

Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #60M – Tenzin Tsomo
April 12, 2010

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INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #60M
2. Interviewee: Tenzin Tsomo
3. Age: 68
4. Date of Birth: 1942
5. Sex: Female
6. Birthplace: Nyero Thoepa
7. Province: Utsang
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1960
9. Date of Interview: April 12, 2010
10. Place of Interview: Old Palace, Doeguling Settlement, Mundgod, Karwar District, Karnataka, India
11. Length of Interview: 1 hr 24 min
12. Interviewer: Rebecca Novick
13. Interpreter: Tenzin Yangchen
14. Videographer: Pema Tashi
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

Biographical Information:

Tenzin Tsomo fondly remembers the village and the happy life she led. Her family was among the richest in the village, owning a large tract of land and animals. Her father was a representative of the government who was responsible for collecting taxes.

The practice of polygamy was prevalent in those days, her mother being married to three husbands who were brothers. Tenzin Tsomo recounts the amicable situation at home mainly due to the fairness of her mother. She explains how the husbands take on different responsibilities in the family and how the wife and children treat each one equally.

When the Chinese first appeared in her village they would occupy her home for a night and move on to another village the next day. Later Chinese took up residence in the village and arrested her mother's three husbands, who were subjected multiple times to public humiliations and beatings. Tenzin Tsomo's family was not allowed to speak with other villagers and her family property and crops were distributed among the poor people.

Tenzin Tsomo relates her dangerous escape journey. She almost drowned crossing a river and was briefly separated from her parents. She stayed in Bhutan 20 years before moving to India.

Topics Discussed:

Childhood memories, customs/traditions, taxes, first appearance of Chinese, life under Chinese rule, forced labor, imprisonment, oppression under Chinese, thamzing, escape experiences.

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Interview #60M

Interviewee: Tenzin Tsomo

Age: 68, Sex: Female

Interviewer: Rebecca Novick

Interview Date: April 12, 2010

Question: *Ama-la* ‘respectful term for mother,’ could you start by telling us your name?

00:00:22

Interviewee #60M: Tenzin Tsomo.

Q: His Holiness the Dalai Lama asked us to record the experiences of older Tibetans to share with the young generation of Tibetans, with the Chinese people and with other people in the world. Your memories will help us to document the true history, experience and beliefs of the Tibetan people.

#60M: Okay.

Q: Do you give permission for the Tibet Oral History Project to use your interview?

00:01:12

#60M: [You] can use it.

Q: Thank you very much.

#60M: Okay.

Q: During the interview, if you would like to take a break, just let us know and we can stop.

00:01:27

#60M: Okay.

Q: If there’s any question you’d rather not answer, just let us know.

#60M: Okay.

Q: If this interview was shown in Tibet or China, would it make any kind of problem for you?

00:01:47

#60M: There will not be as it is factual. [I have] suffered it.

Q: Thank you very much and we very much appreciate your coming to share your story with us.

#60M: [Nods]

Q: First of all, can we talk a little bit about your village of Nyero Thoepa and some of your memories of your village?

00:02:34

#60M: Should I talk about the Chinese and our suffering?

Q: What was the village of Nyero Thoepa like?

#40M: Nyero Thoepa was very large.

Q: How many houses were there; the mountains, the rivers...?

00:02:52

#60M: There was plenty of water. There were many yaks and sheep.

Q: How many houses were there?

#60M: There were 30-odd houses in my village. Thoepa was a huge region and Nyero was one village. It was like one of the camps here. [Thoepa] was huge.

Q: Most people in the village, what was their livelihood?

00:03:53

#60M: The livelihood during the summer...I am talking about the rich families because the poor were engaged in working for the rich. The rich ones milked sheep in the summer and cultivated lands. The sheep must be milked and some [people] went to the nomadic camps and those that remained in the village cultivated lands. In our area, we grew radish and grains, but wheat did not grow because of the cold climate.

Q: By grains you mean barley?

#60M: Yes, the barley grain.

Q: Was the region too cold?

#60M: It was quite cold.

Q: And is that what your parents also did?

00:04:55

#60M: That is right. We did our own work and did not make others do it. However, if [we] could not manage, we hired people at times.

Q: And in the winter?

#60M: During winter until the 3rd Tibetan lunar month it was too cold for other [work]. [We] collected manure. Hay was gathered in order to make manure. One had to prepare manure for the fields. And then there was wool work and weaving.

Q: Did your family own land?

00:06:13

#60M: [We] owned a large tract of land. We cultivated it ourselves, my father and others. In our village the plowing was done by yaks. Even if it was a rich family, they did the work themselves.

Q: So you were quite a rich family?

#60M: The family was among the richest. It was second to the private family [estate holder].

Q: So when you say ‘second richest in the village’ what exactly did your family own in terms of land and animals and property, like this?

00:07:07

#60M: [Speaks before interpretation is complete] Second in the sense that...[We] were the richest in our village because there was no private family. There was no private family in our village. [We were] like tenants of the government.

Q: How many people worked under your father?

#60M: There were no servants that worked under father. Father did the work himself. Though we were rich we did not make other people...Only if we could not cope were laborers hired.

Q: So your father would actually work in the fields himself?

00:08:35

#60M: We sowed the fields in a month and then water was fed to the fields from the 3rd to the 8th month. Field work was completed in 5 months. We hired hands as [the fields] must be irrigated. Father had to go here and there to meet the superiors for tax obligations. As a rich family there were many taxes to pay. He went on such errands on horseback.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Travel on his horse?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Horse, and meet the high officials who came, you know, as a form of tax. It was his duty as a tax payer to meet any officials...

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Oh, he had to meet and greet officials who came.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Or work for them, you know.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Because of his high position?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Because it was a form of tax.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: I'm sorry, Yangchen-*la*, I do not understand. What was a form of tax? Meeting people?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Meeting people and whatever work was given to him by the Tibetan government officials who came to visit the villages because her family cultivated lands that belonged to the Tibetan government.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: So then he had to take sort of orders from the government about what to do and they would come and tell him what to do.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Government officials.

Q: So how had your family acquired this wealth?

00:10:28

#60M: The reason for becoming rich was that in Tibet, if there were three brothers—if [I] tell her [the interviewer], [she] will be astonished—only one wife would be brought home. [To the interpreter] Is it not shameful if I tell her?

[Interpreter to interviewee]: It isn't shameful.

#60M: One [of the husbands] would engage in meeting the government taxes. One would herd the yaks and the other the sheep. A few assistant shepherds would be hired. The one that grazed the yaks went to Bhutan in the winter and brought wood to sell. Many such things were done. Then there was cultivation which left the whole of winter free. Manure was gathered on yaks and [we] owned many yaks. Such tasks were performed.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Okay. Is she talking about her family or is she just talking about this tradition?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: In general.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: In general. Let's ask again.

Q: How did your family become so wealthy?

00:11:58

#60M: I was small then. Here I am not very rich, just medium. When I came to Bhutan as a refugee...

Q: No *ama-la*, I don't mean here. [I] mean in Tibet.

#60M: I see. The wealth was...

Q: Were there three brothers?

00:12:14

#60M: My father and mother, they did their work themselves and when they could not cope, they hired laborers and paid them wages. If your family members [did the work], money need not be paid out, which was why we owned a huge tract of land.

Q: Were there three brothers?

#60M: Yes, there were.

Q: Did your mother have three husbands?

00:12:38

#60M: There were. They were brothers. There were many such rich families, some with two [husbands] and some with three.

Q: Of the three men who were married to your mother, one was obviously your natural father. Did you view the other two men as being as important to you as your father or was your father more significant to you?

#60M: [Speaks before interpretation is complete] Uncles, [we] called them uncles. They were brothers from the same set of parents. [They] shared the same father and mother.

Q: Did you call them uncles?

00:13:49

#60M: [I] called the two younger ones as uncles.

Q: Did you love all three of them the same?

#60M: The same. They were the same. It was the same. We were four siblings. One was rich like us and was left behind in Tibet. [I] heard one has passed away now. The other two are in Bhutan of whom one is dead. I have one surviving sister.

Q: Did you have a special relationship with your father?

00:14:41

#60M: One must call him [the oldest brother] the father. Though [we] called him the father, [we] gave the same love to the two younger ones, too. They were three brothers, but they did not live at the same place all the time. They had to go to distant places to herd the sheep and yaks. The father took the responsibility of the family and did less work. [He] was considered important, the oldest brother.

Q: I know it sounds like a strange question but was it very clear in the family...First of all, how many brothers and sisters did you have?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Four siblings.

Q: So was it very clear who was whose father? Do you understand? Was it everybody knew very clearly that was my dad?

#60M: Except for some facial resemblances... They [the father and uncles] were treated the same. They were brothers and were very close. There were cases of some [families] not being able to get along. However, ours was a cordial [family]. The brothers considered the oldest as most important.

Q: Your mother, did she love all equally, too?

00:16:51

#60M: [She] gave equal love. [She] did not show [more] love to one or the other. She was very good. There were cases of brothers fighting, but that did not happen in our case.

Q: This system worked very well in your family, it seems, yeah?

#60M: It was good if it worked out well. If the mother [wife] did not act well, it did not work and there were many cases of brothers fighting.

Q: But secretly she probably did have a favorite, right? Do you think? But it's just that she didn't show it.

00:17:48

#60M: Well, [we] would not know such things. We considered them equally as parents. [We] would not know who was whose [offspring].

Q: Now was this quite common in your village, this particular arrangement?

#60M: There were many such cases in our village. It was a necessity for the rich families. If the sheep were handed over to an outsider, it was not good. There were yaks and there were sheep. The rich families had a lot of work and one must strive for oneself. It did not work out well for the poor families. They lived individually.

Q: Yeah, it makes sense to me, but you never heard this in exile, right? It's completely stopped.

00:18:57

#60M: It is done in a few cases, but it does not work out well. That is because they must live together. There are some good cases where they are cordial. If the wife is not... [not discernible], it is not good.

Q: But you only have one husband, right?

#60M: [Laughs] I had two, but the older one passed away.

Q: Oh, you did have two?

#60M: [Laughs]

Q: At the same time we are talking about, yes?

00:19:45

#60M: [I] came as a bride [to the husbands' home]. The older one passed away. The older one was so good to the younger one. Whatever decisions had to be made, they were in unison.

Q: They were brothers?

#60M: Yes, they were brothers; very cordial and there never used to be any quarrels in the home.

Q: And you loved them equally.

00:20:26

#60M: Yes, equally. We engaged in trade over here. They, the brothers were very cooperative. In some cases the brothers do not get along.

Q: There're some questions I was to ask, but I think maybe they are too personal, like the sleeping...

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Could you think we could ask her about the sleeping arrangements? I mean do they all sleep in one room or is that too personal?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: If you want to.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Let's see how she goes with it.

Q: What were the sleeping arrangements like?

#60M: One slept in his/her own sleeping area. [Laughs] [To the interpreter] The English do not think well of it.

[Interpreter to interviewee]: It does not matter, *ama-la*. This is our story and it is there in our tradition. Since it is there, it won't make any difference if you talk about it.]

#60M: One slept in his/her own sleeping area and [we] did not do it much. They [husbands] were very amiable [with each other].

Q: I see. Everyone has an own bed?

00:21:49

#60M: Yes, each one slept by himself/herself. [I have] never slept together [with husband on one bed]. These days even if there is only one spouse, everyone including the children sleep together. [I had] never slept like that.

Q: When you were growing up, were you very aware that you were from a wealthier family than the others? Did you feel a bit different to other people in your village?

#60M: [I] did not know it when I was small. They [in-law family] had two sons and their relatives said that they wanted [a bride] and that they [the two brothers] would spend their lives together. Their relatives sought my hand.

The older one was somewhat timid and treated the younger one very well. I treated them equally and never treated one better and the other worse. The children too considered them the same. They were very good [to their father and uncle].

Q: And growing up in your village, did other people in the village treat your family differently?

00:24:04

#60M: When we lived in my village, we were rich. [The villagers] were good to us. Everyone did that. Because we were rich, the Chinese said that we were very bad and caused us much suffering.

Q: Your father's position in the village, what responsibilities did he have in the village itself?

#60M: He had responsibilities just like the leaders we have here. [He] did that kind of work. Taxes used to be collected in the small villages. Nobody ordered [the people] in the small villages to pay, but they gave willingly. Meetings were held and taxes collected, which would have to be reached to the government.

Q: Did your father do that?

00:25:02

#60M: Yes, father did that. [He] had to maintain a lot of connections with the government.

Q: So he had to actually go and collect taxes from people. Did that ever cause any bad feeling towards your family because your father was the tax collector?

#60M: It did not. [The people] never did like that until the arrival of the Chinese. Moreover being a rich family, if the poor people could not make their ends meet, loans were given to them and [we] did not charge a high loan [interest]. If someone was unable to repay within a few years, the loan document was cancelled and a fresh one made saying that too many years had lapsed. When someone was unable to repay, this was what was done. There was no mistreatment. However, the Chinese said, "They are a wealthy family and they should be made to suffer."

Q: And if there was like any kind of dispute in the village, you know over land, property or anything, how would that get resolved? Would your father get involved in those kinds of situations?

00:27:05

#60M: The dispute would be settled by our [family] and another wealthy family--though there were many other families. They settled the disputes between warring parties. They enforced good discipline as they were responsible. At times it was our [family] and at times it was the other [wealthy family].

Q: How old were you when Chinese first came to your area? When you first saw Chinese people in your area, how old were you?

#60M: When [the Chinese] first appeared, it was just prior to the loss of [our] country. Our house was large and there was another family nearby who was equally rich like us. There were two other families who were rich, but they did not pay huge taxes like us or the other family nor did they own large areas of land. The Chinese formed an army camp. They did not immediately start to mistreat us.

Q: Did the Chinese arrive and settle in those four houses?

00:28:28

#60M: No, no. Yes, they settled in those four houses. They always arrived in the night and filled the place. The next morning if one thought that there were so many Chinese, all of them would have left in the night. Again the next day if one thought that there were no Chinese, [they] filled the place in the night. The riot had already taken place in Lhasa. The Chinese did that in Lhasa, the place where His Holiness the Dalai Lama lived. It filled [with Chinese].

Q: *Ama-la*, how old were you then?

#60M: I was about 15 years old then.

Q: When you said that the Chinese camped in the four richest houses and one of these was your house, what happened to you? Where were you sent? Where was your family sent?

00:29:59

#60M: We were in our home. As a wealthy family, there were many homes [rooms]. There were porches and many other [rooms]. [They] stayed there and in Tibet we used dung for firewood and they paid good money for dung, hay and feed for the horses. They came today and left the next day. They came the day after and left the following day.

Q: What was it like to live in the house with all these other Chinese people? What was the atmosphere like in the house?

#60M: [We] thought that this was not good.

Q: And then?

00:31:09

#60M: And then His Holiness the Dalai Lama left. It was in '59 that the Buddha left for India. And then they [the Chinese] started to cause suffering.

Q: Now before His Holiness left for India, while they were camping in your house, how did they behave towards you?

#60M: Initially [they] did not do anything. They were Chinese soldiers and did not cause any suffering. They did not even talk to each other, ate their food and left. Again [they] arrived and left. That was it. Then the Chinese that caused us suffering settled there permanently with interpreters. Not many came to the village, maybe one or so.

Q: So you noticed a big change after His Holiness left Tibet, yes, in the attitude of the Chinese towards the Tibetans?

00:32:56

#60M: After the Buddha...Then [they] started to cause us suffering. A lot of meetings were called, but they did not take place in our village. All the [people] of every village were summoned to assemble at one place across the river. Just like we have nine camps here, Nyero Thoe was like that. [People] were summoned at the place where there was a private [estate]. He [estate owner] had already been taken away by the Chinese. He was the *kugno* 'title of address for government official' like the Settlement Officer here and had been taken away to jail by the Chinese. Everyone was ordered to assemble at his place.

Q: What happened at these meetings?

#60M: After the meetings were called, all the three fathers were taken away.

Q: Who?

00:33:58

#60M: The three fathers that we had. [They] summoned all the fathers of the wealthy families. We might call it a picnic; they were invited guests. They were asked questions, "How much land do you own? How many sheep? How many yaks?" All the belongings of the home were documented. "What work do you do?" By work they meant following the advice of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and performing labor tax to the Tibetan Government.

Many meetings were called and [the Chinese] assessed the strength of yaks and sheep of every family. All the fathers of Nyero Thoe were summoned to the place of the official like the Settlement Office we have here and their wealth assessed to find out who was richer. Lands were assessed and documented. [I] do not know for how many days, perhaps it was six or seven days that they were assembled.

And then our family was grouped among the wealthy category, one among the richest families—like a target to cause suffering. One of the fathers was released while two were kept there. The prison was sort of relaxed. They were interrogated during the day and shut up somewhere in the night. They ate their own food at a certain place.

Q: Were you able to see them?

00:36:27

#60M: [Speaks before interpretation is complete] The youngest one was released because he had lesser responsibilities. The middle one and the older one were jailed.

Q: Were you able to meet the two fathers?

#60M: [We] were allowed to meet them at times but not much. [We] could see them but were not permitted inside. They were in what we would call a relaxed prison. They were kept freely, but people were not allowed to speak to them. We lived close by to them, like from here to Camp Number 6 or 7.

Q: How long were they kept in this situation?

00:37:20

#60M: They were kept for a long time and interrogated constantly. Then they [the Chinese] subjected them to *thamzing* ‘struggle sessions.’ They did not beat the younger father or the middle one that much or bring him outside. The older one was subjected to a lot of suffering. He was made to sit with his head down and the people were called to gather for a meeting. A lot of talks went on. The Chinese said to some of our poor people, “You have been subjected to a lot of suffering” and they [the Chinese] forced them [the poor people] to do [*thamzing*]. It went on for a long time and some of them beat [the prisoner]. Such things were carried out about 11 times.

Q: Were you told to attend this?

#60M: [Speaks before question is interpreted] Then after about 11 times, they [the prisoners] were grouped in twos to indicate that they were hand in hand in oppressing [the people]. They were tied and sent to Gyangtse under which district we lived. Other than when called to attend meetings, we did not go there.

Q: Did you attend the meeting when your father was subjected to *thamzing*?

00:38:55

#60M: Though [we] were told to come, my mother...[Begins crying]

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Can you ask her if she wants to take a break?

Q: Shall we stop?

#60M: No, do not stop. And then mother could not walk on account of *lung* ‘disease of the assembly of wind, bile and phlegm.’

Q: Did your mother attend?

00:39:48

#60M: Mother was there but she stayed home. Though told to come to the meeting, [mother] was unable to walk. [We were] ordered to attend the meeting though.

Q: What had happened to your mother that she was not able to walk?

#60M: She was filled with anxiety when they [husbands] were taken away and on account of something like *lung*, if she went outside, [she] would faint.

Q: So no members of your family had to witness the *thamzing*?

00:40:43

#60M: [We] were ordered to attend and not given the chance to stay back.

Q: And did you go?

#60M: We did not have any freedom and were forced to go.

Q: Yes?

00:40:51

#60M: [I] attended. I was a little older and there were two smaller siblings [at home]. I was about 15 years old then and 16 when we left [for exile]. One of them [the siblings] was about 12 and the other—there was a gap of two years [between] each. They were younger and did not attend. But I was summoned and not left alone by the *u-yon* ‘Tibetan leader appointed by the Chinese.’ There was no freedom.

Q: *Ama-la*, did you attend?

#60M: Yes, I did.

Q: None of the others attended?

#60M: The others could not attend. The other two were children.

Q: When you went to these meetings, was the whole village there?

00:41:53

#60M: They assembled. All the people were ordered to attend the meetings. It was just like we have nine camps here and are called to attend meetings at Camp Number 3. There were some [poor people at the meetings] who were good and spoke nicely. They were allowed to shout. There were others who beat them [the prisoners] a little. They had been misled by

the Chinese. Some did it with the thought of [obtaining] wealth. Everybody is not equal. Some thought of [obtaining] wealth.

Q: The Tibetans who were participating in the *thamzing*, did you know them personally?

#60M: They were our relatives or people of our village. They were never allowed to mix with us. There was another wealthy family like us and we were allowed to talk to each other. [We] were banned from having any interaction with the majority of the people, not even to speak to them. They [the poor] were also being mistreated by the Chinese and told, “They are wealthy because you made them so.”

Q: Did it shock you to see people who you’ve known all your life and who had had previously, you know, good relations with your father and your family suddenly acting in this way?

00:43:58

#60M: Yes, I was shocked. Whether they were our relatives or anyone, when the Chinese ordered that they cannot mix with us, there were a few who treated us badly though majority of them did not. [They were told] “You cannot speak to them. You cannot go to their homes.” Even if the relatives wished to, they were never permitted to have any contact with us.

Q: And when you saw these people in the village, you know these people who’d been involved in *thamzing* of your father, when you saw them after that, like you would not interact at all. Would they just sort of ignore you, like how would they respond to you?

#60M: [We] were not even allowed to speak to each other, no interactions. The other wealthy family and ours could converse. Our two fathers were sent far away and the doors of our house were sealed, meaning that one could not touch them. They [the Chinese] allotted us with two rooms. Even though [we] owned many rooms, [we] were not permitted to use them—just these two rooms and some grains. In Tibet grain was the main [food]. Even though we owned a flock of sheep, we were given only 16 or 17. The rest of our things were...All our belongings...After the fathers were sent to prison, [our house] was locked.

Just before autumn of 1959 began, the standing crops in [our] fields were distributed to the poor. We were left with two plots of land and the rest was given away. The case was similar with the other [wealthy family]. That year the standing crops were given away and then around the 9th month, all the belongings were distributed. All the household belongings, sheep and yaks were given to other people, including cows of which we owned many. We were not allotted any cows except a donkey and a small *dri* ‘female yak.’ That was the case with us and also with the other one [wealthy family].

00:46:50

Then in the year ’60, though we had no interaction with them, our relatives secretly told us in the night, “Everyone, whether rich or poor, are planning to go to exile. Your father and uncle are not here—though the younger one is there. Do not stay like this when the whole village is leaving. You should start out tonight.”

Those people who were responsible for carrying out the reformation as ordered by the Chinese were present [in the house]. The door of our house was huge and when opened, it made a “bung” sound. It had to be shut with force and it went “bung.” So the three children were left outside the house that day. That night the escape was cancelled and [we] stealthily crept back into [the house] and they [the Chinese] did not know it. Whether it was the protective deities that saved us, they did not know of it.

[The people] sent the yaks away that night along with the things. There were 16 or 17 families that left, including our relatives who’d advised us, “Do not stay back for you’ll be made to suffer a lot. Your fathers are not here. Let’s go to exile.” There were our junior father and mother—mother was very ill because of the *lung*. She could hardly walk. The youngest brother [husband] was also greatly affected. I was 16 years old and the other [siblings] were 14 and 12. We were not able to carry anything. Thankfully, they [the relatives] led us. Three of us came with them.

00:48:38

They [mother and uncle] faced a long delay as when one of them was able to emerge [from the house], the other could not. Some fled through the fields and others through routes where one could ride on sheep. After about two weeks, our parents went one way and we the children took another route and we became separated until [we] reached Bhutanese territory. I was told that father was sentenced to 11 years in prison and the other father was sentenced to 9 years. Then we escaped.

Q: So on the journey out she got separated somehow from the rest of her family? That’s what she meant when she lost them?

#60M: The three children were together [and became separated] from the younger father and mother. Mother almost died lamenting, “I do not have the children’s fathers and now the children, too.” We became separated. There was a large river and they had started out around dusk.

Q: Who?

00:52:04

#60M: The parents and a lot of other people. The whole village was leaving. They were together.

Q: In the night?

#60M: Yes, in the night. They arrived at the huge river around dusk and managed to cross it by riding on yaks. Had we journeyed straight ahead that night, nothing would have happened, but we took the other route. There was a place where there were many willow trees. We took the route through it. Had we taken the other route that night, we would not have been carried away by the river.

The next night—I was somewhat small and when we did not hold hands, got washed away but [I] did not die. My two siblings were able to cross the river at a shallow part, but some

of us were washed away by the water, not being able to hold hands. All those who were carrying children on their backs drowned. There were people of our village and some were [our] relatives. They brought us along with them. [We] did not meet [our parents] for about 15 days until the border of Bhutan.

Q: Wow. Wow. So you got washed downstream and how long were you being washed down this huge river for?

00:54:19

#60M: [I] cannot recall how long [as] I was deep in the river. I do not know how far [I] was washed downstream. I was 16 then. I had no idea, but [I] found that we were still holding hands, me and another person. [I] think the relatives carried the two children [siblings] on their backs and took them [ashore]. They were fine.

Q: *Ama-la*, who were you holding hands with?

#60M: There were many relatives when we escaped. I have no idea who it was when I was being washed downstream. When we reached there [the bank], the two children [siblings] were crying.

Q: They had already reached there [the bank]?

00:54:54

#60M: Yes, and saying that *acha* ‘older sister’ was missing.

Q: Did you know how to swim?

#60M: I was led forcefully [in the water]. Someone held [me] by one side. The children’s feet could not touch [the bottom of the river] and water entered their mouths. When [I] reached the bank, [I] was told that [I] spit out a lot of water. They placed [me] face down and [I] threw up water.

Q: Did that happen to you?

00:55:33

#60M: Yes. They told me, but I have no recollection of it. We continued our journey that day itself. There was an old man who the people were unable to take with them. He had been washed downstream and looked like a mad man. I too cannot recollect, but as a child [I] recovered faster.

When [I] looked at his face, it was completely swollen. He used to graze sheep since long and perhaps [the others] thought he knew the surrounding and left us together. They had fled [ahead] fearing capture by the Chinese. We made our way together. I asked the old man who was distantly related to us, “Uncle, where do we go now?” He spoke strange things.

Q: Did the man’s son drown in the river?

#60M: His son did not drown. He was himself in the water for a long time and his belly was filled with water. One of their daughters was drowned in the river. Three [women] with children on their backs were washed away then.

Q: When you were being washed downstream initially, when this happened, had you been trying to cross just walking or had you been on an animal or on a boat or what happened?

00:57:44

#60M: There were no boats. Normally the river was small when there was no rain. It was like at the source. It had rained and the water level had risen immensely. It was nighttime. Had it been during the daytime, one could have crossed where there was less water. It was nighttime and a person who was distantly related to us, held a donkey which was heavily laden, with one hand. The donkey was washed to one side and the man to another. The rope which became loose dragged us along. This was what [I] learned later as I did not know of it then.

Q: So how was it like then to continue the journey without your parents?

#60M: [Speaks before interpretation is complete] The parents were not there but the relatives brought us along. There were many relatives. The sibling who was two years younger to me could walk. I held him with one hand and [the other sibling] with the other hand and after walking for a night, it was safe for us to journey even during daytime. We were given brown sugar candy and dried meat for the stupor one suffered on account of [taking in too much] water.

Q: Who?

00:59:35

#60M: By those that had not drowned in the river. Being children, [we] became well. Then instead of hiding, [we] journeyed during the day and crossed the mountain pass. [The relatives] were familiar with the pass. There was one family who said they were scared to travel in the day and went into hiding and planned to go in the night. We were not afraid and crossed the pass in the daytime. High up there [on the pass] was a nomad. [We] reached near him and then there was so much rock that one did not need to walk. If you did this [makes walking gesture], it took you right down there. [We] came that way. [We] could cross the pass in one night. The pass was close except for the river. One could cross the mountain pass journeying for one night from our village

Q: Once you'd crossed the mountain pass?

#60M: Once you'd crossed the mountain pass, you were in Bhutanese territory. There was no [danger].

[Discontinuity in video. The following statement is taken from the interpreter's English translation]

After we came there, a Bhutanese soldier came looking for children, for three children whose parents had already reached there about a week back. And then we met our parents there.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Looking specifically for them?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Yes.

Q: Can you describe what it was like to meet your parents and see your parents again after this such difficult journey?

#60M: [I] was happy and sad and cried a lot. Mother was sort of ill or something. [She] was like crazy.

Q: Did you think that perhaps your parents had died and not made it?

#60M: They [the escaping people] had mentioned that a child and his parents had been washed away. They spoke about it a lot. The younger siblings were not aware of it as I did not tell them. I thought that my parents had been washed away and was extremely worried. I did not tell my younger siblings. The relative that took us along was a close uncle. He treated us very well but nobody is like your parents.

I wondered a lot, “We three siblings will go there [to Bhutan]. Our two fathers are left behind in Tibet and [cries] our parents are dead.” I listened [to people talking] and heard them mention something about a child. They would not reveal it to [me]. Perhaps they did not think it important to tell children and I did not question them lest they [the siblings] come to know of it. [We] were going to an alien country and I wondered a lot as to how we would do there.

Q: I think you were a very, very brave young girl, really.

00:04:28

#60M: [Speaks before interpretation] Then when we reached Bhutanese territory, it was extremely hot. We had something to eat, which my younger father had carried on his back. I was small and so were my two younger siblings and mother was ill. Bhutan is a country with a very hot climate. The younger father became very ill when we reached there. He suffered from diarrhea. One night [I] think he drank some *chang* ‘home-brewed beer’ as Tibetans love to drink it. Children, adults – every Tibetan suffered from diarrhea and many died. The three children, mother and younger father [were sick] and then [younger father] passed out blood. There were no good doctors in Bhutan and no one helped the Tibetans. At around dawn, [he] called my name and asked me to bring some water. He was passing out blood.

There were some Tibetans who had been living there [in Bhutan] prior to the invasion of Tibet. Since we were well-off in Tibet, we had fine ornaments on us and they [the Tibetans living in Bhutan] were good to us. They might have thought [of owning the ornaments], otherwise why would they be good to us. Mother did not feel any loss over the ornaments

and sold them cheaply. I too did not feel any loss. And then the younger father passed away on account of the heat. They had given him *chang* and pork. [I] heard that raw pork is very harmful during fever. Mother was ill and so were the three children. The younger father passed away there. He was worried over his brothers. He passed away there.

01:07:56

[He] was taken to a hospital by our companions. He was not dead when he left [for the hospital]. The Bhutanese hospital was not good. [I] heard that he was given an injection and [he] opened his eyes. After the second injection he passed away. I was not able to go there and the two siblings were too small. They brought the body and our relatives helped to do the necessary [burial ritual].

The Bhutanese caused us a lot of suffering telling us to go away and there were no Tibetan officials to take care of us. The Bhutanese did treat us [badly] though they were good later. Then they let us go to a place which was cooler. Tibetans did not die in this place, otherwise many Tibetans used to die. Around two people died everyday.

Q: How old were you when you got married?

#60M: [I] was 26.

Q: Where were you when you got married? Where you here?

01:09:37

#60M: [I] was in Bhutan.

Q: So how long did you stay in Bhutan for then, long time?

#60M: For about 20 years.

Q: Wow.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: There was a settlement in Bhutan.

Q: Why did you leave Bhutan?

#60M: We are the newcomers in Camp Number 9 here. They wanted everyone to take up Bhutanese citizenship. That was the reason that this happened to us. Actually taking up citizenship was fine as it is similar to other foreign countries. They ordered that [we] should not have any contact with the Tibetan Government.

Q: Oh, really? That was the condition of citizenship. So your husbands were Tibetans, right—not Bhutanese?

01:10:58

#60M: [They] were Tibetans, not Bhutanese.

Q: Well, this is such an amazing...

#60M: [Interrupts] We were brought [to Mundgod] from Bhutan by the Tibetan Government. [We] were 1,500 in number. Some people left for Rajpur [Uttaranchal] and others are in Camp Number 9, which is the camp for newcomers. “Newcomers” but it’s been 30 years here. [Laughs]

Q: So how would you compare life in India to life in Bhutan?

01:11:51

#60M: Earning a livelihood was easier there because one could do some trading and farming. One did not need to travel far. One could do farming in the settlement and leave it in someone’s care and go to trade in the capital.

Q: I just want to ask you one question about the effect of Chinese policies in your village. I mean, how would you describe how the influence of the Chinese and what they were doing in your village affected the harmony of social life in the village? How would you say it affected the harmony of social life?

#60M: The change that occurred was that the Chinese [told the poor], “They became rich because [they] have made you suffer.” This was created by the Chinese. It [affected] not just us, but the entire wealthy community.

Q: What did they say was the reason for them becoming wealthy?

01:13:17

#60M: They said that they [the poor] had been forced to work [by the rich], which made them wealthy. [Laughs]

Q: Do you think this was true?

#60M: That was true.

Q: No, I mean...

01:13:40

#60M: It was not true. We worked hard ourselves and became rich. Now-a-days the rich sweater traders offer high salaries [to hired help] which are given in advance. [The hired help] spends the money he receives in advance. He is in a bad situation. Poor people spend the money in advance and are yet to do the task. We were not like that. We stood on our own feet and performed our work ourselves. It was like that. The other rich family was also like that. The fathers and mothers of rich families did not sit idle saying that they were rich. The children too worked because in Tibet, it was only the very wealthy who could send them to school, let alone the poor.

Q: Is there anything else that you’d like to tell us?

#60M: No. [Laughs]

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Rebecca, ask about her father and uncle.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Oh yes, that's right. I did have a note to ask about that.

Q: Do you know what happened to your father and your uncle after they were released from prison?

01:15:10

#60M: After they were released, one of them was able to meet us after his release.

Q: Which one?

#60M: The younger one. [I mean] the middle one.

Q: Did he come to Bhutan?

#60M: Yes.

Q: Then?

01:15:28

#60M: Then [he] narrated that they were not given good [enough] food though [they] were not beaten much [in the prison]. Tibetans had very large mugs in the early days called *choesinyiden*. [To the interpreter] Do you know about it? You do not. It was a large mug like [we have] these days; a mug with a handle, which holds about half a kilogram. *Tsampa* 'flour made from roasted barley' was mixed with water and a mug full of this [gruel] was given once in the morning and evening.

They were left hungry for long durations and forced to do a lot of work. Some [prisoners] remarked that if one did a lot of work, one would be released sooner. So they worked hard and died in that way. [They] were locked up in the night and forced to work in the day. Our younger [middle] father was very ill and looked dark. Perhaps his innards were spoiled. [He] lived for about two years and passed away. He'd been in prison for nine years.

Q: Father?

#60M: [That] was the younger father. Father had been sentenced for 11 years and we had come away a long distance. [He] may have passed away in the 70's. He had been dispatched far away to Lhasa, which the younger father told us. [He] may have passed away in the 70's.

Q: Did he pass away in the prison?

01:16:58

#60M: Yes, [he] passed away in prison. [They] were given very poor food. Sometimes [they] were given a huge quantity and they ate a lot and died. At times [they] were not given any food and were so hungry that [they] did not think about the children or wives or relatives. The only wish was to eat some food. Other than that [they] had no other thoughts. That was how those who were imprisoned in '59 suffered and died.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to share with us?

#60M: That's about it. [Laughs]

Q: Did you bring anything with you out of Tibet that you still own?

01:19:21

#60M: [I] do not have many such things. I was given away in marriage, so I do not have such things. [My] parents were extremely anxious and sold everything in Bhutan. [I] do not have any household belongings. The family into which I was married was of good caste but not rich. [They] were middle class. [They] were neither poor nor rich and did just okay. It was like that.

Q: Have you told your story to your children?

#60M: I do tell my children. [I have] a younger child, who never used to earlier, but now asks a lot of questions. [I] have five children.

Q: What was it like to talk about everything that happened today? What was it like for you?

01:20:59

#60M: Nothing happened to me. [I] have suffered in Tibet and [I] thought [I] should relate it. The suffering is what really took place and [I] have not spoken any lies. I feel that this will help the cause of Tibet in the future. One can see such things on the television.

Q: I need to ask you one more time. If this interview was shown in Tibet or China, would this make any kind of problem for you?

#60M: There will be no problem. What [problem] will there be? They [the Chinese] cannot take us there. [Laughs] There will be nothing like that. It would be best if you can show it in China. They will think, "We have done this." [This story] is factual. There are no untruths. I would not relate that we suffered if they had not subjected us to it. [This story] is factual and there'll be nothing [no problems].

Q: And what you said about being shown in China, that's exactly what His Holiness wants to happen and everyone's going to try their best to make sure that that does happen.

01:22:51

#60M: That is right. [I] was interviewed long ago. [I] do not know if it was the Tibetan Government or someone else and [I] recounted the same story. [I have] related it once.

[I] was asked to come and did not know that it was to speak about one's own experience. Someone had interviewed [me] a long time ago. At that time, I did not know that it was to [speak] about my own experience.

People say something about debates which take place these days and I thought it might be something like that. [I] told them that [I] did not have anything to say. If it was about one's own experience, there is no problem in relating it. This would help the community as [I have] not recounted about sufferings that were not perpetrated by the Chinese. His Holiness the Dalai Lama's advice is the Buddha's word. What a lot of difficulties he has undergone!

Q: I hope so too [that it will help the cause of Tibet]. Is it okay to use your real name?

#60M: Yes, it's okay.

Q: Okay, thank you so much. It was really a pleasure to talk to you. Thank you.

#60M: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW