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Preserving the Stories of Tibetan Elders

By Lou Fancher



The Dalai Lama is never far from the thoughts of Marcella Adamski, Ph.D., shown here at her desk in the Tibet Oral History Project's office in Moraga. Photo provided by the Tibet Oral History Project

The Dalai Lama looks on as Marcella Adamski settles into an office chair to talk about her life and the Tibet Oral History Project that has taken over an entire room in her Moraga home. Beaming from photographs sprinkled amid books, artwork and iconic sculptures, images of the holy leader serve as a reminder of the vital work she performs.

In 1999, Adamski, a clinical psychologist, was working with the Tibet Justice Center, an organization helping Tibetans to establish a government in exile after fleeing their country following the 1959 Chinese invasion. After interviewing 64 children, she asked the Dalai Lama what more could be done.

"He said, 'Make sure the people of China know about Tibetans because they do not have access to accurate information,'" she recalls. "It seemed so overwhelming and fearful. It was not my field and it was bigger than anything I had ever done."

Charged by the Dalai Lama with rescuing Tibet's rich cultural and historical heritage, Adamski relied on a lifetime of experience to create, fund and organize the Tibet Oral History Project (TOHP).

"I grew up handling my younger brother, who had suffered brain damage at birth," she says. "It enabled me to be with people who were compromised in various ways."

Blessed with stamina and an uncommon degree of equilibrium in challenging environments, Adamski's work followed what looks, in retrospect, like an inevitable path.

Arriving from the East coast in 1973, she was hired by the Berkeley and Oakland libraries to create and implement a project aimed at an underserved population of her choice.

"I selected the elders with restricted mobility, who could not have access to library services. I was given this huge, 26 foot-long Chevy step van, \$100,000 dollars, and one year to spend it," she says, her voice still tinged with amazement.

Shopping sprees filled the van with books and videos, using up most of the budget. The remainder, a small \$300 fee she managed to negotiate with a designer from Walter Landor & Associates, was used to place a logo on the van.

"Unfortunately, the van looked like an euthanasia pick-up [vehicle], so I had to do something! I was driving up to nursing and rest homes, after all," she laughs.

The outreach project meant she often fell into conversations with elderly people who had suffered the trauma of relocation, if only from their homes to an assisted living facility. She became fascinated with similar populations around the world.

And it was at this time that the disparate strands of her life wove themselves into the fabric of Tibet. She designed an interview process to capture the disappearing stories of Tibetan elders.

Gaining permission to enter the refugee camps in India was complicated. Locating the 70 and 80-year-olds who had lived in the country prior to the invasion, especially amid the 25,000 people living in the camp, was nearly impossible. And requesting permission to talk about injustices suffered at the hands of the Chinese was a delicate operation.

"I would sit down with the camera going and a translator there. I'd say, 'Tell me about life when you were a child: What do you miss about Tibet? What exciting things happened to you?'" Adamski remembers.

The first stories would be about riding horseback, fresh cream from yaks, and dressing up for religious festivals. These were followed by confusing tales of Chinese soldiers claiming to help and offering to "liberate" their communities. And then the accounts would move from mysterious to horrifying: entire villages slaughtered and piles of bodies burned beyond recognition.

The resulting 120 videos are now compiled into a collection. The Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, University of California at Berkeley, Stanford University and soon, the U.S. Library of Congress, hold the entire set of transcripts and DVDs.

Two publishers have expressed interest in publishing a book on the project.

Most significantly, Adamski has heard from young Tibetans responding to blog postings and the project's website. They express gratitude for TOHP's preserving the language, culture and customs of their homeland's common people: the farmers, yak herders, artisans, salt traders and monks who are often overshadowed by more illustrious figures.

Adamski is currently working to raise \$30,000 needed to return to India.

"The window is closing. We have maybe five years to be able to talk to people who can say, 'With my own eyes, I saw this,'" she says.

If she is successful, the Tibetan people will recover their past; filled with love of family, spiritual values and a strong commitment not to harm living beings. And Adamski, immersed in the project and toiling under the smiling face of the Dalai Lama, will return his gaze, happy to have completed her mission.

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