

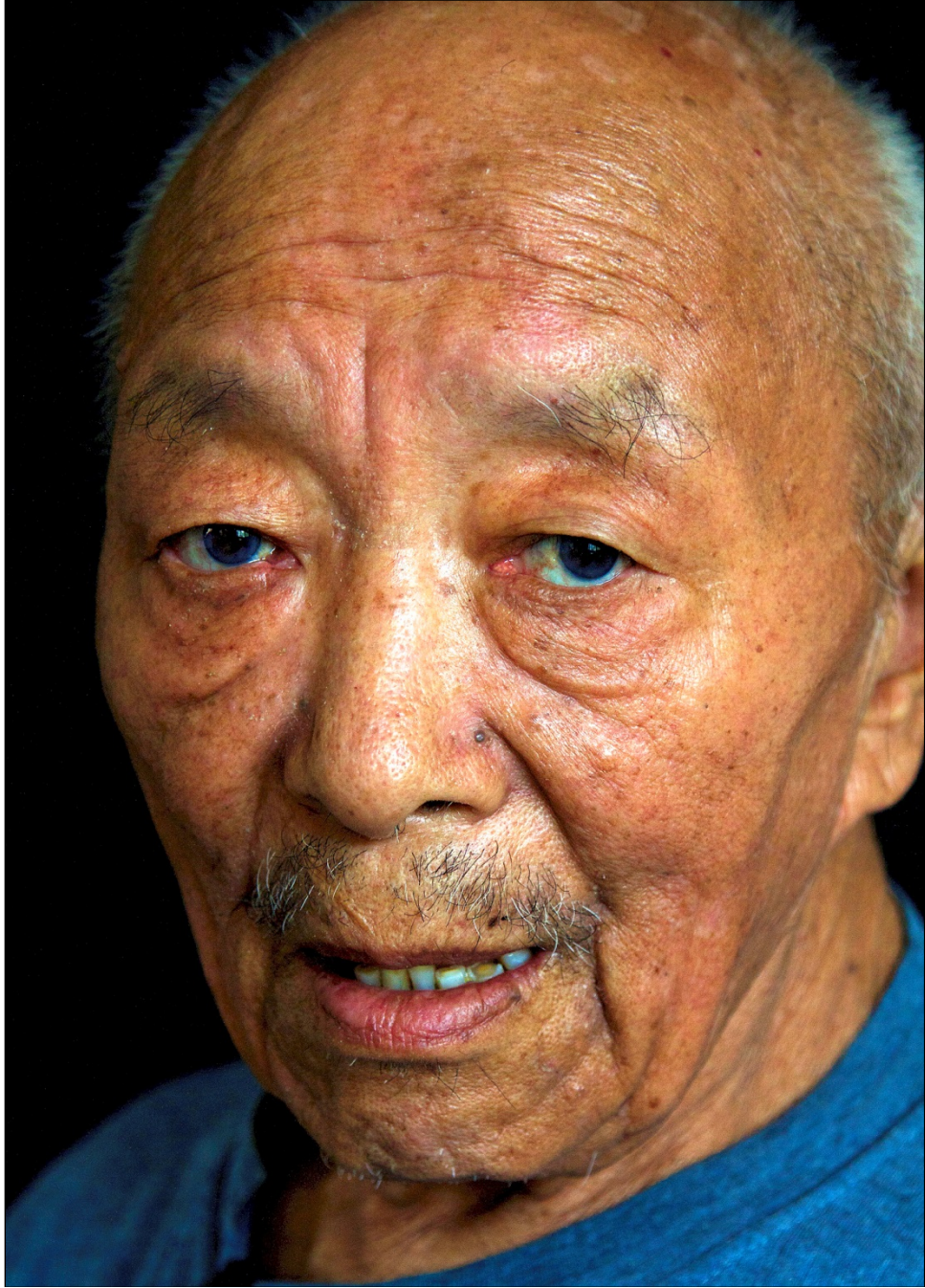
Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #49D – Karma
May 18, 2012

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TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #49D
2. Interviewee: Karma
3. Age: 83
4. Date of Birth: 1929
5. Sex: Male
6. Birthplace: Kongpo
7. Province: Utsang
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: 0 hr 41 min
12. Interviewer: Rebecca Novick
13. Interpreter: Thupten Kelsang Dakpa
14. Videographer: Ronny Novick
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

Biographical Information:

Karma came from the Kongpo region of Utsang Province. His was a family of farmers that grew wheat, peas and barley. Karma spent nine years under the Chinese occupation. He was aware of *thamzing* 'struggle sessions' on the wealthy and land owners, but did not himself have any bad experiences with the Chinese. He cut trees from the forest and made coal at the request of the Chinese and was paid well for this work.

Karma explains the circumstances that compelled him to join the Tibetan Government Army at the age of 21, which he belonged to for two years. They were trained well and stood guard over the region of Sok Tsendhengong, but never had to fight in a battle. His commander told the troops the Chinese had arrived and that he was going to meetings with them; soon after the Tibetan Army was disbanded.

Karma touches briefly on the struggles of the *Chushi Gangdrug* Defend Tibet Volunteer Force as they were pursued by the Chinese through Karma's region. The loss of Lhasa became apparent to the villagers only when they saw the Chinese troops leading the beautifully decorated horses that belonged to His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Karma fled to India in 1959 after hearing about the Dalai Lama's escape. He visited Tibet again in 1990 and saw that only the farmers remained because the wealthy and former leaders had been wiped out.

Topics Discussed:

Tibetan army, first appearance of Chinese, invasion by Chinese army, Chushi Gangdrug guerrillas.

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Interview #49D

Interviewee: Karma

Age: 83, Sex: Male

Interviewer: Rebecca Novick

Interview Date: May 18, 2012

Question: Could you please tell us your name.

00:00:14

Interviewee #49D: Karma.

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 are going to help us to document the true history, culture and beliefs of the Tibetans. Do you give permission for the Tibet Oral History Project to use your interview?

#49D: How?

Q: Is it okay to film?

#49D: Yes, but unless [you] come close I am hard of hearing. [I] am 85 years old; not 85, 83 years old. [I] am 83 years old, so [I] am hard of hearing. Unless close enough, [I] cannot hear.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: So you speak up a little bit for him.

Q: During this interview if you want to take a break at any time, let us know.

#49D: Yes.

Q: If you don't want to answer a question, that's fine.

#49D: Okay.

Q: If this interview was shown in Tibet or China or anywhere else, would it create a problem for you?

#49D: There will be no particular problem as such for me, but I have a sibling who lives in Kongpo presently. I am 83 years old, so he must be 76 or something like that. He might face problems. In the past when we left for India in the year '59, he was subjected to imprisonment and hard labor for around nine months on the grounds that his sibling had

escaped. Now he is 76; there is a difference of 8 years between us, he being younger and me the older. Except for him being troubled, I am in no position to go [to Tibet]. I am 83 years old and at the most may live for a year or two. [I] shall then be going to heaven and have no thoughts about going to Tibet or any such things. It is just a thought that there might be problems [for the sibling]. That is it.

00:03:40

There are no problems besides that because both parents have passed away. [I] brought mother along and [she] passed away here at this settlement. I do not have children or other siblings that would face problems. However, if I bad mouthed them [the Chinese] or spoke about things they had not done as having done, that would be a reason to create problems. However, [I] have not done those. We have lived together for around nine years with the Chinese. I do not have any stories to relate about their causing us suffering or our having done anything to them. Later I once witnessed the *thamzing* ‘struggle session’ of some wealthy people and landowners.

Someone called Gangka Naymo was subjected to *thamzing* but I was not present. I was called, but in order to speak against her—I knew nothing about her and so I did not want to go. There was one called *uyon* ‘leader appointed by Chinese’ that had been appointed. I sent a little girl who was my relative—she was about this then [raises hand to around 3 feet]—[I] sent her thinking she would not be harmed.

[I] think [the person subjected to *thamzing*] was pulled by the hair, gagged, slapped and [assaulted] in various ways. I did not want to attend it when I did not know the person or the reason. And [I] was not in a position to say whether she was good nor did [I] want to be forced into saying she was bad. That is about all [I] have to say.

Q: Can you talk to us about your life in Kongpo and living side by side with the Chinese there? Can you tell us a little bit about that?

#49D: At that time when the Chinese said something they spoke with one voice, unlike what happened in a large group of our people when some said this and some said that. It was like that. If there were four, five or six people in a room like us here and a Chinese came, [he] would smoke and offer each one a cigarette whether one smoked or not. They did like that. They were trying to be gentle.

00:07:29

[The Chinese] were being good and did not cause harm to me personally. Yet in order to squeeze out wealth, the rich people were subjected to *thamzing*, slapped and pulled by the hair. There were talks of such things having occurred. As for my witnessing [a *thamzing*], I told you earlier about sending a girl and did not witness it [myself]. That was it.

Q: You were farming at this time. What were you farming?

#49D: [Speaks before question is interpreted] After that His Holiness the Dalai Lama left Lhasa for India in the 1st, 2nd or 3rd month. After [His Holiness’] departure, one thought it was useless to stay. For instance, our refuge was His Holiness and he was gone. It was

similar to a man with a body but no head. [I] thought it was futile to stay and we escaped in the 8th Tibetan lunar month. We fled from the southerly direction.

Q: What were you farming in Tibet?

#49D: Yes?

Q: You were a farmer.

#49D: Yes, yes, a farmer.

Q: What were you cultivating?

00:10:50

#49D: It was the trio of wheat, peas and barley. That is what we grew in Tibet. Besides wheat, barley and peas, not many kinds [of crops] grew in Tibet.

Q: You said you lived side by side with the Chinese. What does that mean exactly? Where were they in relation to you?

#49D: The Chinese cut trees on the mountains and transported [them] to the plains and were also constructing roads. They planned to occupy Tibet in a gentle way and did such things. There were thick forests on the mountaintops. [They] cut the woods according to size and then vehicles arrived to transport them to Lhasa and other places where there was scarcity of woods. They engaged in doing such things and nothing in particular.

When they first appeared, eight, nine or 10 soldiers drove one, two or three horses and mules that were feeble. The horses and mules could not walk. [They] were exhausted and refused to move. Then they [the Chinese] took out *dhayen* ‘Chinese silver coins’ from their pouches and it seems they were saying, “You will be given grass. We will buy and feed you grass and water.” [They] showed the *dhayen* to the horses. Not all the men carried guns then.

Q: There were no guns?

00:13:03

#49D: They did not. There were two or three guns for eight, nine or 10 men. All the horses were exhausted, and around the necks [of the men] were bags of *tsampa* ‘flour made from roasted barley’ mixed with salt and chili. The *tsampa* was packed in sacks that were hung over the necks.

Q: Were the Chinese kind of passing through your region or were they settled there?

#49D: At that time [they] were moving towards Lhasa as they had occupied Lhasa. [They] were going to Lhasa and had settled in Kongpo, too. Kongpo Nyitri was a large town. [To the interpreter] Your parents would know. It was a large area where there was a Chinese army camp and also Chinese civilians that engaged in trade. There was a huge number

settled there. Kongpo had one of the largest numbers of Chinese. It was like a capital city for them, the [place] called Kongpo Nyitri.

Q: Kongpo Nyitri?

#49D: Yes. There is someone called Nyitri Lhawang in Mysore [south India] who hailed from that place. He was a Chinese official but might have passed away. We have not met for many years since coming to India. Each one went [his] way after arriving here. Timay Tenkha and Nyitri Ada Lhawang are in the south.

Q: Your personal interaction with the Chinese is quite limited?

#49D: How?

Q: Have [you] had interactions with the Chinese?

00:16:43

#49D: [I] have had interactions. [I] should say [I] have because when we went to the mountains, we had to follow their orders. We went to the mountains and cut trees and rolled down the logs. Drivable roads were located away from the trees on the mountains. So we did this [work] and received *dhayen* in payment.

Q: Did [you] work for the Chinese?

#49D: Yes, for the Chinese. [We] cut logs for the Chinese. The logs were in lengths of six, seven or 12 feet and handed over to them at the base [of the mountain] for which [we] received payment. That is like interaction, right?

Then coal was made underground from the wood called *betho*. We called it *betho* in Kongpo, but [I] don't know what wood is used here. A huge quantity of coal was made from such wood. Perhaps the coal was used for warmth during winter or for the manufacture of things by blacksmiths. Many pits were dug to make coal. We sold these to them and received whatever the price. [I] have also done this, which is interaction. [Laughs]

Q: The people who you were selling the firewood to, were they soldiers or were they ordinary citizens?

00:18:47

#49D: They should be called Chinese citizens; they were not exactly soldiers. Those to whom we sold wood were dressed in blue and were people like us. There were two types, one like civilians that dressed in blue and the army that wore yellow [khaki] colored army uniform. [We] interacted with those dressed in blue and not the soldiers.

Q: Were they giving you a fair price for the wood?

#49D: Money?

Q: Yes.

#49D: Yes, [they] did. [They] paid well. [The currency] was the white *dhayen* of the Chinese then. [They] paid well.

Q: So you were doing this work and selling wood to the Chinese in the blue uniforms and so what happened then?

#49D: Yes?

Q: [You] sold wood and what happened after that?

#49D: How?

Q: Did anything happen? Special experiences?

#49D: Other [happenings]?

Q: Yes.

00:20:12

#49D: [I] did not have any other interactions with them. [I] worked for them and received payment in return. Besides that [I] have not had any other interactions with them.

Q: And then what happened later? What happened later in your life?

#49D: At what age?

Q: What happened later?

#49D: Later an army was formed in Kongpo that I [joined].

Q: Was there a war in Kongpo?

#49D: An army was formed when they [the Chinese] attacked Chamdo in the Dhoday [Amdo] part of Tibet. Lhasa is in the upper region and Chamdo in the lower, in Dhoday. I joined the army then at the age of 21 or 22. I went to join the army at Sok Tsendhengong in the Changthang 'Northern Plateau' and was there for around two years. It was the Badhang unit of the Tibetan Government army. The Tibetan Government army consisted of the *ka, kha, ga* or the 30 [letters of the] alphabets. The Kongpo unit was the Badhang.

So in this way I was there for around two years. However, we did not have to fight the enemy. Chamdo was lost after two years. There was one called Dapon 'Colonel' Moja. Dapon Moja was the Commander-in-Chief. When leaving for Lhasa, he said, "[The Chinese army] has arrived at the border. There is no need for you to fight." He said that he would proceed to Lhasa, have talks and that [we] would get to go home soon.

That was true because in two or three months the army was allowed to return [home]. All our guns—a pack of five guns formed one part of an animal load. Ten guns formed a full load. All our guns were sent to Lhasa through Nagchukha. We soldiers were told to return and [I] came to Kongpo. Less than a month after our return, the Chinese appeared. [The people] joked with us, “It seems like you have gone to receive the Chinese.” [Laughs] They appeared and it was like that.

Q: Didn't the Chinese attack when they appeared?

00:23:33

#49D: There was no attack because at that time in Kongpo there were only 15-20 troops that were like sentries. [The incoming Chinese soldiers] did not fight but spoke to them [the sentries] and then they too left. There was no attack. After a lapse of a year or so, the Tensung Magmi or the one presently called *Chushi Gangdrug* [Defend Tibet Volunteer Force]...The *Chushi Gangdrug* was led by—[utters a mantra] *Om mani padme hun* ‘Hail the jewel in the lotus’—I do not know if he has passed away—Bachung Pon ‘Chieftain.’

He and the force arrived through upper Kongpo and Dhagpo to Chapna Monastery in Kongpo. Those Chinese that I told you were camped at Nyitri arrived at the edge of Chapna Monastery—there were almost 1,000 or 2,000 troops—and clashed for a while. Artilleries were fired from both sides but it was not much of a fight because our men fought readily and also fled readily. [They] fought as [they] fled towards upper Kongpo in the direction of Lhoka and Mon Tawang, the men of *Chushi Gangdrug*. The Chinese pursued [them].

They [the Chinese] had in their possession horses belonging to His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Then only did we realize that Lhasa was lost. It was said that they [the Chinese] had occupied [Lhasa] and had said, “You should surrender. We have occupied Lhasa.” However, the soldiers of the Tensung Magmi said, “Ha, ha. How can Lhasa be taken so easily?” and they did not believe it. Though they did not believe it, yet [we] observed later that the [Chinese] soldiers were leading horses that were decorated with *serga* ‘golden saddle,’ *seryok* ‘golden cover,’ with *thok* ‘pointed headdress’ on its head and the *tam* ‘bell’ [touches breast]. In Tibet only lamas and leaders that were entitled to could decorate their horses with the *thok* and the *tam*. All such [horses] were led there. These were His Holiness’ horses and people believed [Lhasa was lost] and everybody started to cry. One had to endure the suffering for there was nothing else to do.

00:26:47

All the Tensung Magmi men fought the Chinese as they fled. [They] went towards Lhoka. Then we realized it was true what they [the Chinese] had said about occupying [Lhasa]. It was during this time that we understood clearly that Lhasa was lost. Had Lhasa not been lost, His Holiness’ horses would not fall into their hands. That was it.

His Holiness and others had left Lhasa in the 2nd or 3rd lunar month. Later in the 8th month we fled towards Lhoka. After that [I] do not know what they [the Chinese] did. It happened like that.

00:29:39

Q: You said you joined the Tibetan army in 1921 and was there...

[Interpreter to interviewer]: No, he was 21 years old.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: I'm sorry.

Q: When you were 21 years old, was there someone who came to your region to conscript you? Did you voluntarily go to sign up?

#49D: The Tibetan Government assigned soldier duty when Chamdo was lost. We were supposed to put up a fight against them [the Chinese]. However, orders came from the government and the army was dissolved. It happened then.

Q: Were you enthusiastic to sign up or were you a bit reluctant?

#49D: Yes?

Q: Were you happy to join the Tibetan army or not?

#49D: [I] joined happily because I was young then, just aged 21 or 22. [I] went enthusiastically. There were protective amulets that we could request from the lamas. Therefore, [we] went to request for such and the lama said, "It is a must for you to go as that is the order of the government. It is imperative but [I] do not think you would have to face and fight them."

That was true. [We] joined but did not have to fight. I told you earlier about Dapon Moja who came there. He had been to the lower regions as the Commander-in-Chief. Chamdo in the lower regions was lost and [he] said, "It is useless for you to remain here. You will be returned soon. I will go to Lhasa and hold talks." That was true and it happened exactly [as he said].

Q: When you were recruited, what instructions were you given in the very beginning?

00:32:46

#49D: Instructions?

Q: Yes, what instructions in the army?

#49D: Lessons in the army?

Q: Were you given any training?

#49D: Yes, [we] were.

Q: Like what?

#49D: What should I say... something like march past, really such that [I] wondered if such things could be done when there is a war! Instructors arrived and taught warfare. [They] taught ways to move, to fire a gun, likewise, to lie on the ground; [we] were taught everything. However, [we] did not need to do them.

Q: What were you paid?

#49D: Yes?

Q: Were [you] paid a salary?

00:33:41

#49D: A salary was paid. A salary was paid by the government. The Tibetan Government paid salaries to the soldiers.

Q: How much was it?

#49D: It was the *ngulsang* [Tibetan currency unit] at that time. It was around 30-40 *ngulsang* and nothing much.

Q: You said you didn't see any action in the two years that you were in the army. So what were you doing for those two years?

#49D: [We] were there and sort of guarded the area. [We] practiced warfare a little. Then at 3 or 4 o'clock in the evening we chanted the *Dolma* 'praises to the 21 Taras,' which is the tradition of Tibet. In the night [we] went to patrol the mountains. [We] left on patrol [duty] at specific times and it was very cold in the north. It was like that.

Q: Were you pretty much stationed in one place?

#49D: Yes?

Q: Where were you stationed?

00:35:49

#49D: It was not just one place. The main army base was at the [place] called Sok Tsendhengong.

Q: Where?

#49D: Sok Tsendhengong.

Q: Sok Tsendhengong.

#49D: It was at Sok Tsendhengong. [That] was the name of the place. We were sent to the border at Martamnyi. The Chinese had arrived close by. One could reach the Chinese by passing through where we were. Fearing that they would advance, we camped there. In that way [we] were guarding the border.

Q: I'm a bit curious about where exactly which border, bordering India or Nepal?

#49D: Yes?

Q: Which border is Martam?

#49D: Martamnyi is near Chungpo Tengyekha.

Q: Is China on the other side of the border?

00:37:17

#49D: No, no, China is not on the other side. [The Chinese] had already arrived in Tibetan territory. They had advanced way inside. [They] had advanced way inside Dhomay Province but just short of reaching us. [They] had reached a place that was only 15-20 days away from Lhasa. It was not China [border], which is far away from Chamdo.

Q: Can you just tell us, just a little bit about your family, what they were doing at this time?

#49D: The family was living in Kongpo cultivating land. There were not many family members. I was not married then. Father had passed away earlier but mother was there. She was living on the land that we had been cultivating.

Q: Didn't you have siblings?

#49D: There was a sibling that I told [you] about.

Q: Was [he] doing farm work?

#49D: The sibling [I] told you about was living with mother.

Q: When you went back to Tibet in the 1990s, how did you find that it had changed?

#49D: Yes?

Q: You went back to Tibet?

#49D: Tibet?

Q: You went back in 1990?

00:39:33

#49D: Back to Tibet?

Q: Yes.

#49D: [I] did. [I] went back to Tibet. I went to meet the brother [I] spoke about.

Q: What difference did you notice from the old Tibet?

#49D: There was no difference as the area was as it used to be. The Chinese had confiscated all the wealth of the rich and had done various things to the people. They had wiped out all those in authority and the leadership class. Only the farmers and those that obeyed their every command were living there.

I told you about my sibling that was not exactly imprisoned, but given the label and food of a prisoner and forced to cut wood because we had escaped to India. He was made to suffer for around nine months. [He] was punished for around nine months. There was nothing other than this. [He] was living like that. They were living exactly like earlier. I went to meet my sibling before His Holiness the Karmapa arrived in India.

Q: Okay, thank you so much for sharing your story with us.

END OF INTERVIEW