

Compte-rendu

Thupten Tenzin, translated by Pema Thinley and Mathew Akester, *Escape from Tibet: The Experiential Life Story*, New Delhi (privately published), 2024. xv+300 pp., incl. 43 ills.¹

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E*scape from Tibet: The Experiential (sic) Life Story* is an autobiography by Thupten Tenzin who fled Tibet in 1959 while he was a monk in the Namgyal Monastery in the Potala Palace, now a retired photographer and filmmaker who has lived in Norway since 1964. His ability of storytelling never fails to grip the reader's attention, whether it is his everyday life in the village where he was born, his becoming a monk in the prestigious Namgyal Monastery, his description of life in the Potala, his perilous flight from Tibet to India, or his perseverance in learning, taking him to different places in India and eventually to Norway where he settled, worked as a professional photographer, and, together with his wife Lobsang Pelmo, raised their children.

The book has so much to offer, including detailed information of the lifestyle of the monks and the celebrations of special occasions before the uprising in March 1959 against the Chinese rule. His description, so rich in detail of life in Tibet as a village boy – not to mention the dramatic unfolding of the last days in the Potala palace, besieged by the Chinese army– as well as of the early years in exile, sets it apart from most other autobiographies written by diasporic Tibetans. It is an important book, not only for scholars, whether historians or social anthropologists, but for anyone who is interested in Tibet and Tibetans – all readers will benefit from the author's detailed observation throughout his life of people and places, in Tibet as well as in exile.

The book is divided into six major chapters, each being further divided into subsections. The first chapter is about his childhood in a village near Lhasa. The second chapter is about his life in the Potala Palace from he was a little boy until he becomes a monk in Namgyal Monastery, while the third chapter describes his perilous escape from Tibet and his early life in exile. In the fourth chapter he recounts his continued life in exile, this time in Europe – from UK to Switzerland, before finally settling in Norway in 1964. The fifth chapter covers his

¹ First published in Tibetan by Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, Dharamsala, 2011, with the title *mThong thos myong tshor lo rgyus*, vol. 28 in "Oral History Series", xvi+534 pp., incl. 54 ills.

traveling to Nepal in 1973 where he filmed the activities of the Tibetan guerillas who, from their base in Mustang, continued to mount raids against the Chinese in Tibet. The final chapter is about his life in Norway and the Tibetan community there, as well as an account of the Norwegian supporters of Tibet.

The book accordingly begins with his early childhood in a small village in Mar in Tölung, where was born in 1938. Although his account is based on his memories as a little boy, the interdependence between nomads, farmers, and other people in the village does give a credible picture of a stable community. It also provides descriptions of some social practices I have not heard of before. For example, he writes that the evening before Losar, when everyone having given lump of *tsampa* which was then rubbed on the body and thrown into a container to ward off evil, surprisingly, the otherwise peaceful Tibetans at that moment would not only light firecrackers but also fired their muskets in the air (p. 12).

In 1947 the author joined the renowned Namgyal Monastery at the age of 9 after his mother died. His historical information is not about lofty political decisions and intrigues – on the contrary it is about the preparing of meals and tea for the Dalai Lama's quarters and monk officials – the mundane life of the palace kitchen and Potala dairy (*dzomo-ra*). He writes that the *dzomo-ra*, including their animals, was moved from the palace to the monasteries near Lhasa as the Dalai Lama moved (p. 29). Nowhere else can one find information such as that the palace kitchen owned 30 milch *dzomo*, two sturdy bulls, two horses and a mule to carry water for cooking, and two stable hands (p. 24). The preparation of the Dalai Lama's food was done with utmost care and was kept separately. Since they did not possess a watch, the cook counted out loud instead. Moreover, the room where the Dalai Lama's yogurt was curdled was called *solwa-khang*, and no women were allowed to enter it (pp. 28-29). This must involve the concept of *drip*, 'pollution', and when associated with women, it is their menstruation that pollutes people, place or thing.

Another interesting passage is the description of the Shölpa Lekung, the police station and prison in Lhasa, at the foot of the Potala Palace (p. 26). As a little boy, he was allowed to watch the interrogation of thieves and other culprits by officials. The prisoners were not interrogated verbally but were whipped until they confessed. The author describes the prisoners; some being shackled while others were put in chains in the prison courtyard. To defecate, bringing their own chamber pot, they had to climb a ladder passed down by the guards. They were also made to recite prayers together with the monks who were imprisoned after the revolt in Sera monastery in 1947. However harsh their conditions were, there were also special days when

prisoners – except for the most dangerous ones – were sent out in pairs, unguarded but shackled, to the Lingkor and Barkhor streets in Lhasa to beg for alms. By evening, they all returned (pp. 26-27).

Thupten Tenzin's eye-witnessed description of the procession accompanying the Dalai Lama on his visit to the great monasteries of Sera and Drepung, with the excited people, organized according to their rank, waiting to get the Dalai Lama's blessing, makes one feel one is almost in the middle of the crowd. He writes that after the procession, marching tunes, composed in great secrecy, were played by the different army regiments, competing with each other while returning to their camps (pp. 31-32). On that day, roads were cleaned and marked out with lines of whitewashed stones, with people wearing their finest clothes, officials and monks dressed according to their rank, and "horses fitted with golden saddles bearing the Dalai Lama's personal effects, including the golden seal box, draped with covers of ancient Mongolian brocade" (pp. 29-30). Another important fact one learns from his book is that a female oracle, the "Tenma", is one of the main protectors of Drepung Monastery. He writes that Drepung monks used to say, "The Tenma knows it all!". Although her oracle was of high rank, she was, however, was not allowed to stay in the Lingkor (p. 36). Although a detail, it can be of interest to the social anthropologist or the historian.

Another fascinating fact that drew my attention is how everyone in the Potala participated in maintaining the security of the palace. Everyone, from top to bottom, was checked and allotted a place in the hierarchy. At the bottom rung were sweepers and door keepers, who were supervised by housekeepers, who in turn took their orders from the palace bursary. At around 7 or 8 in the morning these housekeepers made an inspection tour of the palace, carrying lanterns and ensuring that the staff were doing their jobs (p. 50). The door of the monastic quarters was locked from the inside at 7 in the evening and keys passed on to the head monk inside, so that the inspector did not need to enter the monks' quarters. In the morning, they beat a small drum three times calling, "Is the keeper of the monks' quarters at the post?", which was then affirmed by the second call, "Be on watch for fire and theft", followed by a third call at the backdoors. Finally, after the inspection they beat the drum again by the entrance of the kitchen and called, "Be on the watch for danger of fire and theft in the palace from the top to the bottom" (p. 50). Such inspections probably contributed to the Potala palace remaining unharmed through the centuries.

In the description of *dob-dob*, who are normally believed to have been widely feared, they become normal and likable people who respected their elders, who cared about their distinctive dress, and

gave great importance in maintaining their long hair. Thupten Tenzin writes that they "kept long beards and their dob-dob hairpieces must have been at least 20 centimeters long. Each had a red protection cord tied around his right arm. A proper dob-dob cultivated and combed his hair piece with great care and attention" (pp. 32-33).

The author's following statement suggests that trust between the Tibetan officials from Lhasa and the local chiefs at the beginning of the Chinese infiltration could have maintained Tibetan independence. He states, "During his [Ngapo's] time in Kham, Lhalu had maintained good relations with the local chiefs, and if the army and the local people had joined forces to secure the territory they might have succeeded, since the Chinese were not able to carry enough arms and supplies to support their large army" (p. 57). However, one senses that even after the Chinese had entered Lhasa, the monks in general had no understanding of the seriousness of the situation until it was too late. Even with the large Chinese garrison stationed in Lhasa, the author indicates that there was no sense of emergency in the Namgyal monastery.

The yearly rituals, picnics, and games continued as usual, as for example the kite-flying in Lhasa in the eighth month of the lunar calendar. The kites were brought from India, and it seems to have been the game of boys and young monks. The author writes that although kites were brought from India, the strings become Tibetan, when boys "...crush broken glass and porcelain and mix it with glue, which was boiled to produce a paste called nak". Applying this paste to the kite string could make one a winner by cutting the string of a rival's kite (p. 92). However, "Those who did not wish to duel could attach a long tail which meant it could not be attacked" (ibid.).

Chap. 3 (pp. 97-177) begins with a dramatic account of the March 1959 uprising. The author not only witnessed the Tibetan uprising in Lhasa but also, while still in the Potala Palace participated in armed resistance to the Chinese army until the situation became completely hopeless. He is surely among the last Tibetans still alive to bear witness of this momentous and tragic event in Tibet's history. The monks and lay people who took up arms to protect the Potala Palace soon realized that their situation was hopeless when the Chinese army started shelling the palace. The dire situation he and the others in the palace faced shows how poorly prepared the Tibetans were in the case of an armed conflict with the Chinese (pp.101-110).

The author's flight from Lhasa was unprepared, amongst the sound of artillery, gunfire, and the nauseating smell of gunpowder. He, a monk, fled his monastery, not in his red robes but in military dress, with a British carbine, 200 bullets, and some Tibetan money (p. 112). He describes a moment during his flight from Lhasa which makes

reader feel the pain of the Tibetans. Having got a piece of dry yak meat, he writes, "No matter how much I chewed on it, my mouth was dry, and it felt like trying to swallow a lump of wood". The last thing he sees of Lhasa was the cloud of smoke billowing from the Ramoche area (p. 114).

Many know that the Dalai Lama and the Lhasa government consulted the Nechung oracle before fleeing Tibet, but ordinary monks, too, consulted an oracle about whether to stay back in Tibet or to flee in the footsteps of the Dalai Lama. This shows the importance of oracles in Tibetan society at the time. Thupten Tenzin writes that his uncle, who was a monk in the Namgyal monastery, together with other monks, decided to consult a *tsen* spirit, its oracle being a woman. The spirit told them to leave as soon as possible to catch up with the Dalai Lama (p. 119).

We learn from his autobiography how the Tibetan guerrillas, the Chushi Gangdruk, not just fought against the Chinese, but also provided a safe passage for Tibetans on their way to exile. For instance, Alo Dawa, who was the commander of the guerillas' camp at Samyé, escorted a Tibetan minister, Kungo Taring, all the way to the Indian border. The Chushi Gangdruk base in Lhoka was a meeting point for many people fleeing from Lhasa (pp. 122-126). The book provides another interesting fact, which historians have generally missed, viz., that among those escaping to exile there were also some Chinese who had sided with the Tibetans. He even writes that a Chinese who fled from the Chinese army camp at Nortö Lingka reached the Tibetan headquarters at Drapchi, eventually joining the Chushi Gangdruk and getting a Tibetan name, Lobsang Tashi (p. 131).

After crossing the Indian border, Tibetans in exile faced harsh conditions in the beginning. Having arrived at Tawang on the Indian side of the Tibetan border, seeing Chinese who had fled along with them successfully begging for *tsampa*, the author writes, "Considering *tsampa* was rarer than gold by that point, I was impressed by their begging skills" (p. 141). He also writes that the Tibetan silver *tamka* was still in use as currency in Tawang (p. 143). Although Tawang was part of India, the Tibetan refugees seemed not have felt as strangers because it was the birthplace of the sixth Dalai Lama Tsangyang Gyatso (1638-1706) (p. 143). He gives a detailed account of his stay at Tawang, and his subsequent journey to where he was admitted to a Tibetan school in India (pp. 138-166). These are interesting personal details not just fascinating for the general reader, but also for historians and scholars interested in the early period of the Tibetan diasporic community.

Realizing what a drawback it was not have learned a foreign language growing up in Tibet, Thupten Tenzin not only learned Hindi,

but also English (p. 153). Soon he was chosen by Mrs. Rinchen Dolma, popularly known as Ama Taring, who came from one of the aristocratic families in Lhasa, to be sent to England (p. 161). His account shows how Tibetans in exile, although scattered, with the help of their leaders were able to use their limited resources in improving their situation in exile. After having studied in the Tibetan Mussoorie school, the Tibetan Education Department sent him to England in February 1963 as an assistant to Kungo Drupok Wöser Ngawang to escort 22 Tibetan children who had been accepted to live and go to school in the Pestalozzi Village in Sussex (pp. 171-174), originally built for displaced European children after the Second World War. At the airport they were received by the headmaster, Spencer Chapman, who had stayed in Lhasa for six months in 1936-37, along with many journalists from television and the press – a contrast to the reception of refugees today (p.174).

In 1964 Kungo Pala sent Thupten Tenzin to Norway as a Tibetan teacher for 44 boys who were pupils at a specially established school there (p. 179). As it turned out, Norway became his new home, and the author sheds his personal light on the history of Tibetans in Norway. The history of the Tibetans in Norway, known popularly as the “Gjövik Boys”, thus named after the small town of Gjövik where the school was located, some 100 kms north of Oslo, is largely unknown. He introduces the reader to people in Norway who had worked since 1963 to establish this school, such as the famous radio host Lauritz Johnson, then known throughout Norway (and fondly remembered by the boys) as “Uncle Lauritz”. The author later became a photographer with the help of Mr. Johnson and other Norwegian families. In meeting the boys, Thupten Tenzin told them, “...the most important thing was to keep good relations among themselves, have high regard for Tibetan culture, and that if we were together there is nothing we could not achieve” (p. 181). His words also reflect how Tibetans and non-Tibetans feared the loss of Tibetan culture and religion. The author’s autobiography shows it was the hard-working Tibetans and their leaders under the Dalai Lama, with the help of many non-Tibetans, that made the Tibetan exile a success story, to the extent that the social anthropologist Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf referred to it as *The Renaissance of Tibetan Civilization* (1990)².

In Chap. 5, the autobiography contains an extremely interesting account of the Tibetan guerilla fighters based in Mustang in northern Nepal on the border to Tibet, especially of commanders such as Gyado Wangdu. His account of his travel to Mustang in 1973 to make a film

² von Fürer-Haimendorf, Christoph, *The Renaissance of Tibetan Civilization*, Oracle, Arizona, Synergetic Press, 1990.

on Tibetan guerillas fighters, sheds light on the personal life of these fighters at the time, and their desperate attempt to continue the armed resistance. There was a moment when the author and one of the fighters, Drayab Gyapön, were waiting for the former's camera and other equipment, and the former said, "What is waiting 17 days? ... We Mustang guerillas have waited for so many years for independence" (p. 211). These words reflect the anguish – and at the same time the resilience – of the last Tibetan guerrilla fighters. Even when the USA ceased providing aid, they maintained their mission by starting carpet factories, handicraft centres, shops, hotels, and transport operations (p. 219). One reads about the daily lives in the camps of these fighters (pp. 227-231). I think it is his experience of having himself fought against Chinese together with his contact with the guerilla fighters in Tibet while escaping, that must have inspired him to make a documentary film about the guerillas in Nepal.

All in all, this is a rich book full of important and fascinating information about life in Tibet before 1959 and life in exile during the subsequent years. It is perhaps rare to have such a detailed autobiography with the names of a great many of those whom he has met in the course of his life. By writing his autobiography, Thupten Tenzin has shown aspects of Tibetan history that might otherwise have been consigned to oblivion. As indicated above, *Escape from Tibet, The Experiential Life Story* has been published privately. However, this is a book that deserves to be widely read. One must therefore hope that it will be reprinted by a well-established publisher who recognizes its unique value and importance.

