

Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #16 – Gelong
June 30, 2007

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TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #16
2. Interviewee: Gelong
3. Age: 74
4. Date of Birth: 1933
5. Sex: Male
6. Birthplace: Dhuena
7. Province: Utsang
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1959
9. Date of Interview: June 30, 2007
10. Place of Interview: Interviewee's residence, Camp No. 1,
Lugsung Samdupling Settlement,
Bylakuppe, Mysore District,
Karnataka, India
11. Length of Interview: 2 hr 13 min
12. Interviewer: Martin Newman
13. Interpreter: Lhakpa Tsering
14. Videographer: Tsewang Dorjee
15. Transcriber: Tenzin Yangchen



Biographical Information:

When he was a child in Tibet, Gelong's family owned a huge herd of sheep and fierce dogs to guard them from wolves. Gelong had the difficult responsibility of grazing the animals in the mountains, often separated from his family for extended periods of time. He recalls the beautiful animals like lynx, gazelles and wild asses that used to roam in Tibet.

Once, as a young boy, when Gelong (originally named Namgyal Tenzin) grew sick, his family consulted a *lhapa* 'medium.' The *lhapa* believed Gelong to be a reincarnated lama and renamed him "Gelong," a name typically reserved for high lamas. Then he recovered from the illness.

After the Chinese came to his village, Gelong's family was subjected to the *thamzin* 'struggle sessions' initiated by the Chinese on Tibet's wealthy and influential families. Gelong relives those sad moments when the Chinese turned his family out of their house and confiscated their assets. He also talks about his experience of forced labor under Chinese rule; Gelong had to help build roads. When the road work was completed he returned to his village, only to find that his family had fled to India. He soon he followed them and helped to build his settlement in India.

Topics Discussed:

Childhood memories, herding, life under Chinese rule, forced labor, Chinese oppression, *thamzin*, escape experiences, early life in Bylakuppe, life as a refugee in India.

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Interview #16

Interviewee: Gelong

Age: 74, Sex: Male

Interviewer: Martin Newman

Interview Date: June 30, 2007

Question: Hello.

Interviewee #16: *Tashi Delek* ‘Greetings.’

Q: Please tell us your name.

#16: Gelong.

Q: Gelong, do you give your permission for the Tibet Oral History Project to use this interview?

#16: Yes. Unless you speak loud, I can't hear you.

Q: Thank you for offering to share your story with the Tibet Oral History Project.

#16: Okay.

Q: His Holiness the Dalai Lama requested that we record your experiences so that we can share your memories with Tibetans for generations to come.

#16: Okay.

Q: And also inform the world community and the next generation of Chinese about the true history, culture and the beliefs of the Tibetan people.

#16: Okay.

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

#16: Okay.

Q: If you do not wish to answer a question or discuss some issue, please tell us.

#16: Okay.

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

#16: There will be no problem. You were sent by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, so I have full faith. I will relate whatever I know.

Q: We are honored to record your story and appreciate your participation in this project.

#16: Okay.

Q: To start off, I wonder if you could tell us how you got the name Gelong?

#16: Just as I told you now, I was given the name by a *Lhapa* 'a medium.' Gelong means a lama. Actually, I was named Namgyal Tenzin, but we were stupid and we continued with the old name Gelong and now this is also in my documents. I couldn't change it later because it was already there in my documents. For my part I am guiltless.

Q: Who gave you the name?

#16: The *Lhapa* 'a medium' gave it to me.

Q: Was that common for mediums to give people names?

#16: They did not give names for everyone. I was very sick and extremely weak. She said that I was the reincarnation of that lama and that I had to go to a cavern in the hills. Then the Chinese arrived and the recognition could not take place and we escaped.

Q: How did they know or decide that you were a reincarnation of a particular lama?

#16: I was very young and did not know. The lady who was a medium said that I was the reincarnation of the lama who had died. He used to live in a cavern. When this lama died, it was said I was his reincarnation. They said that his reincarnation should be recognized, but the Chinese arrived and it could not be done.

Q: The lady said that?

#16: Yes, the medium. We have one *tapa* 'type of fortune teller' here that is similar.

Q: That's very interesting.

#16: Okay.

Q: Where were you born?

#16: I was born in Tsang Dhuena. I lived in Dhuena.

Q: Was that a village or a town?

#16: Dhuena came under the district of Gyangtse. There was a mountain pass and if you crossed it, you would be in Phari District.

Q: Did you live in the village or the district?

#16: I lived in the village called Dhuena. It had to come under a district just like we are under Mysore here.

Q: Just to go back for a moment. I wanted to ask, what is the name Gelong mean?

#16: I just told you the meaning.

Q: Does it mean a monk or what does Gelong mean?

#16: Gelong is what it is. I have no spirituality. That is the meaning. If I was a monk and had practiced religion, I would be able to explain, but I did not practice religion. The medium said that my health was weak because I was the reincarnation and that I should be recognized as such, but the Chinese came and it couldn't be done.

Q: What do you remember about your family life as a child; your life as a child? Can you just describe what you remember about being a child in your village in Tibet?

#16: Yes, I do remember my life as a child. I must have been about 7, 8 or 9 years old then. I remember that. The medium said that I was the reincarnation of the lama and that my health would improve. Since I was the reincarnation of the lama, I should be recognized as such and then my health would improve. If this was not done, I might become weaker and die.

Q: So you had to change your name because it might cause a problem, because you were the reincarnation of that lama?

[Interpreter to interviewer] If he didn't change his name, he would be ill all the time. That was why he had to change his name.

Q: Do you remember what it was like being a young child in your home?

#16: This is the story of a long time ago. At about the age of 7 or 8, we would play because there were no schools. We were nomads and once you were about 14 or 15, you had to take responsibilities of the animals. We had a lot of goats and sheep. To take care of the animals, we had to go wherever there was plenty of grass for them.

Q: But before you reached 14 or 15, what do you most remember about your life?

#16: I do not remember much except that I used to play as a child.

Q: What type of games?

#16: We played a funny game called *tapo* and we used to make houses out of mud and play with mud. We played a game with small stones.

Q: Did you go inside the mud house that you built?

#16: No, we did not enter it. It was made of mud and looked like a house. How can we build a house we could enter? It was child's play.

Q: Can you describe what the game of *tong* is? How do you *tong*?

#16: Play? Playing is playing and I can't explain. We played with mud, we played *apto* [a game played with five small stones] and we played *tapo*. These were all children's games.

Q: Do you still remember how to play *tapo*?

#16: We had a lot of animals and some would be killed, so we had *tapo*. There were small *tapo*. We used to play to win or lose. We played such games.

Q: Do you still remember how you played?

#16: Yes, I remember.

Q: *Tapo* is the feet of the horses?

#16: Yes and the sheep have a small *tapo*.

[Interpreter to interviewer] The sheep's ankle, that part.

Q: The sheep's bone?

[Interpreter to interviewer] Yes, the sheep's bone.

#16: At times, we would place them against a wall depending on the number of children. You struck at them from a distance and if you hit a *tapo* and if it fell down on the ground, you were the winner and if it didn't drop down, you lost. That was how we played.

Q: That sounds like fun.

#16: [Laughs]

Q: Do you remember any performers or perhaps magicians or storytellers who would come to your village and put on a performance?

#16: There were singers and dancers, but I was not very interested in them. I had to go to tend the goats and sheep. We did have performers who performed during the festivals. I was mostly out with the animals earning my livelihood.

Q: That's too bad.

#16: [Smiles]

Q: What kind of animals did you look after?

#16: Our family owned about 4,000 animals.

Q: What kind of animals did you have?

#16: We had around 2,500 male sheep and around 2,500 ewes.

Q: Were they all sheep?

#16: Yes, all were sheep. We did have goats, but they were very few. The majority were sheep. The male sheep were sent to graze on the grassy hills. The pregnant ewes were brought down from the hills during winter to the warmer regions called Dowo.

Q: Did you say 4,000?

#16: Yes, there were 4,000.

Q: That's a lot of animals.

#16: Yes, we had many animals. Our livelihood was tending the animals. During autumn, the male sheep called *thukri* were let loose among the ewes. Every six months lambs were born. The ewes had to be taken down to Dowo for the birth. Within a month or two in *Dowo*, the lambs were born. In about the fourth Tibetan month, the lambs would have grown and then they were taken up to the hills.

Q: The sheep took six months to give birth?

#16: They took six months. The sheep mated in autumn.

Q: Did you do this with your brothers and sisters or who did you look after the animals with?

#16: Three people tended the male sheep. When the ewes were brought down to Dowo for the birth in spring, there were six to seven people to look after them. Lambs were born and there were some ewes that did not allow the lambs to suckle and we had to help. We would make an enclosure big enough for only one sheep and tie the mother ewe in it.

Q: When you went to graze the sheep, did you alone look after all the animals or were your other family members there with you to help tend the 4,000 sheep?

#16: Not all the family members went. We had servants who went to graze the animals. The family members would stay home.

Q: So it was you and your servants?

#16: Yes, the servants were there.

Q: Did you have brothers and sisters?

#16: My brothers and sisters did not come. They stayed home.

Q: You had brothers and sisters?

#16: Yes, I did. I had brothers and sisters. We also had some farmland. It was not extensive but about four *tekang*. In terms of acreage, it was around 10 acres. They had to look after the 10 acres and pay the government taxes, so they stayed home.

Q: Did you grow pumpkins?

#16: No, we didn't grow pumpkins.

Q: Then what did you grow?

#16: We grew barley. It was only barley that we cultivated.

Q: Did you have any dogs helping you?

#16: Yes, we had dogs; without dogs you couldn't. In our region, there were wolves, which ate the sheep. However, the sheep were in such large numbers that the wolves did get to them. For the male sheep group, there were about four dogs. When we went to Dowo, we had about three to four dogs. Without dogs you can't. It was not easy to manage the dogs. If they escaped, they would bite any other person passing by. Unless he had a weapon and killed it, the dog would injure him seriously.

Q: Each person took around three to four dogs with him?

#16: They were not on leash. They were let loose.

Q: The dogs were to protect the animals from foxes and from other humans who might want to steal the animals? Is that correct?

#16: There was no one who came to steal the sheep.

Q: It was to protect them from the wolves?

#16: Yes, because of the wolves. The dogs were accustomed to that kind of life and would follow us. We didn't have to put them on a leash.

Q: Those dogs sound very fierce.

#16: They were very fierce. They were large dogs, like you have the *Taka* here. However those dogs had long hair.

Q: *Taka* is the name of the hair or the name of the dog?

#16: No, they were not called *Taka*. It is here that you call the dogs *Taka* [mispronunciation for Tiger, the common name for Alsatian dogs in the Tibetan community in Bylakuppe]; there we used to name them Dhomnak or Seka, depending on the fur color. Those black in color were called Dhomnak, one with white underbelly would be named Dhomnak Nyenkar and if one had yellow coat, it was called Seka.

Q: That is very interesting.

#16: [Smiles]

Q: Did you ever get bitten by one of those dogs?

#16: No, how would it bite its owner? If you had a dog which bit its owner, why not throw it out?

Q: Can you tell me a little bit about your house? Was it a big house, a small house?

#16: It was big.

Q: Do you remember how many rooms it had?

#16: There were about seven rooms on the ground floor. The upper floor had about five rooms.

Q: Very big house.

#16: Many muleteers came to our region. The muleteers came from the direction of Kham. If they came from Phari, it was to our region that they had to come. We had immense-sized grounds. There were two grounds large enough to keep four or three *la* 'one group of 7 or 10 horses or mules used by a trader.'

Q: Did those people who came from Kham stay at your house?

#16: Yes, they were located at the end of the house.

Q: Did those people come on pleasure trips?

#16: Not on pleasure trips. What the *telpa* did was...

Q: What does *telpa* mean?

#16: *Telpa* meant those people that came from Kham driving horses and mules laden with wool and such goods to be traded in India. And on their return trip they took other goods with them. Some went to Kalimpong, some to Gangtok and some to Phari.

Q: So you had many visitors?

#16: No, I was out tending the animals as that was my responsibility. I did not have duties in the home.

Q: But they stayed in your house?

#16: Those members of my family who lived at home did all that.

Q: When you were home, did you have a favorite hiding place?

#16: What?

Q: Did you have a hiding place?

#16: What does it mean by hiding?

Q: Like hiding in a hole or behind something.

#16: Hiding? No, I did not hide. I had to go to the north to look after the sheep.

Q: So you did not have a hiding place?

#16: No, I did not.

Q: Did you ever hide when your parents scold you and you hid and did not want to come home?

#16: That might have happened when I was a child and I might have run away when my parents scolded me. However, I was older and I took my responsibilities and my parents did not beat me.

Q: Did they beat you when you were younger?

#16: When one is younger and naughty, the parents beat you.

Q: When you think that at this time, is this a happy memory for you?

#16: If I think now, those early days were difficult times. We had continued with our difficult days. Now, with the grace of His Holiness the Dalai Lama we are so happy. If one did his work according to the wishes of His Holiness, though I am not knowledgeable, I appreciate those people who do. I do not like those people who do otherwise.

Q: So you think those days in Tibet when you looked after your sheep were difficult?

#16: Those were difficult times and I think they were difficult.

Q: What problems? Because you are not describing problems right now. I am talking about this time when you were a child. Was this a happy time for you?

#16: If I think deeply now, it was not difficult because I remember my country now. I miss my country.

Q: No, no. When you were a child, was it a happy time or sad a time?

#16: No, I did not face problems because it was our own property and we were looking after it. However, it was difficult in the sense that, come summer or winter, we had to be out there. Everyday we had to go and at night we slept wherever we were with the flock.

Q: So on the whole, if you think of your childhood days in Tibet, do you see those days as happy or sad?

#16: There was no sadness. I was happy.

Q: When you didn't have your responsibilities, did you like to go into the village? Were there any things you like to see when you went into the village when you weren't working?

#16: I used to wander around. I would do that because I was young. I used to wander everywhere.

Q: When you roamed, was there a... What do you remember that was most interesting that you found when you were roaming?

#16: I was very happy when I was wandering about because I got to do what I wanted to do.

Q: Did you like to hike in the hills?

#16: I loved it. At that time I loved it. I loved climbing hills and wandering about.

Q: Did you ever see any animals when you hiked?

#16: Yes, we saw animals. There were not many in our region. There was one called *yi* 'lynx.' Then the regular animals like gazelle and wild ass which we saw on the plains. There was the lynx which harmed the sheep. We didn't have tigers or other animals like we do here.

Q: Zebra? You saw a zebra?

#16: Wild ass was common. If they were not killed by the Chinese, the plains of our region were full of them; wild ass and gazelle. Wild ass and gazelle were plentiful. Unless the Chinese have exterminated them, we had them in plenty.

Q: What were *yi*? What kind of animal was *yi*?

#16: If I compare it to an animal here, it was like a leopard. It was long like a leopard. There were people who snared them. If one couldn't kill it; one had to be very careful. It was dangerous because it would charge toward you. The animals that harmed the sheep were the wolf and lynx.

Q: You mean the *yi* runs faster than you?

#16: Yes, definitely. It lives high up and it would pounce if it saw a human. Its body was long. It was not small.

Q: Did one ever run after you?

#16: Yes, of course I was scared of them. One would be scared as we could not subdue it.

Q: Have you been chased by a lynx?

#16: No, I was not chased. When I grazed my sheep I was careful.

Q: I understand that until you were a teenager you were working, taking care of the animals and roaming the hills, did you ever spent any time in a monastery or go to a monastery?

#16: No, I did not. I have not stayed at a monastery.

Q: Except for your name?

#16: No, never. Because of my weak health, the medium gave me the name. In our village there were not many who became monks in the monastery.

Q: There were fewer monks in your village. Can you tell me what your parents were like? Do you have a clear memory of them?

#16: Yes, I can remember them.

Q: What can you tell me about them? Describe them, what was your father like? What was your mother like?

#16: Both my parents were tall.

Q: Were they short-tempered?

#16: No, they were not.

Q: They were not short-tempered. So they had a lot of patience?

#16: They were not short-tempered.

Q: Did you have any funny relatives at all; funny uncles or aunts that would visit?

#16: I had many relatives but none who was scary. There was none who was bad.

Q: That's too bad. Was there much laughter in your home?

#16: No, there was not. I would be away and the times I visited my home, we used to talk.

Q: It sounds like there was much work to be done?

#16: In general it was not much, but I had the responsibility of the sheep.

Q: There was a lot of work?

#16: Yes, I had to look after the sheep. There were servants and I had to seek out fresh pastures and direct them where to go that day or the next.

Q: Lots of responsibilities. When did your life start to change? What did you start to notice happening that was different?

#16: As shepherds, we would be out looking after the sheep. Much later the Chinese arrived. When the Chinese came, what they said was this. They were in our village about a year. They had come once earlier, but I was not home most of the time. They came to our house and it was full of Chinese, inside and outside. They were being very good and doing things of their choosing. I was not home most of the time as I had to be out.

Then about a year later, they called meetings. They called the poor and told them that they must *thamzin* 'subject to struggle sessions' them [the wealthy] as they had been suppressed by them. We were told that we couldn't stay in our house. They advised them [the poor] that they should protest against them [the wealthy]. There were many such people in Tibet, who were like beggars.

Then later the Chinese became worse and worse. They started to *thamzin*. Then they told us that we couldn't live in our house any longer, that we had already lived in it and that we did not have the rights to live there now. The flocks of sheep were called back and divided. They said the animals had to be distributed because until now we had suppressed the people. First they divided our assets and properties. We were made to remove our good clothes and put on shabby clothes

Q: They were all divided and given to the poor people?

#16: Yes.

Q: Were you allowed to stay in your home? Was your family allowed to stay in your home?

#16: They had to move from the main upper floor to the ground floor. They were not allowed to go upstairs.

Q: Were you still able to go out? After this, did you have any animals still to look after? Or did the Chinese take all of them?

#16: Yes, I did have animals.

Q: Did they take away all your animals or how many did they take away?

#16: A little less than half of the animals were distributed among the people. Some were given 100, some 50 and then they [the Chinese] tied different pieces of cloth on the ears of the sheep that bleated. We had no power. It was up to them whether they wanted to give a 100, 50 or 20 sheep.

Q: So half of your animals were taken away?

#16: They took away about half of our animals.

Q: Did you still look after the sheep that you had?

#16: Yes, I did.

Q: When this happened, what did you feel?

#16: I felt very sad. [Begins crying]

Q: What did your parents say to you?

#16: [Crying] They said, "We can't do anything. It is in their hands. We have to give in to them. We are helpless."

Q: What happened next?

#16: Then I went to the usual grazing sites and during winter when it became cold, we came down to Dowo.

Q: Were you away from the Chinese when you did this? Were you still able to stay away from them or did you always run into them whatever you did?

#16: The Chinese were there.

Q: Where were they?

#16: They were there near our village but not many, maybe two or three groups. If you went further to Khangmar, I heard there were innumerable Chinese troops.

Q: In Khangmar?

#16: Khangmar. It was far away. I haven't seen it but I heard that it was near Gyangtse

Q: Did they leave you alone, the Chinese?

#16: I was left alone as I was out grazing the sheep. However, my siblings were subjected to *thamzin* though in a mild way because we had been kind to our servants, giving them *tsampa* 'flour made of roasted barley' or grains whenever they needed. They [the poor] were forced to perform *thamzin*, but didn't do it very severely, as we had been kind earlier.

Q: Gave them food, so they didn't give your family so many problems because you fed them.

#16: Because we had been kind to the servants before, but they were forced to do *thamzin*. They were made to do it by them [the Chinese]. They didn't do it harshly.

Q: Why did they subject your family to *thamzin* if your family had provided food not only to the villagers but also to the Chinese? Why did they then still subject them to this?

#16: They were helpless. There were a hundred families in our village. The name of my family is Dhuena Meypa. Just like here, we used to have many coolies, working with the construction of the house everyday. If they were in need of money, money was given; if they were in need of food, my parents provided for them. They were forced to perform *thamzin*.

Q: The reason your family was *thamzined* was because you were well-off?

#16: That is right. They did this to the well-off families. This happened everywhere. They were told, "You cannot avoid doing *thamzin* to them. Until now you worked for them. Now you have to do it." They did it because they were forced to do it. Such bad things were being done.

Q: Can you describe what exactly occurred during the *thamzin*?

#16: They would hit and pull on the hair.

Q: To your family members?

#16: Not to my family members. Such things were not done to them. They were threatened, but nothing bad happened to them. I came to know about it when I came home.

Q: Who gave the verbal warning? Did this take place in public with all the villagers or in a room with a few people? How did this occur?

#16: It was a Tibetan. It was said in the meeting of all the people.

Q: Did you see this happen yourself?

#16: No, I did not see. I was outside and when I came home, I saw that my family was thrown out from our home. [Cries] It was very sad. My family was driven out and those bad people were living there. That was how they did it.

Q: And this made you feel very, very bad?

#16: I was sad. Of course it would make you sad. At that time we were living there and had worked hard throughout our life and then you are driven out and others are made to live there. I was dejected, but helpless.

Q: After the *thamzin* of your parents, how did they react to all of that? How were they different afterwards?

#16: After the *thamzin*, the son of the family who did the main work of going to Gyangtse for the payment of taxes, was arrested and imprisoned.

Q: Who was imprisoned?

#16: He was imprisoned in a house in our village. He was imprisoned for around five months.

Q: Who was imprisoned?

#16: The Chinese imprisoned him.

Q: Who did the Chinese imprison?

#16: Our family's main member who managed the taxes and all other things of the family. He was captured and imprisoned for about five months.

Q: Who did they put? Did they put your father? Who did they take away?

#16: He was my older brother, who had the responsibility of the family.

Q: They imprisoned your brother? Did they do anything to your father?

#16: They didn't do anything to my father. They imprisoned the main person of our family who took care of all the responsibilities for about five months.

Q: Maybe you can help me understand that this is something very Tibetan, I am sure. Why your brother is considered the head of the family and not your father?

#16: That was by force. He was the head and the best person in the family and he was imprisoned despite all that was done.

Q: Your brother was imprisoned because he was educated? Why was he imprisoned?

#16: Because he was educated and he took responsibility for the family, that was why he was imprisoned.

Q: Once again, after the *thamzin* of your... Was your brother also subjected to *thamzin*?

#16: Yes, he was there.

Q: After the *thamzin*, what did your parents and you brother, what did they say to you? What did they tell you?

#16: I was out at that time. I came home after six to seven days of the *thamzin* and everyone was crying. We were so sad. They had been given a room on the ground floor and I was dejected. [Cries]

Q: So you told me after being away in the fields, for several days you returned and then you found everyone in your family crying. Do you remember what they said to you then?

#16: Yes, I remember.

Q: What did they say?

#16: They said, "Now we don't have anything to eat. It is not us alone. The Chinese are suppressing and doing the same to all."

Q: And what did you think when you heard that?

#16: I thought except for the animals, we have nothing. I was so depressed that there was no feeling of hunger or the urge to eat for almost a month. I was terribly unhappy but I was helpless, there was nothing I could do.

After about a month, then you slowly tend to forget. We used to hear many people talking about severe *thamzin* that took place elsewhere. We heard that some people had their scalps come off due to the constant pulling of the hair, and that their ears were pulled but such terrible things did not happen to us because we were good earlier. The people committed the *thamzin* with us under duress in accordance with the law of the Chinese. The people used to say that we were lucky.

Q: You heard that some people that they had their hair pulled out or they were pulled by the hair and that they were slapped in the face? Is that correct?

#16: I heard that such things took place and people said that we were lucky because such things were not done to us. People were slapped; they were made to bend and then pulled up by the hair [demonstrates], such terrible things.

Q: Had your brother already been taken away by the Chinese?

#16: He died later. He died just before I left for India.

Q: When the beatings took place, had your brother already been taken to the prison?

#16: He wasn't taken to prison. He was in prison for only about five months and released. He was not taken away to be imprisoned. He was released and sent home, but he died just before I fled. He died there in the village.

Q: I am sorry. For one month it was very bad and you had little food but you weren't tortured and your brother had been taken away, did your parents say to you what they thought might happen? Did they have any idea?

#16: We talked among ourselves in the family and thought that my brother would be taken to a big prison and would not be released. We thought he might be taken to either Gyantse or Shigatse and had lost all hopes, but later he was released. [Cries]

Q: Were you there when he came back after five months?

#16: I was not home. I was away tending the sheep. If I didn't go, we could not depend on the servants now. I was never home much. I might stay home for two days and that was it.

Q: You were still staying away taking care of the sheep. And how long did this situation stay like this where you were taking care of the sheep, your brother was in prison? Just how long did the situation stay just like that?

#16: It did not last for years. For about ten to fifteen days I was in anguish, if I ate, the food had no taste, but later you get adjusted to it. When I came home, my family members talked...

Q: How long did this period last?

#16: Deep within our hearts, there was no end to our misery. We had become so poor from how we used to live earlier. We were driven out and we had no rights over what we had worked hard for.

Q: Yes, we know but at home, what other problems did they create for you during this time?

#16: There were no other problems to create for us because the properties, assets and animals that we had were confiscated by them. Besides that there were no other problems that they gave us. Those who were imprisoned were released soon. There were no other problems that they gave us.

Q: How did your mother react to all of this?

#16: There was nothing to do but weep. Crying was the only thing in the pathetic situation. There was no way we could discuss it with them because it was a case of the mighty and the weak. So everyone wept and was helpless.

Q: What happened next?

#16: As I told you, we remained in one place for a week or a month depending on the availability of grass. That's how I used to graze the animals, but I was very depressed. I missed my parents and food became tasteless. Other than that I don't remember.

Q: What I'm trying to understand is how long this situation went on until the next event happened?

#16: He was in prison for five months.

Q: Did the suffering go on for five months?

#16: As for the suffering, there was no end to it until we escaped. We had no rights over the possessions that we owned. When I thought of that, the mind was full of suffering. Earlier we could utilize what we had, but those were taken away by the use of force. It was the use of power against the weak. If we had done some wrong, that was understandable, but we had done nothing. They just grabbed, they used their might, they issued orders and they confiscated everything. When such things happen one feels so dejected and helpless.

Q: This was so until you escaped to India?

#16: Yes, it remained the same.

Q: How did it come about that you escaped? Was this something that your family planned together or you decided alone or can you tell me what led up to your escape?

#16: This was how it happened. I was with the animals and the family was at home. They sent a person to the grazing area with a message that I had to return and that they were told that the one who looked after the sheep had to go to work for the Chinese road construction. I had to go, after all I had no rights. I left the sheep with someone else and went to work on the Chinese road construction.

Q: Chinese road construction?

#16: Yes.

Q: What happened when you were sent for the road construction?

#16: We were sent to a place called Gye in Yaktsa Jangkhu to build roads. There were many groups like Gyantse Group, Nganyi Group and so on.

Q: There were people from different areas?

#16: There were people from different areas. They were in groups. Then later we were sent to Khangmar. We were ordered to construct the road from Khangmar to Nyero and told that if we completed up to Nyero, we would then be relieved.

Q: What does giving relief mean?

#16: By relieving us, they meant that we would be allowed to go back to our own villages.

Q: Once the road was completed?

#16: Yes.

Q: So please continue.

#16: They would make us assemble for a meeting once a week and distribute flags. They would say that the Phari Group was the winner or Gyantse Group was the winner. They were just lying.

Q: By giving flags?

#16: Yes, they would give flags and say that group was enthusiastic and had worked very hard at building the road. It was to indicate that everyone should work enthusiastically.

Q: The flags were Chinese flags?

#16: Yes.

Q: Did they give you a flag?

#16: They would give the flags in rotation. We were all working very hard. They were just lying to encourage us to still work harder. They gave the flags saying that we had done a good job.

Q: Did you get a flag?

#16: Our group was given the flag.

Q: Did you work hard hoping that you would receive a flag?

#16: There was nothing to win if you received the flag. They were deceiving us. It was just a deception.

Q: Please continue.

#16: They told us that if we completed construction on the road from Khangmar to Nyero, we would be allowed to return to our villages, so we built the road up to Nyero. It had taken us around a month. It was extremely cold there. When the road touched the pass at Nyero, they gave the next day off for us saying that we were to relax as we had worked very hard. We were told that we should wash and clean and rest. We had completed the road and thought that we would be sent home. It was around 7 o'clock in the evening that a meeting was called. There were many groups.

Q: So you were called for the meeting?

#16: At the meeting they said that the road to Nyero had been completed. Now the road from Nyero to Nelung should be constructed. Nyero was in the plains. There were many groups. It was around 9 o'clock and the Phari Group said, "The Chinese told us that when the road touched the pass at Nyero, we would be allowed to go back. Now we have completed the road up to Nyero. We do not have clothes or other things and we will not go further." When we said that we would not go...

Q: Then what happened?

#16: We could not be seen in the dark. Our group had raised the voice. There was a Chinese officer and he asked who was the one who had said that and he shone his flashlight on us. He asked for the person who said that to come out.

Q: That was said at the meeting?

#16: Yes, our group was sitting together and we had said that. The officer came around with his flashlight, but no one said anything. Still they suspected us and so they sent all the other groups to bed and told the Phari Group to stay back. Then they asked us, "Who was it who said he wouldn't go? That is very bad. To announce such a thing in front of so many people! Who was it who said that?" Our group said that we could not point a finger at anyone because we did not know who said it.

Q: Then what happened after your group was held back?

#16: Three persons from our group were arrested. I think it was four who were arrested. They were told to come out. There was a dark room a little distance away and they were taken there. We said that it was not our Phari Group who had said that and asked them to put all of us in there together.

Q: You said that either release the three men or put all of you in there?

#16: Yes, we said put all of us in there. Then it was around 10 or 11 o'clock a whole lot of soldiers arrived.

Q: What happened when the Chinese troops arrived?

#16: After the troops arrived, a vehicle came and the four arrested men were put into it. Then all of us also piled into the vehicle. The Chinese beat the people so much, but we said that we were united come what may. We persisted that it wasn't us who had said it and that in the dark, who knew who said it? We told them that we were willing to go anywhere the Chinese asked us to go. Then it was around 12 o'clock as we thus argued.

Q: Then what happened?

#16: The road ahead from the pass at Nelung was yet to be constructed. They had said that they would allow us to return once the road up to the pass was completed. They said that we had to build the road to Nelung and that we would be released then. They also said that they would drop the Phari Group back in the vehicle.

Q: It was midnight and all of you were in the vehicle, did they take your group somewhere?

#16: No, they didn't take us anywhere. We stayed there and they said that we had to construct the road from Nyero to Nelung and that from Nelung they would take the Phari Group back home in the vehicle.

Q: Then you accepted to build the road to Nelung?

#16: It was all hills and plains. What else to do but go? It took us over one month to construct the road to the pass of Nelung. In one month we were able to complete the road.

Q: What happened once you reached Nelung?

#16: Once again they let us rest for a day. They said we could wash our clothes and that we would be allowed to return home.

Q: Before or after the completion of the road?

#16: We had completed the road by then. The people of that area were farmers and also raised cattle. There were many yaks. They [the Chinese] told the Gyangtse Group to bring yaks. Now they were planning to drop us back on yaks and their promise of the vehicle was gone. So our group told them, "You spoke two different things. First you said that we would be let off when we reached the pass of Nyero but you didn't, putting us into difficulty. Then you told us that you would drop us home in the vehicle after the road from Nyero to Nelung was completed. If you drop us back in the vehicle, we will go. In case you do not take us back in the vehicle, we will scatter in whatever directions."

Q: Did they say you had to go back on yaks?

#16: Yes, they told us to go back on yaks.

Q: You told them you would not return?

#16: Yes, the Phari Group stayed back for three days because they had said that the vehicles were not available for one reason or the other. We reminded them that we were told we would be dropped back in vehicles. Our group leader said, "All our men are scattering. I don't know where they are going. It is not right for all to scatter. We have to go back together." They said, "You can load your food supplies on the yaks and for those of you who cannot walk, we will arrange for yaks."

Q: Did they send you thus?

#16: In the end we had to go on the yaks. They didn't arrange anything but the yaks.

Q: After they gave you the food supplies and the yaks, did you go back?

#16: Then we went back home. They said it was not right for the people to scatter.

Q: Then did you go back to your home?

#16: Then I went back home. I had to go.

Q: And you returned by yak?

#16: No, I didn't ride on the yak because I was young and able to walk. The older ones rode and our things were loaded on the yaks.

Q: And how long did you have to walk?

#16: It took a little over two days.

Q: When you got home, what did you find?

#16: The home situation was naught. They were living down there and could not go upstairs. Though I had returned home, my heart was not happy. It was very sad. There was nothing to be happy about.

Q: Yes, but when you got home and you saw your parents and your family, how did they look to you?

#16: They were happy to see me, but the despair was there deep within the hearts. They were happy that I was back.

Q: They were happy to see you, you mean, but they were really sad?

#16: Yes.

Q: Had your brother come back by then?

#16: Yes, he was back.

Q: Had he changed much because of his imprisonment?

#16: He had become weak.

Q: You mean his health?

#16: Yes.

Q: Had he been tortured in prison?

#16: He was not tortured.

Q: So you had come home and you were reunited with your family?

#16: Yes.

Q: What did you all do next?

#16: When I came home the first time, I met my family. But I was once again sent to build road at Nyero. They wouldn't let me live in peace.

Q: You were sent to Nyero to construct road?

#16: Yes.

Q: After that?

#16: We had *dri* 'female yak,' yaks and sheep. I learned that my family had escaped. I heard that.

Q: At that time you were in Nyero?

#16: Yes, that is right.

Q: You came home and the Chinese sent you again to Nyero as a road laborer. You heard that your parents had escaped to India?

#16: Yes, I heard that.

Q: During this time, were you aware of what was happening in Lhasa, fighting, the Dalai Lama's escape? Did you know what was going on in the rest of the country?

#16: Nothing was heard. We never heard anything.

Q: Did you hear about any fighting or of any battles or anything?

#16: Earlier we heard that the *Chushi Gangdrug* Volunteer Force was fighting, but other than that we never heard about the fighting by the Tibetan government army. We were road workers and at the construction site we never heard anything except our work.

Q: Now once again you are back in Nyero doing road construction with another road crew. What was going through your mind?

#16: They [the family] had escaped and there were many Chinese army camps everywhere and I was very anxious that I would hear the news about their capture. I did not want to remain at all. I just could not stay there and I thought of nothing else but of fleeing to India.

Q: So what did you do? Did you escape?

#16: I couldn't escape until the completion of the road. After completion of the road, I came back home but there was no one at home, so I stayed with family friends. I might have been there for about a month.

Q: What happened after one month?

#16: During the one month, my friends assured me that my family was not captured and that they might have safely reached India. They said I could stay with them and that they would share whatever food and living arrangements they had. They spoke kindly, but my mind could not rest even when I slept. I could think of nothing but escaping. [Cries]

Q: Then what happened after that?

#16: Then I made up my mind and from my village I fled to India. I crossed the Timola through Phari and escaped.

Q: You decided to do this by yourself?

#16: I made the decision to go to India and I had a person who helped me. I left my village at around 12 o'clock. My region received a lot of snow. When it snowed, you wouldn't find the roads.

Q: You escaped at 12 o'clock in the night?

#16: Yes.

Q: You knew the way to India?

#16: We knew the way until Phari, but we couldn't use the road. From our village, we arrived at a place called Shopra. If you continued on, you reached Dhangla. From Dhangla we did not walk on the road because of the fear of encountering the Chinese. Then there was Pokthang. There was so much snow that at times we sank into it. We carried on in this condition and reached Chugya.

Q: I imagine it was very, very cold.

#16: The weather was cold and I had on some warm clothes. From Chugya, Phari was close. I could see Phari and the lights of flashlights. Avoiding Phari we walked on to Richung Pota, a monastery.

Q: Then?

#16: If you walked a little further away from the Monastery, you would find the road to Pato in Bhutan. I found the road to Pato and took this route.

Q: Then?

#16: Then I walked on. Everywhere it was white with snow. I had not taken this road earlier, but carried on and after a while, high up on a mountain pass I could see a dark cave in the snowy background. I thought that there might be some Chinese and did not dare go on. Slowly I crawled in the snow listening for sounds but heard nothing. I waited an hour or so watching the cave to see if there were any human movements. There were none.

Q: Then you waited?

#16: There was a cave and since I was unfamiliar, I thought there might be people in there. I waited quite a while and there was nothing, so I carried on and reached the top of the mountain pass. And from there the way was downhill to Bhutan. I met people from Phari

who were fleeing. Then I felt safe and carried on. I came to Cheka at around daybreak. I saw some Bhutanese soldiers at an army camp and took some tea at a tea stall. The Bhutanese soldiers questioned me.

Q: You were questioned by the Bhutanese soldiers?

#16: They asked where I was going. Others before me might have taken the same route and they knew. I replied that I was fleeing. They asked what I carried. I had nothing except food in a bag, which they searched. There was nothing to be found upon the search.

Q: Then what happened?

#16: Then I was sent to Pato, which is a Bhutanese district. In this place were Tibetans who had escaped earlier and more Tibetan escapees arrived. We were stopped there for about ten days.

Q: Then?

#16: We were stopped there for about ten days. We stayed there. Food was scarce and I went to beg and the Bhutanese gave some things to eat. After ten days, we were made to leave.

Q: Where did you go?

#16: We were sent to a place called Buxa. There were many monks there. The government provided us food rations. We were there a day and then sent.

Q: Then where did you go?

#16: From there we were sent to Missamari. There were many people there and that place was extremely hot. People died in large numbers. In the one month I was there, at least two or three people died everyday.

Q: Did you get ill yourself?

#16: I did not fall ill.

Q: Just continue telling your story.

#16: I was about a month at Missamari. Then we complained to the authorities that we could not stay there and requested to be sent to a place with a cooler climate. We were used to cold weather and snow in Tibet. Finally eight of us, including children, were sent to a place, which was said to be cooler, though we did not know it. Later as I think back, I think the place was Mandi.

Q: Was the climate better in Mandi?

#16: The climate was no better in Mandi and it was difficult there. We had an interpreter, though compared to today, he was not very fluent. We worked there. There was some building construction going on and we worked as laborers. It was hot there. We remained there for about a month. From Mandi, we went to a place...I can't remember the name of the place.

Q: That's okay.

#16: Here we worked on a road crew.

Q: How long were you here working on a road crew?

#16: We worked there until we came to Bylakuppe.

Q: What year did you come to Bylakuppe?

#16: I can't remember the year.

Q: How old were you when you came to Bylakuppe?

#16: I was about 29 years old when I came to Bylakuppe.

Q: Was that at the beginning when Bylakuppe was established or was it already established?

#16: It was yet to be established. I was among the first. As we came here [Camp No. 1] from Bylakuppe, there was just a tiny path and about a hundred tents put up. In those days Kushalnagar [the nearest town] was not like what it is now. There were just about five or six shops selling vegetables, rice and millet in wooden containers. Kushalnagar was nothing like it is now. The whole area was a jungle. Even if you went to attend nature's call, it was so thick, no one would see you.

Q: At this time, had you found out what happened to the rest of your family?

#16: I did not know what happened to my family. When I came here I did not know where they were. I was in a daze and did not know anything.

Q: Were you able later to find out what happened to them or to contact them?

#16: After coming here, and later when I had adjusted, I heard my family had arrived in Lachen Lachung, which is close to Gangtok.

Q: Where is Lachen Lachung? Is this place in Tibet or India?

#16: It is in India.

Q: So you must have felt relieved when you heard that?

#16: Of course, I was relieved.

Q: Tell us more about your early days in Bylakuppe? What were the hardships you had to face here? What was life like?

#16: I did not face any hardships. We were working here. The first camp people were the first to arrive in Bylakuppe. Some of us were engaged in building roads and some of us cleared the forest. We prepared the tent area for the people of Camp Number 2 to stay. Then the people of Camp Number 2 prepared the place for Camp Number 3 and so on. I didn't think I had any problems. Due to the grace of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, we had a place to stay and food to eat.

Q: But did you have any difficulties with elephants here?

#16: One or two people were harmed by elephants. The Indians had not been able to settle here.

Q: The elephants killed a man or two?

#16: Yes.

Q: Did you have any close calls with an elephant?

#16: Yes, I have seen them at close quarters. I encountered them, but they didn't do any harm. When we first arrived here, their trumpeting could be heard close by, but they didn't do anything drastic.

Q: When did you meet your wife?

#16: I met my wife here.

Q: How many children do you have?

#16: I have seven children.

Q: Did someone arrange for a meeting with your wife or did you meet her while you were doing something else? How did you meet her?

#16: It was a love marriage.

Q: When you saw her, what was the thing you liked most about her?

#16: I saw her as beautiful. [Laughs]

Q: She must have thought the same of you?

#16: I don't know what she thought of me.

Q: What do you think?

[Wife speaking off screen] I did not find him handsome, but the children were our karma.

#16: [Laughs]

Q: How old are your children now?

#16: The youngest child is 20 years old and the oldest is about 41.

Q: At this point now in your life, what are your feelings towards the Chinese?

#16: The Chinese are definitely bad. We do not have our country. We are living here and the Indian government, with the grace of His Holiness the Dalai Lama...

Q: Tell us about the Chinese? How do you see them?

#16: I do not see them as good. They are very much the devils. Who would like the devils?

Q: If you could go back to Tibet, what would you do?

#16: If I were in Tibet, I could not do much because of my age. Still even if I were to die there, my mind would be at rest.

Q: Do you have any relatives that are still alive there who you are in contact with?

#16: I have relatives in Tibet. I have one sibling and many other relatives.

[Discontinuity in tape]

#16: In my opinion the most important thing to preserve is religion. If there is religion, everyone will have happiness. It is religion which is beneficial. Other than that I do not have much to say.

Q: What do you think allowed you to survive all the hardship that you went through? What was it that you called upon yourself that enabled you to survive?

#16: Nothing comes to my mind except that the Buddha [His Holiness the Dalai Lama] should live long. It was only because of the grace of this Buddha that the Tibetans can live without any problems. No one else is capable and no one would do it either, except fending for oneself. Besides that I do not have any other thought.

Q: What advice would you like to give to future generations of Tibetans that you think is important for them to know?

#16: If I were to advise, I would say that studying is most important. Without knowledge, a person is like us. We had our country, but lost it to someone else. We lost it because we had no education. If we had education, we would not have lost our country; no one could have taken it. That's what I think.

Q: And finally, is there anything that you feel is important to tell about your story that I have not asked or you have not said yet that you think is important that we hear?

#16: I do not have anything like that. I do not think I do. I do not have anything more to say.

Q: Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW