

Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #50D – Urgen Tsering
May 18, 2012

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INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #50D
2. Interviewee: Urgen Tsering
3. Age: 88
4. Date of Birth: 1924
5. Sex: Male
6. Birthplace: Shungpa
7. Province: Utsang
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1968
9. Date of Interview: May 18, 2012
10. Place of Interview: Community Hall, Tashi Jong, Himachal Pradesh, India
11. Length of Interview: 1 hr 24 min
12. Interviewer: Rebecca Novick
13. Interpreter: Thupten Kelsang Dakpa
14. Videographer: Ronny Novick
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

Biographical Information:

Urgen Tsering is from Shungpa Marzen where residents paid taxes to the Tibetan Government and the district of Ngari Gar. His family herded animals and traded in salt as well. He gives a detailed account of salt gathering and the journey to Porang near the Indian border to barter salt for grains. He describes the caravan of 300-400 salt laden sheep that made two or three trips in a year to the saltpans.

Urgen Tsering laments that people in his region suffered from incredibly exorbitant taxes. He gives a comprehensive list of the kinds of taxes the people paid, including a gold tax to the Tibetan Government, which was mined at a region called Dijunghok. His family was most affected by the taxes on their animals, which required a payment of one sheep or goat for every 15 that they owned.

Urgen Tsering explains how the taxes were assessed and common people exploited by the officials that came to collect taxes along with their many assistants. Taxes were collected twice each year and the villagers must supply food and housing for the visiting tax collectors. They were also required to help the government transport goods for six days by supplying men and pack animals whenever needed.

Topics Discussed:

Nomadic life, trade, taxes, escape experiences, life as a refugee in India.

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Interview #50D

Interviewee: Urgen Tsering

Age: 88, Sex: Male

Interviewer: Rebecca Novick

Interview Date: May 18, 2012

Question: *Pa-la* 'respectful term for father,' could you please tell us your name?

Interviewee #50D: Yes?

Q: What is your name?

00:00:20

#50D: Urgen Tsering.

Q: His Holiness the Dalai Lama asked us to record your experiences, so that we can share your memories with many generations of Tibetans, Chinese and the rest of the world.

#50D: [Silent]

Q: Your personal memories are going to help us to document the true history, culture and beliefs of the Tibetan people.

#50D: Okay.

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

#50D: [I] do.

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

#50D: Okay.

Q: If there's any question you're not comfortable answering, that's perfectly fine.

#50D: Okay.

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

00:01:44

#50D: There will not be.

Q: Thank you very much. We really appreciate your coming today.

[Discontinuity in video]

Q: *Pa-la*, can you tell us a little about your region of Shungpa Marzen? Can you tell us...Describe this region in Tibet? What was it like?

#50D: Okay. We in Shungpa Marzen were taxed highly. [We] had to pay taxes to the Tibetan Government and to Ngari Gar. We were nomads and possessed a large number of goats and sheep. [An authority] from Ngari Gar arrived with servants and counted the number of goats and sheep. After counting the flocks, [a tax] of one goat for every 15 goats and one sheep for every 15 sheep was levied. Depending upon the number of goats and sheep, they drove away all the goats and sheep [received in the form of tax].

Q: Goats and sheep?

#50D: Goats and sheep. [The tax] was one goat for every 15 goats and one sheep for every 15 sheep and we possessed 700-800 goats and sheep. Besides, we had to pay a butter tax. When the five member officials came from Ngari Gar, [we] had to provide them with the best food and drinks. We must pay [taxes] in butter and *tsampa* ‘flour made from roasted barley.’ They took back sacks of *tsampa* and sacks of butter. All these were taxes that we had paid. [We] received no payment, nothing; [the things] had to be given to them.

Q: Did you have to pay taxes to Ngari?

00:03:32

#50D: Yes. [We] had to pay taxes to Ngari Gar and the Tibetan Government as well. The taxes to the Tibetan government were to provide pack animals when [officials] came with fabrics and goods. [We] were obliged to travel to a distance of six days to receive [them]. Then [accompany them] to Ngari Gar and to [the place] called Dergay. We had to provide yaks to all these places. [Our] yaks were laden with goods and the men [yak drivers] taken along as servants. That is how it was. [We had to escort them] to Ruthok where apricots were purchased, and also to Porang to transport different types of fabrics. All the goods must be delivered to a distance of six [*duk*] days.

Q: Towards the direction of Bhutan Duk?

#50D: For a distance of six days.

Q: Six days?

#50D: [We] travelled for six days along with the goods. Places were assigned [to particular villages] and we transported to a distance of six days to the next place. [We] delivered [the goods] there and returned empty while they [people in the next village] continued onwards.

Q: How many days journey was it to Lhasa?

#50D: Yes?

Q: How long did it take to travel from your village to Lhasa?

00:05:36

#50D: To Tsala?

Q: To Lhasa.

#50D: It is many [days] to Lhasa and I have never been there. Lhasa was far away.

Q: Can you describe the weather and the different seasons where you lived?

#50D: The weather was good in our region. There was a snow-covered mountain close by where it snowed a little during winter. Most of the time we moved from place to place and it did not snow much in the winter place. It was a very pleasant place. During summertime [we] moved close to a mountain where it was not hot but pleasant. The region was vast and one could move three to four times [in a year].

Q: Can you describe like just a typical day the work that you had to do in your family?

#50D: In our region there was a difference between [the responsibilities] of men and women. The men must go to trade or gather salt in summertime. After drinking tea in the morning, we must begin our duties and there was not much time to stay at home. The salt was loaded on the sheep and then [we] proceeded to Porang to barter the salt for grains. And then [we] returned.

Q: Did you barter salt for sheep?

00:07:50

#50D: We must go a long way from our region to gather salt. Well, [I] must say it is a long way because one must travel 3-4 days. At the saltpan was a water body upon a large plain where salt had formed. One must gather the salt, make a pile and leave it to dry for a day. And then it was packed in sacks and loaded on the sheep. [We] went there to gather salt. And then [we] went onwards to Porang. Porang is located in Ngari. It is a district called Porang District that is under the control of Tibetans. [We] must pay a tax there.

Q: What work did the women do?

#50D: During summertime the women engaged in making *tsampa* at home. [We] possessed numerous animals that must be milked. The milk was made into curd and then the curd churned to make butter. [The women also] made cheese. [They] placed the whey upon the stove and made cheese. Butter was made and many pats of it stocked. [The pats of butter] were made into lumps by kneading in water. Then the lumps were covered in skin and stored.

The storage place for our provision was an empty space surrounded by mountains. Four small families lived there, there, here and here [points to four sides], encircling the sacks [of provisions] and guarding it. Old sheep coverings and *ba* ‘tent’ material were used to cover the butter, cheese and grains. And also the meat of animals that were killed in winter...*Om mani padme hung* [chants the mantra: Hail the jewel in the lotus]...all such things were stocked there. Then from time to time, driving yaks, supplies were taken from there for the winter or summer.

Q: You shared all your products with the families like a small commune?

#50D: Yes?

Q: There were four families...

00:11:39

#50D: There were four or five members in my family but only two of us, including a monk living in a monastery survive.

Q: How many people lived near you?

#50D: Yes?

Q: There were 2-3 other families where you used to live.

#50D: That is right.

Q: There were four families. Did they all store supplies together?

#50D: Everyone did not live together [in one place]. Ours was a vast region and [we] needed to move from place to place with [our] belongings. When grass depleted in one area, [we] moved to another place and set up camp. We owned a huge number of animals—goats, sheep and yaks. They must feed on grass, so [we] moved from place to place. [We] could not live together [in one place] like it is done here.

Q: The salt, was it very far away? Did you have to go very far to collect the salt?

00:12:53

#50D: There were separate [grazing] areas for summer and winter. It was four days travel from the winter region to the [salt] gathering place.

Q: Four days?

#50D: Yes.

Q: Was it four days?

#50D: It was four days journey with laden sheep. The sheep were free of weight on the onward journey to the [saltpans]. The journey took four days. Then salt was gathered for three or four days and packed. There were numerous sheep, 500, 400 or 700. Four or three men worked together.

Q: Were there around 600 sheep?

#50D: Wealthy families owned around 600 sheep solely for salt transportation. Smaller families owned 100-200.

Q: How many did you own?

#50D: During my time, I owned around 230 or near about 200 sheep. Some wealthy families owned around 500 sheep. [They] drove around 500 on the trade mission. I was not like them.

Q: Did the journey to gather salt take eight days: four days to go and four days to return?

00:14:04

#50D: It took eight days. After returning, the salt was unloaded and [we] stayed home around four days while the sheep were driven to the hills. Then the salt was reloaded on the sheep and it took five days to reach Porang. The sheep were laden with salt throughout the journey. They slept at night carrying the salt [sacks].

Q: How many people would go at one time to collect the salt with you?

#50D: [The number of people] gathering salt depended upon the number of sheep. Families combined and left with five or four people. Most families that drove 300-400 sheep had two members on the trip. Those of us driving a little over 200 or near about 300 had one person. Workers could be hired at the saltpans by paying wages, and along with five [family] members it would take around five or four days at the saltpans. During the time we were engaged in gathering salt, the sheep were driven to the hills. After packing the salt in sacks, having spent five, three or four days there, the salt was laden [on the sheep] and then we set off.

After we reached home, the salt was unloaded once and the sheep allowed to move about for around four days. Then once the salt was reloaded, the sheep continued to carry the loads for the next five days to Porang. The sheep continued to carry the salt day and night, even as [they] slept at night.

Q: How many times a year would you go and collect salt from this place?

00:16:43

#50D: If the weather was good and there was no snow in winter, we went three times for salt. If the weather was not good or the year was not good, then [we] went twice, in spring and autumn. The salt was bartered for grains at Porang. [We] returned with loads of grains after giving them the salt.

Q: Was it something that you looked forward to? Was it a bit of an adventure?

#50D: Yes?

Q: Was salt gathering pleasant or hard work?

#50D: Packing the salt was a bit tiring because of the huge number of sheep and salt quantity. However, you could pay people to do the work. When there were helpers to pack, it was fine; it was not very exhausting. Once the sheep were laden, [the sacks] were left so throughout the four-day journey, during the day as well as in the night while they slept. Hence, it was not very difficult [for us].

Once you were home, the salt was unloaded and the sheep allowed to relax in the hills for five or four days. And then the salt was reloaded and [we] set off for Porang. If the [weather] was good in winter, [we] took the salt further than Porang to the border called Jangrong. Once you reached there, you could barter the salt for equal measures of grains. [Salt] was very valuable. However, trading at Porang meant that you got only one measure of grains for two measures of salt or two measures of grains for three measures of salt. It was not simple.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: What's this action he keeps doing?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: It's to show that the sheep...when they put grain on both sides.

Q: Can you describe the process of getting the salt, like how did that work actually?

#50D: Yes?

Q: How did [you] gather salt? Please explain that.

#50D: About salt?

Q: How [you] collected salt...

00:20:05

#50D: On the trips during spring and autumn one used a hoe to scoop out [the salt] at the edge of a large water body and made a pile. And then you packed.

Q: Then the salt formed?

#50D: Salt had formed at the edge of the water and it must be scooped out. You made a pile and left it for a day or two for the water to drain. Then the salt was packed in sacks. During summertime the water was so much [gestures off camera] and [salt] must be swept out. The floor [of the water body] called *dham* was hard and [the salt] could be scooped out. It must be carried out of the water and left for around two days. Then packed in sacks when dry and loaded [on the sheep]. It was done in that manner.

During spring and autumn there was no water but salt [in the water body]. You could do this [taps with right hand on the floor] and scoop out [the salt]. [The salt] was already dry and could be packed sooner. It may take two or three days to pack and then laden on the sheep.

Q: How many days journey was it to the Indian border?

#50D: To the Indian border?

Q: Yes.

#50D: We journeyed for four days to reach Porang with the salt-laden [sheep]. From Porang to the valley of the Indian border, one had to cross a huge mountain pass that took two days and then another three days after the crossing. It was five days' journey. Grains were cheap at this place. During a good deal, one received an equal measure of grain for salt. If not, it was two measures of grain for every three measures of salt. That is how [we] bartered. That was in Jangmarong.

Q: Jangmarong?

00:23:12

#50D: The name [of the place] was Jangmarong, but it was located at the Indian border. They purchased salt and that is how we dealt.

Q: The Indian border, is this the border with Ladakh?

[Interpreter interprets question as: Is Jangmarong in Ladakh or elsewhere?]

#50D: No, no. It is on the Indian border and is part of India. It's called Jangmarong and we could not follow their language. We only understood the traders and not the people of the region.

Q: Where's this region? It's not Tawang?

#50D: It is not Tawang. Actually it is on the Indian border and called Jangmarong. It is located at a distance from Porang and called Jangmarong.

Q: When you got to the Indian border, did you ever have any interference with the trade by the Indian border people?

#50D: No, no.

Q: [They] didn't say anything?

#50D: Not many [Indian] soldiers arrived where we were. Those were good times.

Q: Didn't [you] have to cross the Indian border?

00:25:17

#50D: No.

Q: Didn't [you] have to cross the Indian border?

#50D: They stayed on their side and did not venture towards Porang. In Porang there was the Tibetan Government's [representative] called District Administrator who had the authority to be harsh or to trade during which [he] gave grains mixed with dust and hay for [our] salt. The truth of the matter is that it was the Tibetans that caused misery. It was the Tibetans, the Tibetan Government's people.

We must pay taxes to him. Taxes were paid to him in proportion to the quantity of salt. We must barter with him according to his demands. The grain [he] gave in return was of very low quality. He was called Porang District [Administrator].

Q: Porang District?

#50D: Yes, Shenpeling Porang District. Shenpeling was a monastery. The District Administrator of Porang was the one that collected taxes from the Tibetans.

Q: How much tax would he charge?

00:26:54

#50D: The tax was hefty. Located further from Porang was Ngari Gar, whose District Administrator arrived with three assistants. There were four people who had to be provided with food and drinks in summertime. They stayed for around 20 days to count all our sheep. We assisted the four of them. Once the counting was done, a goat for every 15 goats and a sheep for every 15 sheep [was levied as tax]. There were not anyone among us that did not own at least 100 or 200 [animals]. Some owned 500, 600 or 400. [We] paid a tax of a goat for every 15 goats and a sheep for every 15 sheep.

Q: Did [they] drive away a goat for every 15 goats?

#50D: Yes, a goat for every 15 goats and a sheep for every 15 sheep. They took a count. If there were 30 sheep, two sheep were taken and if there were 30 goats, two goats were taken. We owned 200, 300 or 400 and mine was one of the smaller families. The wealthy families owned a thousand sheep. After counting, [the tax collectors] drove away the goats or sheep. Our ram may be absent as it used to be taken to Porang on the trade [mission]. They made us swear that it was the truth because during the counting of sheep, it was nowhere to be seen and we had to explain the absence. [We] must swear that the ram was away. Such was the tax. And then [we] had to pay a butter tax, wool tax and lambskin tax.

The lambskin tax came about this way. Long ago, around four people including a leader [hailing from our region] used to [help] drive the goats and sheep [that were collected as tax]. The District Administrator of Ngari District possessed a silver kettle, a kettle for tea.

The leader said, “Your kettle is made of silver.” Saying that it should be cleaned with lambskin, he presented [the District Administrator] with two lambskins; the skin of lambs. After they had left, [the gift] was recorded as 500 lambskins. Hence, for presenting two lambskins, we were obliged to pay a tax of 500 lambskins. That is how the tax came about. You could not refuse because the Tibetan Government’s Ngari Gar District Administrator had left a record mentioning [a tax of] 500 lambskins when he was replaced. He [the leader of the four who helped drive the goats and sheep] presented two lambskins and [we] were taxed with 500 lambskins! Then there were wool and butter taxes. Oh, God!

Q: Did you think that the taxes in your area were higher than the taxes that other people had to pay or was it just everyone was paying these high taxes?

#50D: Yes?

Q: Taxes were collected in your region...

#50D: Yes, taxes.

Q: Do [you] think the taxes were high or okay?

00:31:29

#50D: There were many and incredibly heavy.

Q: Was it the same everywhere?

#50D: There was a place called Gerze where [we] had to go [to pay taxes]. Another was Ruthok where apricots were purchased, and of course to Ngari Gar. When the Tibetan Government tax [collectors] arrived, everyone must provide yaks. If there were three sons in our family, only one could stay home. One person left on salt trade and another was entirely engaged in driving yaks for [labor] tax.

Q: What happened if a family couldn’t pay the tax?

#50D: There was no way you could say you could not pay the taxes. The Tibetan Government changed [the tax collector] once every three years. Whatever the orders [they] should be followed. They did not come but dispatched servants whose orders must be followed.

Q: Did the taxes change from official to official or they were all stating the same tax or some taking more than others?

00:33:17

#50D: The taxes were the same just as recorded. Long ago someone gave two lambskins [to a tax collector] saying, “[Your] silver kettle is very good. [You] need a lambskin to clean it.” He [the tax collector] went back and recorded it as 500 lambskins, recorded as 50 [?]. When this official was replaced, the next one recorded it as 500 instead of 50. Later we had to pay 500 lambskins on account of the 2 lambskins.

When little lambs died, the pelts were removed and washed and on the day of the payment of tax, these lambskins were taken to him [the tax collector]. He inspected them. [The lambskins] should be spotlessly white or spotlessly black. He would keep aside five or six as rejects. After a lapse of time [we] had to plead with [him] to accept them. He would accept a few and then reject the rest. Later [the ones rejected] were doubled which meant that one had to give two lambskins instead of one. Therefore, if one had to give him 50 lambskins, one was obliged to give 100. That was the replacement he took for the ones rejected. He demanded two lambskins for one or three for one [that was rejected]. That too, one had to plead [with him] to accept. We had washed, dried and offered the nicely prepared [lambskins].

For 25 days in summer [we] gathered for meetings. Everyone set up tents and waited on them [the tax collector and his assistants] who were served the best food and drinks. They had with them bags of *tsampa* but instead of eating that, [they] ate our food. In addition to that [we] had to offer *tsampa* and butter as tax.

Q: Although it sounds like it was difficult sometimes and it was a lot for you to have to come up with every time, you wouldn't describe these officials as corrupt though? Would you go that far?

00:36:24

#50D: Guru, please consider me! You dare not call the leaders greedy. Somebody had said, "I said *pharo zagyu* 'eat [your] father's corpse' to the leader today." "How audacious! How did you say that?" [he was] asked. "I did not dare utter it inside the house but I said *pharo zagyu* near the door." [Laughs] Such things were said. Though subjected to much misery, one could not speak about it. Even if one was angry, you could not petition anyone but agree, "Yes, yes." They were leaders sent by the Tibetan Government. [They] spoke very sweetly saying, "This [tax] will reach His Holiness the Dalai Lama."

After [the tax collectors] went back, a gold tax must be paid since gold was found around our region. Likewise, a fistful of silver coins were collected from all the homes were paid as taxes. The 50 numbers of gold...

Q: Was gold found under the homes?

#50D: We did not mine it but gold was found in the place called Ruthok.

Q: Gold was found?

#50D: Gold was found in Dijungthok close to our region. Families living around this region were obliged to pay the gold tax.

Q: When they took the sheep, where did they go actually...like the sheep, did they go to a monastery? Where did the sheep end up that they took from you, they taxed from you?

#50D: Yes?

Q: The leaders took the goats and sheep from you.

#50D: Yes.

Q: Where were [they] taken?

00:39:36

#50D: [The tax collectors] took a goat for every 15 goats and a sheep for every 15 sheep to Ngari Gar. They lived at Ngari Gar and sold [them] to people living in their area. There were many *sokpo* [Mongolians?] living there who were actually Tibetans. [The goats and sheep] were distributed there. After the assessment, a sheep for every 15 sheep and a goat for every 15 goats were driven from us. The ram that was away on [salt] trade was also accounted for. [They] drove away all of them. Instead of receiving a penny as remuneration, a group consisting of one leader and four assistants from our [region] had to go to reach the sheep until Ngari Gar.

Should a sheep die on the way...A huge river called the Indus River had to be crossed and a sheep could be get washed away in the water. Sheep with horns had their horns marked called *ratam* and sheep without horns were marked on the ears. If one could not produce the head, the missing sheep must be replaced later. It would be recorded as missing to be replaced later.

Q: It must be replaced?

00:40:49

#50D: Yes, the sheep were recounted on reaching there and if four sheep were missing, they must be replaced; if four goats were missing, they must be replaced. At time 2-3 could be washed away in the Indus River that flowed from the snowy mountain. All these must be replaced. The original number [of animals] must be delivered.

[Shakes head] We had plenty to eat and drink and trading was profitable. Otherwise, if one were to assess the amount we paid as taxes, it was incredibly difficult. One of the male members was engaged in transporting stuff belonging to the Tibetan Government to Ngari Gar, to Dergay and another place called Chukdha close to a snow covered mountain. [We] were obliged to pay taxes at four places.

When they returned, [the animals] were loaded with *nambu* ‘machine-made woolen cloth,’ *buram* ‘brown sugar cube’ and apricots. Then everyone assembled for meetings at our region and preparations were made [for the tax collector group]. And then all these [articles] had to be transported to a distance of six days as a form of tax. Poor families sometimes had to use *dri* ‘female yaks’ to transport when they did not have sufficient [yaks]. The taxes we paid to the Tibetan Government were incredible.

Q: Okay, because I wanted to ask that. It sounds like it was difficult but you never faced starvation because of these taxes? It was never so bad that you were facing like real hardship?

#50D: Yes?

Q: [You] had to pay a high tax...

#50D: Taxes were incredibly high.

Q: It wasn't like [you] did not have anything to eat?

00:44:15

#50D: It was thanks to the sheep that we had enough to eat and drink. Salt were loaded on the sheep and bartered for grains, rice, wheat flour or whatever one wanted. We could eat because of that. We owned the animals, whether for meat or butter. Even a poor family, one that could be called really poor owned at least 100-200 goats and sheep, while the majority owned 1,000 sheep and 1,000 goats. [We] could use them and during summertime all the women worked hard in the preparation of butter and cheese. Then there was weaving to do. During summer and autumn, most of the men left to serve transport tax to Porang or to Ngari Gar driving the yaks while a group went to Gerze to trade and also to Ruthok where apricots were found. One went to serve merchants depending upon the volume of goods by driving 20, 15, 16 or 17 yaks.

Q: Technically, who owned your sheep and goats? Was it you or was it the government that owned them?

#50D: Yes?

Q: The goats and sheep...

#50D: Yes...

Q: Were you the real owner?

#50D: Yes. Each family was the owner [of their animals].

Q: Wasn't the owner the Tibetan Government?

00:46:52

#50D: No, no. That is to whom we paid taxes. The rest [of the animals] were your own. However, what one could not retain were the taxes levied by them of a goat for every 15 goats and a sheep for every 15 sheep. One must remit that. However, the choice of the quality [of animal paid as tax] depended upon you. One gave the older ones or young ones and not the finest ones. The quality was your choice but you had to pay the required number. You could not tender any excuses of not paying.

Q: Was there anything else that you were taxed on apart from the goats and the sheep?

#50D: Apart from the animal tax for the Tibetan Government, there was a place called Dijunthok that came under our region where gold was found. A gold tax of 25 coins must

be remitted. Then the Tibetan Government sent [us] tea, 15 numbers of tea boxes—it could be either 15 or 20...

Q: Tea?

#50D: *Ja bagchung* ‘small brick-shaped compressed tea leaves.’

Q: *Ja bagchung*.

#50D: At times it was 15 and at times it was 20. [We] could not refuse the boxes that were packed with *ja bagchung*. Twenty such boxes arrived.

Q: Where did the *ja bagchung* come from?

#50D: Yes?

Q: Where did [you] get the *ja bagchung*?

#50D: The *ja bagchung* came from the Tibetan Government. It originated in China. It came to Tibet from China and then to us.

Q: Were [you] taxed for purchasing *ja bagchung*?

00:49:25

#50D: One paid tax. Each box contained 21 *ja bagchung*. The cost of this must be paid in silver [cash?]. The 25 gold coins were the land tax. We received a grass tax from Dijungthok in the form of sheep. It was around 30 or 36-40 sheep annually.

Q: Thirty sheep?

#50D: Yes. That was supposed to be the annual grass tax. Then we must pay the 25 *tola* ‘10 grams’ of gold tax here.

Q: How many *tola* of gold?

#50D: Twenty-five.

Q: Did [you] have to pay 25 *tola* of gold every year?

#50D: It must be paid every year. One must give the correct measurement of gold that was packed in a cloth...[not discernible]. If there was dust or a speck of dirt, [the tax collectors] scolded [us]. [We] untied, cleaned and repacked it. Sometimes one would get scolded that the quality was not up to the mark.

Q: Where was gold found?

00:51:01

#50D: Yes?

Q: What's the name of the place where gold was found?

#50D: Dijunthok. It was across a mountain pass from our region. The name of the village was Sengur.

Q: Did you mine the gold?

#50D: No. The gold was found in their region and they did it.

Q: Who was the owner?

#50D: They were. Gold was also found in the north in Ruthok...

Q: Didn't you get the gold?

#50D: Gold is gotten from the ground. We charged a grass tax to Ruthok. They mined [the gold]. I have been to mine gold as a form of tax. Pits had been dug so deep that if someone underground shouted, one on the top could hardly hear him. The earth was removed from within and brought up and heaped aside. A layer of fine pebbles was laid on the bed of a river and then the earth from the heap was [poured] over it in a thin layer. The soil gets washed away. Once the water washes away the soil...

Q: ...the gold was exposed?

#50D: The gold lay under the [layer of] pebbles. There was a *dhermo* spread underneath a *bari* on which the layer of pebbles was laid. A steady stream of water washed over it. After stopping the water, you removed the stones gently and the gold was stuck to the [mat] spread underneath. Then the gold could be taken out from there. [Gold] is derived from the belly of the earth.

Q: Did you do that or other people did it?

00:54:23

#50D: They did it. It is their land and they did the work. We purchased [the gold] but did not mine.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: But they had to provide this 25 grams a year, is that right?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Twenty-five.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: ...to the tax collector?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Twenty-five *tola*.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Twenty-five *tola*?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: I think it's around...I don't know. I'm not sure about how much *tola* is.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Okay, but it's a weight? It's a weight?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Yeah, 25 *tola*. It's Indian style.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Okay, a year?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: *Tola*.

Q: Did you also keep any gold for yourself? Was it all going to the tax collector?

#50D: Yes?

Q: Didn't you get any gold?

#50D: No, [we] did not. One could buy if one wished. We had to pay a tax of 25 *tola* of gold. There was the *lep*, which is the number of goats and sheep. A *lep* consisted of six goats or six sheep. The gold [tax] was based on the number of *lep* [a family owned]. The poor people could not buy gold. Hence, wealthy people purchased the gold. The gold [tax] was payable by everyone but the wealthier families handled everything. They went to Ruthok to buy gold. Buying gold was simple. One paid sheepskin, goat hide, butter, cheese or other things and bartered for gold.

The gold [tax] was based on *lep* or the number of goats and sheep. It covered all families, whether one was poor or middle class. One paid money for that. However, the wealthier families handled the gold. They also did the buying at Dijungthog and Ruthok. They were the ones that did the buying. We had to compensate them in money.

Q: Did you know about any ceremonies, any kind of religious ceremonies that were done during the mining, the mining of the gold?

#50D: Yes?

Q: Was anything special done when mining gold?

00:57:15

#50D: The people of Ruthok...

Q: Were any religious offerings performed?

#50D: No. It was their [the people of Ruthok's] job. One heard instances of animals falling into the pits. In those days we did not have houses in the Changthang 'Northern plateau.' If [we] were to compare the depth of the gold mines with the houses of today, they were dug

two floors deep and [miners] entered it. The gold miners [within the pits] shouted and sang songs, which were heard by those at the top. The Indian workers use a basket like thing to remove mud. Similar to that the miners at the top held such devices with three handles. When the shouts and songs were heard, [the baskets] were pulled up. [The miners] entered deep within the earth. The soil was heaped and washed the next day and the gold recovered.

Q: Were offerings made to the deities before work started?

#50D: No, no. Nothing was done. Some of them partied after work was over. People would comment, “[The miners] must have discovered quite a lot [of gold] today as they are feasting.” It was for sure that they would found [gold pieces] of this size [gestures off camera], gold nuggets from the soil. When such were found, they had a *thukto*.

Q: What’s *thukto*?

00:58:54

#50D: It means to assemble and enjoy. They gathered together, made tea and cooked. That is when they had found a nugget. Otherwise, one would have no idea of locating one because one washed the unearthed soil in the water where pebbles had been laid. Then one must look for the gold. [I] have seen how gold was panned.

Q: The tax collector, how many times a year did the tax collector come to collect taxes?

#50D: [Speaks before interpreter] [I] have been there numerous times because we had to buy gold.

Q: How many times a year did the authority come to collect taxes?

#50D: It was once in summer and once in autumn. The one that came in autumn was the Tibetan Government’s tax collector. The tax collector from Ngari Gar arrived once a year in summer. [He] came once annually. There were four or five people, including the leader and what one may call [his] servants or assistants that came to count the sheep. They stayed for around 15-20 days in the tents we would organize. They had to be served with food at regular hours. One day they would go to a certain area to assess the number of sheep and record it. Then the next they went to another location, counted the sheep and recorded. In that way [they] stayed for a long time during summer and we had to serve food to them.

Q: When the official came, he didn’t come to your houses, right? You had to come to his place, yeah?

01:01:16

#50D: We would set up a tent with carpeting and everything with great care for him. He stayed there.

Q: He didn’t come to [your] house?

#50D: The official and four servants; there were around five people that stayed there. [They] did not come to [our] homes.

[We] had to serve food and drinks there. Wooden bowls were filled to the brim with *tsampa* that had been mixed with butter. [We] must offer four or five of these according to the number of men. And of course, tea also.

Normally nomads did not eat meat in summer. However, during his stay meat had to be served every day. So, during the course of his stay in summer around four goats or sheep were slaughtered. They must be served with meat every day. Otherwise, we did not slaughter animals during summer for meat. During the tax collection drive [animals were killed] and except for the innards that we may consume, the rest were served to them.

Q: Was there any actual mistreatment by the officials of the nomads?

#50D: Yes?

Q: Did the officials mistreat the nomads?

01:02:59

#50D: [The official] did not mistreat very much. The servants were bad. The tax collector...

Q: Were the servants bad?

#50D: [They] scolded a little. They were the servants deployed by the official. We never answered back, so they scolded a little but not much.

Q: Do you know what happened to these officials?

#50D: Yes?

Q: Do you know what happened to these officials?

#50D: We did not know much about the officials. [We] went once [annually] to deliver the taxes [to Ngari Gar]. Those that came to [collect taxes in our region] were not the chief leader. The chief of Ngari Gar was a very high official. Five people including a leader and four assistants [from our region] went to deliver the taxes. [They] would have to approach the chief there. Otherwise, not many went there.

What they [the chief of Ngari Gar] gave in return was...there were four or five of our men [who delivered the taxes] that were given two packets of *ja bagchung* and a ceremonial scarf. That was the gift he gave.

Q: Was the leader given a packet of *ja bagchung*?

#50D: The one that handed it was an assistant. He [chief of Ngari Gar] was the one that gave the order. After we had delivered all the taxes, two packets of *ja bagchung* and a ceremonial scarf was presented.

Q: At what point did you start trading with the Chinese?

#50D: Yes?

Q: Did you trade with the Chinese?

01:05:05

#50D: Long ago when I went towards Porang to trade and the Chinese appeared in Porang, they were not many in number then. The few Chinese that appeared stayed in Porang. They cultivated lands and did some trading. I have traded a bit right at the beginning. Besides that, [I] have not dealt with [them] much.

Q: Porang?

#50D: Porang District where we bartered salt for grains. The leader [of the district] was the District Administrator who was a Tibetan Government official. It was in the region of Porang that was located beyond a mountain pass in the north. It was called Porang where we purchased grains and sold salt. At present it is under the Chinese.

Q: The barter system, was that a fair system? Did you think that that was fair, the arrangements that were made?

[Interpreter interprets question as: Were the Chinese good when [you] traded with them? Was a good price given?]

#50D: Since they did not own lands in Porang, the Chinese claimed new farmlands that [they] cultivated. As it was new land the yield was incredibly good. Hence, [they] gave us a good amount of grain for the salt. We gave them salt and they gave us grains. They gave us a good amount of grains.

Q: So you felt they were more fair than the Tibetan officials?

01:07:18

#50D: They [the Chinese] used to criticize the leader a bit then. When the Porang District Administrator gave us grains mixed with hay, [the Chinese told us,] “What will you do with such [grains]? Overturn [the grains] where he can see, take the grains and leave the hay.” They said such things.

Q: Did they criticize too?

#50D: Yes, they criticized. “What will you gain by this [kind of trade]? You must trade correctly.” However, at that time we had to abide by the orders of the Tibetan Government.

They [the Chinese] gave us good grains for the salt. “Why do you accept hay when there is plenty of grass in the Changthang? Throw it away,” they used to say such things to show their resentment. It was not much but the point was that they [the Chinese] did not like [the leaders].

Q: Did your life get affected much by the occupation?

#50D: Yes?

Q: Did it affect you and your family’s life when the Chinese occupied Tibet later?

01:08:50

#50D: There was not much change. We left during the very early stage [of the Chinese occupation]. And then [we] faced difficulties. [We] had animals to drive and things to carry. Then we reached [the place] called Tsarkha and learned that one could not carry stuff nor drive animals further, and that all animals must be given for safe keeping on an profit sharing basis. So, [we] gave them the yaks, goats and sheep. It was said that [we] must continue onwards and then reached Nepal. [We] did not stay in Nepal but went to the place called Jorpatti where [we] were for a year.

Two or three people were sent to India to assess the situation and learn about His Holiness the Dalai Lama. We remained there a year before they returned with information about availability of facilities. [We] could not bring our animals and had to proceed empty handed. There was no one to buy the yaks, goats or sheep. [We] gave the animals to the Nepalese on a profit sharing basis for a year on the understanding that [we] would return to claim them later. So [we] came away leaving all the animals in that way.

And then [we] reached Jorpatti where numerous people had arrived. We were given aid in the form of an incredible amount of food rations and spend a year there.

Q: Four years?

#50D: One year. Then it rained and provisions could not reach there except by planes. So we were told to go to Beribani. Beribani is located at the Nepalese border.

Q: Where?

#50D: Gorkha [Nepal].

Q: Border of Nepal?

01:11:09

#50D: Nepal. [We] went there. [We] went there and stayed around a year. Numerous people arrived. [Some] were sent to receive an audience of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Tibetan [officials] arrived [to assess our situation] and asked us whether we wanted to go to a settlement, to construct roads or what it was that we wished to do. Some remarked that it

was very hot in the settlements and wished to join the road crew. I listed in the road crew group. After arriving in India, [I] worked for around two or three years building roads.

There were no roads in the region and we constructed roads. We build roads in Spiti [Himachal Pradesh] and another road to the Garsha side for around three years. After that we went to build roads a little further away from Amritsar [Punjab] for a year or two. It was very hot, so we moved to Manali [Himachal Pradesh]. [We] were told that [we] could join the Settlements but one of our leaders said that it was too hot to go there. So [we] lived here and there, and later the group scattered. Each one went his way. Then we came to Khamtul Rinpoche. My father-in-law would always pray to Choekyi Nyima who was the predecessor of the present [Khamtul Rinpoche] and that is how we came here.

Q: If your life didn't change that much in Tibet...you were not much affected by the Chinese occupation, *pa-la*, why did you leave?

#50D: Yes?

Q: Why did you come to India from Tibet?

01:14:23

#50D: When [we] came away...

Q: What was the reason, *pa-la*?

#50D: We?

Q: Yes, what was the reason for coming to India?

#50D: The reason we came was like this. The Tibetan Government did not come to collect taxes for a year. When the Tibetan Government did not come to collect taxes, all the people remarked, "This year the sun has risen from the back of the yak. [We] do not have to pay taxes. The year has been very good." Saying so [we] remained in our region. However, our leader said, "It is not a good sign that the Tibetan Government has not come to collect taxes this year. Times are very bad." There were many people [in the region] and some said, "We have not had to pay taxes this year. We have not had to go here and there to remit taxes. This has been a very happy and good [year]." [We] had heard that things were not good in Tibet. After sometime [we] heard that His Holiness the Dalai Lama had left for India.

When [we] heard this, our leader said, "It is no use for us to remain like this. There is no time because His Holiness has already left for India. I am not forcing [you] to leave. You have your provisions, properties, animals and everything. If you wish to stay back on account of that, you are at liberty to do so. There is no time left for us. It will become difficult for us to take care of our provisions and our animals. I am leaving for India. There is no longer time left for us."

Q: Who said that there was no time left?

01:16:21

#50D: It was our leader.

Q: A leader?

#50D: One who oversaw the taxes of the village and who interacted with the leader [in Ngari Gar]. We had one leader called the *chikhyab* ‘district official’ and four assistants. There were five people.

Q: How many men?

#50D: There were five people. The leader was called *chikyab* and the four men were called *gopa* ‘headmen.’ There were five people who said, “We are going away. Once His Holiness the Dalai Lama has left, there is no use of our staying back. [We] are going to India come what may. If anyone wants to come, get ready. If one wants to remain, I cannot force you but you will suffer problems and will have to give up your properties, etc. It is up to you but I am leaving.”

My father and everyone wished to go. All our supplies, belongings, summer and winter clothes were left at a spot. Leaving behind innumerable things and food stock that were piles and piles of grains, we left with a little supply of food and our animals. When [we] reached Nepal territory with our animals, [we] stayed a year at the Nepal border. [We] were provided a good amount of food supplies by aid organizations that were there but [our] animals were useless. A certain illness befell them and [they] perished. Perhaps the region did not agree with them that half of the animals died there, the goats and sheep.

Q: It was in Nepal, right?

01:18:16

#50D: It was in Nepali territory. From thence [we] had no animals [goats and sheep] and drove a few yaks. After Rumthak [?] one could not drive the yaks. So [we] carried the loads on [our] backs. During the journey my father-in-law and stepmother-in-law passed away. That is how [we] came to India. I carried the things on my back. One of my children expired on the way. In this way, [we] just about managed to reach India. [I] worked as a coolie in India and that is it.

Q: You were still in Tibet in the early years of the Cultural Revolution, *pa-la*, but you had no...it seems it didn't affect you very much?

#50D: Yes?

Q: Did it affect you when the Chinese launched the Cultural Revolution in Tibet?

#50D: No because we were towards Ngari. Only the peaceful Chinese and not the bad ones arrived in Ngari then.

Q: The good Chinese? The farmers?

#50D: When they initially arrived, [they] did so in a peaceful manner and lived in Porang where [they] had lands and houses. [They] had settled there. We went there to trade and they gave us good grains for the salt. Other than that we had no interactions. We left after trading was complete. And when we escaped, [we took] a different route from where the Chinese were. We did not have much interaction.

Q: Could you just describe like when you were talking earlier about trading across the Indian border, can you just describe what that was like? What kind of set up it was because you said you were on the Tibetan side and then people on the Indian side would come and trade with you? Can you describe what that was like?

#50D: Yes?

Q: [You] went to trade to the Indian border...

01:22:14

#50D: Yes, [we] went to trade salt...

Q: What was the set up like at the trading place?

#50D: The place where we traded was called Porang. It was not at the Indian border but in Tibet. At present it is under the Chinese. It was in Tibet. There is Yaryang that is located in Indian territory, but [I] have been there only once or twice during autumn to trade. If one could cross the mountain pass and go there, the salt trade was good. One gave salt and received grains. That was one time. Another time [I] gave three measures of salt for two measures of grains. [I] have only been once or twice. Besides that [I] have never gone across the mountain pass.

Q: Is it like a camp?

#50D: We set up tents at the trading spot while they owned houses. [They] had regular houses.

Q: They had houses?

#50D: They came to us and we gave them salt and took the grains. And then we packed. At the place across the mountain pass, the salt and grains were bartered in equal measures. At times it was three measures of salt for two measures of grains. [I] have been a few times but not many. We mostly traded at Porang.

Q: Okay, *pa-la*, thank you so much for sharing your story with us and we have to ask you one more time, if this interview was shown in Tibet or China or anywhere else, would that create a problem for you?

01:24:22

#50D: Yes?

Q: Would it be a problem if this film was shown in Tibet or China?

#50D: No, there will be no problems.

END OF INTERVIEW