

Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #7 – Tashi Nyima
July 1, 2007

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TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #7
2. Interviewee: Tashi Nyima
3. Age: 76
4. Date of Birth: 1931
5. Sex: Male
6. Birthplace: Tsakhalowa
7. Province: Dhotoe (Kham)
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1957
9. Date of Interview: July 1, 2007
10. Place of Interview: Home for the Aged and Disabled,
Lugsung Samdupling Settlement,
Bylakuppe, Mysore District, Karnataka, India
11. Length of Interview: 1 hr 12 min
12. Interviewer: Rebecca Novick
13. Interpreter: Tsering Dorjee
14. Videographer: Ronny Novick
15. Transcriber: Tenzin Yangchen



Biographical Information:

Tashi Nyima was born in the village of Tsakhalowa, meaning ‘village of salt.’ He gives an account of how salt was made on rooftops in his village. At around the age of 12 or 13 his father taught him to inscribe *mani* ‘prayers’ on stones. He did this work until he was 17 or 18 when he became a transporter/trader.

When he was 18 years old Tashi Nyima went to China to buy tea bricks, pork and other goods to sell in Lhasa. At that time he witnessed the Communist Chinese forces massacring supporters of Chang Kai Shek’s Kuomintang regime. When he returned to Tibet and the Chinese invaded his region, he saw them dividing the rich Tibetans from the poor and using the poor to humiliate the rich.

Tashi Nyima was one of the few Tibetans who visited India before 1959. As a trader, he transported goods between Phari and India. The Chinese began arresting all of the traders, but Tashi Nyima managed to escape and went to India.

Topics Discussed:

Childhood memories, trade, Chinese oppression, brutality, life under Chinese rule, Chushi Gangdrug guerillas, escape experiences, life as a refugee in India.

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Age: 76, Sex: Male

Interviewer: Rebecca Novick

Interview Date: July 1, 2007

[Questions are asked by either interviewer or interpreter. In Interview #7, the interviewer directs questions to the interpreter, who then asks the questions of the interviewee.]

Question: So first of all, thank you Tashi for coming and sharing your story today with us for the Tibet Oral History Project.

Interviewee #7: Okay.

Q: And tell him once again that His Holiness the Dalai Lama asked us to collect these stories from older Tibetans and to preserve their experiences, their way of life before the Chinese came to Tibet.

#7: Okay.

Q: If he needs to take a break, just let us know anytime during the interview.

#7: No, I don't need.

Q: And if there is anything he doesn't want to talk about, that's fine.

#7: Okay

Q: Could we hear his full name?

#7: Tashi Nyima.

Q: Does he give permission for us to use his story for the Tibet Oral History Project?

#7: Of course you can use it. I will tell you whatever I can remember. I can recall from the age of eight.

Q: Wonderful. That's fantastic. Many people don't remember. So tell him the question again.

#7: Of course, you can use it. There is no reason why you shouldn't.

Q: Ask Pala if this were shown in Tibet or China, would that be a problem for him?

#7: I don't need to go to China. I am going to be here and nowhere else. I don't have to go anywhere. The only place I will go is the local cemetery, as I am old. I don't know if they will create problems for my relatives back in my hometown.

Q: That is a concern?

#7: No, nothing will happen to them. You can say anything. Nothing will happen to them. We are not rich people but humble people.

Q: First of all I'd like to find out about his childhood in his village in Kham and can he describe his village a little bit what it looked like and what his house was like?

#7: The name of my village is Tsakhalowa. In my village, we get salt. Water is taken and poured on the roof and in a week's time, it becomes salt. We come under the Gongkar Lama district.

Q: What did it look like? If I walked over a hill and saw his village, what would I see?

#7: It was in a valley. There was a monastery higher up called Lagon Gonpa. Salt forms in the valley. We take the salt water and pour it on the roofs of the houses and in one week, it dries and salt is formed. Then we sell the salt.

Q: Is that what they did for a living in that region? They dried salt?

[Interpreter to interviewer] They dried salt and the name of his village Tsakhalowa; tsa means 'salt.' So you can get salt from that water.

Q: So is that what the livelihood of his family was?

#7: On the roofs of the houses, we had squares for salt water which was filled up to the height of our ankles. In seven days they became salt.

Q: Is that what his family did for a living?

#7: That was the livelihood. That was the livelihood of the people of this village. If you traveled for one day, it was the same district and you reached my village where I was a farmer.

Q: Did you work with the salt as well as farming?

#7: The salt was one day's journey from my village. There was a river running in the Gongkar Lama Zong and salt was formed on both sides of the river. If you traveled for one day, you reached my village. I did farming.

Q: So the salt was like a supplementary income?

#7: The salt [formation] was at the district headquarter. There was a river and salt was made on either sides. There was no bridge on the river and one had to cross it using the *ding*, a contraption worn on the body and swung with a rope to the other side. And you came back the same way.

Q: What is the *ding* like?

#7: It was plaited bamboo.

Q: Was it so if they fell in the river they would float? That was the purpose of the jacket?

#7: There was a rope, which was attached to the *ding*. Then a part of the rope was tied to your waist and shoulders and you swung to the other side of the river. There was no bridge, only the *ding*.

Q: Do they tie it to one and another?

#7: You have to tie it yourself.

Q: It is for one person to cross?

#7: Yes, for one person.

Q: Ask him what the purpose of the jacket was?

#7: There were ropes made from the skin of yak and *dri* 'female yak.' Then a sort of pulley called *wa* was made using fine wood, which was attached on to the yak rope. From the pulley you knotted the ropes and tied the ends of this rope to yourself and swung to the other side. I have no rope here or else I could have demonstrated it for you.

Q: Was the river too wide to build a bridge across?

#7: It was quite wide. If this was one side of the river, the other side was as far as the paddy field you see there [points to the fields outside].

Q: What was the name of the river?

#7: It was called Dhachu [Mekong].

Q: Were there any stories or legends connected with his area?

#7: There are three rivers that I have seen. The largest one is the Drichu [Yangtse] which runs near Ba and Lithang. The middle one is Dhachu [Mekong] in my village. The other one is Jamo Ngongchu [Salween] flowing in Tsawarongpa.

Q: Were there any stories or legends attached to his area; relating to his area?

#7: Relating to this area, it would be cultivation and cutting trees in the forests. The place where I came from, we harvested corn, peas, wheat and barley. We had water to feed the fields.

Q: Ask him about his own household; how many people did he live with in his house?

#7: From my mother we were four sons and four daughters; that is eight children. My father had a daughter called Dechung Dolma from his earlier marriage. She was given away in marriage at Tsawarong. We were eight siblings in the family; four sons and four daughters.

Q: Then there were your parents?

#7: We were eleven in all.

Q: Oh, his father had another wife? Did she pass away before?

#7: She passed away. The mother of the oldest daughter came from a place called Miyuno, near Gyu, the place of Samdong Rinpoche.

Q: A big household. Can he describe his house? Does he remember what his house looked like?

#7: I lived in a rented house. I was a poor man. I used to work for others, looking after goats and sheep. I also had donkeys, horses and a few cows.

Q: What did it look like?

#7: It was a small house. How can you have a big house when it is rented? We didn't have to pay for it. In our village we did not have to pay rent. Someone lends it and we can just live in it.

Q: What does he remember doing for fun when he was a kid?

#7: We used to play tug-of-war. We danced accompanied by the *piwang* 'musical instrument.' Boys were on one side and the girls on the other and we used to dance and play the *piwang*. We didn't sleep, but danced the whole night.

Q: Did he used to play the *piwang*?

#7: I can play. I don't have a *piwang* else I could have played it for you now.

Q: Oh, it would be really great. Maybe we can find one around here?

#7: You bring one and I will play. I am adept at playing the *piwang*.

Q: Does he sing also?

#7: I can also sing. Due to old age, my voice is not good.

Q: I am sure it's going to be great. Did he receive any kind of education?

#7: I used to carve *mani* 'prayers' on stones and rocks. For that I received payment.

Q: And who taught him to do that?

#7: My father.

Q: Did his father give any religious instruction?

#7: My father was a learned man. He would take me with him to receive religious instructions from lamas like the Dayab Tobden Rinpoche, Dayab Lamrin Rinpoche, Lagon Gonpa's Gye Samdong Rinpoche—who lives in Dharamsala now—Zig Kusho, etc. My father took me with him to all the lamas to receive religious teachings. I might have been around eight years old then.

Q: Was it the previous incarnation of the Samdong Rinpoche?

#7: Yes, the previous incarnation.

Q: You mean the *Kalon Tripa*?

#7: Yes, the *Kalon Tripa* 'Chief of the Cabinet.'

Q: So can he tell us more about that and what kind of instructions does he remember receiving from Samdong Rinpoche and the lamas? What did he learn from them?

#7: Religious teachings. I told you about inscribing the *mani* on the rocks—Dorji Choepa, Mani Doduk, Benza Guru, Nasha, Disha all these were carved on the rocks.

Q: Your father taught you that, but what did you learn from the lamas?

#7: They taught me to recite the prayers and to pray to the Buddha. There is an icon of the Buddha here. We have to pray to the Buddha and the Guru.

Q: He was inscribing on stone and wood or just stone?

#7: On rocks. The lamas tell you not to inscribe on stones as the Chinese lay the stones on the ground. Flat stones on which *mani* was inscribed were laid on the ground by the Chinese and people would walk on them.

Q: So you carved on rocks?

#7: Yes, in the later years. Earlier they were inscribed on stones too. There were flat stones on which inscriptions were done, but when the Chinese came the lama, Zig Kusho, told us not to carve on stones. Chinese would use them as stepping-stones and people walked on them.

Q: On the rocks that you couldn't move? On the hills, that's what he did. What did his father teach him about the reason for inscribing the *mani*? What did he teach him about the purpose for this?

#7: The reason is to help you when you die. [Laughs] When you die, it will be beneficial. In this life it doesn't help.

Q: What did he use to think about when he was doing inscribing?

#7: I didn't have much thought because I was a child then. I didn't think but just did the inscribing. I was around 12 or 13 years old.

Q: And what happened to the stones after he made them? What happened to them? Did people take them to their houses? What happened to them?

#7: The inscriptions were on rocks.

Q: That was later. Earlier when carvings were done on stones, what happened to the stones?

#7: Those were piled by the roads. They were as long as the distance from here to Camp Number 1 [1.5 miles]. The Chinese laid all these on the ground.

Q: How did you put the stones on the roadsides?

#7: The stones were piled one on top of the other, up to the height of a man's chest. On top of the pile a *kyingkor* 'mandala' was constructed and stones placed all around the *kyingkor*. There were series of such piles of stones one after the other running into distances as far as Camp Number 1 here.

Q: For long distances you made such piles?

#7: Yes, by the roads, such that when people passed by they walked on one side of the stone pile and while returning they walked on the other side, thus completing a circumambulation. People did not even meet on the road because while one walked on one side of the stone pile, the other would be on the other side. You made the clockwise circle.

Q: It was at chest height?

#7: It was about the height of a man's chest and the *kyingkor* was constructed right at the top with *mani* and Benza Guru stones circling it.

Q: How old was he when he started doing the inscribing work?

#7: I was about 12 or 13 years old.

Q: And when did he first start noticing the Chinese in his area?

#7: I didn't realize the benefits in my mind because I just did what my father told me to. People paid for it.

Q: Does he do it now at all?

#7: No, I don't. From the age of 17, I looked after the horses and mules. Then I went to China, to Sadang Gyalpo. I brought tea bricks, *Kanphel* and pork for sale to Lhasa. From Lhasa I came to India and stayed here in winter. In Summer I returned to my village.

Q: When he went into China at that early age...

#7: Taiwan, Chang Kai Shek. Chang Kai Shek escaped to Taiwan. At that time he had already left for Taiwan. The people of Chang Kai Shek were captured by the Chinese and their hands tied behind their backs. Some were burned alive. They were doing such things. After their parents were killed, the little girls with short hair in school would search for grains to eat from that, which fell from the mules' feed bag.

Q: You saw these?

#7: Yes, I saw this. I was 18 years old then.

Q: Because they didn't have anything else to eat?

[Interpreter to interviewer] Yes.

Q: Tell us what else he saw when he went on these trips to China? This is really interesting history.

#7: I saw nothing except people being killed. They lined up ten people and fired a shot, which killed them all and they fell in a pit nearby. They would say Chang Kai Shek *holo* and Mao Tse Tung *poholo* and fire the gun and the people fell.

Q: He saw this himself?

#7: Yes, I did. They just fell right into the pit after they were shot. Nobody had to throw them in.

Q: He saw this?

[Interpreter to interviewer] Yes.

Q: Does he want to tell us anything else about this?

#7: I was 18 years old at that time.

Q: Does he want to tell anything else?

#7: Then the Chinese had come to our area which is called Gyu. They gathered all the people together for meetings which lasted until one in the morning. In the meantime the soldiers would go into the homes; they had flashlights to investigate what arms and things the people possessed. We would, at this time, have gathered for the meeting. The next day, the Chinese would ask each person whether he possessed such and such a thing and he would reply "No." Then the person would be arrested and his hands tied behind his back.

Q: This is on his return from China? Which year was it?

#7: I was 18. I have been many times to China and then to Lhasa, India and back to Gyu. I didn't go to Sadhang which is in Yunan.

Q: Is the place called Gyu in Tibet?

#7: No, it is in Jong; Jong Sadhang Gyalpo. You know the round shaped tea brick? This tea and *phing* 'noodles' and pork came from this place. That is the native place of Chang Kai Shek.

Q: When he said torture what is that happens?

#7: They kick us, hit us and beat us with sticks—then imprisonment.

Q: Was he put in prison also?

#7: No, I was not imprisoned. I fled just before I could be arrested. Then I never went back. I told my parents to come away and that the Chinese were up to no good. My parents were in the village and they did not come.

Q: How long after he saw these things happening in China when he was trading; how long after did that start happening in villages in Tibet? What was the period in between?

#7: When India gained her independence, I had come to India.

[Interpreter repeats the question.]

#7: The Chinese came to Gyu, the village of Samdhong Rinpoche. Then I didn't go back. I came to India and stayed here.

[Interpreter again repeats the question]

#7: I don't remember.

Q: When he was seeing this happening in China before he'd seen it happen in Tibet, did he imagine—was he worried that this was going to happen in Tibet? What did he think? Did he go and try to warn the people? What was he thinking about? You know, was this going to happen in Tibet in his mind?

#7: I told my parents. If I told anyone else, who would listen to me? I was just a humble man. Nobody would listen to me. I told my parents not to stay there and that they should slowly make their way to Lhasa, that the situation was not good and the Chinese' intentions were not good.

However, being a poor family, the Chinese have not ill-treated my parents and siblings. They have inflicted sufferings on the rich people. Those from humble backgrounds were not subjected to any sufferings. Actually what reason was there to ill-treat the poor? They had nothing.

Q: Was there any resistance when this started happening in Tibet? Did he at that time, when it first started in Gyu, in that village, was there any resistance happening by the Tibetans?

#7: Yes, there was resistance. There were two groups, the *Chentu* and *Dhintu*. The *Chentu* were poor people who were promoted by the Chinese, while the *Dhintu* were the rich people. The *Chentu* were provided with arms and ammunitions by the Chinese. The *Dhintu* escaped to the hills and for years remained in hiding. Later the *Chushi Gangdrug* Force resisted the Chinese. But the Chinese said that this was futile because "you people have just a box of bullets while the Chinese government transports bullets in trucks." They told them to surrender.

Q: He said earlier that he decided to stop doing *mani* on small stones; he went and did it on rocks because the Chinese were walking on them. Can he tell us more about that? Did he see that or was it something that he heard that they did? Because this was earlier on, so can you just describe the circumstances around that?

#7: Yes, I have seen [them walking on the stones].

Q: Why were they walking on them?

#7: Because they were laid on the ground. Some stones were laid with the *mani* side down and others the opposite way.

Q: They made them into steps?

[Interpreter to interviewer] Yes.

Q: And did they do it to be disrespectful—was that their purpose?

#7: That was on purpose to be disrespectful. They put all the religious scripts on the ground to be trampled on.

Q: How did that make him feel when he saw that?

#7: Among the people, the *Chentu* who were bad and who liked the Chinese, they removed all the religious texts and threw them on the ground.

Q: What did he think when he saw this?

#7: At that time I was a child. I did not think anything. It was only much later that I understood, when one ages and thinks about religion. At that time, I did not know about practicing religion.

Q: Later what did he think when he thought back about this?

#7: Later when I saw lamas and learned about the importance of practicing the dharma and the sins of doing such things, then you realize as you grow older. At that time I was young and ignorant.

Q: What happened to the previous Samdong Rinpoche?

#7: The previous incarnation passed away. At that time nothing happened. The Chinese did not do anything at that time. It is during the time of this incarnation that he had to escape.

Q: Did any of his brothers join the resistance?

#7: No, they didn't join. They were always very humble. The Chinese have given them a house and they are working as officials. There is a place in Tsarong from where you could come over to India, they are working there as Chinese officials. They are not in the police force or in a position to beat people. I sent them a letter saying that they can join me here, but they said that they were happy there.

Q: Are they still alive?

#7: Yes, they are alive. They have children and their children have children. Their number has grown. They are at Tsawa Zayul. This is at the border of India.

Q: And can he tell us anything...anything that he can tell us about his experiences up until 1957 when he left and can he tell us anything else that he saw and experienced—just anything else that he witnessed?

#7: I was already in India before 1950. When the Chinese were liberating there. I had reached India.

Q: Before 1950?

#7: Was it before 1950? We lost our country in 1959. Yes, it was in 1951 to 1952 that I came to India. I used to transport Indian things to Phari and from there I brought wool. I was a transporter between Phari and India. Once the Chinese arrested all the transporters, took them to Lhasa and imprisoned them. They took away all the horses and mules and no one had anything left.

Q: He was in prison in Lhasa?

#7: They couldn't catch me. I escaped. All my colleagues were arrested and taken to Lhasa.

Q: He escaped to India. What happened to his friends? Does he know?

#7: They [the Chinese] couldn't catch me. I escaped through the forests.

Q: This was when he finally escaped and he stayed there? That was it? He didn't come back after that?

#7: Then there was no way to go back; the mountain pass was closed. Natula was closed and there was no way to go back. Then we made our way to India.

Q: So going back to when his friends were arrested, can he just describe what that was like? What happened, were they intercepted by a convoy? What actually happened?

#7: In Domo, there was an open ground called Lenpa Thang. The Chinese had ordered that horses and mules were not allowed to rest at Lenpa Thang. However, many muleteers had unsaddled their animals. The *Chentu* informed the Chinese, who came and arrested all the people and drove away the animals. They couldn't catch me as I escaped. All the rest were captured. The mules were driven away.

Q: Does he know what happened to his friends?

#7: They were taken to Lhasa. A few of them came. They were Phuntsok and a Chatingpa who escaped. The rest never came back.

Q: They escaped from prison?

#7: They were released after serving a sentence. Upon their release, they escaped to India.

Q: Can you describe what it was like to see them again?

#7: When we met, we were so happy and the Chinese must have been angry. If it was good in Tibet, they would have stayed there. Since the situation was not good, they escaped to India. His Holiness the Dalai Lama is in India.

Q: What were his feelings?

#7: I was happy to see them.

Q: What did he say about His Holiness?

[Interpreter repeats the response.]

Q: What happened when he escaped through the jungle? What happened after that?

#7: I didn't have any experience escaping through the forest. At that time I was a strong person, as I was a transporter. I didn't feel hungry even if I didn't have food to eat for two days. I was not hungry nor was I scared in the jungle though there were said to be tigers and gorillas in the forest around Domo. I didn't encounter gorillas or tigers. It was thanks to God. I prayed to His Holiness the Dalai Lama and came.

Q: What happened when he got to the Indian border?

#7: I came through the forest and when I reached Gangtok, I had people I knew there. In Kalimpong I had a home.

Q: He had a home in Kalimpong?

#7: Yes. It was a double storied building.

Q: When he escaped from Tibet, he first reached Gangtok?

#7: Yes, first to Gangtok and to Kalimpong. Here the businessman for whom I worked had purchased a house. It was a double storied building. His sister was my wife. It was his mules that I used to work with. Then later the mules were lost and there was nothing left. That was the end.

[Change of tapes and some discussions]

Q: We want to clarify something that he said earlier about walking on the *mani* stones. Was that Chang Kai Shek's people or was that the Communists, who was doing that?

#7: They were the Communist Chinese. They were among the *Chentu*.

Q: The *Chentu* were Tibetans.

#7: Yes, they were. The Chinese were within the hearts of the *Chentu*. Because of the support of the Chinese, they became powerful. They perpetuated suffering on us, which was all done at the behest of the Chinese.

Q: We are going to go back a little bit to this time to the period. Could you ask him: was there tension between the poor Tibetans and the richer Tibetans during this time when the Communists... Please ask him whether there was tension between the Tibetans who agreed to do this kind of things; Tibetans who were agreeing to, you know, walk on the *mani* stones and the other Tibetans who were not doing what the Chinese were telling them? Was there tension between those two groups? The Tibetans who were willing to go along with the Chinese and the Tibetans who were not willing?

#7: The rich people, or the *Dhintu*, were in the *Chushi Gangdrug* Force. All the *Chentu*, who liked the Chinese, remained in the village. The Chinese were treating them very well, these bad people. The *Dhintu* were rich families and owned guns. When the Americans dropped arms and ammunition at Chari Penpa; the first time the *Chushi Gangdrug* Force received them. During the second time, the Chinese came to know about it and they lost everything to the Chinese. The Chinese were in large numbers and took away everything. Our people were fewer in number in the *Chushi Gangdrug* Force.

Q: Was there any problem with the Nationalists before the Communists came into his area in Kham? Was there any problem between Tibetans and the Nationalists, *Kuomintang*, actually?

#7: There were no problems, there was a good relationship. The *Kuomintang* and we shared the same religion.

Q: They were practicing Buddhism?

#7: Yes, same as us. They believed in the Buddha.

Q: When he came in to Sikkim at that time, how long did he stay in Sikkim and what did he do there?

#7: I must have spent seven or eight years in Sikkim and Kalimpong. Sikkim and Kalimpong are very close.

Q: What did he do there?

#7: I was going after the horses and mules.

Q: He was trading within Sikkim?

#7: Within Sikkim.

Q: When did he decide to come to Bylakuppe?

#7: Before I came to Bylakuppe, I was in Kolkotta. I worked as a cook for three years in Kolkotta. Then I joined the 22 company of the Indian army. I was in the army for 15 years. When I was discharged, I came to Bylakuppe.

Q: His parents, did they join him in India?

#7: I never met any of them, my parents and my siblings. Both my parents are dead now. I had four brothers and four sisters. The oldest sister who was given away in marriage has four sons but none of them came here.

Q: So nobody took his advice to come out when he was trying to persuade his family to come out with him and nobody listened to him?

#7: Nobody listened to me. At that time I was not escaping. I was transporting with the horses and mules. I told them that they should slowly make their way out. They had come until *Tsawa Zayul* and then the Chinese started the liberation and the way was closed.

Q: They did try to come and they were stopped and turned back?

#7: They were stopped because during the liberation, people were not allowed to go anywhere, neither ahead nor back. They were stopped there and given land and house.

Q: Does he think about Tibet very much these days?

#7: No, I don't. His Holiness the Dalai Lama is here and what is there for me to think about Tibet? I do not think of it at all.

Q: Tell him that we ask everybody this question at the end of the interview. What advice does he have for the young generation of Tibetans—if they would listen to him what advice would he have for them?

#7: I do not advise at all. Who will listen if I advise? I should have some education. If I were a school teacher, I could have advised them.

Q: If they would listen, what would be his advice?

#7: If they would listen, I would tell them to practice their religion, pray to His Holiness the Dalai Lama and work hard toward Tibetan independence.

Q: That's good advice. I have one more question for him. Where do we find a *piwang*?

#7: You can only get in Taiwan.

Q: Where can we get one somewhere around here?

#7: You can't find one here.

Q: Tell him we are going to find one and if we find one we are going to bring it back here. Would he play for us if we found one?

#7: Of course, I will play. I will not play on a bad *piwang*, which screeches.

Q: Could you ask him whether any stories or legends attached to his area—related to his area where he was brought up? Does he remember any legends or stories?

#7: I did not listen to many stories as a child. The elders knew stories. I was just a child and didn't listen to the stories.

Q: Oh really, they didn't tell children stories?

[Videographer to interpreter] Could you tell *Pa-la* that it was a wonderful interview? He has such a good memory and it was really nice talking to him.

END OF INTERVIEW