

Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #86 – Sonam Dorjee
July 1, 2007

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TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #86
2. Interviewee: Sonam Dorjee
3. Age: 68
4. Date of Birth: 1939
5. Sex: Male
6. Birthplace: Kham Chungpo
7. Province: Dhotoe (Kham)
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1959
9. Date of Interview: July 1, 2007
10. Place of Interview: Tibetan Co-operative Society Ltd.,
Lugsung Samdupling Settlement,
Bylakuppe, Mysore District,
Karnataka, India
11. Length of Interview: 1 hr 50 min
12. Interviewer: Martin Newman
13. Interpreter: Lhakpa Tsering
14. Videographer: Tsewang Dorjee
15. Transcriber: Tenzin Yangchen



Biographical Information:

Sonam Dorjee was born in Kham Chungpo to a family who engaged in both farming and a nomadic lifestyle. He and his family were very happy in independent Tibet; he recalls with emotion his childhood days in school and, later, as a monk in Sera Monastery in Lhasa.

Sonam Dorjee describes seeing Chinese soldiers bombard the Potala Palace and Sera Monastery. He also recalls the siege of Bakor and how the Chinese constantly announced on loud speakers that Tibet was “lagging behind” and that the Chinese had come “to help” the Tibetans.

After these events, the situation in Tibet deteriorated and Sonam Dorjee, along with a friend, fled the country. He relates in detail the hardships they suffered on their journey from Tibet. Once in India, Sonam Dorjee worked on road crews and then learned how to drive and repair cars. He saw many Tibetans die from the hot climate in India and suffer from leeches and mosquitoes.

Topics Discussed:

Childhood memories, monastic life, first appearance of Chinese, invasion by Chinese army, life under Chinese rule, resistance fighters, escape experiences, life as a refugee in India.

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Interviewee: Sonam Dorjee

Age: 68, Sex: Male

Interviewer: Martin Newman

Interview Date: July 1, 2007

Question: Hello.

Interviewee #86: *Tashi delek* ‘Greetings.’

Q: Please tell us your name.

#86: My name is Sonam Dorjee.

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

#86: Yes.

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

#86: Okay.

Q: His Holiness the Dalai Lama requested that we record your experiences so that we can share your memories with Tibetans for generations to come.

#86: Okay.

Q: And also inform the world community and the next generations of Chinese about the true history, culture and beliefs of the Tibetan people.

#86: Okay.

Q: During the interview if you wish to take a break or stop at any time please let us know.

#86: Okay.

Q: If you do not wish to answer a question or discuss some issue, please tell us.

#86: Okay.

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

#86: No.

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

#86: Okay.

Q: I'd like to start by asking you about your life in Tibet before the Chinese came.

#86: Okay.

Q: Can you tell us where you were born?

#86: Kham Chungpo.

Q: And where in Kham is Chungpo?

#86: It is in Dhotoe province close to Chamdo.

Q: How big a town or village was Chungpo?

#86: Chungpo is a large town. However, I was very young when I left my village. It's a large town because later I heard people say that Chungpo was established in the ancient times. Chungpo is a very old name. It was right there from the time Tibet was an independent nation.

Q: What did your parents do?

#86: My parents were farmers as well as nomads. In the summer they cultivated the fields, and in winter they went to the nomadic camp.

Q: Did you go to school or did you help out your parents in working?

#86: I went to school when I was young. At that time we were taught Tibetan. I learned Tibetan.

Q: Can you tell me what you are thinking about that's making you sad right now?

#86: [Gets emotional.] We were very happy when Tibet was an independent country. However, now we are in such a difficult situation. When you asked me questions about my childhood in Tibet, I remember my parents.

Q: I want you to take your time, all the time you need to talk about this and you don't have to hurry. If you want to stop, we can stop. Just let us know.

#86: You can continue with your questions.

Q: Did you live in a house or live in a tent?

#86: We lived in a house.

Q: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

#86: There were four sisters and three brothers, including me.

Q: Did you help out your parents tend animals or do agricultural work?

#86: I helped a little with the animals.

Q: What did you liked to do best?

#86: At that time I helped herd the animals. Milk, curd and meat were plentiful as we were nomads.

Q: Were you ever tending the animals alone? Did you spend any time alone doing that?

#86: We didn't have to go far when tending the animals. My parents did their work while we looked after the animals close by.

Q: What was the landscape around your town? Was there any mountain or was it flat? What did it look like?

#86: There were many mountains.

Q: Were there any special games that you played as a child?

#86: Yes, we played special games. In our village, we played with *achu*, which is the bone of a sheep or a goat. We also ran and played catch. Wrestling was popular in our village.

Q: Who did you wrestle with?

#86: I wrestled with boys of my age.

Q: Were there winners or losers? Did you just wrestle and didn't care?

#86: It was to win. If one could push the other down, everybody clapped for the winner.

Q: When did you start going to school?

#86: I think I was about 8 years old when I went to school.

Q: Did you go to school in Chungpo?

#86: Yes, in Chungpo.

Q: And what did you study there?

#86: I studied the Tibetan script.

Q: And what else?

#86: Besides Tibetan, we learned about Buddhism and how to practice the dharma.

Q: So you were introduced to Buddhism in your school.

#86: Yes.

Q: As a child in your village, were there ever performers or storytellers that would travel around different villages and perform in your village?

#86: I don't know about performers or storytellers. However, we used to have people come from other places carrying prayer wheels and chanting "Om mani padme hum." They taught us, "One must practice the dharma before death. Otherwise, one will go to hell upon death." Then there were others who put up a *thanka* 'religious scroll painting' on a wall and traced on the *thanka* the way to Buddha-hood if one practiced dharma, and the way to hell, if one did not practice the dharma. Such people came to teach us.

Q: It sounds just like the Catholics.

#86: I see.

Q: In your home, did you have a special place just for yourself that you liked to, maybe hide in? Did you hide in your home or a special place that you enjoyed to be?

#86: I cannot remember any place that I hid.

Q: You continued to go to school for how long?

#86: I might have attended school for about four years. Then I left for Lhasa.

Q: You went to school for four years and studied Buddhism and Tibetan language in the school.

#86: Yes.

Q: What was the reason you went to Lhasa after four years?

#86: My father, mother and all the children traveled to Lhasa on a pilgrimage. We went to see the Jowo Sakyamuni statue, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the Potala Palace and the Gyetsen sum in Lhasa. As Buddhists, then we planned to see Mount Kailash.

Q: Was this the kind of pilgrimage that you did prostrations?

#86: I went on pilgrimage.

Q: Yes, but what I mean by pilgrimage, did you walk all the way or did you go to Lhasa first?

#86: We came walking.

Q: Did you walk doing prostrations?

#86: No, we did not do prostrations.

Q: How old were you when you did that?

#86: Perhaps I was about 12 years old.

Q: How long a walk was it?

#86: It might have taken us over one month to walk to Lhasa. We walked for sometime and then rested. We did not walk continuously all the way.

Q: You went to Lhasa and then Kailash?

#86: We were planning to go to Mount Kailash, but we could not.

Q: Because?

#86: At that time my mother fell sick in Lhasa. We couldn't continue and stayed back in Lhasa. We couldn't go back to our village either. My elder brother was a monk right from our village and he was in Sera Monastery, so I became a monk and his student.

Q: That was at Sera Monastery?

#86: Yes, Sera Monastery.

Q: How well do you remember that walk, the month you walked to Lhasa? How well do you remember?

#86: Yes, I remember.

Q: What do you remember about it?

#86: My parents carried the *tsampa* ‘flour made from roasted barley’ and our provisions. In those days there were no restaurants on the way where you could eat like we have in India. When we traveled we had to reach the next village, stay with a family and eat with them and sleep there. There were no restaurants. My parents carried the loads; I didn't have anything to carry and walked beside them.

Q: What did you eat?

#86: We ate *tsampa*, meat, butter and cheese. We also ate radishes and potatoes.

Q: Did you find it physically hard to do that?

#86: It was okay because at that time I did not have any problems in my mind. I faced no hardships on the way.

Q: Did your brothers and sister come with you too?

#86: Yes.

Q: So you got to Lhasa and your mother was ill. Your brother joined Sera Monastery and you decided to become his disciple.

#86: My parents and my brother decided that I should become a monk.

Q: So you joined Sera Monastery and you were 12 years old.

#86: Yes.

Q: What was that like the first couple of days that you went to the monastery and your life was completely different than what you had known before? Can you describe what kind of things you had to do and what your day was like?

#86: There was not that much of a difference, except that I had to observe the rules of the monastery. While I lived with my parents, I was free to do what I liked. As I had to follow the rules in the monastery, it was a bit difficult.

Q: You didn't like that?

#86: It was not that bad. It was okay.

Q: You liked the rules? What did you like about that?

#86: If there were no rules everybody would act disorderly. When one joined the monastery, first there was one's teacher, then came the *Khangtsen* ‘house’ teacher, next the *Datsang* ‘section’ *chapri*, the *gekoe* ‘disciplinarian’ and *Khenpo* ‘abbot.’ That was the order that was observed.

Q: You felt that was exactly what you wanted to do at that time?

#86: I liked that.

Q: Did you spend any time in meditation, or was what you mainly did, as a child, chores and take care of things?

#86: I did not meditate as I was too young.

Q: In your time at Sera Monastery, is there any one memory that stands out the strongest for you?

#86: I remember the monks' prayer assemblies and after the prayer session was done, the new monks had to serve tea and *thukpa* 'noodle soup.' However, when one grew older, one didn't have to do that kind of work. When we returned to our rooms [after the prayer assembly], we had to study the scriptures.

Q: You are saying that when you were a newcomer, that's what you had to do?

#86: Yes, that is right. One must perform those services.

Q: Did you participate in any ceremony or in any *cham* 'performance by monks' dancing or anything like that?

#86: I have not participated in *cham* dance. However, I used to watch the *cham* performances.

Q: How many years did you spend in Sera Monastery?

#86: I lived in Sera Monastery from the age of 12 to about 16. I was there for about four to five years. Then I escaped here in 1959.

Q: You have good memories of those years?

#86: One memory that I have, happened before 1959, perhaps 1955 or 1956, when the Chinese first appeared in Lhasa. In Lhasa there was a large field called Bhanashoe and there I saw an airplane for the first time. Men were being thrown down from the airplane. They were all Chinese soldiers. I went there to watch as I was just a child. The men came down from the sky with parachutes and when they landed on the ground, they dug their heels in like this [demonstrates]. They smiled at us and said, "Hello." I was just a child then and that's what they did.

Q: What did you think when you saw that?

#86: When I saw that I wondered how they came down from the sky. I saw that they were Chinese soldiers when they landed. I did not have many thoughts because I was a child. However, the elders remarked that that was not good and that the Chinese would destroy the Buddha's dharma. The Tibetan elders were filled with fear and anxiety.

Q: What was the next thing that happened that made you aware of the Chinese?

#86: Around five or six months after the incident, Chinese troops marched into Lhasa in a procession, carrying huge photographs of Mao Tse Tung, Stalin and Chou Enlai. The soldiers marched into Lhasa from the other side of the Tsangpo River. They were singing a song. I saw that the soldiers had cracked lips and their faces were red. They looked emaciated and very tired. I saw them arrive. They had rifles and machine guns.

Q: When you were a monk in Sera, did you go frequently to the center of Lhasa? Did you go to the Bakor regularly when you were a monk in Lhasa?

#86: Yes, I went frequently. I left Sera Monastery in the morning, circumambulated the Bakor and go back to Sera Monastery in the afternoon. Sometimes I stayed with my parents.

Q: Before the Chinese entered Lhasa, can you give a little description of what that was like around the Bakor area before the Chinese?

#86: Before the Chinese arrived, the Bakor area was a very joyful and nice place. Later after the Chinese arrived, it changed. Earlier it was very serene, but now it's changed and looks very different.

Q: Was it always crowded everyday? Were there many people coming there?

#86: Yes, there were many people in the Bakor of Lhasa. Mostly in the afternoon monks, nuns, men, women and old people come to circumambulate and offer prayers.

Q: Before the Chinese came, did you ever hear or see the Dalai Lama?

#86: Yes, I have seen him.

Q: How old were you when that happened?

#86: I saw him when I was about 14 years old. I was a monk at Sera Monastery then and during every *Losar* 'Tibetan New Year' we were allowed to see His Holiness the Dalai Lama whether he was staying at Norbulingka or the Potala Palace. His Holiness blessed us by keeping his hands on our heads. His Holiness blessed the monks.

Q: You remember being blessed by the Dalai Lama?

#86: Yes, I do.

Q: Did that happen once or did that happen several times?

#86: I received the blessings several times.

Q: After that happened, how did you feel?

#86: I thought I was fortunate.

Q: I can see that that meant a lot to you. Let's come back to when you noticed the Chinese were coming and you started seeing soldiers. Did the soldiers start to come to the monastery?

#86: When they first came to the Bakor, the Chinese soldiers carrying their guns, formed rows of three or four abreast and surrounded the Bakor. At that time they wanted to demonstrate to the people of Tibet that they were a very powerful nation. They were showing off their guns, machine guns and artillery loaded on mules and horses. They thus surrounded the Bakor. At the beginning, they [the Chinese] stayed in tents in the fields outside Lhasa.

Q: Then what happened?

#86: While they were living in tents outside Lhasa, they developed contacts with Tibetan government officials and noblemen. They deceived the Tibetans by bribing them with *dhayen* 'Chinese silver dollars' and succeeded in misleading some of them into forming contacts with the Chinese.

Q: So they acted like they were going to be friends?

#86: Yes and they said, "We Chinese have come here from China as Tibet is lagging behind in the world. You are people who are lagging behind. We will help you catch up and be on par with the people of the world." They set up loudspeakers in the four directions of Bakor and announced first in Chinese and then translating it into Tibetan, "We are helping the Tibetan people. You are people who are lagging behind in the world. We are helping you. We are the people who will help you. The Chinese government will help the Tibetans.

Since ancient times, China has been a religious sponsor for Tibet. Our relationship dates back to thousands of years. We are religious sponsors and used to come to Lhasa to make offerings. We have come to bring progress." That was announced all the time, morning and evening from the loud speakers. Even if the Tibetans did not want to listen, they kept announcing it. As the Tibetans circumambulated the Bakor, reciting their prayers, the announcements went on, "The Chinese government will help the people of Tibet. They are supporters."

Q: So they set up loud speakers in the monastery?

#86: That was not in the monastery. The loudspeakers were set up in the Bakor in Lhasa.

Q: Did they, at least in the beginning leave you alone in the monastery?

#86: When they first arrived, they did not do anything. Then later after one, two, three years, they became worse and worse.

Q: So initially, just to summarize what you were saying as I understand it, the Chinese came, but they kept a low profile. At first they camped outside the city, then they came to the Bakor to show that they were in charge, that they were stronger, so that it does not make any sense to resist them and then they try to propagandize the people with loud speakers to tell them you are an undeveloped country and we are here to help you.

#86: Yes.

Q: When you say that it started one year, two years, three years, it started to get worse and worse. What were some of the things that started to get worse?

#86: First when they [the Chinese] formed relations with the Tibetans, they said that they were going to help. Initially they were kind and helped some people. Later, they gradually began to tighten their hold and their speech became harsher and harsher. They told the Tibetan government, "It is not necessary to have the Tibetan army. The Chinese government's army will suffice, so they [the Chinese army] must be established."

Q: So they were trying to show that, at least in the beginning that they were going to be your protectors. They were going to protect you and you did not need any army because we will protect you.

#86: Yes, that is right.

Q: Continue saying how things started to get worse? What kind of things happened little by little that you noticed where the situation was getting worse and worse?

#86: Then the Tibetan government's ministers like Lukhangwa and others said, "Tibetans need the Tibetan army. Tibet has been an independent country since ancient times. The Tibetans do not need the help of the Chinese. You Chinese should go back to China. Tibet has been an independent country for thousands of years." But they did not go back; instead they became worse and worse. They changed their policy and used violence. They brought in truckloads of soldiers from China. Like earlier, they surrounded the Bakor, performing drills and marching in a procession carrying their guns. They put fear in us when we looked at them.

Q: Did you personally run into any Chinese? Did you have any encounters with them?

#86: Oh, I have encountered many Chinese. I have spoken to the Chinese and I also learned some Chinese words.

Q: How did they treat you? In these encounters, were they just discussions or were they kind of rough with you?

#86: During the earlier times they were not rough. When I spoke to the Chinese citizens, it was just in general. The Chinese soldiers did not talk much with us. There were Chinese civilians who came to trade that I used to talk to. They were also living in Lhasa.

Q: If you would continue to tell us what happened?

#86: Then later in 1957 to 1958, the Chinese started talking more roughly with the Tibetans. While negotiations were going on between the Tibetan and the Chinese governments, prior to March of 1959, the Chinese had already dug hideouts in the hills near Dip on the other side of Lhasa's Tsangpo River and soldiers were stationed there. There were Chinese soldiers also stationed at Nordhoe Linka behind Norbulingka. Similarly, the Chinese army was camped in Jara Linka behind the Potala Palace.

Q: When you say they became more violent, what violence did you personally see?

#86: Prior to 1959, I was living in the monastery. The Chinese told the Tibetan government that His Holiness the Dalai Lama was invited to attend a show at the new Chinese military base. They said, "You cannot bring many guards, only one or two servants. The servants should not be armed. You can come with only one or two assistants."

Q: Before we get to that story, I want to know...you said the Chinese became more violent. I was wondering what you personally, you, yourself saw?

#86: That part will come later in the story. The Chinese then began to get violent. At that time I was at Sera Monastery. Around one or two thousand monks went to the Potala Palace to get weapons from the Tibetan government's armory. We went to get weapons.

Q: You wanted to take weapons to the Potala Palace or from the Potala Palace?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: From the Potala Palace.

Q: To take them for what reason?

#86: The Chinese were invading us and we wanted to defend ourselves.

Q: I wasn't aware that they kept weapons in the Potala Palace.

#86: It seems there were armories in the lower part of the Potala Palace.

Q: So you brought weapons to your monastery?

#86: Yes. When we were on our way to the Potala Palace, the Chinese army fired on the Potala Palace and Chakpori from Dip and other places. I saw young Tibetan soldiers hit by gunshots and bleeding from their necks. We went to the Potala Palace first.

Q: You were one of the people going to bring weapons from the Potala?

#86: Yes, I was among them. When I was inside the Potala Palace, the Chinese fired artillery shells. When the shells hit the windows of the Potala Palace, there were loud sounds. When it hit the walls outside, around five, six, seven or eight stones fell down in a shower of dust. However, it couldn't bore through the walls. I think the walls of the Potala Palace were as wide as from here to here [gestures]. There was no cement; the walls were made of stones and mud.

Q: You were in the Potala when the Chinese army was firing shells at it? Is it correct?

#86: Yes, I was inside the Potala Palace.

Q: What happened next? Did you wait for it to stop to bring the weapons back to the monastery or what happened?

#86: After removing guns from one armory and entering another armory to bring bullets, two or three of our men were killed by the Chinese. When we emerged from the rear of the Potala Palace, the Chinese were firing machine guns from Jara Linka, the Chinese army camp near the Potala Palace. I was hit on my leg and I tumbled down.

Q: And then what happened?

#86: I did not feel any pain then. My companions and I went back to the monastery. My leg was not broken except for a wound.

Q: They took you back to the monastery and you got treatment there?

#86: The only treatment was bandaging the wound with a clean cloth. That was it.

Q: Continue what happened.

#86: When we left the Potala Palace it was about 3 o'clock in the afternoon. It was about 5 o'clock when we reached the monastery. Just before we reached the monastery, the Chinese fired artillery shells everywhere on the Sera Monastery, on the upper parts, on the lower parts and all over it. Then they fired guns. I thought some Chinese soldiers must have arrived there. I looked around and could not see any Chinese soldiers, but they were firing guns.

Q: Then what happened?

#86: That night we went to the monastery and ate a *pa* ‘dough made from *tsampa*.’ When we were in the Potala Palace, we had no food and so we ate *torma*, the dough offerings from the altar.

Q: That was the food that is only for special occasions, but because you were so hungry you ate them?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: *Torma* is not for eating. It is an offering; it is for the gods.

Q: It is never supposed to be eaten. I understand.

#86: We were back in the monastery and that night there was a lot of chaos in the monastery. People were running helter-skelter wondering what was going to happen. When night fell we wondered where to go. Each one ran here and there. After sometime I came out of Sera Monastery to see what the others were doing. People were fleeing and said that the Chinese would shell the monastery. I had two monk friends with me, and so the three of us escaped that night. We left the monastery and we slept the night in a crevice near a waterway a little further away.

[The next sentence is missing from interviewee's statement. It is taken from the translation.]

Early in the morning we climbed a mountain, which was very high.

Q: Then what happened?

#86: After we climbed up the hill and crossed over the pass, the sun set. We spent the night in a cave. The next morning at around 5 or 6 o'clock, a Chinese airplane flew. People called out, "A plane is coming!" and everyone hid here and there. Then as the airplane flew lower, people in our group who carried guns fired at it. I too fired. We just fired aimlessly. The airplane flew higher up and went far away. Again at around 11 o'clock—I don't know whether it was the same airplane or another one—an airplane came again. As people were walking in a line, they dropped bombs and huge stones; like the stones on the river banks.

Q: Why were they dropping stones?

#86: They dropped stones so that people would be crushed and die under it. They were huge stones.

Q: So they ran out of bombs or they didn't have enough bombs or they just dropped big stones?

#86: At that time they dropped stones. It was 1959 then. It looked like their armaments were poor at that time considering their plan [of dropping stones].

Q: What happened then?

#86: Then we passed through Phenpo, Gaden Taktse and met up with fleeing Tibetans one after the other in rows. Everybody was escaping. On the way if we came upon a family and asked for some *tsampa*, the reply was, "Our *tsampa* stock is finished because many people have come." It was very difficult to find food to eat on the journey and we had no blankets. From Gaden Taktse we went to Samye and then towards Tsethang. Tsethang was the place where the Chinese had underground bunkers. As we walked through Tsethang, the Chinese fired machine guns at us in the night. People didn't travel during the daytime as that was the only route. When we traveled at night, the Chinese flashed lights at us and then fired their machine guns. Several people were killed on the road.

Q: In the night?

#86: Yes, in the night.

Q: So you had to pass a Chinese army camp in the night without being discovered, is that what you are saying?

#86: The Chinese were there under the ground.

Q: In trenches or barracks?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: In bunkers.

Q: They were just shooting the guns and some of your comrades were killed?

#86: Yes. Then we continued our journey. We thought of confronting the Chinese and moved towards where they were, but when we were prepared to fight, we did not encounter them. So we moved on.

Q: How was your leg at this time, the injury?

#86: On the journey, I took Tibetan medicine as well as applied it to the injury. The wound did not give me any trouble. I also had the protective amulet of Jigjimai, which I ate so the wound did not aggravate.

Q: At this time you were looking for ways to surprise attack the Chinese.

#86: We were trying to resist the Chinese and fleeing at the same time. Actually, everybody did not know what to do. Everyone kept on walking, but nobody actually knew where we were heading.

Q: Everybody was confused.

#86: Yes.

Q: In the confusion you had your weapons. If you saw Chinese, you were going to shoot them?

#86: We would definitely shoot at the Chinese if we saw them. On the journey, at times we did not get any food for a day or two. We walked day and night under such conditions. When we rested a while in the night, I would fall asleep at that very spot. People woke each other up. Once, a friend and I were left behind for a few kilometers.

Q: Because you fell asleep? You fell asleep and your comrades went ahead of you?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Yes.

Q: You didn't realize they had gone on?

#86: I would fall asleep as soon as I sat down.

Q: Then what happened?

#86: Just before we reached Tso, we heard in the night that the Chinese army was guarding the mountain pass. Tibetans who'd fled earlier were killed and their horses and mules were running about. The Chinese had blocked the mountain pass and that night people said to each other, "Everybody must be very quiet. Do not smoke and be quiet." The next morning everyone started moving on the road—that was the only road and it was blocked—and we were prepared to retaliate if the Chinese fired on us.

Q: How many of you were there?

#86: There were many people with us. I was with the men of Simchung Maga, policemen of Lhasa of the Tibetan government army. Besides them were the *Chushi Gangdrug* guerrillas. There might have been about 300 to 400 people.

Q: That's a large group to be traveling under cover.

#86: The group accidentally met each other on the journey. We were not together from the start. That was the only road available. That morning the Chinese army had blocked the road and they started firing at us. I was young at that time. We had a donkey, which carried a *tsampa* load. I hung on to its tail and in the interchange of firing, it galloped away and me with it. Many of our people and also Chinese were killed at that place.

Q: Because you held on to the donkey, you were able to survive.

#86: The donkey ran and I was able to escape. The [Chinese] army had blocked the road and we had to be careful. There was interchange of fire from morning until evening. As we walked on the road, firing started suddenly and everybody panicked. The *Chushi Gangdrug* guerrillas rode horses and they dashed away. The others did not have horses, so as the rat-a-tat began, I caught hold of the donkey's tail and it dragged me with it.

Q: The horses ran away when they heard the artillery.

#86: Yes.

Q: You didn't let yours go away because you were holding on to it. The donkey was carrying the *tsampa*?

#86: Yes, it had *tsampa* and some other things.

Q: Then what happened?

#86: That day we lost many of our men and some were injured. We led the injured and reached the Indian border near Bomdila at night. As we had nothing to eat, we entered someone's house and in the dark searched for something to eat. I saw a big basket and when I put my hand in and felt, I found something black and round like sheep's dropping. I ate it and found they were black grapes! So everyone filled their pockets with grapes. I told everybody that there were grapes and we should take them. We ate them on the way.

Q: What happened to your donkey with the *tsampa*?

#86: The donkey was with me. It remained with me until the border at Bomdila.

Q: Did you give that donkey a name?

#86: It didn't have a name. When we arrived at Bomdila, the guns, bombs and whatever weapons we had were handed over to the border police of the Indian government. The police gave us a small signed and stamped round receipt and then we moved on to Assam and Missamari in India.

Q: They gave a paper, which was signed and stamped?

#86: The paper with a stamp was the receipt for the guns. It contained the guns' numbers and a round seal.

Q: How long were you in Bomdila?

#86: I was probably in Bomdila a week.

Q: From Bomdila you moved to?

#86: Missamari in Assam. There were no vehicles. We walked from Bomdila to Missamari.

Q: What were your feelings at this time, after you had crossed the border from Bomdila, Assam, Missamari? What did you think? What did you think would happen to you?

#86: Before reaching the border there was anxiety and panic in my mind, fearing when I would encounter the Chinese. However, after crossing into India, during the day time I did not have anxiety and panic, but in my dreams at night I always had anxiety and panic.

Q: You dreamed that they were still coming after you?

#86: At that time I had many such dreams.

Q: Did your brother escape as well?

#86: No, he could not. My father was in Lhasa and my mother had passed away before that. I have an older sister who was left behind in Lhasa. She passed away two years back.

Q: The brother who was in Sera Monastery?

#86: My brother passed away before that.

Q: He passed away in Tibet. He never was able to get out?

#86: He could not. He passed away before that.

Q: Do you know if he was ever imprisoned by the Chinese, or was he ever mistreated by the Chinese?

#86: My brother died before that [Chinese invasion].

Q: What about the rest of your brothers and sisters?

#86: It's been two years since one of my sisters died in Tibet. She has come to see me in India. She had a son named Tenzin Phuntsok; he was imprisoned by the Chinese.

Q: Why was he put in jail?

#86: The Chinese just accused him and put him in jail at that time.

Q: Did you think when you were safe in Missamari that you would be able to return to Tibet?

#86: I thought I would be able to return soon. I thought that I would be able to return within two, three, four, five months or at the most a year. I only had the anxiety of returning to Tibet and never about living here like this.

Q: At that point you were still with the group of people you had escaped with, your fellow monks from Sera Monastery and also the people from *Chushi Gangdrug*?

#86: Everybody was together, the *Chushi Gangdrug* guerrillas, the monks, the soldiers [the policemen of Lhasa], laypeople and everyone.

Q: Even as you traveled from Bomdila to Assam to Missamari, you still went as a group?

#86: At that time people went in groups. Some left in the morning and some left in the evening. It was like the people on the roads here.

Q: Please tell me what happened next when you were sent to other towns? What happened?

#86: It was so hot in Missamari that every day there were 5 to 10 Tibetan bodies being cremated. Because the people had come from a cold country to a hot one, daily 5 to 10 people died.

Q: Did you lose friends that you were close to?

#86: None of my friends died, but I felt very sad to see the bodies of the Tibetans being cremated. Moreover, we were provided with rice and lentils, which we didn't know how to eat or cook. The food was different and seeing so many dying caused great anxiety in me.

Q: Then what happened?

#86: Though it was very hot in Missamari, it was good for the people from Tibet in a way because we did not have clothes to wear and blankets. Since it was hot, the Indian government provided us with shorts. So we wore the shorts, spread our *chupa* 'Tibetan traditional coat' on the ground and slept. The next morning we got up in the same manner and there were no other tasks. We had nothing to wear except the shorts and no other things with us. Shoes were in tatters after walking from Tibet and I threw mine away and walked barefoot. There was no need for socks in the heat, just the pair of shorts, which I wore night and day.

Q: Please continue.

#86: The Chinese always said, "The monks are people who never work. The worst people have fled to India. The Dalai Lama is a reactionary. All the colleagues of the reactionary are monks. All the monks wish to split [the country] and are reactionaries and do not work." We went to construct roads.

Q: Was that said on the radio?

#86: They announced that in the news. They said that the Dalai Lama was a reactionary and that following him were the monks who do not work and wish to split [the country]. While the Chinese said this, we went to work as road crew.

Q: Because the Chinese said that, you were sent to work?

#86: We were not sent to work. The Chinese said that. We couldn't just stay there without doing anything, so we went to work.

Q: So you went on the road crew and then what happened?

#86: We returned to Bomdila from Missamari on the road crew. When it rained in summer, we did not have shoes—I did have a torn pair, but I did not want to use it lest it gets worse—and remained barefoot in the mud. There were leeches and mosquitoes in Bomdila and they sucked our blood. I scratched the area and boils erupted on my legs. It was hot and when I went to sleep at night, I felt dizzy like I was drunk. I would be talking in delirium.

Q: Then what happened?

#86: When we worked in Bomdila, money had high value at that time. I think we were paid about 25 *paisa* per day. I worked for about six months. Then I came back to Missamari and then to Chamba in Himachal Pradesh once again for road construction.

Q: And then how did you get to Dharamsala?

#86: Chamba and Dharamsala are very close. While I worked as a road laborer in Chamba, the Manager of the Himachal Government's Transport Department was very kind to me. Patting me [gestures], he said, "Tibetan boy Sonam is very good." I served as a truck cleaner for the Himachal Government's Transport Department. Later I became a mechanic for the department. When I worked as the cleaner, I learned to drive the truck. After I learned to drive, I went to serve in the Tibetan Government in Dharamsala as a driver.

Q: And from Dharamsala?

#86: After two or three months in Dharamsala I was sent to the Bureau [of His Holiness the Dalai Lama] in Delhi. I worked as a driver, as well as did any other tasks given to me.

Q: For how long?

#86: For about one year.

Q: In this time had you married or had you met anyone?

#86: No, I was not married.

Q: How did you get to Bylakuppe?

#86: While I was at the Bureau, a Mr. Luthi of Swiss Techo said that he was going to help buy tractors for the settlement in Bylakuppe. He informed His Holiness the Dalai Lama that it would be good to have Tibetan mechanics and drivers for the tractors. His Holiness instructed [his aides] to look for young Tibetans who could work as mechanics and drivers

and they spotted me. The Bureau in Delhi told me that I have to go to Bylakuppe as per His Holiness' words.

Q: You were sent here and you stayed. Is that right?

#86: I have been here since then.

Q: Did you meet your wife here?

#86: Yes, I met her here.

Q: How many children do you have?

#86: Five children.

Q: How old are they now?

#86: My oldest son is 33 years old and the next is 30.

Q: When you have a lot of children, it is hard to remember.

#86: [Laughs] One is in college, one is studying in 12th grade and the last one in 10th grade. The youngest is about 16.

Q: What do you tell them, especially your 16-year-old, what do you tell her about Tibet?

#86: I tell all my children, the older and the younger ones, "The educational opportunity that you have is due to the Tibetan government and the grace of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. You should study hard and return the favors. Once you have studied hard day and night, you must serve the Tibetan government. You are the seeds of future Tibet and you must get back Tibet's independence. Just as His Holiness advises, you must follow his words." I say this to my children, to others' children, to my friends' children and to everyone.

Q: Please tell me what is bringing up the tears for you right now?

#86: [Gets emotional] We have to plan to get back Tibet's independence in the future. Fifty years have passed and still from the Chinese side—the Chinese are the most ill-behaved and worst people in this world, like bandits—they do not acknowledge us and we are put in a lot of difficulties. So if we are not enthusiastic and do not work hard enough in the future ... when I think about that, I feel sad and tears automatically fall. Otherwise, thanks to the blessings of His Holiness I work hard and I have no such worries. I have been a member of the Tibetan Youth Congress since its formation in 1970. I have been an active member until now.

Q: And your tears are because you want so badly for Tibet to be free again? Is that correct?

#86: Yes, we should be able to get it back. When I think of that, it automatically makes me feel like this.

Q: Thank you very much for sharing your story.

#86: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW