

Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #27U – Sonam Tobden
March 31, 2017

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INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #27U
2. Interviewee: Sonam Tobden
3. Age: 80
4. Date of Birth: 1937
5. Sex: Male
6. Birthplace: Sintso
7. Province: Dhoday (Amdo)
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1959
9. Date of Interview: March 31, 2017
10. Place of Interview: Minling House, Clement Town, Dehradun, Uttarakhand, India
11. Length of Interview: 1 hr 21 min
12. Interviewer: Marcella Adamski
13. Interpreter: Tenzin Yangchen
14. Videographer: Tenzin Choenyi
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

Biographical Information:

Sonam Tobden was born in 1937 in Sintso, Amdo Province, which was a village of 60-70 families filled with flowers. All the villagers helped one another in times of need, such as a family illness or construction of a new house. The houses were made of wood, designed with many pillars, and each floor had a specific use. His family members gathered together and recited prayers in the evenings in the shrine room. As a teenager, Sonam Tobden whiled away his time hunting and racing horses.

The Chinese began entering his region in small groups, offering to help the Tibetans and giving them money. After the Tibetans realized that the Chinese were not there to assist them, fighting broke out. Sonam Tobden's family sent him on a long journey to Lhasa to sell butter. He arrived in Lhasa in 1957 and later received letters from his parents telling him never to return to Amdo because it was not safe there.

In March of 1959 Sonam Tobden joined many others in Lhasa who went to the Norbulingka palace to protect His Holiness the Dalai Lama from the Chinese. They were powerless to act after the Chinese' bombarded the palace for hours. After 10 spending days there, it was announced that the Dalai Lama had escaped safely and Sonam Tobden fled to India.

Topics Discussed:

Amdo, childhood memories, customs/traditions, trade, first appearance of Chinese, resistance, defense of Norbulingka.

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Interview #27U

Interviewee: Sonam Tobden

Age: 80, Sex: Male

Interviewer: Marcella Adamski

Interview Date: March 31, 2017

Question: Please tell us your name.

00:00:11

Interviewee #27U: Sonam Tobden.

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 culture, history and beliefs of the Tibetan people. Do you give your permission for the Tibet Oral History Project to use this interview?

#27U: Permission is granted.

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

#27U: [Nods]

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

#27U: Umm...

Q: If [you] need to drink water or anything like that [we] can stop.

#27U: Okay.

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

#27U: Okay.

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

#27U: [I] do not think there will be any problem.

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

#27U: [Nods]

Q: *Pa-la* ‘respectful term for father,’ please tell me where you were born?

00:02:25

#27U: Sintso.

Q: Where is that in Tibet?

#27U: It is close to China, near Tindhu in Siting. For instance, there are [the states of] Kerala and Assam and such in India. We were close to Tindhu, maybe around 100 kilometers away.

Q: What year were you born, Sonam?

#27U: Perhaps it’s ’39...the year of birth?

Q: Yes.

#27U: The year of birth?

Q: The year.

#27U: [I] think it was ’39 [’37?].

Q: How old are you now?

#27U: ...80 now.

Q: When you were growing up, what kind of work did your family do for a livelihood?

#27U: It was like raising animals, cultivating lands and doing some business. I could not do much, but my father and mother worked in the fields and herded animals like sheep.

Q: Was your family average income or middle class or high...?

00:04:41

#27U: For income there were the animals like sheep. Every year there was income through butter and milk. In Tibet we did not maintain any accounts. [We] survived by selling the animals and butter and there was no accounts maintained for the incomes and expenses.

Q: How many people were in your family, *pa-la*?

#27U: In the family were Father and both the parents of my father and his four sisters. Then there was my mother. That was it.

Q: Was that typical to have four sisters living with the father of a family?

00:06:15

#27U: The four daughters...four daughters do not remain [at home]. In our region the practice was to give [the daughters] away in marriage.

Q: Given away in marriage later?

#27U: Yes, given away.

Q: And they were eventually?

#27U: Yes.

Q: Can you describe your house? Was it a large house, small or what kind of house?

#27U: The houses were of different sizes. A house like this [looks around interview room] would be built upon pillars. In our hometown houses were built upon pillars and on top of these pillars were fixed more pillars. Pillars were fixed here and there and some houses had 15 and some 20 pillars. Then more floors were built upon it. Pillars were fixed upon pillars for we did not have...[not discernible].

Q: Yes?

#27U: All the pillars of our houses were of wood. There were some with 20 pillars and some with 30 pillars. And upper floors were constructed over [the ground floor]. It was the pillars that supported. You understand a pillar? A pillar is...there will be a beam and then a pillar here and here and here [points off camera].

Q: And your house...how many pillars?

00:08:12

#27U: Animals were kept on the ground floor and humans stayed on the first floor and the uppermost floor was the shrine room. A large house had a minimum of a hundred pillars.

Q: Your home?

#27U: Yes.

Q: Animals on the ground floor, humans in the middle and the top?

#27U: The top floor was meant as a shrine room where we made offerings and had monks come over and read prayers. That is the top floor.

Q: How many homes were in your village, please?

#27U: We were only 70 families, but that is not what it is now. In the early days there were only 60-70 families.

Q: Really? So 60-70 homes in the village area?

#27U: Yes.

Q: You mentioned you were very close to China, like how long would it take to go by walking or by horse?

#27U: Where to?

Q: To go to the border of China, to China.

#27U: To go to China?

Q: Yes.

00:10:09

#27U: It would take a long time. It is over 500 kilometers to China. It is quite a long way and will take around 7-8 days.

Q: On horseback?

#27U: Yes, but normally we did not go there. It is 500 kilometers. A fast one will take 5-6 days.

Q: Did Chinese people come to visit your village for trade or other reasons?

#27U: [The Chinese] did not come for trade as such, but some came to sew boots and things like that. In those days only 10, 15, two or three came. Rich Chinese did not come, but they were the poor that came to seek work. They came at times in groups of two or three.

Q: If you looked out of your house, what would we see? Were there many mountains or just rolling hills? What was the terrain like?

#27U: Behind our place were hills with pastures like the hills of Mussoorie [India]. On the other side were forests, forests like...[not discernible]. The place was beautiful with flowers and such. It was an incredibly beautiful place. In the middle our place flowed a river called Rasay. The river is called Rasay. It was a large river.

Q: It sounds very beautiful.

00:12:41

#27U: It was an incredibly beautiful place.

Q: What are some of your favorite memories of your childhood growing up in this beautiful place?

#27U: These days?

Q: Memories of childhood now.

#27U: There are stories about when one was a child. There are stories about when one was a child.

Q: What enjoyable memories can [you] recall now?

#27U: The hometown was very beautiful. My hometown was an incredibly happy place. After the Chinese came...if one considers the situation these days, the Chinese are there and houses have been built for tourists, the hills leveled and the river...This is the situation these days.

Earlier it was an incredible place with flowers such that if we did not wear glasses, the eyes hurt because of the flowers. If one walked without shoes on the feet, flowers became stuck between these [interpreter interprets "toes"]. It was an incredibly happy place.

Q: What kind of games did you play as a child?

00:14:28

#27U: One caught horses and carried guns and went hunting for wild animals in the forests. There were wild animals like deer and musk deer. All of us young men went together to the forests and caught horses and such. There were no facilities in our region like there are here.

Q: Hunted wild animals?

#27U: [We] ate wild animals.

Q: Did you eat these animals or trade them? What did you do with them?

#27U: No, [the hunted animals] were not for trade. However, in our hometown, in our province of Amdo [domestic] animals were slaughtered during winter—were slaughtered during winter and consumed. The snout was bound, which is not good.

Q: Yes?

#27U: During winter some animals were slaughtered but not in summer.

Q: Was that a regulation of the government?

00:16:09

#27U: That was because of the difference in temperature. If animals were slaughtered during winter the meat did not get spoiled. The meat was stored in a room for our consumption. There were no slaughters during summer.

Q: So you could preserve the meat in the cold temperatures. Would you preserve it in your home or outside? How did you do that?

#27U: It was for your own consumption and not for sale.

Q: Where was the meat stored?

#27U: For storage we had crates made of wood that were plastered with animal dung.

Q: On the wooden crates?

#27U: Yes. [The meat] was packed in wooden crates. Wooden crates were made and [the meat] packed in them. It was similar to being kept in a refrigerator.

Q: Were the boxes kept outside or in some part of the house?

#27U: There was a different place for storage.

Q: You mentioned there was a prayer room in the house. Was that used very often and for what purpose?

00:18:00

#27U: It was not used much except for doing prostrations and burning butter lamps, and at times monks were invited to read prayers. Fifteen to 20 monks were invited to read prayers. When a lama was consulted to do a divination, it became necessary to read certain prayers and the room was used. In the evenings two or three butter lamps were lit and prostrations done. There were certain prayers and a few prostrations done in the evenings. During the day one must go out to work and in the evenings prostrations were done and butter lamps lit. There was no other use.

Q: Were there any gathering in the family everyday for prayers or was it just for special reasons?

#27U: We did not have monks reading prayers in the evening. After the day's work all the animals were gathered together and before partaking of tea, [we] chanted the Dolma 'praises to the 21 Taras,' chanted the Dolma 5-6 times like *Om Jetsunma...*the Dolma. The Dolma was chanted.

Q: How long did those prayers last?

#27U: Perhaps an hour or so.

Q: So that was a very dedicated practice every day for the family?

00:20:12

#27U: Yes, every evening, but some may have work or be out on trade. All the family members were not together all the time, but only at times. This was done every evening. There were some [families] that did this and some that did not but most did it.

Q: *Pa-la*, what kind of things did you pray for when you did those chants and prayers? What were the wishes or intentions?

#27U: It was for good fortune in business, prevention of misfortunes and illnesses. That was the tradition of Tibet.

Q: Different kinds of work probably had to be done in different seasons. What kinds of work did you do in different seasons in your family?

00:22:00

#27U: As for work some engaged in herding animals and some worked in the fields and some went on trade. That was it; trading, fieldwork and... Some repaired the house. That was the way it was.

Q: What activities did you personally do, *pa-la*?

#27U: I did not have a lot of work. It cannot be said that there was no work at all for there was work to be done, but the parents did it. [I] played and sort of whiled away time and did not have any responsibilities.

Q: How old...up to what age did you stay in your village?

#27U: [I] was fairly old...'57, '56, '53...I was fairly old, perhaps around 19 years of age because [I] left in the year '57. I left for Lhasa in the year '57.

Q: When you were a young boy growing up, what kind of dreams or hopes did you have for yourself? What did you want to do with your life?

00:24:12

#27U: [Laughs] There were no thoughts whatsoever, but just lived life that way.

Q: Did you want to get married and have a family and stay in the region?

#27U: There were no such thoughts. I would have taken a wife, but left at the age of 19-20 for Lhasa.

Q: You were to get married but couldn't?

#27U: [I] did not get married.

Q: Why did you have to leave?

#27U: I left for Lhasa with Sangay, who presently lives in the settlement in Mysore [India] driving animals laden with butter. We were around 150 families that went to Lhasa driving animals that were laden with butter. I spoke a little bit about this earlier [during the pre-interview]—that my father’s sibling was captured by the Chinese and could not go and so I went to Lhasa with the butter. Then [Tibet] was lost in the year ’59 and [I] escaped to India.

Q: Did you go to Lhasa to trade?

#27U: No, not on trade, but went to deliver butter to Lhasa.

Q: To deliver the butter?

#27U: Yes, butter.

Q: To sell the butter?

#27U: Yes, driving around 120 *dzo* ‘animal bred between a yak and cow’ that I spoke about yesterday.

Q: One hundred or 500 animals?

#27U: [I] drove around 120 *dzo* to Lhasa, laden with butter to Lhasa to sell. In short, it can be said that [I] went to trade.

Q: Was that a typical trading journey that you went on or was that the first time you did that?

00:26:37

#27U: I did not understand that. Please repeat.

Q: [You] went to Lhasa driving around 120 *dzo* laden with butter, is that a normal trading journey?

#27U: No, no because it is very far away. The journey took around 5-6 months. It happened only after many years. One must travel for around three months. The journey to Lhasa was not undertaken every year, but maybe once in 15-20 years.

Q: Who were you going to trade the butter to? Who’s going to take that much butter, a hundred *dzo*?

#27U: The Lhasans, the Tibetans in Lhasa.

Q: Yes?

#27U: There were Tibetans in Lhasa—in Lhasa. No one else but Tibetans consumed butter.

Q: Did you actually make that journey?

#27U: [I] reached Lhasa then but had not gone there before. It was '59 and [I] had left the hometown in '57. [I] sold the butter and the animals in Lhasa and then in '59 Lhasa was lost.

Q: Sold the animals too in Lhasa?

00:28:17

#27U: Yes, the animals were also sold.

Q: So you arrived in Lhasa just as the capital was falling to the Chinese.

#27U: Yes.

Q: [You] arrived around that time.

#27U: [Tibet] was not lost for another two years.

Q: Yes, round about...

#27U: [I] came in the year '57. So it was around two years later for [I] came there in '57 and Lhasa was lost in '59.

Q: Did you stay two years in Lhasa?

#27U: Yes.

Q: Two years later...I realized that when I said that. So can you tell us, describe that journey. It must've been very arduous 5-6 months with all those animals and how many people were in the caravan with you? What happened on the way?

#27U: There must have been around 200 people driving the animals. However, I did not travel with the group but came in a Chinese vehicle. I traveled in the vehicle while the servants—[I] spoke about this yesterday—four servants drove the 120 *dzo* to Lhasa. I came in a vehicle. There must have been nearly 130 families with them.

Q: How many families, *pa-la*?

#27U: There must have been a hundred odd families. I do not know exactly.

Q: Did the vehicle keep up with the rest of the animals or did it go ahead?

00:31:05

#27U: Yes, that is right [the vehicle went ahead].

Q: Can you tell us; were you excited about going to see Lhasa for the first time?

#27U: [I] cannot remember much about it.

Q: When you said they didn't do it very often, like why? Is it because it took a while to collect the butter and to have the animals? You know, like why didn't you go every year or every other year?

#27U: It was not about collecting butter. Everybody must get together and make a sort of program. Sangay who lives in the settlement in Mysore was like a leader then. Everyone said "I want to go" and then a list was prepared and the date of journey finalized. The to and from journey took nearly a year. Initially a program and the date of journey was finalized and everyone said, "I want to go, I want to go" and then they went to Lhasa, went to see Lhasa.

Q: Was it like a pilgrimage?

#27U: Yes, like a pilgrimage. Yes, it should be called pilgrimage.

Q: I was wondering if some of the butter was also sold for butter lamps in all the monasteries?

00:33:32

#27U: No, no, it was to be sold to earn your living. One did light butter lamps. One went on pilgrimage to Gaden, Drepung and Sera [monasteries near Lhasa] and lit butter lamps. However, the entire stock of butter was not used to light butter lamps but was meant to be sold. It was to be sold.

Q: You know, just before we leave your village for good, can I go back and ask what was village life like? Were people very supportive and friendly? Were there difficulties? Was there good leadership? Can you tell me about village life because that's rather a large number of homes in a Tibetan village? So I'd like to know about how the community lived together?

#27U: [The people] were very cordial. Whether we did dharma practice or rendered help to others, there were different groups that lend incredible assistance when someone died or fell ill.

Q: Oh, what were the prayer groups like?

00:35:32

#27U: Just like we chant *mani* 'mantra of Avalokiteshvara' and *siddhi* 'mantra to Padmasambhava' here, in Tibet we assembled and practiced once in a year.

Q: If someone got sick in the family, how did the neighbors respond to that?

#27U: Those that offered help to a family would be the relatives, whether from the father's side or the mother's side. If there was an illness or any misfortune, everybody lend help and of course, your relatives were always there. If a person passed away there were certain people that were responsible for taking away the body. [There were families] that you went

[to help] and others that you did not. If a person passed away there were certain people that did the work of carrying away the body.

Q: Also you know, you described that the houses had many pillars. How did the community help people build houses? How did that happen?

00:37:41

#27U: [People] came, everybody came. There was earth to transport and logs to fix. Everybody did the best to help. A member of each family came until the completion of the house. If I was building this house, a member from each family came every day. It could either be the husband or the wife. They came everyday for there was earth to transport and to dig, and to beat the walls. Everybody came to help every day.

Q: *Pa-la*, can you tell us what were the houses made of? What were the ingredients that went into creating a house?

#27U: It was just wood that was used, wood. You know wood? It was just wood that was used; wood was used for the roof and the pillars were wood. It was just wood and earth and nothing else. Everything was wood and earth.

Q: And the wood did that come from nearby forest?

00:39:33

#27U: Forests, one could obtain wood from anywhere. Wood was abundant in our region. There were trees to be cut.

Q: And the earth, was that...was the earth packed together like clay or was dung used? What went into the walls?

#27U: It was nothing else but earth. Earth was packed between two wooden boards that were tied using ropes of which you [interpreter] have a picture. A log [beam] was pushed into a hole in the wall. Just wood was used.

Q: Were there men in the village who were known to be good architects or people in charge of building houses, you know, that was their special skill?

00:41:01

#27U: Yes, there were. There was a person in charge, a person in charge who inspected the beams and the walls being beaten because sometimes the walls became crooked. There were people like what we call contractors here.

Q: And the earth must've been sealed very tightly because otherwise the rain or the weather would wash away the earth?

#27U: It never gets washed away. It never gets washed away. The earth was very good and on top of the beaten wall was the roof and nothing happened. However, our rainfall was not like the rainfall in India. It rained softly in our region and not very strong.

Q: What was placed on top, *pa-la*?

#27U: On the top of the walls and pillars was the roof and nothing happened.

Q: How was your village governed? Was there somebody elected as the mayor or the head of the village or was there a council of elders?

#27U: No, there was no voting system. If there was a leader, he was permanent. There was no casting of vote as such.

Q: Really? Where did they come from, these permanent leaders?

00:43:17

#27U: [The permanent leaders] belonged to the village—belonged to the village. There were people that were selected as leaders depending upon the type of person. Someone who was capable of serving the people was selected as a leader and there was no casting of votes.

Q: The most capable person was selected.

#27U: That is right.

Q: Do you remember any of the leaders? Were they good guys?

#27U: The leaders were rendered no more by the Chinese. They are all dead. They were either killed or have died.

Q: I know, they're no more, yeah. Was your family kind of average family or was your family in the leadership role in the village? What was your status?

#27U: My family?

Q: Your family.

#27U: We were not leaders but one of the best families.

Q: Best meaning?

#27U: Among the best [richest].

Q: I see that, you know, you had to learn before you left for Lhasa, you grew up doing many things. Can you describe some of the skills that you learned like did you know how to shear sheep? Did you have to learn that or how to build a house? What skills did you have to learn as a young man?

00:45:50

#27U: [I] did not do any of that. You mean whether I did that?

Q: Yes.

#27U: No, no, [I] did not do any of that.

Q: But what kind of jobs or tasks did you do when you were a teenager like 14, 15? What did you do?

#27U: [I] played and whiled away the time being young in age.

Q: Around 14, 15?

#27U: Yes.

Q: What about horse riding? Did you do horse riding?

#27U: [I] rode horses—very much so—[I] did a lot of horse racing. One spent time playing for there was not any work [with] it being a village. One did not need to go on trade...

Q: Yes?

#27U: One did not need to go on trade. It was just eating and doing nothing.

Q: When they decided to go to Lhasa for this pilgrimage and trade, did you volunteer to go or did they ask you to go?

00:47:20

#27U: No, no. It was vital for me to go because the Chinese had captured my father's sibling who was suppose to go with the butter to Lhasa. So I was sent to Lhasa to sell the butter. Before the butter could be sold in Lhasa, Lhasa was lost in '59 and [I] left for India.

Q: Where was your paternal uncle arrested?

#27U: In Tindhu.

Q: In your area?

#27U: [I] live in Sintso.

Q: Was [he] arrested in Tindhu?

#27U: It is a major state.

Q: Why was he arrested?

#27U: [The Chinese] accused [him] of doing business—for doing a great deal of business—and was captured.

Q: When you were growing up, did you ever see any Chinese in your region?

#27U: What?

Q: When you were growing up as a child, did you ever see any Chinese in your region?

#27U: There were not.

Q: When is the first time you saw Chinese?

00:49:24

#27U: Then gradually, under the regime of Mao Zedong, the Chinese gradually came into every part of Tibet including Ngawa in Amdo. They came in groups of 20-30. Otherwise, there were none before that.

Q: But when they came in, were you still there?

#27U: Yes, of course.

Q: Okay, the Chinese came into your village in groups of 20 or 30?

#27U: Yes, [the Chinese] came and said, “[We] are going to help you shear the animals and plow and work in the fields.” The Chinese came in groups of 15 or 20 saying that they had come to help us.

Q: What was your family’s reaction to their offer of help?

00:51:04

#27U: It was not just my family, but everyone was ordered to gather and told, “...[not discernible]. What help do you need? Certain people called *thiwu thukpo* will come to you.” *Thiwu thukpo* are like the terrorists of today. “Such people will come but you should not listen to them.” The people of Amdo were told that helpers will come that will assist them with money or whatever aid was needed with the animals. They came to help. The Chinese came in groups of 15, 20, 30 and 40.

Q: Do you have any idea who they meant the terrorists were?

#27U: There were such people. They were there and killed the Chinese in Amdo and elsewhere and killed many Chinese. [They] were like bandits.

Q: Okay. So what happened when they came? Did the village accept the help of the Chinese?

00:53:02

#27U: It was accepted. [The Chinese] gave a little help in plowing and digging the fields. It was accepted because [the villagers] did not know what was the intention behind that.

Q: When did they begin to understand the intention behind that?

#27U: This went on for sometime and then the people realized the Chinese were not doing any good. Those in Kham and Amdo fought like terrorists and were helped by Taiwan. Then there was a lot of conflict. Earlier at one point [the Chinese] did well by plowing the fields, loaning money and also gave money and many other things. This was long ago.

Q: Did anybody begin to worry about what would happen in their village?

#27U: What was that?

Q: It was said that the Chinese were not doing good and there were conflicts in other regions. Did the people of your village begin to worry about what would happen in their village?

#27U: Yes, [the villagers] did. It was said in Amdo, “The Chinese are not doing any good. The Chinese are not doing any good. The Chinese are talking sweetly to us but they are treating the people very badly. There is nothing for us to do but to challenge the Chinese.” The leaders said so and then the fighting began. Many battles were fought in Amdo.

Q: Were you there when that happened or had you already gone to Lhasa?

00:55:43

#27U: No, the fighting was going on at the time we left.

Q: Had it just started or was it going on for a while?

#27U: A little had been happening earlier. It continued to happen like the fighting by terrorists. It had been going on earlier.

Q: Did your family get involved in the fighting?

#27U: No, nothing happened. There was nothing. There were no arrests or anything like that.

Q: Do you think your parents thought you'd be safer if you went to Lhasa?

#27U: What was that?

Q: You were sent to Lhasa along with the animals. Did your parents think you'd be safer once...?

#27U: Yes, yes. That is what they thought fearing [I] would fall into Chinese hands. Later I received letters saying, “Do not ever come back. Do not ever come back for [the Chinese] are not doing any good. Everybody is being arrested. Do not come back.” We never imagined that there would be any turmoil in Lhasa. In Amdo people thought Lhasa was very large and believed there would never be any riots in Lhasa. [My parents] sent many letters saying, “Do not ever come back. Do not come back.”

Q: You know, His Holiness the Dalai Lama was from Dhotoe...I mean Dhoday, Amdo. So do you think, was there a special love or appreciation for His Holiness because he came from that area, from your area?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Does he have...?

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Did his family or the people of his village like the idea that His Holiness the Dalai Lama came from their region from Amdo?

00:58:36

#27U: There might not be much because we were so far away. We from Amdo did not know the language of Lhasa. There was faith, incredible faith in His Holiness the Dalai Lama. However, we from Amdo did not know the language of Lhasa and the language of Kham. In 1959 people from Kham, Amdo and Tibet [Utsang] became a mixture and came to understand each other. We from Amdo did not understand the language of the Lhasa area because [ours] was a small region.

Q: I see. So let...I want to go back to your journey. I know you went from...you went by a Chinese vehicle to Lhasa but it still took a long time. Were there any memories of that journey that you have that were scary or exciting because that's a long, long journey from Amdo to Lhasa?

01:00:34

#27U: There was not anything unusual that happened [during the journey]. I came along with our lama who is called Amchok Rinpoche in the year '57. Sangay was not there then. I was together with Amchok Rinpoche. We brought a huge number of *dhayen* 'Chinese silver coins.' Each person had two or three thousand *dhayen* wrapped around the waist and traveled together towards Lhasa. At Tindhu [the Chinese] said, "You have to give all the money and it shall be handed over to you in *dhayen* in Lhasa." So at Tindhu all our money was given.

Q: To whom?

#27U: There must be around 200,000-300,000 in the form of white *dhayen*.

Q: Whom was it given to? Whom was it given to?

#27U: To the Chinese. "You will be returned the money in Lhasa." In Lhasa [the Chinese] returned only paper currency and kept the *dhayen*. In Lhasa [the Chinese] gave paper currency, Chinese paper.

Q: Paper?

#27U: We had given in the form of *dhayen* and in Lhasa instead of *dhayen* [we] were given paper. I do not know much, but we traveled in a vehicle and there was no excitement or such. The journey took a while, perhaps around 15 days in the vehicle.

Q: Were you given paper currency in Lhasa?

#27U: Yes, [we] received paper currency.

Q: Did you give the Chinese the silver coins?

01:02:52

#27U: Yes, we gave the *dhayen* at Tindhu and received paper currency in Lhasa.

Q: Was the paper currency good?

#27U: It was good though there was the Tibetan currency in Lhasa. [The Chinese paper currency] could be used.

Q: What happened? Were there any other adventures along the way besides the Chinese telling you to trade?

#27U: Nothing happened along the way as we journeyed in the vehicle.

Q: What did you feel when you first saw Lhasa?

#27U: [I] was happy for there was enough money and one was young.

Q: And then what happens during the next two years? Can you give us a summary of that?

#27U: In the two years I tried to sell the butter and had an enjoyable time during the two years. It was less than two years for [I] left in '57 and then in '59...it was less than two years, but can be rounded off to two years though it was not two years. [I] came in '57 and Lhasa was lost in the 1st month of '59.

Q: Did you stay with family or friends or in a monastery? Where did you go?

01:05:12

#27U: I stayed right in the city of Lhasa at the place of the aristocrat called Sandhotsang.

Q: In the home of Sandhotsang?

#27U: [He] is called Sandhotsang, an aristocrat and a Kungo 'Your Presence [title of address for government officials].' Next to his house in Lhasa, he had a large guest house where [I] stayed.

Q: And so why did you leave Lhasa?

#27U: Lhasa?

Q: What was the reason for leaving Lhasa?

#27U: The reason was that it was said His Holiness the Dalai Lama was being invited to China—that His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama were being invited to China in 15 days. Therefore, all the people of the three provinces of Amdo, Kham and Lhasa [Utsang] declared that His Holiness the Dalai Lama cannot go, that His Holiness must remain in Lhasa and not go [to China]. The uprising began that day and [I] went to the Norbulingka and then suddenly from the Norbulingka...[I] must have been at the Norbulingka for around 10 days.

Q: How many days?

#27U: Perhaps for around 10 days, and then the uprising began and Norbulingka was lost.

Q: And why did you go?

01:07:16

#27U: One went there to fight. [Smiles]

Q: And did you fight?

#27U: There was no fighting. [The Chinese] attacked at 4 o'clock in the night...4 o'clock in the morning. At around 3 o'clock in the night of the 10th day of the 1st lunar month [the Chinese] began bombarding...

Q: ...of the 1st lunar month?

#27U: Yes, and by 4 or 5 o'clock Norbulingka was destroyed and the land lost.

Q: What did you do then, *pa-la*?

#27U: We were surrounding the Norbulingka with the intention to fight. However, instead of fighting, they [the Chinese] had made preparations and bombarded for 5-6 hours and everyone was forced to flee.

Q: It must've been very scary?

#27U: Yes, it was incredibly scary. The bombardment did not cease for hours and went *drrr...*as if a machine was running.

Q: People didn't know what was going to happen?

01:09:12

#27U: [People] in Lhasa did not know. [I] went to the Norbulingka with the intention of protecting His Holiness the Dalai Lama. However, His Holiness had left [the Norbulingka]. After His Holiness had left...the Chinese suspected His Holiness might leave. It was said that they bombarded believing His Holiness was within the Norbulingka. However, His

Holiness had already left. From 3 o'clock in the morning until 4-5 o'clock in the evening, [the Chinese] bombarded Norbulingka continuously.

Q: Right. So His Holiness escaped and then gradually the people found out that His Holiness escaped?

#27U: That was much, much later. Everyone did not know about it [then]. It became known later when people wondered if His Holiness was there. Then people came to know His Holiness had left and remarked, "It does not matter if [I] get killed for His Holiness the Dalai Lama has left towards Lhoka where the *Chushi Gangdrug* [Defend Tibet Volunteer Force] is. That is very good. Now we may die but His Holiness the Dalai Lama has escaped, which is very good." This was heard later.

01:11:08

Leaders of His Holiness' [government] announced over a loudspeaker, "His Holiness the Dalai Lama has left and you need have no worry. You have been here until now. Please do not leave for some time. Stay for a while and tell the others that His Holiness the Dalai Lama has left. You need not have any worry for [he] has reached Lhoka." This announcement was made...

Q: ...by the leaders?

#27U: Yes, by the government officials.

Q: How did people react when they heard that?

#27U: [When it became known that His Holiness] had left, some screamed, some cried, some exclaimed [we] had lost the battle with His Holiness leaving and some said it was very good. [The reactions] were different. Some exclaimed, "It is good that His Holiness has left. With such bombardment of the Norbulingka, had His Holiness been within, [he] would have been killed." While some said, "This is not good. If we had fought, we would win." There were different opinions.

Q: Exactly. What was your reaction, *pa-la*?

01:12:56

#27U: There was not much. [I] thought with such bombardment [I] would not be able to leave the Norbulingka. Once outside, there were many thousands fleeing and I thought it would be difficult [to escape]. There was fear, immense fear. There was not much to think. [We] did not have any experience fighting. [We] had just gone there but could do nothing.

Q: You were very young and inexperienced and away from your family.

#27U: [Nods]

Q: Oh, my goodness! Could you find some people that you could flee with?

#27U: Yes, there were a few people from my hometown. They told [me] to come along for I was young then. When they said “come and sit” [I] obeyed and when they said “get up and flee” I just followed them then. [Laughs]

Q: What happened to you next?

01:14:44

#27U: Then [we] came to Lhoka to the *Chushi Gangdrug* and then continued to flee.

Q: Joined the *Chushi Gangdrug*?

#27U: Yes, one was forced to join the *Chushi Gangdrug*. [We] passed Gaden [Monastery] and then met the soldiers of the *Chushi Gangdrug*. We were not allowed to pass through for [they] said, “We are the soldiers of *Chushi Gangdrug*. You are not permitted to leave.” Then we fled together; they fled and we fled.

Q: Yeah, that seems like that’s how the story ended. Well, *pa-la*, is there anything else that you would like to add to your story?

#27U: I do not have much to say. If she [interviewer] asks, [I] will speak about what I know. However, I do not have anything to add.

Q: So what year was that when you finally left Tibet and came to India or where?

#27U: What was that?

Q: What year was that when you finally left Tibet and came in exile to India?

01:16:21

#27U: [The country] was lost in ’59. So it must be between ’59 and ’60.

Q: Okay. What are your hopes for Tibet these days, *pa-la*?

#27U: What for Tibet?

Q: Hope for Tibet? What do you hope for?

#27U: A long time ago there was a lama, a lama from Amdo, with whom I went to see His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who was living in Mussoorie then. His Holiness said, “We will not face problems finding food. However, it will be difficult for us to return to Tibet for the time being. It is difficult. So it will be good if you get some education.” Other than that I do not have any thought about what is going to happen.

Q: So we meet today and we hear your history, your own personal history of Tibet. What was it like to talk about your history?

#27U: I did not understand.

Q: How do you feel about telling us your story?

01:18:37

#27U: What about telling you the story?

Q: How do you feel about telling the story?

#27U: My feeling?

Q: Yes, feeling.

#27U: I feel it is good because you are following His Holiness the Dalai Lama's wishes and I am happy, and have nothing but to say that I am happy.

Q: Thank you, *pa-la*. I want to revisit the one question. If this interview was shown in Tibet or China, would this be a problem for you?

#27U: There were many that faced problems. Some that went to China and had spoken about China were told, "You are a follower of His Holiness the Dalai Lama." If someone had visited Europe or America, [the Chinese] said, "You seem to be a great person." He faced some problems and his family members faced problems as well.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: So what do we do?

Q: But we may use your story?

#27U: There is no reason why it should not be used.

Q: Okay, thank you.

01:20:54

#27U: You can use it. I am in my 80s and there is nothing of importance left for me. If this can be of help for Tibet and you use it, I am happy and do not think that this will be of any problem for me.

Q: *Pa-la*, thank you very much.

#27U: [Joins palms and laughs]

END OF INTERVIEW