

# TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

## Background, Methods, Practices, Funding and Team Members

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# TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

## Interviews #1-91

Tibetan Settlements Bylakuppe,  
Karnataka, India June 25-July 7, 2007

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The Tibet Oral History Project serves as a repository for the memories, testimonies and opinions of elderly Tibetan refugees. The oral history process records the words spoken by interviewees in response to questions from an interviewer. The interviewees' statements should not be considered verified or complete accounts of events and the Tibet Oral History Project expressly disclaims any liability for the inaccuracy of any information provided by the interviewees. The interviewees' statements do not necessarily represent the views of the Tibet Oral History Project or any of its officers, contractors or volunteers.

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## **BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES**

Marcella Adamski, Ph.D., initiated the Tibet Oral History Project (TOHP) at the request of His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama. Adamski met with the Dalai Lama in 1999 in Dharamsala, India, where she had been interviewing recently escaped children as part of an investigation of human rights abuses in Tibet. At her meeting with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Adamski asked what more might be done to help the Tibetan people. His Holiness urged Adamski to record the life stories of Tibetan elders living in exile before they died and their stories were lost forever. He wanted their childhood experiences of early life in Tibet, with its rich culture and religious traditions, preserved for generations to come.

His Holiness also believed the elders' eyewitness accounts of China's invasion, occupation, and human rights violations in Tibet needed to be documented for the historical record. He felt that these testimonies would inform the world about the plight of the Tibetan people and, if translated, would educate the next generation of Chinese, who have no accurate information about Tibetan life and culture due to their government's control of the media. The Dalai Lama, known for his interest in technology, recommended that the elders' oral histories be made available to a global audience through the Internet and to the Chinese through translated interviews. Adamski, a clinical psychologist who had previously worked with various human rights organizations, founded TOHP in 2003 to fulfill the Dalai Lama's request.

### Mission

TOHP's mission is to document the life stories of Tibetan elders living in exile and then to disseminate their oral histories through print, broadcast media, and the Internet. TOHP strives to communicate the Tibetan experience through as many diverse media and venues as possible and to make these first-person accounts available to the Tibetan and Chinese populations, the general public, researchers, and scholars. The oral histories collected by TOHP will afford all who review them the opportunity to hear directly from the Tibetans about life in Tibet before, during, and after China's invasion and occupation. It is hoped that the elders' accounts will be used fairly, to compare and contrast the Chinese government's official version of Tibetan history with the personal narratives contained in the oral histories. It is also hoped that people who have access to these oral histories will acquire a deeper and more nuanced understanding of recent important historical events.

### Project Significance

The exiled elders interviewed by TOHP are the last generation to have lived in an unoccupied Tibet. They are the last people on earth to fully embody the Tibetan language and culture. The urgency of TOHP's preservation work is further dictated by the age of the exiles—many are now 80 to 90 years old. TOHP plans to record as many narratives as possible before the exiled elders die and their accounts, memories, and experiences of Tibet prior to the Chinese invasion and occupation die with them. The oral history collection gives voice to a people, their age-old way of life and the total dismantling of their society following the Chinese invasion.

The importance of this project is:

- *Historical*: The project documents personal recollections of life in Tibet before 1949 and eyewitness accounts of the effects of the Chinese invasion and occupation.
- *Cultural*: The elderly Tibetans describe unique, often ancient, customs, rituals and festivals that highlight their art, music and dance, and the roles played by people in various sectors of society.
- *Philosophical*: The interviews reveal how the elders' lives were imbued with Buddhist beliefs and principles incorporated in their daily lives and celebrated through ceremonies at their local monasteries.
- *Political*: The Tibetans' subsequent response to invasion and occupation has been unique among nations. The elders first describe how their resistance forces failed to stop the invading Chinese army in 1959, but go on to state their current commitment to uphold the request of the Dalai Lama to follow the Buddha's teaching of non-violence—even towards their oppressors.

TOHP is the first oral history collection to provide complete English transcripts of interviews with Tibetan elders, made accessible worldwide through the Internet. TOHP also provides video footage of the interviews on DVD and through several international websites. Since these interviews were made available on TOHP's website, there has been a continuous favorable response from Tibetans, historians, anthropologists, oral historians, journalists and others interested in the richness and scope of information found in these eyewitness accounts.

### Documenting Early Life in Tibet

From a cultural and historical perspective, the elders' accounts of their childhood experiences document a period of Tibetan life not easily obtained due to the remoteness of a people living in the vast Himalayan region. Their memories of being farmers, herders, traders, monks, housewives, civil servants and land owners provide rich, first-hand accounts of a way of life practiced for generations. Their descriptions reveal the social, political, cultural and religious aspects of the daily lives of a people living in a free and independent country with its own language, currency, national flag and government. The videotaped interviews provide examples of the various dialects of the participants who come from one of the three provinces of Tibet, Amdo (Dhoday), Kham (Dhotoe) and Utsang and will be useful in preserving these languages.

The respondents gave detailed accounts of the dynamics of family life and religious traditions surrounding birth, marriage and burial ceremonies. They recalled the hardships as well as the joys of their life tilling the fields, herding yaks, caring for large families and studying as young monks in the local monasteries. As their stories unfolded, the elder's initial shyness dissolved and they went on to give memories of their Himalayan homeland filled with majestic mountains abundant with spring flowers and wild animals. They recounted horse racing festivals, the details of trading fairs and the deep satisfaction derived from their Buddhist beliefs and practices.

The interviewees, especially those from lower income levels, were forthright in recounting their memories of severe poverty, lack of education and medical care. They did not hesitate to describe the challenges they faced in paying taxes to the local monasteries and to the Tibetan government, which depended on their contributions to sustain the monastic culture they valued and the government services they needed.

### Accounts of the Invasion of Tibet

After describing their early lives in Tibet, the elders were asked to recount when and how their lives changed. Because of the limited access to news of world events and conflicts, the Tibetans were psychologically and politically caught off-guard by the Chinese army's invasion of their country. Interviewees reported being stunned and horrified by the reality of the invasion as Chinese troops fired on nomad gatherings, bombed monasteries in the middle of the night and imprisoned village leaders without cause. Property and family possessions were confiscated, religious leaders captured, and people were forced at gunpoint to participate in beatings and public humiliation sessions known as *thamzing*, where children were forced to harm their own parents and monks beat their teachers. The constant refrain, "I saw it with my own eyes" often preceded accounts of these experiences.

### Interviews with Trauma Survivors

Because many interviewees were trauma survivors, it was necessary to tread carefully around memories that were partially repressed or compartmentalized. For example, a man described a torture treatment in great detail and in the third person, although he himself was the victim. In another interview, a woman mentioned in passing that no one in her village had children after the Chinese came. It was only when the interviewer explored this curious fact that she revealed all the men and women of child bearing age had been sterilized, including her husband and herself. When a respected monastic leader was asked several times if he used any special spiritual practices to cope with his arduous imprisonment and near starvation, he always ignored the question and instead spoke of the importance of the United Nations interceding on behalf of Tibet. It was as if his individual suffering were not worth discussing compared to the needs of his entire country.

### Influence of Buddhist Teachings

The Buddha's teachings, or dharma, were considered the most cherished treasure of Tibetan culture without which one could not find true happiness. The intentional destruction of the monasteries, treasured ancient texts and revered spiritual teachers struck at the heart of the Tibetan people and the interviewees often tearfully recounted their eyewitness accounts of these events. To understand the elders' past and current reactions to the invasion and on-going occupation, it is important to note that Tibetan culture, and most importantly Buddhism, teaches that suffering in this life is the result of karma or past deeds. Although elders spoke of their anger at the Chinese oppression, they also felt it was perhaps due to their destiny or fate and "partly due to the might of China." The elders often described how they struggled over the years to let go of anger or hatred towards the Chinese because these feelings destroyed their own peace of mind. They described their commitment to follow the Dalai Lama's counsel to refrain from violent retaliation and seek freedom for Tibet through negotiation.

## **METHODS AND PRACTICES**

Adamski founded the Tibet Oral History Project in 2003 by organizing a steering committee to plan and carry out its development. The members attended seminars in conducting oral histories and hired Basya Petnick, a consultant in oral history, to work with the committee. Because there were no Tibetan oral histories of elders readily available in English, except as individual biographies, Adamski consulted with Tibetan leaders, government officials and the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives about the need for the project.

Interview protocols were designed and questions were formulated based on general knowledge of Tibetan history. Adamski gained experience in videotaping, using interpreters, and testing interview questions by initially interviewing three Tibetan elders living in California: a reincarnate lama, the son of a widowed village weaver, and the daughter of a farmer turned resistance fighter. Their oral histories were completed in June 2006. These first three oral histories were so compelling, rich in detail and historically fascinating that the TOHP team knew the project could make a significant contribution by videotaping a greater number of elderly Tibetans.

In 2007, TOHP began making plans to find a location where a large number of elders could be interviewed in a short time period. It was not possible to record oral histories in Tibet without endangering the elders or the team given Chinese government restrictions. Consequently, the largest Tibetan settlements in India located in Bylakuppe in the state of Karnataka were selected for the interviews. There are two settlements in Bylakuppe: one established in 1960, the oldest Tibetan settlement in India, called Lugsung Samdupling Settlement or Old Settlement and the other established in the 1970's called Dickey Larsoe Settlement or New Settlement.

A resident of Bylakuppe, Tenzin Yangchen, was hired as Outreach Coordinator to ask elders in the community if they would like to participate in the project. Although shy at first, many agreed when they learned that the Dalai Lama wanted them to share their stories to inform people about Tibet. Many respondents, due to their lack of education, thought they had nothing important to contribute as individuals, but felt motivated if it would help the cause of Tibet and preserve their cherished Buddhist beliefs for future Tibetan generations. Those who agreed were pre-interviewed by the Tenzin Yangchen to obtain biographical details, such as village of origin, livelihood in Tibet, key experiences, such as imprisonment, year of fleeing Tibet, and other experiences the elders wanted to recount.

### **Interviewee Statistics and Interview Process**

A team of interviewers, videographers, and translators residing in the U.S. and India was assembled to conduct the interviews. Three teams were able to complete 64 oral histories over a two-week period from June 25 to July 7, 2007. The interviews were videotaped in the location most convenient for each elder: homes, community centers, convalescent homes and monasteries. The interviewees ranged in age from 56 to 95, except for a 45-year-old monk interviewed at the special request of Sera Monastery because of the suffering he endured in Tibet. Many women were invited to be interviewed, but they were reluctant to speak and often declined. Subsequently, 77% of the interviewees have been male. Most interviewees came from

two regions of Tibet, Kham (Dhotoe) and Utsang, with only a few elders from Amdo (Dhoday), which is situated farther from the escape routes to India and Nepal. The Tibetan elders interviewed come from diverse backgrounds such as nomads, farmers, housewives, servants, traders, monks, nuns, government officials, and community leaders. During and after the Chinese invasion, some of these individuals became political prisoners, victims of *thamzing* (public beatings), forced laborers, and resistance fighters.

Each interview was videotaped. Interviewers were provided in advance with pre-interview forms containing interviewee details obtained by the Outreach Coordinator. Interviewees were informed at the beginning that they did not need to answer any questions or talk about anything that they preferred not to discuss. They were also asked, both before and after the interview, if there would be a problem if the interview were seen in Tibet or China, in order to gauge the interviewees' concerns about the topics being discussed. If the interviewees were greatly concerned about retaliation against themselves or their relatives, they were given the option to choose a pseudonym which would be used from that point forward.

The interviewers asked questions in English and the interpreters repeated the question for the elders in Tibetan, then translated their answer back into English for the interviewer. Non-Tibetan interviewers were intentionally selected to explore subjects that Tibetans know so well they might not think to ask about or they might feel reluctant to ask about because of cultural constraints. A series of questions was prepared in advance to lead the interview in chronological order, starting with early childhood memories through escape into exile. During the interviews, elders were invited to recount their childhood experiences in Tibet, their cultural and religious traditions, the impact of China's invasion and occupation of Tibet on their lives, and their escape and resettlement in India.

### Editing and Archiving

Interviews were recorded with video cameras using MiniDV tapes. Upon completion of the interviews the video footage from the MiniDV tapes was transferred to computer hard drives for storage and editing. Video footage was edited to remove any pre- or post-interview footage, to remove any names (interviewee or family) when the interviewee requested the removal, or to remove various interruptions during the interview. The edited footage was then transferred to a set of DVDs as the final medium for archival storage and distribution.

TOHP hired a team of Tibetans in India to translate the interviews fully into English and to transcribe the interviews using the video DVDs. The transcribers followed this process:

- 1) Listened to the question posed by the interviewer and then transcribed it in English.
- 2) Listened to the interviewee's complete response in Tibetan and then the interpreter's translation of the response in English.
- 3) Simultaneously translated into English and transcribed the interviewee's response (and that of the interpreter if in addition to the interviewer's statements/questions).
- 4) Replayed each question/answer series to make corrections as needed.
- 5) Read through entire transcript, returning to video for any additional corrections, and correcting various typing errors.

## Tibet Oral History Project

The transcribers also completed a brief biography of each interviewee, a summary of the interview, and a list of main topic keywords.

Once this work was completed, the transcripts were transferred to the United States to be proofread, formatted and converted to PDF documents. Transcripts were edited only to make basic corrections in grammar. No statements from either interviewee or interviewer were removed or changed, except to remove names (interviewee or family) when the interviewee requested the use of a pseudonym.

Each elder received a copy of his/her interview on DVD. The English transcripts are posted on TOHP's website ([www.tibetoralhistory.org](http://www.tibetoralhistory.org)). A full set of videos and printed transcripts are archived at the United States Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. and the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in Dharamsala, India, as well as several other libraries in the United States and Europe connected to Tibetan studies programs.

## **CHALLENGES IN CONDUCTING INTERVIEWS**

Although the TOHP interviews were conducted by Westerners with some knowledge of Tibet's history and some contact with Tibetans or travel in Tibet, cultural differences still played a role in shaping the interviews. Questions directed towards describing "feelings" were difficult for many of the elders to answer or to elaborate upon because it is not typical for Tibetans to focus on one's individual emotional state as something of importance. They tended to evade such questions and focus on what they had witnessed happen to others.

The passage of time may have been a factor that influenced the respondents' abilities to recollect and recount experiences that took place more than fifty years ago. For others, the memories of life in Tibet were remarkably clear and comprehensive—as was the case for Tashi, a 95 year-old man who, for over two hours, recounted his life as a yak herder in surprising detail. While it is likely that many of the elders' traumatic experiences were forgotten, repressed or let go of, many participants gave painful accounts of what they had endured or witnessed. Their courage in reliving these memories was gratefully acknowledged as a contribution to preserving the history of the Tibetan people.

### **Translation Challenges**

One of the three translators on the oral history team was very skilled and experienced in providing accurate translations during the interviews. The more limited skills of the other two interpreters resulted in some difficulties during the interviews. For example, if the interpreters provided inaccurate translations or only abbreviated summaries, the follow-up questions by the interviewer did not always correlate with the elder's previous answer. Although the interviewers strove to develop the topics under discussion, some important issues may have not been explored due to the challenges of interviewing through an interpreter.

In some of the interviews this problem in communication can be noted in the transcripts. Every word spoken by the Tibetan elder and by the interpreter is accurately translated, even if it was not conveyed to the interviewer. If dialects, "old Tibetan" words, or the names of people and places could not be understood or were not translated during the interview, great effort was made to provide correct translations in the subsequent transcriptions of the interviews. Therefore, the written transcripts provide complete and accurate English translations of the interviews. They should be utilized in conjunction with the video footage where the language can be heard and the people can be seen recounting their life stories. Together they provide an extraordinary window into the voice of the Tibetan people.

### **Videos and Transcripts**

The interviews were filmed at locations most convenient to the elders such as in their homes, community centers or monasteries. While these locations offered an informative glimpse into their everyday lives, they often also contributed substantial background noise. Additionally, the small size of many locations placed limitations on the arrangement of team members within the room and also resulted in occasional interruptions/interjections from other people. Changes in weather, lighting, and background noise resulted in interruptions to the interviews when

adjustments needed to be made to improve filming conditions. Heavy rains from the monsoon also were often a source of strong background noise.

All video cameras used in the interviews required MiniDV tapes which record up to one hour of film. Changing of these tapes in the middle of interviews created discontinuities in the interviews. Statements or questions are sometimes cut off at the end of the finished tape or the beginning of a new tape if the conversation was not paused or started along with the videotaping. Although discontinuities are noted in the transcripts, it is not always possible to define them as “tape changes” unless clearly stated in the video footage. There may be other unknown circumstances under which the tape was paused or stopped.

All elders were asked if they felt comfortable having their own name published with their interview. For those who were concerned about retaliation against them or their relatives, we asked the elder to select a pseudonym. This pseudonym is then used for both the video DVD and transcript of the interview. As a result single words or whole sentences may have been deleted from the video footage and transcripts in order to remove the elder’s name or names of family members and relatives. The use of a pseudonym is noted in the transcripts as “alias.”

A subset of transcripts was reviewed for accuracy by two Tibetan language scholars, Karma Thinley Ngodup at University of California, Berkeley, and Robert W. Clark at Stanford University. Both scholars indicated that the Tibetan to English translations provided in the transcripts were good translations. Ngodup noted, “My overall remarks about the transcripts are that these are done very accurately, very precisely, using the correct terminology as much as they could, maintaining the chronology of the story, yet not without little inaccuracies here and there due to the lack of understanding the dialect, and the nature of the Tibetan terminology.”

**FUNDING**

The Tibet Oral History Project interviews from Bylakuppe have been funded by individual donors and grants from private foundations. Major funders included:

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Isdell Foundation

Lucasfilm Foundation

Ron and Cheryl Howard Family Foundation

The Rowell Fund for Tibet/International Campaign for Tibet

The Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation

## **INTERVIEW TEAM BIOGRAPHIES**

### **Interviewers**

#### **Marcella Adamski, Ph.D.**

Marcella Adamski, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist with a practice in San Francisco, California, USA, who has worked for more than 30 years with various international humanitarian and human rights organizations. She served as Director of Survivors International, an organization dedicated to the treatment of survivors of political torture from around the world. She has conducted therapy groups for the International Rescue Committee with traumatized refugees from Bosnia. She has also served as Chairwoman of the Board, and board member, of the Tibet Justice Center (formerly International Committee of Lawyers for Tibet). As a consulting psychologist Dr. Adamski participated in two Tibet Justice Center investigations in Dharamsala, India, conducting interviews with Tibetan women and children refugees about conditions in Chinese-occupied Tibet. She has travelled to Tibet to deliver medical supplies for a health organization serving the rural populations. She founded the Tibet Oral History Project in 2003 and serves as its Executive Director.

#### **Martin Newman, MFT**

Martin Newman, MFT, is a psychotherapist and photographer living in the San Francisco Bay Area of California, USA. For the past several years he has been visiting the Kham and Amdo regions of Tibet and photographing the people and their way of life. He has also conducted trainings for graduate students of psychology and education in China who work with Tibetans in the identification and treatment of emotional problems in children found in rural Tibetan communities. He exhibits photographs frequently in the Bay Area and has been published in *National Geographic Traveler* magazine, *The San Francisco Bay Guardian* and in the book *The Dawn of Modern Korea*.

#### **Rebecca Novick**

Rebecca Novick is currently based in New Delhi, India, where she is the Executive Producer of The Tibet Connection radio program. She also contributes articles about Tibet to *The Huffington Post*. She wrote, produced, and co-directed the award-winning Tibetan human rights documentary, "Strange Spirit: One Country's Occupation," and has produced and edited numerous radio documentaries. She has conducted hundreds of interviews with exiled Tibetans, particularly with elders and with survivors of torture. She has also written and edited a number of books on Tibetan Buddhism and culture, including *Fundamentals of Tibetan Buddhism* and *Illuminating the Path to Enlightenment*.

Interpreters

**Tenzin Yangchen**

Tenzin Yangchen is a Tibetan who was born in India and lives in a refugee community in Bylakuppe, India. She speaks Tibetan, English, Hindi and Kannada. She completed all her education in the English language. She is fluent in the three major dialects of the Tibet provinces of Utsang, Dhotoe and Dhomay as a result of the mixed backgrounds of the community's residents. She served as an accountant for the Tibetan Cooperative Society Ltd., Bylakuppe. Tenzin Yangchen serves as Managing Trustee of the Gesar Charity Foundation and as International Service Director of Rotary Lhasa in Bylakuppe. She is also the Outreach Director for the Tibet Oral History Project and she pre-interviewed 80 Tibetan elders in Bylakuppe.

**Lhakpa Tsering**

Lhakpa Tsering is a Tibetan who was born in a refugee community in India. He received a Bachelor in Arts degree from St. Aloysius College, Mangalore University, India, where he studied Communicative English, Economics and Sociology.

**Tsering Dorjee**

Tsering Dorjee is a Tibetan who was born in India and lives in a refugee community in Bylakuppe, India. He studied English from grammar school through university, attending Annamalai University, India, where he received a Bachelor of Science in Math. He is fluent in Tibetan, English and Hindi. He is presently working as a mathematics teacher and as translator for the "Science Meets Dharma Project," initiated and sponsored by Rikon Monastery, based in Switzerland.

Transcript Translator

**Tenzin Yangchen**

[See interpreter biography.]

# TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

## Interviews #1B-28B

Tibetan Settlements  
Bylakuppe and Hunsur, Karnataka, India  
December 23, 2013 – January 6, 2014

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Because many interviewees were trauma survivors, it was necessary to tread carefully around memories that were partially repressed or compartmentalized. For example, a man described a torture treatment in great detail and in the third person, although he himself was the victim. In another interview, a woman mentioned in passing that no one in her village had children after the Chinese came. It was only when the interviewer explored this curious fact that she revealed all the men and women of child bearing age had been sterilized, including her husband and herself. When a respected monastic leader was asked several times if he used any special spiritual practices to cope with his arduous imprisonment and near starvation, he always ignored the question and instead spoke of the importance of the United Nations interceding on behalf of Tibet. It was as if his individual suffering were not worth discussing compared to the needs of his entire country.

### Influence of Buddhist Teachings

The Buddha's teachings, or dharma, were considered the most cherished treasure of Tibetan culture without which one could not find true happiness. The intentional destruction of the monasteries, treasured ancient texts and revered spiritual teachers struck at the heart of the Tibetan people and the interviewees often tearfully recounted their eyewitness accounts of these events. To understand the elders' past and current reactions to the invasion and on-going occupation, it is important to note that Tibetan culture, and most importantly Buddhism, teaches that suffering in this life is the result of karma or past deeds. Although elders spoke of their anger at the Chinese oppression, they also felt it was perhaps due to their destiny or fate and "partly due to the might of China." The elders often described how they struggled over the years to let go of anger or hatred towards the Chinese because these feelings destroyed their own peace of mind. They described their commitment to follow the Dalai Lama's counsel to refrain from violent retaliation and seek freedom for Tibet through negotiation.

## **METHODS AND PRACTICES**

Marcella Adamski founded the Tibet Oral History Project in 2003 by organizing a steering committee to plan and carry out its development. The members attended seminars in conducting oral histories and hired Basya Petnick, a consultant in oral history, to work with the committee. Because there were no Tibetan oral histories of elders readily available in English, except as individual biographies, Adamski consulted with Tibetan leaders, government officials and the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives about the need for the project.

Interview protocols were designed and questions were formulated based on general knowledge of Tibetan history. Adamski gained experience in videotaping, using interpreters, and testing interview questions by initially interviewing three Tibetan elders living in California: a reincarnate lama, the son of a widowed village weaver, and the daughter of a farmer turned resistance fighter. Their oral histories were completed in June 2006. These first three oral histories were so compelling, rich in detail and historically fascinating that the TOHP team knew the project could make a significant contribution by videotaping a greater number of elderly Tibetans.

In 2007, TOHP began making plans to find a location where a large number of elders could be interviewed in a short time period. It was not possible to record oral histories in Tibet without endangering the elders or the team given Chinese government restrictions. Consequently, the largest Tibetan settlements in India located in Bylakuppe in the state of Karnataka were selected for the interviews. A resident of Bylakuppe, Tenzin Yangchen, was hired as Outreach Director to ask elders in the community if they would like to participate in the project.

Although shy at first, many elders agreed to be interviewed when they learned that the Dalai Lama wanted them to share their stories to inform people about Tibet. Many respondents, due to their lack of education, thought they had nothing important to contribute as individuals, but felt motivated if it would help the cause of Tibet and preserve their cherished Buddhist beliefs for future Tibetan generations. Those who agreed were pre-interviewed by Tenzin Yangchen to obtain biographical details, such as village of origin, livelihood in Tibet, key experiences, such as imprisonment, year of fleeing Tibet, and other experiences the elders wanted to recount.

A group of interviewers, videographers, and interpreters residing in the U.S. and India was assembled to conduct the interviews. Three teams completed 64 oral histories in Bylakuppe over a two-week period from June 25 to July 7, 2007. In 2010, TOHP completed the next series of interviews in another large Tibetan settlement – the Doeguling Settlement in Mundgod, Karnataka, India. Two teams completed 53 oral histories over a two-week period from April 4 to April 14, 2010.

In 2012, TOHP again asked Tenzin Yangchen to coordinate new interviews in Dharamsala, Himachal Pradesh, India, home to the Tibetan government-in-exile. Two teams consisting of an interviewer, videographer, and interpreter were assembled to conduct these interviews. In addition to interviews in the McLeod Ganj region of Dharamsala, the teams also conducted a limited number of interviews in the small Tibetan settlements in Bir and Tashi Jong. TOHP completed a total of 50 oral histories over a two-week period from May 14 to May 24, 2012. One

interview was removed from the collection at the request of the interviewee, leaving 49 interviews in this new set.

During 2012, 2013 and 2014 an additional 32 interviews were videotaped at Tibetan Buddhist centers and Tibetan community centers in the United States and Canada. At the end of 2013 TOHP returned to Bylakuppe, India. Another series of interviews were videotaped in the Bylakuppe and Hunsur Settlements of Karnataka. One team completed 25 oral histories over a two-week period from December 23, 2013 to January 6, 2014. The focus of this endeavor was to interview revered teachers, lamas and rinpoches who were attending the teachings given by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. To this end, 18 of the 25 interviewees were individuals with a religious or monastic background.

### Interviewee Statistics and Interview Process

The Bylakuppe interviews were videotaped at three locations—a private home in the settlement, Sera Monastery and the office of the Tibetan Cooperative Society. Two interviews were videotaped at Buddhist monasteries in the settlement of Hunsur. The interviewees ranged in age from 62 to 90, with the exception of one monk, age 43, who was interviewed by special request. The majority of interviewees were male and more than half were Buddhist monks. Most interviewees came from two regions of Tibet, Kham (Dhotoe) and Utsang, with only one elder from Amdo (Dhoday) and one from Ladakh, India. The Tibetan elders interviewed came from diverse backgrounds such as nomads, farmers, housewives, traders, monks and nuns. During and after the Chinese invasion, some of these individuals became political prisoners, victims of *thamzing* (public beatings), forced laborers, and resistance fighters.

Each interview was videotaped. The interviewer was provided in advance with pre-interview forms containing interviewee details obtained by the Outreach Director. Interviewees were informed at the beginning that they did not need to answer any questions or talk about anything that they preferred not to discuss. They were also asked, both before and after the interview, if there would be a problem if the interview were seen in Tibet or China, in order to gauge the interviewees' concerns about the topics being discussed. If the interviewees were greatly concerned about retaliation against themselves or their relatives, they were given the option to choose a pseudonym which would be used from that point forward as well as the option to not have their face shown in photographs or videos.

For most of the interviews the interviewer asked questions in English and the interpreters repeated the question for the elders in Tibetan, then translated their answer back into English for the interviewer. A few of the interviews were conducted entirely in English. Non-Tibetan interviewers were intentionally selected to explore subjects that Tibetans know so well they might not think to ask about or they might feel reluctant to ask about because of cultural constraints. A series of questions was prepared in advance to serve as options for the interviewer, starting with early childhood memories through escape into exile, but a strict adherence to the questions was not required. During the interviews, elders were invited to recount their childhood experiences in Tibet, their cultural and religious traditions, the impact of China's invasion and occupation of Tibet on their lives, and their escape and resettlement in India.

### Editing and Archiving

Interviews were recorded with one video camera using a direct input to a laptop computer. Upon completion of the interviews the video footage was transferred to computer hard drives for storage and editing. Video footage was edited to remove any pre- or post-interview footage, to remove any names (interviewee or family) when the interviewee requested anonymity, or to remove various interruptions during the interview. The edited footage was then transferred to a set of DVDs as the final medium for archival storage and distribution.

TOHP hired a Tibetan in India to translate the interviews fully into English and to transcribe the interviews using the video DVDs. The transcriber followed this process:

- 1) Listened to the question posed by the interviewer and then transcribed it in English.
- 2) Listened to the interviewee's complete response in Tibetan and then the interpreter's translation of the response in English.
- 3) Simultaneously translated into English and transcribed the interviewee's response (and that of the interpreter if in addition to the interviewer's statements/questions).
- 4) Replayed each question/answer series to make corrections as needed.
- 5) Consulted dictionary, atlas, Tibetan handbooks, monks and/or lay people when clarification was needed for the translation.
- 6) Read through entire transcript, returning to video for any additional corrections, and correcting various typing errors.

The transcriber also completed a brief biography of each interviewee, a summary of the interview, and a list of main topic keywords.

Once this work was completed, the transcripts were transferred to the United States to be proofread, formatted and converted to PDF documents. Transcripts were edited only to make basic corrections in grammar. No statements from either interviewee or interviewer were removed or changed, except to remove names (interviewee or family) or related statements when the interviewee requested the use of a pseudonym.

Each elder received a copy of his/her interview on DVD. The English transcripts are posted on TOHP's website ([www.tibetoralhistory.org](http://www.tibetoralhistory.org)). A full set of videos and printed transcripts are archived at the United States Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. and the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in Dharamsala, India, as well as several other libraries in the United States and Europe with Tibetan studies programs and Tibetan community centers in the United States and India.

## **CHALLENGES IN CONDUCTING INTERVIEWS**

Although the TOHP interviews were conducted by Westerners with some knowledge of Tibet's history and some contact with Tibetans or travel in Tibet, cultural differences still played a role in shaping the interviews. Questions directed towards describing "feelings" were difficult for many of the elders to answer or to elaborate upon because it is not typical for Tibetans to focus on one's individual emotional state as something of importance. They tended to evade such questions and focus on what they had witnessed happen to others.

The passage of time may have been a factor that influenced the respondents' abilities to recollect and recount experiences that took place more than fifty years ago. For others, the memories of life in Tibet were remarkably clear and comprehensive—as was the case for Tashi, a 95 year-old man who, for over two hours, recounted his life as a yak herder in surprising detail. While it is likely that many of the elders' traumatic experiences were forgotten, repressed or let go of, many participants gave painful accounts of what they had endured or witnessed. Their courage in reliving these memories was gratefully acknowledged as a contribution to preserving the history of the Tibetan people.

### Translation Challenges

The interpreter on the oral history team was very skilled and experienced in providing accurate translations during the interviews. Although the interviewer strove to develop the topics under discussion, some important issues may have not been explored due to the challenges of interviewing through an interpreter.

Every word spoken by the Tibetan elder and by the interpreter is accurately translated in the transcripts, even if it was not conveyed to the interviewer. If dialects, "old Tibetan" words, or the names of people and places could not be understood or were not translated during the interview, great effort was made to provide correct translations in the subsequent transcriptions of the interviews. Therefore, the written transcripts provide complete and accurate English translations of the interviews. They should be utilized in conjunction with the video footage where the language can be heard and the people can be seen recounting their life stories. Together they provide an extraordinary window into the voice of the Tibetan people.

### Videos and Transcripts

Filming at locations within the community resulted in occasional interruptions to the interviews, interjections from other people and occasional loud background noises. Changes in natural lighting and background noise resulted in interruptions to the interviews when adjustments needed to be made to improve filming conditions. Although discontinuities are noted in the transcripts, it is not always possible to define them as such unless clearly stated in the video footage. There may be other unknown circumstances under which videotaping was paused or stopped.

All elders were asked if they felt comfortable having their own names published with their interviews. For those who were concerned about retaliation against them or their relatives, TOHP

asked the elder to select a pseudonym. This pseudonym is then used for both the video DVD and transcript of the interview. As a result single words or whole sentences may have been deleted from the video footage and transcripts in order to remove the elder's name or names of family members and relatives. The use of a pseudonym is noted in the transcripts as "alias."

A subset of previous transcripts was reviewed for accuracy by two Tibetan language scholars, Karma Thinley Ngodup at University of California, Berkeley, and Robert W. Clark at Stanford University. Both scholars indicated that the Tibetan to English translations provided in the transcripts were good translations. Ngodup noted, "My overall remarks about the transcripts are that these are done very accurately, very precisely, using the correct terminology as much as they could, maintaining the chronology of the story, yet not without little inaccuracies here and there due to the lack of understanding the dialect, and the nature of the Tibetan terminology."

**FUNDING**

The Tibet Oral History Project interviews from Bylakuppe have been funded by individual donors and grants from private foundations. Major funders included:

Firedoll Foundation

The Rowell Fund for Tibet/International Campaign for Tibet

The Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation

## **INTERVIEW TEAM BIOGRAPHIES**

### **Interviewer**

#### **Marcella Adamski, Ph.D.**

Marcella Adamski, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist with a practice in San Francisco, California, USA, who has worked for more than 30 years with various international humanitarian and human rights organizations. She served as Director of Survivors International, an organization dedicated to the treatment of survivors of political torture from around the world. She has conducted therapy groups for the International Rescue Committee with traumatized refugees from Bosnia. She has also served as Chairwoman of the Board, and board member, of the Tibet Justice Center (formerly International Committee of Lawyers for Tibet). As a consulting psychologist Dr. Adamski participated in two Tibet Justice Center investigations in Dharamsala, India, conducting interviews with Tibetan women and children refugees about conditions in Chinese-occupied Tibet. She has travelled to Tibet to deliver medical supplies for a health organization serving the rural populations. She founded the Tibet Oral History Project in 2003 and serves as its Executive Director.

### **Interpreter**

#### **Tenzin Yangchen**

Tenzin Yangchen is a Tibetan who was born in India and lives in a refugee community in Bylakuppe, India. She speaks Tibetan, English, Hindi and Kannada. She completed all her education in the English language. She is fluent in the three major dialects of the Tibet provinces of Utsang, Dhotoe and Dhoday as a result of the mixed backgrounds of her community's residents. She served as an accountant for the Tibetan Cooperative Society Ltd., Bylakuppe. Tenzin Yangchen serves as Managing Trustee of the Gesar Charity Foundation and as International Service Director of Rotary Lhasa in Bylakuppe. She is also the Outreach Director for the Tibet Oral History Project; she pre-interviews the Tibetan elders and coordinates all interviews in India.

### **Transcript Translator**

#### **Tenzin Yangchen**

[See interpreter biography.]

# TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

## Interviews #1U-35U

Tibetan Settlements in Clement Town, Manduwala,  
Rajpur, and Sahastradhara (Uttarakhand);  
Puruwala (Himachal Pradesh), India  
March 30 – April 7, 2017

Tibet Oral History Project  
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Website: [www.tibetoralhistory.org](http://www.tibetoralhistory.org)

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The Tibet Oral History Project serves as a repository for the memories, testimonies and opinions of elderly Tibetan refugees. The oral history process records the words spoken by interviewees in response to questions from an interviewer. The interviewees' statements should not be considered verified or complete accounts of events and the Tibet Oral History Project expressly disclaims any liability for the inaccuracy of any information provided by the interviewees. The interviewees' statements do not necessarily represent the views of the Tibet Oral History Project or any of its officers, contractors or volunteers.

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## **BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES**

The Tibet Oral History Project (TOHP), on the advice of His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, was initiated by Marcella Adamski, Ph.D. She met with the Dalai Lama in 1999 in Dharamsala, India, where she had been interviewing recently escaped children as part of an investigation of human rights abuses in Tibet. At her meeting with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Adamski asked what more might be done to help the Tibetan people. His Holiness urged Adamski to record the life stories of Tibetan elders living in exile before they died and their stories were lost forever. He wanted their childhood experiences of early life in Tibet, with its rich culture and religious traditions, preserved for generations to come.

His Holiness also believed the elders' eyewitness accounts of China's invasion, occupation, and human rights violations in Tibet needed to be documented for the historical record. He felt that these testimonies would inform the world about the plight of the Tibetan people and, if translated, would educate the next generation of Chinese, who have no accurate information about Tibetan life and culture due to their government's control of the media. The Dalai Lama, known for his interest in technology, recommended that the elders' oral histories be made available to a global audience through the Internet and to the Chinese through translated interviews. Adamski, a clinical psychologist who had previously worked with various human rights organizations, founded TOHP in 2003 to fulfill the Dalai Lama's request.

### Mission

TOHP's mission is to document the life stories of Tibetan elders living in exile and then to disseminate their oral histories through print, broadcast media, and the Internet. TOHP strives to communicate the Tibetan experience through as many diverse media and venues as possible and to make these first-person accounts available to the Tibetan and Chinese populations, the general public, researchers, and scholars. The oral histories collected by TOHP will afford all who review them the opportunity to hear directly from the Tibetans about life in Tibet before, during, and after China's invasion and occupation. It is hoped that the elders' accounts will be used fairly, to compare and contrast the Chinese government's official version of Tibetan history with the personal narratives contained in the oral histories. It is also hoped that people who have access to these oral histories will acquire a deeper and more nuanced understanding of recent important historical events.

### Project Significance

The exiled elders interviewed by TOHP are the last generation to have lived in an unoccupied Tibet. They are the last people on earth to fully embody the Tibetan language and culture. The urgency of TOHP's preservation work is further dictated by the age of the exiles—many are now 80 to 90 years old. TOHP plans to record as many narratives as possible before the exiled elders die and their accounts, memories, and experiences of Tibet prior to the Chinese invasion and occupation die with them. The oral history collection gives voice to a people, their age-old way of life and the total dismantling of their society following the Chinese invasion.

The importance of this project is:

- *Historical*: The project documents personal recollections of life in Tibet before 1949 and eyewitness accounts of the effects of the Chinese invasion and occupation.
- *Cultural*: The elderly Tibetans describe unique, often ancient, customs, rituals and festivals that highlight their art, music and dance, and the roles played by people in various sectors of society.
- *Philosophical*: The interviews reveal how the elders' lives were imbued with Buddhist beliefs and principles incorporated in their daily lives and celebrated through ceremonies at their local monasteries.
- *Political*: The Tibetans' subsequent response to invasion and occupation has been unique among nations. The elders first describe how their resistance forces failed to stop the invading Chinese army in 1959, but go on to state their current commitment to uphold the request of the Dalai Lama to follow the Buddha's teaching of non-violence—even towards their oppressors.

TOHP is the first oral history collection to provide complete English transcripts of interviews with Tibetan elders, made accessible worldwide through the Internet. TOHP also provides video footage of the interviews on DVD and through several international websites. Since these interviews were made available on TOHP's website, there has been a continuous favorable response from Tibetans, historians, anthropologists, oral historians, journalists and others interested in the richness and scope of information found in these eyewitness accounts.

### Documenting Early Life in Tibet

From a cultural and historical perspective, the elders' accounts of their childhood experiences document a period of Tibetan life not easily obtained due to the remoteness of a people living in the vast Himalayan region. Their memories of being farmers, herders, traders, monks, housewives, civil servants and land owners provide rich, first-hand accounts of a way of life practiced for generations. Their descriptions reveal the social, political, cultural and religious aspects of the daily lives of a people living in a free and independent country with its own language, currency, national flag and government. The videotaped interviews provide examples of the various dialects of the participants who come from one of the three provinces of Tibet, Amdo (Dhoday), Kham (Dhotoe) and Utsang and will be useful in preserving these languages.

The respondents gave detailed accounts of the dynamics of family life and religious traditions surrounding birth, marriage and burial ceremonies. They recalled the hardships as well as the joys of their life tilling the fields, herding yaks, caring for large families and studying as young monks in the local monasteries. As their stories unfolded, the elder's initial shyness dissolved and they went on to give memories of their Himalayan homeland filled with majestic mountains abundant with spring flowers and wild animals. They recounted horse racing festivals, the details of trading fairs and the deep satisfaction derived from their Buddhist beliefs and practices.

The interviewees, especially those from lower income levels, were forthright in recounting their memories of severe poverty, lack of education and medical care. They did not hesitate to describe the challenges they faced in paying taxes to the local monasteries and to the Tibetan government, which depended on their contributions to sustain the monastic culture they valued and the government services they needed.

### Accounts of the Invasion of Tibet

After describing their early lives in Tibet, the elders were asked to recount when and how their lives changed. Because of the limited access to news of world events and conflicts, the Tibetans were psychologically and politically caught off-guard by the Chinese army's invasion of their country. Interviewees reported being stunned and horrified by the reality of the invasion as Chinese troops fired on nomad gatherings, bombed monasteries in the middle of the night and imprisoned village leaders without cause. Property and family possessions were confiscated, religious leaders captured, and people were forced at gunpoint to participate in beatings and public humiliation sessions known as *thamzing*, where children were forced to harm their own parents and monks beat their teachers. The constant refrain, "I saw it with my own eyes" often preceded accounts of these experiences.

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Although shy at first, many elders agreed to be interviewed when they learned that the Dalai Lama wanted them to share their stories to inform people about Tibet. Many respondents, due to their lack of education, thought they had nothing important to contribute as individuals, but felt motivated if it would help the cause of Tibet and preserve their cherished Buddhist beliefs for future Tibetan generations. Those who agreed were pre-interviewed by Tenzin Yangchen to obtain biographical details, such as village of origin, livelihood in Tibet, key experiences, such as imprisonment, year of fleeing Tibet, and other experiences the elders wanted to recount.

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From 2012 to 2016 an additional 32 interviews were videotaped in private homes, Buddhist centers, and Tibetan community centers in the United States and Canada. In 2015 a team of interviewers, videographers and interpreters from the U.S, India and Nepal conducted another series of interviews in Nepal. This team was able to complete 52 oral histories over a two-week period from April 6 to April 21, 2015. The interviews were conducted in Tibetan communities located in Kathmandu, Pokhara and Tanahun.

In 2017 one team from the U.S, India and Nepal videotaped 25 interviews in the Dehradun region of India. This team worked from March 30 to April 7, 2017 and travelled to Tibetan settlements in Clement Town, Manduwala, Rajpur, and Sahastradhara (Uttarakhand) and Puruwala (Himachal Pradesh), India. This mission focused on members of the Tibetan exile community who had been previously under-represented in this oral history collection: women, people from Amdo, and Sakya practitioners. To fulfill this goal TOHP recorded the oral histories of 16 women and four men from Amdo.

### Interviewee Statistics and Interview Process

The Dehradun interviews were videotaped at private homes, courtyards at the Old Age Homes, Buddhist temples and community centers. The team travelled to a different Tibetan settlement in the region every few days, which included Clement Town, Manduwala, Rajpur, and Sahastradhara in Uttarakhand and Puruwala in Himachal Pradesh, India.

The interviewees ranged in age from 71 to 92. Unlike previous interview missions in which the majority of interviewees were male, this time two-thirds of the interviewees were female. The interviewees came from all three regions of Tibet: Amdo (Domay), Kham (Dhotoe) and Utsang. The Tibetan elders interviewed came from diverse backgrounds such as nomads, farmers, housewives and monks. During and after the Chinese invasion, some of these individuals became forced laborers and resistance fighters.

Each interview was videotaped. The interviewer was provided in advance with pre-interview forms containing interviewee details obtained by the Outreach Director. Interviewees were informed at the beginning that they did not need to answer any questions or talk about anything that they preferred not to discuss. They were also asked, both before and after the interview, if there would be a problem if the interview were seen in Tibet or China, in order to gauge the interviewees' concerns about the topics being discussed.

For most of the interviews the interviewer asked questions in English and the interpreters repeated the question for the elders in Tibetan, then translated their answer back into English for the interviewer. One of the interviews was conducted entirely in English. Non-Tibetan interviewers were intentionally selected to explore subjects that Tibetans know so well they might not think to ask about or they might feel reluctant to ask about because of cultural constraints. A series of questions was prepared in advance to serve as options for the interviewer, starting with early childhood memories through escape into exile, but a strict adherence to the questions was not required. During the interviews, elders were invited to recount their childhood experiences in Tibet, their cultural and religious traditions, the impact of China's invasion and occupation of Tibet on their lives, and their escape and resettlement in India.

### Editing and Archiving

Interviews were recorded by video on an SLR camera. Upon completion of the interviews the video footage was transferred to computer hard drives for storage and editing. Video footage was edited to remove any pre- or post-interview footage or to remove various interruptions during the interview. The edited footage was then transferred to a set of DVDs as the final medium for archival storage and distribution.

TOHP hired a Tibetan in India to translate the interviews fully into English and to transcribe the interviews using the video DVDs. The transcriber followed this process:

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- 4) Replayed each question/answer series to make corrections as needed.
- 5) Consulted dictionary, atlas, Tibetan handbooks, monks and/or lay people when clarification was needed for the translation.
- 6) Read through entire transcript, returning to video for any additional corrections, and correcting various typing errors.

The transcriber also completed a brief biography of each interviewee, a summary of the interview, and a list of main topic keywords.

Once this work was completed, the transcripts were transferred to the United States to be proofread, formatted and converted to PDF documents. Transcripts were edited only to make basic corrections in grammar. No statements from either interviewee or interviewer were removed or changed.

Each elder received a copy of his/her interview on DVD. The English transcripts are posted on TOHP's website ([www.tibetoralhistory.org](http://www.tibetoralhistory.org)). A full set of videos and printed transcripts are archived at the United States Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. and the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in Dharamsala, India, as well as Tibetan community centers in India.

## **CHALLENGES IN CONDUCTING INTERVIEWS**

Although the TOHP interviews were conducted by Westerners with some knowledge of Tibet's history and some contact with Tibetans or travel in Tibet, cultural differences still played a role in shaping the interviews. Questions directed towards describing "feelings" were difficult for many of the elders to answer or to elaborate upon because it is not typical for Tibetans to focus on one's individual emotional state as something of importance. They tended to evade such questions and focus on what they had witnessed happen to others.

The passage of time may have been a factor that influenced the respondents' abilities to recollect and recount experiences that took place more than fifty years ago. For others, the memories of life in Tibet were remarkably clear and comprehensive—as was the case for Tashi, a 95 year-old man who, for over two hours, recounted his life as a yak herder in surprising detail. While it is likely that many of the elders' traumatic experiences were forgotten, repressed or let go of, many participants gave painful accounts of what they had endured or witnessed. Their courage in reliving these memories was gratefully acknowledged as a contribution to preserving the history of the Tibetan people.

### Translation Challenges

The interpreter on the oral history team was very skilled and experienced in providing accurate translations during the interviews. Nonetheless, the process of simultaneous interpretation may have resulted in some minor difficulties during the interviews. For example, if the interpreter provided an inaccurate translation or only an abbreviated summary, the follow-up questions by the interviewer did not always correlate with the elder's previous answer. Although the interviewer strove to develop the topics under discussion, some important issues may have not been explored due to the challenges of interviewing through an interpreter.

Every word spoken by the Tibetan elder and by the interpreter is accurately translated in the transcripts, even if it was not conveyed to the interviewer. If dialects, "old Tibetan" words, or the names of people and places could not be understood or were not translated during the interview, great effort was made to provide correct translations in the subsequent transcriptions of the interviews. Therefore, the written transcripts provide complete and accurate English translations of the interviews. They should be utilized in conjunction with the video footage where the language can be heard and the people can be seen recounting their life stories. Together they provide an extraordinary window into the voice of the Tibetan people.

### Videos and Transcripts

Filming at locations within the community resulted in occasional interruptions to the interviews, interjections from other people and occasional loud background noises. Changes in natural lighting and background noise resulted in interruptions to the interviews when adjustments needed to be made to improve filming conditions. Although discontinuities are noted in the transcripts, it is not always possible to define them as such unless clearly stated in the video footage. There may be other unknown circumstances under which videotaping was paused or stopped.

A subset of previous transcripts was reviewed for accuracy by two Tibetan language scholars, Karma Thinley Ngodup at University of California, Berkeley, and Robert W. Clark at Stanford University. Both scholars indicated that the Tibetan to English translations provided in the transcripts were good translations. Ngodup noted, “My overall remarks about the transcripts are that these are done very accurately, very precisely, using the correct terminology as much as they could, maintaining the chronology of the story, yet not without little inaccuracies here and there due to the lack of understanding the dialect, and the nature of the Tibetan terminology.”

## **FUNDING**

The Tibet Oral History Project interviews from Dehradun have been funded by individual donors and grants from private foundations.

## **INTERVIEW TEAM BIOGRAPHIES**

### Interviewer

#### **Marcella Adamski, Ph.D.**

Marcella Adamski, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist with a practice in San Francisco, California, USA, who has worked for more than 30 years with various international humanitarian and human rights organizations. She served as Director of Survivors International, an organization dedicated to the treatment of survivors of political torture from around the world. She has conducted therapy groups for the International Rescue Committee with traumatized refugees from Bosnia. She has also served as a board member, of the Tibet Justice Center (formerly International Committee of Lawyers for Tibet). As a consulting psychologist Dr. Adamski participated in two Tibet Justice Center investigations in Dharamsala, India, conducting interviews with Tibetan women and children refugees about conditions in Chinese-occupied Tibet. She founded the Tibet Oral History Project in 2003 and serves as its Executive Director.

### Interpreter

#### **Tenzin Yangchen**

Tenzin Yangchen is a Tibetan who was born in India and lives in a refugee community in Bylakuppe, India. She speaks Tibetan, English, Hindi and Kannada. She completed all her education in the English language. She is fluent in the three major dialects of the Tibet provinces as a result of the mixed backgrounds of her community’s residents. Tenzin Yangchen serves as Managing Trustee of the Gesar Charity Foundation and as International Service Director of Rotary Lhasa in Bylakuppe. She is also the Outreach Director for the Tibet Oral History Project; she pre-interviews the Tibetan elders and coordinates all interviews in India and Nepal.

### Transcript Translator

**Tenzin Yangchen** [See interpreter biography.]

# TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

## Interviews #1D-73D

Dharamsala, Tashi Jong and Bir Tibetan Communities  
Himachal Pradesh, India  
May 14-24, 2012

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## **BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES**

The Tibet Oral History Project (TOHP), on the advice of His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, was initiated by Marcella Adamski, Ph.D. She met with the Dalai Lama in 1999 in Dharamsala, India, where she had been interviewing recently escaped children as part of an investigation of human rights abuses in Tibet. At her meeting with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Adamski asked what more might be done to help the Tibetan people. His Holiness urged Adamski to record the life stories of Tibetan elders living in exile before they died and their stories were lost forever. He wanted their childhood experiences of early life in Tibet, with its rich culture and religious traditions, preserved for generations to come.

His Holiness also believed the elders' eyewitness accounts of China's invasion, occupation, and human rights violations in Tibet needed to be documented for the historical record. He felt that these testimonies would inform the world about the plight of the Tibetan people and, if translated, would educate the next generation of Chinese, who have no accurate information about Tibetan life and culture due to their government's control of the media. The Dalai Lama, known for his interest in technology, recommended that the elders' oral histories be made available to a global audience through the Internet and to the Chinese through translated interviews. Adamski, a clinical psychologist who had previously worked with various human rights organizations, founded TOHP in 2003 to fulfill the Dalai Lama's request.

### Mission

TOHP's mission is to document the life stories of Tibetan elders living in exile and then to disseminate their oral histories through print, broadcast media, and the Internet. TOHP strives to communicate the Tibetan experience through as many diverse media and venues as possible and to make these first-person accounts available to the Tibetan and Chinese populations, the general public, researchers, and scholars. The oral histories collected by TOHP will afford all who review them the opportunity to hear directly from the Tibetans about life in Tibet before, during, and after China's invasion and occupation. It is hoped that the elders' accounts will be used fairly, to compare and contrast the Chinese government's official version of Tibetan history with the personal narratives contained in the oral histories. It is also hoped that people who have access to these oral histories will acquire a deeper and more nuanced understanding of recent important historical events.

### Project Significance

The exiled elders interviewed by TOHP are the last generation to have lived in an unoccupied Tibet. They are the last people on earth to fully embody the Tibetan language and culture. The urgency of TOHP's preservation work is further dictated by the age of the exiles—many are now 80 to 90 years old. TOHP plans to record as many narratives as possible before the exiled elders die and their accounts, memories, and experiences of Tibet prior to the Chinese invasion and occupation die with them. The oral history collection gives voice to a people, their age-old way of life and the total dismantling of their society following the Chinese invasion.

The importance of this project is:

- *Historical*: The project documents personal recollections of life in Tibet before 1949 and eyewitness accounts of the effects of the Chinese invasion and occupation.
- *Cultural*: The elderly Tibetans describe unique, often ancient, customs, rituals and festivals that highlight their art, music and dance, and the roles played by people in various sectors of society.
- *Philosophical*: The interviews reveal how the elders' lives were imbued with Buddhist beliefs and principles incorporated in their daily lives and celebrated through ceremonies at their local monasteries.
- *Political*: The Tibetans' subsequent response to invasion and occupation has been unique among nations. The elders first describe how their resistance forces failed to stop the invading Chinese army in 1959, but go on to state their current commitment to uphold the request of the Dalai Lama to follow the Buddha's teaching of non-violence—even towards their oppressors.

TOHP is the first oral history collection to provide complete English transcripts of interviews with Tibetan elders, made accessible worldwide through the Internet. TOHP also provides video footage of the interviews on DVD and through several international websites. Since these interviews were made available on TOHP's website, there has been a continuous favorable response from Tibetans, historians, anthropologists, oral historians, journalists and others interested in the richness and scope of information found in these eyewitness accounts.

### Documenting Early Life in Tibet

From a cultural and historical perspective, the elders' accounts of their childhood experiences document a period of Tibetan life not easily obtained due to the remoteness of a people living in the vast Himalayan region. Their memories of being farmers, herders, traders, monks, housewives, civil servants and land owners provide rich, first-hand accounts of a way of life practiced for generations. Their descriptions reveal the social, political, cultural and religious aspects of the daily lives of a people living in a free and independent country with its own language, currency, national flag and government. The videotaped interviews provide examples of the various dialects of the participants who come from one of the three provinces of Tibet, Amdo (Dhoday), Kham (Dhotoe) and Utsang and will be useful in preserving these languages.

The respondents gave detailed accounts of the dynamics of family life and religious traditions surrounding birth, marriage and burial ceremonies. They recalled the hardships as well as the joys of their life tilling the fields, herding yaks, caring for large families and studying as young monks in the local monasteries. As their stories unfolded, the elder's initial shyness dissolved and they went on to give memories of their Himalayan homeland filled with majestic mountains abundant with spring flowers and wild animals. They recounted horse racing festivals, the details of trading fairs and the deep satisfaction derived from their Buddhist beliefs and practices.

The interviewees, especially those from lower income levels, were forthright in recounting their memories of severe poverty, lack of education and medical care. They did not hesitate to describe the challenges they faced in paying taxes to the local monasteries and to the Tibetan government, which depended on their contributions to sustain the monastic culture they valued and the government services they needed.

### Accounts of the Invasion of Tibet

After describing their early lives in Tibet, the elders were asked to recount when and how their lives changed. Because of the limited access to news of world events and conflicts, the Tibetans were psychologically and politically caught off-guard by the Chinese army's invasion of their country. Interviewees reported being stunned and horrified by the reality of the invasion as Chinese troops fired on nomad gatherings, bombed monasteries in the middle of the night and imprisoned village leaders without cause. Property and family possessions were confiscated, religious leaders captured, and people were forced at gunpoint to participate in beatings and public humiliation sessions known as *thamzing*, where children were forced to harm their own parents and monks beat their teachers. The constant refrain, "I saw it with my own eyes" often preceded accounts of these experiences.

### Interviews with Trauma Survivors

Because many interviewees were trauma survivors, it was necessary to tread carefully around memories that were partially repressed or compartmentalized. For example, a man described a torture treatment in great detail and in the third person, although he himself was the victim. In another interview, a woman mentioned in passing that no one in her village had children after the Chinese came. It was only when the interviewer explored this curious fact that she revealed all the men and women of child bearing age had been sterilized, including her husband and herself. When a respected monastic leader was asked several times if he used any special spiritual practices to cope with his arduous imprisonment and near starvation, he always ignored the question and instead spoke of the importance of the United Nations interceding on behalf of Tibet. It was as if his individual suffering were not worth discussing compared to the needs of his entire country.

### Influence of Buddhist Teachings

The Buddha's teachings, or dharma, were considered the most cherished treasure of Tibetan culture without which one could not find true happiness. The intentional destruction of the monasteries, treasured ancient texts and revered spiritual teachers struck at the heart of the Tibetan people and the interviewees often tearfully recounted their eyewitness accounts of these events. To understand the elders' past and current reactions to the invasion and on-going occupation, it is important to note that Tibetan culture, and most importantly Buddhism, teaches that suffering in this life is the result of karma or past deeds. Although elders spoke of their anger at the Chinese oppression, they also felt it was perhaps due to their destiny or fate and "partly due to the might of China." The elders often described how they struggled over the years to let go of anger or hatred towards the Chinese because these feelings destroyed their own peace of mind. They described their commitment to follow the Dalai Lama's counsel to refrain from violent retaliation and seek freedom for Tibet through negotiation.

## **METHODS AND PRACTICES**

Adamski founded the Tibet Oral History Project in 2003 by organizing a steering committee to plan and carry out its development. The members attended seminars in conducting oral histories and hired Basya Petnick, a consultant in oral history, to work with the committee. Because there were no Tibetan oral histories of elders readily available in English, except as individual biographies, Adamski consulted with Tibetan leaders, government officials and the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives about the need for the project.

Interview protocols were designed and questions were formulated based on general knowledge of Tibetan history. Adamski gained experience in videotaping, using interpreters, and testing interview questions by initially interviewing three Tibetan elders living in California: a reincarnate lama, the son of a widowed village weaver, and the daughter of a farmer turned resistance fighter. Their oral histories were completed in June 2006. These first three oral histories were so compelling, rich in detail and historically fascinating that the TOHP team knew the project could make a significant contribution by videotaping a greater number of elderly Tibetans.

In 2007, TOHP began making plans to find a location where a large number of elders could be interviewed in a short time period. It was not possible to record oral histories in Tibet without endangering the elders or the team given Chinese government restrictions. Consequently, the largest Tibetan settlements in India located in Bylakuppe in the state of Karnataka were selected for the interviews. A resident of Bylakuppe, Tenzin Yangchen, was hired as Outreach Director to ask elders in the community if they would like to participate in the project.

Although shy at first, many elders agreed to be interviewed when they learned that the Dalai Lama wanted them to share their stories to inform people about Tibet. Many respondents, due to their lack of education, thought they had nothing important to contribute as individuals, but felt motivated if it would help the cause of Tibet and preserve their cherished Buddhist beliefs for future Tibetan generations. Those who agreed were pre-interviewed by Tenzin Yangchen to obtain biographical details, such as village of origin, livelihood in Tibet, key experiences, such as imprisonment, year of fleeing Tibet, and other experiences the elders wanted to recount.

A group of interviewers, videographers, and translators residing in the U.S. and India was assembled to conduct the interviews. Three teams were able to complete 64 oral histories in Bylakuppe over a two-week period from June 25 to July 7, 2007. In 2010, TOHP completed the next series of interviews in another large Tibetan settlement – the Doeguling Settlement in Mundgod, Karnataka, India. Two teams were able to complete 53 oral histories over a two-week period from April 4 to April 14, 2010.

In 2012, TOHP again asked Tenzin Yangchen to coordinate new interviews in Dharamsala, Himachal Pradesh, India, home to the Tibetan government-in-exile. Two teams consisting of an interviewer, videographer, and translator were assembled to conduct these interviews. In addition to interviews in the McLeod Ganj region of Dharamsala, the teams also conducted a limited number of interviews in the small Tibetan settlements in Bir and Tashi Jong. TOHP completed a total of 50 oral histories over a two-week period from May 14 to May 24, 2012. One interview

was removed from the collection at the request of the interviewee, leaving 49 interviews in this new set.

### Interviewee Statistics and Interview Process

The Dharamsala interviews were videotaped in one central location— Hotel Tibet in Mcleod Ganj. Interviews in Bir were conducted at the local guest house and in Tashi Jong we worked in the community hall. The interviewees ranged in age from 60 to 90. Many women were invited to be interviewed, but they were reluctant to speak and often declined. Subsequently, 76% of the interviewees were male. Most interviewees came from two regions of Tibet, Kham (Dhotoe) and Utsang, with only a few elders from Amdo (Dhoday), which is situated farther from the escape routes to India and Nepal. The Tibetan elders interviewed come from diverse backgrounds such as nomads, farmers, housewives, servants, traders, monks, nuns, government officials, and community leaders. During and after the Chinese invasion, some of these individuals became political prisoners, victims of *thamzing* (public beatings), forced laborers, and resistance fighters.

Each interview was videotaped. Interviewers were provided in advance with pre-interview forms containing interviewee details obtained by the Outreach Director. Interviewees were informed at the beginning that they did not need to answer any questions or talk about anything that they preferred not to discuss. They were also asked, both before and after the interview, if there would be a problem if the interview were seen in Tibet or China, in order to gauge the interviewees' concerns about the topics being discussed. If the interviewees were greatly concerned about retaliation against themselves or their relatives, they were given the option to choose a pseudonym which would be used from that point forward as well as the option to not have their face shown in photographs or videos.

The interviewers asked questions in English and the interpreters repeated the question for the elders in Tibetan, then translated their answer back into English for the interviewer. Non-Tibetan interviewers were intentionally selected to explore subjects that Tibetans know so well they might not think to ask about or they might feel reluctant to ask about because of cultural constraints. A series of questions was prepared in advance to serve as options for the interviewer, starting with early childhood memories through escape into exile, but a strict adherence to the questions was not required. During the interviews, elders were invited to recount their childhood experiences in Tibet, their cultural and religious traditions, the impact of China's invasion and occupation of Tibet on their lives, and their escape and resettlement in India.

### Editing and Archiving

Interviews were recorded with one video camera using memory cards and the other using a direct input to a laptop computer. Upon completion of the interviews the video footage from these devices was transferred to computer hard drives for storage and editing. Video footage was edited to remove any pre- or post-interview footage, to remove any names (interviewee or family) when the interviewee requested anonymity, or to remove various interruptions during the interview. The edited footage was then transferred to a set of DVDs as the final medium for archival storage and distribution.

## Tibet Oral History Project

TOHP hired a Tibetan in India to translate the interviews fully into English and to transcribe the interviews using the video DVDs. The transcriber followed this process:

- 1) Listened to the question posed by the interviewer and then transcribed it in English.
- 2) Listened to the interviewee's complete response in Tibetan and then the interpreter's translation of the response in English.
- 3) Simultaneously translated into English and transcribed the interviewee's response (and that of the interpreter if in addition to the interviewer's statements/questions).
- 4) Replayed each question/answer series to make corrections as needed.
- 5) Consulted dictionary, atlas, Tibetan handbooks, monks and/or lay people when clarification is needed
- 6) Read through entire transcript, returning to video for any additional corrections, and correcting various typing errors.

The transcriber also completed a brief biography of each interviewee, a summary of the interview, and a list of main topic keywords.

Once this work was completed, the transcripts were transferred to the United States to be proofread, formatted and converted to PDF documents. Transcripts were edited only to make basic corrections in grammar. No statements from either interviewee or interviewer were removed or changed, except to remove names (interviewee or family) or related statements when the interviewee requested the use of a pseudonym.

Each elder received a copy of his/her interview on DVD. The English transcripts are posted on TOHP's website ([www.tibetoralhistory.org](http://www.tibetoralhistory.org)). A full set of videos and printed transcripts are archived at the United States Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. and the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in Dharamsala, India, as well as several other libraries in the United States and Europe with Tibetan studies programs and Tibetan community centers in the United States and India.

## **CHALLENGES IN CONDUCTING INTERVIEWS**

Although the TOHP interviews were conducted by Westerners with some knowledge of Tibet's history and some contact with Tibetans or travel in Tibet, cultural differences still played a role in shaping the interviews. Questions directed towards describing "feelings" were difficult for many of the elders to answer or to elaborate upon because it is not typical for Tibetans to focus on one's individual emotional state as something of importance. They tended to evade such questions and focus on what they had witnessed happen to others.

The passage of time may have been a factor that influenced the respondents' abilities to recollect and recount experiences that took place more than fifty years ago. For others, the memories of life in Tibet were remarkably clear and comprehensive—as was the case for Tashi, a 95 year-old man who, for over two hours, recounted his life as a yak herder in surprising detail. While it is likely that many of the elders' traumatic experiences were forgotten, repressed or let go of, many participants gave painful accounts of what they had endured or witnessed. Their courage in reliving these memories was gratefully acknowledged as a contribution to preserving the history of the Tibetan people.

### Translation Challenges

One of the interpreters on the oral history team was very skilled and experienced in providing accurate translations during the interviews. The other interpreter had less experience, which resulted in some minor difficulties during the interviews. For example, if the interpreter provided inaccurate translations or only abbreviated summaries, the follow-up questions by the interviewer did not always correlate with the elder's previous answer. Although the interviewers strove to develop the topics under discussion, some important issues may have not been explored due to the challenges of interviewing through an interpreter.

In some of the interviews this problem in communication can be noted in the transcripts. Every word spoken by the Tibetan elder and by the interpreter is accurately translated, even if it was not conveyed to the interviewer. If dialects, "old Tibetan" words, or the names of people and places could not be understood or were not translated during the interview, great effort was made to provide correct translations in the subsequent transcriptions of the interviews. Therefore, the written transcripts provide complete and accurate English translations of the interviews. They should be utilized in conjunction with the video footage where the language can be heard and the people can be seen recounting their life stories. Together they provide an extraordinary window into the voice of the Tibetan people.

### Videos and Transcripts

Filming at locations within the community resulted in occasional interruptions to the interviews, interjections from other people and occasional loud background noises. Changes in natural lighting and background noise resulted in interruptions to the interviews when adjustments needed to be made to improve filming conditions.

Changing of video camera memory cards or backup tapes in the middle of interviews created discontinuities in the interviews. Statements or questions are sometimes cut off if the conversation was not paused or started along with the videotaping. Although discontinuities are noted in the transcripts, it is not always possible to define them as such unless clearly stated in the video footage. There may be other unknown circumstances under which the tape was paused or stopped.

All elders were asked if they felt comfortable having their own name published with their interview. For those who were concerned about retaliation against them or their relatives, we asked the elder to select a pseudonym. This pseudonym is then used for both the video DVD and transcript of the interview. As a result single words or whole sentences may have been deleted from the video footage and transcripts in order to remove the elder's name or names of family members and relatives. The use of a pseudonym is noted in the transcripts as "alias."

A subset of previous transcripts was reviewed for accuracy by two Tibetan language scholars, Karma Thinley Ngodup at University of California, Berkeley, and Robert W. Clark at Stanford University. Both scholars indicated that the Tibetan to English translations provided in the transcripts were good translations. Ngodup noted, "My overall remarks about the transcripts are that these are done very accurately, very precisely, using the correct terminology as much as they could, maintaining the chronology of the story, yet not without little inaccuracies here and there due to the lack of understanding the dialect, and the nature of the Tibetan terminology."

**FUNDING**

The Tibet Oral History Project interviews from Dharamsala have been funded by individual donors and grants from private foundations. Major funders included:

Firedoll Foundation

Namaste Foundation

The Isdell Foundation

The Rowell Fund for Tibet/International Campaign for Tibet

## **INTERVIEW TEAM BIOGRAPHIES**

### **Interviewers**

#### **Marcella Adamski, Ph.D.**

Marcella Adamski, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist with a practice in San Francisco, California, USA, who has worked for more than 30 years with various international humanitarian and human rights organizations. She served as Director of Survivors International, an organization dedicated to the treatment of survivors of political torture from around the world. She has conducted therapy groups for the International Rescue Committee with traumatized refugees from Bosnia. She has also served as Chairwoman of the Board, and board member, of the Tibet Justice Center (formerly International Committee of Lawyers for Tibet). As a consulting psychologist Dr. Adamski participated in two Tibet Justice Center investigations in Dharamsala, India, conducting interviews with Tibetan women and children refugees about conditions in Chinese-occupied Tibet. She has travelled to Tibet to deliver medical supplies for a health organization serving the rural populations. She founded the Tibet Oral History Project in 2003 and serves as its Executive Director.

#### **Rebecca Novick**

Rebecca Novick served for many years as the Executive Producer of The Tibet Connection radio program based in Dharamsala, India. She contributes articles about Tibet to *The Huffington Post*. She wrote, produced, and co-directed the award-winning Tibetan human rights documentary, “Strange Spirit: One Country’s Occupation,” and has produced and edited numerous radio documentaries. She has conducted hundreds of interviews with exiled Tibetans, particularly with elders and with survivors of torture. She has also written and edited a number of books on Tibetan Buddhism and culture, including *Fundamentals of Tibetan Buddhism* and *Illuminating the Path to Enlightenment*.

Interpreters

**Tenzin Yangchen**

Tenzin Yangchen is a Tibetan who was born in India and lives in a refugee community in Bylakuppe, India. She speaks Tibetan, English, Hindi and Kannada. She completed all her education in the English language. She is fluent in the three major dialects of the Tibet provinces of Utsang, Dhotoe and Dhoday as a result of the mixed backgrounds of the community's residents. She served as an accountant for the Tibetan Cooperative Society Ltd., Bylakuppe. Tenzin Yangchen serves as Managing Trustee of the Gesar Charity Foundation and as International Service Director of Rotary Lhasa in Bylakuppe. She is also the Outreach Director for the Tibet Oral History Project; she pre-interviews the Tibetan elders and coordinates all interviews in India.

**Thupten Kelsang Dakpa**

Thupten Kelsang Dakpa is a Tibetan who was born in India. He has worked as a freelance content writer. He founded The Tibetan Art Collective in 2011 in Delhi to create an emerging global network of young visual artists, photographers, poets, writers and cinematographers/filmmakers of Tibetan origin. He was a contributing producer on The Tibet Connection radio program for which he created a series based on the dynamics of interpersonal relationships between opposite sexes in the Tibetan diaspora and the conventional paradigms of courtship.

Transcript Translator

**Tenzin Yangchen**

[See interpreter biography.]

# TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

## Interviews #1N-53N

Kathmandu, Pokhara and Tanahun Nepal  
April 6 - 21, 2015

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His Holiness also believed the elders' eyewitness accounts of China's invasion, occupation, and human rights violations in Tibet needed to be documented for the historical record. He felt that these testimonies would inform the world about the plight of the Tibetan people and, if translated, would educate the next generation of Chinese, who have no accurate information about Tibetan life and culture due to their government's control of the media. The Dalai Lama, known for his interest in technology, recommended that the elders' oral histories be made available to a global audience through the Internet and to the Chinese through translated interviews. Adamski, a clinical psychologist who had previously worked with various human rights organizations, founded TOHP in 2003 to fulfill the Dalai Lama's request.

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TOHP's mission is to document the life stories of Tibetan elders living in exile and then to disseminate their oral histories through print, broadcast media, and the Internet. TOHP strives to communicate the Tibetan experience through as many diverse media and venues as possible and to make these first-person accounts available to the Tibetan and Chinese populations, the general public, researchers, and scholars. The oral histories collected by TOHP will afford all who review them the opportunity to hear directly from the Tibetans about life in Tibet before, during, and after China's invasion and occupation. It is hoped that the elders' accounts will be used fairly, to compare and contrast the Chinese government's official version of Tibetan history with the personal narratives contained in the oral histories. It is also hoped that people who have access to these oral histories will acquire a deeper and more nuanced understanding of recent important historical events.

### Project Significance

The exiled elders interviewed by TOHP are the last generation to have lived in an unoccupied Tibet. They are the last people on earth to fully embody the Tibetan language and culture. The urgency of TOHP's preservation work is further dictated by the age of the exiles—many are now 80 to 90 years old. TOHP plans to record as many narratives as possible before the exiled elders die and their accounts, memories, and experiences of Tibet prior to the Chinese invasion and occupation die with them. The oral history collection gives voice to a people, their age-old way of life and the total dismantling of their society following the Chinese invasion.

The importance of this project is:

- *Historical*: The project documents personal recollections of life in Tibet before 1949 and eyewitness accounts of the effects of the Chinese invasion and occupation.
- *Cultural*: The elderly Tibetans describe unique, often ancient, customs, rituals and festivals that highlight their art, music and dance, and the roles played by people in various sectors of society.
- *Philosophical*: The interviews reveal how the elders' lives were imbued with Buddhist beliefs and principles incorporated in their daily lives and celebrated through ceremonies at their local monasteries.
- *Political*: The Tibetans' subsequent response to invasion and occupation has been unique among nations. The elders first describe how their resistance forces failed to stop the invading Chinese army in 1959, but go on to state their current commitment to uphold the request of the Dalai Lama to follow the Buddha's teaching of non-violence—even towards their oppressors.

TOHP is the first oral history collection to provide complete English transcripts of interviews with Tibetan elders, made accessible worldwide through the Internet. TOHP also provides video footage of the interviews on DVD and through several international websites. Since these interviews were made available on TOHP's website, there has been a continuous favorable response from Tibetans, historians, anthropologists, oral historians, journalists and others interested in the richness and scope of information found in these eyewitness accounts.

### Documenting Early Life in Tibet

From a cultural and historical perspective, the elders' accounts of their childhood experiences document a period of Tibetan life not easily obtained due to the remoteness of a people living in the vast Himalayan region. Their memories of being farmers, herders, traders, monks, housewives, civil servants and land owners provide rich, first-hand accounts of a way of life practiced for generations. Their descriptions reveal the social, political, cultural and religious aspects of the daily lives of a people living in a free and independent country with its own language, currency, national flag and government. The videotaped interviews provide examples of the various dialects of the participants who come from one of the three provinces of Tibet, Amdo (Dhoday), Kham (Dhotoe) and Utsang and will be useful in preserving these languages.

The respondents gave detailed accounts of the dynamics of family life and religious traditions surrounding birth, marriage and burial ceremonies. They recalled the hardships as well as the joys of their life tilling the fields, herding yaks, caring for large families and studying as young monks in the local monasteries. As their stories unfolded, the elder's initial shyness dissolved and they went on to give memories of their Himalayan homeland filled with majestic mountains abundant with spring flowers and wild animals. They recounted horse racing festivals, the details of trading fairs and the deep satisfaction derived from their Buddhist beliefs and practices.

The interviewees, especially those from lower income levels, were forthright in recounting their memories of severe poverty, lack of education and medical care. They did not hesitate to describe the challenges they faced in paying taxes to the local monasteries and to the Tibetan government, which depended on their contributions to sustain the monastic culture they valued and the government services they needed.

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After describing their early lives in Tibet, the elders were asked to recount when and how their lives changed. Because of the limited access to news of world events and conflicts, the Tibetans were psychologically and politically caught off-guard by the Chinese army's invasion of their country. Interviewees reported being stunned and horrified by the reality of the invasion as Chinese troops fired on nomad gatherings, bombed monasteries in the middle of the night and imprisoned village leaders without cause. Property and family possessions were confiscated, religious leaders captured, and people were forced at gunpoint to participate in beatings and public humiliation sessions known as *thamzing*, where children were forced to harm their own parents and monks beat their teachers. The constant refrain, "I saw it with my own eyes" often preceded accounts of these experiences.

### Interviews with Trauma Survivors

Because many interviewees were trauma survivors, it was necessary to tread carefully around memories that were partially repressed or compartmentalized. For example, a man described a torture treatment in great detail and in the third person, although he himself was the victim. In another interview, a woman mentioned in passing that no one in her village had children after the Chinese came. It was only when the interviewer explored this curious fact that she revealed all the men and women of child bearing age had been sterilized, including her husband and herself. When a respected monastic leader was asked several times if he used any special spiritual practices to cope with his arduous imprisonment and near starvation, he always ignored the question and instead spoke of the importance of the United Nations interceding on behalf of Tibet. It was as if his individual suffering were not worth discussing compared to the needs of his entire country.

### Influence of Buddhist Teachings

The Buddha's teachings, or dharma, were considered the most cherished treasure of Tibetan culture without which one could not find true happiness. The intentional destruction of the monasteries, treasured ancient texts and revered spiritual teachers struck at the heart of the Tibetan people and the interviewees often tearfully recounted their eyewitness accounts of these events. To understand the elders' past and current reactions to the invasion and on-going occupation, it is important to note that Tibetan culture, and most importantly Buddhism, teaches that suffering in this life is the result of karma or past deeds. Although elders spoke of their anger at the Chinese oppression, they also felt it was perhaps due to their destiny or fate and "partly due to the might of China." The elders often described how they struggled over the years to let go of anger or hatred towards the Chinese because these feelings destroyed their own peace of mind. They described their commitment to follow the Dalai Lama's counsel to refrain from violent retaliation and seek freedom for Tibet through negotiation.

## **METHODS AND PRACTICES**

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In 2007, TOHP began making plans to find a location where a large number of elders could be interviewed in a short time period. It was not possible to record oral histories in Tibet without endangering the elders or the team given Chinese government restrictions. Consequently, the largest Tibetan settlements in India located in Bylakuppe in the state of Karnataka were selected for the interviews. A resident of Bylakuppe, Tenzin Yangchen, was hired as Outreach Director to ask elders in the community if they would like to participate in the project.

Although shy at first, many elders agreed to be interviewed when they learned that the Dalai Lama wanted them to share their stories to inform people about Tibet. Many respondents, due to their lack of education, thought they had nothing important to contribute as individuals, but felt motivated if it would help the cause of Tibet and preserve their cherished Buddhist beliefs for future Tibetan generations. Those who agreed were pre-interviewed by Tenzin Yangchen to obtain biographical details, such as village of origin, livelihood in Tibet, key experiences, such as imprisonment, year of fleeing Tibet, and other experiences the elders wanted to recount.

A group of interviewers, videographers, and interpreters residing in the U.S. and India was assembled to conduct the interviews. Three teams completed 64 oral histories in Bylakuppe over a two-week period from June 25 to July 7, 2007. In 2010, TOHP completed the next series of interviews in another large Tibetan settlement – the Doeguling Settlement in Mundgod, Karnataka, India. Two teams completed 53 oral histories over a two-week period from April 4 to April 14, 2010.

In 2012, TOHP again asked Tenzin Yangchen to coordinate new interviews in Dharamsala, Himachal Pradesh, India, home to the Tibetan government-in-exile. Two teams consisting of an interviewer, videographer, and interpreter were assembled to conduct these interviews. In addition to interviews in the McLeod Ganj region of Dharamsala, the teams also conducted a limited number of interviews in the small Tibetan settlements in Bir and Tashi Jong. TOHP completed a total of 50 oral histories over a two-week period from May 14 to May 24, 2012. One

interview was removed from the collection at the request of the interviewee, leaving 49 interviews in this new set.

During 2012, 2013 and 2014 an additional 32 interviews were videotaped at Tibetan Buddhist centers and Tibetan community centers in the United States and Canada. At the end of 2013 TOHP returned to Bylakuppe, India. Another series of interviews were videotaped in the Bylakuppe and Hunsur Settlements of Karnataka. One team completed 25 oral histories over a two-week period from December 23, 2013 to January 6, 2014. The focus of this endeavor was to interview revered teachers, lamas and rinpoches who were attending the teachings given by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. To this end, 18 of the 25 interviewees were individuals with a religious or monastic background.

In 2015 a team of interviewers, videographers and interpreters from the U.S, India and Nepal conducted another series of interviews in Nepal. This team was able to complete 52 oral histories over a two-week period from April 6 to April 21, 2015. The interviews were conducted in Tibetan communities located in Kathmandu, Pokhara and Tanahun.

#### Interviewee Statistics and Interview Process

The Nepal interviews were videotaped at two locations in Kathmandu—a hotel in the Boudha region and the Swayambhu Old Age Home. The team then travelled to the Tibetan settlements of Paljorling, Tashi Palkhiel and Tashiling in the Pokhara region and Jampaling in Tanahun. The interviews in those locations were filmed at private homes, courtyards at the Old Age Homes, Buddhist temples and community centers.

The interviewees ranged in age from 62 to 89. Over two-thirds of the interviewees were male and the majority left Tibet in 1959. The interviewees came from two regions of Tibet, Kham (Dhotoe) and Utsang. The Tibetan elders interviewed came from diverse backgrounds such as nomads, farmers, housewives and monks. During and after the Chinese invasion, some of these individuals became political prisoners, victims of *thamzing* (public beatings), forced laborers, and resistance fighters.

Each interview was videotaped. The interviewer was provided in advance with pre-interview forms containing interviewee details obtained by the Outreach Director. Interviewees were informed at the beginning that they did not need to answer any questions or talk about anything that they preferred not to discuss. They were also asked, both before and after the interview, if there would be a problem if the interview were seen in Tibet or China, in order to gauge the interviewees' concerns about the topics being discussed. If the interviewees were greatly concerned about retaliation against themselves or their relatives, they were given the option to choose a pseudonym which would be used from that point forward as well as the option to not have their face shown in photographs or videos.

For most of the interviews the interviewer asked questions in English and the interpreters repeated the question for the elders in Tibetan, then translated their answer back into English for the interviewer. One of the interviews was conducted entirely in English. Non-Tibetan interviewers were intentionally selected to explore subjects that Tibetans know so well they

might not think to ask about or they might feel reluctant to ask about because of cultural constraints. A series of questions was prepared in advance to serve as options for the interviewer, starting with early childhood memories through escape into exile, but a strict adherence to the questions was not required. During the interviews, elders were invited to recount their childhood experiences in Tibet, their cultural and religious traditions, the impact of China's invasion and occupation of Tibet on their lives, and their escape and resettlement in India.

### Editing and Archiving

Interviews were recorded by video on SLR cameras. Upon completion of the interviews the video footage was transferred to computer hard drives for storage and editing. Video footage was edited to remove any pre- or post-interview footage, to remove any names (interviewee or family) when the interviewee requested anonymity, or to remove various interruptions during the interview. The edited footage was then transferred to a set of DVDs as the final medium for archival storage and distribution.

TOHP hired a Tibetan in India to translate the interviews fully into English and to transcribe the interviews using the video DVDs. The transcriber followed this process:

- 1) Listened to the question posed by the interviewer and then transcribed it in English.
- 2) Listened to the interviewee's complete response in Tibetan and then the interpreter's translation of the response in English.
- 3) Simultaneously translated into English and transcribed the interviewee's response (and that of the interpreter if in addition to the interviewer's statements/questions).
- 4) Replayed each question/answer series to make corrections as needed.
- 5) Consulted dictionary, atlas, Tibetan handbooks, monks and/or lay people when clarification was needed for the translation.
- 6) Read through entire transcript, returning to video for any additional corrections, and correcting various typing errors.

The transcriber also completed a brief biography of each interviewee, a summary of the interview, and a list of main topic keywords.

Once this work was completed, the transcripts were transferred to the United States to be proofread, formatted and converted to PDF documents. Transcripts were edited only to make basic corrections in grammar. No statements from either interviewee or interviewer were removed or changed, except to remove names (interviewee or family) or related statements when the interviewee requested the use of a pseudonym.

Each elder received a copy of his/her interview on DVD. The English transcripts are posted on TOHP's website ([www.tibetoralhistory.org](http://www.tibetoralhistory.org)). A full set of videos and printed transcripts are archived at the United States Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. and the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in Dharamsala, India, as well as several other libraries in the United States and Europe with Tibetan studies programs and Tibetan community centers in the United States and India.

## **CHALLENGES IN CONDUCTING INTERVIEWS**

Although the TOHP interviews were conducted by Westerners with some knowledge of Tibet's history and some contact with Tibetans or travel in Tibet, cultural differences still played a role in shaping the interviews. Questions directed towards describing "feelings" were difficult for many of the elders to answer or to elaborate upon because it is not typical for Tibetans to focus on one's individual emotional state as something of importance. They tended to evade such questions and focus on what they had witnessed happen to others.

The passage of time may have been a factor that influenced the respondents' abilities to recollect and recount experiences that took place more than fifty years ago. For others, the memories of life in Tibet were remarkably clear and comprehensive—as was the case for Tashi, a 95 year-old man who, for over two hours, recounted his life as a yak herder in surprising detail. While it is likely that many of the elders' traumatic experiences were forgotten, repressed or let go of, many participants gave painful accounts of what they had endured or witnessed. Their courage in reliving these memories was gratefully acknowledged as a contribution to preserving the history of the Tibetan people.

### Translation Challenges

One of the interpreters on the oral history team was very skilled and experienced in providing accurate translations during the interviews. The other interpreter had less experience, which resulted in some minor difficulties during the interviews. For example, if the interpreter provided inaccurate translations or only abbreviated summaries, the follow-up questions by the interviewer did not always correlate with the elder's previous answer. Although the interviewer strove to develop the topics under discussion, some important issues may have not been explored due to the challenges of interviewing through an interpreter.

Every word spoken by the Tibetan elder and by the interpreter is accurately translated in the transcripts, even if it was not conveyed to the interviewer. If dialects, "old Tibetan" words, or the names of people and places could not be understood or were not translated during the interview, great effort was made to provide correct translations in the subsequent transcriptions of the interviews. Therefore, the written transcripts provide complete and accurate English translations of the interviews. They should be utilized in conjunction with the video footage where the language can be heard and the people can be seen recounting their life stories. Together they provide an extraordinary window into the voice of the Tibetan people.

### Videos and Transcripts

Filming at locations within the community resulted in occasional interruptions to the interviews, interjections from other people and occasional loud background noises. Changes in natural lighting and background noise resulted in interruptions to the interviews when adjustments needed to be made to improve filming conditions. Although discontinuities are noted in the transcripts, it is not always possible to define them as such unless clearly stated in the video footage. There may be other unknown circumstances under which videotaping was paused or stopped.

## Tibet Oral History Project

All elders were asked if they felt comfortable having their own names published with their interviews. For those who were concerned about retaliation against them or their relatives, TOHP asked the elder to select a pseudonym. This pseudonym is then used for both the video DVD and transcript of the interview. As a result single words or whole sentences may have been deleted from the video footage and transcripts in order to remove the elder's name or names of family members and relatives. The use of a pseudonym is noted in the transcripts as "alias."

A subset of previous transcripts was reviewed for accuracy by two Tibetan language scholars, Karma Thinley Ngodup at University of California, Berkeley, and Robert W. Clark at Stanford University. Both scholars indicated that the Tibetan to English translations provided in the transcripts were good translations. Ngodup noted, "My overall remarks about the transcripts are that these are done very accurately, very precisely, using the correct terminology as much as they could, maintaining the chronology of the story, yet not without little inaccuracies here and there due to the lack of understanding the dialect, and the nature of the Tibetan terminology."

**FUNDING**

The Tibet Oral History Project interviews from Nepal have been funded by individual donors and grants from private foundations. Major funders included:

The Betsy Gordon Foundation  
Firedoll Foundation  
Robert and Evelyn Apte

## **INTERVIEW TEAM BIOGRAPHIES**

### **Interviewers**

#### **Marcella Adamski, Ph.D.**

Marcella Adamski, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist with a practice in San Francisco, California, USA, who has worked for more than 30 years with various international humanitarian and human rights organizations. She served as Director of Survivors International, an organization dedicated to the treatment of survivors of political torture from around the world. She has conducted therapy groups for the International Rescue Committee with traumatized refugees from Bosnia. She has also served as a board member, of the Tibet Justice Center (formerly International Committee of Lawyers for Tibet). As a consulting psychologist Dr. Adamski participated in two Tibet Justice Center investigations in Dharamsala, India, conducting interviews with Tibetan women and children refugees about conditions in Chinese-occupied Tibet. She founded the Tibet Oral History Project in 2003 and serves as its Executive Director.

#### **Katharine Davies Samway**

Katharine Davies Samway is a writer, researcher, and educator. For 20 years, she was a professor at San José State University's College of Education in California, where she taught courses focused on non-native English speakers, literacy learning and teaching, writing, and qualitative research methods. She has spent many years conducting research, with an emphasis on in-depth, open-ended interviews and close observation in classrooms and community settings. She is also an experienced writer and has published many books and articles related to teaching English language learners. She is a correspondent with Oakland Voices.

### **Interpreters**

#### **Tenzin Yangchen**

Tenzin Yangchen is a Tibetan who was born in India and lives in a refugee community in Bylakuppe, India. She speaks Tibetan, English, Hindi and Kannada. She completed all her education in the English language. She is fluent in the three major dialects of the Tibet provinces as a result of the mixed backgrounds of her community's residents. She served as an accountant for the Tibetan Cooperative Society Ltd., Bylakuppe. Tenzin Yangchen serves as Managing Trustee of the Gesar Charity Foundation and as International Service Director of Rotary Lhasa in Bylakuppe. She is also the Outreach Director for the Tibet Oral History Project; she pre-interviews the Tibetan elders and coordinates all interviews in India and Nepal.

#### **Palden Tsering**

Palden Tsering is a Tibetan who was born in Nepal. He serves as a local consultant for the Tibet Fund's projects to rebuild the Tibetan refugee communities after the earthquake in 2015.

### **Transcript Translator**

#### **Tenzin Yangchen**

[See interpreter biography.]

# TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

## Interviews #2M-70M

Doeguling Tibetan Settlement  
Mundgod, Karnataka, India  
April 4-14, 2010

Tibet Oral History Project  
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Moraga, CA 94570 USA  
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Email: [info@tibetoralhistory.org](mailto:info@tibetoralhistory.org)  
Website: [www.tibetoralhistory.org](http://www.tibetoralhistory.org)

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The Tibet Oral History Project serves as a repository for the memories, testimonies and opinions of elderly Tibetan refugees. The oral history process records the words spoken by interviewees in response to questions from an interviewer. The interviewees' statements should not be considered verified or complete accounts of events and the Tibet Oral History Project expressly disclaims any liability for the inaccuracy of any information provided by the interviewees. The interviewees' statements do not necessarily represent the views of the Tibet Oral History Project or any of its officers, contractors or volunteers.

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## **BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES**

The Tibet Oral History Project (TOHP), on the advice of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, was initiated by Marcella Adamski, Ph.D. She met with the Dalai Lama in 1999 in Dharamsala, India, where she had been interviewing recently escaped children as part of an investigation of human rights abuses in Tibet. At her meeting with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Adamski asked what more might be done to help the Tibetan people. His Holiness urged Adamski to record the life stories of Tibetan elders living in exile before they died and their stories were lost forever. He wanted their childhood experiences of early life in Tibet, with its rich culture and religious traditions, preserved for generations to come.

His Holiness also believed the elders' eyewitness accounts of China's invasion, occupation, and human rights violations in Tibet needed to be documented for the historical record. He felt that these testimonies would inform the world about the plight of the Tibetan people and, if translated, would educate the next generation of Chinese, who have no accurate information about Tibetan life and culture due to their government's control of the media. The Dalai Lama, known for his interest in technology, recommended that the elders' oral histories be made available to a global audience through the Internet and to the Chinese through translated interviews. Adamski, a clinical psychologist who had previously worked with various human rights organizations, founded TOHP in 2003 to fulfill the Dalai Lama's request.

### Mission

TOHP's mission is to document the life stories of Tibetan elders living in exile and then to disseminate their oral histories through print, broadcast media, and the Internet. TOHP strives to communicate the Tibetan experience through as many diverse media and venues as possible and to make these first-person accounts available to the Tibetan and Chinese populations, the general public, researchers, and scholars. The oral histories collected by TOHP will afford all who review them the opportunity to hear directly from the Tibetans about life in Tibet before, during, and after China's invasion and occupation. It is hoped that the elders' accounts will be used fairly, to compare and contrast the Chinese government's official version of Tibetan history with the personal narratives contained in the oral histories. It is also hoped that people who have access to these oral histories will acquire a deeper and more nuanced understanding of recent important historical events.

### Project Significance

The exiled elders interviewed by TOHP are the last generation to have lived in an unoccupied Tibet. They are the last people on earth to fully embody the Tibetan language and culture. The urgency of TOHP's preservation work is further dictated by the age of the exiles—many are now 80 to 90 years old. TOHP plans to record as many narratives as possible before the exiled elders die and their accounts, memories, and experiences of Tibet prior to the Chinese invasion and occupation die with them. The oral history collection gives voice to a people, their age-old way of life and the total dismantling of their society following the Chinese invasion.

The importance of this project is:

- *Historical*: The project documents personal recollections of life in Tibet before 1949 and eyewitness accounts of the effects of the Chinese invasion and occupation.
- *Cultural*: The elderly Tibetans describe unique, often ancient, customs, rituals and festivals that highlight their art, music and dance, and the roles played by people in various sectors of society.
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### Interviewee Statistics and Interview Process

The interviews were videotaped in two central locations—the community’s Kalachakra Hall and the prayer hall at the “Home for the Aged” —plus a few at various locations in Drepung Monastery. The interviewees ranged in age from 58 to 87. Many women were invited to be interviewed, but they were reluctant to speak and often declined. Subsequently, 75% of the interviewees were male. Most interviewees came from two regions of Tibet, Kham (Dhotoe) and Utsang, with only a few elders from Amdo (Dhoday), which is situated farther from the escape routes to India and Nepal. The Tibetan elders interviewed come from diverse backgrounds such as nomads, farmers, housewives, servants, traders, monks, nuns, government officials, and community leaders. During and after the Chinese invasion, some of these individuals became political prisoners, victims of *thamzing* (public beatings), forced laborers, and resistance fighters.

Each interview was videotaped. Interviewers were provided in advance with pre-interview forms containing interviewee details obtained by the Outreach Director. Interviewees were informed at the beginning that they did not need to answer any questions or talk about anything that they preferred not to discuss. They were also asked, both before and after the interview, if there would be a problem if the interview were seen in Tibet or China, in order to gauge the interviewees’ concerns about the topics being discussed. If the interviewees were greatly concerned about retaliation against themselves or their relatives, they were given the option to choose a pseudonym which would be used from that point forward.

The interviewers asked questions in English and the interpreters repeated the question for the elders in Tibetan, then translated their answer back into English for the interviewer. Non-Tibetan interviewers were intentionally selected to explore subjects that Tibetans know so well they might not think to ask about or they might feel reluctant to ask about because of cultural constraints. A series of questions was prepared in advance to serve as options for the interviewer, starting with early childhood memories through escape into exile, but a strict adherence to the questions was not required. During the interviews, elders were invited to recount their childhood experiences in Tibet, their cultural and religious traditions, the impact of China’s invasion and occupation of Tibet on their lives, and their escape and resettlement in India.

### Editing and Archiving

Interviews were recorded with one video camera using memory cards and the other using an external data storage unit. Upon completion of the interviews the video footage from these devices was transferred to computer hard drives for storage and editing. Video footage was edited to remove any pre- or post-interview footage, to remove any names (interviewee or family) when the interviewee requested the removal, or to remove various interruptions during the interview. The edited footage was then transferred to a set of DVDs as the final medium for archival storage and distribution.

TOHP hired a team of Tibetans in India to translate the interviews fully into English and to transcribe the interviews using the video DVDs. The transcribers followed this process:

- 1) Listened to the question posed by the interviewer and then transcribed it in English.

## Tibet Oral History Project

- 2) Listened to the interviewee's complete response in Tibetan and then the interpreter's translation of the response in English.
- 3) Simultaneously translated into English and transcribed the interviewee's response (and that of the interpreter if in addition to the interviewer's statements/questions).
- 4) Replayed each question/answer series to make corrections as needed.
- 5) Read through entire transcript, returning to video for any additional corrections, and correcting various typing errors.

The transcribers also completed a brief biography of each interviewee, a summary of the interview, and a list of main topic keywords.

Once this work was completed, the transcripts were transferred to the United States to be proofread, formatted and converted to PDF documents. Transcripts were edited only to make basic corrections in grammar. No statements from either interviewee or interviewer were removed or changed, except to remove names (interviewee or family) or related statements when the interviewee requested the use of a pseudonym.

Each elder received a copy of his/her interview on DVD. The English transcripts are posted on TOHP's website ([www.tibetoralhistory.org](http://www.tibetoralhistory.org)). A full set of videos and printed transcripts are archived at the United States Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. and the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in Dharamsala, India, as well as several other libraries in the United States and Europe with Tibetan studies programs and Tibetan community centers in the United States and India.

## **CHALLENGES IN CONDUCTING INTERVIEWS**

Although the TOHP interviews were conducted by Westerners with some knowledge of Tibet's history and some contact with Tibetans or travel in Tibet, cultural differences still played a role in shaping the interviews. Questions directed towards describing "feelings" were difficult for many of the elders to answer or to elaborate upon because it is not typical for Tibetans to focus on one's individual emotional state as something of importance. They tended to evade such questions and focus on what they had witnessed happen to others.

The passage of time may have been a factor that influenced the respondents' abilities to recollect and recount experiences that took place more than fifty years ago. For others, the memories of life in Tibet were remarkably clear and comprehensive—as was the case for Tashi, a 95 year-old man who, for over two hours, recounted his life as a yak herder in surprising detail. While it is likely that many of the elders' traumatic experiences were forgotten, repressed or let go of, many participants gave painful accounts of what they had endured or witnessed. Their courage in reliving these memories was gratefully acknowledged as a contribution to preserving the history of the Tibetan people.

### **Translation Challenges**

One of the interpreters on the oral history team was very skilled and experienced in providing accurate translations during the interviews. The other interpreter had less experience, which resulted in some difficulties during the interviews. For example, if the interpreter provided inaccurate translations or only abbreviated summaries, the follow-up questions by the interviewer did not always correlate with the elder's previous answer. Although the interviewers strove to develop the topics under discussion, some important issues may have not been explored due to the challenges of interviewing through an interpreter.

In some of the interviews this problem in communication can be noted in the transcripts. Every word spoken by the Tibetan elder and by the interpreter is accurately translated, even if it was not conveyed to the interviewer. If dialects, "old Tibetan" words, or the names of people and places could not be understood or were not translated during the interview, great effort was made to provide correct translations in the subsequent transcriptions of the interviews. Therefore, the written transcripts provide complete and accurate English translations of the interviews. They should be utilized in conjunction with the video footage where the language can be heard and the people can be seen recounting their life stories. Together they provide an extraordinary window into the voice of the Tibetan people.

### **Videos and Transcripts**

Filming at locations within the community resulted in occasional interruptions to the interviews, interjections from other people and occasional loud background noises. Changes in natural lighting and background noise resulted in interruptions to the interviews when adjustments needed to be made to improve filming conditions.

Changing of video camera memory cards or backup tapes in the middle of interviews created discontinuities in the interviews. Statements or questions are sometimes cut off at the end of the finished tape or the beginning of a new tape if the conversation was not paused or started along with the videotaping. Although discontinuities are noted in the transcripts, it is not always possible to define them as such unless clearly stated in the video footage. There may be other unknown circumstances under which the tape was paused or stopped.

All elders were asked if they felt comfortable having their own name published with their interview. For those who were concerned about retaliation against them or their relatives, we asked the elder to select a pseudonym. This pseudonym is then used for both the video DVD and transcript of the interview. As a result single words or whole sentences may have been deleted from the video footage and transcripts in order to remove the elder's name or names of family members and relatives. The use of a pseudonym is noted in the transcripts as "alias."

A subset of previous transcripts was reviewed for accuracy by two Tibetan language scholars, Karma Thinley Ngodup at University of California, Berkeley, and Robert W. Clark at Stanford University. Both scholars indicated that the Tibetan to English translations provided in the transcripts were good translations. Ngodup noted, "My overall remarks about the transcripts are that these are done very accurately, very precisely, using the correct terminology as much as they could, maintaining the chronology of the story, yet not without little inaccuracies here and there due to the lack of understanding the dialect, and the nature of the Tibetan terminology."

**FUNDING**

The Tibet Oral History Project interviews from Mundgod have been funded by individual donors and grants from private foundations. Major funders included:

Firedoll Foundation

The Rowell Fund for Tibet/International Campaign for Tibet

## **INTERVIEW TEAM BIOGRAPHIES**

### **Interviewers**

#### **Marcella Adamski, Ph.D.**

Marcella Adamski, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist with a practice in San Francisco, California, USA, who has worked for more than 30 years with various international humanitarian and human rights organizations. She served as Director of Survivors International, an organization dedicated to the treatment of survivors of political torture from around the world. She has conducted therapy groups for the International Rescue Committee with traumatized refugees from Bosnia. She has also served as Chairwoman of the Board, and board member, of the Tibet Justice Center (formerly International Committee of Lawyers for Tibet). As a consulting psychologist Dr. Adamski participated in two Tibet Justice Center investigations in Dharamsala, India, conducting interviews with Tibetan women and children refugees about conditions in Chinese-occupied Tibet. She has travelled to Tibet to deliver medical supplies for a health organization serving the rural populations. She founded the Tibet Oral History Project in 2003 and serves as its Executive Director.

#### **Rebecca Novick**

Rebecca Novick served for many years as the Executive Producer of The Tibet Connection radio program based in Dharamsala, India. She contributes articles about Tibet to *The Huffington Post*. She wrote, produced, and co-directed the award-winning Tibetan human rights documentary, “Strange Spirit: One Country’s Occupation,” and has produced and edited numerous radio documentaries. She has conducted hundreds of interviews with exiled Tibetans, particularly with elders and with survivors of torture. She has also written and edited a number of books on Tibetan Buddhism and culture, including *Fundamentals of Tibetan Buddhism* and *Illuminating the Path to Enlightenment*.

Interpreters

**Tenzin Yangchen**

Tenzin Yangchen is a Tibetan who was born in India and lives in a refugee community in Bylakuppe, India. She speaks Tibetan, English, Hindi and Kannada. She completed all her education in the English language. She is fluent in the three major dialects of the Tibet provinces of Utsang, Dhotoe and Dhoday as a result of the mixed backgrounds of the community's residents. She served as an accountant for the Tibetan Cooperative Society Ltd., Bylakuppe. Tenzin Yangchen serves as Managing Trustee of the Gesar Charity Foundation and as International Service Director of Rotary Lhasa in Bylakuppe. She is also the Outreach Director for the Tibet Oral History Project; she pre-interviews the Tibetan elders and coordinates all interviews in India.

**Namgyal Tsering**

Namgyal Tsering is a Tibetan who was born in a refugee community in India. He began studying English in grammar school. Since 1984 he served in the Regional Tibetan Youth Congress, Nashik, Tibetan Sweater Seller Association, Nashik and Regional National Democratic Party of Tibet. He worked as press correspondent for local and national English newspapers. He also serves as President of the Tibetan Cooperative Society, Mundgod.

Transcript Translator

**Tenzin Yangchen**

[See interpreter biography.]

# TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

## Interviews #92-94

San Francisco Bay Area California,  
United States of America June 2-26, 2006

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## **BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES**

Marcella Adamski, Ph.D., initiated the Tibet Oral History Project (TOHP) at the request of His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama. Adamski met with the Dalai Lama in 1999 in Dharamsala, India, where she had been interviewing recently escaped children as part of an investigation of human rights abuses in Tibet. At her meeting with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Adamski asked what more might be done to help the Tibetan people. His Holiness urged Adamski to record the life stories of Tibetan elders living in exile before they died and their stories were lost forever. He wanted their childhood experiences of early life in Tibet, with its rich culture and religious traditions, preserved for generations to come.

His Holiness also believed the elders' eyewitness accounts of China's invasion, occupation, and human rights violations in Tibet needed to be documented for the historical record. He felt that these testimonies would inform the world about the plight of the Tibetan people and, if translated, would educate the next generation of Chinese, who have no accurate information about Tibetan life and culture due to their government's control of the media. The Dalai Lama, known for his interest in technology, recommended that the elders' oral histories be made available to a global audience through the Internet and to the Chinese through translated interviews. Adamski, a clinical psychologist who had previously worked with various human rights organizations, founded TOHP in 2003 to fulfill the Dalai Lama's request.

### Mission

TOHP's mission is to document the life stories of Tibetan elders living in exile and then to disseminate their oral histories through print, broadcast media, and the Internet. TOHP strives to communicate the Tibetan experience through as many diverse media and venues as possible and to make these first-person accounts available to the Tibetan and Chinese populations, the general public, researchers, and scholars. The oral histories collected by TOHP will afford all who review them the opportunity to hear directly from the Tibetans about life in Tibet before, during, and after China's invasion and occupation. It is hoped that the elders' accounts will be used fairly, to compare and contrast the Chinese government's official version of Tibetan history with the personal narratives contained in the oral histories. It is also hoped that people who have access to these oral histories will acquire a deeper and more nuanced understanding of recent important historical events.

### Project Significance

The exiled elders interviewed by TOHP are the last generation to have lived in an unoccupied Tibet. They are the last people on earth to fully embody the Tibetan language and culture. The urgency of TOHP's preservation work is further dictated by the age of the exiles—many are now 80 to 90 years old. TOHP plans to record as many narratives as possible before the exiled elders die and their accounts, memories, and experiences of Tibet prior to the Chinese invasion and occupation die with them. The oral history collection gives voice to a people, their age-old way of life and the total dismantling of their society following the Chinese invasion.

The importance of this project is:

- *Historical*: The project documents personal recollections of life in Tibet before 1949 and eyewitness accounts of the effects of the Chinese invasion and occupation.
- *Cultural*: The elderly Tibetans describe unique, often ancient, customs, rituals and festivals that highlight their art, music and dance, and the roles played by people in various sectors of society.
- *Philosophical*: The interviews reveal how the elders' lives were imbued with Buddhist beliefs and principles incorporated in their daily lives and celebrated through ceremonies at their local monasteries.
- *Political*: The Tibetans' subsequent response to invasion and occupation has been unique among nations. The elders first describe how their resistance forces failed to stop the invading Chinese army in 1959, but go on to state their current commitment to uphold the request of the Dalai Lama to follow the Buddha's teaching of non-violence—even towards their oppressors.

TOHP is the first oral history collection to provide complete English transcripts of interviews with Tibetan elders, made accessible worldwide through the Internet. TOHP also provides video footage of the interviews on DVD and through several international websites. Since these interviews were made available on TOHP's website, there has been a continuous favorable response from Tibetans, historians, anthropologists, oral historians, journalists and others interested in the richness and scope of information found in these eyewitness accounts.

### Documenting Early Life in Tibet

From a cultural and historical perspective, the elders' accounts of their childhood experiences document a period of Tibetan life not easily obtained due to the remoteness of a people living in the vast Himalayan region. Their memories of being farmers, herders, traders, monks, housewives, civil servants and land owners provide rich, first-hand accounts of a way of life practiced for generations. Their descriptions reveal the social, political, cultural and religious aspects of the daily lives of a people living in a free and independent country with its own language, currency, national flag and government. The videotaped interviews provide examples of the various dialects of the participants who come from one of the three provinces of Tibet, Amdo (Dhoday), Kham (Dhotoe) and Utsang and will be useful in preserving these languages.

The respondents gave detailed accounts of the dynamics of family life and religious traditions surrounding birth, marriage and burial ceremonies. They recalled the hardships as well as the joys of their life tilling the fields, herding yaks, caring for large families and studying as young monks in the local monasteries. As their stories unfolded, the elder's initial shyness dissolved and they went on to give memories of their Himalayan homeland filled with majestic mountains abundant with spring flowers and wild animals. They recounted horse racing festivals, the details of trading fairs and the deep satisfaction derived from their Buddhist beliefs and practices.

The interviewees, especially those from lower income levels, were forthright in recounting their memories of severe poverty, lack of education and medical care. They did not hesitate to describe the challenges they faced in paying taxes to the local monasteries and to the Tibetan government, which depended on their contributions to sustain the monastic culture they valued and the government services they needed.

### Accounts of the Invasion of Tibet

After describing their early lives in Tibet, the elders were asked to recount when and how their lives changed. Because of the limited access to news of world events and conflicts, the Tibetans were psychologically and politically caught off-guard by the Chinese army's invasion of their country. Interviewees reported being stunned and horrified by the reality of the invasion as Chinese troops fired on nomad gatherings, bombed monasteries in the middle of the night and imprisoned village leaders without cause. Property and family possessions were confiscated, religious leaders captured, and people were forced at gunpoint to participate in beatings and public humiliation sessions known as *thamzing*, where children were forced to harm their own parents and monks beat their teachers. The constant refrain, "I saw it with my own eyes" often preceded accounts of these experiences.

### Interviews with Trauma Survivors

Because many interviewees were trauma survivors, it was necessary to tread carefully around memories that were partially repressed or compartmentalized. For example, a man described a torture treatment in great detail and in the third person, although he himself was the victim. In another interview, a woman mentioned in passing that no one in her village had children after the Chinese came. It was only when the interviewer explored this curious fact that she revealed all the men and women of child bearing age had been sterilized, including her husband and herself. When a respected monastic leader was asked several times if he used any special spiritual practices to cope with his arduous imprisonment and near starvation, he always ignored the question and instead spoke of the importance of the United Nations interceding on behalf of Tibet. It was as if his individual suffering were not worth discussing compared to the needs of his entire country.

### Influence of Buddhist Teachings

The Buddha's teachings, or dharma, were considered the most cherished treasure of Tibetan culture without which one could not find true happiness. The intentional destruction of the monasteries, treasured ancient texts and revered spiritual teachers struck at the heart of the Tibetan people and the interviewees often tearfully recounted their eyewitness accounts of these events. To understand the elders' past and current reactions to the invasion and on-going occupation, it is important to note that Tibetan culture, and most importantly Buddhism, teaches that suffering in this life is the result of karma or past deeds. Although elders spoke of their anger at the Chinese oppression, they also felt it was perhaps due to their destiny or fate and "partly due to the might of China." The elders often described how they struggled over the years to let go of anger or hatred towards the Chinese because these feelings destroyed their own peace of mind. They described their commitment to follow the Dalai Lama's counsel to refrain from violent retaliation and seek freedom for Tibet through negotiation.

## **METHODS AND PRACTICES**

Adamski founded the Tibet Oral History Project in 2003 by organizing a steering committee to plan and carry out its development. The members attended seminars in conducting oral histories and hired Basya Petnick, a consultant in oral history, to work with the committee. Because there were no Tibetan oral histories of elders readily available in English, except as individual biographies, Adamski consulted with Tibetan leaders, government officials and the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives about the need for the project.

Interview protocols were designed and questions were formulated based on general knowledge of Tibetan history. Adamski gained experience in videotaping, using interpreters, and testing interview questions by initially interviewing three Tibetan elders living in California. Their oral histories were completed in June 2006. These first three oral histories were so compelling, rich in detail and historically fascinating that the TOHP team knew the project could make a significant contribution by videotaping a greater number of elderly Tibetans.

### **Interviewee Statistics and Interview Process**

The interviews were videotaped in the location most convenient for each elder: home, office and Buddhist center. The interviewees ranged in age from 57 to 71. Interviewees included a reincarnate lama, the son of a widowed village weaver, and the daughter of a farmer turned resistance fighter. The two males were from Utsang and the female interviewee was from Kham (Dhotoe).

Each interview was videotaped. Two interviews (Interviews #93 and #94) were conducted in English. For Interview #92 an interpreter was required. The interviewer asked questions in English and the interpreter repeated the question for the elder in Tibetan, then translated her answer back into English for the interviewer. Non-Tibetan interviewers were intentionally selected to explore subjects that Tibetans know so well they might not think to ask about or they might feel reluctant to ask about because of cultural constraints. A series of questions was prepared in advance to lead the interview in chronological order, starting with early childhood memories through escape into exile. During the interviews, elders were invited to recount their childhood experiences in Tibet, their cultural and religious traditions, the impact of China's invasion and occupation of Tibet on their lives, and their escape and resettlement in India.

### **Editing and Archiving**

Interviews were recorded with video cameras using MiniDV tapes. Upon completion of the interviews the video footage from the MiniDV tapes was transferred to computer hard drives for storage and editing. Video footage was edited to remove any pre- or post-interview footage or to remove various interruptions during the interview. The edited footage was then transferred to a set of DVDs as the final medium for archival storage and distribution.

TOHP hired a team of Tibetans in India to translate the interviews fully into English and to transcribe the interviews using the video DVDs. The transcribers followed this process:

## Tibet Oral History Project

- 1) Listened to the question posed by the interviewer and then transcribed it in English.
- 2) Listened to the interviewee's complete response in English/Tibetan and then the interpreter's translation of the response in English.
- 3) Simultaneously translated into English (if necessary) and transcribed the interviewee's response (and that of the interpreter if in addition to the interviewer's statements/questions).
- 4) Replayed each question/answer series to make corrections as needed.
- 5) Read through entire transcript, returning to video for any additional corrections, and correcting various typing errors.

The transcribers also completed a brief biography of each interviewee, a summary of the interview, and a list of main topic keywords.

Once this work was completed, the transcripts were transferred to the United States to be proofread, formatted and converted to PDF documents. Transcripts were edited only to make basic corrections in grammar. No statements from either interviewee or interviewer were removed or changed.

Each elder received a copy of his/her interview on DVD. The English transcripts are posted on TOHP's website ([www.tibetoralhistory.org](http://www.tibetoralhistory.org)). A full set of videos and printed transcripts are archived at the United States Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. and the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in Dharamsala, India, as well as several other libraries in the United States and Europe connected to Tibetan studies programs.

## **CHALLENGES IN CONDUCTING INTERVIEWS**

Although the TOHP interviews were conducted by Westerners with some knowledge of Tibet's history and some contact with Tibetans or travel in Tibet, cultural differences still played a role in shaping the interviews. Questions directed towards describing "feelings" were difficult for many of the elders to answer or to elaborate upon because it is not typical for Tibetans to focus on one's individual emotional state as something of importance. They tended to evade such questions and focus on what they had witnessed happen to others.

The passage of time may have been a factor that influenced the respondents' abilities to recollect and recount experiences that took place more than fifty years ago. For others, the memories of life in Tibet were remarkably clear and comprehensive—as was the case for Tashi, a 95 year-old man who, for over two hours, recounted his life as a yak herder in surprising detail. While it is likely that many of the elders' traumatic experiences were forgotten, repressed or let go of, many participants gave painful accounts of what they had endured or witnessed. Their courage in reliving these memories was gratefully acknowledged as a contribution to preserving the history of the Tibetan people.

### **Videos and Transcripts**

All video cameras used in the interviews required MiniDV tapes which record up to one hour of film. Changing of these tapes in the middle of interviews created discontinuities in the interviews. Statements or questions are sometimes cut off at the end of the finished tape or the beginning of a new tape if the conversation was not paused or started along with the videotaping. Although discontinuities are noted in the transcripts, it is not always possible to define them as "tape changes" unless clearly stated in the video footage. There may be other unknown circumstances under which the tape was paused or stopped.

## **INTERVIEW TEAM BIOGRAPHIES**

### **Interviewer**

#### **Dr. Marcella Adamski**

Marcella Adamski, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist with a practice in San Francisco, California, USA, who has worked for more than 30 years with various international humanitarian and human rights organizations. She served as Director of Survivors International, an organization dedicated to the treatment of survivors of political torture from around the world. She has conducted therapy groups for the International Rescue Committee with traumatized refugees from Bosnia. She has also served as Chairwoman of the Board, and board member, of the Tibet Justice Center (formerly International Committee of Lawyers for Tibet). As a consulting psychologist Dr. Adamski participated in two Tibet Justice Center investigations in Dharamsala, India, conducting interviews with Tibetan women and children refugees about conditions in Chinese-occupied Tibet. She has travelled to Tibet to deliver medical supplies for a health organization serving the rural populations. She founded the Tibet Oral History Project in 2003 and serves as its Executive Director.

### **Interpreter**

#### **Tashi Chodron**

Tashi Chodron is a Tibetan who was born in India and immigrated to the United States. She has extensive experience as a Tibetan activist, organizer, and fundraiser. She has written and oral fluency in Tibetan, Kannada, Hindi, and English. She serves as an interpreter at a national translations service for Tibetan refugees needing assistance. She also served as a Board member for the Tibetan Association of Northern California and the Committee of 100 for Tibet. Tashi Chodron received her bachelor's degree from St. Teresian College in Mysore, India, and studied Early Childhood Education at the City College of San Francisco.

### **Transcript Translator**

#### **Tenzin Yangchen**

Tenzin Yangchen is a Tibetan who was born in India and lives in a refugee community in Bylakuppe, India. She is fluent in Tibetan, English, Hindi and Kannada. She is fluent in the three major dialects of the Tibet provinces of Utsang, Dhotoe and Dhoday. She served as an accountant for the Tibetan Cooperative Society Ltd., Bylakuppe. Tenzin Yangchen is now serving as Managing Trustee of the Gesar Charitable Foundation and as International Service Director of Rotary Lhasa in Bylakuppe. She is also the Outreach Director for the Tibet Oral History Project.

# TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

## Interviews #1C-32C

California, New Mexico, Oregon,  
and Washington, United States;  
British Columbia, Canada  
February 21, 2012 – October 24, 2016

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## **BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES**

The Tibet Oral History Project (TOHP), on the advice of His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, was initiated by Marcella Adamski, Ph.D. She met with the Dalai Lama in 1999 in Dharamsala, India, where she had been interviewing recently escaped children as part of an investigation of human rights abuses in Tibet. At her meeting with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Adamski asked what more might be done to help the Tibetan people. His Holiness urged Adamski to record the life stories of Tibetan elders living in exile before they died and their stories were lost forever. He wanted their childhood experiences of early life in Tibet, with its rich culture and religious traditions, preserved for generations to come.

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### Project Significance

The exiled elders interviewed by TOHP are the last generation to have lived in an unoccupied Tibet. They are the last people on earth to fully embody the Tibetan language and culture. The urgency of TOHP's preservation work is further dictated by the age of the exiles—many are now 80 to 90 years old. TOHP plans to record as many narratives as possible before the exiled elders die and their accounts, memories, and experiences of Tibet prior to the Chinese invasion and occupation die with them. The oral history collection gives voice to a people, their age-old way of life and the total dismantling of their society following the Chinese invasion.

The importance of this project is:

- *Historical*: The project documents personal recollections of life in Tibet before 1949 and eyewitness accounts of the effects of the Chinese invasion and occupation.
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- *Political*: The Tibetans' subsequent response to invasion and occupation has been unique among nations. The elders first describe how their resistance forces failed to stop the invading Chinese army in 1959, but go on to state their current commitment to uphold the request of the Dalai Lama to follow the Buddha's teaching of non-violence—even towards their oppressors.

TOHP is the first oral history collection to provide complete English transcripts of interviews with Tibetan elders, made accessible worldwide through the Internet. TOHP also provides video footage of the interviews on DVD and through several international websites. Since these interviews were made available on TOHP's website, there has been a continuous favorable response from Tibetans, historians, anthropologists, oral historians, journalists and others interested in the richness and scope of information found in these eyewitness accounts.

### Documenting Early Life in Tibet

From a cultural and historical perspective, the elders' accounts of their childhood experiences document a period of Tibetan life not easily obtained due to the remoteness of a people living in the vast Himalayan region. Their memories of being farmers, herders, traders, monks, housewives, civil servants and land owners provide rich, first-hand accounts of a way of life practiced for generations. Their descriptions reveal the social, political, cultural and religious aspects of the daily lives of a people living in a free and independent country with its own language, currency, national flag and government. The videotaped interviews provide examples of the various dialects of the participants who come from one of the three provinces of Tibet, Amdo (Dhoday), Kham (Dhotoe) and Utsang and will be useful in preserving these languages.

The respondents gave detailed accounts of the dynamics of family life and religious traditions surrounding birth, marriage and burial ceremonies. They recalled the hardships as well as the joys of their life tilling the fields, herding yaks, caring for large families and studying as young monks in the local monasteries. As their stories unfolded, the elder's initial shyness dissolved and they went on to give memories of their Himalayan homeland filled with majestic mountains abundant with spring flowers and wild animals. They recounted horse racing festivals, the details of trading fairs and the deep satisfaction derived from their Buddhist beliefs and practices.

The interviewees, especially those from lower income levels, were forthright in recounting their memories of severe poverty, lack of education and medical care. They did not hesitate to describe the challenges they faced in paying taxes to the local monasteries and to the Tibetan government, which depended on their contributions to sustain the monastic culture they valued and the government services they needed.

### Accounts of the Invasion of Tibet

After describing their early lives in Tibet, the elders were asked to recount when and how their lives changed. Because of the limited access to news of world events and conflicts, the Tibetans were psychologically and politically caught off-guard by the Chinese army's invasion of their country. Interviewees reported being stunned and horrified by the reality of the invasion as Chinese troops fired on nomad gatherings, bombed monasteries in the middle of the night and imprisoned village leaders without cause. Property and family possessions were confiscated, religious leaders captured, and people were forced at gunpoint to participate in beatings and public humiliation sessions known as *thamzing*, where children were forced to harm their own parents and monks beat their teachers. The constant refrain, "I saw it with my own eyes" often preceded accounts of these experiences.

### Interviews with Trauma Survivors

Because many interviewees were trauma survivors, it was necessary to tread carefully around memories that were partially repressed or compartmentalized. For example, a man described a torture treatment in great detail and in the third person, although he himself was the victim. In another interview, a woman mentioned in passing that no one in her village had children after the Chinese came. It was only when the interviewer explored this curious fact that she revealed all the men and women of child bearing age had been sterilized, including her husband and herself. When a respected monastic leader was asked several times if he used any special spiritual practices to cope with his arduous imprisonment and near starvation, he always ignored the question and instead spoke of the importance of the United Nations interceding on behalf of Tibet. It was as if his individual suffering were not worth discussing compared to the needs of his entire country.

### Influence of Buddhist Teachings

The Buddha's teachings, or dharma, were considered the most cherished treasure of Tibetan culture without which one could not find true happiness. The intentional destruction of the monasteries, treasured ancient texts and revered spiritual teachers struck at the heart of the Tibetan people and the interviewees often tearfully recounted their eyewitness accounts of these events. To understand the elders' past and current reactions to the invasion and on-going occupation, it is important to note that Tibetan culture, and most importantly Buddhism, teaches that suffering in this life is the result of karma or past deeds. Although elders spoke of their anger at the Chinese oppression, they also felt it was perhaps due to their destiny or fate and "partly due to the might of China." The elders often described how they struggled over the years to let go of anger or hatred towards the Chinese because these feelings destroyed their own peace of mind. They described their commitment to follow the Dalai Lama's counsel to refrain from violent retaliation and seek freedom for Tibet through negotiation.

## **METHODS AND PRACTICES**

Marcella Adamski founded the Tibet Oral History Project in 2003 by organizing a steering committee to plan and carry out its development. The members attended seminars in conducting oral histories and hired Basya Petnick, a consultant in oral history, to work with the committee. Because there were no Tibetan oral histories of elders readily available in English, except as individual biographies, Adamski consulted with Tibetan leaders, government officials and the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives about the need for the project.

Interview protocols were designed and questions were formulated based on general knowledge of Tibetan history. Adamski gained experience in videotaping, using interpreters, and testing interview questions by initially interviewing three Tibetan elders living in California: a reincarnate lama, the son of a widowed village weaver, and the daughter of a farmer turned resistance fighter. Their oral histories were completed in June 2006. These first three oral histories were so compelling, rich in detail and historically fascinating that the TOHP team knew the project could make a significant contribution by videotaping a greater number of elderly Tibetans.

In 2007, TOHP began making plans to find a location where a large number of elders could be interviewed in a short time period. It was not possible to record oral histories in Tibet without endangering the elders or the team given Chinese government restrictions. Consequently, the largest Tibetan settlements in India located in Bylakuppe in the state of Karnataka were selected for the interviews. A resident of Bylakuppe, Tenzin Yangchen, was hired as Outreach Director to ask elders in the community if they would like to participate in the project.

Although shy at first, many elders agreed to be interviewed when they learned that the Dalai Lama wanted them to share their stories to inform people about Tibet. Many respondents, due to their lack of education, thought they had nothing important to contribute as individuals, but felt motivated if it would help the cause of Tibet and preserve their cherished Buddhist beliefs for future Tibetan generations. Those who agreed were pre-interviewed by Tenzin Yangchen to obtain biographical details, such as village of origin, livelihood in Tibet, key experiences, such as imprisonment, year of fleeing Tibet, and other experiences the elders wanted to recount.

A group of interviewers, videographers, and interpreters residing in the U.S. and India was assembled to conduct the interviews. Three teams completed 64 oral histories in Bylakuppe over a two-week period from June 25 to July 7, 2007. In 2010, TOHP completed the next series of interviews in another large Tibetan settlement – the Doeguling Settlement in Mundgod, Karnataka, India. Two teams completed 53 oral histories over a two-week period from April 4 to April 14, 2010.

In 2012, TOHP again asked Tenzin Yangchen to coordinate new interviews in Dharamsala, Himachal Pradesh, India, home to the Tibetan government-in-exile. Two teams consisting of an interviewer, videographer, and interpreter were assembled to conduct these interviews. In addition to interviews in the McLeod Ganj region of Dharamsala, the teams also conducted a limited number of interviews in the small Tibetan settlements in Bir and Tashi Jong. TOHP completed a total of 50 oral histories over a two-week period from May 14 to May 24, 2012. One

interview was removed from the collection at the request of the interviewee, leaving 49 interviews in this new set.

During 2012 and 2013 an additional 15 interviews were conducted with Tibetan refugees living in or visiting the western United States. Most of these interviews were conducted as a series over a 2-3 day period. A few interviews were done individually throughout the year. Each interview team comprised of an interviewer and videographer and if needed, an interpreter.

During 2014 TOHP conducted 17 interviews in the western United States and Canada with Tibetan refugees living in or visiting North America. These interviews were conducted as a series over a 2-3 day period in each location. Each interview team comprised of an interviewer and videographer and if needed, an interpreter. One additional interview was conducted in 2016 in the San Francisco Bay Area.

### Interviewee Statistics and Interview Process

The first set of United States interviews were videotaped in the San Francisco Bay Area during 2012 and 2013 and in 2013 in Portland, Oregon. The second set of United States interviews were videotaped during 2014 in Portland, Oregon; Santa Fe, New Mexico and Seattle, Washington and in 2016 in Albany, California. One interview in 2014 was videotaped in Richmond, British Columbia, Canada. The interviews were conducted in Tibetan Buddhist centers and Tibetan community centers as well as a few private home and one in a private office.

The interviewees ranged in age from 61 to 85 with the exception of one artist, age 44, who was interviewed due to his knowledge of tradition painting. The majority of interviewees were male and several were Buddhist monks. Most interviewees came from two regions of Tibet, Kham (Dhotoe) and Utsang, with only one elder from Amdo (Dhoday) and one from Sikkim, India. The Tibetan elders interviewed came from diverse backgrounds such as nomads, farmers, housewives, students, monks and even a yogini. During and after the Chinese invasion, some of these individuals became political prisoners, forced laborers, and resistance fighters.

Each interview was videotaped. The interviewers were provided in advance with pre-interview forms containing interviewee details. Interviewees were informed at the beginning that they did not need to answer any questions or talk about anything that they preferred not to discuss. They were also asked, both before and after the interview, if there would be a problem if the interview were seen in Tibet or China, in order to gauge the interviewees' concerns about the topics being discussed. If the interviewees were greatly concerned about retaliation against themselves or their relatives, they were given the option to choose a pseudonym which would be used from that point forward as well as the option to not have their face shown in photographs or videos.

For most of the interviews the interviewers asked questions in English and the interpreters repeated the question for the elders in Tibetan, then translated their answer back into English for the interviewer. A few of the interviews were conducted entirely in English. Non-Tibetan interviewers were intentionally selected to explore subjects that Tibetans know so well they might not think to ask about or they might feel reluctant to ask about because of cultural constraints. A series of questions was prepared in advance to serve as options for the interviewer,

starting with early childhood memories through escape into exile, but a strict adherence to the questions was not required. During the interviews, elders were invited to recount their childhood experiences in Tibet, their cultural and religious traditions, the impact of China's invasion and occupation of Tibet on their lives, and their escape and resettlement in India.

### Editing and Archiving

Interviews were recorded with video cameras using memory cards. Upon completion of the interviews the video footage was transferred to computer hard drives for storage and editing. Video footage was edited to remove any pre- or post-interview footage or to remove various interruptions during the interview. The edited footage was then transferred to a set of DVDs as the final medium for archival storage and distribution.

TOHP hired a Tibetan in India to translate the interviews fully into English and to transcribe the interviews using the video DVDs. The transcriber followed this process:

- 1) Listened to the question posed by the interviewer and then transcribed it in English.
- 2) Listened to the interviewee's complete response in Tibetan and then the interpreter's translation of the response in English.
- 3) Simultaneously translated into English and transcribed the interviewee's response (and that of the interpreter if in addition to the interviewer's statements/questions).
- 4) Replayed each question/answer series to make corrections as needed.
- 5) Consulted dictionary, atlas, Tibetan handbooks, monks and/or lay people when clarification was needed for translation.
- 6) Read through entire transcript, returning to video for any additional corrections, and correcting various typing errors.

The transcriber also completed a brief biography of each interviewee, a summary of the interview, and a list of main topic keywords.

Once this work was completed, the transcripts were transferred to the United States to be proofread, formatted and converted to PDF documents. Transcripts were edited only to make basic corrections in grammar. No statements from either interviewee or interviewer were removed or changed.

Each elder received a copy of his/her interview on DVD. The English transcripts are posted on TOHP's website ([www.tibetoralhistory.org](http://www.tibetoralhistory.org)). A full set of videos and printed transcripts are archived at the United States Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. and the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in Dharamsala, India, as well as several other libraries in the United States and Europe with Tibetan studies programs and Tibetan community centers in the United States and India.

## **CHALLENGES IN CONDUCTING INTERVIEWS**

Although the TOHP interviews were conducted by Westerners with some knowledge of Tibet's history and some contact with Tibetans or travel in Tibet, cultural differences still played a role in shaping the interviews. Questions directed towards describing "feelings" were difficult for many of the elders to answer or to elaborate upon because it is not typical for Tibetans to focus on one's individual emotional state as something of importance. They tended to evade such questions and focus on what they had witnessed happen to others.

The passage of time may have been a factor that influenced the respondents' abilities to recollect and recount experiences that took place more than fifty years ago. For others, the memories of life in Tibet were remarkably clear and comprehensive—as was the case for Tashi, a 95 year-old man who, for over two hours, recounted his life as a yak herder in surprising detail. While it is likely that many of the elders' traumatic experiences were forgotten, repressed or let go of, many participants gave painful accounts of what they had endured or witnessed. Their courage in reliving these memories was gratefully acknowledged as a contribution to preserving the history of the Tibetan people.

### **Translation Challenges**

The interpreters used were not professionals and their skills in providing accurate translations during the interviews varied. Although the interviewers strove to develop the topics under discussion, some important issues may have not been explored due to the challenges of interviewing through an interpreter.

Every word spoken by the Tibetan elder and by the interpreter is accurately translated in the transcripts, even if it was not conveyed to the interviewer. If dialects, "old Tibetan" words, or the names of people and places could not be understood or were not translated during the interview, great effort was made to provide correct translations in the subsequent transcriptions of the interviews. Therefore, the written transcripts provide complete and accurate English translations of the interviews. They should be utilized in conjunction with the video footage where the language can be heard and the people can be seen recounting their life stories. Together they provide an extraordinary window into the voice of the Tibetan people.

### **Videos and Transcripts**

Filming at locations within the community resulted in occasional interruptions to the interviews and interjections from other people in the room. Interruptions to the interviews or adjustments needed to improve filming conditions or changing of video camera memory cards or tapes may have created discontinuities in the interviews. Although discontinuities are noted in the transcripts, it is not always possible to define them as such unless clearly stated in the video footage. There may be other unknown circumstances under which videotaping was paused or stopped.

All elders were asked if they felt comfortable having their own names published with their interviews. For those who were concerned about retaliation against them or their relatives, TOHP

asked the elder to select a pseudonym. This pseudonym is then used for both the video DVD and transcript of the interview. As a result single words or whole sentences may have been deleted from the video footage and transcripts in order to remove the elder's name or names of family members and relatives. The use of a pseudonym is noted in the transcripts as "alias."

A subset of previous transcripts was reviewed for accuracy by two Tibetan language scholars, Karma Thinley Ngodup at University of California, Berkeley, and Robert W. Clark at Stanford University. Both scholars indicated that the Tibetan to English translations provided in the transcripts were good translations. Ngodup noted, "My overall remarks about the transcripts are that these are done very accurately, very precisely, using the correct terminology as much as they could, maintaining the chronology of the story, yet not without little inaccuracies here and there due to the lack of understanding the dialect, and the nature of the Tibetan terminology."

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Firedoll Foundation

## **INTERVIEW TEAM BIOGRAPHIES**

### **Interviewers**

#### **Marcella Adamski, Ph.D.**

Marcella Adamski, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist with a practice in San Francisco, California, USA, who has worked for more than 30 years with various international humanitarian and human rights organizations. She served as Director of Survivors International, an organization dedicated to the treatment of survivors of political torture from around the world. She has conducted therapy groups for the International Rescue Committee with traumatized refugees from Bosnia. She has also served as Chairwoman of the Board, and board member, of the Tibet Justice Center (formerly International Committee of Lawyers for Tibet). As a consulting psychologist Dr. Adamski participated in two Tibet Justice Center investigations in Dharamsala, India, conducting interviews with Tibetan women and children refugees about conditions in Chinese-occupied Tibet. She has travelled to Tibet to deliver medical supplies for a health organization serving the rural populations. She founded the Tibet Oral History Project in 2003 and serves as its Executive Director.

#### **Martin Newman, MFT**

Martin Newman, MFT, is a psychotherapist and photographer living in the San Francisco Bay Area of California, USA. For the past several years he has visited the Kham and Amdo regions of Tibet and photographed the people and their way of life. He has also conducted trainings for graduate students of psychology and education in China who work with Tibetans in the identification and treatment of emotional problems in children found in rural Tibetan communities. He exhibits photographs frequently in the Bay Area and has been published in *National Geographic Traveler* magazine, *The San Francisco Bay Guardian* and in the book *The Dawn of Modern Korea*.

#### **Hilary Kaiser, Ph.D.**

Hilary Kaiser is a retired university professor, an oral historian, a writer and a storyteller. Her various fields of interest include bi-culturalism, intercultural communication and intercultural management. She has given lectures on French and American culture and business practices at various schools in Europe. She has been a visiting scholar at the University of California in Berkeley and at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. She has served as a consultant for the oral history projects of two Paris-based organizations: the Association of American Wives of Europeans (AAWE) and the American Library in Paris (ALP). For her dissertation on the socio-linguistic aspects of the English-speaking churches of the Paris area, Dr. Kaiser conducted and transcribed numerous interviews. A history buff who is fascinated by World War II, she conducted oral history projects with U.S. veterans and French war brides of World War II and has published three books based on these interviews.

Interpreters

**Tashi Wangchuk**

Tashi Wangchuk is a Tibetan who was raised in India and lives in the United States. He completed all of his education in the English language. He is a film director and TV host/producer responsible for interviewing, video editing and cinematography. He has published both feature films and documentary films about Tibetans in exile.

**Nyima Tsam**

Nyima Tsam is a Tibetan who was born in India and lives in the United States. She completed all of her education in the English language. In addition to studying nursing she performs oral dharma translation work for Tibetan lamas.

**Tenzin Tsedup Wangdu**

Tenzin Tsedup Wangdu is a Tibetan who was born in India and lives in the United States. He completed all of his education in the English language. He served as Board President of Tibetan Association of Northern California and as Vice President for the board of directors of the Tibet Oral History Project.

**Kalden Norbu**

**Khenrab Palden**

**Kunga Choeden**

**Sonam Ngodup**

**Tashi W. Juchungtsan**

**Tenzin Sherab**

**Tenzin Yangchen** (of Portland, Oregon)

Transcript Translator

**Tenzin Yangchen** (of Bylakuppe, India)

Tenzin Yangchen is a Tibetan who was born in India and lives in a refugee community in Bylakuppe, India. She speaks Tibetan, English, Hindi and Kannada. She completed all her education in the English language. She is fluent in the three major dialects of the Tibet provinces of Utsang, Dhotoe and Dhoday as a result of the mixed backgrounds of her community's residents. She served as an accountant for the Tibetan Cooperative Society Ltd., Bylakuppe. Tenzin Yangchen serves as Managing Trustee of the Gesar Charity Foundation and as International Service Director of Rotary Lhasa in Bylakuppe. She is also the Outreach Director for the Tibet Oral History Project; she pre-interviews the Tibetan elders and coordinates all interviews in India.