role was the Tibetan Government army doing in...we're talking about the Kham area?

#48D: The army came to look out for the Chinese and to guard the border. Besides [the army] also fought the Chinese Ambans and Siling Chinese that appeared suddenly.

Q: You said that you went on trade missions when you were 15, 16? What kind of a young man were you?

#48D: [Speaks before interpretation is complete] I was around 18, 19, 20 or 21, 22 when I went on the trade missions.

Q: What kind of a young man were you then?

00:53:50

#48D: I was a handsome young man with [long] hair then. I did not have a wife at that time. I married after coming to India. Though there were women [I] did not have a wife, [laughs] to speak the truth.

Q: Were you a good singer in those days?

#48D: Yes, quite so. Now due to old age the voice quality has deteriorated but I have not forgotten the songs and can remember them. I miss [my] village as [I] grow older. [I] recall going up in the summer and coming down in the wintertime. [I] have memories of what [my] village was like. I've been asked to visit but cannot because of the knee pain. It is very difficult to answer nature's call in Tibet, there being no [proper] toilets; I have to use a high commode. I cannot go to the village. Siblings and many relatives have expired, but their children who live there ask me to visit but am unable to go.

Q: You would be free to go back to Tibet? There would be no problem if your leg is better and accommodations were better? Would you consider going back to visit? Would that be safe for you?

#48D: [I] heard that these days proper [travel] documents are not being issued in Delhi and one can be arrested along the way and that's fearful. At present Tibet is occupied by China and should there be freedom in traveling and in case I am fit, I would like to go back.

Q: So your happiest memories, it sounds like were those days when you could visit so many beautiful places in your travels or when you were taking care of the animals. Is that why you miss them?

00:57:36

#48D: Tibet was free and [we] were happy then. One could practice the dharma at one's free will and there was no oppression.

Q: When did that change? In your life when did things begin to change, you said you didn't have that same happiness?

#48D: Everyone became unhappy in Tibet. Even though His Holiness the Dalai Lama is living everybody felt deep pain from the time Tibet was lost until now when we have not achieved anything, neither autonomy nor independence. Every Tibetan in general has the same anguish even now.

Q: When did the change occur and why?

#48D: We experienced suffering when China occupied Tibet. Our suffering can be resolved if Tibet is declared independent, that Tibet is a separate [country] or China should agree to autonomy stating, "We will be responsible for the external matters while internally, the Tibetans are free to practice the dharma or to carry out any kind of work." If His Holiness the Dalai Lama receives such a document in the United Nations, then there will be no anguish in the hearts of all the Tibetans; the pain will vanish. We will never feel sad.

00:59:08

Take me for instance. When I was capable, I joined the *Chushi Gangdrug* [Defend Tibet Volunteer Force] and fought the Chinese. Likewise, I trained in the [Indian] army in Dehradun [Uttarakhand]. These days many of our people are immolating themselves for the cause of Tibet's independence. Though I no longer have enthusiasm to do such, I chant prayers that the truth about Tibet should prevail. I pray with fervor as I have that much of enthusiasm.

However, I am too old to do anything much but the anguish is there. Living in a foreign land, we cannot see our parents or relatives when [they] die. Even though we wish to go, we cannot because Tibet is not independent. If one wants to go abroad, we are without a pass. Except by spending money, we are unable to go abroad. We face a lot of suffering.

Q: *Aku-la*, can you please tell us how your personal life changed from this very happy young adult? What happened to you personally? When did things start to feel bad?

#48D: Then I left my village in Kham for Lhasa where I had two siblings who were monks at Drepung [Monastery]. From among the many brothers, my immediate older and younger brothers were monks in Drepung. Another brother, the one below the two eldest ones was a son-in-law to a family that was living in Gyatso Tsomora. I left my village to see all of them. I met my monk brothers and when [I] was living with the family of my older brother, people from Lhasa and various places were joining the *Chushi Gangdrug*. [It was said that people] must join the force.

01:02:20

My brother's family was a wealthy one. It was said that wealthy families were obliged to join [the force] with horses and guns. I told my older brother that I would go. So my older brother sent me to the *Chushi Gangdrug* equipping me with a horse and two guns of different lengths. There were many families in Gyatso Tsomora, which was under the authority of Kundeling. A group left to join the *Chushi Gangdrug*. I left then. Our commander then was Derge Bachungpon who passed away last year in Nepal. [We] were under his command.

Q: But before you left for Lhasa from Kham, what was changing in your neighborhood? What could you see with your own eyes? What was different than the life you had been living?

#48D: When the Chinese initially arrived there were no roads for them. They had a mule or horse for two people and arrived poorly. They had nothing to eat but *tsampa* 'flour made from roasted barley' that was packed in long bags and worn across [gestures to shoulders]. [I] wondered what spices were mixed with the *tsampa*, but they poured it in half a mug of water, stirred and ate it. They were humble then when they came to our region, humble and treated the people very well. In that way, they gradually advanced to Lhasa. They went to Lhasa. And then they started to construct roads from China, constructed roads for vehicles to move.

01:04:56

[The Chinese] constructed motor roads and were quite gentle. [They] paid a huge amount of *dhayen* 'Chinese silver coins' for sheep or goats that were sold, and presents to the children. [They] were very good and were deceptive. They built roads. After the construction of roads, they became worse and worse and occupied Tibet. In Kham Andrug [Gonpo Tashi] fought the Chinese in around 1951-52 when unrests began there. There were some problems, but not much then. The real problem and suffering began when Lhasa was lost. It was for everyone just as it was for me.

Q: *Aku-la*, what was your thought and your feeling when you saw the Chinese coming into your community, into your country?

#48D: [I] thought, "What is going to happen? What are the Chinese like?" Some of the older people said that the Chinese were not good. I was young then and did not have much awareness.

Q: How old were you when you first saw them?

#48D: I was aged between 12-13 that the Chinese arrived in our region.

Q: 12-13?

#48D: Yes. [I] was around 12 when [the Chinese] arrived.

Q: What happened between the time you were 12 or 13 and then you wanted to go join, to visit your relatives in Lhasa? How old were you when you went to Lhasa?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Twenty-one.

Q: Twenty-one. So between 12 or 14 and 21, what was going on in your community?

01:08:17

#48D: Between those times, the Chinese constructed roads and became powerful. I continued to live in my village in the meantime. The unrests in the further regions of Kham did not spread to ours. Andrug Gonpo Tashi [founder of the *Chushi Gangdrug*] was resisting the Chinese in Kham then. There were clashes.

Q: Your people did not fight the Chinese then?

#48D: There were combats in the further regions at that time. The clashes were not great battles, but [the resistance fighters] had launch sudden attacks and kill a few Chinese. Such skirmishes were taking place.

Q: What made you decide to go to Lhasa?

#48D: I did not have any intention of joining the *Chushi Gangdrug* initially but came to Lhasa to meet my siblings. [I] thought a bad period would start if the Chinese imposed restrictions and may not be able to see the siblings. So, I went away. Then I could not return to my village and joined the *Chushi Gangdrug* from Lhasa.

Q: Which monastery were your two brothers in, the monastery...

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Gaden Monastery.

Q: Were your two brothers in the Gaden Monastery?

01:10:08

#48D: No, in Drepung.

Q: Drepung Monastery, two brothers in Drepung and one brother married a rich woman?

#48D: He was in the place called Tsomora.

Q: Not in Lhasa?

#48D: Gyatso Tsomora is 2-3 *gyatsog* away from Lhasa.

Q: Was it close?

#48D: It was close. From Lhasa one arrived at Metagonkar, then Tsomora, then Numara and then to Kongpo and onwards to Kham.

Q: Close to Lhasa? How did that brother happen to meet...?

#48D: [Interrupts] The region where I lived was 30 *gyatsog* from Lhasa.

Q: Yes.

#48D: You may not know what *gyatsog* is but in the olden days in Tibet a distance of 30 miles was one *gyatsog*.

Q: Did 30 families make a *gyatsog*?

01:11:06

#48D: No, mile [pronounces as “mil”].

[Interpreter to interviewee]: Thirty *mi* ‘people’?

#48D: There was a milestone after every 30 miles, which is one *gyatsog*. Therefore, I [lived] at a distance of 30 *gyatsog* from Lhasa. If one set out on horseback early in the morning, one covered a distance of one *gyatsog* by the evening. However, driving yaks took around two days to cover a *gyatsog* as [they] could not go fast. 30 miles is a great distance.

Q: Oh, *gyatsog* is the distance...

#48D: Yes, like the kilometers that the Indians refer to. We called it *gyatsog*. A *gyatsog* consists of 30 miles.

Q: How many *gyatsog* were there...

01:11:44

#48D: The distance from my village of Tsawagang to Lhasa was 30 *gyatsog*.

Q: One of your brothers married into a rich family.

#48D: Right.

Q: How did this brother meet the rich family?

#48D: It was a rich family. The man renounced his life to the dharma and took my brother as the husband of his wife. He became a lama.

Q: How did [they] meet?

#48D: [The man] said, “I am going to renounce the vicious cycle of existence. You should stay here as my wife’s husband. I am going to renounce the vicious cycle of existence.” They were friends from the beginning. That is how my brother came to live there.

Q: Did you ever want to become a monk yourself?

01:13:33

#48D: I never became a monk.

Q: [You] didn’t become a monk.

#48D: No, [I] did not.

Q: Did you wish [to become a monk] or not?

#48D: [I] did not have a wish to become a monk then.

Q: So when you got to Lhasa...we’ll see if we can pick up the story there. You got to Lhasa and how did you join the *Chushi Gangdrug*? Where did you go and how did you do that?

#48D: At that time the *Chushi Gangdrug* asked all the rich Khampa ‘people of Kham’ families in Lhasa to become soldiers of the *Chushi Gangdrug*. My brother’s family was a wealthy one and they were obliged to join. [I] told my brother, “I shall go instead of you.” That is how I joined.

Q: This was the brother married to the rich woman. Okay. All the Khampas if they were required to join, what if they chose not to?

01:15:00

#48D: The choice was yours. Nobody forced you to join. One must join with enthusiasm for the cause of Tibet’s independence and for the cause of the dharma. There was not anyone to force you to join with an ultimatum.

Q: How did you go and find them? Were they located somewhere? How did you sign up to be a member?

#48D: At that time there were groups of around 230 men joining the *Chushi Gangdrug* and one left with them.

Q: Where? Where were they?

#48D: We were 3-4 months at a place called Wahazingchu.

Q: Zingchu?

#48D: Wahazingchu is located behind the river in Lho. The army camp was established there. [We] observed Chinese movements and fought a little. And then His Holiness the Dalai Lama was escorted from Norbulingka. Khampa men arrived to escort His Holiness the Dalai Lama. It is mentioned in the earlier yellow composition [*My Land and My People: The Original Autobiography of His Holiness the Dalai Lama of Tibet*], when His Holiness the Dalai Lama was being escorted, two men named Kunga and Tenpa Dhargay hailing from Ganze in Kham arrived. He [Tenpa Dhargay] lives in Dalhousie [Himachal Pradesh, India] but [I] do not know if he still survives. Upon meeting them, His Holiness asked the man from Ganze, “What is your name?” He replied that he was called Tenpa Dhargay. His Holiness said, “This is very good. This is very auspicious.” When he mentioned Tenpa Dhargay, His Holiness presented a ceremonial scarf. The other person was Kunga, the son of Chudho who was a leader. This is mentioned in the earlier yellow composition with photographs but I do not know about it now. They came and escorted His Holiness to India.

01:17:09

We stayed back a little longer to fight after the men had left. Later the boats at the river were withdrawn and so, in the night each of us looked for boats and boatmen. We could not come through Mangola [mountain pass] but after crossing the river moved towards Nay Jora, which is the way to Druk Sanga Choeling and managed to come through Elhagyari. We were nearly 400 men of the *Chushi Gangdrug* then.

Q: You couldn't come through the Mangola pass?

#48D: Mangola was blocked and we could not come through.

01:18:46

Q: What does Tenpa Dhargay mean?

#48D: Tenpa Dhargay means the “Progress of the Dharma.” That was his name and His Holiness gave a ceremonial scarf in recognition of it.

Q: Did you see any...Were you engaged in any battle between *Chushi Gangdrug* and the Chinese?

#48D: I took part in two encounters. One was at a place called Chimdha near Gyatso Numara. Chimdha is located on the way to Kongpo Jamdha. A huge Chinese army camp was established there. The Chinese had dug tunnels beneath the house and all of them were hiding there with just 2-3 men as lookouts in the house. 21 men of the *Chushi Gangdrug* volunteered to attack the house and I was one. I was number 16 or 17. Monks of the three great monasteries who hailed from Dayab and Chamdo were in the lead. They rushed and were fired upon from the house. Four or five monks were killed and we failed to enter [the house] and retreated.

Q: What do you mean by “I was 16 or 17 in line”?

01:21:48

#48D: I was behind 16 or 17 people. As the men entered the house, 4 in the lead were killed. Then we dare not enter. The protective amulets did not function that day and it was said that a woman had fired. Otherwise, the protective amulets were very potent, the ones called Jigshay Mahe granted by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. They were highly potent but that day they did not protect. Then we retreated because we dare not take any risks.

Q: Would the fact that it was a woman do something to make the amulets not protective that day?

#48D: It was a woman that fired. A protective amulet did not function when fired upon by a woman, which was why they did not protect.

Q: Was that woman Chinese or Tibetan?

#48D: The woman was a Tibetan, who was the wife of a Chinese leader. We had killed the Chinese leader.

Q: If you were 16th or 17th in line, how many were killed ahead of you?

01:23:50

#48D: Twenty-one men ventured and 4 were killed.

Q: Where did you retreat to and what happened next?

#48D: [We] retreated to Wahazingchu where our camp was located.

Q: Can you tell us what was it you had, a gun? Was that the first time in your life you had a gun and were trying to kill people and what was that like for you?

#48D: That was the first time. [I] did not get to fire [my] gun at that time. We could not enter the house and retreated after the lead people got killed.

Q: What were you feeling when you saw these people being killed in front of you?

#48D: [I thought,] “We dare not advance or will get killed.” They that possessed potent protective amulets had been killed and we had the same one. I too had a Jigshay Mahe and many other protective cords and they did not protect. Saying that we should not proceed, we retreated and went back.

Q: Do you understand what it is about the protective amulet not protecting you when it’s a woman attacking you?

01:26:07

#48D: Women are from a lower birth order and [protective amulets] did not protect. Even to this day if a woman fired, protective amulets did not protect. For instance in our region—it was not so in Tibet [Utsang]—but in Kham even a wife could not touch a

husband's protective amulet, sword and gun. They must be kept separate. That was the custom in Tibet.

Q: What happens after this attack and you go back to the camp? What happens next?

#48D: That night Chinese planes flew in the sky and dropped rocks and attacked our main army camp.

Q: Rocks?

#48D: At Wahazingchu. [The Chinese] had loaded rocks in the planes and dropped them. Then after crossing the river we could not go towards Mangola and went to Sanga Choeling and through Elhagyari...[To interpreter] Which region are you from?...[You] do not know?

[Interpreter to interviewee]: [I]'m a Bapa.

#48D: Bapa? We are the same. Okay. Okay. And that's how we journeyed. Then [we] had an encounter at Nay Jora. [Addressing interpreter] Which part of Ba?

Q: What happened [at Nay Jora]?

01:28:41

#48D: We escaped from Wahazingchu with Chinese planes in the sky, with nothing to eat and no grass for the horses. Pursued by the Chinese we fled for six days and nights. We fought a little as we fled. After six days and nights the Chinese gradually fell silent. Nay Jora is a large place facing the east and a flowing river. Across the river was an army camp where there were [men] from the trio of Ba-Li-Gyal [Bathang, Lithang and Gyalthang], Dhargay Gonpa, Derge, Tsawarong and all the different regions of Kham. They had formed an army camp on the other side of the river.

I was in the Gonjo group and among those who were responsible for the supplies of the men of *Chushi Gangdrug*. We stayed in a home where the residents had run away. When the Khampa had arrived, [I] do not know why but [they] had taken flight. We stayed there, drank tea and ate. There was one called Dhondup Phuntsok from Gonjo who said, "Let us stay here for tonight. The Chinese will not come tonight. Go to sleep." So we lay with our heads on the saddles, and then gunshots were fired. The Chinese started firing. The Chinese had arrived.

01:30:00

Guns and artilleries were fired. People on the other side of the river, who were exhausted had released their waistbands and pants, disarmed and were drinking tea. It felt like there was hailstorm and thunder, horses bolted, people ran towards the horses and some caught them. [The Chinese] fired two shells at us but [we] were not hit. They hit the rocky mountain, so there was an avalanche of rocks and sand. The supplies were loaded on 20-30 horses and [we] managed to catch a few. Except for a few, [we] could not catch the rest of the horses. Two men were killed at this place called Elhagyari. There were monks and

many women with the *Chushi Gangdrug*. At Elhagyari one monk was hit here [gestures off camera] and another that ran was hit. Two men were hit. We just about managed to catch the horses and ride them.

With us were monks of the three great monasteries, villagers, their wives and children; an exodus of whom many were bound to get killed. “All of us cannot run away. We must try to resist for around an hour. Otherwise, the Chinese will kill everyone.” A few commanders rushed in and 12 of us—I was also there—the 12 of us resisted. There were no watches then but [we] fought for a little over half an hour during which the people managed to cross the pass. Then the sun was about to set. We rushed towards the horses and rode them.

01:31:44

Later we learned...the 12 men fired together, pulling triggers at the same time. The guns we owned then were Tibetan ones called Palmolive and Bura and not Chinese-made guns. The trigger must be pulled for every shot. [We] fired the 12 guns at the same time, aiming [shows action of aiming left and right]. The Chinese [makes shivering motion] and planes flew over the sky as we kept firing. Gradually [the Chinese] closed in and almost captured us. “Now it is better for us to flee or we will be captured.” Some men were holding [our] horses. [We] ran towards the horses and rode over the mountain pass. Later we learned that nearly 300 Chinese troops had been killed there. That could be because [we] continued to fire for nearly an hour. I was present at the time of this encounter and took an active part.

And then we continued in the night not knowing the way. However, around twilight we had reached Druk Sanga Choeling. Once again before we finished drinking a cup or two of tea here, planes started to fly. [We] went down towards Tsari where the route was terrible. The snow and forest-covered mountains were high [raises both hands side by side] with a huge resounding river gushing by in the valley. We proposed to spend the night and “if we cannot make it through the Mangola route, taking the way through the tribal region would mean everyone being killed with poisoned spears or dying of starvation because there is nothing to be bought there. [We] do not know where the Indian army is based.” We conferred with the commanders.

01:33:30

There were 10-20 men from Dhargay Gonpa or Tiwu in Kham. They said, “Come what may, we will proceed. We will take a few supplies. Divide the money. We are determined to go to India. If you wish to go back, you can keep our horses.” They owned very good horses. We decided to go back. We left men at three different points on the border, three men at each point. From the nine men, only two survived while the Chinese killed the others.

We took some butter, *tsampa* and dried meat leaving the rest of the things behind. Numerous lamas had come and there were their boxes, holy images and a host of things. We started out and just before we reached the monastery of Druk Sanga Choling, [we] heard that the route was blocked. And then planes flew. We could not turn the horses around and left them.

Q: Where did [you] reach?

#48D: [We] moved down to the tribal region. There was no path to lead horses. I left my horse there and walked.

Q: Where did you reach finally?

#48D: After Druk Sanga Choling, we reached the tribal region of India.

Q: Reached India?

#48D: The tribal region in India through the route in Tsari.

Q: So it was a group of nine people that you escaped with?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Yes.

Q: From a group of nine, only two and you were one of the two?

01:37:46

#48D: No, no. The two men that survived were from Gonjo.

Q: There were nine men guarding the border and...

#48D: From the nine men, two survived while the Chinese killed seven.

Q: You were not among the nine men?

#48D: They were part of us but hailed from Gonjo in Kham.

Q: Only two survived while seven were killed, but you were one of the two survivors.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: No.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: This is another story.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Another group.

Q: What happened to you then?

#48D: After leaving the horses, the men had nothing but the clothes and guns. He was empty-handed. I thought I must carry some food and escaped with a bag filled with dried meat, butter, *tsampa* and tea leaves.

Q: Where?

#48D: One must escape.

Q: Where did [you] get the meat and butter?

01:38:56

#48D: They had been left there. The *Chushi Gangdrug* had piles of butter, *tsampa* and everything stocked under spotted tents. They were left there and could not be transported. We tried to flee through Mangola with the horses but failed. [The supplies] were left there and could not be transported. I took some and left. My colleagues were men from Gonjo. As I continued dusk fell. [I] met a few Khampa men camped along the way and asked about my colleagues. [They replied], “[They] could be a little distance away.” I had brought the large spotted tent hoping to use it and gave it to the Khampa soldiers saying, “Keep the tent. I cannot carry it.”

I carried the supplies and met up with them [Gonjo colleagues] in the night. I gave them the food. Nobody had food then because there were no horses. We were 13 or 14 people and the food did not last since there was not much *tsampa*. When we reached the first army camp where [we] surrendered the guns, we could get food rations that had been airdropped.

01:40:07

We then ran short of food. There was one called Chupapo, who was a commander, that said to a man from Gonjo, “Either you or the man from Markham, please retrace your steps and search for *tsampa* or butter that have been hidden along the way. Otherwise, we will die of starvation.” There was nothing to buy from the tribesmen that were naked and armed with spears. There was nothing to buy. So, three of us went back. There was a little quantity of *tsampa* that we divided. We took the bigger portion and left a little for them [the Commander and others].

After journeying for two days—the route was terrible—one had to trek through bamboo groves infested with leeches. Rivers had to be crossed in boats and if one did not make payment, the tribesmen slashed at the boat. After sometime, among the swaying bamboos we found a blue bag, which [I] pulled out. There was a small packet of butter wrapped in hide, a little bag of *tsampa* and a saddlebag. We found these. Inside the blue bag were some paper money and quite a large amount of coins. Except for the silver items, the rest were useless. We divided the *tsampa* and the butter into three bags and returned.

01:41:48

We trekked until dusk fell and then prepared tea and ate some food, and started out the next day at dawn. [We] stopped at around 10 o’clock in the morning to make tea and then continued. We met up with the colleagues in the evening and gave [them] the food. It lasted us until Assam. [We] had also received food rations.

Dhondup Tashi was formerly a merchant in Kalimpong and he knew the Indian language. We surrendered our guns to the Indians at the first army post. At that time I had problems with my leg. There were also many others who had suffered gun injuries and were ill. Hence, 18 of us men, from Guwahati in Assam to Missamari...no, [we] went in a plane

from Daporirap to Guwahati and then in a vehicle. The healthy people were stopped for many months at the airport in Daporirap. And then I arrived in Assam.

Q: What a long and courageous and scary escape story.

01:44:36

#48D: Yes.

Q: *Aku-la*, thank you so much but before you go I would like to ask if you would like to sing one more song for us, okay? Is there a favorite song that you would like to sing?

#48D: Okay.

01:45:15-01:46:28

[Sings a song. Words are not discernible.]

Q: Thank you. Very lovely. Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW