

# **Tibet Oral History Project**

Interview #76 – Sonam  
July 5, 2007

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**TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**  
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**INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET**

- |                           |                                                                                           |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Interview Number:      | #76                                                                                       |
| 2. Interviewee:           | Sonam                                                                                     |
| 3. Age:                   | 64                                                                                        |
| 4. Date of Birth:         | 19                                                                                        |
| 5. Sex:                   | Male                                                                                      |
| 6. Birthplace:            | Jang Namchung, Namru                                                                      |
| 7. Province:              | Utsang                                                                                    |
| 8. Year of leaving Tibet: | 1959                                                                                      |
| 9. Date of Interview:     | July 5, 2007                                                                              |
| 10. Place of Interview:   | Private residence, Dickey Larsoe Settlement, Bylakuppe, Mysore District, Karnataka, India |
| 11. Length of Interview:  | 2 hr 14 min                                                                               |
| 12. Interviewer:          | Martin Newman                                                                             |
| 13. Interpreter:          | Lhakpa Tsering                                                                            |
| 14. Videographer:         | Jeffery Loda                                                                              |
| 15. Transcriber:          | Tenzin Yangchen                                                                           |



**Biographical Information:**

Sonam describes his early life as a nomad in Jang Namchung, Namru. As a child, Sonam enjoyed spending his time grazing animals and playing games with other boys. He fondly recalls horse racing during a special month-long annual festival.

When the Chinese came to Sonam's village in 1959, they interrogated everyone and began forcing the villagers to participate in *thamzin* 'struggle sessions.' During the Cultural Revolution beginning in 1966, the Chinese restricted the Tibetans' freedom, including banning religious practices and imposing various taxes. Unable to tolerate this oppression, Sonam and others protested by beating up a few Chinese officers and destroying an administrative office.

Expecting to be arrested after the protests, Sonam decided to escape to India. He left his pregnant wife and one-year old daughter behind in the village and fled with several men on horseback. During a confrontation with Chinese soldiers on the way to Bhutan, one of Sonam's companions was killed. Then after reaching Bhutan, Sonam was questioned by American officials to determine if he was a Chinese spy. Sonam visited Tibet in 1986, seeing his wife and two children for the first time since he had escaped.

**Topics Discussed:**

Childhood memories, animal herding, salt gathering, festivals, first appearance of Chinese, *thamzin*, life under the Chinese, escape experiences, life as a refugee in India.

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**Interview #76**

**Interviewee: Sonam**

**Age: 64, Sex: Male**

**Interviewer: Martin Newman**

**Interview Date: July 5, 2007**

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

**Interviewee #76: There is no problem. The reason for there being no problem is because since time immemorial Tibet had its distinct language and traditions. The younger Chinese would also realize that that was how Tibet was. That's my opinion.**

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

**#76: [Smiles]**

Q: I would like to begin by asking you about your life in Tibet before the Chinese came and your childhood. Perhaps you can tell me where you were born.

**#76: I was born in the village of Jang Namchung in Namru [region].**

Q: And where is that?

**#76: Jang Namru is a desert region. There were no agricultural fields where we lived nor were there forests. There was nothing except plains, *nama* [?] and rocky mountains.**

Q: Where is that in Tibet? Is it near any big city?

**#76: It is not a big city. It is a small town. There are 13 divisions in Namru; similar to the 16 villages in the New Settlement here [in Bylakuppe].**

Q: Which is the nearest big city to Namru?

**#76: It took about 26 days if one walked to Lhasa along with the yaks.**

Q: So it is far away from Lhasa. Was it near the Indian border or Bhutanese border?

**#76: Compared to [the distance to] Lhasa, the Indian border is still further away. If Lhasa is in the south, we are right in the north.**

Q: You are far away from Lhasa and you are far away from the Indian border.

**#76: Yes, they are very far away.**

Q: How many people were in your family?

**#76: We were not many in the family. There was my father, mother and only one son.**

Q: What kind of work did your family do?

**#76: They raised animals, milked them and made butter and cheese, which were bartered for grains in Tibet. The animals were sheared and their wool taken to Tibet and exchanged for grains. We went to Penam in Shigatse to do our trading.**

Q: Did you help them or were you going to school?

**#76: There was not a single school in our village. The villages were tiny and unlike here, no schools were established. The children grazed the animals and the fathers went to trade. We need money in India, but that was not necessary in our village. Our products, butter and cheese, which I told you about earlier and salt—we just had to go to gather it and one did not need money to purchase salt—were bartered for grains. There were no schools.**

Q: Why not [payment for salt]?

**#76: One didn't have to pay for the salt. There was a large lake. One had to work really hard [to get the salt]. The person had to wade into the middle of the lake with the water up to here [gestures at waist level]. I was a small child then and hadn't been on such expeditions, but my parents [father] did, and with the help of a broad wooden board, the salt was dragged out and piled. The salt was piled so high that one had to look up at it. When the water depleted, the salt was removed. One could bring it that way and no money was required.**

Q: So there was a big lake nearby where you could get salt?

**#76: It was not close by. The expedition took around 20 days; for the salt to be removed, packed in the gye 'saddle bags made from yak hair' and loaded on the yaks.**

Q: I think you are 20 days from everywhere.

**#76: We did not go anywhere else except the salt lake during the expedition.**

Q: I understand that, but I'm just saying that apparently where your village is located, it was 20 to 30 days no matter what you want to do, you had to travel 20 to 30 days.

**#76: Yes.**

Q: What kind of animals did you look after?

**#76: We had three types of animals, yaks, sheep and horses. Well, I left out the goats.**

Q: Did you enjoy going off and tending these animals?

**#76: It was very enjoyable. I was a young child and there were others, too. We herded our animals separately and then we played and ate our meals together. It was very enjoyable.**

Q: What did you play?

**#76: We played a game with stones called *ghopo ghopto*. A number of stones, about seven or eight were placed in a line and from either side we threw stones at them. Whoever hit the stones in the center was the winner, but we did not play with bets.**

Q: Who did you play with?

**#76: I played with the other boys who came to graze their animals.**

Q: Was there enough food all the year round or was it more difficult in the winter than the summer? How was it?

**#76: No, there was no difference between summer and winter. We mostly ate meat, butter and cheese. Our diet contained very little *tsampa* 'flour made from roasted barley' because we had to travel a great distance to get grain. So we ate less *tsampa*, but more meat and butter.**

Q: So it sounds like life was good?

**#76: Yes, life was really good. It was very good.**

Q: When you went into town, did you ever see any performers that would sing and tell stories or anything like that?

**#76: No, there were no singers. I don't know if there were storytellers or not.**

Q: How did you celebrate holidays?

**#76: We had a celebration at the end of the sixth and the beginning of the seventh Tibetan lunar months. This was an annual event and continued for almost a month. The people of Namchung put up tents, raced horses and fired at targets. People took part in running race and the events continued for almost a month. There was also lifting heavy stones.**

Q: What kinds of events did you participate in?

**#76: I must have been about 9 or 10 years old then and I used to participate in horse racing. I used to race so much that my pants stuck to the sores on my bottom! I was a horse racer then.**

Q: Did you ever get thrown off the horse?

**#76: I have fallen many times. You fall and get hurt many times.**

Q: Did you ever do any shooting from your horse?

**#76: No, I did not. In this event the rider sat on the galloping horse and aimed at the target with a gun—we only had Tibetan made guns called *birzi*, which required gunpowder—and fired, but I did not participate.**

Q: How did you dress when you were doing this? Did you wear special clothes?

**#76: There were no special clothes as such. We did not have any special clothes. However, the horses were specially prepared and the riders did not wear the pelt of goats and sheep, which we normally did in Tibet. They wore *chupa* ‘traditional coats’ and did not use saddles on the horses. The distance of the race extended from here to further than Kushalnagar [approximately 5 miles].**

Q: So you must have looked forward to this holiday every year.

**#76: Yes, the event took place every year.**

Q: Were there festivals at the local monastery as well?

**#76: At a distance from here to Camp Number 10 or 11 [3 miles] was a monastery called Samo Gonpa. It was a *ngakpa* monastery. [*Ngakpa* is a Tibetan Buddhist tradition in which the practitioners are allowed to marry and keep long hair.]**

Q: Were they from the Bon religion or were they from some other kind?

**#76: They were Buddhists. It is rare to find a *ngakpa* lineage because there are very few *ngakpa*. They are not monks, but like monks they assemble [for prayers].**

Q: They also had festivals and celebrations there?

**#76: The *ngakpa* also attended the [one month] festival. Generally they held prayer assemblies on auspicious days like in other monasteries. However, on other days, they did not have [prayer assemblies].**

Q: Do you remember what they were like?

**#76: The *ngakpa* wore red robes, but the upper red cloth had white linings. That was the dress of the *ngakpa*. Monks wore complete red robes, but though they wore red, their stole was red with white linings in the center. They did not cut their hair whereas monks shaved their heads.**

Q: Do you remember any holidays that happened at the monastery? Was there a monastery in your village?

**#76: There was no monastery in my village. The nearest monastery was one day's ride.**

Q: Only one day? I thought it must be 20 days.

**#76: No, no. [Laughs]**

Q: Did you have any schooling whatsoever?

**#76: There were no schools. There were no schools at all. If the parents were economically well off, their children were taught to read and write. All the rest were engaged in tending animals; some grazed the yaks, some looked after the sheep and some the horses. Some rich families owned about 15 to 20 horses. There were no schools.**

Q: When did things in your village start to change?

**#76: I have experienced many things in my life. I am 66 years old and since the time I can remember, I have had many happy and sad times as well as experiences. I have also come across many places due to those reasons.**

Q: When did things start to change?

**#76: My village was a very happy place in Tibet. However, we have gained some experience [coming to India]. As I told you earlier we did not have schools; those that were farmers, worked in the fields and the nomads worked as nomads. They had neither other experiences nor learned skills. The worst thing is that we have had to come to another country.**

**However, we have gained a lot of experience from it. Take school for example; there are schools everywhere, where we can send our children. If one has the knowledge and ability, he can achieve anything. Secondly, we can see the situation in the world. So I feel that we have acquired a lot of experiences.**

Q: When did things change in your village that you were living in?

**#76: I have faced many hardships: the cause for leaving our village, the way we left, the difficulties we underwent during the journey and the sufferings connected to it.**

[Question is repeated.]

**#76: The Tibetan people have experienced change after coming to India. Those left in Tibet still continue to suffer under the Chinese.**

Q: I am trying to understand about your life. When did it start to change?

**#76: If the Chinese had not come, I would not be here. That is the change. I was married in my village and had two children. I had to leave them and come here. The reason was that I was on the verge of being imprisoned by the Chinese. Thanks to God, I met some people with whom I came away. That is one change that occurred.**

Q: That's what I am interested in learning about; before you left your village and the Chinese came and the things that happened then.

**#76: Okay.**

Q: When did you get married?

**#76: I married when I was 23 years old.**

Q: How did you meet your wife?

**#76: That is the way of life. Both my parents had passed away and I was left alone. We fell in love and we lived together.**

Q: So both your parents had passed away?

**#76: My wife had her parents and many relatives. Later after I had come to India, as we belonged to the wealthy class, he [wife's father] was arrested by the Chinese and died in prison. The mother also died. I went back to Tibet in 1986.**

Q: And found out about that?

**[Interpreter to interviewer]: And learned that.**

Q: I'd like to get to that but right now to tell the story, the time from what happened when you were a young man.

**#76: Okay.**

Q: When were you first aware of the Chinese? How did you become aware?

**#76: I moved my residence. My birthplace was Jang Namru, but I lived at Shang Gaden Chokhor at Sapu Lungpa. I lived in two places. I was born at Jang Namru, but lived at Sawu Gonpa, a monastery.**

Q: Did you live at the monastery?

**#76: No, I did not live at the monastery, which was called Sawu Gonpa, but I lived in that area. I got married there.**

Q: What about the Chinese? When did you first encounter the Chinese?

**#76: It was in the spring, around March or April of 1959 that the Chinese arrived in my village. When the Chinese entered Lhasa, I was living at Jang Namru.**

Q: Had you seen or heard about them before that?

**#76: Yes, I have heard about them. As early as 1947 and 1948, I heard that the Chinese had arrived in Lhasa and not only that—I heard that the Chinese were giving a lot of money to the Tibetans. I was a young child then. I must have been around 12 or 13 years old, but I still remember it.**

Q: What did you think; that this was a good thing?

**#76: At that time I was too young to realize whether this was good or bad. When I heard that the Chinese had arrived, I never thought that they would cause us suffering or bring us happiness.**

Q: In your village of Jang Namru, were there any special foods that you used to eat there?

**#76: A delicacy we ate was a special food that was grown in my village called *doma* [sweet potato]. We could dig this from the earth or the pile made by rats under the ground. It is very tasty and slightly red in color. It grows under the ground with the plant above. To dig out the *doma*, one had to look for the plant. However, the rats went underground and as the *doma* was found there, they removed and made a pile of it. When the ground froze, the rats made one big pile from the many small ones it had made earlier. They did that when the weather became cold. In our region we had nothing but ice in winter.**

Q: So the rats were helping you collect *doma*?

**#76: Yes, poor rats. Humans are very powerful. They [the rats] collect it to eat it during the year and we forcefully remove it and ate it; like a big insect eating a smaller insect.**

Q: But they were helping you because they did the work for you.

**#76: Yes, they help us, but it is bad for them. They didn't have anything to eat for the whole year; perhaps they tried elsewhere to keep from starvation. We took away and ate what they have collected for the whole year. They have nothing left to eat, but perhaps they were able to find something.**

Q: So they starved afterwards?

**#76: Perhaps they didn't die because the rats were still there afterward. Maybe they tried and found something else to eat.**

Q: Where did you get your water?

**#76: We had water in summer. In winter, everything turned to ice from the ninth Tibetan lunar month, so we had to cut out the ice with a *chaphur*. It was an iron tool of this length [gestures] with a pointed tip. We cut out [ice] with it and then heat the ice to melt it.**

Q: What are *chu langma*?

**#76: *Chu langma* might be the *langma* that grows close to the *chu* [water]. Just like we have the *changma* [a type of eucalyptus tree] that grows here, there is a type of *changma* called a *langma* that grows near the waters. *Langma* grows in certain areas. It is a tree and does not grow in Jang Namru. It is not a fruit tree, but its wood is used in house constructions. There is something called a *chusha* [water-mushroom] which is found in the waters and is edible.**

Q: I have a good picture of your village life, so let's go back to the time when the Chinese first came. You had not seen the Chinese until 1959, right?

**#76: I had never seen the Chinese before that. I had heard of them, but never seen them.**

Q: You heard that they gave money in Lhasa. Did you hear anything else?

**#76: No, I did not hear anything else.**

Q: So what happened in 1959 in your village?

**#76: When they came to my village they said, "We have come to help Tibet and to implement liberation through a peaceful way." They called all the people for a meeting and said, "Tibet is a country which is lagging behind and its people subjugated. Some of you are suffering as serfs. We have come to make you happy and make everyone equal. Everyone will enjoy equal power and equal livelihood. We have come to liberate you through peaceful methods and help you." That's how they spoke initially.**

Q: In your village, they gathered people for meetings?

**#76: No, they didn't give us anything to eat. They brought their own food and didn't give us any.**

Q: You said that Chinese gathered people for meetings. Did they gather people in your village for meetings?

**#76: Yes, they did.**

Q: Were you witness to these meetings?

**#76: I have seen the meetings and attended them.**

Q: Can you tell me what you saw?

**#76: Just as I told you earlier they announced, "We have come to liberate you through a peaceful way. The Tibetan people are lagging behind. You have no freedom and you are suppressed. We have come to relieve you from that. We will implement 'Liberation through Peaceful Way'. First you have to name the people who are causing you misery." That was what they said.**

Q: There was just talking or were there any beatings or *thamzin* 'struggle sessions' or anything like that?

**#76: First they gave that statement. Then they divided the people into groups of 50 to 60 or around a 100 and questioned each one, "Who caused you misery? Who is your leader?" In my village of Jang Namru, my father was the leader. I belonged to the category of those holding leadership posts. The questions were, "How did these people suppress you? What did your leader speak about the future?" Then he [the leader] was captured and brought before the public and subjected to *thamzin*. Some even committed suicide on account of the sessions. One man committed suicide in my village.**

Q: Did you see any of the *thamzin*?

**#76: Yes, I saw it. Not just that, one had to participate in the sessions and if one didn't, they [the Chinese] would say that one was supporting that person!**

Q: Did you participate in the *thamzin*?

**#76: For example, if I was undergoing *thamzin* and among the three of you here, if two participated and one didn't, he would...**

Q: So you too participated in the *thamzin*?

**#76: Yes, that is right.**

Q: What did they make you do?

**#76: [The person brought for *thamzin* was asked:] "What did you do during the previous system? How did you make the people suffer?"**

Q: Were you *thamzined* or did you *thamzin* others?

**#76: I had to relate that [ask those questions]. I did not undergo *thamzin*. My parents underwent *thamzin*, but I did not.**

Q: Did you subject others to *thamzin*?

**#76: Yes, I did.**

Q: How did you do it?

**#76: We had to say, "How did you make others suffer? How did you suppress the people? How did you make the serfs work? What is the reason for doing that? Now the Chinese people are here and you have to change your mind."**

Q: Did you just say that orally?

**#76: Yes, I only spoke orally and never raised my hands. If we did not participate, we would be immediately considered one among them.**

Q: So they made you question them and yell at them? Is that what they made you do?

**#76: We had to question them. If there were 10 men during the *thamzin*, each one of them had to question the person undergoing *thamzin*. Everyone had to stand up one by one to question the person. The bad people ruined the accused person's clothes, spit on them and pulled their hair. I never did anything like that.**

Q: How old were you at that time?

**#76: I might have been about 15, 16 or 17 years old then.**

Q: What did you think about all of this that was happening? What was going through your mind?

**#76: My father was left behind at Jang Namru. He belonged to the category of leaders and I thought he might suffer the same fate. That was the feeling in my heart. However, I was helpless because we did not have telephones and they [the Chinese] would not allow me to go there. I had that feeling in my heart.**

Q: Were you at Shang Gaden?

**#76: Yes, at that time I was at Shang Gaden Chokhor.**

Q: Was your father *thamzined*?

**#76: My father was not only arrested and subjected to *thamzin*, he was imprisoned and died in prison. I heard about that later. He died in prison and could not return home.**

Q: Where was he? Was he not in the same place you were?

**[Interpreter to interviewer]: He [his father] was in Jang Namru and I [interviewee] was in Shang Gaden Chokhor.**

Q: You heard that your father underwent *thamzin*, thrown in the jail and he died there. Is that correct?

**#76: Yes, but I do not know in which year he died. I heard that later.**

Q: But he was not a rich man. Why do you think they *thamzined* him?

**#76: He was rich as well a man of authority. He was the leader of the village, a man holding a leadership post.**

Q: In 1959 you were with your wife in the town of Shang Gaden. Shang Gaden has any relation to the Gaden Monastery or near Gaden Monastery?

**#76: In the olden days Shang Gaden Chokhor was a very big monastery.**

Q: Which monastery is close to Shang Gaden?

**#76: The Shang Gaden Chokhor was a very large monastery. It was located on the top of a hill. There were hundreds of monks there.**

Q: What were you doing in Shang Gaden? What kind of work were you doing there?

**#76: I worked as a farmer as well as a nomad. I had animals at the nomadic camp. When the Chinese arrived, they made us cultivate lands where crops were not grown earlier. We used to farm lands quite a distance away.**

Q: For yourself or for someone else?

**#76: I worked for myself. I plowed the fields and sowed the seeds and used the harvest myself. Very much later the Chinese levied taxes on grains and animals. They did not do that immediately, but after several years.**

Q: To which government?

**#76: Taxes were collected by the Chinese.**

Q: Did you have any children at that time?

**#76: I have a son and a daughter. When I left in 1969, my wife was pregnant with my son and my daughter was one year old then. I married when I was 23 years old and my daughter was born a year later. I did not have children when the Chinese arrived.**

Q: How were you able to get to Shang Gaden? Was this through your wife or did you buy land? When you came from your village to Shang Gaden, how did you acquire land?

**#76: No, I did not buy land. Shang Gaden Chokhor was the owner of the land since long back. The lands were unused and they distributed it among the people.**

Q: Who is “they”?

**#76: “They” are the Chinese who distributed the lands.**

Q: Which year was that?

**#76: In 1959, they implemented the Revolution of Democracy. They started this work from 1951.**

Q: In 1951? What year did you move to Shang Gaden?

**#76: No, no it was not 1951. Isn't it 1961? Yes, it was in 1961.**

Q: When did you move to Shang Gaden?

**#76: I moved to Shang Gaden in 1957. After two years the Revolution of Democracy was put into operation.**

Q: Before the land was distributed what did you do?

**#76: Before that I was totally a nomad; I had no land. Earlier in Jang Namru I tended animals and likewise, though the number of animals was not many, I tended animals [at Shang Gaden].**

Q: You were there in 1957 and in 1959 there were the *thamzin*. Then what happened?

**#76: I tilled the land from 1961 to 1966.**

Q: But we are still in 1959. I want to know what happened after the *thamzin*.

**#76: Then they [the Chinese] categorized the society. The properties of the wealthy were divided and distributed among the poor. The farmers were given land and houses. Those who were wealthy earlier were made to live in a poor house. The poor people were allotted the good houses and given more lands. In the case of the nomads, the animals [of the rich] were divided, giving more animals to the poor and less to the rich. That's how they did.**

Q: What were your feelings about that? Did you think that was a good thing? What did you think?

**#76: I thought that was good and very beneficial to the poor. They [the Chinese] used to say initially that they would create equality and I thought they were doing just that and that was very good.**

Q: So you were happy that there was more equality. But at the same time what did you hear about what was going on in Lhasa and the escape of the Dalai Lama? Had you heard any of that news?

**#76: Yes, I heard that a large number of Tibetans had escaped and that His Holiness the Dalai Lama had left for a place called India with which [Tibet] had religious and political relations. However, the Chinese would not say that they had left. What they did was deprive the rich and the influential of any opportunities to talk [to each other] and they were not allowed to attend the meetings.**

Q: What did you think when you heard the news that the Dalai Lama had left and that many people were leaving? What did you think?

**#76: At that time it never occurred to me that I would go to India. I thought I was happy that I had the freedom to trade or to do anything. I felt happy and never had thoughts about going to India. My story will gradually unfold.**

Q: This is interesting. You felt this was a good thing for your life what had happened.

**#76: Yes.**

Q: So then what happened?

**#76: Then after a year or two they [the Chinese] became worse and started the *Sungma Marpo* committee [named after a protective deity]. Though the possessions of the wealthy had already been divided, the Chinese selected some people who were on their side and made them search the houses for photos of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and religious articles. Monasteries and *stupa* ‘shrines’ were to be destroyed. Gradually they became worse and worse.**

Q: How did that make you feel?

**#76: I wondered why they were restricting us more and more when earlier we were happy. I wondered why it was so and felt tense. That was around 1963 or 1964. I remained there until 1969. The *Sungma Marpo* existed for more than a year and we were not allowed to make incense offerings on our houses. We were not allowed to rotate our prayer wheels. We were not allowed to carry a rosary. When the Revolution of Democracy came into being in 1959, for a year or two we were free to practice dharma, do our prostrations, light butter lamps, rotate our prayer wheels and carry rosaries.**

Q: What did you think about that?

**#76: I thought the situation was very bad as there was no freedom to practice religion, though there was freedom to earn one's livelihood from farming and raising animals. By then they [the Chinese] had already levied taxes. There was a grain tax and an animal tax in the form of butter, wool and yak hair. I realized that what they claimed earlier did not match with what they were doing. There was no religious freedom and I thought, a day will come when things will still worsen. I was disturbed in my heart.**

Q: Things became worse?

**#76: Then they started to interrogate each individual. Take me for example. They asked, "What work does your father do? What work does your mother do? What work has your father done?" One had to give a truthful answer when such questions were asked, as they would come to know the truth anyway. Then after a few years around 1965 to 1966, I was banned from moving around with the people or speaking to them because they [the Chinese] placed me among the upper-class category. They told me, "You belong to the upper-class. You are part of those who suppressed the people. If not during your time, it was done during your father's time."**

Q: Why did they ask your parents names?

**#76: When the *Sungma Marpo* Cultural Revolution began, they questioned each individual about what work one's father and mother did.**

Q: So they were gathering political information?

**#76: That is right.**

Q: Which year was it when they gathered that information?

**#76: That was around 1963 or 1964, but I am not sure. The Cultural Revolution happened in 1959 and I worked in the fields from 1961, so it must have been around 1963 to 1964.**

Q: In 1963 to 1964 the Cultural Revolution had already started and when did you notice that there was something different that the Chinese were doing, that something was happening?

**#76: That was in the same year of 1963-64 when they started the interrogations and tightened their hold. As I told you earlier we were not allowed to light butter lamps in the monasteries or do anything [spiritual]. If a person died, the body was just thrown away and one could not do anything [perform the last rites].**

Q: Then what happened?

**#76: Then I think it was in 1965 that the *genlok* 'protest group' started. The *genlok* originated in Shang Nyenmo. We heard that a *genlok* was organized to oppose the Chinese at Shang Nyenmo. Then it was started in my village. A section of people who liked the Chinese would not oppose them. But there were others that did not like the Chinese and**

they met to discuss about the formation of a *genlok* to oppose the Chinese at Shang Nyenmo and this news was asked to be shared with friends in secret.

Q: You met secretly and then?

**#76: We met and told each other that this was no time to sit back. We were growing stronger. Though we were in no position to attack the big Chinese army camps and offices at Shang Gaden, one day we went to attack a small Chinese office at Wuyukchu.**

Q: So you went there to destroy it?

**#76: We caught the officers and beat them and destroyed the office. But they did not retaliate.**

Q: Did you beat the Chinese?

**#76: Yes, I beat them, but they did not hit back.**

Q: I can see a tremendous amount of anger built up inside you towards the Chinese.

**#76: Yes, I was furious.**

Q: So you went into the Chinese headquarters; you and how many people?

**#76: Perhaps we were about 15 to 20 people. I do not know the exact figure because I didn't make a count. There were definitely between 15 and 30 people.**

Q: You went in and you destroyed the office and you beat up the Chinese?

**#76: Yes, we destroyed it. We threw away their registers, documents and furniture. However, the building was not set on fire. Perhaps we did not have the idea of setting fire to it. Most of the staff ran away. We couldn't catch them except for two or three.**

Q: Then what happened?

**#76: A whole lot of *genlok* arose in many areas. His Holiness the Dalai Lama had left for India together with many Tibetans. Surely, there must be some support forthcoming [we thought]. In places like Nyenmo, [Tibetans] destroyed many Chinese army camps. They seized the soldiers' weapons—none of them [the Chinese] were killed—but they did not retaliate. Some important [Tibetan] people went to Lhasa to attend meetings but I did not. When they returned, we held discussions among ourselves. Everyone opined that there definitely was hope and we should persevere. We thought that under the leadership of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, there was hope of support coming from outside countries. I had a lot of hope in my heart.**

Q: This was in what year?

**#76: That was around 1966 to 1967.**

Q: At this time were people in the street running around waving Mao's Red Book?

**#76: No, I do not remember that.**

Q: Were you afraid what might happen to you by the Chinese for what you did to their office and beating up the men there? Were you afraid that they would come and do something?

**#76: I thought we had support [from outside]. In case I was arrested, I thought it my destiny. I had been able to do what I wished to do, just as we had resolved during the discussions. All of us wished to stand united and stayed alert. The Chinese did not arrive [in the village] nor did they call us to attend meetings, so I continued to live in that way.**

Q: Were you not afraid after you destroyed the Chinese' office?

**#76: No, there was no fear.**

Q: Please continue.

**#76: Then from 1967 onwards the Chinese started to restrict the *genlok*. Those people that went to Lhasa to attend meetings came back and said that there was no real support forthcoming [from other countries]. There was no actual support or help from foreign countries. They said those stories were created in some areas [of Tibet] and that whatever happened there was no support. This was what we heard.**

Q: Then what happened?

**#76: Then we heard that the Chinese were clamping down on the *genlok* in Shang Nyenmo. The first founder of *genlok* was a nun and she was arrested. Now we were in panic. They [the Chinese] did not come to our village, but we lived in dread. Then we heard the news that the nun was released from the Chinese prison. We were quite close [to Shang Nyenmo] perhaps two days journey by horse ride. We heard that the nun that was in prison earlier was out. I thought, "How it could be possible?"**

Q: Was she really released?

**#76: I wondered what magic the nun was doing. I heard that the nun was arrested, killed, cut up and fed to the vultures and that she was no more. Many people witnessed her body being fed to the vultures, but then I heard that the nun was back!**

Q: You were hearing all sorts of stories then.

**#76: Yes, that is right. That was nothing but the truth. Then many Chinese officers and soldiers arrived in our village. They said, "You have to live meekly. If some of you think**

you can oppose a powerful nation like China, you are still immature. You still have the shades of the old system left in you. You have to change." They began holding meetings, but at that time they did not know whom to arrest. However, they began the investigation.

Now we were helpless and there was no support. We would be captured by the Chinese and we could not escape. So I lived like that until 1969. I was a farmer and on that day I was thrashing the harvested crops in my yard. Eight horsemen arrived—they were carrying goods, and they asked me, "We heard that there is a strong *genlok* in your village, is that true? You do not have to suspect us. We are from Kham Nangchen. You do not have to doubt us because we have come after revolting against the Chinese." They included Gadak and Karma Tenzin. They showed me their protective amulets. I felt extremely happy. To my queries they replied that they were seven people and that in Kham they did not succeed in organizing a huge *genlok*, while we had formed a strong *genlok* in the Utsang region.

Q: The horsemen heard there were protests in your village, but in their village there were no protests, so they decided to come to your village where there were protests.

#76: They said that they were on their way to India and that if anyone in our village was interested, he could join them. They said that they met Gadak [one of the seven men] at Borshoe and he wished to join the group. If anyone wished to join the group, it was either do or die together as a group. When they said that, I felt extremely happy. It was 100 percent certain that I would be captured by the Chinese. I knew that. So I told them that I wished to go [with them]. They said, "Are you certain you want to go? You can't say midway that you wish to return. Do you know the area well? As for us we do not know where the *genlok* are or who the people that side with the Chinese are and who are the people that oppose them."

Q: You took your wife and your child?

#76: My wife's father told me, "You should go. There is no way of escape for both of us from here. Do not worry about your wife and child. If you find the opportunity, do not remain in India, but come back."

Q: Then what happened?

#76: The nomadic camp where I had my animals was called Zakhar Lungpa. The nomads lived at a very high rocky area while I was living at the farmland. The distance between them was like from here to Kushalnagar [approximately 5 miles]. We rode there on horses. From the eight horsemen, five stayed back [in the village] and three accompanied me because they suspected me. I had spoken to my wife that her father had told me so and that I was leaving. I told her that she was not to worry.

Q: You didn't take your wife with you?

#76: No, how could we escape successfully then? I told my wife, "You are pregnant and our other child is just one year old. If I take you, it is impossible to escape successfully. Do

**not worry. If in the future times are good, I will never live in India. I will return home. Do not worry. I am going now." I rode my horse and we left.**

Q: Then?

**#76: I knew my way up until Shang Gyangtse. I knew which route to take in the day and which way to take in the night. Since the protests had already started, we climbed the rocky mountains during the day. I knew that India lay directly in the south, so we walked keeping to that direction.**

Q: So the eight men were on their flight?

**#76: There were nine of us including me. I knew the way up until Gyangtse. Just before Gyangtse, there is the large river of Shigatse. I knew where to get the boats to cross the river while the other men did not. We dare not cross the river in the day, so when night fell I told the boatman a lie. I said, "We are traders. We are on our way to Penam to purchase grains. It is very important that we cross the river tonight. It is imperative. We will give you whatever you ask for." But he said, "That is impossible. I can't do it at night." I pleaded with him to take us across and that we'd pay him whatever he asked for. Then he complied and took us across.**

Q: What happened after you crossed the river?

**#76: Then we reached the mountainous region of Gyangtse. We climbed up a high mountain leading the horses, unsaddled them there and hid the saddles under rocks. There were ten horses; one each for the nine men and the tenth horse to carry our provisions. We freed them on the mountain and walked that whole night. Then we reached Khangmar. We were exhausted and stopped to rest at a mountain pass. Chinese soldiers had learned of our presence and were approaching us stealthily. Gadak told us that he did not feel easy thinking that the Chinese might arrive there. Just as he looked back and said, "There's a Chinese."—the shots rang out.**

Q: Then what happened?

**#76: We were nine people and among us we had one rifle and two pistols. We divided into three groups. The group in the center had the rifle. There were me, Karma, Atsue... We separated into three groups. The groups with the pistols remained on the sides and then we fought. A shot killed one Chinese. There were only two Chinese, but we couldn't see [more of] them because we were in a sort of bend [in the mountain]. We killed one Chinese and then felt we might exhaust our bullets.**

**The other Chinese shouted, "You protestors. If you surrender to the policies of the Communist government you will be excused. Otherwise, I am going to finish you today." We thought more Chinese might join him and then we would not be in a position to defend ourselves, so we removed our [cumbersome] clothes and picked up stones. Those with the**

**guns got ready. Atsue was a very good aim. He fired one shot and the cap [of the Chinese] flew away. He was hit on the forehead.**

Q: The sharpshooter in your group shot the Chinese man through the head. And then what happened?

**#76: One of our men had been hit by a bullet from the Chinese soldier who was just killed. He wasn't dead, but he had a hole about the size of a finger. We killed him and the two Chinese there and took away their weapons.**

Q: There were two dead Chinese and then you killed your colleague because he was injured?

**#76: No, we did not kill him, but he was injured. He could not walk and some suggested that it was better to kill him, while some said we could never do that. So we left him there, the wounded one.**

**Now we were only eight men. We had removed our clothes when we carried the stones. We put on our clothes. Then we saw that Chinese soldiers were arriving on the plains below. We were on the rocky mountain and we fired at them and they fired at us. We climbed up to the top of the rocky mountain. Our bullets perhaps did not reach them and their bullets did not hit us. Now there were two dead bodies and one injured man there. They [the Chinese] had brought along many Tibetans. We were at the top of the rocky mountain and they were down below and it was very easy for us to see them. They carried the three bodies on their backs. We had nothing with us.**

Q: The Chinese carried away the three bodies?

**#76: Yes, they took them away. Two were dead, while the third was not yet a dead body, but they took him away. The battle was over. We talked among ourselves of the possibility of death by starvation. It was the ninth month of the Tibetan lunar calendar and very cold atop the rocky mountain. It snowed and two of the men did not have [warm] clothes, so we tried to cover each other and then took turns to keep a look out. We were hungry and decided that we'd have to rob anyone we came across, whether a Chinese army camp, a soldier or a Tibetan. Then when night fell, we walked down and saw a herd of yaks.**

Q: Then?

**#76: It was our luck that the yak herder had just received his provisions; a bag of *tsampa*, a cut of meat and a pat of butter. We took them away from him. We also took the two or three [articles of] clothing that he had.**

Q: Did you take any of the yaks too?

**#76: No, we did not take the yaks. It was a very steep rocky mountain and we stayed there for two days. We'd heard that India lay right in the south and we made a guess. Keeping**

one snow-covered mountain on our right and another one on our left, we walked right between them.

After sometime we saw some movements on a large plain, which were vehicles. That night we climbed down and again encountered a group of yaks and two herders who were monks. We had some *tsampa* left with us, but we'd eaten the meat and the butter. They [the monks] made us tea, gave us meat and told us to eat *pa* 'dough made from *tsampa*.' We showed them our protective amulets and swore on our gods, so as to remove their suspicions.

They told us, "Well, if that is the case, you must be careful tonight. There is a Chinese [camp] over there and if you go near, they have ferocious dogs. Drink your tea and carry on and by daybreak tomorrow you would have crossed the mountain pass. Keep one snow-covered mountain on your right and the other on your left. Once you have crossed the pass, you are at the Bhutanese border. Then you can relax. If you can't cross tonight it is dangerous because the army camp has ferocious dogs." Then we walked and walked and the group of eight split into three parts. Two men could cross the pass before daylight. The six of us were trailing behind them. Then five moved on and the one called Gadak was left behind. When daylight began we were not able to cross the pass.

Q: Two people were able to reach the border? What happened to the others?

**#76:** We lagged behind due to exhaustion. We had to walk in the snow. At times the snow reached up to here [gestures] and at other times we could walk on the snow. The group split into three and the last one was Gadak. Just around day break at a distance from here to Tengyeling [half a mile] we could see a tall man walking in the snow. We could see that the person was not Chinese, but a Tibetan.

Q: Were everyone able to escape?

**#76:** Yes, everyone could escape. It was just a matter of two to three hours [between the groups].

Q: Was Gadak left behind?

**#76:** When the five of us looked carefully, as the figure neared us we saw that it was Gadak. So we got together. The other two had already gone ahead. We could see that from their footprints in the snow.

Q: So everybody came across?

**#76:** [Nods] Now we became very relaxed in our hearts. In Tibet we wore boots with laces tied here [gestures at calf]. Now there was nothing left below this; the whole lower part [of the boots] was worn out from walking on the rocky mountains. Some men had sores of this size and some of this size [gestures]. Normally one wouldn't be able to walk [in such conditions]. Now that we had no fear, our feet ached and we felt the hunger. The two men

who had gone ahead carried our cooking vessel with them while someone in our group had the *tsampa* bag. We found a stream, prepared some *tsampa* porridge with the cold water and drank it. Then we moved on slowly. After sometime we saw a smoke and found that the two men had made a fire and prepared tea. There were plenty of wild animals and we shot a blue sheep and skinned it. Then we reached Bhutan.

Q: You cooked it [the blue sheep]?

**#76: Oh, yes. We boiled and ate it. We also grilled the meat and ate. That was like a feast. There was no fear in our hearts. Then we met the Bhutanese who said, "You are very fortunate. Earlier when they [the Tibetan refugees] came to Bhutan, we used to hand them over to the Chinese. It is a year or two since His Holiness the Dalai Lama asked us not to return the people. You are lucky."**

Q: Who said that?

**#76: The Bhutanese soldiers who were stationed at the border said that to us. After about 15 days they told us that we had to proceed to Bhutan.**

Q: You are in Bhutan now.

**#76: They said we had to go to the capital city, Thimpu, but they were waiting for a telephone call from their leader. We remained there for about 8 to 10 days and then one day they told us that the call had come. The soldiers were very kind and gave us shoes and clothes. After walking for a day and a half we reached some vehicles. The first place we reached in Bhutan was called Lungtenphu. It is close to Thimpu.**

Q: At that point did you have a plan to get your wife and children out of Tibet?

**#76: At that time I didn't think of that. I was not worried because my wife had her parents and many relatives with her. However, the eight men remained in Thimpu for a month of interrogation. A few leaders from the United States came by helicopter to Thimpu upon hearing that new people had arrived from Tibet. They questioned us, "What is your number when you were in the army?" We related to them how we had escaped. They said, "It is impossible for anyone to escape that way. Since 1963 to 1964, except for people living in the border areas, no one from as far away as Kham Nangchen succeeded in escaping. You are lying." They did not believe us. They thought we were spies. They interrogated us many times for about a week. We told them that we were not spies and that we had to escape due to such reasons.**

**Then they were convinced and told us, "We have questioned you for 15-20 days and we understand your story. We will help you. You can live in the United States. Come with us." We replied, "We will not come to the United States. We want to see His Holiness the Dalai Lama. The six million Tibetans are suffering day and night and that is the purpose why we have come. Each of us did not come to save our lives or earn a livelihood. We have left**

behind children, wives and parents. We have come for a purpose and with an aim." We thus told them and also that we would not go [to the United States].

Q: Why did they want to take you to America?

**#76: They said we could come and live there and that they would help us, but they said that helping us did not mean assisting us to go back to Tibet to fight or provide us with weapons. They said we could come to their country and earn a livelihood.**

Q: Then what happened?

**#76: We told them, "We are not coming [to the United States]. We would like to see His Holiness the Dalai Lama and report our grievances. We do not plan to live here, but return [to Tibet]. For many generations [Tibet has] political and religious relations with India and we are hoping that they will extend us their help. Mainly His Holiness the Dalai Lama and many Tibetans are in India."**

Q: So you wished to go to India?

**#76: "We will go to India and see His Holiness the Dalai Lama and do whatever he tells us to do. We did not come here for our survival. We wish to go back to Tibet and we need help for that."—that's what we told them. After we were questioned thus at Lungtenphu, we went to the Tibetan Settlement in Thimpu. The head of the settlement was Mr. Lhathing. We stayed there for one month. No one interrogated us during that month. Lhathing took us to the hospital for medical checkups and said we would have to leave for Delhi where we would face interrogations. Then he sent us to Sonada [near Darjeeling, West Bengal, India], to a small Tibetan settlement. We had to climb up a hill by a small train and we stayed there for one month.**

Q: Then you came to Bylakuppe?

**#76: During the one month in Sonada, we were interrogated once a week or once in two weeks. The rest of the days, we were left free. Then we were told that we had to go to Delhi, so we went to Siliguri and from there to Delhi. Advance information about our arrival was relayed and there were three or four taxis ready for us.**

**It was the first day of *Losar* 'Tibetan New Year' when we reached Delhi. We were housed on the second floor of a four-story building. The Indian officers spoke in Tibetan and their command over the language was unbelievable. They said, "It is very auspicious [arriving on the day of *Losar*]. Your capital city is Lhasa and the capital city of India is Delhi." The leaders brought us presents, various fruits and juices. We had a very relaxing day, as there was no interrogation.**

Q: When did you come to Bylakuppe?

**#76: It was 1970 when we reached Delhi. We stayed in Delhi for six months and reached here at the end of the year.**

Q: Were you ever able to get your wife and children out of Tibet? Were you ever reunited with them?

**#76: I only met them when I went back to Tibet in 1986.**

Q: What was that like going back?

**#76: My father-in-law had died in prison. And my mother-in-law had also passed away. So there were my wife and two children and they were fine. My wife had good relatives and everyone was there.**

Q: Were they happy to see you?

**#76: Yes, they were happy to see me. However, I told them, "I have come to see you. But if I live here, the Chinese know how I left this place and one day they will certainly make me suffer. You should not feel sad." I gave some presents to my wife and children. They lived very well. I did not have anything when I reached here [Bylakuppe]. They lived better than I and I was not worried about them, so I comforted them and left. If I lived there, I would surely be troubled.**

Q: Did they not punish her when you escaped?

**#76: My wife and children were greatly ill-treated. My wife was discriminated against and lived an isolated life. She was not allowed to talk with other people and did not have any freedom whatsoever. Her father died. [The Chinese told her], "Even if you did not commit it [oppose the Chinese], your husband has done it." However, she was not subjected to *thamzin*.**

Q: Were people curious about your life here when you went back to Tibet? Or perhaps they couldn't talk?

**#76: I could talk to them. The people in Tibet said that their livelihood was okay and they could also trade, however they had no freedom to practice their religion.**

Q: So you returned here and you married again in Bylakuppe?

**#76: Yes, I married again in Bylakuppe.**

Q: And did you have more children?

**#76: We do not have children.**

Q: Are you happy here now?

**#76: I faced a lot of hardship in the beginning, as I did not have anything when I came here. However, thanks to the blessings of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, I have enough and am happy. It's the people there [in Tibet] who do not have freedom and I feel sad that Tibet does not have her independence. As far as my livelihood is concerned, I am happy.**

Q: Do you have any contact with your children?

**#76: No, they live in a very isolated region. Contact is possible with those that live in cities like Lhasa and Shigatse. They live in a secluded region and I have no contact whatsoever.**

Q: That's too bad.

**#76: Yes.**

Q: How old are they now?

**#76: My son was born when I was 25 years old and now I am 66. My daughter was a year old when I was 25. How old are they now? They are in their forties now.**

Q: Just a few more questions.

**#76: Okay. I am fine.**

Q: What do you miss most about Tibet?

**#76: I miss Tibet's environment. The water of Tibet tastes better than the milk of India. It's a happy place.**

Q: I hope the Indian government doesn't hear that.

**#76: [Laughs]**

Q: What advice would you like to give to the younger generation of Tibetans?

**#76: I am a member of the Tibetan Youth Congress. The Tibetan tradition is being lost as people dress like the foreigners. I always tell them, "It is not good if we lose our tradition. You are the seeds [of Tibet]. We will die here in a few years. Since you are the seeds of Tibet, you should preserve and promote Tibet's traditions and customs." My wife has a daughter living abroad and she has children there. When they come here on vacation, they wear funny clothes. So I advise them a lot and tell them not to wear such clothes.**

Q: So you are saying you hope the younger generation will keep the traditions?

**#76: Yes.**

Q: When you returned to Tibet in 1986, what kind of changes did you see?

**#76: There were no changes in the isolated regions. My village, which is an isolated place, has seen no change. However, the cities have changed. When I went there in 1986, the roads of Lhasa were good and paved with tar.**

Q: Thank you.

**#76: [Nods] On my part, I would like to say that I very much appreciate that as advised by His Holiness the Dalai Lama you have taken so much trouble and lent your support for the cause of Tibet. I would like to request you to please continue to help us as much as possible and I hope that you will do so.**

**I thank you both [interviewer and videographer] for the trouble you have taken and the expenses that you have incurred to go to various places to interview and then inform [the world] about it. I am extremely happy and I hope that the issue of Tibet will be resolved soon and that truth will prevail. I request and hope that you will continue to help us.**

END OF INTERVIEW