

Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #23C – Lama Wangchuk Gyaltzen
August 3, 2014

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TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #23C
2. Interviewee: Lama Wangchuk Gyaltzen
3. Age: 61
4. Date of Birth: 1953
5. Sex: Male
6. Birthplace: Gyangkar
7. Province: Utsang
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1959
9. Date of Interview: August 3, 2014
10. Place of Interview: Tibetan Association of Santa Fe Community Center, Santa Fe, New Mexico, USA
11. Length of Interview: 0 hr 58 min
12. Interviewer: Marcella Adamski
13. Interpreter:
14. Videographer: Tomas Haywood
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

Biographical Information:

Lama Wangchuk Gyaltzen was born in Gyangkar in Utsang. As the only boy in the family, he teased his five sisters and was spoiled by his parents. He describes his large home and beautiful village with snow-covered mountains and lakes and a large nunnery nearby. His family farmed and reared animals and his father also engaged in trading. Lama Wangchuk Gyaltzen talks about the school system in Tibet and shares his experience of attending classes with a local tutor.

Lama Wangchuk Gyaltzen remembers being very ill at the age of 5. He also recalls a prophecy by a learned lama that was given to his parents and the consequences of not fulfilling the prediction. He then recounts the appearance of Chinese in his village and being forced to learn Chinese songs with other village children at nightly meetings. His parents made a sudden decision to escape after a friend informed them that they would be arrested the next day.

Lama Wangchuk Gyaltzen describes their preparations to leave and the harsh journey over the mountains. He felt sad witnessing his family reduced to laborers in Nepal. When a Tibetan school opened in Darjeeling, India his parents enrolled him. His good education allowed him to serve the Tibetan government-in-exile in Dharamsala before migrating to the United States.

Topics Discussed:

Utsang, childhood memories, education, first appearance of Chinese, escape experiences, life as a refugee in Nepal.

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Interview #23C

Interviewee: Lama Wangchuk Gyaltsen

Age: 61, Sex: Male

Interviewer: Marcella Adamski

Interview Date: August 3, 2014

[Interviewee speaks in English. No interpreter required.]

Question: Please tell us your name.

00:00:07

Interviewee #23C: My name is Lama Wangchuk Gyaltsen.

Q: His Holiness the Dalai Lama asked us to record your experiences, so that we can share your memories with many generations of Chinese, the Tibetans 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?

#23C: Yes.

Q: Thank you for offering to share your story with us. During this interview if you wish to take a break or stop at any time, please let me know.

#23C: [Nods]

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

#23C: [Nods]

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

00:00:53

#23C: In China, maybe. I'm still trying to get a visa to go to Tibet to meet my relatives, but it's okay.

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

#23C: [Nods]

Q: Lama, can we begin by understanding where you were born in Tibet? What was the location and what was the year?

#23C: I was born in Tibet in the vi...it's not a village; it's a town called Gyangkar in Tingye District, which is in Utsang, Central Tibet. I think I was born around 1950 or so. I'm not sure, my Tibetan...that is the rabbit, in the rabbit year. In the Tibetan rabbit year, that's my...yeah, it's the rabbit year, so around that.

Q: How many people were in your family?

#23C: Oh, when I was born, I think I had five elder sisters and was told I had an elder brother, but I think he passed away in childhood when he was young. He was, I think, the first child of my parents. And then after me two sons were born but they didn't live long. So I'm the only son in my family and the youngest.

Q: What kind of livelihood did your parents engage in?

00:02:46

#23C: I think basically we were farmers. My father was also doing trading business.

Q: You know, your town in Utsang, how far away was it from any other border?

#23C: I'm told from my town to the border of Nepal in good times, riding on horseback would take about a week to 10 days.

Q: So that was not very close, a week to 10 days.

#23C: Yes.

Q: Could you please tell the name of your village again?

#23C: Gyangkar.

Q: Gyangkar.

#23C: Yeah, Gyangkar means "white from a distance."

Q: Was it a large village or a small village?

#23C: I would...in Tibet I don't know how large a village is, but I think it's a pretty decent sized town. It has several families.

Q: Several...

#23C: Yeah, households, several households.

Q: Several, not a hundred but...

00:04:05

#23C: May not be 100. I don't know. Yeah, it's hard to guess.

Q: Do you have any visual memories of what your village looked like?

#23C: Oh yes, yes.

Q: Can you describe it?

#23C: Okay. From the east...I'll use the directions, okay? On the east...I think my house is by the main road or the main street on the east side. Beyond that on the east of that road we used to have a lake, a big lake.

Q: What was the name of the lake?

#23C: I don't know. We use the lake for skiing in the winter and in the summer maybe we're using it for swimming but I don't know swimming. So my house is, roughly, I think, the household is about like 3-4 acres large. It's a very big household. On the east side of the main street we have high walls. I think the walls are as high as these walls [points with right hand] because you can't see out. And then on the west side is our main entrance, but nobody comes by the main entrance because we have a huge Tibetan mastiff, dog, Tibetan mastiff dog. He's tied with two really, very big chains and is very strong. So nobody would come by that.

Then on the north...so inside that...so on the...east, this is south. It's not west; it's south. On the west side is like, we have our living room, our chapel, our kitchen, our storage, everything. And then on the...that's the west. On the north side we have the back entrance from where all our relatives and people come. So on the north side from my house, I don't know the distance—I'm not very good in distance—you can see it, so you shouldn't be very far, we have the town's monastery. It's right by the mountain, close to the mountain.

Q: Do you know the name of that monastery?

00:06:36

#23C: No. It's a nunnery and the head of that monastery is related to us. I think he's one of my uncles. It's a very large nunnery. On the north side of our town is the mountains. Mountains begin with meadows and gradually going up. Then you have the rocks and things and then high up, snow-covered mountains. Beautiful. On those slopes of the mountains we have our Tibetan—what do you call? You know where we grind our food, like the mill. Mills. Those are run by water. You have the big wooden wheels and the water is put like this [makes a downward slope with left hand]. So the force of the water churns the wheel and then we, you know, make our *tsampa* 'flour made from roasted barley' there. So we like kind of own two of them there.

Q: Like an old mill?

#23C: Old, yeah, mill. These are old...we don't have electricity in Tibet. So we use the water, waterpower.

Q: Waterpower.

#23C: Waterpower. So that's the beautiful part. Then on the west are small hills. You cross those small hills [and] you reach other towns. So largely looking, you know, my mental like looking from above...I think it is a pretty big...I see several houses because there are several families. There are my relatives living on the north side and then on the west side, on the south side. So it's pretty big and it's a plain. Where the town is located it's kind of a plain.

Q: It sounds very beautiful.

00:08:43

#23C: Yeah, it's beautiful, lake on the front and mountain on the north and small hills on the west side. I think on the south side is all plain. That's where we have all our fields, agriculture fields. Like from my home, our agricultural lands are located at least like, nowadays maybe like three miles away. And then we have a homestead in the fields.

Q: It sounds like your family was rather well off?

#23C: I think the whole [population] in that town are pretty good.

Q: People had good...

#23C: And we had...basically we're agriculturists, farmers and also then we maintain small nomads; you know yaks and *dri* 'female yaks.' We have homestead like Tibetan animals sheep, yaks, cows for, you know, household. But then we have a small section of nomads who live up in the mountains. So in terms I think it's...the land is very productive. We had good river systems. So even [if] rains do not fall in time, we always can use the river system to irrigate.

Q: You made the land very fertile.

#23C: The land very fertile, very productive, yeah.

Q: Very productive. If you were...when you were in that area did you go to any local school or monastery when you were a little boy?

00:10:27

#23C: We have no local schools in Tibet. All those in Tibet the schools are started by teachers and we go to their home. So we went to a teacher who's I think my uncle, related to us. Yeah, when I was maybe like 6 or 7.

Q: What were they teaching you?

#23C: Oh, in Tibet they...it's very simple. For couple of years you just learn calligraphy; first on the wooden slate; gradually you progress to paper, you have to write a big script, then a smaller, then a medium, yeah. I learned those. And then my first teacher in my life is

my father who taught me the first Tibetan alphabet and also he's my spiritual teacher. So I learned the...maybe around age 6.5 or 7, learning the prayers, memorizing the prayers.

Q: Was your father a spiritual teacher for you...in the monastery?

#23C: No, no.

Q: He was a householder?

#23C: Householder.

Q: Householder, but he wanted you to know these prayers.

#23C: Yes.

Q: Basically, what was your life like growing up as a child?

00:11:51

#23C: Oh, it's very free, very carefree, very happy, very...no worries and as I said earlier being the only son and the youngest, so you get extra care from your parents, from your relatives, from your sisters. So I think in my childhood I've been a little bully to my, you know, immediate elder sisters because they told me stories [that] sometimes I used to pull their hair, you know, and then I'm never at fault in front of my parents. It has to be my sisters' fault. So I think I was a real bully to my sisters.

Q: A little spoilt.

#23C: I think so, yes, spoilt. That's true.

Q: But loved.

#23C: Loved and spoilt.

Q: So it sounds like you were a very beloved and cherished child in your family, very nice easy going childhood with lots of food and...

#23C: Oh, yes.

Q: ...and play and caring family. So does anything change in your childhood that you remember that was significant?

00:13:05

#23C: Change...going to school was not a change but it was for...personally a new experience. Tibetans believe in, you know, when you start a new project or new activity, you know that day or before that day auspicious good things should happen so that it goes without any hindrance or disturbances.

So when I was going to school—in Tibet we go to school very early. I think I was carried on my mother's back with my sister and my father leading the road. A woman...we met on the road a woman carrying water on her back, in a big jar, a wooden, you know kind of water-carrier. That was very auspicious. My father, I think he put a Tibetan scarf round her neck and gave her lots of things. That was...then when I went to school the teacher was waiting for me with a few students. So there was like Tibetan rice-tea, all those formalities we did it.

Then, you know, we did prayers, especially praying to Manjushree to give me better intelligence. So we started the first day. My teacher had written the alphabet on that, so I had to write on that. So the first day I did it quite well. I enjoyed with the other kids my age. And then from that day and afterwards morning was little bit—I didn't like it because my parents wake me up before dawn and then I have to say prayers, go to the rooftop and very loudly recite Manjushree's mantra. That part I didn't like so much.

Q: They were getting you more disciplined...

#23C: Yes.

Q: ...as a young boy.

#23C: Yeah.

Q: What age would that have been when you started school?

00:15:30

#23C: I think around 6 or 7. Yes, between 6 and 7. Then I think age, yes 6 and 7, around 5 years old I became sick. I don't know what but it took a long time for me to get back. So I was, I think bedridden; I remember it. My mother was with me for 24 hours playing with me and taking care of me. I don't remember the pain or the suffering but I remember the joys I had, having, owning my mother 24 hours with me, all those times. And then around like when I was 5, I think that time when I was sick, you know one Tibetan lama, must be a very highly realized master from Kham, he was riding—I was told—I don't remember, but I was told that he was riding on a sheep—a huge Tibetan sheep and he came by our main door. There was nobody to receive him. The household was surprised and they went to see him. How could he come in passing that mastiff, huge mastiff dog, our guard?

Q: Yeah.

#23C: They said the dog was lying like that [stretches both hands] there.

Q: Wow!

#23C: And I remember that lama, you know, briefly staying in our house and my parents told me he stayed there for like two months.

Q: So he came in the front way that nobody comes in because the mastiff was there and the dog...

#23C: He just came in and the dog was [stretches both arms out and bows head] like this. He was kneeling in front. He stayed there and then my father stated him saying that...in Tibet you need more sons to keep your lineage. I was the only one and then I was sick. So he requested the lama that, you know, what would they need to do to have, you know sons. They already have five daughters and his only son died in childhood. So the lama said, "You have to recite the 21 praises of Tara along with other prayers every day without any break." If we do that then he was told that he was, kind of prophesized that he would get two sons. And then there was another condition. For the two sons to survive they have to take me to a pilgrim, on a pilgrim[age] to Tashi Lhunpo [Monastery]. Otherwise, these two sons will not survive.

00:18:36

So I remember in Tibet every evening in the kitchen all family members would assemble and then we had...we recite the 21 praises of Tara 21 times. It was one occasion I didn't like. It was too long and then you have to say other prayers. Only after that we're given dinner. So, yeah, after that...that's like childhood...

Q: Did you remember seeing the mastiff lying down?

#23C: No, I didn't see it.

Q: But the family told you.

#23C: Yeah, they told me. I roughly remember the lama.

Q: You vaguely remember the lama.

#23C: Vaguely, yeah, remember.

Q: So what happens next? Do you go to Tashi Lhunpo?

#23C: No, then I was, you know 6 and 7...that happened at 5 and then I became sick a year; then I went to school. My father became very busy in his business. He was going down to eastern Tibet, to India and doing business. Then he's involved in other works in Lhasa. So, you know, my going to pilgrimage to Tashi Lhunpo did not materialize because sometimes my father was away for a whole year on his business.

Q: Did he...?

#23C: And then one year when he came back, my younger brother immediate to me, one night he suddenly became ill and then he passed away on my father's lap. I very clearly remember.

Q: Was this a son...When the lama he said you must, you should try to have more sons and then was this son was born after that?

00:20:40

#23C: [Nods] After that. I think the lama came around when I was 5 and this son must have been born when I was 6 or so.

Q: I see.

#23C: And then another was born around, maybe I must be 7 or so. My sisters and me, you know we have two years' gaps. Everyone was like...it's very easy to count our age. If I know my age correctly, then I can count all my sisters' age, how old [they are]. But my brothers after me, we have one year gap only.

Q: How many brothers after you?

#23C: [Raises two fingers]

Q: You have two. Did they both live?

#23C: No.

Q: Do you think there was any reason given...?

#23C: Yeah, the lama said that unless I'm taken on a pilgrimage to Tashi Lhunpo...

Q: ...they will not live.

#23C: ...they will not survive.

Q: What effect did that have on your father?

00:21:31

#23C: My father, he's a very spiritual, very learned person. He's learned in Tibetan astrology, Tibetan Buddhism, Tibetan literature. He had the great opportunity to be a student of great Tibetan masters at that time. So he was going round the country and he was able to meet all these great masters and get teachings from them. It must have been devastating on him, must have been, on my mother.

Q: It sounds like he was drawn also to go around and listen to these teachings more than to have a family.

#23C: He's doing these teachings and he's doing the business. He's always on [the] move.

Q: He's on the move and so...

#23C: He went all over Tibet.

Q: So you had a brother. Was it like two years after you? Maybe you were 5 or 6 and one...

#23C: One must be 6 or 7. They could be 7 or born when I was 7 or 8 or 6 or 7.

Q: So then what happens next to your life?

#23C: Next, then my father said I must go on the pilgrimage, otherwise he might lose me. And then me, my father and some of my other family members, we set out on our pilgrimage riding. That time I think it was already 1959; the Chinese were coming. So other relatives, my father's brothers, my mother's brothers, uncles and aunts, immediate families, they said, "You cannot do this. You cannot leave all these other children here and go to Shigatse, you know, for the sake of this one child." So they prevented us. So I never made my pilgrimage to Shigatse. Then we...you know after that in 1959, I think in the summer of 1959 we escaped.

Q: The other children your father would have had to leave were the girls, the daughters?

#23C: Yeah, the daughters.

Q: He would have had to leave them to go to take you?

#23C: Yeah, in care of my other, you know uncles and aunts and...

Q: And they didn't want him to do that. How far was Shigatse from your house?

#23C: Who?

Q: You said you...?

00:24:06

#23C: Shigatse? Nowadays my sister is saying if you drive, they said it is like six hours drive, but back in those days maybe like a week or more.

Q: So what happened to the family that they said, "Okay, don't go to Shigatse. You have to be with these children." Did you know anything about the Chinese in your community? Was anything happening?

#23C: That time when we're setting for the pilgrimage, I think the Chinese are yet to come to our town.

Q: Right.

#23C: Not too late, pretty soon after that, maybe like after a few months the Chinese came.

Q: They did.

#23C: They did come.

Q: So you didn't go...?

#23C: By that time most of my relatives, my father's brothers, immediate brothers, uncles, aunts, most of them have left the town. They escaped to Nepal before the Chinese came in. So they could take all their, you know, whatever properties that they could take with them. They went with no fear, very...

Q: ...relaxed.

#23C: ...relaxed.

Q: They weren't being chased.

00:25:21

#23C: Yeah, no chase. So the Chinese came and then one evening all the children in my town were called into a big courtyard, and then we're taught Chinese songs. I don't remember what they said but they did teach us two Chinese songs and we used to sing that. That's the first time I saw the Chinese, short, fair-complexion, very different looking from the Tibetans. I didn't know anything about China invading my country but I didn't like them at the first sight. But I did sing those Chinese songs.

Q: It sounds like the children were almost required to come.

#23C: Oh, every evening we have to go. Every evening, I think like the children have to go from like around like 4 and then we're there until like 8 in the evening. And then when we are taught all these Chinese songs and about Mao Zedong, my parents were, maybe in other Chinese meetings. So I think we lived...they came to my town and I think we lived, I think I lived with the Chinese a month or a couple of months at the most because then we escaped one night just like that.

Q: Really?

#23C: Yeah, the Chinese translator, he was the...I was told—I don't remember anything, but my parents told me he was from Amdo and my father knew him very well from his business trips there. So the Chinese translator, the Amdo Tibetan, the Tibetan guy told my parents, my father, "If you can't escape tonight, tomorrow morning you and your wife will be arrested." So they'll be the first Tibetans to be arrested from my town.

Q: Why were they going to pick on your family?

00:27:29

#23C: I think my family maybe the better [one] of there and then that kind of set up the process of escape to...

Q: That was immediate then.

#23C: Immediate. I must have [been] told that in the afternoon because I...so secret. So by that time the Chinese have appointed my next immediate neighbor on the north side, he was the leader of the town now right under the Chinese and we didn't have a good relation[ship] with him. He was the most prosperous business person in our town, very wealthy. So we had a case and my father took him to the [court] case to Shigatse. He lost and in Shigatse he was whipped, punished by Tibetan law. So we were like bitter enemies.

Q: Just tell me what he did again. Your father took him to Shigatse...?

#23C: Yeah, they had...his wife, his wife is...my neighbor's wife, she's a little bit too much talking and you know...

Q: Gossip?

#23C: Gossip. So I think one day my father scolded her and I think he used derogatory Tibetan word.

Q: Derogatory Tibetan word to this man's wife.

00:29:01

#23C: Yeah, *moray*. *Moray*, Tibetans regard as abusive. "You woman," like that. So because he is the big businessman, they had a case but my father won the case because he's also a Tibetan advocate, my father. So then that big businessman was punished with lashes on his...that's Tibetan law system that time.

Q: Really?

#23C: So he was punished. It's like we are bitter enemies. So now we have to escape and he was our immediate neighbor. So my father told me that he had few, you know, gold with him. So he took it to him, to the new leader of our town and he told him, "I have to escape. This is what is going to happen to me. I have all these small children to take with me. So please help me. Don't tell the Chinese. Don't block my way." The guy, he said, "Okay. You are a brave man, a very courageous and a straight man. When we were enemies, you treated me like an enemy and punished me. When the time has come for you to bow to me and accept my leadership, you are doing that. So you are a real man. You go. I'll help you as much as I can."

So that night in my house [makes whispering sounds] you know things are going on. My sisters, my mother, my father, they're all very busy. Then my mother came to me and she was trying to put me into sleep. Then I sometimes...because my mother, she has the most patience, most loving mother, she never gets angry. She was trying to put me to sleep and then I pretended I'm sleeping. Then she would try to slip [away]. Then I go near her. Then she'd again try to put me into sleep and I pretended sleeping. Then she would try to slip [away] and then I go [near her] and my mother [was] at last kind of exhausted. She said, "Why you're not going to sleep?" Then I...this all my mother told me later on. Then she

said the first time she saw tears in my eyes and I said to her, “You guys are leaving, going somewhere. Please don’t leave me.”

Q: ...leave me behind.

00:31:32

#23C: Yeah. “Please take me with you.” Then my mother said since I have realized that we are going, so my mother said, “Keep quiet. Stay just here [until] when we get ready to leave.” They were getting ready, take some precious jewels, wear them and take some provisions, food with them. And then we left. One thing I remember as a child is, you know, these boots, cowboy boots? There are long boots in Tibet. When I was young I used to like them. So my father brought me one pair and my father had a pair. So the two [pairs of] boots were lying in the corner of one of the rooms. I went, grabbed them and tied with a rope and immediately...my parents and sisters...carried them on my back. My parents told me, “No, we don’t need them. We don’t carry them.” I said, “Please, let me carry these.” So they let me and they came into Nepal, into exile with us.

Q: Did they?

#23C: That’s one thing I...

Q: That was your precious.

#23C: My precious...rest I don’t know. So we escaped that night. There was some moonlight. So we went up. I told you that we have a mountain on the north side of our town. We went up the mountain. We had, maybe a couple of horses and a donkey carrying our provisions. And on one of the horses I was riding with the boots on my back. My oldest sister, now she’s the next in command after my father and she’s dressed like a Tibetan man, not like a Tibetan woman, dressed like a man with a long sword and a binocular on her. She was leading the front and my father at the back and my mother always by my side. So we went up; we went up the meadows, then the rocks and then we came into the snowy part of the mountain. So we stopped there.

00:33:42

That’s what I remember, we stopping there. That’s in the night and so it became morning and we can’t go because the Chinese will see us. So we stopped there. And morning around, I think it’s 8 or 9 in the morning and the Chinese [are] having meeting down there. My sister was looking through the binoculars and, you know, reporting what is happening. First time in my life I looked through that binocular and I could see my relatives right in front of me and I was talking to them, I see them like as if I’m seeing you. That was kind of a miracle to me but they don’t respond to me.

Then they [the Chinese] started the meeting and after a while the weather was very clear, was very clear. And then it became very foggy. It became so foggy, the distance between you and me I couldn’t see. The weather changed. Later on when we reached Nepal and those my relatives who could escape after us, they told us that in the meeting they said that my parents will be arrested because they think that they were like the upper class.

And then lot of my family, our family members, they said my mother was sitting right next to her or my father was here. Some of my aunts said I was on their lap during the meeting. But we were up on the mountain. So then they realized when they checked our home. It's empty; we have escaped. So the Chinese said, "Okay, he has all the little kids. He cannot go far." So they commanded, ordered my uncles to come with them and they were riding horses to chase.

That is the time when it became very cloudy that we couldn't see. Later on we were told that they had come like, maybe very close to us. Then they couldn't see and turned back and the next early in the morning...no, in the night we escaped. So that time we always escaped in the night when there's no moonlight. Daytime we hid in the caves or under rocks or boulders. So that's how we escaped over the mountains, the snow-covered mountains and it took us almost a month to reach the border of Nepal.

00:36:25

And later on I asked my father why it became suddenly foggy and how could those our relatives see you and my mother and me when we are up. My father said, "This is all due to Tara's display of power and protecting us." So therefore, Tara is our family kind of deity. We have very special close relationship.

Q: It sounds like it was a...

#23C: So then on the way when we're escaping, one day...I'm always by the side of my mother; I can't kind of lose her. Me and my mother, we're hiding under a boulder and one of the shepherds just passed by us, you know, taking his animals for grazing up on the mountain. But we never got caught.

One day in another place it was very sunny and my family members, they were thirsty. So somebody...a stream is running right down. Somebody has to go and fetch water. So it was me. My mother chose me. She made me naked and put a leather [makes gesture of mixing in bowl]...we used to make *tsampa* over my head so that they don't see the black [hair], and then with a small pot she made me go down and fetch water. So I made, I think two trips. That was the greatest thing I did on my escape.

And one more on the border of Nepal in Tibet, it was the crucial thing. That was the first time I saw light, electricity. It was a Chinese garrison, army. They had electricity, you can see there. So my mother said that...I think it's like half a mile distant. She said this is the most crucial. We have to just run into the Nepalese border. So she tied a rope around my waist and she tied the other end on her waist. So if I'm not able to walk she was just going to pull me. This was marshy area, you know, lot of marsh.

Q: I see, marshy?

00:38:44

#23C: Yeah, so she was just going to drag me; that's what she said. But she said I did very good. I walked as fast as her without her having to pull me and then by dawn we reached

the border of Nepal. By that time we may have a handful of Tibetan tea and maybe two handfuls of Tibetan *tsampa*. That's all we had. So we make the tea and then we're sitting there to have that tea. And then a Tibetan who had escaped before, he walked by and then my parents said, "Are we safe in the territory of Nepal?" That guy, really when I grew, you know to [be] a teenager, I wanted to, really wanted to beat him but my parents forbid me from doing that. Because he lied to my parents and said, "Oh, the Chinese will come this way. You better start going." That last tea, we had to just throw away. All running.

My mother when she tells me that story, she tells it so sad. She saw that me, my sisters, all were tired, hungry and she wanted to, you know, give us the good tea and some *tsampa* to nourish us. That man, you know he spoiled that. When my mother told this...that time I took it kind of in my mind. I said, "When I grow stronger and grow up, I'm going to beat him and take revenge on him."

So when like I was in Grade 9 or 10...that guy from that Nepal border to India, we all came together. So we know him very well by then. So I told one day my mother that I'm going to beat him. Now I'm in a position [to] but my mother said, "Never in your life beat him. Revenge is not good at all. Never. Forgive him." She said "Never. If you do that I'll be very sad, very angry." That's how we escaped.

Q: Yeah, what a story! Yeah, you made it. How many started out with you from your family home and made it to Nepal? So it was mother...?

00:41:16

#23C: My mother, my father, my four sisters—one of my sisters was married in Tibet very long, so she couldn't escape—so my four sisters, my parents and me.

Q: That's it? That was a very small party.

#23C: Small, yeah.

Q: Very small.

#23C: And then on our way we had our father's guidance. He does divinations sometimes. So most of the time we've to travel in the dark; moonlight, Chinese see us; daytime, Chinese and Tibetans see us. The Tibetans tell, "Oh, that family is escaping." So it always has to be in the dark. My father, I think his sense of geography is very good. Without any problem he took us straight to the border all the time.

Q: Wow and it sounds like you also had to take very not public ways.

#23C: No, it's always over the snow-covered mountains.

Q: Over the snow-covered mountains, amazing story. So, let's see. Maybe we can just take a little bit more time if it's okay with you to just kind of hear what happens to the family, but I almost want to go back and ask the question you had, "How did the relatives see us sitting in the room?" Where were they? Where they in front of the Chinese when they said...?

#23C: In the meeting, in the public meeting.

Q: And they said all this is...?

00:43:00

#23C: Yeah, they said my father was right there, someone said. Someone said my mother was sitting with them. One of my aunts who later escaped, she said I was on her lap.

Q: Wow. So visually it looked like you were really there.

#23C: Yeah, yeah.

Q: To them.

#23C: Yes.

Q: And could the Chinese see you too or just...?

#23C: I don't know.

Q: You don't know. Just that they could see you.

#23C: Yeah.

Q: That's quite an interesting experience. Lama, would you like to tell us a little bit about, just kind of a general overview of what happens with your family when you get to Nepal? What happens next?

#23C: Then, you know, we are refugees. We came to the Chinese...the Nepalese customs. By that time many of my relatives, I said before, they already escaped. So we were able to send word that we are at the customs because we were told that Nepalese customs, they take all our ornaments, good things. They take it from us, snatch from us. So one of my relatives came to receive us at the customs office. And then I think they couldn't take my mother's and my sisters' ornaments, jewelries. That time that's all that we have and the clothes on...

Q: ...on the back. Yeah.

00:44:30

#23C: So then our relatives have arranged our stay there. They have rented a house for us and they have a kitchen, utensils, everything ready for us, food provisions. So we stayed there. And then you have to start a living. My father, I think he's also a very good Tibetan tailor. In Tibet all tailoring you do with the hand. He was very good in doing...what to say...em...em...?

Q: Embroidery.

#23C: Embroidery. Tibetan shoes, they have to have a lot of embroidery. He was very good. So then he started working for other people, you know, doing as a tailor. That was one when he had to go work for other people to earn wages. It made me very, very, very sad because he was very respected in Tibet. He never had to do. He had other people doing that for him. It was a big change.

And then, I think my sisters, the older two sisters, first they...the older two sisters then started working as, you know porters. They carried heavy loads from place to place. They never had to do such things in Tibet. My two immediate sisters, the second immediate sister, I think she did childcare, watching other people's small child. That was very, very sad to me. I think I cried. I could, you know, at that time I could see what is happening to my family and how we lived in Tibet. [It] was a very drastic, dramatic, big change in my life.

Then I went...even then under such circumstances my father had the vision that he sent me and my immediate sister to school. There was a big Tibetan school and the school was run by one of my uncles. So we started learning there and then they heard that His Holiness the Dalai Lama had started a Tibetan school for Tibetans in Darjeeling [India] exclusively. So then my father, my two immediate elder sisters and me, we walked from that Nepal border to Darjeeling for almost a month to be admitted to school. On the way coming from Nepal border to Darjeeling, I remember very well, you know, we had no food, so we were begging on the way, begging from house to house and then eating that and going to Darjeeling.

Q: What a change!

00:47:18

#23C: Yeah, what a change! And I was told by one of my uncles, maybe because of praying to Manjushree I picked up Nepali language so good and I was speaking like a little Nepalese boy. So when I go and beg, the mothers maybe feeling sympathy to me, I get a lot of rice and food more than others. So I was one of the good beggars. Then we came to Darjeeling and then we stayed in a monastery, the first I think Tibetan monastery ever built in exile. It was a Sakya Monastery and the head of the monastery is known to my father from Tibet. So we were welcomed there. We were given accommodation, food from the monastery and we were admitted to the Tibetan school in Darjeeling.

So the life of me and my sisters, you know, changed and then...Yeah, that time...yes, my father, my mother and two of my sisters, we came. And until that time...that time, maybe I must be like 9 or 10 years, maybe 10 years old or older than 10. Every night that I remember, except the month-long escape from Tibet I always slept with my mother. Then in the school you are put on your own bed. Several nights I couldn't go to sleep. I cried all night. The bed was cold, uncomfortable and I see nothing but my mother's face. If I look to the other people sleeping with me—we have double decker, so I was on the top and when I look at the person sleeping to my right and left, they sleep very well but I couldn't.

Q: You were heartbroken.

#23C: Heartbroken, yes.

Q: You missed your mother.

00:49:29

#23C: Oh, my mother and my father. On that way from Nepal to Darjeeling we're coming, I'm receiving teachings from him, spiritual teachings all the time. Even on the road, you know, we don't have...there are no guesthouses first of all; even if there are guesthouses on the road, we don't have money to pay. So we always sleep on the road. Even sleeping on the road, in the evening he would make me and my sisters, you know, do our learning. Then to improve my writing skill, he would dictate and I would write, you know, letters to our family and to our relatives. Morning and evening always he would teach me, give me teachings.

Q: So you got a head start.

#23C: Yes.

Q: Thanks to him.

#23C: Thanks to him. So he's not only my father; I always say he's my first teacher, you know, in a sense that we know a teacher; my first spiritual teacher, my first lama.

Q: Beautiful.

#23C: Yeah, he means so much. My mother is one I think I'm nurtured by her love, her compassion. Oh, she...even now I miss her. Everyday I think when I try to do Boddhichitta practice I remember her face, her kindness, her compassion. I always pray that I should develop compassion, my mother's compassion.

Q: Did your mother, when you went to Darjeeling for the school, Darjeeling; did you have to stay there for a couple of years?

00:51:20

#23C: No, we've a boarder school. So we're there. When I was...

Q: You were a boarder there?

#23C: Yeah. When I was admitted to the school, my father made a pledge saying, "These, my three children, from this day I offer them to His Holiness. They are no more my children. I offer them [to] His Holiness so that by going to school and getting education, they can serve His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan people."

Q: So did your mother ever come to see you?

#23C: In the school, in the boarding, you know, we have winter vacation. The first winter my both parents have went back to the border, you know, where we first came to collect

some of our...whatever they have there. So we spent the first winter with my, one of my uncles, a very realized lama. We spent with his family and then they moved to Darjeeling. My parents moved to Darjeeling.

Q: Well, it sounds like your father's wish to dedicate, you know, his children to the service of His Holiness, for the Tibetan people is something that you have done with your life.

#23C: I think I fulfilled my father's wish.

Q: Yes, could you tell us because we're going to have to wrap up in a little bit but tell us a little bit about the ways that you served the Tibetan Government?

00:52:51

#23C: Okay. When I graduated from high school [in] '71, you know I had two choices. I can go to university to get a modern education or I can go to the University of...Sanskrit University like Tashi [interpreter for other interviews] went. Tashi-la went to receive traditional Buddhist education. So we went to His Holiness Kyabje Dudjom Rinpoche, the head of the Nyingma tradition and one of my father's root gurus. So we went to him to ask whether I should go to Varanasi Tibetan University or a modern day university—which would be more beneficial for the Tibetan people and which would serve His Holiness better.

Without question Kyabje Dudjom Rinpoche said, "He should go to university to get a modern education." So that's how I went to a Jesuit college and honestly I have the highest regard for these Jesuit fathers. One of the best educators, I say. And I have very good relations with them. I learned about Christianity from them. Our father principal and I used to have very frank exchange about Buddhism.

Q: Where was the school that you went to?

#23C: In Darjeeling.

Q: In Darjeeling.

#23C: Darjeeling, Darjeeling. It was the best college in Darjeeling. It was specially started for the British rulers,' you know, officers' children.

Q: What was the name of the college?

#23C: St. Joseph's College.

Q: St. Joseph's College.

00:54:27

#23C: Yes. So, then I graduated from the school in '74 and [in] '75 His Holiness visited Darjeeling for the first time. And our school principal—there were six of us who graduated—the first graduates from the school. That was his great achievement, the

principal, a Tibetan. So he paraded us before His Holiness and I had medals from my college and lot of, you know, certificates, achievements. So he made me carry all those like this [gestures off camera]. Then His Holiness [was] very pleased and His Holiness asked us to come and work for the Tibetan Government in Dharamsala. So in '76 we make the journey to Dharamsala and then from there until 1998...from '75 to '98 I served His Holiness and the Tibetan Government and I think I did pretty good there.

Q: To 19...what year?

#23C: '98.

Q: Until 1998.

#23C: Yeah, then I moved here [United States] under this family reunification program. So in the Tibetan Government service from the lowest rank and then I gradually rose up to the Secretary. Yes, and I really...

Q: Secretary of what?

#23C: Secretary to the Government of Tibet. That's the, you know, a civil servant's highest position you can go.

Q: That was quite a tribute to your father...

#23C: Yes.

Q: ...who helped you from the very beginning as your teacher, your spiritual teacher and then you got to go...he even taught you on the journey. Then you got to go to a good college. So this is a wonderful story of how what looked like a tragedy has many, many beautiful fruits...

#23C: Yes, yes.

Q: ...and benefits for many people.

#23C: Yes.

Q: So maybe, because we only have five minutes to talk, maybe you can tell me what would be your hope for the Tibetan people right now? What is your wish?

00:56:45

#23C: My wish is for Tibetans like His Holiness, under His Holiness' Middle Path Approach—Tibet gets, you know, freedom and the suffering of the Tibetan people end as soon as possible, and the Tibetans living in Tibet could receive His Holiness the Dalai Lama in Tibet and fulfill their aspirations and also fulfill His Holiness' aspiration. Have peace, happiness and then we may wish we'll be able to live harmoniously with the Chinese people, you know under the Chinese Government system, as part of the Chinese Government. You know the Middle Way Approach.

Q: Yes.

#23C: I wish that could realize as soon as possible. The situation in Tibet is very, very severe, very, very heartbreaking.

Q: It is.

#23C: Yes, and to prolong that for one hour is too much. That's what I do pray and that's my wish. Then I want His Holiness to live forever.

Q: That's a beautiful wish and I hope that one and the ones that, all the other ones, which you included, will come true for you.

#23C: Thank you.

Q: Thank you for this very, very fine interview.

END OF INTERVIEW