

Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #57M – Dechen Lhamo
April 13, 2010

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TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #57M
2. Interviewee: Dechen Lhamo
3. Age: 74
4. Date of Birth: 1936
5. Sex: Female
6. Birthplace: Gyangtse
7. Province: Utsang
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1966 or 67
9. Date of Interview: April 13, 2010
10. Place of Interview: H. H. the Dalai Lama's Palace, Camp No. 3, Doeguling Settlement, Mundgod, Karwar District, Karnataka, India
11. Length of Interview: 1 hr 57 min
12. Interviewer: Marcella Adamski
13. Interpreter: Tenzin Yangchen
14. Videographer: Pema Tashi
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

Biographical Information:

Dechen Lhamo was born in Gyangtse, a large town in central Tibet. Her family worked as farmers and her father was also employed to distribute offerings to the monasteries of Gyangtse. She describes how the offering contribution is distributed to the monasteries.

Dechen Lhamo was given away as a bride to a family in Phari by her father at the age of 21. She gives a detailed description of how marriages are arranged by the bride and groom's families, the clothing and jewelry provided and the delivery of the bride to the groom's house.

Dechen Lhamo remembers the Chinese arrived a year after her marriage. Her husband was sent by the local Tibetan administration many times to Kalimpong [West Bengal, India] to deliver letters. This had serious repercussions on her life when the Chinese labeled her husband "running dog of the Dalai." She recounts her suffering under Chinese rule after her husband and father-in-law were arrested and her she and her daughters labeled as "rebels." Her husband escaped first, leaving her with a nearly blind father-in-law and two young children. She managed to flee with her family to Bhutan five years after his escape. They were later reunited in Dharamsala, Himachal Pradesh, India.

Topics Discussed:

Childhood memories, customs/traditions, invasion by Chinese army, life under Chinese rule, forced labor, imprisonment, oppression under Chinese, thamzing, escape experiences, life as a refugee in India.

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Interview #57M

Interviewee: Dechen Lhamo

Age: 74, Sex: Female

Interviewer: Marcella Adamski

Interview Date: April 13, 2010

Question: Please tell us your name.

00:00:16

Interviewee #57M: Dechen Lhamo

Q: His Holiness the Dalai Lama asked us to record your experiences, so that we can share your memories with many generations of Tibetans, the Chinese and the rest of the world. Your memories will help us to document the true history, culture and beliefs of the Tibetan people. Do you give your permission for the Tibet Oral History Project to use this interview?

#57M: Yes.

Q: Thank you for offering to share your story with us.

#57M: [Nods]

Q: During this interview if you wish to take a break or stop at anytime, please let me know.

00:01:28

#57M: Okay.

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

#57M: Okay.

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

00:01:51

#57M: There will be no problem.

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

#57M: [Nods]

Q: *Ama-la* ‘respectful term for mother,’ please tell me where you were born and how old you are now?

00:02:18

#57M: I was born in Gyangtse. I am 74 years old now.

Q: What kind of livelihood did your family have?

#57M: We worked in the fields. We cultivated our land, raised animals and milked them.

Q: Did you live right inside the city of Gyangtse or on the outskirts?

00:03:07

#57M: My father was appointed to distribute the offering contribution to the 16 different Gyangtse lamas. He was appointed to the post by our leader. Since he was employed there, we lived right next to the monastery's gate. That was when I was small.

Q: How big of a town was Gyangtse? Was it as big as Lhasa or smaller? What can you say?

#57M: It was smaller than Lhasa.

Q: Do you have any idea how many families lived in Gyangtse when you were born?

00:04:19

#57M: There must be many families, but I do not know the count.

Q: How many people were in your family?

#57M: There were three older brothers, two sisters-in-law and my father in my family.

Q: Your mother?

00:04:52

#57M: She'd passed away when I was young. She died when I was about 12 years old.

Q: You were the only girl in the family?

#57M: There was one younger to me, but she passed away when she was small.

Q: What kind of chores did you do as a little girl?

00:05:44

#57M: I helped with the cooking. I have not been to school. My father was employed there by our leader. Basically we were farmers. We were engaged in sowing, harvesting and such kind of work.

Q: What leader was he employed by?

#57M: That was the Takra Rinpoche who was the regent. He acted as the regent in Lhasa when His Holiness the Dalai Lama was very young.

Q: Who acted as the regent?

00:06:53

#57M: He was a lama.

Q: The Reting?

#57M: No, not the Reting. It was called the Takra Ladang. The monastery was located at Samling in Lhasa. That was our leader. In the olden days, we were under the Kapshu but later we came under the leadership of Takra Rinpoche. He appointed my father to work in Gyangtse. My family worked in the fields and we were farmers.

Q: Would you say your family was very well off or middle class or poor?

00:08:07

#57M: We were middle class. We were farmers. The work in Gyangtse was given by the leader. He was responsible for the contribution received for the 16 branch monasteries. His work was to go to the villages to collect grains and disburse them to the monasteries. My family, as farmers had enough for its survival.

Q: Was this job an easy job or a difficult job? Do you remember?

#57M: When he went for the collection of grains, he visited the estates where the people brought their grains on donkeys. There was a person appointed at each estate to collect these grains. Then in the 5th month, he [father] measured the grains and distributed them to the 16 branches of the Gyangtse Monastery. That was for their sustenance. In Tibet, we made *tsampa* 'flour made from roasted barley' from it.

Q: Were there 16 branch monasteries?

00:09:48

#57M: There were 16 monasteries long ago. Except for three, all the rest have been destroyed. The 16 branch monasteries had two divisions, which catered to them, called Sercho and Phende. We were with the Sercho, which was under the Takra Rinpoche. Their duties were collecting grains and butter from the villages and giving them to the monasteries. They took the butter and such things to the monasteries.

Q: The grains and the butter were given directly to the monasteries. They were not transformed into cash and the cash given.

#57M: They [the grains and butter] were collected and given to the monks of the monasteries. The grains and butter were given directly. All the butter was given to the kitchen, while the grains were measured and the monks came to receive their allotted share.

Q: The grains were given to the individual monks?

00:12:00

#57M: Yes, each one received his share. Here [in India], the *monlam* 'prayer festival' is conducted over a certain number of days. Similar to the *monlam*, *menlha* was held in Gyantse in the 5th month. So during this one month [of *menlha*], the monks received their share of grains.

Q: Just for the month? How much grain were they given for one month?

#57M: If we go by the measurement used here, it must be about 30 kilograms per monk for one month. In Tibet the grains used to be measured in a *de*.

Q: *Ama-la*, do you think that was enough for one monk to live on for a month?

00:13:17

#57M: Except for two months, during the *Losar* 'Tibetan New Year' and the *monlam*, the rest of the period, the monks left for their local monasteries in the villages. They only converged during the prayer festivals and the expense incurred was for that period.

Q: Was the monastery located at Gyantse?

#57M: There were *khangtsen* 'smaller monk communities' in the villages. They attended the prayer festival and then returned to their respective monasteries. The *monlam* and the other festival lasted for around two months.

Q: Where did it take place?

00:14:01

#57M: The assembly took place inside the large Jokhang.

Q: Was it at a stupa?

#57M: It was held in the large hall of the Jokhang. Just like monasteries here have huge halls, the assembly took place in the large hall.

Q: For the monasteries right in your neighborhood, how much grain was given to each monk every month or once a year?

00:15:02

#57M: There were three monasteries in Gyantse, where monks remained throughout the year. Except for the festival period, the monks had to fend for themselves and there was no one to make offerings to them all the time. When monks from the other [branch] monasteries converged at the [main] monastery, the monks [of the main monastery] also received their share of rations and tea just like the visiting monks during the festival. That was for about two months in a year.

Q: How did they do that, *ama-la*? How did they fend for themselves?

#57M: They went back to their monasteries in their villages. In Tibet most of the monks worked for their livelihood unlike the custom that is followed here.

Q: How did they earn a livelihood?

00:16:12

#57M: Their original families had to bring them their provisions. During the prayer assembly in Gyantse, they received their rations for the period of two months. There were three regular monasteries in Gyantse and perhaps the monks gathered for prayers at their respective *khangtsen* as they too did not receive any offerings otherwise. They had to fend for themselves just as it was with all the monks in Lhasa who received offerings only during the *monlam*.

Q: To get back to your family, tell me how does your life change when you are not a little girl and you begin to be a teenager. What happens to your life?

#57M: I continued to work in the fields and then at the age of 21, I was given away in marriage at a place called Phari.

Q: You mean to the city of Phari?

00:17:49

#57M: Yes, it is on the border of India.

Q: How far is Phari from Gyantse?

#57M: It will definitely take five days of travel on horseback. In those days there were only horses and no vehicles.

Q: Who selected your bridegroom?

00:18:34

#57M: My parents arranged the marriage and gave me away. In Tibet we [brides and bridegrooms] never set eyes on each other.

Q: Do you have any idea why your parents picked a partner who lived five days away instead of someone in Gyantse where there were lots of people?

#57M: My prospective in-laws had sought my hand from my parents. That's how I was given away.

Q: Why do you think they were interested in having you as the wife of their son?

00:19:58

#57M: I think the family came to know of my family through people who knew us. They might have spoken about my family's good background. So that was why they asked for me.

Q: Were the family you were going to marry into, did they have a similar economic level and background or was there a difference between the two families?

#57M: We were similar. They did not grow grains in Phari, but they owned a lot of animals like sheep and yaks. They made cheese and took it to Kalimpong [West Bengal, India]. From Kalimpong, they purchased sugar and other goods. Most people in Phari earned their livelihood that way. Grains did not grow in Phari but the Chinese made the people do so. Then they harvested a very sweet type of grain.

Q: Earlier they did not grow any crops.

00:21:32

#57M: *Jangpa* used to be sold in Phari. *Jangpa* was twisted into bundles and sold [to the muleteers] for their horses and mules, that arrived from Gyangtse and other places. They used to be sold in bundles of five.

Q: What did the *jangpa* do for the mules and horses?

#57M: The *jangpa* is the plant that grows to a height but its grain does not mature. The plant was cut and made into bundles of five and sold.

Q: That was fodder for the horses and mules?

00:22:41

#57M: Yes, it was fodder for the animals. There were many muleteers from parts of Tibet, who drove their horses and mules to Kalimpong to bring in goods. So it was purchased by these people.

Q: *Ama-la*, tell us how you found out that you were going to be married and what was your reaction?

#57M: I learned that I was to be married about a month earlier. They [the bridegroom's family] came to our house to talk about it. After the decision to give away the bride was finalized, my family told me, "We have decided to give you away to that family." They told me about a month earlier.

Q: You were 21. Was that an average age to get married or is that early or late?

00:24:30

#57M: Some girls were given in marriage at age 18. However, most get married at age 20, 21, or 22. Some were married off at 18.

Q: What did you feel about the idea of getting married?

#57M: In Tibet when your brother was married and living in the house with his wife, there was nothing for the daughter to do but to go away in marriage. She could not stay in the house. I felt sad and cried a lot. It was the custom and I could not live in the house.

Q: When you were going to leave your family, who was at home at that time?

00:25:43

#57M: There were my father, three older brothers and two sisters-in-law.

Q: Was there any engagement or betrothal or were you going to go in one month to actually get married?

#57M: There was a *longchang* [bringing of *chang* ‘home-brewed beer’ to seek the girl's hand by the groom's family]. Then there was a second *longchang*. On the third *longchang*...In our region a girl was adorned with a *chong* at the top [points to top of head] to indicate that she was yet to be married. A *chong* is a bluish-yellowish thing, which you find here.

Q: Is it a flower?

00:26:43

#57M: No, it is not. It was an ornament in Tibet, which was adorned atop [indicates top of head] to indicate that she was yet to be send away in marriage. Then that was removed by the boy's family and in its place a turquoise was fixed, after which she was given away in marriage in a few days. The *chong* was worn by all those who were yet to be married. The married women did not wear a *chong*. The *chong* was like a symbol to indicate that she was yet to be married.

Q: Did all the young girls have a *chong*?

#57M: Yes, all the young girls did. That was a custom of the people of Tsang and it was worn right at the top [of the head].

Q: When the boy's family comes two times, in those first two times, did they bring the boy you were going to marry?

00:28:38

#57M: No, they did not. In Tibet one never saw [the boy before marriage]. Most of the brides did not see them. The arrangements were made between the parents. The hand of the bride was requested for by parents from that side and she was given away by the parents from this side. In those days most [brides and grooms] did not see each other. These days it's not like that.

Q: Were you given any information by your family or his family about what kind of a man he was?

#57M: No, such information was not given. In the Tibetan custom, before a [bride's] hand was sought, an astrological calculation was charted and if these matched, the arrangements went ahead, but one did not have any interaction with the boy. The parents fixed the alliance.

Q: How did you prepare for your marriage, which was going to happen in one month? Can you tell us what kind of preparations you made or what you had to do or what you had to find out, anything?

00:30:37

#57M: The custom in Tibet was to provide [the girl with] a lot of dresses, which the family readied. In Tibet we normally wore a *chupa* 'traditional dress' with long sleeves and one without sleeves over it, a *pangden* 'a striped apron indicating married status of woman,' a pair of pants and a pair of boots. The wealthy families provided 15 such sets. However, middle class families like mine readied about 10 sets: 10 *pangden*, 10 sleeveless *chupa*—since it was cold in Tibet, the *chupa* were made of *paktsa* 'fur' and *nambu* 'woolen cloth,' pants and the full set. The family also gave her ornaments.

Q: That was your own family that gives that to you?

#57M: Yes, the family got those ready. When one reached the boy's home, a list of the things was prepared. A sort of agreement was written to show how much the family had provided [the girl], as one does not know what will happen in the future. It was good if it [the marriage] worked but in case it did not, they got divorced and referred to the list. Making a list of the things was a custom to show what her family had given her.

Q: What would happen if the marriage didn't work out? What happens to the list of things?

00:33:25

#57M: Then the woman, of course got back whatever her family had provided her with. If things did not work out, depending on the number of years one has lived with that family, my family would take wages for all the years that I worked there. That was the custom.

Q: Ten sets of clothing in one month: *chupa* and blouses. Did you get to choose the colors and who made all this beautiful clothing?

#57M: In Tibet there were not many colors you could choose from. The *paktsa chupa* would be made of brownish brocade and the sleeveless one in green. Those made from *therma* fabric were either blue or brown, whereas all the woolen cloth in Tibet was black in color. There were some fabrics that had different colors.

Q: Even to go to Phari, you needed fur coats?

00:35:28

#57M: Yes, you needed to take your fur coats. It was cold in Phari. It snowed there. It is said that Phari is the highest place in Tibet. I believe it is very difficult for the airplanes to fly there. It snowed heavily in Phari.

Q: Besides the *chupa* and the blouses, were the *chupas* made of fur and woolen cloth?

#57M: Many young lambs died and their skin was [made into *chupa*] with an outer covering of brocade or *therma*.

Q: Who made this clothing for you?

00:36:51

#57M: My family made these for me.

Q: Who tailored them?

#57M: There were many tailors in Tibet. They were hired to stitch them. However, the spinning and weaving were done by us. The whole family took part in these tasks.

Q: When your family gave you the jewelry, where did the jewelry come from? For instance, was it purchased for the wedding or was it family heirlooms?

00:37:59

#57M: In those days in Tibet, one could not find new jewelry like you do here. One could buy old ones in Lhasa and such places. Whether it was *gawu* 'amulets' or any other jewelry, one could buy them from the jewelry shops in Lhasa and the market places of Gyangtse and Shigatse.

Q: Was it purchased specifically as a gift for your wedding?

#57M: Yes, they were purchased and given to me. In Tibet if one did not wear a full set of ornaments, it was almost like a law that one could not participate in ceremonies like incense burning or *choekhor* 'carrying scriptures.' One had to possess them irrespective of the quality.

Q: On that third visit from your fiancé's family, did they bring you turquoise for your hair?

00:39:26

#57M: They brought it and fixed it. Then they arrived a few days later to escort me; after a date was fixed. In my region the custom was to give a bride away only at the end of the month and never during the early part of a month. It was always at the end of the month, like the 26th 27th, 28th.

Q: But before they came to get you, on their third visit that was just to give you something for your hair? Was that the visit to take you too?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: No.

Q: On the third visit, they were going to bring you turquoise jewelry for your hair and what kind did you get from your in-laws?

#57M: It was actually made of gold and studded with the turquoise. The Tsangpa's 'people of Tsang' [head ornament] was three pronged and it was fixed here [gestures with fingers to show that the prongs faced the front]. The *chong* was removed and it was fixed here [shows top of head].

Q: Did you like it? Can you describe it?

00:41:11

#57M: [Laughs with embarrassment] I did not know much at that time to like it. They did not show it to me but the parents had it made earlier. One saw it only when the people [from the boy's side] came to escort you.

Q: Was your mother still alive at that time?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: No.

Q: Was there any woman in the family who gave you instructions about what it was like to have your wedding night and to sleep with a man? Was there any information given to you?

#57M: My older sister-in-law gave me the instructions. She told me what was required to do in the family's home and all such things.

Q: So the instruction was more about duties and not about marriage intimacy?

00:43:00

#57M: She did not tell me much about it. However, in order to see whether there was a physical relation between the couple that night, a sketch was drawn on the bed, using grains and if the drawing was found to be disturbed the next morning, it was understood that there was physical contact that night.

Q: Is that what you saw on your wedding night? Was the grain on the bed?

#57M: Yes, the grain drawing was there. We were made to lie on the bed together. [A cup of] *chang* was offered. After the boy had taken a sip, I was made to take a sip from it.

Q: Had you had *chang* before that?

00:44:50

#57M: *Chang*? While working in the fields in Tibet, there was hardly any tea and we always drank *chang*. We added *tsampa* to the *chang* and drank it. We mostly drank *chang* while we worked as there was not much tea.

Q: So to go back to your wedding, can you tell us when the month was over, what happened next? How did you go to your marriage?

#57M: They hurriedly had the clothes stitched and then I was given away in marriage. Three or four people from the boy's side came to escort me. Three or four people from my side accompanied me, including my older brother and a woman relative. Much *chang* was brewed for the wedding at the boy's side as well as mine. A party was given for a day, when *chang* was drunk and people danced.

The escort side brought a *dhadha* and put it here [gestures to the back]. During the celebration at my house, they placed the *dhadha* here [indicates *dhadha* being pushed between collar and dress along the spine, down to the waist], which was to indicate that I belonged to the boy's family now.

Q: What is a *dhadha*?

00:47:43

#57M: It is a sort of thing with five colors, a silver *melong* 'a small mirror-like round object' and about three turquoise and coral stones at the top. Even here these days, the *dhadha* is used for all brides.

Q: Was it a piece of stick?

#57M: Yes, a stick with five points was made and each prong affixed with a different colored piece of cloth. At the top of it was a *melong* with a turquoise in the center and two coral stones. This was brought from the boy's home and fixed to the girl.

Q: Did it look beautiful?

00:49:15

#57M: Yes, it was beautiful with points like this [brings fingers close together to indicate the five prongs]. It was fixed to the girl's [back] during the celebration [at her house] and again at the boy's home when there was a day's celebration there. Then it was kept in the house of the boy.

Q: *Ama-la*, who were the people who were going to accompany you to Phari from your family?

#57M: They were one of my older brothers, my paternal aunt and a helper of our family. There were three of them.

Q: Was the helper a male or female servant?

00:50:15

#57M: He was one who cared for the horses because we had to go on horseback.

Q: Then you rode on your horses?

#57M: Yes, then we journeyed many days on horseback.

Q: Tell us about the journey? What was that like for you?

00:50:53

#57M: So we journeyed for five days, riding during the day and when we halted at night, the boy's family had the food and everything ready for us.

Q: You left your home on the first day and then?

#57M: We spent a night at a place called Kala. Then we journeyed for three more days. The boy's family had organized our stay and food along the way. About an hour to the end of the journey, a pillow was placed on the neck of the horse and I lay over it, while my head was covered by a large cloth, which looked like a *pangden* and was called *rinchen ney nga*. I was covered with it even at the time of the marriage celebration at the boy's home. In some instances, a bride's face was not seen even for 10-15 days!

Q: What was it that covered her face?

00:52:05

#57M: It was *rinchen ney nga*, which is normally worn over the back in Tibet. It is striped like a *pangden* and large. She was fully covered with it. During the marriage, [brides] did not sit up like they do here. She would be lying down and nobody could see her face when they offered her *khata* 'ceremonial scarf.' Some families held the celebration for about 10 days and some for 5 days. Nobody could see the bride's face as she was wrapped up!

Q: What was that like to be kind of hidden and covered for five days before the wedding during the ceremony?

#57M: When the bride reached the house, they put her in a separate room. So even when I went outside to answer the call of nature, I went outside wearing it [the cloth cover] and for about 15-16 days, I did not see anybody. I did not see anybody nor did they see me.

Q: *Ama-la*, what do you think is behind that custom of keeping the bride's face covered?

00:54:37

#57M: It must be a sign of shyness to remain covered. For a long time, she did not venture out and even if she had to, she was not allowed until an auspicious day. After the celebrations, the family members would see her and she them. If she had a sister, her family left her with the bride for about a month. She did not venture out and if she had to go to a monastery, an auspicious day was selected.

Q: You arrive on the horse with your head down on a pillow and covered and then...is there a time when there actually is the marriage ceremony during those five days?

#57M: There is an auspicious time and the bride has to arrive [at the bridegroom's house] exactly at that time. She was then given tea and the boy's family provides her a set of dress.

She has to put on this set for the ceremony. She has to take off all the clothing from her family and wear the one provided by the boy's family. Then the ceremony took place.

Q: What kind of clothes did the boy give for the bride?

00:57:24

#57M: They gave me a fur *chupa* and a sleeveless brocade *chupa*, along with a pair of boots, a blouse and the whole set, including a *pangden*.

Q: Was this the clothing you wore for the ceremony, the marriage ceremony?

#57M: Yes, that is right. I wore the clothes from the boy's family for the ceremony.

Q: Were you given any jewelry?

00:58:18

#57M: Some boys' families gave a full set of jewelry, while others gave a few items and the girl wore the full set of jewelry that she was given by her family. I think the boy's family gave me one item of jewelry.

Q: *Ama-la*, I understand you've now arrived at the house of your bridegroom and your head is covered, you go in and you put on these new clothing and then, is there a wedding ceremony that occurs and do you see your husband-to-be at that time?

#57M: No, I did not see his face that day. I did not. I saw his face for the first time the next day, as he sat for a while in the room where we were. Otherwise I did not see [him].

Q: When does the actual wedding ceremony occur, during those five days, on Sunday or the very day you arrive?

01:00:01

#57M: The actual ceremony was performed on the day the bride reached the house. The next few days were feasts. Some grand parties went on for 10 days and some for five days. Food was provided to the invitees and there was dancing.

Q: Was there singing and dancing and were there lamas there?

#57M: It was said to be harmful for the deities, so before [the bride] arrived, the monks performed prayers during the night. It was over by the time she arrived. However, these days here, monks come and offer *khata* during the marriage ceremony. In Tibet, a *pooja* 'rituals of worship' was performed at the home of the bride the night before she was to be given away to request her family deity to release her. And the night before she was to arrive at the boy's house, his family deity was requested to accept the new person. It was an appeasement to the deities.

Q: What was the importance of telling the deity? Who was the deity?

01:02:33

#57M: [The deity on the girl's side was] informed that she has been given away and the boy's side informed their deity that a new person was joining the family. The deities were conveyed the information.

Q: Does this deity have a name?

#57M: In Tibet every family has their respective deities. My family's deity was Palden Lhamo. The boy's family deity was called Namgu Tsen-nga.

Q: After what point do you have a chance to meet your husband and talk to him and have a good interaction?

01:04:00

#57M: After about 15 days, those who accompanied me from home went back. In some cases, a sister stayed back for a year while some stayed for about three months. A relative was left with me for about three months. She stayed as my companion because I was a stranger to the [new] family members. They did not ask me to carry out any responsibilities immediately.

Q: What was the purpose of that [leaving a companion for the bride]?

#57M: Since I was not used to the family members and in order that I feel happy, a companion was left for me.

Q: *Ama-la*, when you finally met this new family and your husband, how did you feel about being married to this man and in this family?

01:06:06

#57M: There were not many members in the family and it was much simpler. While at my home, I had to do a lot of field work, however in Phari there was no field work. One was more physically relaxed. As for food, in Phari you got rice and wheat flour which came from India, Bhutan and elsewhere. They did not eat a lot of *tsampa* in Phari. Food was better and the family consisted of the father, mother and an only son.

Q: You were 21 when you got married and you were born in 1936. So you have arrived in Phari around 1957 and lots of things are happening in Tibet in 1957. Can you tell me what was going on in Phari in '57 in Tibet?

#57M: A year after I reached Phari, the Chinese implemented the Reformation. In the beginning the Chinese planned to capture the lama of the Richung Monastery. However, before he could be arrested, the lama brought sickness upon himself and passed away. The lama used to frequently take my husband to assist him in Kalimpong and other places.

He [the lama] used to lament that 'It is not good for Lhasa. It is not good for Lhasa.' Still my husband requested him to give a teaching. He replied, "Now I can no more teach. You, who are living, can practice." At that time when Lhasa was being [invaded] by the Chinese,

Rinpoche 're-incarnate lama' passed away. The Chinese could not imprison him and they remarked, "That's how a lama should be!" When they planned to put him in prison, the lama expired. Then the Reformation started in Phari.

Q: What happened next that came out to be true?

01:09:47

#57M: Then all the wealthy families of Phari were captured. Most of the people of Phari were traders, so they had money with them. The Chinese did not replace the value of the new Tibetan notes. They claimed that all the new notes were the currencies of the rebels.

Q: What were the new notes?

#57M: When people saved money, they normally kept the new 100 notes. Most people in Phari were traders and the Chinese only compensated the old notes with their currency and claimed that all the new ones were rebel money. In this way, the whole of Phari was made bankrupt by the Chinese. People usually retained the new notes when they saved. When presented for exchange, they [the traders] were labeled. First it was the money and later in Phari, the *trelpa* 'tax payer' and officials of Phari District Administration were all captured.

Q: And then what happened?

01:11:37

#57M: They were kept in Phari for about a week and then they were taken to prisons in Gyangtse, Kongpo and elsewhere. They were not to be seen. All their homes were confiscated. I do not know whether it was the Chinese or the Tibetan workers who took away all the valuable items like gold and silver. However, the beddings, household items and animals were distributed among the poorer people of Phari. All the fathers of the wealthy families were taken away to prison. That's what they did.

Phari suffered less compared to the other regions. Phari is located close to the border and easy to escape. One could reach Bhutan in an hour's time and Kalimpong in two hours. They did not cause as much misery as in [other parts of] Tibet. It was a little better. But all the properties of the wealthy were distributed.

Q: *Ama-la*, what happened to your relatives? What class were they and what happened to them?

01:13:42

#57M: During the year of the reformation, my husband was the group leader, as we would say here. So he had to go many times to Kalimpong to deliver letters from the government.

Q: Who sent him?

#57M: He was sent by the officials of Phari District, those who worked for the Tibetan government. I do not know whether it was for the nobles or the Tibetan government, but he

was sent many times to Kalimpong to deliver letters. Since he lived in Phari, he knew the Indian language. Later he was labeled “running dog of the Dalai.” [Smiles]

He was accused of being a running dog. He carried letters from Lhasa to deliver to Kalimpong on the instructions of the officials. So he was given the name “running dog of the Dalai.” My father-in-law was imprisoned and my husband was taken away to face hard labor.

Q: Who?

01:15:04

#57M: They said my husband was to face *nge tson gyokhoe*. He was taken away to labor by the Chinese. My husband's father was put in prison. All our possessions and house was distributed among the people. We were given the kitchen to live in.

Q: The Chinese captured your husband and sent him to forced labor. Do you know where he was sent?

#57M: First he was sent to Domo and later to Karkhang in Gyangtse. There was a government store house, where all the grains that were confiscated from the villagers were transported in carts. He was taken there to transport the grains.

Q: After he was sent to forced labor, did you ever have a chance to go see him with your own eyes or talk to him or hear about his condition?

01:17:21

#57M: I could not see him. My father-in-law was in prison. He became blind in the prison and so he was released after six months. He could not see, so he could not be forced to work. All the other Phari [prisoners] were sent to work in Kongpo and other places. My father-in-law could just about find his way. He lost his eye sight in the prison. So, he was released. My mother-in-law was subjected to *thamzing* 'struggle session' once and she fled alone. She fled with nothing. She escaped to Bhutan.

Q: Do you know how your father-in-law lost his eyesight?

#57M: Earlier one of his eyes was not good and then his other eye was covered with a bluish membrane, just like the surgeries that are conducted here for cataract. His [eye] was covered and since he could not see, they could not make him work. So he was released in six months.

Q: Your mother-in-law was *thamzinged*. Did you see that with your own eyes?

01:19:35

#57M: When she underwent *thamzing*, I was away in my village where I was called to visit my brother who had been released from prison. When I arrived, she had been subjected to *thamzing* the day earlier and she looked sick.

Q: So you went to your home?

#57M: My brother had been jailed in the summer. My father was imprisoned for good and he died in prison. I heard she [mother-in-law] was released and went to see her. They told me that she was subjected to *thamzing* the day earlier and my mother-in-law looked sick.

Q: Was your father sent to prison around the same time that your in-laws, your father-in-law was sent? Was it in the same year or month or something?

01:21:01

#57M: It was at the same time. As soon as the attack took place in Lhasa, my father was among the first to be arrested in Gyantse. My father was also called a “Dalai rebel” because he was among the people who received and organized His Holiness' visit to Domo. He was called a rebel and arrested.

Q: Do you know what caused his death in prison, *ama-la*?

#57M: A long time after I reached here [Mundgod], a relative of mine, who is a monk, came here and told us that he [father] died in prison. He said that they were in the same prison. Other than that, we never heard anything.

Q: Your mother-in-law had just been *thamzinged* the day before you returned to Phari. Did you get a chance to talk to her or take care of her or anything?

01:23:03

#57M: I could take care of her. Our home was not completely confiscated. There was a different policy called the *lonay sijue*, wherein the lands, animals and other houses were distributed to the people, but the place of our residence and a few animals were left for us. So I could provide her with good food.

Q: Tell me more about what happened to the family house? Was it a large house or medium sized and what happened to the inside of your house and where were you forced to go?

#57M: You mean the house where I came as a bride?

Q: Yes, where you came as a bride.

01:24:12

#57M: The house had about five rooms. On the outer side, there were also 6-7 rooms, which were what we would call a hotel here, that were rented out to others. Except for the kitchen where we lived, the rest of the houses were given away to other people [by the Chinese].

Q: Were your in-laws very wealthy or medium wealthy that you were picked on by the Chinese?

#57M: Because he [husband] delivered many government letters to Kalimpong, we were grouped among “the Dalai clique.” That was the accusation. Otherwise, we lived in Phari earning our own livelihood and doing nothing beyond that.

Q: What kind of letters was your husband carrying to Kalimpong?

01:26:21

#57M: The letters could not be opened. The Phari District Administration held many meetings and since he [husband] was the group leader, he had to deliver the letters to Kalimpong. We could not open the letters to know what was written in them. Whatever the officials gave to him, he delivered them into the hands of the concerned officials in Kalimpong.

Q: *Ama-la*, when you saw your mother-in-law, what shape was she in? What had happened to her during the struggle session or *thamzing*?

#57M: Even before she suffered from an ailment called *soklung* and after the *thamzing*; she could not get up for many days. She could drink a little gruel. Then after she became somewhat better, we heard that a meeting was going on about putting her back in prison. So she fled Phari alone at night to Bhutan.

She might have remained about a year after the *thamzing*. Then when she got better, she was to be imprisoned again. I was grazing the few animals that were left for us in the hills. She had fled alone from home. Father-in-law was already in prison at that time.

Q: She left to go where?

01:29:03

#57M: My mother-in-law had escaped to Bhutan and was living there.

Q: So she heard she was going to be *thamzinged* again?

#57M: She might have heard from the people that she was to be imprisoned again. [That might have come up] during the meeting of the people. Fearing that she would be imprisoned again, she'd escaped in the night, while I was up in the hills where we stayed in tents minding the few animals that were allotted to us. Each person had been given 10 animals and I was herding the 40 animals, along with my two daughters.

We were also apportioned a land. The Chinese forced the people of Phari to cultivate the fields and the crops matured into a type of broken and very sweet grain. Smoke was made in the night and no one could sleep the whole night. They made people to light a fire near the fields to prevent them from freezing. However, the crops still froze and the grains we reaped were sweetish in taste. If we made *pa* 'dough made from *tsampa* and tea,' it expanded in volume. I believe it had a lot of energy due to the high attitude of the land. That was how people were forced to cultivate the fields and make fire in the night. The people were made to do that, though we were not allowed to talk to other people on account of our “category.”

Q: Who was left in your family? Your father-in-law is dead, your husband is imprisoned, your brother was in prison and your mother-in-law has escaped to Bhutan. So who is left in your life and what do you feel about these days?

01:32:11

#57M: There were me and my two daughters. I had given birth to two daughters.

Q: What kind of thoughts was going through your mind because these daughters...? First of all, how old were they?

#57M: At that time, the older was about 3 years old and the younger one 5 years old. I used to send them out to graze the animals.

Q: The older one was 5 years old and the younger one 3?

01:32:52

#57M: Yes.

Q: So you are left alone with these two little girls. What kind of thoughts are going through your mind about what to do?

#57M: I was helpless. Wherever I looked, there was misery. [Smiles] Since I knew fieldwork from earlier experience, I cultivated the land, making my daughters help me bring the manure. I sent my daughters to graze the animals. The other nomads would help bring down the animals along with theirs, without the knowledge of the nomad *u-yon*. They stayed away from my daughters and our animals in front of the *u-yon*, a leader appointed by the Chinese. They helped my daughters bring in the animals when they were out of sight [of the *u-yon*].

Q: You could not go together with the others.

01:34:21

#57M: We could not go with them or even talk to them. We were not allowed to talk to other people as we were the “rebels.”

Q: You were being punished because you belonged to a wealthy family of rebels, is that why?

#57M: We could not interact with others or even talk to them.

Q: You were isolated from the other members of the Phari community?

01:35:33

#57M: Yes, we were isolated.

Q: *Ama-la*, when your in-laws were arrested, did they come into the house and did you see them being arrested?

#57M: They were called for a meeting and did not return after attending the meeting.

Q: They were not arrested from your home.

01:36:10

#57M: They went to the meeting from home. They were to be taught political lessons or some such thing and never returned home.

Q: Did you see them come for your mother-in-law?

#57M: My mother-in-law heard that she would be imprisoned and...

Q: Did you see her being taken to prison? Your mother-in-law was earlier subjected to *thamzing*.

01:36:55

#57M: She had been subjected to *thamzing*. When I returned, she was sick.

Q: Did you see her being arrested?

#57M: No, I did not. She had been subjected to *thamzing* the day earlier and she was sick.

Q: At this time, had Lhasa already fallen?

01:37:22

#57M: They began such things in Tibet as soon as Lhasa was defeated. I think it was in the 2nd Tibetan lunar month that Lhasa was defeated.

Q: What happened?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: The happenings in Phari?

Q: The happenings in Phari happened right after. So how long did you live in Phari, *ama-la* before you escaped?

#57M: We escaped just when the Chinese were about to implement the Cultural Revolution. I was there for about six or seven years after the reformation.

Q: Since your mother-in-law had already left, what kept you in Phari so long under the Chinese occupation?

01:38:39

#57M: The Bhutanese were restricting the passage over the mountain pass and were handing the escapees over to the Chinese. I could not find any way and was left behind.

Q: Did you want to escape or did you want to stay?

#57M: [Speaks before question to be interpreted.] My two children's father was given leave for a week during the Tibetan New Year by the Chinese. In order to avail this leave, he had to give his wrist watch, radio and all other things to the Chinese. Then he escaped just by himself. He pretended to be returning to the place of work. The *u-yon* was living in the best room of our house. He [husband] was alone and they believed he was going back to work. They did not notice anything and he succeeded in his flight alone. We were left for another five years: I, my father-in-law who could not see well and my two daughters.

Q: What was that like to be left with so much responsibility and no help?

01:40:53

#57M: I underwent immense difficulties. I made my two little daughters to work equally hard. I made them carry manure in a small basket to the field nearby. Each person had been distributed with 10 animals and we had to herd the 40 animals up in the hills. I took my daughters and grazed the animals in the hills, while my father-in-law who could not see well stayed at home.

Q: Did you understand why your husband escaped or did you wish he could have stayed with you?

#57M: No, I did not. Had he stayed, he would be back in prison in the earlier place. If he escaped, he would not have to be in prison. So I felt good that he was successful in his attempt. Had he been imprisoned, he would never be out.

Q: During those five years that you were there in Phari, did you continue to be shunned or isolated, so that no one else in the area would speak to you?

01:43:06

#57M: Yes, we lived that way.

Q: Were you able to secure enough food and clothing for your family and how did you do that?

#57M: [Speaks before question is interpreted.] While herding the animals, the people helped me in little ways when we were out of sight of the *u-yon* appointed by the Chinese. When he was around, we could not talk to each other. We spoke a little with each other when they [*u-yon*] were away. We could not talk when the officials were around, since they [the other people] would also be ...

Q: So very secretly you received some assistance from other people in the neighborhood and community?

01:44:11

#57M: Secretly. There were poor Tibetans who were appointed as officials by the Chinese and unseen by them, they [the other people] helped me with the animals and spoke a little to me. We never talked [to each other] in front of them. They [the *u-yon*] also reprimanded us if we wore good clothes, saying that we could no longer wear such clothes.

Q: Did these *u-yons* become very powerful in Phari?

#57M: Yes, everything was in their power. They did the distribution, giving the clothes of the wealthy people of Phari to the beggars. These people were promoted as officials. They were the people who conducted the *thamzing*.

Q: Were you forced to go to the *thamzings*?

01:45:48

#57M: I was not subjected to *thamzing*. The elders [in the family] were subjected.

Q: I meant were you forced to go and watch?

#57M: The place where we lived was located a little further away from Phari and called Chugya. One day some people from Phari were brought for *thamzing*. They were chained [joins palms together to indicate chained at the wrists] in yellow iron, which looked like golden bangles. When they moved, [the handcuffs] became tighter and gradually they [the prisoners] just fell down. I was made to watch one like this.

Q: Were they around their feet or just their ankles?

01:47:13

#57M: The yellow things were on their hands. When they moved, it became tighter and tighter [indicates wrists]. They [the prisoners] were made to stoop like this [stoops low down] for long durations, while they were pulled from here [indicates hair] and here [indicates ear] and after sometime, they automatically fell down. They were laid on the ground in a row. They'd been brought from the prison for this and we were made to watch it that day.

Q: *Ama-la*, you spent many years under these conditions and so what happened that allowed you to finally escape?

#57M: Finally a relative of my husband asked a Bhutanese animal trader at the border, whether escapees were allowed passage into Bhutan and he was told that people were allowed to enter. Prior to us [our escape], a girl from Phari escaped and she was not handed to the Chinese. Normally, the Bhutanese gave them [the escapees] back to the Chinese, which would result in imprisonment and beatings. Later we heard that people were allowed [into Bhutan] and the girl escaped ahead of us. When we left, there were about 30 people [in the group] from Phari.

My father-in-law spent his days reciting the *mani* mantra and saying his prayers. It came about that he got back his vision. He said he could see clearly. He used to stay home, not being able to see and when we fled at night, he was able to see his way! He recited a lot of prayers and blew the air into his eyes and the bluish membrane disappeared by itself. So, we were able to flee that night. He was able to walk.

Q: How did you do that [escape]?

01:50:27

#57M: My younger daughter was 6 and my older one was 9 when we escaped. My father-in-law was able to walk in the night. There was a main road that people normally used and when we took that route, we saw the bright lights of flashlights and fearing that they were the Chinese; we went another way and came through an isolated path. Then we were successful.

Q: How many days did it take you?

#57M: When I reached the capital [of Bhutan], there were many people of Phari origin who'd made camp there. Then, we were sent further away and saw that there was a [Tibetan] settlement and a Representative [of the Tibetan Administration] called Mr. Lhathing. We were kept in Bhutan for about three months.

Q: How many days did it take you from Phari to....

01:51:58

#57M: [Interrupts] It took us one whole night from Phari. Actually it's a distance of just an hour. If this [points in front] were Phari, the other side [points to another side] of the mountain pass was Bhutanese territory. It was an easy walk. We journeyed the whole night and at day break, we were still unable to climb up the mountain.

Q: Did you ever get reunited with your husband?

#57M: We did not meet very soon. After we came from there [Phari], we stayed about three months in Bhutan. Then in Siliguri, due to some legal problem, 30 of us were imprisoned in an Indian jail for about three months. We met a year later, after we reached Dharamsala.

It was two years later that we met. Then we were dispatched to construct roads.

Q: *Ama-la*, you've shared so much history of Tibet. I want to thank you but I want to ask you; why do you think it's important to record these stories about your personal history and the personal stories of other Tibetan people?

01:54:11

#57M: I have high hopes that [my story] will help the cause of Tibet.

Q: What was it like for you to sit here for almost two hours and tell your story? What was this experience like for you?

#57M: [Speaks with folded hands] I have told you the truth and there is no untruth whatsoever [in this story]. The Chinese will have no answers [because what is related is] the actual misery caused by the Chinese.

My brother's three children are in Tibet. I do not know if we will ever meet. My two sisters-in-law jumped into the river. Terrible things happened. They suffered.

Q: Did they commit suicide?

01:55:41

#57M: The older sister-in-law jumped into the river at around the time I made my escape. The Chinese destroyed the holy images and scriptures, and a small pot which is normally retained [as holy] in Tibet was found. She was accused of keeping that and beaten. She then jumped into the river. Her three children are left behind. My sisters-in-law were sisters and the younger one was subjected to *thamzing*. She died from the *thamzing* earlier. The older one jumped in the river.

Q: You have suffered a great deal.

#57M: [Smiles]

Q: In conclusion, we've covered many things, so I want to ask you one more time, if this interview were shown in Tibet or China, would this be a problem for you?

01:57:10

#57M: I have three children [brother's children] left in Tibet and if they do not face any problems, there's no problem [for me].

Q: Can we use your real name for this project?

#57M: Yes, you can.

Q: *Ama-la*, we would like to give you this [a gift].

#57M: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW