



Why the Dalai Lama escaped to India

Interview with Mr Tempa Soepa

Tekchen Choeling, Dharamsala

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On March 31, the Dalai Lama reached the Indian border in Tawang district of what is today the State of Arunachal Pradesh. A new life as a refugee was starting.

*What are the circumstances which lead to the 'escape of the century'? **Claude Arpi** travelled to Dharamsala and met Mr Tempa Soepa who had been intimately linked to the events as a young officer who helped coordinating the escape. Unfortunately for him, he did not make it with the Dalai Lama's party and was arrested. He spent the following 20 years in a Chinese gulag under the most atrocious conditions. Today, though retired, this very discreet man works in the Private Office of the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala.*

Translation: Ms Norzin Dolma

CA: Mr Soepa, tell us what is your background, when were you born, when did join the Tibetan government?

TS: I am born in Lhasa region and I joined the Tibetan Government at the age of 19. From the age of 8 to 10, I studied in a private school then I went to a Government school [which prepared the students for civil service]. At that time I was a monk, it was at the end of 1952.

CA: The Chinese had just arrived in Lhasa at that time?

TS: Yes

CA: The two Tibetan Prime Ministers Lukhanga and Lobsang Tashi were dismissed soon after dismissed. Could you explain why?

TS: They were dismissed in 1953. [To give you a background], a 17-Point Agreement signed between the People's Republic of China and the Tibetan Government in 1951. In this Agreement the Tibetan economic system will was not to be altered. However, after a short period of time, because of the pressure of the Chinese troops who arrived in Lhasa, there was a huge impact of the Tibetan economy [starvation].

[As a result] the Tibetan people started having meetings and writing petitions to the Kashag [Tibetan Government] as well as to the People's Liberation Army (PLA)'s authorities saying that Tibet has always been independent and that the PLA should return to China. The Chinese believed that this public outpouring was instigated by the lay and monk Prime Ministers, Lukhangwa and Lobsang Tashi.

Because of this alleged involvement of the two Prime Ministers in the public outpouring against the Chinese, there was a tremendous pressure on His Holiness [the Dalai Lama] to dismiss the two Prime Ministers. Though in the 17-Point Agreement it was clearly stipulated that the power and status of the Dalai Lama would not be changed, due to the pressure of the occupation authorities to change the status quo, the Agreement was de facto violated. This action [to force the Dalai Lama] to dismiss the Prime Ministers was contrary to the status quo promised in the Agreement, regarding the function and status of His Holiness.

Because of the influx army, there was a tremendous increase of the price of the grain. In the early 50's, the cost of a khel [approx 15 kg] of grain, was 14 gormos [Tibetan currency]. In 1959, it had rocketed to 200 gormos. You understand that this economic pressure created a lot of resentment against the Chinese authorities.

CA: In 1954, did you accompany the Dalai Lama to Beijing?

TS: Yes

CA: What was your first impression of Communist China?

TS: At that time, I felt strongly that Tibet was backward because of its policy of isolation.

CA: Other members of the delegation felt like you?

TS: The majority of the delegation felt like this. I gathered from discussions with my friends that it was the general feeling, Tibet was wrong to remain isolated. It was not correct to block the development. That was our feeling.

C: Were they indoctrinated by the Chinese and Bapa Phuntsok Wangyal, the first Tibetan Communist who was a senior member of the Communist Party at that time?

TS: We used to have informal discussions with Phuntsok Wangyal. We knew about his strong Marxist leanings; in our conversations, Wangyal always said that Tibet need to change, you can't keep the status quo. There is an incident that I remembered very clearly: one day we had a Chinese hotpot [a single Chinese dish in which everybody help himself]. We all said that we like the hotpot, then Phuntsok Wangyal made a remark: "Today, you all like this Chinese hotpot, but are you sure that the Tibetans will continue to like this hotpot in the future?" It was clearly a message that [today you like the 'reforms', will you continue to enjoy them in the future].



CA: Did you understand the meaning at that time?

TS: Not only I understood, but it has remained cleared in my mind till today.

CA: Do you mean to say that for someone like Phuntsok Wangyal, his tibetness and his love for Tibet was not incompatible with Marxism?

TS: Already at that time, Phunsok Wangyal was a strong nationalist, but he also believed that Tibet needs to develop. On this point, we agreed with him, but we did not agree on the way [Marxism] and the fact that Tibet should be under China. We differ on the process.

CA: Did you hear that Mao had asked the Dalai Lama why he had not hoisted the Tibetan flag in his Guest House in Beijing?

TS: During the high level discussions between His Holiness and Mao, I was not present. It must have happened during one these encounters.

CA: Did the situation started deteriorating soon after their return from China in 1955?

TS: In Central Tibet, there was no immediate deterioration other than the economic situation that I already mentioned (i.e. the price of the grain). When we came back to Lhasa, we further had the impression that Tibet was [materially] backward compared to China.

CA: What about the other provinces of Tibet (Kham and Amdo)?

TS: In 1955, when we returned from China, we travelled through Dartsedo [the Sino-Tibetan border town]. While His Holiness was resting in Dartsedo, there was a rumour that many Tibetans were affected by an infectious disease in a nearby area. As these Tibetans wanted to meet His Holiness, I was asked to go and enquire if this was true and this [could be a danger for His Holiness]. I went there secretly. I went to the market place and I enquired with a local Khampa businessman. The Khampa thought I was Chinese because I was well-dressed. He told another Khampa: "This is a Chinese speaking Tibetan" and he refused to reply. It was already clear at that time (1955) that there was a strong resentment against the Chinese presence in Tibet.

CA: How did the situation worsened to end by an uprising in March 1959?

TS: Even the people of Central Tibet, did not like the Chinese who had forced their entry into Tibet. The 17-Point Agreement had been forced under duress [the seals were forged]. Thereafter, the clauses of the Agreement were violated by the Chinese. With the deterioration of the economic conditions, all this lead to a lot of resentment and this lead to the March 1959 uprising.

CA: Tell us what happened in March 1959?

TS: What precipitated the events which ended by the uprising was the invitation by the Chinese authorities for His Holiness to attend a theatre performance. This invitation was very sudden.

Later, rumors circulated that His Holiness himself had wished to attend this performance, but this was not true.

A month earlier, on the occasion of the Tibetan New Year, a Cham [monastic dances] performances was given at the Potala. It was attended by the representatives of India, Nepal and China. At the end of the Cham, the Chinese officials told His Holiness that they would be very happy if he would accept to attend a theatre performance. His Holiness said that he was busy during the next few months (by the Great Prayer Festival and other commitments) but later he could certainly attend, but not the near future. This shows that it was not in his [immediate] plans.

One month after this incident, on March 9, 1959, a Chinese representative came to extend the invitation once again. This time the invitation was for the next day, March 10.

The commandant of the Bodyguard Regiment was invited to the Chinese Army camp and was told that the next day, His Holiness would be coming [to attend the performance]. When the Chief of the Bodyguards checked, no arrangements had been made to receive the Dalai Lama. It was just an empty hall. He was further told that instead of the 10/15 security officers, he should only have 1 or 2. Further these 1 or 2 security should not carry any weapon. Usually also, the Army would be deployed on the way between His Holiness Palace and the place to be visited. This was also not allowed. All this arouse suspicion.

There were some other factors. In 1956, some 'democratic reforms' processed were initiated by the Chinese in Kham region and during this process, several lay and religious leaders disappeared after being invited

to performances or 'cultural events' by the Chinese. This of course increased the suspicion of many Tibetans.

We also had heard that in some newspaper published in Tibetan in Kham (in Kartze) by the Chinese authorities, the monk community was denounced "the yellow robbers and red thieves". The people of this region who had taken refuge in Lhasa had heard all sorts of stories like this. The National People's Congress was to be held in Spring 1959 in Beijing; and people felt that His Holiness would be abducted and taken away after the theatre performance and forced to attend the proceeding in Beijing. All this incidents and rumors resulted in creating doubts and suspicious and this ultimately led to the March 1959 uprising.

CA: Did you accompany the Dalai Lama on his escape?

TS: I was one of the officials secretly working on the escape of His Holiness. We divided the party in three groups. The first group consisted of His Holiness' mother and elder sister. His Holiness and high officials were in second group. The third group consisted of His Holiness' two tutors and three ministers. I was in charge of the preparation for this group.

CA: All the ministers were informed of the escape? What for example about Ngabo who had collaborated with the Chinese?

TS: Ngabo was not informed, but three other ministers were informed and escaped to India. I came back to Lhasa and it is how I ended in the Chinese gulab (he laughs about it).

CA: How did you coordinate with the Khampa guerrilla?

TS: The Chuchik-Gangdruk (the Tibetan guerrilla) was not involved when the preparations were made in Norbulinka. Those involved were some government officials and the two regiments of Bodyguards and Drapchi. They took oath not to speak about the preparations. The guerrilla had nothing to do with the preparations.

It is only when His Holiness arrived in the Lhoka region (south of Lhasa), that the party met the Khampa soldiers of the Freedom Fighter Volunteer Force. If you see pictures of the Khampas with His Holiness, they were taken later on the escape route.

However it is true that representatives of the 2 regiments had gone ahead and informed the Khampas of our arrival. However the inner ring was assured by Drapchi Regiment, the second ring by the Bodyguard Regiment and the Khampas were only the third.

Some may say differently today, but the important fact is that His Holiness managed to escape safely. It was a great victory for us all.

CA: When was the Government of India informed of the Dalai Lama's departure??

TS: On March 17 itself.

CA: But Nehru informed the Parliament on March 23 that he did not know what was happening, only vague information had been received?

TS: I know for sure that the GOI was informed on March 17 itself.

CA: The Chinese have celebrated March 28 as the 'Emancipation Day'. The serfs would have been emancipated this day when the Tibetan government was dissolved and a puppet administration installed. All seems a lie. Is not the March 1959 movement on a contrary a 'mass' movement?

TS: It is not only a lie, but it is also politically motivated. The Chinese have the habit to make provocative actions which in turn makes the Tibetan people react to express their feelings, their resentments. Then the Chinese have an excuse to crack down heavily on the Tibetan masses. Like this year, the Tibetan had decided not to celebrate Losar [Tibetan New Year]. The Chinese decided to force them, this lead to more resentment and at the end the Tibetans cannot hold themselves. If the Tibetans protest, they are arrested, beaten or tortured. These actions from the Chinese authorities [to force the Tibetans to do what they want] are politically motivated.

CA: Do you feel that it is a sigh of weakness from the part of China?

TS: It is. The Chinese propaganda about the Serf-Emancipation Day' is a total lie. Take what happened in [March 2008], it occurred not only in the Tibetan Autonomous Region, but all over [traditional] Tibet. The majority of those who participated belong to a new generation who has never known 'old' Tibet. But their feelings are so strong for the Tibetan cause that they participated to the demonstrations. The Chinese always speak badly of 'Old Tibet', but compare the so-called old system with the present one. At that time, , there was only 2 prisons: I visited myself at that time. In these prisons, there were only 10 to 15 prisoners, now there are prisons all over Tibet; in Lhasa region only, there 5 prisons and thousands of prisoners in each. Their propaganda is contradicting the reality.

CA: After 50 years, how do you see the future of Tibet?

TS: For the Tibetan cause, until and unless major changes happened inside China, it is difficult. But changes have started taking place inside China and this is inevitable. The Tibet issue will be solved through these changes.