

# **Tibet Oral History Project**

Interview #44N – Tsering Dhondup  
April 15, 2015

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# TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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## INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #44N
2. Interviewee: Tsering Dhondup
3. Age: 85
4. Date of Birth: 1930
5. Sex: Male
6. Birthplace: Ruchok, Saka Dzong
7. Province: Utsang
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1959
9. Date of Interview: April 15, 2015
10. Place of Interview: Jampaling Tibetan Refugee Settlement, Dulegaunda, Tanahun, Nepal
11. Length of Interview: 1 hr 46 min
12. Interviewer: Katharine Davies Samway
13. Interpreter: Tenzin Yangchen
14. Videographer: Henry Tenenbaum
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

### **Biographical Information:**

Tsering Dhondup hails from a middle-class nomadic family. He fondly remembers the happy life that he and his community led when food was good and illnesses were unheard of. He contrasts the incredibly wealthy nomads with poor families based on the number of animals owned. He also describes how to ensure the herds are well fed and protected from harmful plants and water.

As a young adult Tsering Dhondup went to gather salt carried on yaks and then bartered them for grains. He also talks about how the salt formed in the presence of *tsalay* 'borax.' The Chinese have since removed all the *tsalay*, such that Jang Tsakha no longer has any salt. Tsering Dhondup also explains the *kag* 'year of obstruction,' which is believed to be when major changes occur in one's life and special prayers are offered.

Tsering Dhondup recalls seeing Chinese for the first time around 1945 when they were transporting boxes of *dhayen* 'Chinese silver coins' towards Ngari on hired yaks. He thought the silver was a good thing until hearing rumors of unrest in Kham. Then in 1958-59 he was witness to the *thamzing* 'struggle sessions' of the wealthy and the leaders of the community when the former poor were put in charge by the Chinese. Tsering Dhondup escaped to Nepal and participated in the *Chushi Gangdrug* Defend Tibet Volunteer Force in Mustang from 1960-70.

### **Topics Discussed:**

Utsang, childhood memories, nomadic life, customs/traditions, first appearance of Chinese, guerrillas in Mustang.

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**Interview #44N**

**Interviewee: Tsering Dhondup**

**Age: 85, Sex: Male**

**Interviewer: Katharine Davies Samway**

**Interview Date: April 15, 2015**

Question: Please tell us your name.

00:00:09

**Interviewee #44N: Tsering Dhondup.**

Q: His Holiness the Dalai Lama has 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?

**#44N: Yes. I am just going to give you a story and not a teaching that lamas give. I cannot do that.**

Q: Can we use your story?

**#44N: Yes.**

Q: Thank you.

**#44N: Okay.**

Q: If at any time you want to take a break or stop, please let us know.

**#44N: Okay. Okay.**

Q: If you don't want to answer a question or there's something you do not want to talk about, please let us know.

**#44N: Okay.**

Q: If your interview were to be shown in Tibet or China, would it be a problem for you or your family?

00:02:08

**#44N: There will be no problems for the family. It is unlikely that there will be problems.**

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

**#44N: Okay.**

Q: *Pa-la* 'respectful term for father,' you have lived a long life and we would like it if you could tell us a little bit about your childhood. What are your strongest memories of your childhood in your village or in your home?

**#44N: As a little child, when one reached the age of 8 or 9, then one must work as a cattle herder or a shepherd and herd the animals. There were no such things like schools then, no schools. So [the children] looked after animals and took good care of them and protected them from wolves and various kinds of [wild] animals. From the ages of 8, 9, 10, 11 until around 15 one took care of animals. He brought the animals back in the evening and took them to the mountains to graze in the morning. One did this kind of work.**

Q: You said that you took good care of the animals. In what way did you...what did you do to take such good care of them?

00:04:28

**#44N: At daybreak you had breakfast and then took the cattle and sheep to graze. The cattle must be protected from wolves and taken to where the grass was good. In the evening, around dusk you brought them back to your village into the enclosure. The women milked the *dri* 'female yaks.' And then at daybreak, when the sun rose one took them to graze. There was no education then and one was very happy. There was good food, thanks to your parents. As for me I liked animals and looked after them very well. I liked that.**

Q: What did you like most about taking care of the animals?

**#44N: Yes?**

Q: What did you like most about taking care of the animals?

**#44N: One felt happy being with the animals, then drinking milk and churning curd. The women churned curd. There was *tsampa* 'flour made from roasted barley' in Tibet and one added butter and made *pa* 'dough made from *tsampa* and tea' from it. Then cheese was kneaded into *thue* 'soft creamy cheese' by adding brown sugar. All the food was very good. And then animals were slaughtered and the meat dried well. There was no practice of using currency but the wool of animals, butter and cheese were used. Everyone was extremely happy.**

**Tibet's natural surrounding was good; its water was good and its grasslands good. There were different kinds of rivers and rivers that originated from snow looked white like milk. Drinking it made a person fair. There were no illnesses like tuberculosis that is rampant these days. There were never any types of such illnesses or leg pain. Having lived in Tibet for around 30 years, there were never any instances of people falling ill with tuberculosis or such. It was an incredibly happy time in Tibet.**

Q: What diseases are you referring to?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Excuse me?

[Interviewer to interpreter]: What diseases?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Tuberculosis.

Q: Oh, tuberculosis. You said that you looked for good grass. How did you know that you've found good grass?

00:09:06

**#44N: Good grass was when there were pastures with fresh grass like these [gestures off camera] and also there were mountains with snow at the top, rocks below it and pasturelands at the bottom, which were very beautiful with flowers and such. Herding was not just driving the animals to a good grassy area, but a person must lead them to where there was good grass and take care. In the evening all the animals were well fed.**

**Then the parents were happy and remarked, "Today the child has herded the animals very well. All the animals are well fed." The parents said this and the children were...the parents praised the children, "The animals have been led to a very good grassy spot. The milk yield will increase from tomorrow. The animal is full and milk yield will be good. The milk yield will be very good." [The parents] said such during our times.**

Q: In my country there are some plants that would make animals sick. Were there any of those kinds of plants where you herded your animals?

**#44N: There were poisonous water and poisonous plants that grew in summer with some kind of white flowers where [the animals] must not be allowed. The nomads knew of these. If the animals were allowed there, they became bloated and died instantly. Such cases were rare in our region. Care had to be taken in certain regions where there were such [poisonous water and plants].**

**It is certain that there are poisonous plants and poisonous water. [The animals] should not be allowed there and everyone knew of this. The parents advised, "There are poisonous plants in that place and the animals should not be allowed there." So one did not do so. In our region we took good care and there were not any cases of animals dying from poisonous plants and poisonous water. There were some regions that were polluted with such. That was for sure.**

Q: When your parents told you to avoid these bad regions, you know, bad grassy regions, what were the characteristics they told you to look out for...and water, too?

00:13:18

**#44N: Where there was poisonous water...the parents said, "Drinking from that water is poisonous. It is not good." The leaves around the place where poisonous water is found looked darkish and there was some sort of steam emitting from the ground and the water**

seemed dirty. And also where there was the presence of poisonous grass, in summer—one cannot see it in winter—a certain flower bloomed in summer that had something that looked like a candy on top. If any animal ate that, its stomach burst and it died. So one knew about it.

Q: Which animals did you herd?

00:14:47

**#44N: Animals that we owned were yaks. In general, yaks are the males. In Tibet we called them *nor*. Wealthy families owned 400-500 *nor* and thousands of sheep. There were incredibly wealthy nomads. Two shepherds and two *nor* herders were required to herd them. The animals were sheep, *nor* and then horses. Horses did not need herding much. The horses were let loose. The horses were let loose during summer and not much taken care of except to give some feed.**

**In wintertime the horses were taken care of and enclosed in the stable that were built like houses using rocks. Grass that had been cut during summer was fed in winter. [Horses] were given feed that looked like lentils. Wealthy families fed grains and grazed the horses. During winter the horses were kept in the stable and not let out. The horses were given feed and covered, and the cover removed during the day. At night they were tethered.**

Q: So how many yaks did your family have?

**#44N: When I was small our family owned around 200 including *dri*, yaks and calves. There were around 200. [We] owned a little over 400 sheep and 5-6 horses. I owned such.**

Q: So was your family considered poor, middle class or wealthy?

00:17:51

**#44N: It was middle class. It was not very wealthy nor was it poor in any way. My family was fairly good.**

Q: If you had been poor, how would we have known that you were a poor family?

**#44N: Poor thing, a poor family does not possess many animals, perhaps 10 or four or five and then has many children. It does not possess many yaks, male animals to bring salt or to go to barter for grains. There was no currency and one must give wool and *khulu* ‘hair on upper part of yak’s body’ that is found at the back. Very poor families are called *pango*. Those without possessions are called *pango*.**

**There were some poor families in our hometown. In general, there might be many poor in Tibet and there were also the wealthy owning *kati nakthong*, which means possessing ‘10,000 sheep and 1,000 cattle.’ There were *kati nakthong*, incredibly wealthy nomads. Poor ones would have 5-6 cattle and 30-40 sheep. “They are poor and do not have possessions.”—there was such talk.**

Q: *Kati nakthong*...

**#44N: *Kati nakthong* means 1,000 *nor* meaning yaks and 10,000 sheep. That is called *kati nakthong*. It is said, “This nomad is very rich. He has *kati nakthong*.” It is like that.**

Q: Ten thousand sheep...

[Interpreter to interviewer]: ...and 1,000 yaks.

Q: And one thousand yaks. That is a lot of animals!

00:20:41

**#44N: Yes, it is a lot. Some have more than that. An extremely wealthy nomad owning *kati nakthong* possessed many hundreds of horses, innumerable cattle and tens of thousands of sheep. There were such extremely wealthy nomads.**

Q: Were there many?

**#44N: Yes. The wealthy owned extremely huge *ba* and inside the *ba* were grains, rice and meat. The provisions were stacked high within the *ba* that had four pillars such that one might think, “Oh, the sacks might fall and kill people!” Such was the wealth. Those were good times, happy times. There were extremely wealthy ones. [Times] were very good.**

Q: So about how high would it be?

**#44N: It was stacked high. The *ba* had a foundation of stone. The stack was upon a square-shaped base of stones and reached up to the height of the *ba*.**

Q: How high would it be, *pa-la*?

00:22:32

**#44N: A large *ba* would be around 10 feet high. The height of a *ba* is around 10-15 feet.**

Q: How high would the grains be stacked?

**#44N: The grains were piled upon a square-shaped base and stacked neatly.**

Q: Stacked to the height of the *ba*?

**#44N: The stacks did not go above the *ba*. There was a rope that stretched inside the *ba* and pillars. The stacks reached until there.**

Q: You mentioned that they stored food in these *bas*. Could they store other things too?

**#44N: Grains were stacked as well as boxes of tea. There were boxes of tea in Tibet that contained 40 pieces of *bagchung* ‘bricks of compressed tea leaves’ each. The tea was bought from the place called Dhartsedo in China. Wealthy families had stacks of boxes of tea.**

**There were boxes containing 60 or 40 [pieces]. The boxes were covered in leather on the outside. Large and fine quality boxes of tea were piled.**

Q: What else would they store?

00:24:32

**#44N: Then there were provisions like rice, grains and meat; dried meat that were covered in leather. In the land of Tibet it was unheard of meat turning stale or dirty even if kept for 10-15 months. That was because of the good environment, good air and good water, and everything being clean. Meat would be stored and then there were different types of provisions. Butter would be made into rolls. First the butter was kneaded in water. Then the butter was packed in leather created into square shapes. In Tibet nothing turned stale or melted because it was not hot. It was not hot at all. There were the packs of butter. This is in the case of wealthy families. Poor things, the poor did not have such to store.**

Q: How many people lived in your community? How many families lived in your nomadic community?

**#44N: In the nomadic region there were around...There were no houses but *ba* then. There were around 60 *ba*.**

Q: Sixty to 70?

**#44N: There were around 60, but [we] did not live close to each other like here. Nomads lived far apart for the region was vast. There would be two, three, four or five nomads' *ba* [in a cluster] or a single *ba*. [We] lived like this in the vast region.**

Q: Going back to the rich families, how many rich families were in your bigger community, in this community?

00:27:29

**#44N: Wealthy families...there were not many wealthy nomads in our hometown...the number one wealthy person was called *tsorpon*. The number one was called *tsorpon*. The second one was...there were 5-6 families that were called wealthy. The rest were somewhat equal. There were many like my family. However, there were not poor families that did not own many animals or did not have much provision. The region was very good.**

Q: In many communities that I've known where there are some very rich people and some poor people and a few middle class, there are jealousies. Were there any jealousies in your community according to people's wealth?

**#44N: It is possible that there were jealousies but it was not much like the poor seeking assistance. The rich families employ the poor to take care of the animals and take them along as helpers on trips to gather salt on yaks. They were employed to help with work. So there were not any poor. [The rich] employed them and there were no jealousies like commenting, "He is rich or he is poor and bad." There were nothing like this in our hometown. It was quiet.**

Q: How did the rich families accumulate so many animals?

00:30:14

**#44N: The many animals...the older animals like yaks were slaughtered for your consumption during winter. At a certain time in the 10<sup>th</sup> Tibetan lunar month the older animals were slaughtered and the younger ones grew up. Then when winter began yaks were sold in Tsang, the central part of Tibet for grains. Each yak was bartered for four *tenzin kharu* of grains.**

Q: How many?

**#44N: *Tenzin kharu* is larger than a *bo* [unit of measurement]. It is called *tenzin kharu*.**

Q: What's it called?

**#44N: *Tenzin kharu*.**

Q: *Tenzin kharu*?

**#44N: Yes. A *bo* is different. The larger one...four *tenzin kharu* [of grains was bartered] for a yak's *gyap* 'back.' That is how yaks were sold and grains received. On each yak's back are two *dhopo* 'packs'. So that is four *dhopo*. A *gyap* is two *dhopo*. It was like that.**

Q: What were the grains on the yaks exchanged for?

**#44N: Yaks were sold and the grains received from families living in the town. Then the grains were brought back and the yaks given away. That was done with the older ones.**

Q: I'm still trying to understand how the rich got so many animals. How did they accumulate so many more animals than your family, for instance?

00:32:39

**#44N: The accumulation happened when *dri* gave birth to calves every year. Every year 30-40 *dri* gave birth during summer. It is the same with the *dri* and sheep. If there were 400-500 ewes, around 400 lambs would be born in a year. A few small ones might die. That is how the number rose. However, you could not accumulate by buying, as there was no practice of trading. That is how the number increased and became large.**

Q: Thank you.

**#44N: [Nods]**

Q: Earlier when you were talking about the rich and poor, you said that the poor had a lot of children. Why was it that the poor had a lot more children?

**#44N: It is possible to have [many] children. However, the cause [for their being poor] was not working hard enough. If one did not own many animals, one did not feel like working or the style of working and planning was different from those owning large number of animals. Each person has a way of doing things and that seems to be the reason for one becoming poor. Otherwise, it was not like one oppressed the other. Such things did not happen. It is the way each person does things and the poor seems to remain poor. It was like that.**

Q: When you say oppression, what are you thinking? Why would oppression produce more children?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: He was not referring to producing more children.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: They were poor, just that they were poor?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: They were poor. It was not due to oppression or anything like that. They became poor because it was their way of not working hard or a different way of working or not having good planning.

Q: Not having good planning meaning what? Planning what?

00:36:14

**#44N: If one possessed a little bit of wealth and animals, one could plan to go to gather salt or on trade missions and then there was progress. Those that did not have much, poor things, there was nothing to plan and could not go to do trade or one did not have the ability. One did not work hard and was satisfied eating frugal meals. If one did not think about the future and about accumulating wealth, one became like that. That is what I feel.**

Q: So you talked about how you looked after animals until you were about 15, and I believe you stayed in Tibet until you were about 29 years of age. So between 15 and 29 what kind of jobs, responsibilities did you have?

**#44N: Between that period I went to gather salt, saddling the yaks. [I] went to gather salt at Jang Tsakha. The place called Jang Tsakha is filled with salt, the plain ground looked white all around. [We] pitched tents and using the horns of yaks and such tools—wood is very scarce in the actual Changthang ‘Northern Plateau’ region—using old horns of animals and such tools the salt was beaten. Then with flat tools or any kind of flat sheets piles were created and then the salt packed in bags. The yaks were tethered on the plain ground for a night or so, tents pitched and everybody ate the food brought along.**

**The next day yaks were loaded with the salt and [we] left. The whole region, the plain ground was covered in salt. Nearby was a large lake. The lake called Tsamtso looked green like turquoise. In between lay the *tsalay* ‘borax’ but these days *tsalay* is no longer available. The Chinese have sold all the *tsalay* to Russia and such [countries] in truckloads. Now salt is no longer found in Jang where we used to gather salt. The formation of salt was due to the presence of *tsalay*. Salt does not form if there is no *tsalay*.**

Q: What a *tsalay*?

00:39:33

**#44N: *Tsalay* is a bluish thing found in the mud. If this was present salt gets formed. Salt cannot form without *tsalay*. It is sort of sweet and...[not discernible].**

Q: The *tsalay*?

**#44N: Yes, the *tsalay*. It seems the Chinese sold truckloads of this. These days salt is no longer found in Jang.**

Q: Sold to Russia?

**#44N: Sold to Russia. Each truckload fetched millions. Everything was destroyed. There is no longer any salt. The nomads of Jang in Tibet travel to the valleys to get salt that had been bartered for grains and stocked in houses from earlier times. The salt is sold to them. One needs salt and the salt in Tibet is destroyed. These days [the nomads] buy this salt and salt has become scarce.**

**Gathering salt is out of question; the whole region is empty. The place where we used to gather salt has become empty. [I] went to Tibet once to see relatives in 1979 when Deng Xiaoping brought about changes and allowed relatives to meet. There was freedom for relatives to travel back and forth. I went there then. The salt was all dried. The Chinese sold everything.**

Q: So the greenish stuff, was it like a plant like algae?

00:43:09

**#44N: No, it is sweet; sweet like candy. When one ate it as a child, it was sweet and tasty. It is square and found on the mud beside the salt. As one walked it could be seen lying there in the mud. When the yaks were driven across the mud, the *tsalay* moved up. *Tsalay* is why salt can be formed. That is the real gem of Tibet. It is a genuine gem that they...they [Chinese] removed all the *tsalay* and...**

**There is like a guardian of the salt called Dayay Tsakha. They [Chinese] indiscriminately bombed the rock and destroyed it and from the earth appeared a golden horse. They [Chinese] did not see it and the golden horse flew up into the sky. [The people] spoke about such things. They bombed indiscriminately and the gem of the salt...the saltpans and every part of Tibet had guardians. So the golden horse flew up into the sky. They [Chinese] could not catch it. Those people in my hometown said so though I have left [the region]. My sister and others who live at home said that such things happened there.**

Q: So what is your sister and her family and the other families do for salt?

00:45:45

**#44N: As I mentioned earlier [they] went to the south, to the valleys like Tsum and the regions of Himachal Pradesh. They are Tibetan people but come under Nepal. They are**

actually Tibetans and Himachal people. Being Nepalese they did not need to fear the Chinese. They are Tibetans and Buddhists who dress and eat like Tibetans. They had filled [their] houses with salt from earlier times. This salt was now being sold to [the people of] Jang in Tibet. [They] bought from them. [They] said that they bought from them in desperation as salt was not available.

Q: Going back to collecting salt I've heard that it's very hard work. How was it? Could you describe it to us, please?

**#44N:** The entire plain lay covered in salt. The salt was beaten into powder and piled. Then it is packed in bags and loaded onto yaks. The difficulty... Tibet is a good place. The people have strength. There was good food and water. It was amazing that whatever work the people did, [they] did not feel tired. Therefore, [I] did not feel very tired but the animals did. Poor things, the animals got tired being laden with packs on the back. The animals must be taken good care of. After traveling a whole day with the salt, the yaks must be led to good grass, the saddles and packs removed and left to relax. The next day [we] set off again. [I] did not think that it was that difficult then.

Q: What else do you remember about collecting the salt?

00:49:24

**#44N:** What [I] remember about collecting salt was that once you reached home, there were the parents and then the salt had to be taken to where it must be bartered for grains. There was a lot of worry and problems during the journey—like if the yaks do not get good grass they would not be able to carry the loads. Such problems were constant. That problem was constant. That was it.

As for food...one might fall sick suddenly being made of flesh and blood but there was not anything like someone falling ill on account of eating something or falling ill from drinking water and such. Tibet's land was good with clean air, clean water, clean land; everything was clean. One felt light when the breeze blew. It was an incredibly happy place, the one called Tibet, the land of snow. In order to travel there was no need to construct roads in the plains and pastures. One could go easily anywhere. Animals could eat their fill from the grass. In those days there were no thieves and bandits that troubled the people. The region was calm, the people calm and humble and god-fearing. It was like that.

Q: You mentioned that you were god-fearing people, what roles did your spiritual beliefs, your religion play in your life on a day-to-day basis?

00:52:49

**#44N:** Religious practice...not like now...Once a year a decree was issued from the Gyalwang Thamchen Khyenpa 'The Omniscient King of the Victorious Ones' stating that animals should not be killed on account of the lama's *kukag* 'respectful term for year of obstruction.' Otherwise, we chanted prayers and mainly the *mani* 'mantra of Avalokiteshvara.' Then one went to see great holy lamas like Talung...[not discernible], Sakya Gongma Rinpoche and Gyalwang Karmapa. [We] used to speak about the

Thamchen Khyenpa then but had never seen the Thamchen Khyenpa. There was no way of seeing [him].

Incredibly wealthy families travelled with 30-40 horses and mules and then there was talk about their having seen [His Holiness the Dalai Lama] that year. We did not have any such opportunities. However, [I] have seen the Karmapa and Sakya Gongma having visited the monasteries. Then we chanted the *mani* and prayed to the triple gem and spent time taking care of the animals. Our livelihood depended upon the fur and wool of animals, curd, milk and meat from the slaughtered [animals]; these were utilized. One did not fail to remember that it was due to the benevolence of the lamas and gods. Some wealthy families conducted large prayer readings. Some that were not so rich performed *choedok*. People were very pious. *Choedok* and such were done.

Q: What's *choedok, pa-la*?

00:54:37

#44N: *Choedok* is to chant.

Q: Did the monks do the chanting?

#44N: What?

Q: Did the monks do the chanting?

#44N: Zungdhue [collection of Buddhist religious texts] and Gyaythong 'Summary of the Prajnaparamita in 8,000 Verses' used to be chanted. Two, three or four people did the chanting. So [the people] were very pious.

Q: You mentioned earlier that a decree was issued asking not to kill animals. Where did it come from?

#44N: Yes, the decree was issued from Lhasa stating that it was His Holiness the Dalai Lama's *kukag*. It was called *tsatsik* 'public notice' and did not actually mean all animals. An animal called wolf and rat that live underground, these two were the exceptions. But for these two, shedding even a drop of blood from the nose of any bird or animal of Tibet was forbidden. Such edicts were issued. Animals were not to be killed during a lama's *kukag*.

Q: What's *kukag*?

#44N: The lama's year of the *kag* 'year of obstruction.' For instance, His Holiness the Dalai Lama is 80 years old this year. It is not a *kag* year. [Age] 25 is a *kag*; 37 is a *kag*; 49 is a *kag*; 61 is a *kag*; 81 is a *kag*.

Q: Twenty-five, 37...?

#44N: Yes, 37, 49, 61...these are big *kag*. Prayers are chanted during such years. That is how it was with us nomads.

Q: When you received these orders from the Tibetan Government not to kill animals except for the wolves and rats, for how long were you not allowed to kill animals?

00:58:14

**#44N: This was issued during the year of a lama's *kag*.**

Q: For one year?

**#44N: What?**

Q: For one year?

**#44N: Yes, for one year. Actually the culture of Tibet...the past culture is being lost these days. [Tibet's] culture in the past had many different sayings. Tibet's culture had grand attire and such, and observing prayers during a lama's *kag*, not killing animals except wolves and rats. These were considered enemies.**

**Wolves ate fresh meat; attacked live animals, instantly killed and ate [them]. The worst [predator] for nomads' animals is the wolf. It causes great harm. The rats get into the sacks stored in houses, eat and dirty the grains. Rats do a lot of damage. Just before the Chinese arrived in Tibet a lot of bad things happened. It was some sort of a bad omen.**

Q: Did a large number of rats appear before the Chinese came?

**#44N: Yes. Just before the Chinese arrived, a great many rats and wolves appeared. Normally there would be only three, four or two wolves, but just before the Chinese arrived packs of wolves in 13-14 appeared. It was some sort of an omen.**

Q: For people who do not understand the lama's year of the obstacle, could you explain exactly what that is?

01:01:09

**#44N: For someone who does not understand...For instance, there is the almanac of the Tibetan Medical Center. It is contained in there but nobody utilizes it much these days. There is one called *gumik* [nine eyes?]  $9 \times 1 = 9$ ,  $9 \times 2 = 18$ ,  $9 \times 3 = 27$ ,  $9 \times 4 = 36$ ,  $9 \times 5 = 45$ ,  $9 \times 6 = 54$ ,  $9 \times 7 = 63$ ,  $9 \times 8 = 72$ ,  $9 \times 9 = 81$ . There is the one called *gumik* wherein changes occur in one's life. Then there are special prayers that have to be read during a *kag*.**

Q: What happens during a *kag* year?

**#44N: A text called Gyanak Kagdhok 'Obstacle Times Alleviating Ritual' is read. That is for a person whose *kag* does not fall in a *gumik* year. There is a scripture called Gyanak Kagdhok.**

Q: What would happen during a *kag* year?

**#44N: During a *kag* one might fall ill suddenly. However, it does not happen for some. Some might die during the *kag*. It happens. These days nobody consults this much. They do not. [Laughs] In the past this used to be considered very important.**

Q: So was it just for the very high lamas? Just His Holiness the Dalai Lama, how did you know it was the year of the obstacle?

01:03:21

**#44N: He is the omniscient, I take refuge in him but during a *kag*, it could happen, but one cannot tell him.**

Q: That's not it, *pa-la*. Is the *kag* only for high lamas or...?

**#44N: It is for everyone. All of us have *kag* and not just the lamas. It is everyone, men, women and children.**

Q: How did you know that you had one of those years?

**#44N: *Kag* is calculated based on one's age. This year I am 85 years old. There is a *kag* at age 85. *Kag* is when it shows the *sogdhel*, *luedhel*, *wangdhel*, [*lungdhel*,] *ladhel*...there are around five of them in the almanac. It shows the gravity of *kag*...[not discernible] and what prayers to read. There is a slight *kag* for me. Likewise, at 85...even numbered ages do have *kag*.**

**If one is 10 years old...if one is 9 years old, there is a *kag* at age 9 and then a *kag* at age 13 called child's *kag*. Then  $9 \times 2 = 18$ , there is the calculation according to the *gumik*— $9 \times 2 = 18$ ,  $9 \times 3 = 27$ , there are *kag* in all these years. In order to overcome that these days [people] hold prayers saying, "This year is the daughter's *kag* or it is the son's *kag* or it is the mother's *kag*." [People] used to do a lot of prayers. It is done here in Jampaling, which is good. However...**

Q: It comes every nine years?

**#44N: Yes.**

Q: Is it nine or 13?

**#44N: At age 13 there is the child's *kag*, which is a *kag* for a young one.**

Q: Twenty-seven, 36, 45, 54...is there a *kag* every nine years?

**#44N: Yes, there is a *kag*. That is the *gumik kag*. Then the real *kag* is at age 13, 25 for women, 37 for men, for middle-aged women at age 49, for older women at age 61, for older men at age 81. These are big *kag*. Prayers are held during these times.**

Q: You mentioned earlier the Chinese, the impact of the Chinese on the salt, you know, the presence of the salt. When did you first see Chinese?

01:06:38

**#44N: [I] saw Chinese for the first time in...It was in 1945-46 that the Chinese appeared. They transported boxes containing *dhayen* ‘Chinese silver coins’ on 300-400 yaks. They transported the load from place to place, and it was mentioned that they were to go towards the direction of Ngari. It was a lot of *dhayen*, silver. They paid wages in the form of *dhayen*. The families were given *dhayen*. “The Communist Chinese are very beneficial. [They] are giving a lot of silver.”—some said that [the Chinese] were very good and were giving out silver and food; the poor families said so. Then it remained so for some time.**

**Then just before the start of ’59...around ’58 the *thamzing* ‘struggle sessions’ began. Everybody had to gather and those that were rich in the past...the poor were appointed as leaders. The rich were demoted. They [Chinese] formed categories like wealthy class and poor class. The poor class was put at the top, appointed as leaders [smiles] and given tasks. The wealthy class was subjected to *thamzing*: the leaders, heads and village headmen beaten.**

**All the people were...There were stones with *mani* carvings at the monasteries that were removed and laid on the ground and then people forced to sit on them. Poor things, some people who hesitated stepping on the carved *mani* stones were forced to and told, “You must transform your mind. [You] need education. Do not attend meetings for a week but receive instructions.”**

**Then the leaders and village headmen were subjected to *thamzing*. [The poor were told] “You do not have wealth and used to be servants in the past. These days you are leaders. Make [the past leaders] work.” [The leaders and village headmen] were slapped, spit on, dragged up and down by the hair and covered in dust. That is how it was done to the wealthy people.**

Q: Did you witness?

01:09:11

**#44N: Yes, such was done. This was done in my hometown. It might have been done in other regions too.**

Q: Did you witness?

**#44N: Me?**

Q: Did you witness it?

**#44N: I was not subjected to *thamzing*. My father was not a village headman or a leader.**

Q: Did you witness a *thamzing*?

**#44N: Yes, [I] did. I went to the *thamzing* site where [people] sat on the carved *mani* stones. [The Chinese] said, “You need education.” Then instructions were given for around a**

**week. “[Your] brain has still not transformed.” Such things happened many times in our hometown. Soon there was unrest and these things stopped. After we left, it happened on a large scale and [the people] suffered a lot.**

Q: In 1945-46 when the Chinese came in with so many horses loaded with silver coins, what were they paying people?

01:12:05

**#44N: That was wages for hiring yaks to transport the boxes from place to place. [The Chinese] paid in *dhayen*. Then the poor families were paid silver and such. That was the way it was done.**

Q: Were the *dhayen* transported on yaks?

**#44N: Yes, *dhayen* were transported on yaks in boxes. There were large boxes and small square-shaped boxes of this size [gestures off camera]. The larger boxes might have contained weapons or something. These were very large boxes like tea boxes that were loaded [on yaks]. Then there were small ones. The *dhayen* boxes were like small cartons. It seems each carton contained 500 *dhayen* and a yak carried a 1,000: two boxes of 500 each. The yaks looked empty because the boxes were small but they were very heavy, such that the yaks got tired carrying the load. A huge amount of silver was transported then. It was the *dhayen* at that time.**

Q: Was the weight of the coins too much for the yaks?

**#44N: [The boxes] were heavy. It seemed like [the yaks] were very tired when being driven. Though it looked small, it was heavy when you lifted it. The load seemed small but the silver was heavy and [the yaks] seemed very tired.**

01:14:36

**Then they asked the names of places. “Which river is this? What is the name of this place? What is the name of this lake? What is this animal called? Where would you reach taking this mountain pass? Where is the monastery?” [The Chinese] kept asking such questions as [they] traveled. There was a different group that asked questions about the names.**

Q: So what do you think they were doing when they came in 1945-46?

**#44N: I was quite young then around 18, 19, 20 years old and did not much...[I] felt the *dhayen* looked good. But the older people said, “Oh, this is not good. [The Chinese] will do something bad in the future. [They] will do something bad. What will happen to Tibet? Tibet will be occupied. [The Chinese] are planning to occupy; it is just a matter of time. Otherwise, why would they go with the *dhayen*? There is not any reason for [them] to go. It must be to occupy Tibet.” The older people passed such remarks. “It is not good; it is not good,” they said. I felt fear then thinking, “What will happen?”**

Q: So you were in a bartering society and didn't use coins. So what did people do with the silver coins? What did you do with the silver coins? What did other people do with them?

01:17:24

**#44N:** There was great joy because it was silver. You felt, “[We] are given such nice silver. This is good.” One did not think about what will happen in the future or whether they will do something bad. One did not think about that. One could not think that way but felt it was good. Then [we heard] about fighting in the Kham region, fighting the Chinese in the Kham region. [People] arrived from Kham and fled towards Thoe region on horseback. “Now it is not good.” And then there was unrest. Then one realized it was bad. That was the reason for escaping. Otherwise...initially, one felt it was very good when *dhayen* were given.

Q: So could you please tell us about your escape from your settlement to out of Tibet?

**#44N:** Okay. It was said, “There is no use remaining.” [I] think it was in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Tibetan lunar month of ’59 that it was said His Holiness the Dalai Lama had left for India. Monks of the great monasteries and soldiers from the Kham region remarked that His Holiness was gone, gone to India. Then there was great turmoil in the region with [people] fleeing this way and that way such that one felt, “What is happening?” You felt it was best to go and wondered whether to go towards the valley or somewhere else. Some said that there is the place called Shambala in the north and going to Shambala in the north and reaching it would mean no more seeing [the Chinese] and that it was a paradise.

Q: What was it like?

**#44N:** Shambala in the north. Many tens of thousands of nomads and people fled towards the north. Shambala, [I] do not know if people were deceiving for it was said, “Once in Shambala there are no Chinese to be seen, no enemies to be seen. It is like arriving in paradise.” There were many that went towards the north. We had [heard] that His Holiness the Dalai Lama had left for India and that an uprising had taken place in Lhasa; an uprising had taken place in Lhasa. Then everyone became agitated and that is the reason for our leaving. [We] made the decision and came to the valley in Nepal. However, my parents were left behind. [They] could not come. Only single men could manage to flee. The others could not come and were left under the Chinese. [They] were all captured.

Q: So who did you come with?

01:21:53

**#44N:** [I] saw some soldiers from here...There were soldiers in the place called Mustang. A few soldiers came over the mountain pass of the north for animals. At that time the Chinese had become very quiet and had left. The Chinese became silent during that period. The soldiers were facing difficulties and bought animals. Then a few of us came [along with the soldiers]. The rest were left behind. I came away like that taking the path to Mustang.

The *Chushi Gangdrug* [Defend Tibet Volunteer Force] had been established then. It was just newly established. They [guerrillas] came in the year 1959 while I arrived in December of 1960 at the *Chushi Gangdrug* military unit that was set up in the east of Mustang at the base of a mountain called Zipothang. There was not any military structure or even tents,

but [I] saw smoke emerging from the woods of the mountain. [The guerrillas] were living in enclosures made from stacks of juniper trees and such when I arrived there. [They] had no weapons, nothing except sticks. [The guerrillas] were training using the piece of stick like a gun. Supplies were difficult and things very poor. When I arrived [I] was dismayed. “Oh God, [I] have reached a very bad place,” [I] thought. Then gradually [my] mind...I struggled and gradually forgot everything. It was like that.

01:24:39

**Do you need to rest a little? [You] might be tired. Do [you] need to rest a little if tired? You might be tired. I am fine.**

Q: Not at all! Not at all! This is much too interesting. Are you tired?

**#44N: No.**

Q: So you thought that you had come to the wrong place? What did you do then?

**#44N: [I] felt hungry but there was nothing to do but stay there. It was not me alone but everybody was struggling. Everybody underwent a lot of struggle. Oh God, there was nothing to wear, nothing to eat, no house to live in. Everybody was poor. “I am not the only person going through difficulties but everybody is. However, truth will prevail eventually and something good will come about. [We] will get weapons and be able to fight the Chinese, be able to wage a war,” I thought such in [my] mind. That was it. There was not any other thought.**

Q: In which year was this?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: 1960.

Q: So when you joined the *Chushi Gangdrug*, who did you come with?

01:27:08

**#44N: I was alone. [I] was alone and came along with some soldiers that had come to purchase animals over the mountain pass who [I] met.**

Q: In the *Chushi Gangdrug* encampment, was it just men?

**#44N: It was only men. There were no women, not even one.**

Q: Not even one?

**#44N: No.**

Q: Where you were in Mustang, were you near any Nepalese villages?

**#44N: There were clusters of villages around in Mustang, but these were actual Tibetans in the way of eating, drinking, practicing the dharma, monasteries. There were many Tibetan**

monasteries. The region is a place of pilgrimage. [The people] are actual Tibetans. They spoke Tibetan but came under Nepal. [They] came under the authority of Nepal. [I] wonder during which period the region was lost [to Nepal]. Otherwise, they are Tibetans. There were no Nepalese villages close by. It was far away in the lower parts.

Q: How long were you in Mustang?

01:29:32

**#44N: Ten years, from 1960 to 1971. That is 10 years, right? [I] was there for 10 years.**

Q: So for those 10 years tell us what you did with the *Chushi Gangdrug*?

**#44N: [We] had to guard the border.**

Q: Guarding the border.

**#44N: The other side of the border is Tibetan Territory and this side is Nepalese Territory. We were in Nepalese Territory. The *Chushi Gangdrug* was in Nepalese Territory. [We] guarded this border. Ten to 15 soldiers guarded the top of the mountain pass in 2-hour shifts at night. Men took turns through the night in 2-hour shifts. The ground was hard and food scarce. Each man had a blanket that was rent into two parts and one worn around the waist. The gun was slung here [indicates left underarm] and then it was used as a pillow as one slept. We took turns until daylight. The duty rotated, which was a lot of hard work in that region.**

**Then there were some that went there [to the Tibetan Territory] to fight the Chinese. However, I did not get to go where guns were fired. I did not encounter [the Chinese] anywhere. There had been fighting and killing. Some went to the Tibetan Territory and fought guerrilla style, destroying two Chinese vehicles. They destroyed two vehicles, killed 13 people including a leader. Some soldiers did that. I did not get to do that. [I] did not get to do that nor did [I] encounter any Chinese, thank God. However, the duty was very difficult and it was a great struggle for 10 years.**

Q: So you were on guard duty during the nights. So were you on guard duty for two hours and then did you sleep for a few hours and then come back on guard duty?

01:33:19

**#44N: Yes, that is how it was.**

Q: So you guarded two hours...Did you do that throughout the whole day, all the 24 hours?

**#44N: Yes, it has to be done day and night. There was a group of 10-15 men that took turns. The base camp was located much lower. One returned to the base camp and the substitutes came back. That was how the men struggled. It was not me alone. There were many men and all took turns.**

Q: What kind of training did you get for guarding the camp?

#44N: Yes?

Q: What type of training did [you] undergo?

**#44N: Right from the beginning one trained in warfare, how to fire a gun, how to fight the Chinese. Such things had been taught earlier at the place called Zipothang. The United States assisted with weapons. Guns arrived at that time. There had been no guns earlier. Weapons were dropped in Tibetan Territory. There were incredibly fine guns and artilleries. [We] received training, the training was in warfare.**

Q: Dropped from the sky?

**#44N: Yes, dropped from the sky from a plane. [The weapons] were dropped at night within Tibetan Territory. Our soldiers went to retrieve them while the plane flew away. All the weapons came from there. [I] was told that the state of President Carter of the United States extended this help to the *Chushi Gangdrug*. They gave this help. That is how the weapons came.**

Q: Were you taught how to use the artillery?

01:36:00

**#44N: [We] were taught.**

Q: Did you ever use them?

**#44N: It is called 6 mm mortar. The way the mortar fired was that one calculated the range by rotating a wheel to target a distance from here to Pokhara or Damoling. Three men were necessary to rotate the wheel of the gun: one to rotate, the other to watch the number...We received training in all of these. Then the other kinds of training were lying on the ground, fighting and attacking. Such were the training for which [we] worked very hard.**

Q: Despite the hardships that you encountered in Mustang with the *Chushi Gangdrug*, did you enjoy this time?

**#44N: It was for the cause of the Buddha dharma and if you were to die, this was the place to die by fighting the enemy. Whether it was beneficial or not, [I] had left Tibet forsaking my parents and everything. If possible [I] wished for a chance of going to Tibet to fight. That was it. Later the supplies became better and [we] were happy such that one was able to work hard. By around 1968-69 military camps had been formed and it was enjoyable.**

[Discontinuity in video]

Q: We are about to wrap up the interview and if I may, I would like to ask you a slightly indelicate question that has been interesting me for a long time...And it's this...

01:39:32

**#44N: Okay.**

Q: So you were in the *Chushi Gangdrug* for 10 years. There were no women there and you were far away from villages. So what did the men in *Chushi Gangdrug* do about that kind of companionship that women can give you?

**#44N: There were many that went to the villages and got married. [They] got married and took leave from the office of the *Chushi Gangdrug*. There were many such cases. Most of us did not marry. Then the leader of *Chushi Gangdrug* sent the likes of us to India, sent to India after the completion of 10 years.**

Q: Were you sent to India?

**#44N: Yes, [I] was sent to India.**

Q: I thought that the *Chushi Gangdrug* wouldn't allow their soldiers to interact with local community?

**#44N: It was possible that there was a little bit of interaction. It did not cause that much of damage. Then the likes of us were sent to India. Then there was some turmoil with Nepal and Nepalese troops...[Tibetan] soldiers were sent to settlements like Jampaling Settlement and many other settlements. Then they had come down when Nepal forbade [them] from staying in Mustang. [They] came down towards Pokhara.**

Q: This has been a fascinating interview. Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about life in Tibet?

**#44N: There is not anything much left to say but my main opinion at present and when I lived in Tibet is that, due to the benevolence of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the wheel of dharma has rotated in the West. I feel that the truth about Tibet will be resolved and that I will get to go back to Tibet before [my] death and do not believe that [I] will not get to go back.**

**The Buddha has been very benevolent during my time here and when I was young in Tibet. Though [I] had never seen His Holiness, yet in the mind...we could not continue to live in our land and had to leave it. Presently...His Holiness took spiritual and temporal leadership at the age of 16 and struggled so much to turn the wheel of dharma in the world and teach love and compassion. [His] benevolence is great. My final wish is that the truth about Tibet will be resolved. That is it. [I] do not have anything else to say.**

Q: Do you think it will be resolved in your lifetime?

01:44:45

**#44N: I do. Not just me, His Holiness the Dalai Lama himself...[he] is 80 years old this year and has struggled so much. In my opinion [based on] such a great struggle and [His Holiness'] many advices, I feel that the truth will prevail in this reincarnation's lifetime. I**

**believe that I will reach Tibet, the Land of Snow, and never that [I] will not get to go back. That is my opinion.**

Q: I hope that you arrive and that you are ready to go back to Tibet.

**#44N: Okay. [Joins palms]**

Q: I need to ask you two questions. If this interview was shown in Tibet or China, would there be a problem for you or your family?

**#44N: When [I] reach there?**

Q: No, when we...

**#44N: Oh, for recounting this?**

Q: Yes.

**#44N: [I] do not think there will be any problems. There will be no problems.**

Q: And then, may we use your real name?

**#44N: Yes.**

Q: Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW