

Tibet Oral History Project

**Interview #11C – Dekyi K. Dongretsang
July 6, 2013**

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INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #11C
2. Interviewee: Dekyi K. Dongretsang
3. Age: 71
4. Date of Birth: 1942
5. Sex: Female
6. Birthplace: Lhasa
7. Province: Utsang
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1948/49
9. Date of Interview: July 6, 2013
10. Place of Interview: Tibetan Community Center of Portland, Oregon, USA
11. Length of Interview: 1 hr 08 min
12. Interviewer: Marcella Adamski
13. Interpreter:
14. Videographer: Jeddadiah Emanuel
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

Biographical Information:

Dekyi K. Dongretsang was born in Lhasa and was the daughter of an employee at the British Mission. As a young girl her family moved to Kalimpong in India where they had an estate with a big house and orchard. At the age of 6 she was admitted to St. Joseph's Convent. She fondly recalls those days of school in Kalimpong and visiting Gyantse in Tibet during holidays until the Chinese occupation prevented them from returning to Tibet from India.

As a result of her good education and knowledge of the English language, Dekyi K. Dongretsang was asked to work as a translator for the Tibetan refugees who were resettled in Bylakuppe in south India in 1960. She gives a detailed account of her work, the hardship endured by the first Tibetan refugees in Bylakuppe and how they managed to survive in a totally new country with harsh climate and a different way of life.

Dekyi Dongretsang describes the Tibetans' early years in exile, including the education of the children, formation of settlements, health problems, shortage of funds and educated staff for the government. She became a staff member of the Tibetan Government-in-exile established in Dharamsala and gives details about her tenure in different offices and their functioning. She spent many years helping to document the personal accounts of what Tibetan refugees has endured under Chinese rule. After more than 35 years of service to the Tibetan Government, which she terms as most satisfying, and Dekyi Dongretsang moved to the United States.

Topics Discussed:

Utsang, childhood memories, life as a refugee in India, Tibetan Government-in-exile.

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Interviewee: Dekyi K. Dongretsang

Age: 71, Sex: Female

Interviewer: Marcella Adamski

Interview Date: July 6, 2013

[Interviewee speaks in English. No interpreter required.]

Question: Please tell us your name.

00:00:12

Interviewee #11C: My name is Dekyi Khedup Dongretsang.

Q: His Holiness the Dalai Lama asked us to record your experiences, so that we can share your memories with many generations of Tibetans, the Chinese and the rest of the world. Your memories will help us to document the true history, culture and beliefs of the Tibetan people. Do you give your permission for the Tibet Oral History Project to use this interview?

#11C: Oh, yes.

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

#11C: [Nods]

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

#11C: [Nods]

Q: If you do not wish to answer a question or talk about something, let me know.

#11C: Okay.

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

#11C: Pardon?

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

00:01:09

#11C: Oh no, not at all.

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

#11C: [Nods]

Q: Thank you, Dekyi-*la* ‘term of respect.’

#11C: [Nods]

Q: So let us begin by...perhaps you can tell us when you were born and where you were born?

#11C: I was born in Lhasa in Dekyi Linka.

Q: What year?

#11C: 1942.

Q: 1942. So you are 70 years old.

#11C: Yeah.

Q: Is Dekyi Linka right inside of Lhasa or nearby?

00:01:49

#11C: It is in Lhasa.

Q: So the nearest temple was...?

Q: The nearest temple was...

#11C: The nearest temple was...well; I am not very sure. I think the Drepung Monastery was a little, you know...

Q: Nearby.

#11C: Nearby.

Q: Drepung.

#11C: Yeah.

Q: Okay.

#11C: Dekyi Linka was the residence of the British Mission then.

Q: Oh, tell me more.

00:02:20

#11C: The British...there were a representative, secretaries and that was their residence.

Q: Where you were born?

#11C: Yes, I was born there because my father used to work there. I think he was secretary and advisor to the British Mission there.

Q: To the British Mission.

#11C: [Nods]

Q: Can you tell us for people who don't know anything about British Mission in Lhasa? Can you tell us about that?

00:02:48

#11C: Well, I do not know much but I think they were there to work with the Tibetan Government, you know. Trying to settle down there.

Q: Do you know what year they came, what year?

#11C: Who?

Q: The British?

#11C: As far as I know...I think they were there from 1936 or [193]5 but I do not know what details. I was born there but I know that much.

Q: What did your father do? Tell us more about that.

#11C: I think he was the assistant to the British Commissioner whoever he was. And I believe he also was an advisor working there with them.

Q: How many people were in your family, in your own family?

00:03:38

#11C: In my own family...one, two, three, four...five, I think.

Q: Five children? Was that five children or...?

#11C: No. My parents, myself, my brother and you know, some workers and all that.

Q: Were you the youngest or...?

#11C: No, I was the eldest.

Q: Given your father's position, what would you say in terms of socio-economic levels? Were you kind of, you know at the higher levels of Tibetan society or medium or lower? Which was it?

#11C: At that time, you mean when I was born?

Q: Yeah.

00:04:20

#11C: Maybe higher because he was working at the British Mission. I am not sure because after that, when I was very young we came to India. Then we went back to Tibet on holidays and all but I was not really settled there because my mother's place is in Gyangtse, not Lhasa. So we used to stay there also on holidays.

Q: In Gyangtse?

#11C: Yeah.

Q: How far from Lhasa is Gyangtse?

#11C: Oh, how far? Just one moment. [Inquires of someone off camera] How far could it be?

Q: How far away?

[?]: Two days' ride.

#11C: Two days, yeah, on horseback.

Q: Your parents and you were the oldest girl?

#11C: [Nods]

Q: Were there other girls or boys in the family?

#11C: Later on?

Q: Yeah.

#11C: Yeah, one boy and two girls.

Q: Do you happen to know how did your father get that job working for the British Government?

00:05:27

#11C: No, I have no idea.

Q: Do you have any memories of Lhasa?

#11C: No, not much. Actually nothing, I could say. I was very young then. Then we moved to Gyangtse and stayed there. I have little memories of Gyangtse, not the place itself but where I lived, mother's family, you know.

Q: Tell me about...what are those memories.

#11C: Oh, well we had...I remember a four-story building...big stone building and lots of servants around. We were children; so we just played around, go on picnics, doing all that sort of thing. Then we came to India to study.

Q: How old were you when you came to India?

00:06:14

#11C: Five, 6 maybe. I am not sure of the exact thing, you know.

Q: Do you know why your father left his post and came to India?

#11C: No. He was retired, I think. He was not keeping well and he got retired.

Q: Where did you move to in India?

#11C: Kalimpong in Darjeeling District in West Bengal.

Q: Did he continue in poor health or did he get better?

#11C: Poor health. Poor health, yeah.

Q: So he was retired from working there.

#11C: Um.

Q: How did your family survive financially?

00:06:59

#11C: I do not know. We had a big house, orchards and estates in Kalimpong. I remember them but how did it happen, where did it come from...We were children, so we did not have any idea. I think it was a family inheritance, wealth and all that.

Q: That helped you a lot.

#11C: Um.

Q: What are some of your first memories of Kalimpong?

#11C: First memories...going to school, playing around, you know, the usual, nothing special. We had servants at home and we used to go out and play. We had a big ground, estate, orchards and gardens. So it was fun.

Q: It sounds lovely.

#11C: Yeah.

Q: It sounds very pleasant and enjoyable...

#11C: Yeah.

Q: ...for a child. What schools did you go to?

00:07:57

#11C: I attended St. Joseph's Convent.

Q: Who ran that place?

#11C: Oh, maybe...I don't know. St. Joseph's, it is a charity missionary school. All nuns were there.

Q: Were there nuns?

#11C: Nuns.

Q: Did you have to go to school early like first grade, second grade?

#11C: Oh, yeah. From kindergarten we started going there.

Q: I wonder, you know your father worked with the British, did you learn to speak English even before you went to school?

00:08:33

#11C: Oh, no. No, I was very young. I was a baby in Lhasa. We came specifically here...My mother used to tell me that she brought me along, so that I could study in India and have an education.

Q: That was her dream for you.

#11C: [Nods]

Q: What was your mother like?

#11C: She was a very jovial, fun loving woman.

Q: Do you know what her family did for a living in her own area?

#11C: They had lots of estates, lands. They were sort of landowners. There were a lot of estates, coming from the farms and all that sort of...

Q: And that was her city?

#11C: Yeah.

Q: You had a big...well, I guess wasn't it a big contrast to go from...I know you were little...you were 5 or 6 years old but that's a big change from Lhasa to India.

00:09:42

#11C: Yeah, but I remember India more than Lhasa. So I didn't have that impact sort of change in places.

Q: Tell me about school. What was school like for you?

#11C: School was very...We loved going to school because the nuns were very kind. We never had this meetings or punishments going on. And we were very young, KG, Class 1, 2, just passed off. We used to walk to school at that time, 1940s, walk in the morning to school, come back in the evening, 3:30 or 4. That was the routine, you know, all the time.

Q: Were there other Tibetans in the school with you?

#11C: Yeah, few families. Not many, just a few.

Q: Was there anything that made other Tibetan families come to that school? Like your father, you know he retired, so that was one reason, right? Why did the other Tibetan families come?

#11C: In Kalimpong?

Q: Yes.

00:10:48

#11C: Oh well, it depends. Some people did not know anything about education. Some could not afford it, I believe.

Q: So that time if you say 19...you were born in '42 and you were about 6. We're talking about 1948 or 49, somewhere there. What's the town like? What's Kalimpong like?

#11C: It's a small trading post between India and Tibet. There used to be a lot of business going on between Tibetan businessmen and the local people. I mean, local means the business people over there. Lots of woolen business going on. I remember these big trucks coming in loaded from Tibet full of wool and then they used to unpack them in the big stores in Kalimpong.

Q: Do you know what they did with them then?

#11C: I have no idea. I don't know what they did. Maybe they sent it to their own places or made something out of them. It was a trading post between Tibet and India, at that time near the border area.

Q: I think the British may have liked some of that nice wool. Maybe...

#11C: Maybe.

Q: ...made it's way to England and then possibly back. So, there you are. You go to grade school, you have a nice set of teachers, and what's your home life like? What's going on inside your house at that time? You come from a Tibetan tradition, so I'm curious you being raised in a Catholic school by nuns. Do you begin to take on their beliefs or do you...

00:12:37

#11C: Oh no, nothing like that. We just went there to study but nothing was forced on us. Out of curiosity I used to go into the church with my friend just to see but there was nothing such like "I want to become a Catholic or something like that."

Q: Didn't happen.

#11C: No because we had a very...at home we were very Buddhist, staunch Buddhists my parents were.

Q: What tradition was your family's...in Buddhist?

#11C: Gelugpa.

Q: Gelugpa, the Dalai Lama's tradition.

#11C: [Nods]

Q: Were there temples in Kalimpong where you could go?

#11C: Oh, yeah. There was a monastery. We used to go there frequently and then we used to celebrate some occasions there also. All the people around there used to come there.

Q: Your parents had a happy life it sounds like in Kalimpong?

00:13:33

#11C: Oh yeah.

Q: They did? That's really nice. So what begins to happen next? In 1948 you are 6. Tell us like what happens when you get to be 10, 11, 12, anything change?

#11C: No, nothing much. Before that, once I remember we went to Tibet, to Gyangtse on a holiday and we stayed at my mother's place. I don't know how long but we had a nice

holiday over there. Then we came back on horseback. I remember those, you know. On horseback, a lot of mules and horses.

Q: You must have been a good horseback rider.

#11C: Yeah, but we were small. I mean we were young, so we were put in a basket on either side, inside a basket with blankets and some eatables in the middle and there was someone else leading the horse...cutting on the ice, I remember those just...

Q: What an adventure!

#11C: Yeah, we used to do that and then go back, and stop overnight at places with tents and have hot tea without milk, you know those sort of teas, and *tsampa* 'flour made from roasted barley' and all that. I just little, little, not very detailed but.

Q: It sounds very magical.

00:14:51

#11C: Yeah, now I think of it, it was. Yeah, once when we were crossing a mountain we were told not to look at the snow, as we would be blinded or something. So everyone had these strips of green, red cloth. It was put on our forehead with the cloth hanging like this [indicates covering the eyes], so that the snow wouldn't affect our eyes. I remember those sorts of little, little things on the way.

Q: How long did it take you?

#11C: I have no idea. I was young, so...

Q: You were young, yeah.

#11C: ...on horseback and then we used to come through Sikkim or, Yartung I remember once through the border and then reach Kalimpong. But how in detail, I don't remember.

Once I remember people taking me on their backs because there was no place to walk for the horses, so we were carried on people's backs and then moved along. Something like that, all hazy but. I remember those sorts of...on my trips.

Q: No big roads.

#11C: Yeah.

Q: You had to really walk there or ride...

#11C: Yeah.

Q: How lovely that your mother got to see her family.

#11C: Yeah.

Q: That it was possible to go.

#11C: Um.

Q: That's very nice and then when did your life begin to change from your school days?

00:16:18

#11C: Nothing much but later on we couldn't go to Tibet.

Q: Why?

#11C: The Chinese had come and then the trip was...then we couldn't go back.

Q: What do you remember hearing about the Chinese coming into Tibet? Do you get any...?

#11C: We were going to school [and] busy with studies, but we were told that the Chinese had come and then now we can't go back to Tibet. Because at that time we had a lot of things in Tibet, Gyangtse...our personal things...lots...we couldn't bring them. That was the last trip, I think. We didn't know about it. So when we were trying to go back, we were warned not to come because the Chinese had arrived. After that then we were in India all the time.

Q: What was the warning about, meaning...? What were they afraid would happen to you if you went back?

00:17:19

#11C: I don't know. My parents, they didn't allow us. They said, "Now we can't go back because the Chinese have come and invaded our country."

Q: So that had to be around 1958.

#11C: Yeah.

Q: And you were born...okay. So you were like 16 around that time...

#11C: Yeah.

Q: ...when China had invaded Tibet.

#11C: [Nods]

Q: What happened to your life? Did you go to high school after your grade school?

#11C: I finished my school; yeah, [in the] convent and then we were thinking of going to college. At that time, I think in 1959 all the refugees had come into India and there were

lots of people coming without anything and then Dharamsala... Office was set up in Dharamsala by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Tibetan-in-exile government. So I was...my parents let...I was asked to come there to work, you know, to help with the office work, interpretation, translation and all that.

Q: What year was that?

#11C: 1960. Actually before that...going to Dharamsala I went to Bylakuppe settlement when it was first being set up. There were two camps then. Two camps and then all forests and they were in tents, you know.

Q: Yeah, I heard it was quite a primitive situation for living conditions.

#11C: Yeah, it was. There were officials working there, Tibetan Government officials who had come from Tibet with His Holiness' entourage. So they asked my mother to send me along with them to help them [with] translation and writing because there were none at that time who could speak both Tibetan and English, but I wanted to go to college, you know.

We had filled up the forms and all that but my mother [said], "No, this is your time to serve your own people." She said, "What are you going to do with further education if you can't make use of it? So you must go and work there and later on when you come back, then you can finish your college, go to college." So I said okay. It was a complete new place. I hadn't been out of Kalimpong that much, you know, just in the district only.

00:19:54

So I was sent there [to] Bylakuppe. There were tents and all jungle around, and I had to do all the, like...the Indian Government used to give them rations, rice and *dhal* 'lentils' and all that and they all had to be written and signed. Actually I think maybe few but no one could sign. Everyone was illiterate...refugees coming. So they had this thumb impression to be done, writings to be done, requests to be made and I was alone with the officials working there. They didn't know English, you know.

We had these tents, office tents with big lights...lanterns, no lights...lanterns and working there, writing and doing all those office works and big frogs jumping around. I still remember all that. In the grass big frogs jumping around us and we were doing the work. It was quite difficult, no sanitation, water was scarce, yeah.

Q: You were 16 or 17?

#11C: Seventeen maybe.

Q: So instead of going to college...

#11C: One year I was in Kalimpong after finishing school. I was in Kalimpong trying to get into college and then this came along. So I had to go there.

Q: Where did you want to go to college?

00:21:14

#11C: In Darjeeling. In Darjeeling there were good colleges. Yeah, I was thinking that.

Q: Did you ever get to college?

#11C: No, not after that because...it's a long story. When I came back also, I didn't have that chance but I can...

Q: We'll hear about that story. So you really had to go to the frontier, the new frontier of Tibet in Bylakuppe. For people who don't know what we mean by Bylakuppe, can you describe the countryside and what it was like at that time because we are talking about 1960?

#11C: Yeah, '60-'61.

Q: And the Tibetan people, they fled with His Holiness the Dalai Lama in 1959...80,000 people started leaving Tibet and the Indian Government gave them this land. How did they get the land? Do you know?

#11C: The State Government. It was all jungle, I believe. Forest, unused forest and they were asked to settle there. They used to cut down all the forest and get a daily wage and tents were put up by the government...state government. Daily wage...it was sort of a survival thing, everyday thing.

Q: What were the tents like?

00:22:33

#11C: Common tents, white. I remember common tents like that.

Q: And the weather?

#11C: Weather was okay but hot, yeah. Maybe in June, July it was very hot, I believe. I used to stay inside the tent and just look around and you could see those mirages from the road. Sort of, what do you call it?

Q: Like heat waves...

#11C: Yeah, you could see that. It was all dust, you know. The roads were all ordinary dusty roads.

Q: Were the Tibetan refugees that came there, what were they wearing because they had come from Tibet?

00:23:14

#11C: They were wearing their usual Tibetan attire. Yeah, whatever they had brought with them, Tibetan dresses. The men were wearing pants and things but everything was what they used to wear in Tibet.

Q: But the weather is very different.

#11C: Yeah, different over there. Then slowly I think they adjusted. They knew what to do, what not to wear. Early morning they used to go to work with all their equipment, whatever they had to take and evening they used to return because they were in the forest cutting down trees. They were surrounded by jungle forest, you know.

The opening where they were settled, that was with tents and all that but around that...And I believe lots of elephants also were there, roaming around. I didn't actually see one but I'm told there were one or two accidents also, you know. They were killed by...one or two people by the elephants.

00:24:13

So when we see the swaying of the forest, we used to be very frightened and "elephants are coming," they used to say.

Q: I heard that there were many wild animals in that area. What about illness because it's a big change in climate? You had adjusted a little bit in your home in India but what about the Tibetan people? Were they able...?

#11C: There wasn't an epidemic or any like that. It was nothing that bad, illness. We had a doctor also coming in the dispensary, coming in to see them if anyone was ill but otherwise, it was okay. That was the first camp. That was camp Number 2 where we were staying. And there was another one further away one mile, Camp Number 1. So when the Camp Number 3 people came in, then I had to go from there.

Q: Why?

00:25:07

#11C: Because...not go, but there were two officials there who were working there, my bosses actually. They had to go to Dharamsala for a meeting. So, I insisted that I wanted to go also. I didn't want to stay there any longer. But they said, "No." They said, "Of course, you can come with us for a holiday."

then the local people, you know, I mean the Camp 2 elders, they were very old, old people there, they all came with *khata* 'ceremonial scarf' and asked me, "Oh, please don't go. Please don't go. Why are you leaving us?" I said, "No, no. I'm coming back. I've to go and see my parents and just for a holiday and I'll come back with the *kungo*." We used to call them—*kungo* 'Your Presence, title of address for government officials.' "You must promise that you will come back" and all, but in my heart I said, "Oh no, I don't think I'll come back again, you know." Like that, you know. Anyhow, they let me go saying, "You must come with the *kungo*." "Okay," I said.

Q: What did they want you...I couldn't hear that. Come back with what?

#11C: With the two people, the bosses.

Q: You must come back with them?

00:26:12

#11C: ...with them because they were going to attend the meeting in Dharamsala, you know. So I wanted to go with them to Dharamsala for a change, actually and they said, "You must also come back with them." Because they knew it was a very difficult situation for me. I wasn't used to all the hard...[not discernible] and they thought maybe I won't come back. They [said], "You must come. Without you how can we work here?" The translation, you know doing all the written work and then making all the lists and everything, complains, we had to go to the local Indian people and say what hardship we were undergoing and what changes we wanted.

And there were lots of press people coming in. Oh, busloads of press people. They used to come everyday, interview the people, show slides and then they hadn't seen Tibetan people before. So, once or twice we used to go to a bigger city from Bylakuppe, Bangalore city to meet the officials over there, the local Indian officials, to see and have a meeting. Everybody used to stare at us. The two...my bosses they were in pants and jackets or whatever, but I was in a Tibetan traditional dress and I had very long hair also then. So everywhere you go the crowds...They hadn't seen anyone like that in those dresses, that was the first time. So wherever you go you see crowds coming after you just to see. Even in the restaurants, when we used to go in the restaurants, the waiters and everyone around staring at you. It was quite awkward also, sometimes embarrassing.

Q: This is in Bangalore?

#11C: Yeah, Bangalore, Mysore.

Q: Mysore?

#11C: Mysore, yeah. Later on they got used to it, of course.

Q: Yes.

00:27:56

#11C: So many Tibetans going by bus up and down. At that time in the beginning it was like that.

Q: That was interesting. You mentioned that a lot of press were coming to Bylakuppe to interview or film the Tibetans because they knew about the escape of these people?

#11C: Yeah, they knew that a whole lot of people had come to settle in their country, you know. So the press people, they used to come there quite often. Sometimes they came in busloads, you know, different papers and all that.

Q: What countries, from what countries?

#11C: Oh, the local, local people, Indian.

Q: Indian press.

#11C: Indian press, yeah, not the international press, not at that time. And then I had to do all the translation and show them around, you know, what did they do, what did they eat? I know all those things. I came in the newspapers quite often, you know. They used to put up [my pictures] in Tibetan dress....young thing and all that sort of thing. I had lots of cuttings but I lost them all on the way. So I have no proof. [Laughs]

Q: You did what a lot of college students would like to do after they graduate. You just skipped college.

#11C: Yeah [laughs], doing all that.

Q: You took on such a responsibility. Amazing. So tell us how the story develops? You went to Dharamsala with your bosses and what did you do?

00:29:20

#11C: When I was in Dharamsala, the bosses used to attend the meeting, I stayed back. I said later I was going to go to Kalimpong to my family actually and finish my college. Then the Tibetan Children's Village, you know in Dharamsala, TCV. At that time Mrs. Tsering Dolma, the late...she was there and she said, "Oh Dekyi-la, why are you wasting your time doing nothing over there waiting for the *kungo*. We have shortage of people working there. So you come to my office there." So I went to the TCV Village and worked there voluntarily, you know. Before the *kungo* finished their meeting, I used to stay there and work there with the nurses, children, in the office, work and all that in the Tibetan Village.

Q: For people who don't know, first of tell us who that woman was and tell us what was the Tibetan...TCV, Tibetan Children's Village. Explain what it looked like and what they were doing? Who was the woman and who started it?

#11C: She was the elder sister of the Dalai Lama, Mrs. Tsering Dekyi and she had one or two people working with her in the office. That was all. It was very...not like this, you know. It was very...Working people were very scarce there, you know, who knew English or whatever. So I used to work with her, under her.

Q: What was the...excuse me, but what was the plan? Why were they setting up these schools and who...?

00:30:54

#11C: Oh, these were from...Many were orphans, semi-orphans. When they came from Tibet, their parents died on the way or some parents died when they reached India because

of the weather, poor conditions, you know. So all these orphans were taken. It was set up for that purpose, to take and look after these orphans.

Q: Do you know what percentage of children that went to the Tibetan Children's Village School, what percentage were orphans at that time?

#11C: I have no idea. At that time I just went there temporarily, you know to work. I wasn't thinking of what percentage...but there were lots of children.

Q: Can you remember what were the children's attitude or their emotions or their reactions to their new experience?

#11C: They were very young children, all of them. So they were happy I think. Some missed their parents but some were quite happy because they were fed well, looked after by the *ayah* 'children's nurse' or whoever looked after, the foster parents. There were foster parents looking after them. So I just saw them happily playing around. I was more involved in the office work, yeah.

Q: And what kinds of things did you handle in the office work? What did they need done?

00:32:13

#11C: It was like sponsorship things. It was all different, different works, you know, whatever came up to be done, you know.

Q: Where were they getting these sponsors from?

#11C: Sponsors from abroad, I believe. I was asked to write this letter there or this...you know. I wasn't a permanent staff over there...helping out with what the other bosses were doing.

Q: That's interesting. TCV has grown quite extensively.

#11C: Oh yes.

Q: Tibetan Children's Village. Are they now all over India, or did they start in Dharamsala? Is that where they started?

00:32:53

#11C: Yeah, it started in Dharamsala. Now of course, it's a big institution.

Q: And they have schools all over India?

#11C: Yeah, they have. Not all over India but quite a few, I think places they have, yeah.

Q: When you leave Bylakuppe and you get asked to again, to help out again and you want to go home but you don't make it home? Do you ever get back to your...?

#11C: Oh yeah, I did. My two bosses, they had to go back, of course to Bylakuppe, to continue their work over there. I was sent with some people going up to Kalimpong. So I went to Kalimpong but I wasn't in good health then, you know. Both the diet down there was very poor, you know. We just had rice, I remember, rice and *dhal* once...in the evening it would be potato and *dhal*, no meat or anything. Sometimes it would be fried rice but that would be all turmeric rice, you know, yellow rice. It's just sort of fried, no eggs or no meat or anything. It was very...but I got over...I mean I could adjust very easily but my health deteriorated.

00:34:13

Then I was ill also for sometime. One or two days, I don't know; I've no idea but I couldn't speak, you know.

Q: Really?

#11C: Yeah, no voice coming because I had to do a lot of running around, speaking, translating. Then there was a family nearby, the daughter used to go to school in Mysore. So when she came for holidays, she used to help me. I used to stay there and she used to sit and then she did the translation. I used to write and say what to say and what to do, you know because I didn't have the voice.

And then the two bosses, they were so worried and said, "Oh, what happened to you? We have brought you from so far away and we have to take care of you but now what to do?" They were very worried for me, you know actually. Two, three days, I think I just stayed like that. Just taking some drops and then later on my voice came. I mean it was okay then.

Q: Came back.

00:35:12

#11C: Yeah, came back. Then I went...I told you I went to Kalimpong. They sent me there for a holiday. So I stayed there. I wasn't feeling well and then the doctors told me to take rest, good diet and eat well and all that. So I stayed there, maybe...how many months?...I have no idea but four, five months, I think somewhere around that period. Then I was thinking now to go to college and all that. [Laughs] Yeah, I wasn't going back [to Bylakuppe], I said. It was far away and all that.

Then the letter came from Dharamsala. My mother said, "See, there's a letter from the Kashag 'Cabinet.' They've asked me to send you to Dharamsala." My first response was, "Oh no, I'm not going anywhere." [Laughs] But then mother said, "Oh see, it's very important." The Kashag's seal was there. "You must go. You can't just ignore. It's a very important piece of paper. You can't just ignore[and say], "No, I'm not coming." I won't allow you to do that. You must go. You can go there and stay for 1-2 years and then you can come back. You know, really," she said. I thought over, "Okay then, 1-2 years is okay."

00:36:28

Then I had to go because of that letter. They had asked me to come, the Government-in-exile in Dharamsala. So, I went to Dharamsala. I was sent there.

Q: Explain...

#11C: [Interrupts] Because my mother is very patriotic, you know. She is very, in that sense...She said, "Oh, you must do this for the people. You must do this." So I had nothing...actually to say.

Q: Explain what the Kashag is?

#11C: Kashag is the ministers of...4-5 ministers together, they decide, you know. The whole decision is taken by them and they have officers under them that they look after.

Q: So they are the ministers of the Tibetan Government-in-exile?

#11C: [Nods]

Q: Was the government...So then you can tell us when you got there? So you decided to go again, reluctantly, but your mother was encouraging you to serve the government...

00:37:25

#11C: ...to serve the government and the people and all that, you know.

Q: What was Dharamsala like when you got there?

#11C: Oh, Dharamsala [was] not a bit like now, as it is, you have been there. Just a few houses, I just remember...um...few houses, one store, Nowrojee Store. They had these tidbits, selling sweets and candies, biscuits. That was all, I think. It was all forest and nothing much, you know. The English people had been there before. It was a cantonment, I believe. There were one or two houses that were left by the British when they left, you know. That was all, nothing much there.

Q: It's a hill town, very beautiful, kind of at the edge of ...

#11C: ...edge of the, yeah, and from Pathankot you have to take the bus.

Q: Tell us how long it took?

#11C: Bus four hours...something like that. Four hours, I think by bus. It was a nice journey but up, up hill, you know. You have to go that way and then there was the Dhauladar range of mountains. That was beautiful as the backdrop. Yeah, that was it. And then we had a small army cantonment, and there was a small...That was known as the Mcleodganj, the one I am talking about. And then there was a smaller one Forsythganj market, two markets but few, few houses, nothing much.

Q: Tell us what happened to you when you got there?

#11C: Oh! [Laughs]

Q: Did you get a tent?

00:39:02

#11C: No, I was given a staff quarter, one room staff quarter. There was a big building, not very big but it was left by the British, I think. They used to stay there. We had four offices there, the Security Office, the Home Office, the Religious Office and the Education Office. Those were the four main offices then.

Well, then I worked in the office, Home Office main and then I used to go wherever they, everyone wanted, the four offices, you know. Someone wanted to write this letter or that, or someone wanted me to speak to an official, local official. So I was there all the time running around all the four offices.

Q: You were used as an interpreter.

#11C: Interpreter, secretary and everything.

Q: Primarily with the Indian government or...?

#11C: Indian government.

Q: Primarily?

#11C: Yeah.

Q: Was it exciting or was it scary? What was it like? You are now about 18 or 19 at that time?

00:40:11

#11C: Oh, it wasn't scary, no, exciting...I think I liked the job actually because I could see it was helping people, lots of people, you know, translating for them, taking them to the clinic or writing for them. It was satisfying work, actually.

Q: I guess what I meant was the reason everybody is there is because their country has been invaded and many people are still being imprisoned, tortured and sent to camps, labor camps. Did you...were you hearing stories from the refugees?

#11C: Oh, yeah. Lots of...

Q: Can you tell us what kind of stories?

#11C: Oh no, they used to tell us how they were beaten up, taken to camps, you know, they were known as *thamzing* 'struggle session.' Oh, and then...

Q: Public beatings.

#11C: Public beatings and all that. We used to receive lots of statements from these people and all those statements we used to translate into English and then sent them out to internationally; you know, different organizations and all that. I remember doing that most of the time because all these refugees used to come in and someone used to...they used to talk to these people and then they used to write in Tibetan, because [the writers] didn't know English. He used to speak in Tibetan and then they write in Tibetan.

Oh, whole pages, you know pages and pages, what happened to them, where were their families, public beatings, who was killed, you know all what difficulties they had to undergo, all those things and all these pages I had to write in English, translate all of them in English and make lots of copies and then they were sent out in different places, organizations or whatever.

Q: So the government was documenting the actual experiences of people who just escaped from Tibet?

#11C: Yeah, yeah.

Q: Can you tell us what some of the stories were about?

00:42:10

#11C: Oh, mostly all were typical sort of stories, you know. First they used to say, "Who are you? When did you come?" And then, "Oh, my parents were beaten up and I was..." It was sort of typical; you know what the Chinese did to them. Public beating was always there and imprisonment for many years. It was all more or less like that.

Q: Did people talk about their property, like their farms and houses? What had happened to them?

#11C: Some did. Some said, "Oh, all my lands were taken by the Chinese." Mostly were...just escaped they didn't have anything like that. Some say, "Oh, I just came running, escaped. I don't know what happened back at home." They had all the same stories to tell.

Q: What about stories about how they actually escaped because Tibet's so large and people were coming from all over Tibet. Were you noticing any difference in like...?

00:43:10

#11C: Ah no, I was just doing the translation, you know actually. Then they used to say "Oh I came through this place" but it wasn't...sort of given importance at that time because what happened in Tibet was...

Q: ...given importance.

#11C: Yeah. How did they suffer? What hardships they underwent? That was all in Tibetan and I had to translate them into English. And then there was a nearby Indian office and there was a gentleman there. He was the head of the office. He knew English and

Tibetan. So I used to send him my translations to him asking him, “Please see if it’s okay. Make some changes.”

Because my translation English was all school English. It wasn’t a professional thing but I knew the translation was good but how you put it, it was quite difficult. So I used to send it to the gentleman and then he used to send it back, just one or two red marks. He said, “Oh no. It’s perfect. There’s nothing [to be changed].” “And” maybe, you know, missed and he used to put that but there’s always nothing, you know. And I wasn’t satisfied actually but then he never changed anything. He said, “Oh no, it’s perfect.” And he used to send it back to me in the office.

Q: You were a good student. You learned your English very well.

#11C: Maybe. [Laughs] I’m not sure but it wasn’t professional thing, you know.

Q: I just wanted to know in any of the reports you did, what were you hearing about the monasteries and the monks when people came in?

00:44:35

#11C: Oh, at that time they didn’t have much to say, you know. They said monasteries were destroyed and this and that. But it was very early in the beginning, so they all [spoke] about their personal hardships and what happened to the monasteries. They used to say all that, many were destroyed or monks were killed or imprisoned, but I don’t remember the details of those statements. There were so many. We used to do all that, so many through the years.

Q: How long did you stay in Dharamsala?

#11C: Oh, I stayed... Well, I was stuck over there now, you know [laughs] in the four offices. Then we moved to a bigger place, from that building to a bigger place. We had more offices, more staff, more people working, and I had been working there since until I retired, you know. [Laughs]

Q: Well, let’s get roughly around...you moved to the bigger offices when...like what age would you have been about? 20, 25?

00:45:38

#11C: Yeah, maybe. Let’s see...25...

Q: What year?

#11C: It was in...25, 26, 27...28 maybe, somewhere around that period.

Q: You would have been around 28 and you weren’t married at this time?

#11C: Oh yeah, I was. I was.

Q: You got married...

#11C: ...married in 1964-65 between that, I don't remember the thing...because my husband was studying there. We had a staff...there was a department that was grooming people to become staff, you know, teaching them English, Tibetan, writing, all that, schools. So he was working there and we were in the same building, the quarters. So we met there.

Q: If you were born in 1942, I don't think you...

#11C: '65...

Q: ...you would have been like 17? No...

#11C: No, I might have been 25.

Q: You might have been 25.

#11C: Twenty-four, 25 something like that.

Q: Okay, you might have been 25. That would have been like 1967?

#11C: Um...

Q: And that's when you were married.

#11C: Um...

Q: I'm sorry, say what he did for a living? He was what?

#11C: Who?

Q: Your husband, what was he doing for a living?

00:47:07

#11C: No, he was studying there. The Tibetan Government brought in people to study. They gave them some training and then he worked in the offices like me, you know. There were officials there.

Q: Did your parents come to the wedding or know about your marriage?

#11C: Oh no, they knew but they couldn't come, too far away and then we had it sort of...it was a very simple marriage, sort of. At that time there were no big weddings or marriages taking place. There were all elderly people then working in the offices, all elderly people who had come from Tibet, all big officials who used to work there. We were the younger ones, you know, just brought in and speaking English and all that.

Q: Did your life change very much when you got married?

#11C: Yeah, maybe...not much. It was the usual thing but when my first son was born, then of course, it was a little difficult, you know for us to manage the child and there were no facilities at that time. It was very, you know, difficult period for everyone working there. The salary was not that big and we had to hire someone to look after the child, the baby. That was an extra expense, you know all sort of that. Otherwise, life was okay we have had.

Q: So we are down like around '67. Can you tell us some of the highlights of the years that you worked?

00:48:52

#11C: I was working in the Home Department. Home Department looks after all the settlements. Then there were many settlements, not only Bylakuppe. There were different settlements that had come. I used to work there for many years and then I was sent to Tibetan Homes Foundation also in between for 2-3 years.

Tibetan Homes Foundation in Mussoorie [Uttarakhand] is like the Tibetan Children's Village. It is more or less the same, you know, taking children and sponsorship work and all that. I was the Assistant Secretary there. Then I was transferred back to the Home Ministry. We used to have...then the staff people, they used to be transferred from one place to another. I wasn't transferred outside, only in Mussoorie and then we came back to Dharamsala. Then I was working in the Tibetan...at that time it was known as Information Office. International Relations, now it's known as. I worked there for some years also.

And then later on I worked in the Health Department, Tibetan Department of Health that looks after the health, clinics and hospitals in India, run by the Tibetan Government. And then I worked in the Tibetan Delek Hospital. You must have...I was the Director there, Administrator actually for two years. Then I was transferred to the Health Department. That sort, working in different space and all that, but then in between before I used to go to other offices also when they needed me like, "Oh please, do this typing for us or write this for us."

00:50:27

Later on, of course many people came around who finished school, you know. Then we had many. Before I was the only one there, knowing English, you know. I did all the typing work also for them. There were no computers at that time...putting in these carbon papers and making four copies and then again putting in carbon papers, it was not enough and doing the typing all over again. I did lots of copies.

I used to say "Oh, my thing [looks at finger tips] actually my thing, this skin should have disappeared by now because I used to do lots of typing, you know for all the offices whenever they needed some 'Please do this typing for me'." I did lots of typing.

Q: So you were really valued for your English skills and your secretarial skills and your administrative skills.

#11C: Yeah, and for my Tibetan skills. They had people, one or two I remember who spoke English, but they didn't have the Tibetan writing thing, you know. They spoke but they couldn't write or translate. So that was one advantage I had over them. I could be more valuable to them, helpful you know.

Q: Yes. In a way, I mean this is like a whole society, whole government trying to set up another kind of government because they had different needs once they were out of their own country, right?

#11C: Yeah.

Q: I mean they had a Tibetan Government inside Lhasa but it functioned in that society but when you moved it, it functioned...you know it had to function around office and health care...

#11C: Oh yeah, schools...

Q: Education...

#11C: Education, everything yeah.

Q: What do you think were some of the biggest challenges the Tibetan Government had to deal with as it tried to set up survival outside of Tibet? What do you think...?

00:52:24

#11C: Maybe funds then. It was very scarce then, funds.

Q: Funding.

#11C: Yeah, funding was difficult then. Not now, now we have lots of funding coming in. Maybe the funding was, and then personnel, experienced personnel. We were all sort of...We just spoke English and all that but we weren't experienced in any specific, you know...

Q: ...career or profession?

#11C: Profession yeah, maybe because of that.

Q: Do you think there was a lot of loss of the most highly educated, gifted people who...? Were they killed by the Chinese when the government...when there was a government takeover by the Chinese Government?

#11C: Not gifted but all the, yeah, maybe the elderly people were there and some very highly respected *rinpoche* 'respected lamas,' monks also. And some were left behind. They couldn't come.

Q: Because it would be your...higher people might be targeted by the Chinese.

#11C: Yeah.

Q: Or they might be too frail to come because of their age even if they carried the wisdom of a society.

#11C: Yeah, that's right.

Q: What do you think was lost when Tibetans had to leave Tibet? What do you think was lost of the Tibetan culture when the people had to leave their own country?

00:53:58

#11C: Of the Tibetan culture? More or less everything was lost actually over there, you know, the artifacts and the prints, but the culture when we settled in India, we sort of you know, we didn't let it be lost or anything.

Q: So what do you think was not lost? What do you think you were able to keep even as a whole society of refugees because that's what the society had to do to survive? What do you think the Tibetan people have been able to hold on to?

#11C: Oh, the religion, culture, unity, I think. Culture and religion are still same as in Tibet, maybe more so.

Q: Really?

#11C: Yeah.

Q: Why do you say "even more so"?

#11C: More so, I mean unitedly, you know. At that time Lhasa was one place but Kham and Amdo were another place, not like they were one Tibet or something. But here now everyone is together as one nation, one thing.

Q: That's true. That's true. Yes, all those distinct differences have become more identified as one Tibetan culture instead of Kham, Utsang...

00:55:10

#11C: At that time they had their own local, you know, leaders or whatever. They were sort of different from the Lhasa Government. I feel like that but I don't know actually I wasn't there long enough.

Q: What do you think is very important to be saved for the next generation of Tibetan children like your sons? What do you think is important to be saved?

#11C: Tibetan language, religion, culture, everything, I think should be saved. These are the main aspects of the Tibetans.

Q: What about the religion itself because it's unique; Tibetan Buddhism is...

#11C: ...different from others.

Q: You know, it's a very special kind of Buddhism. What is it about Tibetan Buddhism that you think is valuable for the world?

00:56:03

#11C: Oh, non-violence. I think it's the most valuable.

Q: Why?

#11C: In this particular world you know, what is going on around us, I think non-violence... the Buddhist way of thinking and living.

Q: Do you think that the Dalai Lama's request that there not be any violence towards the Chinese is one that's working for the Tibetan people?

#11C: Pardon? Working...?

Q: Do you think it's working? Do you think it's effective? Do you think it's going to in the end help Tibet?

#11C: Tibet...yeah, I think so. Of course.

Q: Why?

00:56:46

#11C: Because you know, I think eventually we will be returning to Tibet. We feel that way, you know.

Q: Why do you think that might happen?

#11C: Happen?

Q: Why do you think it might happen? I mean the Chinese are occupying Tibet now, so why do you think you will be returning someday?

#11C: Well, we all have that hope and aspiration that one day we will return to our...There maybe changes in the Chinese Government. It wouldn't stay in that position, all the time stable. We just think that way.

Q: What do you think about...?

#11C: Not in my generation, of course, coming generation.

Q: In the coming generation?

#11C: Yeah, I'm not saying in my time I'm going back.

Q: Yeah.

#11C: But we never know. In politics you never know what's going to happen.

Q: What are the things that have been happening in eastern Tibet? Are the number of immolations, now over a hundred, what do you think about that form of protest?

00:57:52

#11C: It's sort of a violence, sort of protest but not to others but self. So His Holiness has asked them also not to take this step, you know. Maybe it will die down eventually.

Q: Yeah. Were you affected by it in any way when you heard that all those...?

#11C: Oh yeah, we were all feeling very sorry for the families.

Q: Could you imagine why they would feel so desperate or not?

#11C: Because of the sufferings they must be enduring under the Chinese over there, maybe they can't take anymore or maybe they want the world to know what is happening.

Q: More like a witness...

#11C: Um...

Q: ...in addition to suffering. Yeah, I think so. Well, there must be many more things we could talk about but I'm going to ask you, is there anything that you want to share with us from your very interesting inside you of the Tibetan Government-in-exile growing and developing, are there any things that you think would be important for people to be aware of if they didn't know about that period of history that you could tell us?

00:59:22

#11C: I think people should know when we first...The government was set up, how it was managed, what difficulties we worked under, you know, all that sort of thing because now they see the government here with lots of funding and all that. But they didn't know how it was actually, you know, started.

Q: Yeah.

#11C: Yeah, those people working there at that time. I know so many have passed away now. There were lots of people who had come from Tibet, not from India but from Tibet itself, with His Holiness' entourage. There is hardly anyone left, you know. I knew so many of them but there is actually no one. I'm trying to remember this one and that one, but oh, everyone has passed away, you know. So there's no one. Those were the main people who actually started this work.

Q: They were the main people, yeah. Were there any that...I know His Holiness is special to you as he is to every Tibetan, but is there any Tibetan like leader or official who you were very admiring of, who you found very noble kind of person that you worked with?

01:00:36

#11C: They were all very hard working and very loyal to His Holiness but there wasn't any particular [person] I remember now. I don't know. Who was there...Well, I couldn't think of anyone, you know. There were several. Some of their names also I don't remember now. Yeah, it was so long time ago and I was very young then. I wasn't that much bothered, you know who was that and this. [Laughs] I'm very sorry but the situation then was different from now. I wasn't thinking too much then of...

Q: Right. You were actually in Dharamsala while the whole government-in-exile began and then you were married and had a child then. Fill us a little bit with the...How does your story develop? Do you have more children? Do you stay there? What happens?

#11C: Oh yeah, I stay there. I worked there all through the years, you know.

Q: Up until what year?

#11C: 1995?...1995, I think.

Q: 1995. Did you come to the United States then?

#11C: Oh no, I returned from the government thing.

Q: Oh, I see.

#11C: After working there for 25 years, you can take a retirement. We went on working, you know.

Q: How many years did you work totally for the government, starting in Bylakuppe?

01:02:17

#11C: Starting in Bylakuppe is very long...'61, '71, '81, '91...45-40 in between, I don't you know actually, you know...

Q: Over 40 years.

#11C: I always count myself when I came to Dharamsala. I count from there, you know. The Bylakuppe thing I always miss. [Laughs] It doesn't come to my mind. 1962, end of that I came to Dharamsala. I say, okay I worked since then, you know. But the Bylakuppe thing is always out of my mind. Actually I worked there but it wasn't sort of an official, official thing, you know. I was asked to come and work there but it wasn't...so I always forget. I always say from Dharamsala I worked in '62.

Q: In '62...

#11C: ...yeah, I came to Dharamsala.

Q: Okay, you came in '62 and then you left Dharamsala...oh no, you retired in Dharamsala...

#11C: ...yeah in Dharamsala in 1995.

Q: In 1995 you retired...

01:03:17

#11C: Because, yeah...because then my two elder sons had come to the USA. You know the 1,000 people that they...the staff people could go. So they went in that thing and then to have the younger ones come there, we had to, the parents had to come here. You understand that.

Q: Explain people who might not know about the 1,000 people...

#11C: One thousand people?

Q: Tell people what that means.

#11C: One thousand people were...we were asked to pick 1,000 people to the United States. It was an official thing, you know.

Q: The United States Government allowed 1,000 Tibetans to come...

#11C: And then the Tibetan Government said 1,000 people from all walks of life, you know, from different area...if they are eligible, and then from the staff, the government employees, they said, "Oh, you can send one from each family who is eligible but not all the staff but above...who has worked this much years." They can send a family member there, but you can't go yourself. You have to send someone from the family member. So we send...we each had one, one allotted to us. So we send our two eldest sons, you know. When they got settled there, the younger sons were still studying in India. But they couldn't bring in the younger ones because it was a different thing you know, over there. So we had to come in. We came to bring in the younger sons, you know.

Q: You had to come.

01:04:48

#11C: Yeah, we had to come because of that and not because "Oh, we don't work there. I like America and all." It wasn't like that actually, personally for me. So we came to America and then we applied for the younger sons to come. So the years went on, you know. It takes quite a long thing for this immigration process. So the younger ones came.

Q: How many children do you have?

#11C: I have five sons.

Q: Five sons and where are they living?

#11C: They are all here.

Q: They are all in the United States now?

#11C: Yeah.

Q: When you finally left, if you retired in Dharamsala in 1995, what year did you come to the United States?

#11C: 2000.

Q: Well, this is quite an adventure you've had.

#11C: Yeah. [Laughs]

Q: What are you doing with your life these days?

01:05:36

#11C: These days nothing much. Now I'm retired here also. No one gives me work because of my age maybe. [Laughs] No, I'm just joking.

Q: Would you like to do a little work?

#11C: No, I used to do. Now not much, you know because of my eyesight, poor eyesight and all. And then it's okay like that.

Q: When you look back on your life, how do you feel about the fact that you gave almost, I don't know, 40 years...

#11C: Yeah, looking back I feel, you know it was very rewarding thing for me to have worked for the Tibetan Government under His Holiness.

Q: So your mother gave you some good direction.

01:06:22

#11C: Yes, of course. Now to think it was. Otherwise, I would have been going to a college over there and roaming around in that area and doing nothing actually with my life. You know, maybe, I always feel.

Q: Was the work in the end...was it satisfying to do this kind of work for the government?

#11C: Oh yes, yes, very.

Q: And fulfilling?

#11C: Yeah.

Q: Okay.

#11C: If I had been given the chance, I think I would have done the same thing.

Q: That's quite a statement. If you had to do over again?

#11C: [Nods]

Q: You would do the same thing?

#11C: Yes, I'll do that.

Q: Well, this has been an honor to interview such a loyal government worker of the Tibetan Government. His Holiness would be very proud of you and all of your work. Thank you so much for what you...

#11C: Thank you for having me on this program.

Q: It's our honor too. It's our honor. Thank you.

Q: Why would you say it is so important for the people of Tibet to have compassion and forgiveness for the Chinese Government? To forgive the Chinese Government for taking the...?

#11C: Why is it important?

Q: Yes.

#11C: That's a Buddhist way of thinking actually. Our religion has always taught us that to think of others more than yourself.

Q: What do you think, what good has come from this, from the Chinese Government invading? There's always good that comes out of bad.

#11C: Yeah.

Q: According to you, what good...

#11C: Well, I always feel if the Chinese hadn't invaded, we would still be in the same place, ignorant sort of, you know. All these people wouldn't have seen the world and get education. You know all sorts of things. We would still be in the same way of living a life.

So now we have come and seen the world and all these people have been educated. Otherwise, the children wouldn't be educated. They may be in the monasteries but they wouldn't have seen the world at all. We would be just there locked in the own kingdom.

END OF INTERVIEW