

Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #66 – Tenzin
July 4, 2007

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TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #66
2. Interviewee: Tenzin
3. Age: 84
4. Date of Birth: 1923
5. Sex: Male
6. Birthplace: Chuetun
7. Province: Utsang
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1959
9. Date of Interview: July 4, 2007
10. Place of Interview: House No. 52, Old Camp No. 6, Lugsung Samdupling Settlement, Bylakuppe, Mysore District, Karnataka, India
11. Length of Interview: 0 hr 46 min
12. Interviewer: Marcella Adamski
13. Interpreter: Tenzin Yangchen
14. Videographer: Tsewang Dorjee
15. Transcriber: Tenzin Yangchen



Biographical Information:

In Tibet Tenzin lived in Gye village in the Gyantse district. His family owned a small farm and 40 or 50 animals. He is proud to say that he had a contended life and never faced any hardships while he was young.

When the Chinese came to his region, he and many others tried to escape in order to avoid pressure to send their children to China for education. Caught by the Chinese in his escape attempt, he was imprisoned and subjected to daily interrogation sessions and accused of organizing those who fled. After over 5 months in prison, he was released and soon he escaped and was able to reach Sikkim where he joined his family, who had fled there earlier.

Tenzin participated in the “Peace March” in India twice, first in 1972 and again in 1982, walking from Dharamsala to Delhi. He did so to express his sentiment against the Chinese government’s occupation of Tibet.

Topics Discussed:

Childhood memories, nomadic life, first appearance of Chinese, life under Chinese rule, imprisonment, forced labor, escape experiences, life as a refugee in India.

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Age: 84, Sex: Male

Interviewer: Marcella Adamski

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[Before the interview begins, the interviewee shows pictures of his participation in a Peace March for Tibet. He participated in the march in 1972 and 1982, walking for one month from Dharamsala, India to Delhi. Interviewee also shows items he brought with him from Tibet and explains:

This is a slingshot. I have heard that in [early] Tibet they fought a war using slingshots. It was also used by the nomads when they went out grazing the animals. This is a needle case and these two are keys. This is an amulet bearing the animal signs of the 12 year circle. This is a thimble used when stitching boots which were very thick.

This is a *phetse khado*. *Phetse*, means a sack. In Tibet, all the sacks were made using thread spun by the men. This is a needle, which was used to stitch *zompa* 'boots.' This is used to clear a *dri* udder when it gets blocked. This is a *yolka* 'spinning device.' I did some spinning here [in Bylakuppe] too and made some ropes.]

[Interview begins]

Question: Could you please tell us your name?

Interviewee #66: Tenzin.

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

#66: Yes.

Q: Tenzin-*la*, can you tell us where you were born, in what village?

#66: Gye.

Q: What was the nearest city to this village?

#66: Nearby Gye were Kala, Dam, Lhakang and Chuthun.

Q: Which was the biggest and nearest town?

#66: Kala was the largest. The rest were not big, just about 20 families in each village. We were in the center with equal distance to Phari and Gyangtse. We paid our taxes at Gyangtse.

Q: How many people were in your family when you were born?

#66: We were eight members in the family.

Q: Where did you come in the order of children?

#66: Oh, in my home? We were only two sons in the family.

Q: What was the livelihood of your family?

#66: My parents had a small amount of farmland. We were basically nomads, but we did not have many animals. We owned only about 40 to 50 animals. The area of the farmland was about half an acre. For the use of the land, we had to perform labor service. I went to work as a shepherd for other people when I was about 8 or 9 years old. I became a nomad at the age of 16, caring for the yaks and *dri* 'female yaks.'

Q: What are the favorite memories of your childhood?

#66: When I was at that age, I was always happy and I was never sad. Even when I was working for other people, the employers were good and I worked hard. I never faced any misery.

Q: What kind of a little boy were you?

#66: I was quite a bragger with a knife at my waist and ever ready to pick a fight. I was a bragger among the youth. I would tie a rope to the horns of a yak and ride it. When I was a shepherd at age 8 or 9, I was one of the best among all the others. Later I took the responsibility of tending the *dri*. I always had the thought of killing or beating on my mind; then after marriage, [I mellowed]. I always used to have a knife close to my body.

Q: At what age did you get married?

#66: I was 25 years old. Well, it was not exactly a marriage, but we lived together. My wife and I met and then we had children. From the age of 25, we were living together.

Q: You mean it was not a marriage arranged by your parents, but that you met and fell in love?

#66: My mother died when I was about 6 years old. My father died when I was around 28 years old. My wife and I had eight children.

Q: In Tibet?

#66: We had six children when we fled [Tibet] and two of our children were born here. We had eight in all, but most of them have passed away while we are left behind.

Q: When did your life began to change as an adult?

#66: There were not many changes and then the Chinese arrived. I used to go along with the animals and I also traveled to Phari and other places, for which the Chinese made my life miserable. The Chinese said they would take my children to school [to China]. All the people of our village unanimously told them that we would not send our children to China. [The Chinese] said that I was the one who led the people [against them] and put me in prison in Dhotay. I was imprisoned in Dhotay for five months and 20 days.

Q: Do you remember what year that was or how old you were when that happened?

#66: I don't remember when the Chinese first came. It was around 1957 that they came to my village. They brought cameras like yours and took photographs. People said that the Chinese had come for sightseeing, so that was how they came.

Q: Photographs of what?

#66: I don't know. They were focusing [their camera] on the surrounding areas.

Q: Why did you think the Chinese were coming to your village?

#66: At that time I did not think anything. When we went to have a look at them, they gave us a cigarette each. We took them and some smoked them while others gave them to those who smoked. We just ran around and did not take much notice.

Q: Did you like cigarettes?

#66: No, I do not smoke. I accepted the cigarettes, but gave them away. There were some who smoked. They gave cigarettes to everyone.

Q: Did they take other children before they asked for your children?

#66: When the Chinese asked us to send our children, one [child] was sent by drawing lots in the village. They asked us to volunteer [sending our children], but no one did. We then fled in desperation. When they said that we had to send our children to school, we escaped.

Q: They asked you to volunteer and since no one did, lots were drawn and one child was sent.

#66: Yes, a child was sent from our village. I had four sons and they said I had to send my children, so I escaped to avoid that.

Q: Can you tell us about your escape? How did you prepare and what did you do?

#66: When we escaped, though we should have spoken to the *Shangdang*, we were afraid to tell him [our plans]. He also had thoughts of escaping, but didn't confide in us, so we made a sudden escape but couldn't [succeed]. We left our village at around sundown, like 5 o'clock in the evening here. We didn't reach Lalung, which we were supposed to reach, but instead we were in the direction of another village. When they [the Chinese] came to look for us, we were down in the valley and they spotted us from a very big mountain called Yarla Kyangkor. That evening we were captured.

Q: What is a *Shangdang*?

#66: *Shangdang* means a leader; a Chinese leader. An appointed leader like we have here.

Q: Was he a Tibetan or a Chinese?

#66: He was a Tibetan.

Q: So you escaped without telling him?

#66: Yes, that is right. We couldn't tell him. He came to look for us and captured us as night fell because he knew the surrounding area.

Q: How many were in the retinue?

#66: There were about 20 families who were fleeing. The number was about 86 people.

Q: So it was almost the whole village leaving?

#66: It was the people of the village of Chuedhue. The people of the surrounding villages were captured while escaping.

Q: Did anybody stay behind?

#66: Except for two blind men who were left behind, nobody was there in the village. Every person in the village fled. Then we were captured and once again I, along with another person, was sent to Dhotay prison.

Q: Before we get to prison, I want to understand what were you feeling when you wanted to protect your children and you were taking them to escape? What were you feeling in your heart?

#66: We escaped because of our children and not because we were wealthy. At that time I thought I could never live under the Chinese in Tibet. But, I was captured and imprisoned at Dhotay. When we fled from our village it was in the first Tibetan month. While I was in the prison, the whole village once again fled in the sixth Tibetan month.

Q: Where did they flee?

#66: To India.

Q: Did they once again make an escape in the sixth month?

#66: All of them escaped.

Q: Where were you at that time?

#66: I was there in the prison.

Q: Your wife and children were not captured?

#66: No, they were not captured; they could escape.

Q: How come you were caught and they weren't caught or arrested?

#66: When we all escaped, [we were captured the first time and] brought back. They [the Chinese] put me and the other person, who was the leader of our area in the prison. I was accused of being a mischief-maker and the one who organized [the escape].

Q: How was it that you were not able to escape along with the others, your wife and children to India?

#66: That was because I was imprisoned in Dhotay and while I was there they escaped.

Q: When you were captured, was your family with you?

#66: I was captured and imprisoned. The family then fled from the village again.

Q: Did you not make plans to escape at all?

#66: I was captured on the first escape attempt and put in the prison.

Q: Did you, your wife and the 86 people of your village plan to escape together?

#66: Yes, we did and we fled together and were then captured. I and my companion were put in the prison while the rest were set free. Then in the sixth Tibetan month, the rest fled again.

Q: When you were arrested, were you with the family or had you run away from them?

#66: The [Chinese] office was located near about, say from here to Camp Number 2 [about three miles] and we were called there for a meeting. At the meeting they asked me, "How did you plan the escape? You are the organizer and the leader. You will have to attend the counseling session for two days." Saying this, they [the Chinese] put me in the prison at Dhotay.

Q: Where did you go to prison?

#66: I was first imprisoned at Dhotay and later at another prison, which is presently in Khangmar Shen. There were many prisoners.

Q: You were shifted to another prison?

#66: Yes.

Q: Can you tell us what happened to you in prison? What were the conditions?

#66: While in prison, for almost a month they banned us from looking here or there, even when we went out to answer nature's call. They kept us locked up. After a month, they took us to Phengoshang to gather grass for the mules. The guards followed us with guns. There were about 80 men imprisoned there.

Q: Was that at Dhotay?

#66: At Khangmar Shen. First I was at Dhotay and later at the prison in Khangmar Shen. With the Chinese guarding us, we went out to gather grass or look for firewood on the hill tops. Four months later, we were sent to labor at construction sites at Khangmar Shen. Bricks.

Q: Did you make bricks?

#66: Some made bricks and some worked on the buildings. We constructed a building with 40 rooms.

Q: Did you know how long you were going to be in prison?

#66: I did not know how long I would be in prison. Some said we might be released, some said we might be sent to Thoe, while others said we might be sent to Samye. I was interrogated and charged with creating trouble and leading the people during the escape, which I had done. They asked me many questions and I gave truthful replies. I told them about what I had done and what I hadn't.

They [the Chinese] said, "Think over it tonight. Otherwise, we will not leave you." I told them that even tomorrow I have only that much to say and that I never created trouble for others. We had gone to Shondang and nearby villages on our attempt to escape. As I was the one who knew the route, I led the people during the first escape attempt. They [the Chinese] warned that I would face no leniency unless I spoke the truth. I couldn't lie like some other people did. If one lied, they called a lot of people. I asked them [the Chinese] to bring the person who told them [the lies about me] and that I would clarify the facts with him in front of them. Before the period of five months and 20 days was over, many people were released gradually while I was not. I thought I might be sent to Thoe or Samye.

Then a meeting was called and a [Chinese] leader said, "What is reason for your being here?" I replied, "The reason I am here is because I tried to escape to a foreign country." He asked, "What is the reason for you to go there?" "The reason I wanted to go was because I thought my children would be taken away," I said. Then on the day of our release a meeting was called. A high official came with a document and asked us the reason [for our escape attempt]. And we told him about trying to save our children from being taken away to school. To this he said, "You people have jumped into a ditch and the Chinese government policy is lifting you out of that. Today you must learn the system of the Chinese government, which will forgive you. You have been awarded leniency. Go back to your village and announce to the people about the goodness of the Chinese policy." Then we were released.

Q: That was after how many months?

#66: Five months and 20 days had passed by.

Q: In prison, what were the conditions like—your sleeping and food, that sort of thing?

#66: Thank God, in regard to food, we had a good official. He was an army personnel and in charge of our security. When the food was over, he replenished it and we had enough to eat. We could have beddings brought from home and even food. However, my family members had already fled.

Q: So there was no one to bring food for you. Did others get food from home?

#66: Yes, others had people bring food for them. The food was taken to the kitchen where three captured women worked as cooks. They then gave it to everyone. We could drink black tea and eat until our heart's content. However, the task they set out for us was enormous.

Q: Did the three women warm the food?

#66: They were cooks. One of the women is the wife of Chonphel, who presently lives at the Home for the Aged.

Q: Were the women good cooks?

#66: Yes, they cooked well.

Q: When you were arrested, were there many other men from your village that were arrested?

#66: On that day along with me there were eight men from the surrounding villages who had all been called for the meeting. Then we were taken to Dhotay and imprisoned. At the meeting, we were made to sit on some stone steps and the main official was sitting up there; though at that time we did not know that he was the leader and learned of it only later.

The time was close to 5 p.m. and we asked him, "Mr. Leader, what do we do?" He replied in some gibberish and imprisoned us in a room. [Laughs] We thought there would be some kind of announcements, but never that we'd be imprisoned.

In the night they provided us with black tea and *tsampa* 'flour made from roasted barley.' After eating that, using our *zompa* 'boots' as pillows, we went to sleep. The next morning one [Chinese] came and checked us all. Some of the people had some money on them while the others did not. He took away all the earrings and made a list. My companion was the leader of our village and he told us, "They will ask us some questions and then release us." But that was not to be. Then he added, "Now it's a disaster. We are real prisoners. We must be prisoners." They searched for needles and other things on us and then we were prisoners.

Q: You were just shut in a room?

#66: That night we were put in a room. The next morning they put us in individual cells.

Q: That was the first prison experience?

#66: Yes.

Q: When you were in prison, was your wife, or any of your children able to come and visit you? How far was the prison from the village?

#66: No, they couldn't come. During the five months and 20 days, the others had visitors, while my family had already escaped. The villagers had planned to flee before and they did just that. I did not have anyone bring me anything.

Q: How far was the Dhotay prison from your village?

#66: One could reach there in one day on horseback. If you didn't have a horse to ride, it took a day and a half [walking]. That [the prison] was in Khangmar Chue and our village was Gye.

Q: When you returned to the village, you were arrested and taken to prison and your family escaped on their own?

#66: Yes, that is right. The villagers fled together.

Q: So when you got out of prison, what did you do next?

#66: After I was released I went back to my village. They [the Chinese] advised me to tell the people of the village about the Chinese policy, which they said we had learned. We were to tell the people about the wonderful policy, which forgave those who made mistakes. I told the *Shangdang*, "There is no other country happier than this. I have made a mistake. I would like to go and bring my family back. I request a few *Shangdang* to help me. I am

going to bring them back from India." They replied, "Don't say that. The Chinese Government has the power to reform the whole world. Of course, they can do it to us. Whatever you want, we will give you. We cannot do that." So I escaped.

Q: Did you ask the *Shangdang* to accompany you?

#66: They said, "You don't have to go. There is no better place than this. Whatever you need, we will provide you. Your family will return by themselves because they will not be happy there." Then one night, I escaped.

Q: You were really hoping they would believe you?

#66: They didn't believe me.

Q: Did you really expect they would believe you?

#66: I asked them to help me, but I only had the thought [of escaping]. Whatever they may say, I would have remained.

Q: Your intention was to flee?

#66: My intention was to flee. I had the knives with me always. I thought if they [the *Shangdang*] accompanied me, they wouldn't dare harm me.

Q: How did you get away to leave your village? How did you leave your village?

#66: They [the Chinese] told me that I must go to the fields to put fertilizer on the crops. This job was allotted to people in groups. One day an old man from our group fell ill.

Q: An old man?

#66: Yes, an old man of our village. When the work was being divided, I was told to go to the hospital in Kala to bring medicine the next day. When I went to get the medicine, I made my escape.

Q: Were you by yourself?

#66: I was alone.

Q: Where did you go?

#66: Then I came to India and my family members were living at Lachung [in Sikkim].

Q: Was it a long journey?

#66: It wasn't very far to Lachung. It was a distance of two days' journey.

Q: When did you catch up with your family, your wife and your children?

#66: I met them at Lachung. I met them after crossing the pass at Lachung and just before reaching the place called Tsondhang in Indian Territory.

Q: How did they feel when they saw you?

#66: My friends who are my neighbors here, were there. They hugged me and cried.

Q: I want to go back to the prison story, when you were released how many others were released at the same time?

#66: When we were released, there were four of us who were released together.

Q: You mentioned that you might be sent to Samye, I wondered what that meant. Was that a good thing, bad thing, what was going on there?

#66: That was a bad thing. We heard that people there had to eat human flesh and leather and whatever they could find. We hoped that we would be allowed to stay where we were.

Q: Why were you moved to another prison and what were the differences in the two prisons?

#66: Dhotay and Khangmar are very close. We were moved from Dhotay prison to Khangmar Shen in order to construct a house with forty rooms.

Q: The conditions were otherwise the same at the two prisons?

#66: The food was the same.

Q: What advice would you like to give to the next generation of children from Tibet?

#66: My only advice is that they must bear in mind the [Tibetan] government and His Holiness the Dalai Lama's advice. I tell my children that there is nothing more important than one's government. They should serve the government and not think of making oneself rich by engaging in other businesses. These days the children are different, but for me I think only of my government.

Earlier I wanted to take revenge for what the Chinese have done to us. I immediately enlisted when Taopon [a Tibetan leader] came to sign up people to join the Volunteer Army. He said he expected a hundred people would volunteer, but I couldn't join it. My brother Ngodup who is two years younger to me joined the army. My wife did not want me to go and so my younger brother did.

Q: Which is the Volunteer Army?

#66: That was the 22 Unit [of the Indian Army] when it was first established.

Q: You were not able to join it?

#66: [My wife] did not allow me to join it. I didn't go, but Ngodup, my brother joined it. I couldn't do anything to the Chinese and so twice I took part in the Peace March. We [the marchers] were told that if we happened to encounter a Chinese on the way, we should not kill him with our knives. So I asked them, "If we can't kill them, what do we do?" They replied, "Show your neck to them." I said, "The best thing for me to do is to crane out my neck to them. If they strike me on my neck, the blood that flows will be white blood. So I am definitely going."

When we received an audience with His Holiness the Dalai Lama [before the march], he said, "It is good that you are thinking of going to Tibet, but the time is not yet ripe. If you go there, [the Chinese] will give you trouble as well as create trouble in India. Lives will be lost. When the time is ripe, I will go first and you can follow me. So go only up to Delhi this time. I will also talk to the leaders about it. Do not lose your spirit." That was the advice His Holiness gave.

Q: Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW