

Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #20 – Tenzin Lhagyal
June 29, 2007

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TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #20
2. Interviewee: Tenzin Lhagyal
3. Age: 74
4. Date of Birth: 1933
5. Sex: Male
6. Birthplace: Nyapso
7. Province: Utsang
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1959
9. Date of Interview: June 29, 2007
10. Place of Interview: Camp No. 4, Lugsung Samdupling Settlement, Bylakuppe, Mysore District, Karnataka, India
11. Length of Interview: 1 hr 05 min
12. Interviewer: Rebecca Novick
13. Interpreter: Tsering Dorjee
14. Videographer: Ronny Novick
15. Transcriber: Tenzin Yangchen



Biographical Information:

Tenzin Lhagyal is from a village called Nyapso. He demonstrates and describes how, as a child, he used to play different games with stones and yak horns. Usually the prize would be *chang* ‘home-brewed beer,’ which everyone, winner and losers, drank together, debating and analyzing the game.

The land in Tenzin Lhagyal’s village was placed under the control of the estate of Ling Rinpoche, senior tutor to His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Having been a servant to the previous land owner, Tenzin Lhagyal was called to Lhasa to look after the horses of the estate.

Tenzin Lhagyal did not face many problems after the Chinese invasion although he worked on a road crew when tax was imposed on Ling Rinpoche’s estate by the Chinese. Tenzin Lhagyal remained in Lhasa until the Chinese took control of the city in 1959. When he heard the news that His Holiness the Dalai Lama had escaped from Tibet, he decided to leave as well. He felt fortunate to join some soldiers of the *Chushi Gangdrug* Volunteer Force who were also fleeing Tibet. He came to India through Bhutan and worked on a road crew before moving to Bylakuppe.

Topics Discussed:

Childhood memories, farm life, forced labor, Chushi Gangdrug guerillas, escape experiences, life as a refugee in India.

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Age: 74, Sex: Male

Interviewer: Rebecca Novick

Interview Date: June 29, 2007

[Questions are asked by either interviewer or interpreter. In Interview # 20, the interviewer directs questions to the interpreter, who then asks the questions of the interviewee.]

Q: First of all, I'd like to ask him about his village where he was raised in Nyapso. Can he first of all describe what his village looked like?

#20: My village was not large. All the houses were spread out and were not in one particular place.

[Discontinuity in interview]

Q: Earlier it was not under the Ling Rinpoche?

#20: It came under Ling Rinpoche later.

Q: Could he talk a little about that?

#20: I did not live with my parents, but in Lhasa.

Q: The village of Nyapso came under the Ling Rinpoche?

#20: All the lands of Nyapso were under the Ling *Labrang* 'residence of a great lama.'

Q: Was it right from the beginning or did this come about later?

#20: It was not so at the beginning. It happened later. In the early days, it was under Yapshi Phunkhang. Yapshi Phunkhang was a person holding a high rank and there was some trouble because of which, the government ordered his lands to be confiscated and his rank demoted. The estate was given to the *Labrang*. The *Labrang* kept servants on the estate and the person in charge was the *sopon* 'private secretary' of the *Labrang*.

Q: Did Nyapso come under Ling Rinpoche after you left for Lhasa?

#20: It happened about three years before I went to Lhasa. First I became a servant to the Yapshi Phunkhang. That was when I was about 8 years old. Then when the trouble began

for Yapshi Phunkhang, I went back home to live with my parents. That was the time the estate was given to the Labrang. Before that it was owned by Yapshi Phunkhang. I do not know the year when it happened. If I knew I could have been much clearer.

Q: Is Phunkhang the name of a person?

#20: It was a name and he was an aristocrat. Later he was demoted and his estate taken by the government. The previous Ling Rinpoche was the tutor of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the estate was awarded to the tutor by the government.

Q: Did that change the life of the village with this new landlord? Did it change the life of the village in any way and if so how?

#20: There were no problems for the village after it was handed over to the *Labrang*. The *Labrang* changed what the Yapshi Phunkhang had been doing. What he had done was done and over with. The *Labrang* was in full authority.

Q: Were there any changes in the life of the people of the village?

#20: No, none at all. In fact it was better for the people when the Ling *Labrang* took charge.

Q: Better in terms of livelihood?

#20: Yes, livelihood became better. However, progress could not be made in agriculture because we did not have machinery, but our livelihood improved. The *Labrang* cared for the welfare of the people. It was better for the people under the *Labrang*. The seeds for the fields were provided by the *Labrang* to the people. Once the seeds were sown, then it was good for the livelihood.

Q: The seeds were not provided to you earlier?

#20: During the time of the Yapshi Phunkhang, we would have to take loans from others for the seeds. People borrowed during the sowing season and repaid in autumn. After the Ling *Labrang* took over, they provided the seeds. From the harvest, people kept what they needed for their food, and an equal measure as the seeds were given to the Ling *Labrang* for safe keeping for the next season.

Q: Let's find out why the minister was dismissed.

#20: He was in the parliament of the government. Later there were some issues concerning children and his estate was confiscated and he was dismissed.

Q: Was it an issue between the children of Phunkhang and some other noble?

#20: No, it was not with other nobles. It was a conflict among the members of their own family. He had many children.

Q: Phunkhang had many children?

#20: He had sons who were monks and other sons. The sons and the parents quarreled. The children wanted their share from the properties and that was not given. The children wanted their share, as it is with children here, too. Their share was refused and they were expelled from the family.

The case came up before the government and they decided that he should be dismissed and his lands confiscated. That was how the government settled the case. Some sons might have received help from the government. The parents received no assistance; they just had to remain in their house. If they had savings from many years, that would have sufficed for them. That's how it was.

Q: So there was an internal quarrel in the Phunkhang family and when this was brought to the government, they decided to confiscate his estate?

#20: Yes, the government confiscated it and it was given to the Ling *Labrang*. It was given by the Tibetan government.

Q: If it was an internal quarrel, why would the government confiscate their land?

#20: That was because the case was taken to the government. If it was an internal quarrel and if they had not approached the government, then it was different, but the issue came before the government and they gave the verdict.

Q: Did he meet Ling Rinpoche personally?

#20: First I was staying at the estate in Nyapsol and then I was called to Lhasa. When the Chinese came, there were horse carriages and I took care of the horses.

Q: You looked after the horses at the Ling *Labrang*?

#20: I was called to look after the horses.

Q: Earlier to that, he was at the estate?

#20: Yes, I was at the estate. From the estate I was taken to Lhasa. That was during the previous incarnation, not the present incarnation.

Q: So he worked closely with Ling Rinpoche?

#20: I was at his residence.

Q: Can he describe a little bit about the work that he did in Lhasa?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: He was looking after the horses.

Q: How long did he stay in Lhasa for? How long was he in Lhasa?

#20: I don't know which year it was. I might have stayed there for around six or seven years. I was in Lhasa until Tibet was lost. Before the Chinese came I was in Lhasa. After the Chinese arrived we escaped to India.

Q: Was he aware of the tension going on in Lhasa before the Chinese actually came to Lhasa? Was he aware of the political tension being so close to somebody high up in the government?

#20: I do not have much to say about the suffering caused by the Chinese at that time.

Q: Where there any changes or tension or political changes during that time?

#20: I might have been there for about two years after the arrival of the Chinese. During that time we were just living side by side and each one doing his own work.

Q: What changes did he notice in the city and did it affect his life personally when the Chinese started making their presence more felt in the city? What changes did he notice in his life or in lives around him?

#20: I was a servant of the *Labrang* and as a servant I performed my duties and did not have any concern with the Chinese.

Q: Did he have any experience of the Chinese in Lhasa? Did he see any Chinese in Lhasa? Did he have any experience?

#20: Yes, I have seen Chinese. I have also worked for the Chinese. When the Chinese began road construction in Tibet, I went to work there.

Q: Did he stop working for the *Labrang*?

#20: The *Labrang* had an estate close to Lhasa. The estate received a tax notice to send one person to work for the road construction that the Chinese were overseeing.

Q: So the *Labrang* was taxed?

#20: It was not actually the *Labrang*, but the estate of the *Labrang*. The estate and we were connected. The Chinese had taxed the estate and so I went to work.

Q: Did he have a choice about that or was he forced to work on the road crew?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: He was still working under the *Ling Labrang*.

Q: [To interpreter] You said he was working for the Chinese.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Ling *Labrang* has an estate in Lhasa and that estate had to pay tax. So he went there to work on behalf of the estate.

Q: [To interpreter] You said he was looking after the *Labrang's* horses and then he was working on the road crew for the Chinese.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Working for the horses and working for the estate was the same thing. It comes under Ling *Labrang*. The *Labrang* sent him to work for the Chinese because the *Labrang* had to pay taxes for the estate to the Chinese. Maybe at that time there was talk between the Tibetan government and the Chinese. The *Labrang* had to pay tax to the Tibetan government.

Q: What was his experience working on the road crew like?

#20: I might have worked there for around three months. It was during the summer season. While working on the road, we had to dig the earth. This couldn't be done in winter with the ice, so we worked for three months during the summer season. After three months, they stopped work.

Q: Actually the Chinese were not the Tibetan government. What was the need to work as tax payment for the Chinese? How did that come about? Did the Chinese ask the Tibetan government? Normally where did the *Labrang* pay tax? To the Tibetan government? Did the Tibetan government ask the *Labrang* to work for the Chinese?

#20: The estates were there from early times.

Q: Was he in Lhasa on March 10, 1959?

#20: No. At that time, I was in the village in Nyapso.

Q: But he heard the news?

#20: I heard it but we were very far away. The soldiers were going to and fro. We heard that Norbulingka was lost.

Q: Did you hear of it at Nyapso?

#20: Yes, we learned of it in Nyapso.

Q: Was he at Nyapso at that time?

#20: Yes, I was. When I escaped, I fled from the estate at Nyapso.

Q: Why did he decide to leave at that point?

#20: When all the soldiers of the *Chushi Gangdrug* Force were fleeing, I escaped with them. The *Chushi Gangdrug* soldiers, the Khampa, they had come to the estate at Nyapso. When we heard that Lhasa was lost and then the village called Chasam, we fled. We couldn't go to Lhasa. We fled to India.

Q: Were the *Chushi Gangdrug* staying at the estate since earlier times?

#20: No, when they were traveling back and forth, they came there. They would spend a night and then set off. They went toward Chasam, they went towards Tsethang, they went everywhere and some were fleeing towards India. The estate was right on the way and everybody came there, whether they were fleeing or not. So, at that time, we all fled together.

Q: The soldiers at the estate were the *Chushi Gangdrug* and not the Tibetan government's army?

#20: No, they were not the Tibetan government's army. They were the *Chushi Gangdrug*.

Q: The estate was on the way?

#20: Yes. Nyapso was right on the way. If one came from Chasam to go to India, Nyapso was the way, it was the main road.

Q: Where did they head?

#20: To India. If you crossed the mountain pass from Nyapso, you reached Pedhe Nagatse, Dhuwa Zong and then you were in the direction of Bhutan. From Bhutan, you reached India.

Q: Was he with his family at that point?

#20: I was not with my family. I was alone.

Q: What happened to his family?

#20: My family was living there in the village. When I left, they were doing their usual work and living on the farmland.

Q: You didn't know anything about them?

#20: No. They had no idea whether I left or not.

Q: What happened to them?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: He doesn't know what happened to them.

Q: Was there fighting along the way when he was traveling with *Chushi Gangdrug*?

#20: We didn't have any trouble on the way. We came right through.

Q: Did they try to recruit him?

#20: I didn't join it.

Q: Did they try to recruit him? Did they persuade him to join?

#20: They didn't say.

Q: So they just escorted him to the border? Is that what happened?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: He came along with them.

Q: So they also crossed over the border into Bhutan?

#20: They came to Bhutan and then to India.

Q: First he came to Bhutan?

#20: Yes, first you had to come to Bhutan. You had to pass the land of Bhutan.

Q: Why were they going to Bhutan? Why was *Chushi Gangdrug* going to Bhutan? Were they going to get supplies?

#20: They were escaping. They were being chased by the Chinese. They didn't have arms to fight with. They had fought in Tsethang and the arms were exhausted. Then they were fleeing. They were fleeing through Bhutan and to India.

Q: So what happened when he got into Bhutan? How was he received?

#20: At the Bhutanese border, they stopped us for about a week. Maybe it was more than a week. His Holiness the Dalai Lama had left Tibet, but at that time had not reached India. He was at Mon Tawang. We were stopped at the Bhutanese border and not let through. After His Holiness the Dalai Lama reached India, the news came over the wireless. Then they let us through, 200 people per day. They didn't send the people together.

Q: How did he meet his wife?

#20: After we had reached the Indian border, we were sent to construct roads. The Indian government kept us in Buxa for about five months providing us with food rations. Then the Tibetan government said that it was not right to remain idle but that we had to do something. So, the Indian government sent us for road construction to Kulu.

Q: How did he meet his wife?

#20: I met my wife at the road construction site in India.

Q: She was also a road crew worker. Was that very hard work?

#20: We had to go to construct roads everyday, but there was no one who caused us suffering.

Q: Can he talk a little bit about his life since then in India and just what's happened to him and the different things that he's done?

#20: After we arrived in India, His Holiness the Dalai Lama sent us to the settlements and the settlements were started. We worked in the fields. Except for farming, I did not do any trade because I did not know and did not have the capital to start a business. I earned my livelihood by agriculture.

Q: How long were you at the road construction?

#20: I worked on the road gang from 1959 to May of 1960. Then I came to the settlement.

Q: I really enjoyed hearing about the games. I would like to hear it again what were the games he played?

#20: Just as I told you earlier, first we made holes in two places in which were placed a white stone each. Five to six boys could play this game. Then each player had three stones and had to hit. These stones had to come close to the white stone in the middle of the hole. The stone in the middle was called *kali*. It had to be a round stone. [Interviewee gets up to demonstrate the game.]

Each player would try to get his stone into the hole to touch the white stone and push out the stones of the other players. One would try to push in all his three stones into the hole. If the first stone was hit and did not touch the white stone but came close to it, the next stone the player threw might push the previous stone to touch the white stone. When that was done, the same thing was played in the next hole.

Q: Then what did the loser have to do?

#20: When one lost, he had lost. The bet was *chang* [home-brewed beer], which would be brought to the playing site. Then we would sit and rest in a circle and drink the *chang*. We would discuss the game and argue who did what and who did wrong.

Q: How old was he?

#20: I might have been around 12 years old or nearly 13 then. When I was young, my parents sent me to gather cow dung on the hills. Those of us who went in search of cow dung assembled. When our baskets were full, we came down the hill. Then we played on the flat ground. We ate what we had [brought] and then watched the sun and if it was early, we even played near the hills. If it was not very early, we came down to the village, kept the dung basket down and played leisurely until it was almost night. [Laughs]

Q: Does he still like *chang*?

#20: It has been many years since I drank *chang*. I do not drink. If one drinks a lot of *chang* he would get a big belly. [Laughs]

Q: Could he enact the game of the horns?

#20: [Demonstrating] It is similar to the other game. The horns of the yak are put in the ground at two places. There are different shapes of horns. We take one with a curved shape and a small stone is placed on the arch. You had to try and hit at this stone. If you hit the horn, it just flew off and you do not get any points. The stone placed at the curve of the horn had to be hit and displaced. Then you were the winner. Then the same thing was played on the other horn at the other side. The game was played alternately between the two horns.

Q: Did he usually win or did he usually lose?

#20: It depends on your ability to hit the target. If your aim was good, you won and if your aim was not good, you lost.

Q: [Question repeated]

#20: I have won a few times, but it is not the same always. Some had good aim and some did not.

Q: Does he remember ever getting into trouble as a kid doing anything naughty that he got punished for or that he got away with?

#20: No, I did not.

Q: He was a good boy?

#20: [Laughs] I played jumping down from heights. If I got hurt, then my parents would hit me on my back with a stick. They would strip me keep me out in the cold.

Q: Did he teach his kids those games; his children?

#20: No, I haven't. My children are girls. I do not have sons.

Q: What games did girls play in his village?

#20: The girls played hacky sack and skipping.

Q: We are asking everybody the same question at the end of the interview. We'd like to know what advice he has for the new generation of Tibetans coming up now who have never seen Tibet; who might not listen but if they would listen.

#20: They have the opportunity to study due to the grace of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Parents must send their children to school and the children must persevere in their studies. His Holiness' advice should be followed for all times to come and they must study hard. They must follow His Holiness' advice which is beneficial for this life and the next and remember it always.

Q: Thank you very much.

#20: Has the interviewer come here earlier? She looks familiar to me.

Q: This is my first time in Bylakuppe, but I've been in Dharamsala many times.

#20: Oh, I'm sorry.

Q: Is there anything he would like to say that we didn't get to?

#20: I do not have much to say. You have come to the settlement and I do not know the entire reason but I would like to request you to kindly lend your support to the wishes of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. I do not have anything in particular to say.

Q: What does he wish?

#20: They [interviewer and videographer] are doing this project for the cause of Tibet and unmindful of the problems, I request you to kindly support the Tibetan issue.

Q: Tell him that we will for sure.

#20: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW