

Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #78 – Yeshe Wangdu
July 3, 2007

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INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #78
2. Interviewee: Yeshi Wangdu
3. Age: 73
4. Date of Birth: 1934
5. Sex: Male
6. Birthplace: A-nyong
7. Province: Dhoday (Amdo)
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1959
9. Date of Interview: July 3, 2007
10. Place of Interview: House No. 3, New Camp No. 4, Dickey Larsoe Settlement, Bylakuppe, Mysore District, Karnataka, India
11. Length of Interview: 2 hr 15 min
12. Interviewer: Martin Newman
13. Interpreter: Lhakpa Tsering
14. Videographer: Jeff Loda
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

Biographical Information:

Yeshe Wangdu hails from Gyerong, which is located between the Tibetan provinces of Dhotoe and Dhoday. His hometown is close to the Chinese border and had been dominated by the Nationalist Chinese for many years before the Communist Chinese invaded.

Yeshe Wangdu's family engaged in farming as well as cattle-rearing. His mother refused to accede to the Chinese' demand to send him to school in China and instead she sent him to Lhasa. In order to survive there, Yeshe Wangdu donned monk's robes and joined the Drepung Monastery near Lhasa.

Later, hearing about the *Chushi Gangdrug* Volunteer Force fighting the Chinese, Yeshe Wangdu left the monastery to join the Force. He describes how the *Chushi Gangdrug* guerrillas escorted His Holiness the Dalai Lama safely out of Lhasa. He also describes how he confronted Chinese soldiers at Yarlung Phodang and the protective amulet he wore, which he believes protected him from the Chinese bullets.

Topics Discussed:

Childhood memories, first appearance of Chinese, monastic life, Norbulingka defense, Chushi Gangdrug guerrillas, Dalai Lama's escape, escape experiences, life as a refugee in India.

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Interviewee: Yeshe Wangdu

Age: 73, Sex: Male

Interviewer: Martin Newman

Interview Date: July 3, 2007

Question: I'd like to start off by asking a little bit about your life before the Chinese invasion. Can you tell me where you were born?

Interviewee #78: I was born in A-nyong in Gyerong.

Q: Where is that?

#78: It is toward the border of China, near Chengdu.

Q: Where about near the Chinese border? Where is Gyerong?

#78: It is located between Dhotoe [Kham] and Dhomay [Amdo] provinces. On one side is China, on the other Amdo and then Dhotoe on another side. Since time immemorial we were pure Tibetans. However, since the time of the Chinese [Kuomintang] invasion, we had to live under them. They did not oppress us like the Communist Chinese did. We had to pay our taxes to China. Taxes were not heavy, but the people of our village suffered a lot. The worst types of people from China came and settled in our region. After they settled, more such people arrived and there were many thieves and robbers.

Q: What did your parents do?

#78: My parents were farmers. They worked in the fields and were also nomads. We were basically farmers, but were like *samadok*, meaning we did farming as well as raised animals. Animals like *dzoo* and *dzomo* 'male and female offspring bred from a cow and yak' were left at the nomad camps and the nomads gave us butter and cheese. We had to provide them with *tsampa* 'flour made from roasted barley.'

Q: This is in Amdo province?

#78: Yes, you could say that. We did not know whether Gyerong was in Dhotoe or Dhomay province. After arriving in India, when it was enquired from His Holiness the Dalai Lama, he said that we came under Dhomay province.

Q: It was kind of land that was unclear who it belonged to.

#78: Earlier we did not know where it belonged. I don't know what the Chinese say, but now, we in India, consider it under Dhomay province.

Q: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

#78: I had many siblings, but all of them are dead now. Three or four months after I was born, the Communist Chinese arrived and they killed my father.

Q: Why did they do that?

#78: He was killed in a battle. The women, children and the elderly fled into the forest; the men remained in the village and fought [the Chinese]. He was killed in an encounter.

Q: Do you have any idea what year it was?

#78: I don't know when it was. It was the year I was born.

Q: Do you know what year you were born in?

#78: It might be 1934 or 1935.

Q: So there was a lot of fighting between the Chinese and the Tibetans in 1934 and 1935?

#78: The Chinese came to our village and there was a fight. Then they went back. They fought a war in China in which the Communist Chinese were defeated. After losing they arrived at our village. At that time they [the Tibetans and Chinese] fought and then they [the Chinese] returned.

Q: The Kuomintang?

#78: Yes, the Kuomintang and they [the Communist Chinese] fought a war. Not just once, they came about three times [to our village] within one year. The first time they arrived, our people were able to drive them away. The next time the Chinese came down the high mountain pass; our people thought they would not be able to overcome them [the Chinese] as they did not have good guns while the Chinese did. They prepared food and everyone fled when the Chinese arrived. Our people had put poison in the food for the Chinese. They prepared the food, poisoned it and fled into the forest. Later when they [the Chinese] investigated the matter, it was said that my father was the one who poisoned the food. Someone must have given him away to the Chinese and he was killed.

Q: So who raised you?

#78: My mother raised me. We had fled into the forest. I used to cry a lot and my mother's companions told her, "Kill this child. Else the Chinese will learn about our presence and capture us," but my mother could not do it. She told me that she put her finger into my mouth thrice as I slept. She did it three times, but I did not die. People told her to kill the

child because of its constant crying, but my mother did not do so. She just covered my mouth.

Q: She was trying to make you're quiet or she was trying to kill you at that time?

#78: Not to kill me. She was trying to make me quiet by putting her fingers in my mouth.

Q: Who told you this story?

#78: My mother used to tell me that. She told me that such things happened long ago and that was how my father died. Whenever I was naughty as a child my mother used to tell me, "You are the one who ate your father."

Q: I didn't understand that "You ate your father"?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: She means to say that, "You brought ill-omen."

Q: Oh my goodness, when she said that how did it make you feel?

#78: At that time I was just a child, so I did not mind it. I did not mind it whether she beat me or said anything.

Q: But that could not have felt good to hear that?

#78: Yes, that is right.

Q: Then growing up, for a while was there peace or continued warfare?

#78: There was no war. We never heard of them once they left and until the time the Communist Chinese actually invaded us. The Kuomintang was in power in China then.

Q: Did the Kuomintang arrive once the Communist Chinese left?

#78: The Kuomintang was present [in the region] since a very long time. The elders of the village used to say, "It has been three to four generations since we have lived under the Chinese, though we are pure Tibetans. We were under the Tibetan government, but [our region was] lost to the Chinese." I heard such stories.

Q: The Kuomintang continued to make war on you?

#78: No, it was not the Kuomintang, but the Khungtentang 'Communist Chinese.' The Communist Chinese came once after I was born. However, they could not go further than our village.

Q: What is that [Khungtentang]?

#78: The leader of the Kuomintang was Chiang Kai Shek while that of Khungtentang was Mao Zedong. When the Khungtentang rebelled against the Kuomintang, the main people of Kuomintang escaped to Taiwan. Then the Khungtentang came into power.

Q: As a child it must have been hard to play and to do things because you never knew when an army would come or when there would be fighting. Was that how it was like?

#78: When I was young, the Chinese were ever present in our village. Our region had been lost to the Kuomintang Chinese since a long time. The towns in our region were all occupied by the Chinese. However, our people lived in the villages and nomadic camps.

Q: So you saw the Chinese all the time growing up?

#78: Yes, they were there. The Chinese occupied the region. All the villages, which were occupied by the Chinese had two names; a Tibetan name and a Chinese name. My actual village was called Meenu in Tibetan and the Chinese called it Shingai.

Q: Did you go to school?

#78: There were no schools. There was no such tradition in our village.

Q: Did you help out your mother? What did you do as a child?

#78: I helped my mother. As a young child, I used to graze the sheep and tend the pigs. I also went to help at the nomadic camps.

Q: What did you do with the nomads?

#78: The animals that scattered [to graze] had to be herded in the evening. Then while they were being milked, I helped hold the calves as a child. When I was about 12 or 13, I could milk the animals.

Q: You had brothers and sisters too?

#78: I had four siblings: an older brother, two older sisters and a sister who is twelve years younger to me. My father died when I was very young and my older brother was also not old enough to help with the farm work, so my mother married again and she had one child.

Q: Was your stepfather a kind man?

#78: He was a very good man. He treated us very well. He had to because the matriarch of the family, my father's mother, was alive. My grandmother fully managed the house.

Q: She made sure he took care of you?

#78: He took very good care of us. He had to because it was the tradition to listen to the old people. If he did otherwise, there would be no harmony in the family.

Q: So you are very lucky in that way.

#78: [Smiles]

Q: In your town, was Chinese spoken equally with Tibetan or did people speak only Tibetan or Chinese and Tibetan?

#78: We spoke in Gyerong language.

Q: Was it Chinese?

#78: No, it wasn't Chinese. It was a dialect.

Q: Was it Tibetan?

#78: It was Tibetan, but slightly different. It was a different language from Tibetan.

Q: Did you speak Chinese as well?

#78: The script is Tibetan, but the spoken language is different. There were four different dialects that were spoken in Gyerong region.

Q: What were the four different languages?

#78: One was the Trichi dialect. The leader of Trichi came to India and then the whole family of about 50 to 60 people was sent to Canada.

Q: And what were the other languages?

#78: One was the Tawo dialect. Tawo presently comes under Dhotoe province. The other dialect was Timnue and Gyerong, which I speak.

Q: Did you learn Chinese as well?

#78: No, I did not learn Chinese.

Q: As a child, were there any special games or things you liked to play?

#78: Yes, I used to play games. We didn't know other games, but we played *apthang* in our village.

Q: *Apthang*?

#78: Yes, it is similar to the game *kabaddi* ‘holding on to the opponent and wrestling’ that the Indians play.

Q: Who did you wrestle with?

#78: I played with my friends.

Q: Do you ever wrestle with any girls too?

#78: No, we did not wrestle with girls. [Laughs]

Q: Was there a monastery nearby this town? Did you ever have any relationship with the local monastery?

#78: Yes, there were monasteries. There were only small monasteries nearby my village, but if one traveled for a distance of a day or two, there were large monasteries with 500 to 1000 monks in other parts of Gyerong.

Q: Do you remember the name of the very large monastery?

#78: Yes, it was called Choeten Sa.

Q: How did you learn about Buddhism?

#78: Buddhism was always present in our village. After the Communist Chinese took power, every family who had two or three children—the Chinese sent them to school in China.

Q: Did they send any of your relatives to China?

#78: I was listed to be sent. The Chinese set up a school in our village and we were taught the alphabets for a few months. However, my mother said that she would not send me to China.

Q: They wanted to send you to China?

#78: They [the Chinese] came and took our names. There was no choice for us.

Q: And did you go to China?

#78: I did not go because my mother did not send me. She said, "I'd rather send you to Lhasa than China."

Q: Your mother was very smart.

#78: [Smiles] I had an uncle in Lhasa who was a very old monk. She said she'd rather send me to serve him than to China.

Q: Did you go to Lhasa then?

#78: Yes, I went to Lhasa.

Q: How old were you when she sent you to Lhasa?

#78: I was 19 years old.

Q: So that was a little later?

#78: That is right.

Q: Up until the age of 19, you stayed in your village?

#78: Yes, I lived in my village.

Q: Since you saw the Chinese come several times to this area, did you see anything you remember that was especially cruel?

#78: The Chinese were present in our village, but the Communists and the Kuomintang were different Chinese. The Communist Chinese destroyed the wealthy and the influential people. The poor liked them and opposed the Kuomintang. The Communist Chinese captured the influential people and imprisoned them.

Q: Did you see either the Communists or the Nationalists? Did you see them do anything in public to hurt people?

#78: I did not witness anyone being hurt because I was sent to Lhasa when the “liberation” was about to take place in our village. We'd heard that they [the Chinese] caused much misery. The “liberation” happened late in our village. When the Communists first came to our village, a few top leaders of the Kuomintang too came to the village from China, so until after they had captured Lhasa, the Communists couldn't come to our village.

Q: But in the times that there was a continued warfare in your area, how often did you have to run away into the forest and hide?

#78: I do not remember because I was an infant. I heard that we hid in the forest for a long time. When they [the Chinese] arrived, we fled into the forest and when the Chinese left, we came home. My mother and other older women used to say that.

Q: Were you scared when you had to hide in the forest?

#78: I did not understand it, as I was a child. Later when the Communist Chinese soldiers arrived, I don't know how old I was, but my mother sent me to take part in the war. I was given a gun and sent to fight. It was terribly frightening.

Q: How old were you?

#78: I don't know my exact age. Perhaps I was 15 or 16.

Q: So she gave you a rifle and said, "Go, fight them"?

#78: She told me to go and fight. The area was filled with soldiers.

Q: Did you shoot the gun?

#78: I could only fire once or twice. The older men went to fight while they left us to guard the route. They said we should fire if someone [Chinese] came. Five or six of us were left to stand guard at a big bridge. They went to fight the Chinese.

Q: Who did you fire at?

#78: I fired at the Chinese. There was no other route except through the big bridge.

Q: Who did you fire your gun at?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: To the Chinese.

Q: Before that did you ever see any shooting or bombs or anything in your area?

#78: Yes, I have seen. We stood guard at the bridge in the night and the next morning left for the battle place. Bombs were hurled, guns were fired and about 200 Chinese were killed. The Chinese bombs were of this length [gestures] with a round top and a handle made of wood. It made it easy to throw. When it was thrown on the ground, it whirled around, shot up and burst at about waist high. If you lay down on the ground when it burst, there was no damage. If one were standing upright, it would strike the body.

Q: So it was like a grenade. Did you see anybody killed?

#78: Yes, I saw that. About 200 Chinese were killed and two of our people died.

Q: That was when you were 15 or later or earlier?

#78: I am not sure whether I was 15 or 16 at that time. I have forgotten it. I did go to fight.

Q: Fifteen or 16 and you were already experiencing pretty heavy combat?

#78: There was no other option. Except for the very old who couldn't go, boys in every family from ages 15 or 16 were sent [to fight]. We had to obey the District Revenue Officer when he said that everyone had to participate.

Q: Were you scared?

#78: Yes, I was terribly scared. I didn't know that I had to throw myself on the ground [when the grenades were thrown], so the older ones pulled me down. I saw that as a grenade lie spinning on the ground, one man ran and hurled it back [at the Chinese] and it burst there correctly.

Q: Wow! And your friends pulled you down to the ground to save you?

#78: They scolded me and told me to lie on the ground. I was scared and had no experience in fighting.

Q: Were you ever wounded?

#78: No, I was not wounded. I never got a scratch.

Q: Between the times there was warfare, were there any holidays or things you really enjoyed to celebrate?

#78: Yes, I can remember a little. Annually a prayer celebration called “The Great *Monlam* Festival” was held at the monastery in our region. All the people of the district gathered at the monastery and enjoyed a day together. The district administration provided food for the day. I can recall that.

Q: You liked it when they were serving food?

#78: Yes, I enjoyed that. My family was the storekeeper of the district. We were responsible for organizing and serving food to the people. For generations my family served as the storekeeper. Even if there was only one person in the family, either a family member or a servant, he was responsible for serving food or performing any work that was required of by the district office.

Q: What kind of food did you eat at those times? What did they serve?

#78: The food was bread and a piece of cooked meat each.

Q: It sounds like that was a real treat?

#78: It was very tasty. Unlike other parts of Tibet, the food in our region of Gyerong was a little different. We ate *tsampa* ‘flour made from roasted barley,’ but mostly ate bread.

Q: So that was very special?

#78: Yes, it was special.

Q: Do you still think of that today?

#78: Yes, I do remember.

Q: Do you ever dream of it?

#78: No, I do not dream of it, but at times I remember it.

Q: Do you dream about anything in your past? Do you ever have a dream of your life in Tibet?

#78: After I had come to India, for around six months to a year, I always dreamt about the Chinese pursuing me. It was not just me, but most of the people did the same. When I asked the older people, they said that they dreamed about war and the Chinese chasing them.

Q: And today, do you still dream about that?

#78: No, nowadays I do not dream about that.

Q: Do you ever dream about anytime when you were a child?

#78: No, I do not dream about it at all.

Q: This was your life until age 17 and you are already fighting. At 19 you went to Lhasa. So obviously you survived all those battles with the Chinese. Who won those battles between you and the Chinese?

#78: We were the losers.

Q: They won, but they didn't capture you and they didn't kill you?

#78: It is not possible to capture us. We could be killed but they could not capture us. We were armed with guns and swords. Some of the older men would fight with the sword when their bullets were exhausted. Many people died that way.

Q: You used to fight them, but the Chinese won. After that they left you alone apparently?

#78: When I was in my village I only went once [to fight]. After I came to Lhasa I faced problems with survival. My uncle took care of me for a year or two.

Q: Did the thought of going to Lhasa make you excited?

#78: I was very happy. Monks from the monastery in our village were on their way to Lhasa. I was not a monk, I was a layperson and a child with no knowledge whatsoever, and my mother sent me along with the monks to Lhasa.

Q: What did you imagine you would find there when you got to Lhasa?

#78: My mother said, "You have a relative in Lhasa and you will meet him. You don't have to worry about food because he will take care of you."

Q: So you went with the monks; you went on foot or by horseback? How did you go?

#78: We went on foot. It took us a little over three months. We walked for two or three days and then rested for a day during the journey. The Chinese had constructed roads up to Chamdo.

Q: Walking to Lhasa, did you do prostrations?

#78: No, I didn't prostrate. I walked.

Q: What about the monks? Did the monks do any prostrations?

#78: The monks also walked together with us.

Q: When you got to Lhasa, do you remember the first moment you saw Lhasa at the end of your journey?

#78: Yes, I do. When I reached Lhasa, I first went to where my relative resided. However, my relative was not there—he had left for another place to practice dharma. Then I went to see the various monasteries.

Q: Do you know the name of the monastery you went to in Lhasa?

#78: I went to see the Potala Palace and the Gyumed Datsang. Since there was no one to take care of me, I went to the Drepung Monastery. There were many people of my village in Drepung Monastery.

Q: Drepung is a monastery?

#78: Yes, Drepung is the largest monastery in Tibet.

Q: Before that, I want to go back to the moment after you had been walking all this time that you saw Lhasa before you. Do you remember what it looked like?

#78: I thought, "Now I am in Lhasa." In our village we considered Lhasa very holy. People would say that it was enough if one could reach Lhasa. Lhasa was considered very

holy. If a person who had no knowledge of the dharma took a trip to Lhasa and returned to the village, he was revered, so one was satisfied if one could visit Lhasa.

Q: Could you see the Potala from the distance when you entered the town?

#78: Yes, I could see the Potala. The road from Lhasa to Drepung Monastery was right in front of the Potala.

Q: What did you feel when you saw that?

#78: I didn't know how to talk to others because I did not know the Tibetan language well. Some of the people from my village said that that was the palace of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. They said we should first go to Drepung Monastery and then see the Potala Palace. People were allowed to see the Potala Palace once in a year.

Q: That was a great moment for you to see that?

#78: Yes, it was.

Q: So you went to Drepung. Did you live in the monastery there?

#78: Yes, I lived in the monastery. I had no choice because survival was a problem. I had not brought much money from home as we used to hear stories about bandits on the road. Except for me all my companions were monks, so I became a fake monk! [Laughs]

Q: You became a fake monk?

#78: Yes, I did not know to practice the dharma.

Q: Were you a good fake monk?

#78: I knew no dharma.

Q: You just reminded me of something talking about the bandits because you said right at the beginning that in your village A-nyong that there were many thieves and bandits. Can you say something about that? How did you know there were bandits around and what did they do?

#78: People who had traveled earlier told stories about meeting bandits. We encountered them too, and they took away our clothes and the little money that we had. However, I had hidden some money in the collar of my shirt and in the waist of my pants. I had just about enough for the expenses on the journey. We had to let go of what was taken away.

Q: Where do these bandits come from?

#78: The bandits were there on the road. There were many thieves and bandits in Tibet.

Q: I guess that was a problem for pilgrims for a long time.

#78: Yes, that was a problem.

Q: Let's go back to Lhasa for your being a fake monk. At any time was there a certain time in which you felt you don't want to be a fake monk anymore and that you become a real monk?

#78: Yes, I did think that I become a real monk. There were many of my village people and one had to find a teacher. I learned a little bit of the scriptures. If one could not learn, there were many tasks in the monastery one could do. There were many others like me who did not know the scriptures and they performed various tasks.

Q: How long did you stay at the monastery?

#78: I reached Lhasa at the age of 19. I stayed at the monastery until I was 25.

Q: So you spent six years as a fake monk working and just doing things in the monastery?

#78: Yes, I did. I had no other options, but to be a fake monk. It was for survival. My relative returned after about four months and he said, "It is good that you have become a monk. It would be difficult for me to take care of you permanently, and you would face a lot of problems if you did some trade or worked for others. You should remain a good monk."

Q: When you arrived at the monastery and told people about the fighting in A-nyong, what did they say?

#78: When I told the people, they did not believe me. Those that lived in Lhasa did not believe it—saying they [the Chinese] cannot do anything in Lhasa. I related about the fights in my village and the hardships perpetuated by the Chinese. Those from my village and my relative said, "The Tibetan government has soldiers and arms. The Chinese cannot do anything."

Q: Were they worried when they heard this in Lhasa?

#78: No, they were not worried. They said they [the Chinese] cannot do such things in Lhasa.

Q: Do you remember what year that was?

#78: I was 19 when I became a monk, but I do not know the year. It was 1959 when I was 25 years old.

Q: What happened then? You had been six years in the monastery. Why did you leave?

#78: The *Chushi Gangdrug* Resistance Force started and I did not want to remain in the monastery. Most of the people did not want to stay in the monastery. Some said that we should run away for a year [to join the *Chushi Gangdrug*], but the monastery officers came to know of that and stopped us.

Q: You left when you were 25 years old?

#78: That time a group of four of us ran away from the monastery.

Q: So the abbot when he heard that the monks wanted to join the *Chushi Gangdrug* said, "No, you can't do it"?

#78: They did not allow us to go. If they did, there would be no monks left in the monastery. At least 20 monks from each *khangtsen* 'house' wished to leave.

Q: Was your idea on leaving that you were going to join the *Chushi Gangdrug*?

#78: Yes, I did.

Q: So what happened?

#78: Later, I joined it and until the fall of Lhasa, I was in the *Chushi Gangdrug*. The four of us left for Lhasa to shop for clothes. We bought *chupa* 'Tibetan traditional dress,' pants and shoes, which we did not have. We removed the monks' robes when we left Drepung Monastery and put on the layman's dress. We'd bought two pairs of yellow colored *chupa* each.

Q: Then you went where?

#78: A little further away from the monastery we changed our clothes. We each carried a sword, as we did not have guns. We removed the monks' robes and put on the *chupa*. We had a monk with us to whom we gave our monks' robes to take back to the monastery.

Q: You were now in civilian clothes and you each had a sword and where did you go then?

#78: Then we went towards Dhampa Linka to Gongkar. Chinese guards at Gongkar stopped us. The Chinese asked, "Where are you going?" We were forced to lie and said that we were going home. If we told them we were either Khampas or Amdos, they would arrest us. "Where is your home?" they asked and some of us replied that our homes were in Chushul and some said Gongkar.

Q: Very smart.

#78: [Laughs]

Q: Then what did they do?

#78: Then they let us go at once. If you told them you were going home, they let you go.

Q: So you could go past?

#78: So we were able to go past the Chinese. As is the custom in Lhasa, we each carried a green bag in which were our clothes and blankets. We carried the bags just like it was the custom in Lhasa. If we acted like Khampas, they would immediately arrest us.

Q: And you continued on your way and where did you go?

#78: After two days' journey we reached Gongkar, where the *Chushi Gangdrug* were. Once we reached Gongkar, we were with the [*Chushi Gangdrug*] force. It was not simple [to join] as there were different groups. They asked us many questions as to which region [we belonged to] and if we knew people of our region there. They feared that we might be Chinese spies, so we told them our region, but there was no one from our region at Gongkar. They told us that we should go to Tsethang and sent us there. They let us stay for five days at Gongkar.

Q: What happened at Tsethang?

#78: The Chinese and the *Chushi Gangdrug* were together at Tsethang. There were two Chinese houses just below the monastery. They also had a house on the top of a hill. The Chinese lived in two different places. And the *Chushi Gangdrug* stayed in the monastery. During the daytime, no one could move about. People went about in the night. Within the monastery grounds, trenches were dug to make way for the people to move. One could not move around on the ground in the daytime.

Q: Then what happened?

#78: Once we reached Tsethang, we had no guns nor did anyone provide us any. However, we were given food like *tsampa* and meat. In the evenings we were sent out to keep guard. The Chinese were within their houses and we had to patrol the area.

Q: So the *Chushi Gangdrug* accepted you after a while? They thought you were okay?

#78: Yes, they did. We found people from our region at Tsethang.

Q: So they would send you on patrol. Continue, please.

#78: Yes, we went to patrol the area in the night and keep a watch on the Chinese where they went. I did not have a gun and had to borrow from someone else. So we spent about a month watching the Chinese at night. Then the war broke out in Lhasa and we were forced to escape.

Q: Then you escaped?

#78: Yes, I escaped to India. I faced a lot of hardship during the escape to India.

Q: So when you learned that the Dalai Lama had escaped to India, you decided it was time for you to go too?

#78: Yes, we escaped because of that.

Q: Tell me about your escape. How did you do that?

#78: Lhasa was defeated. When we reached Gongkar [from Tsethang], the *Chushi Gangdrug* was organizing five people from each division who owned good horses and good guns to go to Lhasa to escort His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

Q: Then what happened?

#78: The five men from each division were ready to move as soon as word came from Lhasa to escort His Holiness. At a place called Ramagon in front of Lhasa, there was a huge Chinese army camp. The *Chushi Gangdrug* guerrillas surrounded the army camp at night and escorted away His Holiness the Dalai Lama. After that they [the *Chushi Gangdrug* guerrillas] stealthily escaped from there. The army [Chinese army] did not know about the happenings.

Q: Did they go to Lhasa to escort His Holiness?

#78: He was escorted out of Lhasa by them [the Lhasa officers]. They [the *Chushi Gangdrug*] went to surround the army camp because if they [the Chinese in the army camp] came to know, His Holiness would not be able to escape.

Q: Where were you? What were you doing?

#78: I was at Tsethang then. I was not sent. They sent only the senior people and not others.

Q: So when did you decide that you would escape?

#78: His Holiness the Dalai Lama was escorted...

Q: To Tsethang?

#78: No, not to Tsethang because there were constant fights with the Chinese in Tsethang. The Lhasa Tsangpo [river] is close to Norbulingka and His Holiness was escorted away from the army camp, which the men had surrounded and then to a mountain pass. Just before reaching Tsethang they escorted him through another route. They didn't escort him through Tsethang because there was continuous fight with the Chinese there.

Q: I want to know what you were doing.

#78: We were fighting there and I did not know that I would escape to India.

Q: You were fighting then?

#78: There were terrible fights. Many people were killed.

Q: At Tsethang?

#78: Not only at Tsethang, but in many places. The *Chushi Gangdrug* men were spread all over the region of Lhasa and Tsang.

Q: Where were you?

#78: I was fighting at Tsethang. Actually I went on patrol duties at night. Once Lhasa was defeated, the Chinese arrived at Tsethang from Lhasa. At around 6 o'clock in the evening, artilleries, guns...

Q: What happened at Tsethang?

#78: A large number of Chinese soldiers arrived at Tsethang in the evening. All the Chinese stayed underground in their two army camps. We could not destroy them. After the war in Lhasa and its subsequent defeat, huge numbers of [Chinese] soldiers arrived and the *Chushi Gangdrug* men gradually fled. His Holiness had already been escorted out.

Q: Then what happened?

#78: Then at around 6 o'clock when dusk was falling, the Chinese started to fire artillery shells everywhere and then we fled. I did not have a gun. In one of the two *datsang* 'divisions' of the monastery, there were many grenades. They were said to be American grenades and were lost [to the Chinese]. They were round and packed in square sacks of this size [gestures].

Q: What happened to the grenades?

#78: We were told to move the grenades to a safer place in the monastery. As we were shifting the grenades, innumerable Chinese swooped in on the monastery. Then all those men of the *Chushi Gangdrug* who were injured while guarding the area or during the fight, arrived at the monastery.

Q: Did the Chinese march into the monastery?

#78: Yes, the Chinese entered the monastery and we were forced to flee.

Q: What was the name of the monastery?

#78: It was called Tsethang Gonpa. I don't know the names of the two *datsang*. One of the *datsang* was on the verge of collapsing after it was hit by a Chinese shelling. We moved the grenades that were there to the other *datsang*. This *datsang* was not damaged in the shelling.

Q: You fled the monastery when the Chinese arrived?

#78: We had no choice but to flee. The Chinese had already entered where we were staying while we engaged in shifting the grenades. We lost all our blankets, dishes and provisions. We fled with nothing except what was on our body.

Q: When you fled, where did you go?

#78: There was a high mountain. The whole night we climbed the mountain pass. However much we climbed up, the Chinese flashed their lights in the night and fired from their machine guns and artilleries. We faced a lot of hardship as boulders fell from the mountain and people fell from the shelling during that night. Just around daylight, we reached Tandu.

Q: Then what happened?

#78: We had no food. We hadn't had food the earlier night. So in the morning we made some tea and the army [*Chushi Gangdrug*] provided us with *tsampa* and butter. I made a *pa* 'dough from *tsampa*, butter and tea,' but I could not swallow it.

Q: Why?

#78: Because of fear and panic.

Q: Then what happened?

#78: Then we fled that whole day and reached Yarlung Phodang. For one full day the men of *Chushi Gangdrug* and the Chinese clashed at Tsethang. Some of the men left were killed on the Tsetang Gonpori [a hill].

Q: What was your feeling on hearing that?

#78: I somehow survived, but I felt that it mattered not if I died. There was no feeling of loss [regret] if I died. I wanted to fight on and it did not matter if I died. However, we did not have good weapons.

Q: Then what happened?

#78: We resisted a whole day and night at Tsethang Gonpori and some of us managed to escape. At Yarlung Phodang, I met people from my region. They provided each of us with a

horse, for those of us who did not have horses, a gun and bullets. The horses that were given to us belonged to those men that died at Tsethang. Many men died at Tsethang.

Q: Then?

#78: After we were provided with a horse, a gun and bullets, we were told that we could not flee anymore. All the leaders of *Chushi Gangdrug* met there for a meeting. It was decided that 10 men from each division would resist the Chinese.

Q: Who was the leader?

#78: I don't know all the leaders of the *Chushi Gangdrug*. I know Ratuk Ngawang who is [presently] in Dharamsala, India. He was our top leader at Tsethang. Then there were Khaji Chanzo and Lithang Alo Dawa. Andrug Jinda [Andrug Gonpo Tashi] was not where we were. He was in the north.

Q: Were you one of the people chosen to fight?

#78: Yes, I was selected. I was given a gun and quite a few bullets. Then we were left to resist the Chinese while the rest of them fled.

Q: Did you fight?

#78: We waited for the Chinese at Yarlung Phodang. The instructions were that we had to stop the Chinese, resist them and not run away. We waited a whole day, but no Chinese arrived. In the night we went up the hills. We had no tea or food. At daylight we were called down to Yarlung Phodang, where there was quite a big village. We prepared some tea and were given *tsampa*, but before the tea was ready, the Chinese arrived, so very early that morning we fought the Chinese. A shell landed on a rock and many men were injured with the fragments. When a shell hits a rock, it explodes.

Then we fled from there, but we were stopped by the [*Chushi Gangdrug*] leaders at around 8 o'clock. We were sent back to Yarlung Phodang to meet the Chinese. The Chinese had occupied Yarlung Phodang. All 10 men from each division were stopped from fleeing and sent back to fight the Chinese. Many soldiers of the Drapchi Army and the Kusung of the Tibetan government were also there.

Q: What was the name of the place?

#78: That was at Yarlung Phodang.

Q: Wasn't Yarlung Phodang captured by the Chinese?

#78: Though it was captured by the Chinese, we were close by. If the *Chushi Gangdrug* was here, the Chinese were not far away. We continued to resist [as we retreated].

Q: Then what happened?

#78: Then we once again fought at Yarlung Phodang. The Tibetan government's army and the *Chushi Gangdrug* together fought the Chinese several times. Our group of 10 happened to be right in the path of the oncoming Chinese. The arms our group possessed were a machine gun and a *tinke* [?], the best gun.

Q: You possessed only one gun?

#78: That is right. Our group of 10 had only one, but the other groups had their own guns. There were many groups. Each of the groups had only a rifle. We battled for about two hours at Yarlung Phodang. Tibetan soldiers were spread all over on the surrounding hills. The Chinese were marching in and we [our group] were right there in the center. In our group the one assigned to fire the machine gun was struck on the hand by a bullet, and the *tinke's* barrel was hit by a bullet, so they became useless. Our rifles were no match for the Chinese' arms, but we did fight for about two hours.

I was lying there in the field where a stream flowed. The Chinese rushed at us one after the other. We fired at them and even if they fell, some got up and came charging. Others ran away. There was firing everywhere. After sometime a trumpet sounded. I wondered what had happened. I didn't know whether it meant one should run away or fight on, but I was sure it must mean something. I saw that people on the surrounding hills were all running away.

I couldn't flee because one of my comrades was wounded. He was hit on the shoulder and the bullet had emerged from the back [gestures]. There was so much firing that when I lay in the ditch, I could see bullets falling on the ground like rain drops. One of my colleagues was hurt while all the other men fled. The Chinese were approaching us. I told my wounded colleague, "I will carry your gun. Get up and run away while I try to stop the Chinese for a while." He got up and ran staggering away carrying his gun.

They [the Chinese] were firing so much that I thought I would not be able to get up [from the ditch]. Then it slowed down for a while. My wounded companion was able to run to quite a distance. I got up. I had a very good protective amulet which I placed near my heart—we did not wear inner clothes then—then praying to His Holiness the Dalai Lama and hoping that my protective deities would protect me, I sprinted away. There was so much firing that I could hardly flee in the dust. As I ran, I could feel the bullets hitting between my legs, but none hit me because I had prayed to His Holiness and the protective deities. Not even a part of my clothes were touched by a bullet, though they were falling like raindrops.

Q: Did your friend escape as well?

#78: He died after sometime. I fled to a distance about from here to the community hall there [a quarter mile] while bullets rained. After some time, I lay down beside a mound and

it became quiet. Then I found a house and behind that were more houses and I was safe. Nobody fired and it was very still.

Q: But the Chinese knew you were there?

#78: Yes, they did. Our people were also hiding behind the house. Then our [wounded] colleague died and we dug a hole with our swords and buried him. We buried his amulet with him, but took away his gun. We fled for some distance and then all our horses were brought to us. However, my horse was not there. My companions had made a mistake and were informed that I had died instead of my colleague. So I rode my dead colleague's horse and we fled.

Q: What was it like for you burying your friend?

#78: I couldn't be happy because there was no one to even burn a butter lamp for him nor say a prayer. I put his protective amulet over him. Just before he passed away I advised him to pray to His Holiness the Dalai Lama—other than that there was nothing to do. I couldn't delay because the Chinese were pursuing us. After that we didn't encounter any Chinese. They didn't follow us when we fled. We could travel slowly, one day at a time. There were men [of the *Chushi Gangdrug*] stationed at intervals on the roads to resist the Chinese.

Q: Where did you go then?

#78: We came towards Mon Tawang from Yarlung Phodang. However, we were stopped there. His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the majority of the people and monks of the great monasteries had been able to pass through Mon Tawang at night. But we were among the last and couldn't come through. The correct route to take would have been through Tsona, but we heard that the Chinese had arrived in Tsona and they were fighting there.

Q: Because they already knew that His Holiness had escaped that way?

#78: Following His Holiness' escape, many people fled. His Holiness was able to pass through Mon Tawang. When we couldn't, we had to cross the immensely high Mangola pass. We faced a lot of problems.

Q: You climbed the mountain?

#78: Yes, there was no other way. The mountain was so high that [normally] people were not able to climb through the snow but for the yaks. The Mangola is a very high mountain. When we were on the ground and looked up, the yaks halfway up the mountain looked the size of crows. That was how high the pass was. One had to tread very slowly. It was snowing and people walked in the snow. We just about managed to cross it walking thus for a whole day and a night. I found the climb down much easier.

Q: You went up with your horses or you left your horses behind?

#78: Each of us led our own horses.

Q: Then?

#78: After we climbed down, the path was very bad. We passed through rivers, forests and hills. Five to six horses perished unable to climb the hills. They had neither food nor grass and we continued to flee day and night.

Q: They died of starvation?

#78: Yes, they died of starvation. There was no food to be found in the snow.

Q: Then?

#78: After we crossed the Mangola and walked for a day, the Indians would not let us through. They stopped us at a forested hill. We stayed on the hill and had nothing to eat and drink for some days. We put a spoonful of *tsampa* in a bowl, poured black tea and some butter and drank it. Since we had nothing to eat, we shot the yaks belonging to the nomads of the region and ate the meat.

Q: Who did the yaks belong to?

#78: They belonged to the Monpas [people of Mon Tawang]. They were citizens of India, of Mon Tawang. They were nomads and we killed their animals. We ate the meat, but we did not have *tsampa* or salt. It was like eating wood. There was no taste at all.

Q: Where was this now? You were in India doing this or this was still in the Tibet side of the border?

#78: It was at the Indian border. It is not in Indian territory, but in Tibet.

Q: What is the name of the place?

#78: The name is Mangola.

Q: The Indian border police did not let you cross?

#78: We were not inside India.

Q: Where did you go from there?

#78: We wanted to come to India. However, some of the people would not surrender their guns. One had to surrender their guns to the Indians. If one did, he would be allowed to cross [to India]. If the guns were not handed over, they would not let us pass.

Q: To back up a moment, what kind of animals did you kill when you were so hungry?

#78: We killed yaks by shooting them with guns.

Q: Then you got to the Indian border and you handed over your weapons?

#78: We had to remain there for about a week. If we handed over our guns, they let us go immediately. When we arrived there, I saw a huge house, which was stacked with guns inside.

Q: Were you a week at the border?

#78: There were many people. We were not 100 or 200, but about 1000 people who refused to hand over their guns.

Q: You didn't hand in your gun either?

#78: I didn't hand it over until later. Later when everyone surrendered their guns, I did too. When it came to handing over their guns, some people did not want to do it and returned [to Tibet] with their guns. I handed it over and came to India.

Q: So you handed in your gun and they allowed you to cross?

#78: Yes, they did. After traveling for a day and a half, we reached Mon Tawang. At Mon Tawang we were provided with food rations.

Q: How long did you stay in Mon Tawang?

#78: We might have stayed there for about a week. Then I went to Missamari in Assam through Bomdila.

Q: How long did you stay in Missamari?

#78: I stayed around two years in Missamari. All of us, who were under 30 years of age, whether they were *Chushi Gangdrug* guerrillas or soldiers of the Tibetan government army, were retained and the rest of the people were sent to road construction camps. We were taught a little bit of Indian language and reading and writing.

Q: Were you above or below 30?

#78: I was 25 years old then.

Q: How long was it until you got to Bylakuppe?

#78: I came to Bylakuppe in 1970. I stayed for two years at Missamari, but I found it was not worthwhile. I didn't know the language, so a friend of mine Ngawang Ridoie suggested

that we leave for Kalimpong where he knew some people. We reached Kalimpong. He stayed there while I left for Siliguri. I lived in Siliguri for about three years. Earlier people were sent to the Indian army, but I did not know that. When I learned about it later, I joined the Indian army.

Q: How long were you in the Indian army?

#78: I was in the Indian army for only four years.

Q: And then you came here?

#78: Yes.

Q: Did you marry here? Did you find someone to marry here or did you marry before?

#78: I married after I came here. While I was in the army, we were undergoing training in 1965. When the training was on the verge of completion, war took place between India and Pakistan in Kashmir. They [the Indian army] made plans to send about a thousand Tibetans [soldiers of the Indian army] to join the war. Various army units proceeded to the border. We were two units in the training center. One unit had completed only half of the training course while my unit had almost finished it. We were to be sent to Kashmir. We didn't realize it because the Indian officers did not tell us.

Q: Were you sent there?

#78: No, we were not sent. All the men were grouped at the border and were to be sent to Kashmir.

[Tape change. Discussions from 02.07.28 to 02.13.30 regarding location of areas in Amdo province]

Q: When you were in the army, there was the Indian Pakistan war that they wanted the Tibetans to fight in that war. Is that correct?

#78: We were not sent to fight. The Tibetan men were scattered in various units. I was sent as a bodyguard to a colonel. All the units assembled at Dehradun and were to be sent to Kashmir. However, when we reached Dehradun, he [the colonel] received a phone call saying that the war was over. Then he went to Delhi and left us in Chakrata in Dehradun.

Q: And then you were discharged from the army?

#78: The Tibetan government dissolved our division in the army because it was under the Indo-Tibetan Border Police. The guerrilla camp in Mustang was shut down and with it the Indo-Tibetan Border Police. We were asked, "Where do you want to go? Do you want to remain in the army or go to Dehradun? You can go to the settlement or anywhere else." So some stayed in the army and some went to the settlements.

Q: And you came to the settlement here?

#78: Yes, I did.

Q: You came to Bylakuppe where you met your wife?

#78: I met my wife here.

Q: How did you meet your wife?

#78: We were about 100 to 200 single men who arrived at the settlement. We needed houses to live in and the representative [of the Tibetan government in Bylakuppe] told us, "You should talk to people [already settled] who are only three or four people in a family. Each of you should join such a [small] household. If we provide five of you a house together, later when you get married that would create problems for you as there is no more land to distribute." So I found and joined the house where my wife lived.

Q: You came with a hundred soldiers and they said, "You pick any house you want and it is yours," even if someone was living in it?

#78: There was an empty room [in the house I joined]. The house had seven occupants on one side and three on the other. There was place for one more person and so I occupied that small room [points to room].

Q: And was it love at first sight?

#78: [Laughs] It was very difficult for us to get a room, as we were single men. I came from a different region Dhomay and her family was from Utsang, so unless one spoke politely, no one would permit us to join them [even if there was an empty room in the house].

Q: So you talked very nice?

#78: [Laughs] Someone I knew spoke on my behalf and so I got the room.

Q: You talk so nice and now you have three children, right?

#78: Yes, I have three children now. [Laughs]

Q: Is this your daughter?

#78: She is not my daughter. She is my youngest son's wife.

Q: Do you miss Tibet?

#78: Yes, I miss Tibet. People go to Tibet to meet their relatives, but I cannot. Even if I want to go to Tibet, I cannot.

Q: Why?

#78: In the 1980s when the doors to Tibet were opened, my children were very young and it was difficult. I had to send my children to school and earn a livelihood. We were just myself, and my wife and it was difficult. Later, when the children grew up, both of us fell ill. My wife had to undergo surgery twice. I had an accident and broke my shoulder.

Q: So you just can't go. There are too many things happening.

#78: So I couldn't go to Tibet.

Q: What do you miss about Tibet the most?

#78: I miss Lhasa more than my village. I wish I could go to Lhasa.

Q: What about Lhasa do you miss?

#78: I wish to see the Jowo Rinpoche, the Potala Palace and the monasteries in Lhasa, but I don't think I'll be able to go now.

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

#78: I do not have any advice except relating my experiences. I cannot advise because I have no education.

Q: What are your feelings towards the Chinese now?

#78: I hope that due to the grace of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the support from the United States and other countries, we will get to go back to Tibet.

Q: I asked what you personally feel towards the Chinese.

#78: I cannot say that they are bad. I feel very sad that 1,200,000 of our people were killed. Secondly, they are not giving us back our country and it makes me very sad. We always hope that if the United States and the European countries help us, we will get back [our country].

Q: Thank you so much for sharing your story. It's really an incredible story. Thank you.

#78: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW