

Tibet Oral History Project

**Interview #6N – Dhondup Lhamo
April 6, 2015**

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INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #6N
2. Interviewee: Dhondup Lhamo
3. Age: 71
4. Date of Birth: 1944
5. Sex: Female
6. Birthplace: Lagong
7. Province: Dhotoe (Kham)
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1974
9. Date of Interview: April 6, 2015
10. Place of Interview: Hotel Norbu Sangpo, Boudha, Kathmandu, Nepal
11. Length of Interview: 0 hr 39 min
12. Interviewer: Katharine Davies Samway
13. Interpreter: Tenzin Yangchen
14. Videographer: Dhiraj Kafle
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

Biographical Information:

Dhondup Lhamo lived in a village called Lagong where the people farmed wheat, barley and medicinal plants under the commune system established by the Chinese. The harvested grains had to be given to the Chinese which led to a shortage of food grains for the farmers. Dhondup Lhamo and her husband, taking along their three children, fled to Lhasa in 1961-62 because they could not get enough food to feed the family.

Dhondup Lhamo describes life in Lhasa as a little better than in her hometown. She talks about how her family depended upon the kindness of other workers that provided them with *tsampa* 'flour made from roasted barley,' clothes and money. Dhondup Lhamo had six children, including twins, and explains how her husband helped her during all the births except one when she was forced to go to a hospital. Her husband worked in construction in Lhasa but she recalls being too sick to work herself.

Dhondup Lhamo hoped to find education and a better life for her children, so the family decided to escape to Nepal. Their journey from Lhasa was difficult with so many small children to carry. They travelled on foot and whenever lucky had short rides in vehicles. After reaching Nepal and receiving help from her husband's friends, her family proceeded to Dharamsala, India to see His Holiness the Dalai Lama and place the children in schools. Her husband received a job at a carpet factory in Dalhousie and their life was much improved.

Topics Discussed:

Kham, life under Chinese rule, commune system, escape experiences, life as a refugee in India.

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Interview #6N

Interviewee: Dhondup Lhamo

Age: 71, Sex: Female

Interviewer: Katharine Davies Samway

Interview Date: April 6, 2015

Question: Please tell us your name.

00:00:10

Interviewee #6N: Dhondup Lhamo.

Q: His Holiness the Dalai Lama asked us to record your experiences, so that we can share your memories with many generations of Tibetans, the Chinese and the rest of the world. Your memories will help us to document the true history, culture and beliefs of the Tibetan people.

#6N: [Nods]

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

#6N: [Nods]

Q: Thank you very much for offering to share your story with us. During this interview if at any time you want to take a break or stop at any time, please let us know.

#6N: [Nods]

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

#6N: Okay.

Q: If your interview were to be shown in Tibet or China, would this be a problem for you?

00:02:08

#6N: There will be no problems.

Q: Thank you. We're very honored to record your story and appreciate very much your participation in the project.

#6N: [Nods]

Q: How old are you?

#6N: 71 years.

Q: Where are you from in Tibet?

#6N: The place where [I] actually lived in Dhargaygon is called Lagong.

Q: In which province was Lagong?

#6N: [I] came to Lhasa at the peak of the difficult period in '61-'62 after the Chinese arrived.

Q: Where were you born? In which province?

#6N: It has been many years and [I] cannot remember.

Q: When you came to Lhasa you were about how old?

00:03:44

#6N: At the time of leaving for Lhasa [I] must have been around 36 years old. When leaving hometown [I] brought along three children and three were born in Lhasa.

It has been many years and [I] cannot remember.

Q: In your village what did your father do?

#6N: At that time [Father] worked in the commune and tilled lands and then also grew *popi* [?] and dug *chiti* [?] from the ground. That is how one earned a livelihood. [These] had to be dug from the ground.

Q: What?

#6N: *Chiti* and *popi*.

Q: *Popi*?

#6N: Yes. The Chinese use these for medicinal purposes. That is how one earned a livelihood.

Q: So you were in a commune. A Tibetan commune or was this a Chinese commune?

00:05:13

#6N: It was a Tibetan commune but managed by Chinese. After harvesting the fields, one must weigh the grains. The wheat and barley must be weighed. [We] could not survive there as the children were small and the children's father was the only working member. So unable to endure the difficulties, [we] fled to Lhasa.

Q: Did you weigh the wheat and barley to be given to the Chinese?

#6N: Must be given to the Chinese.

Q: What memories do you have of your childhood when you were a little girl?

#6N: What should [I] say about when [I] was little? [Laughs] [I] do not know what to say. I did not know much as a child and followed wherever the children's father led. [I] do not have any memories of what [I] did as a child.

Q: What did your mother do?

#6N: At the time of the commune, mother collected manure from where animals used to be milked and also carried hay in a basket. [She] was old. Since the time we fled [I] have no knowledge about whether my parents have passed away. [I] did learn [they] passed away but we did not meet.

Q: Did you say milking and carrying manure?

00:07:24

#6N: Yes, manure from the milking area and transporting hay as they do in Nepal, which must be spread under the horses and mules during the commune.

Q: Did you help your mother or your father with the work on the commune?

#6N: Help me?

Q: Did you help the parents?

#6N: No because I was a child then and also I had trouble trying to raise my children. [They] helped me instead of [me] helping them.

Q: How old were you when you had your first child?

#6N: When the first child was born...we normally do not count the years. [Laughs] Birthing took place like animals, like cows and [we] never recorded years or dates.

Q: Do your children live with you now?

#6N: Not now.

Q: I have three children and I had my children in the hospital. Can you tell us about your experiences giving birth to children?

00:09:50

#6N: I never gave birth in a hospital. The children's father assisted me during childbirth and [I] never went to a hospital. It took 15-16 days [of labor] before the daughter could be born and that was the only time [I] went to a hospital, and never in the cases of the other four children. [I] did not go to hospital for the twins too who were born in Lhasa.

Q: In Lhasa?

#6N: Yes, the twins.

Q: Where were the twins born?

#6N: [They] were born in Lhasa.

Q: How did your husband help you?

#6N: When I was giving birth to the twins, first the older one was born. I could not get up and was kneeling, crouched. He took the child, clothed and laid it there. Then I went to answer nature's call and [my] stomach was still the same. [I] came back and said, "Pa-la, pa-la 'respectful term for father,' there is another one." "It cannot be." "There is one more. Really, there is another one," [I] said. "There is nothing to be done now," he said. Then when it was born, both were placed like this [shows palms]. While breastfeeding one fed here and the other here [indicates breasts]. While giving food...[I] could not breastfeed without sitting up.

Q: At the same time feeding them one here and one here, at the same time?

#6N: Both must be fed as both cried. When both cried, they must be held and breastfed.

Q: Were all your children healthy when they were born?

00:12:43

#6N: The younger child was born leg first. He was not healthy at the time of birth. Thinking [him] headless, [he] was pulled out by the legs. The children's father pulled [him] and the head emerged. [We] believed [him] dead as he was not crying. I touched the legs and they were warm. After the children's father sucked the mouth and nose, [he] started crying. Other than him, the rest of the children were healthy.

Q: Which child was this?

#6N: That was one of the twins.

Q: How did you feel? Can you remember your emotion?

#6N: Then in Lhasa when one of them got sick at 10...12 in the morning the other one caught a cold at 3. I carried both of them on my back. Women in Lhasa would give shirts, pants and such, and money. That is how [we] earned a living. Later the children's father found accommodation at a construction site where [we] lived. He worked there but I was sick and could not do much. That is how [we] made a living.

Q: So when you were sick who took care of your children?

00:15:10

#6N: There was not anyone but I to take care of the children. When the children's father returned from work, both of us strived to care for them. There was not anyone else.

Q: So when you lived in Lhasa, did you have family who also lived in Lhasa or lived near you?

#6N: No, I did not and nor did the children's father.

Q: So you said that you went to Lhasa and you have three children. What made your family go to Lhasa?

#6N: [We] could not make ends meet in the hometown and unable to endure the difficulties came to Lhasa.

Q: What kind of difficulties?

#6N: There was not enough food. Survival became difficult. There was no share of grains, nothing to eat if one could not work. Food was available for those that could work. We had many children with only two people working. So the children's father suggested leaving for Lhasa; that [we] did.

Q: Why wasn't there enough food?

00:17:16

#6N: Food was not provided for those that could not work.

Q: Who didn't provide?

#6N: The officials of the commune. You were awarded points for work done and no points for those that did not.

Q: But you worked, didn't you?

#6N: Yes, [I] did but what is the use when there is no food?

Q: Was it because you had so many children that what you were allowed, your allocation wasn't enough?

#6N: Right, it was not sufficient. It was not enough to survive on and [we] came to Lhasa. While in Lhasa my children's father's friends in Nepal said, "The children will become wayward. It will be good to come to Nepal." So we escaped from Lhasa. [We] told officials that [we] were going on a pilgrimage.

Q: We'll come back to Nepal in a minute, but I was wondering in what ways was life in Lhasa different from life in the village?

00:19:38

6N: Survival became a little bit better after coming to Lhasa. There was work and food. Lhasa women and men gave us left over *tsampa* ‘flour made from roasted barley’ in the evening when they returned home.

Q: Where to in the evening?

#6N: They, the workers, went back to their houses. The Lhasa women and men came for work in the morning to construct houses like these [moves left hand in front]. Such constructions are called *apo* in Lhasa.

Q: [Your] husband was a construction worker?

#6N: Yes.

Q: Who were the women and men that gave *tsampa*?

#6N: They gave *tsampa*. If you approached someone you knew, you received a sack of this size [raises right hand] of *tsampa*. That is how [we] survived.

Q: Were there other ways in which your life in Lhasa was different from the village? You had more food, but were there other ways in which your life was different?

00:20:59

#6N: That [I] do not know. [I] am unable to relate that. That is about it. I do not have anything else to say.

Q: So your family decided to come to Nepal. Can you tell us the story of coming to Nepal?

#6N: [We] came on foot from Lhasa to Nepal, walking wherever it was necessary and taking a vehicle whenever we could. That is how we came. They were big vehicles and would not let us ride more than an hour or two because [we] did not have money to pay. That also the children managed to stop them. [We] came through Dhingri and Tamo.

Q: Dhingri?

#6N: [We] came through the border between Dhingri and Tamo. [We] had a number of little children—some that were carried on the back. I could not, as I was sick. The children’s father carried one of the twins over the neck and the older son carried the other. In Nyelam one had to cross over snow. The children’s father cleared the snow after which we walked across. Thanks to the gods and [our hope] of seeing His Holiness the Dalai Lama [we] managed to get through.

There were checkpoints on this route and [we] were stopped by two girls and a tall young man with a beard. Seeing the little children [they] did not say anything bad. “You are lucky to have come across us. This is a Chinese official but [he] is a good one.” The two girls

looked at the twins and exclaimed, “How beautiful! Why carry little children across like this? Poor things.” By the grace of god [we] managed to get here.

Q: How long did it take you to come from Lhasa to Nepal?

00:24:18

#6N: It took around half a month.

Q: Yes?

#6N: It might have taken half a month.

Q: Half a month?

#6N: Yes, as one must walk. [We] walked wherever necessary and some vehicle took us short distances.

Q: So what did you take with you when you left Tibet?

#6N: [We] carried nothing except for the blankets and a little bit of *tsampa*. [We] carried nothing else on our body. After reaching Nepal there were people the children’s father knew. They were informed about [our] arrival and came to pick us up and took [us] to the Reception Center.

Q: Did you have enough food, enough *tsampa* for your whole family to go for these two weeks?

#6N: [We] had a little bit of *tsampa*. The children were given tiny amounts that they licked. In that way [we] got to the Nepal border. One descended from a mountain at the Nepal border and came across a stream. On the other side were policemen. We did not know about the white Nepalese costume. I and our children were scared and exclaimed, “Father, father, what people are these? Will [we] be killed?”

Q: Killed?

00:26:30

#6N: “[You] will not be killed.” Then there were merchants coming from Nyelam and such who said, “Now you have reached Nepalese territory and will not fall into Chinese hands.” However, we were still nervous wondering where the Chinese would come from. But it was not so. There was Nepalese road crew that had pitched bamboo tents. [We] did not know the language. So the children’s father pushed the children into one to feed them *tsampa*. They [road crew] understood and gave some hot water. I made *pa* ‘dough made from *tsampa* and tea/water’ and fed the children.

[We] arrived here in that manner. It has been nice after coming here. [We] went to Dharamsala [India] to see His Holiness the Dalai Lama. [I] take refuge in him. Then the children were left at school and both of us joined a factory.

Q: So you arrived in Nepal and then how did you get to Dharamsala?

#6N: The Reception Center took [us] there.

Q: I want to go back to make sure I've understood something. So your decision to leave Nepal, I mean to leave Tibet was because of hunger? What was the reason why you left Tibet?

#6N: That is it. [We] left because there was not enough food to survive. Living was good after coming to Lhasa. [We] were forced to escape from the hometown due to lack of food. The reason for leaving Lhasa was that there were no schools for the children, which would result in them becoming bad, while in Nepal the Reception Center had established many schools where [they] could be admitted. So it was on account of the children that we came. Otherwise, livelihood was good in Lhasa.

Q: So you lived in Tibet when the Chinese were there. How was life like for you under the Chinese?

00:28:50

#6N: I do not have much knowledge about it. They were in their offices while our duty was to work. [I] did not give it much thought.

Q: And your work was what? What was your work?

#6N: We must carry out the task of harvesting crops, harvest barley with sickles. Then the crops must be thrashed in an open ground during the commune. [I] have forgotten much of it now and have not very much to say.

Q: What about in Lhasa? What was your work in Lhasa?

#6N: I told you earlier. [We] were constructing houses like these [points around room]. [We] built new houses, dug the ground and laid bricks like constructions are done here. In Lhasa it is called *apo* while here it is construction. That is how [we] lived.

Q: You did that?

00:32:40

#6N: I did not work, as I was sick. [I] could not go to work.

Q: Did you have interactions with Chinese people?

#6N: No. [Shakes head]

Q: Did life change for you when the Chinese came to Tibet?

#6N: Yes, the Chinese had arrived; the Liberation was launched and it was '61-'62. When we initially arrived here, there were none in Nepal that had come from Lhasa. We were the first to come here in Nepal. Later people started coming from Tibet year after year.

Q: And what happened then?

#6N: After coming from there?

Q: Yes.

#6N: And then [we] were here. After joining the Reception Center, we went to see His Holiness the Dalai Lama, left the children in school and both of us joined a factory in Dharamsala. Then there were no difficulties with the children in school. There were no difficulties.

Q: What was the factory?

00:34:32

#6N: The factory was in Dalhousie.

Q: Was your husband affected at all by the Chinese occupation?

#6N: In terms of work?

Q: Were there any changes upon the children's father because of the Chinese appearance?

#6N: At the time of construction of houses, he was in Lhasa and did the job of bending iron rods to make them circular. After coming towards Nepal, [he] was engaged in embossing of carpets in Dalhousie. You know the square shaped carpets? [He] was engaged in embossing those.

Q: Right at the beginning you mentioned that most of your children except your last child was born at home. But one child was born in the hospital. Why was that child born in the hospital? What caused you to take that...you know go to the hospital for that birth?

#6N: He could not be birthed. There was labor pain but the child could not be birthed, which was why [I] had to go to the hospital.

Q: And your baby was safe?

00:36:51

#6N: Yes. [He/she] was born in the hospital. [I] had to remain in hospital for five, six or seven days. I had labor pain and was not allowed to go [home]. [I] said, "I want to leave. It is not yet time for the birth." But [I] was told, "The labor pain is there but the child is big, which is the problem."

Q: Who said that?

#6N: The doctor at the hospital. [I] was not allowed to leave. The children's father too would not take [me] home saying, "Going home will mean death for both you and the child. Stay here." I did not want to stay.

Q: Is there anything else that you would like to share with us about your life in Tibet?

#6N: There is nothing left to say. I do not have anything more to add.

Q: Thank you. If this interview was shown in Tibet or China, would that be a problem for you?

#6N: I cannot say. I do not know what will occur.

Q: Is it okay to use your real name?

#6N: It should be. [I] do not know. If the Chinese saw this and came here they might take me away. [Laughs]

Q: Thank you very much for sharing your story with us.

END OF INTERVIEW