

Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #69D – Lhakpa
May 22, 2012

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INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #69D
2. Interviewee: Lhakpa
3. Age: 81
4. Date of Birth: 1921
5. Sex: Male
6. Birthplace: Kyirong Magal
7. Province: Utsang
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1960
9. Date of Interview: May 22, 2012
10. Place of Interview: Hotel Tibet, McLeod Ganj, Dharamsala, Himachal Pradesh, India
11. Length of Interview: 1 hr 32 min
12. Interviewer: Rebecca Novick
13. Interpreter: Thupten Kelsang Dakpa
14. Videographer: Ronny Novick
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

Biographical Information:

Lhakpa was born in the village of Kyirong Magal and recounts that his family owned 40-50 animals, worked in the fields and performed government tasks as a form of tax. He talks about keeping horses ready for the *atung* 'postman' who came to deliver letters from the government. He recalls taking food to the *ngagpa* 'shamans' and monks that lived on retreat in caverns in the mountains. The villagers requested help from *ngagpa* during times of drought and other difficulties. The *ngagpa* were known for being able to start or stop rain.

Lhakpa travelled to Lhasa at age 25 to visit relatives and go on pilgrimage to monasteries. Upon returning to his village he witnessed how the Chinese initially tricked the Tibetans with *dhayen* 'silver coins' and helped the villagers, then later harassed and imprisoned them. Many influential Tibetans fled at this time, including Lhakpa's family, but he chose to stay in the village in order to fulfill a promise he had made to the manager of the local monastery.

Lhakpa relates that he was selected to stay in Tibet until he and two others were able to safely escort the sacred Kyirong Jowo 'statue of Buddha Sakyamuni' from his village's monastery to Nepal. He gives a detailed account of the planning, the replacement of the statue with a fake one and the execution of the dangerous mission. He explains that the fear of the holy icon being smuggled to China compelled them to embark on this plan. His journey ends with the Jowo safely in Nepal. Later the Jowo was brought to India by plane and installed in Dharamsala.

Topics Discussed:

Taxes, customs/traditions, Buddhist beliefs, shamans/mediums, first appearance of Chinese.

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Interview #69D

Interviewee: Lhakpa

Age: 81, Sex: Male

Interviewer: Rebecca Novick

Interview Date: May 22, 2012

Question: *Pa-la* ‘respectful term for father,’ please tell us your name.

00:00:13

Interviewee #69D: Lhakpa.

Q: Where are you from in Tibet?

#69D: Kyirong Magal.

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

#69D: [Nods]

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

#69D: [Nods]

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

#69D: If it is in compliance with the government, it is fine.

Q: Thank you very much.

#69D: [Nods]

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

#69D: Okay.

Q: And if there’s any question that you’re not comfortable answering, that’s fine.

#69D: Okay.

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

00:01:52

#69D: There should not be any problem, as we do not have any connection with the Chinese.

Q: Thank you. We're very honored to record your story and we appreciate your involvement.

#69D: [Nods]

Q: *Pa-la*, could we start by asking you to tell us a little bit about your life growing up in Kyirong?

#69D: Okay. Long ago when [I] was small there were no schools to attend. Everyone was a farmer and worked in the fields. There was fieldwork and tending animals. Besides that, [we] performed the task of transporting stuff for the government officials.

Q: What task for the government did you say?

00:02:48

#69D: The Tibetan Government imposed taxes in the form of delivering letters or transporting things from place to place. [We] had to go to perform these tasks. It was the order of the Government.

Q: What kind of work were you doing for the Tibetan Government?

#69D: There was no special office of the Tibetan Government in my region. If orders came from the government, we had to keep fresh horses ready at certain designated spots when three or four *atung* 'postman' from the government came to deliver letters.

Q: Can you describe the house you lived in where you grew up?

#69D: The houses were not good like these ones. They were built of stones with wood infused at certain points and, as wood was plentiful in my region, the roof was made of wooden slate-like panels. There were wooden houses but no good buildings [of cement]. Wood was the main material.

Q: How many floors did the house have?

00:04:42

#69D: There were only two floors in our houses, one for the animals and the upper floor for us to live.

Q: And how many animals did you have?

#69D: We owned 40-50 animals.

Q: What kind of animals?

#69D: There were *dzo* ‘animal bred from a yak and cow,’ *dzomo* ‘female *dzo*’ and cows. There were three kinds.

Q: You said there were no schools in your area. So did you get any kind of education at all?

#69D: [I] have never received any. Because [we] could not get [an education] in Tibet, [we] have turned out somewhat stupid. Had there been schools in Tibet, [we] would be somewhat educated. [We] only worked in the fields and performed government tasks. It was just fieldwork and animal herding; that is how [we] led our lives.

Q: Did you learn to write after you came into exile?

00:06:43

#69D: [I] learned to sign [my name] after coming to India. There were lamas and *ngagpa* ‘shamans’ who possessed books. However, we were engrossed in work and did not take special note [of studying].

Q: They [lamas and shaman] used to come to the homes and teach?

#69D: The *ngagpa* lived in their monasteries in the mountains.

Q: Did you have to visit them to study?

#69D: At times we went to offer them *tsampa* ‘flour made from roasted barley.’

Q: So when you would go into the mountains to give them offerings, what kind of situation were they living at that time?

#69D: They were living in caves and in the forests, meditating.

Q: How did they live?

00:07:59

#69D: Some of them lived in small caves, while others who had sponsors lived in tiny wooden houses and sat meditating.

Q: What kind of things would they teach you when you went to see them?

#69D: The *ngagpa* lived there for months and years in retreat. We went to deliver them food, salt, matches, oil and *tsampa*. One could not come within a distance of 5-6 minutes from their dwelling places. There was a demarcation line, stones painted with white lime. The things we had brought were placed at the lime-painted stone heap and then we returned.

Q: Didn't they impart some sort of education?

#69D: They could not speak while they were in retreat. They meditated and did not interfere in what people did. We'd know when their food supplies got over. And there was a time when the retreat got over. Then they called the sponsors and there would be some sort of a feast. One could give any news [to the hermits] and they would advise on how to carry out tasks or religious matters.

Q: Do you remember any of the teachings that the *ngagpas* gave?

00:10:35

#69D: They would advise, "Do not be engrossed in your fieldwork always. Practice the dharma and read the Tibetan scripts. You must read well." However, our work in the fields stretched from morning until evening. And should there be any government tax, then we left everything and carried out the government task, considering this as the ultimate duty. So, there was hardly any time.

Q: Did each *ngagpa* have a sponsor?

#69D: In Buddhism there were *ngagpa* and there were those that were not *ngagpa* [but lived in retreat]. They lived separately [in the mountains]. It was up to you to observe who gave sound advice and who you had greater faith in. To them you [took supplies] but one did so without discrimination. [We] never discriminated. Their advice was, "Whatever work you do on this earth, do it honestly. Do not steal. Do not tell lies. Do your work with faith in God. Keep this in your mind. I thank you for bringing these supplies for me. However, it is not right for us to keep eating what you bring. We remember you in our prayers. You should remember that. Even though the sponsor and the beneficiary do not meet, if you dream in your sleep that we have met, that will extend your life and give you good health.

Q: Did each *ngagpa* have a sponsor?

#69D: Not actually. There was no discrimination at all. Whether they were *ngagpa* or nuns, everybody was treated the same.

Q: Did you also see them in your dreams sometimes?

00:13:30

#69D: At times when you are sleeping, when you are happy...They used to tell us, "Think good things in your mind. In times of trouble, feel that we are with you and this will help you." Hence, at times when we did not feel well or troubled or tired, we prayed and visualized their faces. That brought great solace.

Q: That's a very close relationship. Were they considered to have special powers then, abilities?

#69D: Yes, [they] did. *Ngagpa* have powers. We would not have faith in them if they did not possess powers. They that possessed [power] lived in the mountains with determination

day and night eating only one meal a day. We believed in them from the depth of our hearts. Those that we did not have faith in are the ones that roam around in the markets.

Q: Were there some particular incidents that you remember that's kind of an example that they were very special people that happened?

#69D: During the time of your trouble, you sort of visualized them in your mind. "Today I have so much trouble; I seek refuge in you." And then if you feel as though you have seen them, that gave a lot of solace. It was not just the *ngagpa* but there were many monks who lived in retreat. There were more monks than *ngagpa*, like the *Kagyupa* 'people belonging to the Kagyu sect of Tibetan Buddhism' and numerous others. They lived in total meditation. Their seat was something like this [points off camera]. The knees were in this position [gestures off camera] and there was no space for stretching the legs here or there. They had a wooden seat made to measure a cushion and sat on it day and night. There was no lying down to sleep but [they] sat like this [sits upright with eyes closed].

Q: Did they sit in a sort of box?

00:16:27

#69D: The box was bed-like and made to measure. It was a perfect fit for sitting cross-legged. They had a cushion and wore a *dhagam* 'cloak worn for religious ceremonies' and sat praying. That was the manner in the hermitages, whether they were *ngagpa* or monks.

Q: Did they all live in the mountains?

#69D: They lived in the high mountains near the snow, where some could not get water and some could not get fire. Being aware of it the people took matches, oil and *tsampa* to them. There were more in number of monks and fewer *ngagpa*.

Q: They would sleep like that also in the box?

#69D: [Speaks before question is interpreted] In the small house, the tiny bed-like thing fit them exactly in the cross-legged position.

Q: How did they sleep?

#69D: Yes?

Q: How did they sleep?

#69D: They sat in this [sits upright with eyes closed] position even in sleep and could not do this [moves to right] or this [moves to left] or this [moves forward] in sleep. They ate only one meal a day exactly at noontime.

Q: Would you say that you grew up with a lot of faith in lamas?

00:18:35

#69D: Yes. These days you see the lamas who are clean-shaven. Those that lived in retreat, those who were old had white beard and the younger ones had long black beard and hair. They did not have time to shave like us. They only concentrated on one thing, whether it was years or months. Some who did not have a beard earlier sported long beard and hair. [They] only concentrated on meditation.

Q: Were there any particular problems that your family faced that these *ngagpas* helped you with during those times?

#69D: [We] did not face any great difficulties except for slight physical ailments. There were times of drought after crops were sown when the earth dried up and the crops did not grow. Then the people of our village assembled and wrote a petition to the *ngagpa* or monks describing the problem, “The fields are plowed but there is no water. The fields are drying and there will be no food for the people. Please help us.” Such a petition must be forwarded and then they would give an intimation saying that such and such would arrive on such and such a day. In a day or two the region would be enveloped in mist; there would be thunder and heavy rains.

Q: So the instructions were like certain prayers you should do? Were those the kinds of instructions?

00:21:49

#69D: They would give a letter.

Q: What was it?

#69D: It mentioned, “There will be rainfall on such a date. You need not worry.”

Q: Didn't they give instructions to do something?

#69D: They did not give instructions for carrying out anything. They gave an advice in writing. It would rain so heavily that later, it would be too much rain. Once again they forwarded a petition, “It has been extremely good. The fields have received enough rains.” Then they would stop [the rain]. The monks were incredible.

Q: That's really interesting. Okay, can you tell us a little bit about how this life that you are describing, how it started to change when the Chinese arrived?

#69D: When the Chinese arrived I was around 25 years of age and I...

Q: How old were you?

#69D: I went to Lhasa around the age 25. When I went to Lhasa [I saw that] their ways were deceitful. My sister's husband was escorted from Lhasa.

Q: Your sister?

00:23:59

#69D: [My] sister's husband was the son of an aristocrat.

Q: Your relative's...

#69D: My neighbor had a daughter. The daughter's husband was escorted from Lhasa. Their families were closely connected.

Q: Your neighbor...

#69D: We were close neighbors, living side by side. They [the Chinese] gathered the *olo* 'young people' and paid 5-6 *dhayen* 'Chinese silver coins' for even short distances. Hence, all the *olo* and the poor people crowded around to do their bidding, leaving aside the other [jobs]. They [the Chinese] were being deceitful and cleaned out the toilets of the Tibetans.

Q: The Chinese toilets?

#69D: The Chinese cleaned out [the toilets] from our houses. They scooped out the dirt [human waste] into their baskets and carried them away. The dirt was strewn in the empty fields and [they] grew plenty of vegetables. Then they sold bunches of coriander and various kinds [of vegetables] at our doorsteps. They were devious and the Tibetans did not think deeply. While they were being deceitful, people believed they would remain good all the way. That was how things went wrong.

Q: And then what happened?

#69D: Yes?

Q: And then what happened?

00:26:41

#69D: I felt regret at the way the Chinese were doing things. Initially during the stage of trickery, they paid a lot of *dhayen* and duped the people who listened to whatever they said. Much later they questioned someone who had been paid 10 *dhayen*, "[We] paid you 10 *dhayen*. What did you do with it? Where did you spend it?" [He] was captured and imprisoned. First [the Chinese] paid and then they probed how he had spend it. [He] would have used it and did not have much of an answer. Then he was immediately seized, labeled an *ngadak* 'leaders' and jailed. That was what happened.

Q: Because you don't care about money. You don't have value for money. What were you doing in Lhasa at that time?

#69D: The name of my village is Kyirong Magal. I had two sisters; the older one was married while the younger was not. The older brother of the younger [sister's husband] was an aristocrat of the Tibetan Government. He was the Prime Minister.

Q: Your youngest sister's...

#69D: Her [husband's] older brother was [a member of] the cabinet in Lhasa; like Samdhong Rinpoche and Lobsang Sangay [former and present Prime Ministers of Tibetan Government-in-exile]. He held that responsibility.

Q: No, was that your sister's husband?

00:28:56

#69D: [He] was escorted from Lhasa, a child of aristocracy.

Q: And so did you actually move to Lhasa then?

#69D: [We] went to Lhasa to see the brother-in-law's parents who lived in Lhasa. He was given in marriage at Kyirong and after spending 5-6 years in Kyirong visited Lhasa to see the parents. The parents of the brother-in-law lived in Lhasa and their estate was located in Lhoka. The father was serving the Tibetan Government in Lhasa.

Q: How long did you stay in Lhasa?

#69D: [I] stayed nine months in Lhasa and then returned.

Q: What year was this?

#69D: [I] was 25 years old.

Q: Did you know what the year that was?

#69D: [I] do not know exactly.

Q: What was going on in Lhasa at that time? What else was going on?

#69D: Along with our aristocratic relatives in Lhasa, we went to on a pilgrimage to Sera, Drepung and Gaden [Monasteries]. For nine months we met the relatives and attended parties here and there.

Q: And then you went back to Kyirong after that. So what happened after you went back to Kyirong?

00:31:40

#69D: Then we reached our home. There were our homes, lands, relatives, parents; everyone was there.

Q: What was the next major change that happened in your life?

#69D: The next change happened when my father passed away.

Q: How did father pass away?

#69D: Father was sick and he passed away.

Q: How old were you then?

#69D: I might have been 26 or 27 then. Father passed away and all relatives...everybody had fled by then. All the influential people had fled, leaving the country.

Q: To India?

#69D: To India through Nepal.

Q: To Nepal?

#69D: [They] initially left for Nepal and went onwards to India. As I told you earlier, the *chanzo* ‘business manager’ of Zonga Choedhe [Monastery] and I swore that until the Jowo ‘statue of Buddha Sakyamuni’ of Kyirong was not escorted to another place, we would stay put. “The parents can go but I will not flee with you until my wish is fulfilled. That is my wish.”

Q: Who was your associate?

00:33:13

#69D: The associate was called Gyurme from Dhibu.

Q: I’d like to know: first of all can you please tell us about the statue Kyirong Jowo Wodi Sangpo? Can you tell us a little bit about the background and history of this statue?

#69D: There was a Jowo in Kyirong called Jowo Wodi Sangpo. The others were the Lhasa Jowo and the Porang Jowo. [I] heard that there is another Jowo Sakyamuni in Nepal. I was small then.

Q: The Porang Jowo...

#69D: The Porang Jowo has arrived in Indian territory.

Q: And the Lhasa Jowo?

#69D: The Lhasa Jowo is still in Lhasa. We escorted the Kyirong Jowo. [We] managed to do that. Mother left with relatives and became ill. [I] never saw her again. [I] hardly met the relatives either.

Later the Chinese said, “The rebels have escorted the Kyirong Jowo. The rebels have fled.” [They] made enquiries and assembled the village people for a meeting. During the enquiry, the people of my village revealed my name. “The rebel [Lhakpa] has escorted [the Jowo].” They [the Chinese] learned that the Kyirong Jowo had been replaced by another. That was

what occurred after the Kyirong Jowo was escorted out. Regarding me, [they said], “Wherever he is, he must be caught. Whoever can catch him and hand him over to the Chinese, there will be a reward of 100,000 Chinese currency units.”

Q: 100,000?

00:35:54

#69D: Yes, if I was caught and handed over to the Chinese, a sum of 100,000 Chinese currency units would be given. They had published this in newspapers even in Nepal.

Q: Was it Chinese currencies?

#69D: Yes, Chinese currencies. It was published like that. I did not dare stay and fled to the mountains and everywhere.

Q: Had you arrived in India by then?

#69D: I had reached India and could flee anywhere. Actually they had even published it in India and Nepal.

Q: Had they published it in India too?

#69D: Not in India but it was published in Nepal.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: What’s the second one [Jowo]?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Porang Jowo.

Q: And where in India is it?

#69D: It is in the region of Porang. I have heard of it but am not exactly certain. It is not under the Chinese.

Q: Was the Porang Jowo in India since earlier times?

#69D: Yes, it is somewhere there.

Q: Was it in Tibet long back?

#69D: [I] heard it was in Tibet but am not sure. The [Porang Jowo], the Jowo Wodi Sangpo and the Lhasa Jowo; they were said to be three brothers.

Q: And the Lhasa Jowo is in the Jokhang?

#69D: [It] is in the Jokhang.

Q: And the other one was in Kyirong. And the other one was called...The one in Kyirong, where was it? Was it in a *gonpa* 'monastery'? Which *gonpa* was it?

#69D: Phawa.

Q: Phawa Gonpa?

#69D: Phawa Gonpa.

Q: In Kyiroing?

#69D: It is located in Kyirong. It is near the city of Kyirong.

Q: We've skipped over the story. So let's go back and first of all, why did this statue need to be protected? Why did it need to be protected? What was the problem?

00:39:10

#69D: There was never any [statue] in Tibet that could speak like the Kyirong Jowo. The Jowo spoke like humans. It is housed in His Holiness the Dalai Lama's quarters [in Dharamsala, India] and whenever His Holiness has to travel he seeks advice from it. There never was anything else precious like it in Tibet. Of course, there are many idols but they are all permanently positioned at particular places. There was not any that could speak like it.

It spoke at certain times when divinations were sought [moves hands in circular motion]. The correct answer to an issue was revealed. A divination was sought in Lhasa regarding the escape of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and [the communication was], "It is imperative to leave." [His Holiness] left when that advice came.

Q: Why was the situation so urgent that it could not be left in Tibet?

#69D: [The statue] was there since time immemorial, from the time Tibet came into being.

Q: No, no. Why was the situation so serious in Tibet that it had to be escorted out to India?

#69D: That was because the Chinese invaded Tibet. The Chinese invaded Tibet and shelled Norbulingka and the Potala Palace. There were many huge images but they could not be brought out easily. The images were there but tens of thousands of Chinese surrounded and there was no way out. It was risky even for a person to get out, so there was no chance to bring out things. However, we were near the border. Kyirong happened to be at a border and after applying careful thought, [we] could get the chance to do something.

The [three Jowo] statues had communicated among themselves in Tibet like we do, "Where will you go? Where will you go? Where will you go?" Jowo Wodhi Sangpo replied, "I will go to Kyirong." He uttered these words. The Lhasa Jowo said, "I will stay here."

Q: The images spoke among themselves?

00:41:31

#69D: They spoke among themselves. There are many such stories that senior monks and lamas narrate but I have not gotten close to witness it [speak].

Q: Can you describe the statue a little bit for those who don't have the chance to go down to the temple here and see it for themselves?

#69D: The statue is [made of] *tsendhen* 'sandalwood.' It manifested itself in the *tsendhen*. There is no relic or anything [within it].

Q: One cannot know what it's made of?

#69D: It's *tsendhen*. It is of this size [raises right hand high up in sitting position]. Presently it can be seen at the Tsuglakhang [main temple in Dharamsala].

Q: What's *tsendhen*?

#69D: *Tsendhen* is a wood. The sandalwood's fragrance can be smelled even if you are at a distance. It [the Jowo] has manifested itself in the sandalwood.

Q: What's the size?

#69D: [Stands up to estimate a measurement but is off camera.] [You] can see it there [at the Tsuglakhang] now.

Q: Would you say it's around five or six feet?

00:43:40

#69D: Yes, it must be five... around six feet.

Q: Is it Sakyamuni sitting in meditation posture?

#69D: One hand is outstretched [stretches left hand out] and the other hand is like this [raises right hand near neck-level palm open].

Q: Do you know how old it is?

#69D: It is many generations old. It is many, many generations old with a lot of history.

Q: Is there anything inside it?

#69D: It is similar to us. It is exactly similar to us with intestines, lungs, liver and everything, which is why it speaks. [The Jowo] has manifested itself exactly just like we possess [organs]. There is nothing that is missing from it.

Q: Did it ever communicate with you?

#69D: It will not [communicate] with us but only with very high lamas. I received the opportunity to escort it. It is in the Tsuglakhang and you can prostrate and pray but it will not communicate.

Q: How did it come that you and your friends took the responsibility to take the statue out of Tibet? How did that come about?

00:46:01

#69D: Kyirong consisted of nine districts. The people of the nine districts assembled but most of the influential ones had already fled and reached Nepal. Only a few prominent and young people who worked in the fields were left. Those [Tibetans] that had joined the Chinese side were people that worked as servants to the rich families earlier. They were landless and roamed around and had come under Chinese influence. They stated, “The Kyirong Jowo will fall into the hands of the rebels.”

It was the Tibetans that appointed *thongso* ‘Chinese army officials.’ It was the Tibetans that appointed leaders. It was the Tibetans that formed strict regulations. It was the Tibetans. As for the Chinese, at times they arrived in groups of 50, 60 or 100, stayed for a week or two and then left.

Q: Were those that held power Tibetans?

#69D: Yes, they were Tibetans. They said, “The rebels will escort [the Jowo] out.” The Chinese had induced them, “The precious Jowo will fall into rebel hands. You must be alert.” They [Tibetans collaborating with the Chinese] were guarding it. The Gods provided us a great opportunity. It was the 4th day of the 6th Tibetan lunar month.

Q: Which day of the 6th month?

#69D: The 4th day. The 4th day of the 6th month, which is due soon.

Q: Was that the year 1960?

#69D: Yes, it was long ago.

Q: What happened on the 4th day of the 6th month?

00:48:50

#69D: The 4th day of the 6th month, which is the month of Saka Dawa. It was an auspicious day. Today is the 2nd day of Saka Dawa.

Q: Who actually asked you to take this responsibility upon yourself?

#69D: The nine districts of Kyirong held a meeting. All the prominent families had already left. There was a person of Zonga Choedhe, a *chanzo*. The name of the *chanzo* was Rinzin. He selected us during the meeting. He made the selection of people.

Q: How many men? Was it four?

#69D: We were three people.

Q: Was the selection on the basis of strength?

#69D: Based on strength as well as good class and origin. The other person was named Phuntsok. There were three of us Gyurme, Phuntsok and Lhakpa.

Q: How did you come out with the plan then to what to do? Did you all discuss it together? How you were going to do this?

#69D: We met to discuss with Chanzo Rinzin. We took an oath, "Parents, you can go anywhere. Father and Mother, you can go anywhere. You need not worry about us and we will not worry about you. Please go wherever you have to. We have taken an oath and until that is realized, we will not go anywhere." We waited there for an opportunity to find a way. [We] were ready to seize the opportunity as soon as it presented itself.

Q: Who was it that planned the route?

00:51:50

#69D: The one who planned it was the *chanzo*. He had scattered around numerous informers. Each one brought news and when we heard that there was a chance, we immediately grabbed it.

Q: Were Chinese guarding the monastery? Were they guarding the statue at that time?

#69D: The Chinese were at the main town. The monastery was located a little further away.

Q: Were there no Chinese guarding the monastery?

#69D: There were not any Chinese. There were numerous families living on the perimeters of the monastery that worked for it. There were 20-30 families. The Chinese were regularly holding meetings at the capital. They did not forcefully come into our domain. They had arrived in the region but did not mistreat us then. However, the Tibetans [collaborating with the Chinese] were always watching. Watching us...

Q: You mean the Chinese informers?

#69D: Yes, those that sided with the Chinese. They were all Tibetans. We knew them and always watched where they stayed, what they were doing and where they went. [We] were always on guard.

Q: So what was the plan? What was the master plan?

00:54:08

#69D: The image was on a very high pedestal. There was a sandalwood box the size of the statue. We brought the statue down and lay it in the box like a person would lie sleeping. We stuffed brocade around the sides of the image to prevent abrasion. Two people on either side [of the box lifted it] with the help of a pole, and one person held it there [points to one end of imaginary box].

Q: There were two people on either side and ...

#69D: One person was [holding] the top part. So between 2 and 3 o'clock of the 4th day of the 6th lunar month...

Q: At night?

#69D: Yes, at night. The whole night we had done the packing and made everything ready. At around 3 o'clock...there were guards posted outside and the monastery's doors were locked. We were told that they [the Chinese] were enjoying themselves in the main town and nobody was watching. The informers told us that this was an opportunity not to be lost and we immediately started to escort [the Jowo]. Inside [the temple] was a duplicate Jowo that had been made. We placed the fake Jowo and left with the real one.

00:56:09

Q: [Was the box] made out of wood?

#69D: Sandalwood.

Q: The box was also made of sandalwood?

#69D: It was made a year or two earlier.

Q: This box that you made, was it on wheels?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: No, it was carried from three sides.

Q: Okay but wasn't it very, very heavy, this statue?

[Interpreter interprets as]: Did the box have wheels?

#69D: There were no wheels. If this [gestures off camera] was the box, a pole was secured here and a rope tied here was to be pulled by one person. One person was to lift here [one end of the pole] and another person here [other end of pole].

Q: Wasn't it very heavy?

#69D: It was heavy but thanks to the Buddha...The Tibetans who collaborated with the Chinese had claimed, "It is heavy. It is heavy." They tried to take it away thrice but had to

bring it back. But we were the true people of the government and escorted it away without any hesitation and were extremely lucky.

Q: So they tried to take it away, when exactly did the Chinese collaborators tried to take it away? A few days before or I don't quite understand.

00:59:01

#69D: [It was] not the Chinese [that tried to take it away]. The Chinese told them, "The rebels will escort it away. [They] will steal it." The Chinese had influenced the Tibetans who collaborated with them.

Q: Yes, and they tried to take it away.

#69D: [They] did try to take it away twice.

Q: How many days earlier did they try it?

#69D: On one occasion they escorted it at a distance from here to Kangra.

Q: When did they do it?

#69D: Yes?

Q: When did they do it?

#69D: That happened earlier. They did it before we escorted it.

Q: Was it several months earlier?

#69D: Yes?

Q: Was it several months earlier? Was it several days earlier?

00:59:40

#69D: I do not have an exact [date] to give. Actually, having given away internal [information] to the Chinese, the Tibetans [Chinese collaborators] tried to escort [the Jowo] out as a cover-up. In reality they had no intention of letting [the Jowo out]. They held meetings in the night, "We will not let the Kyirong Jowo leave. [It] is the one we pray to for this life and the next. Once it is out of here, we will not get to see it." The Tibetans that collaborated with the Chinese met and discussed. They planned to keep [the Jowo] there.

However, honest people like us believed that leaving it in their hands was a sure way of it falling into Chinese hands. That is why we went there, kept a replacement Jowo and escorted the real Jowo out.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: There'd been suspicious about what it was? That's why they tried to take it away?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: No, they knew the value of it. They were Tibetans.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: So they wanted to steal it?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: They wanted it not to go because they were suspicious that a lot of people would try to take it away towards...

[Interviewer to interpreter]: You're saying that he actually...they actually knew what it was for? What the box was for?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Not the box. I'm talking about the...

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Now I'm really confused. I thought you said they were trying to take the box away.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: No, they were trying to take the actual idol away.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Okay.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: That's what I'm saying.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: No. I thought you were talking about the box.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: The box was just made one year and that was his only detail.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Yeah, yeah, but then you said they tried to take it away and I thought you meant the box. That's why the "it" thing is...you know, we have to be a bit more specific. Okay, so they tried to take the idol away a few times.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: They were not able to do it. They were just able to take it a distance like here to Kangra. Then they will have to bring it back.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: These are Chinese collaborators.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: No, Tibetans. They put on meetings saying that you should not let this precious idol pass away to India. It should be staying here, but actually they just don't want to give it to the Chinese. "So when we put it in the box we replaced it with a fake one."

Q: You replaced it with a fake one? So you'd had to make that over this period of time. How long did that take you to make?

01:02:07

#69D: That had been made from the beginning. Just after His Holiness the Dalai Lama left, the good Tibetans who had total faith had already formulated plans.

Q: So the one they replaced it with, where did that come from and who made it?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: It was the Tibetan people.

Q: Yes, but where? In Kyirong or where was it made?

#69D: In Kyirong. Sandalwood was procured and the carpentry was done in a secret location. It was at a place where nobody could see.

Q: How long did it take to make the fake one?

#69D: It might have taken a month or two.

Q: Did it look exactly the same? Did it really look...

#69D: It was exactly the same. However, the power was different. Except for the inner power, externally they were exactly similar. Nobody could differentiate.

Q: Did you prepare yourself in any way before you...the night that you were going to do this exchange? Did you do any prayers or you know, sort of prepare yourself mentally for this?

01:04:00

#69D: We had met and discussed a long time back. They had instructed us that the *chanzo*, abbot and other monks would take responsibility of carrying out tasks inside [the temple]. We were to be ready whenever the word was given. [We] ate inside the monks' quarters and did not move outside during the day. [We] waited every night for an opportunity. There were people who kept a look out.

Q: So when the message came to you that this is the night, like what did you do? Did you just jump up and get your friends, you know, hurry to go?

#69D: We immediately carried the ropes and the doors were opened.

Q: Were all the colleagues together?

#69D: [We] were together. There was no need to call someone from here or from there. [We] were just waiting. As soon as the word came, [we] set off immediately.

Q: Had there been any divination done that you know of to see whether this was going to be successful or not?

01:06:05

#69D: The divination had been sought long ago from it [the Jowo].

Q: Who was the divination sought from?

#69D: It was a *zenril* ‘ball of dough.’ Words were written and rolled inside *pa* ‘dough made from roasted barley flour and water.’ There were nice bowls in Tibet inside which were placed [the dough balls]. A very holy lama did the *zenril* [rotates imaginary bowl]. If there were three words in the bowl, one fell out. A *pa* like a *tseril* ‘long life pill’ would fall out. After praying and rotating [the bowl], one fell out. When you opened the *pa* that fell out and read the words, it would be “leave” if one had to go.

Q: And what did the divination say?

#69D: The divination said, “Escort out. You should get ready to go.” That was why we were ever ready—eating, sleeping and waiting. We were ready to go in a moment similar to striking a matchstick.

Q: You said that you made a pact with your friends and part of the pact that you said was that you would see this thing through no matter what. Was part of the pact also that you would not tell on each other if one of you was caught?

#69D: “[I] will serve the Jowo irrespective of whether [I] die or live. Other than that [I] will not speak to parents, relatives, friends or anyone. I have no other work greater than this mission. Once this is achieved, [I] will speak to friends, parents and relatives.” That was the oath [we] took.

Q: *Pa-la*, you were risking a lot by doing this. It was very dangerous. You could have suffered a lot if you had been caught. You never had any second thoughts?

01:08:54

#69D: [Speaks before translation is complete] It was dangerous. Even if the Chinese killed and severed [me], besides praying to God, [I] never had thoughts like, “Oh, by doing this work I have erred.”

Q: Who paid for the whole endeavor; for example, the replacement? It must have been very expensive. Who paid for that?

#69D: The monastery paid it for.

Q: The monastery?

#69D: The monastery and the *chanzo*. Zonga Choedhe is a large monastery. It is now [relocated] in Mundgod [Tibetan Settlement in south India].

Q: The monastery and the *chanzo* paid for it?

#69D: The monastery paid for it. The monastery took full responsibility. There were two other images along with the Jowo that were brought out; two images that could speak. One was an image of Dolma ‘Goddess Tara’ and the other Chenrezig ‘Avalokitesvara, the patron saint of Tibet.’ There were two other images travelling together with us. They were images that could speak.

Q: Did you bring those images?

#69D: We were together. They were packed separately in a small box and being carried by others. We were carrying the bigger one.

The Kyirong Jowo's headdress was made of gold. Here [touches neck area] were turquoise, coral, pearl and *dzi* 'special beads made of agate stones.' There were five strings of [necklaces] made of turquoise and coral: one, two, three, four and five. The headdress was made of gold. These were packed in another box and traveled along with us. There were three golden butter lamps. They were big ones and packed in a box and it too traveled with us.

Q: So how many people in the party altogether? Three carrying the main Sakyamuni statue and how many other people were carrying other things?

01:11:46

#69D: There was an image of Dolma and one of Chenrezig.

Q: How many people were doing the carrying?

#69D: There were just the three of us.

Q: Did you bring everything together?

#69D: There were many people to help. There were numerous monks, but we carried [the Jowo]. When we reached the bridge—there was a wooden bridge across a large river—there was a man with the *chanzo* who helped hold [the image]. I bent down on the bridge and the image was placed on my back. And I crawled like this [gestures off camera]. Once we were on the other side of the bridge, [we] continued as earlier.

Q: Who else knew about the plan, apart from you and the *rinpoche* 'reincarnate lama:' the *chanzo*, *rinpoche* and...

[Interpreter to interviewer]: He was not a *rinpoche*.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Oh, sorry, Chanzo Lama...

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Rinzin.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Chanzo Rinzin.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: He was one of the main leaders.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: He wasn't a lama.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: He was working with the abbots.

Q: I see. So apart from him and a few key people, who else knew about this plan?

01:13:20

#69D: The others were the three of us. Then there were the abbot and the *chanzo*. The people living on the perimeters of the monastery knew a little, as they had been given the task of guarding the surrounding areas.

Q: How much did it weigh in kilos? Do you know?

#69D: Perhaps [it weighed] 25 or 26 kilos.

Q: Okay. Can you talk a little bit about the journey getting it out? Did you have any problems on the way?

#69D: People used to say that it was heavy, but we did not face any problems. [We] were very fortunate during the journey. We spent a day in the forest of Dondhang after leaving Kyirong with Jowo Wodhi Sangpo. After a night in the forest [we] left around 3 o'clock in the morning and reached a place called Sha, where the abbot's family lived. From here the risks were less, as the Chinese traveled on the main road and Sha...

Q: Sha?

#69D: Sha. And reached the family of the abbot. From here the risks were reduced, as the Chinese traveled on the main road and Sha deviated towards Nepalese territory. We stayed three days in the home of the abbot offering *thongchoe* 'a thousand butter lamps.' The abbot offered a *thongchoe*, the Ngupoburro offered a *thongchoe* and the Gonpuburro offered a *thongchoe*. The three villages in the region offered *thongchoe*, burning butter lamps day and night. We had left Sherpa at certain places to watch out for Chinese. So we spent three days there.

Q: And then?

01:15:28

#69D: And then we crossed the mountain pass and reached Mu Gonpa. All the monks of Zonga Choedhe had arrived at Mu Gonpa.

Q: Is Mu Gonpa in Nepal?

#69D: Yes, it is in Nepal.

Q: And after that?

#69D: And after that we handed over [the Jowo] to the Zonga Choedhe. [The Jowo] was installed inside the monastery...

Q: And then your work was over?

#69D: [The Jowo] was there for 2-3 years. And then a duplicate Jowo was made, an exact replica with no difference. Then the fake Jowo was placed in that monastery.

Q: Why did they do that?

#69D: Yes?

Q: What is the reason for doing this?

#69D: After placing the [duplicate] Jowo, the [original] Jowo was to be handed over to the *Chushi Gangdrug* [Defend Tibet Volunteer Force] soldiers. It was to be handed over to the Tibetan Government soldiers.

Q: The image was given to the *Chushi Gangdrug*?

01:16:22

#69D: Yes. The Zonga Choedhe delivered it to the *Chushi Gangdrug*. Then the *Chushi Gangdrug* escorted it by flight to India.

Q: Where to in India?

#69D: [The *Chushi Gangdrug*] accompanied it to India from Tsung by flight. Then His Holiness the Dalai Lama was informed about it. His Holiness said that [the monks of] Zonga Choedhe could escort it to their monastery.

Q: Which monastery?

01:17:03

#69D: Zonga Choedhe, which is [relocated] in Mundgod. Then once again the Jowo was requested by a *zenril* whether it wished to stay in Dharamsala with His Holiness the Dalai Lama or go to Zonga Choedhe. The answer was “I am not going anywhere. I will stay where His Holiness the Dalai Lama is.”

Q: That was it?

#69D: The previous attire included a headdress and such but [the Jowo] said, “I do not want those. I will wear whatever His Holiness the Dalai Lama does.” Hence, there are no ornaments. [The Jowo] wears a hat, yellow robes and a white pearl rosary. That is it; nothing more. You can go and see it tomorrow or the day after.

Q: A pearl rosary and ...?

#69D: ...a hat. And the hand is like this [stretches out right hand].

Q: That is it?

#69D: Yes, that is it.

Q: Mu Gonpa is in Mustang?

#69D: Mu Gonpa is in Nepal. They [people of Mu Gonpa] look very much like Tibetans.

Q: Is it in Mustang?

#69D: Yes?

Q: Is it in Mustang where the *Chushi Gangdrug* was based?

#69D: No, it is not. It was Mu Gonpa. There was a big village.

Q: Do you know what region in Nepal?

#69D: There is a huge mountain pass close to Sha. Once you cross over the mountain pass, you left Tibetan territory and then you were at Mu Gonpa.

Q: I just want to ask you but when you crossed the border; did you have to deal with any border guards at all?

01:19:56

#69D: No, there were none. One climbed over mountain passes in the Tibetan territory and other than that there were no dangers from Chinese or anyone. [We] passed through mountainous regions.

Q: Had Chanzo Rinzin planned out the whole route also?

#69D: The route was there since long ago. It was a trail used by horses. There was a main road too but we climbed over passes. The route was zigzag.

During the journey there was a heavy hailstorm. The soil slipped away when stepped on it. A person travelling with us cut the ground with a knife and then stepped on it to make it firm. After taking a step, he repeated it. Due to the hailstorm, water washed away [the soil].

01:21:45

Q: Why did you feel it was necessary to make a fake in Mu Gonpa since that was not enemy territory?

#69D: The reason for making a fake one at Mu Gonpa was that earlier the real Jowo, the Kyirong Jowo, was kept at Mu Gonpa for a year or two. The monks of Zonga Choedhe also lived there; the owners of the statue lived there too. There might be dangers to [the statue] in Nepali territory. If a fake replaced it, the real one could be taken to a monastery or where His Holiness the Dalai Lama resides in exile. The main idea was to bring it here.

Q: Were you there when it was offered to His Holiness? Were you present?

#69D: We were in Nepal. At the time of the offering, the Buddha [His Holiness the Dalai Lama] was informed.

Q: Were you present then?

#69D: I was not there then. The Zonga Choedhe took care of [the Jowo] at Mu Gonpa and then the Zonga Choedhe handed it over to the *Chushi Gangdrug*. After it reached here, we were not a part of it.

Q: But His Holiness knows that it was you brought it out, right?

#69D: At Mu Gonpa, the Zonga Choedhe took care [of the Jowo] for a year or two. Then it was handed over to the *Chushi Gangdrug* who brought it here. Nobody ever mentioned about the struggle we went through. We too never informed His Holiness about what we'd done. We feel happy day and night that we succeeded in the task that we undertook in sincerity. I'm 81 years old now and not even for a day did I face any problems, in terms of food or anything, which is thanks to the Buddha.

We were three men [carrying the Jowo] until Sha. My two colleagues could not continue from Sha and I carried it singly. I felt that the effort of me carrying it alone was the same as three people. Thanks to the Buddha, I did not feel tired.

Q: Just quickly, what happened to the ornaments? You said the ornaments were removed from the statue?

01:26:24

#69D: They were packed in a box and I heard it was send from Nepal through a person who carries goods.

Q: Where is it now?

#69D: [It] might be at Zonga Choedhe or...I heard it was sent through a carrier from Nepal. There was a monk [accompanying it] and at the Nepalese border [he] was told that [the box] must be opened or a sum of 500 *rupees* paid. "Pay 500 *rupees* and go. If you do not pay, it will not be cleared." The monk refused to pay the 500 *rupees*. Such was the sad affair. For want of 500 *rupees*, the Nepalese Government confiscated everything.

Q: Was it seized?

#69D: Yes.

Q: Are they with the Nepalese?

#69D: Yes, in Nepal.

Q: Are all the ornaments in Nepal?

#69D: [They] were confiscated by the Nepalese Government. The case was pursued but [the ornaments] were not returned.

Q: Because you said that the statue said, “I want to be with His Holiness but I want to be simple.”

01:28:16

#69D: This statement was given after reaching Dharamsala. His Holiness the Dalai Lama requested a *zenril*, “Would you like to go to Zonga Choedhe? Where would you like to go?” The *zenril* result was, “I will stay wherever you, the Buddha, resides. I do not want any ornaments.”

Q: But there were no ornaments.

#69D: There were no ornaments. The Nepalese Government confiscated them and were not to be seen. That was the result of not paying 500 *rupees*.

“Whatever the Buddha wears, I will do that too. [I] do not want any ornaments.”

[Interviewer to interpreter]: That’s what the statue said. Okay. So we don’t know what actually happened to the ornaments.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: They were stuck in Nepal.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Oh, this happened earlier?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Yeah. I don’t know what the time line is, little bit chronologically misplaced.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Yes, it seems a bit confusing.

Q: So what... Just quickly, what do you do these days in Dharamsala?

#69D: I am the head of the people in Dharamsala and call meetings, organize candlelight vigils for those that died in Tibet and help poor people when they die. [I] assist people that lack food by informing the government and providing them food on a monthly basis.

Q: The guys who came out with you, who helped you, what happened to them?

#69D: One of the men is still in Nepal; the one called Gyurme is in Nepal. The one named Phuntsok passed away. He passed away in Bylakuppe [Tibetan Settlement in south India].

Q: And you still think His Holiness has no idea how the statue got here?

01:30:51

#69D: The Jowo is already here. The Buddha [Dalai Lama] has not been informed about how it was escorted out of Kyirong, how it came to be here and the role we played. It is not nice for us to explain what we did. We did the work and the Buddha [Jowo] is here, so [His Holiness] would know in his mind. We never explained to anyone of what we had done.

Q: Have you ever had any dreams about the statue?

#69D: At times when I feel unwell, [I] pray and visualize [the Jowo] being close by and the next day [I] feel good.

Q: Amazing story. Well, we won't keep you because we know you are really busy.

END OF INTERVIEW

