



Shadow Circus

A Personal Archive of Tibetan Resistance (1957–1974)

A project by Ritu Sarin and Tenzing Sonam in collaboration with Natasha Ginwala



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After the Communist Chinese invasion of 1950 and its subsequent takeover in 1959, Tibet has been a country under occupation. Since then, resistance to Chinese rule, both inside Tibet and in exile, has been unyielding and resilient, transforming over time in response to the changing situation in China and the shifting winds of geopolitical alignments. But little is still known of the guerrilla war that was fought from the mid-1950s to 1974 when thousands of Tibetans took up arms against the invading forces of China.

In the early 1990s, filmmakers Ritu Sarin and Tenzing Sonam started to research the story of Tibet's armed struggle, a movement that became entangled in global geopolitics when the CIA got involved. They were inspired by Tenzing's father, the late Lhamo Tsering, one of the leaders of the resistance and the key liaison between the Tibetans and the CIA. Serving as Chief of Operations, he oversaw the activities of the resistance and at the same time, maintained an incredibly detailed archive of photographs, documents, letters, and maps.

The CIA's involvement in the Tibetan resistance started in 1956, at the height of the Cold War. Codenamed STCIRCUS, it was one of the CIA's longest-running covert operations until it was abruptly abandoned in the late 1960s. The resistance collapsed in 1974 when its last stronghold on the Nepal-Tibet border was shut down by the Nepalese army. For reasons that have to do with both the clandestine nature of the operation and the fact that Tibet's armed struggle sits uncomfortably with contemporary narratives of the non-violent nature of the movement, this episode has languished in the forgotten corners of recent Tibetan history.

The exhibition, SHADOW CIRCUS, is an attempt to unshackle and shed light on what anthropologist and historian Carole McGranahan calls, "arrested histories of the Tibetan resistance army". It re-evaluates the audiovisual material that Ritu and Tenzing gathered over the years, along with Lhamo Tsering's personal archives, and includes a re-edited version of their 1998 documentary – The Shadow Circus: The CIA in Tibet – to create a more complete and complex mosaic of this still largely obscure story. The Cold War epoch is navigated within a third space, as an uneasy alliance beyond geopolitical power blocs to examine forms of intelligence gathering, guerrilla warfare and clandestine resistance deployed in the service of an unfinished freedom struggle that continues to resonate today.

PERSONAL NOTES BY TENZING SONAM

I was born in January 1959 in a hospital in Darjeeling, the well-known British hill station located close to the border with Tibet. My mother was alone when she gave birth. My father had left home a few months earlier on a work trip and she had no idea where he had gone or when he would be back. When he returned some months later, all my mother gleaned from him was that he was engaged in a secret activity that was connected with the worsening situation in Tibet. Throughout my childhood, he disappeared for long periods. It was only many years later that I discovered that my father was a key figure in the Tibetan resistance.

At the time I was born, he was being trained by the CIA in spycraft and guerrilla warfare in the US, first at a military installation in Virginia and then at Camp Hale, a top secret facility high in the Colorado Rocky Mountains. Gyalo Thondup, the Dalai Lama's elder brother, was instrumental in initiating contact between the resistance and the CIA and my father was his closest aide and confidante from their student days in Nanking. Thondup had entrusted him with the task of coordinating operations with the CIA. The CIA code-named the Tibet operation ST CIRCUS. Over the next few years, around 250 Tibetans were trained at Camp Hale. Recent refugees from the armed pushback against the Chinese in Tibet, the trainees immediately fell in love with the place, which, with its high mountains, thick forests and alpine meadows, reminded them of their home.

They nicknamed the camp, Dumra – The Garden. These men would be instrumental in conducting secret operations inside Tibet and maintaining the armed resistance from exile. At Camp Hale, the Tibetans were given common American names like Pete, Rocky, Lou (my father's was Larry), and during their training, they could only address each other by these monikers. They were taught radio operation, guerrilla warfare, intelligence gathering, photography, parachuting, and lessons in geography, mathematics, and political science. They had art classes, which were designed for psychological assessment purposes, but which the trainees took to with pleasure. Many of them loved to draw and created several charcoal and crayon drawings that recalled their homes and the traumatic events they had recently fled from. The CIA took advantage of their artistic skills to create numerous propaganda cartoons that were disseminated both among the exile community and in Tibet to keep morale high and maintain public sentiment against the Chinese occupation.

In 1974, I was 15 and in boarding school in Darjeeling. One morning, as I scanned the headlines of the daily newspaper pinned on the school bulletin board, my eyes were drawn to a small headline: TIBETAN LEADER HELD IN NEPAL. The leader was my father. I was shocked and perplexed. Why had he been arrested? Why was his name being mentioned in connection with 'Khampa rebels'? As far as I knew, my father worked for the Tibetan Government-in-exile and had an office in New Delhi, which was why he was often absent from home. A few days later, my mother came to visit me and I learned the details of my father's arrest and the true nature of his work.

My father, I found out, was the Chief of Operations of the Mustang Resistance Force, a guerrilla organisation based in the remote and barren kingdom of Mustang in northern Nepal that juts into Tibet. Soon after escaping to India in 1959, Andrug Gompo Tashi,

the leader of the resistance in Tibet, and Gyalo Thondup drew up plans to find a fresh base of operations from which to launch a new front. Mustang was selected for its geographical proximity and similarity to Tibet, and the fact that its people shared the same culture and traditions. Andrug Gompo Tashi appointed a trusted Chushi Gangdruk lieutenant, a former monk named Bapa Yeshe, as commander of the Mustang Resistance Force. My father was given the responsibility of taking operational charge and serving as the liaison with the Americans. His role involved not just spending long periods of time in Mustang, taking care of administrative matters and planning guerrilla raids and intelligence-gathering operations inside Tibet, but regularly reporting to his CIA counterparts in Calcutta.

My father once described to me the cloak-and-dagger nature of these meetings: "If we needed to update them or receive money for expenses, we had to go to Park Street at a specified time and hold a newspaper in our right hand. They would locate me. It was normally near a Chinese restaurant called Park Restaurant, on Park Street. They would come at around 9:00 am. I would have the newspaper in my right hand. I would then get in the car. We talked while driving. I reported the updates and handed them various documents. In return, I received funds and instructions for future plans. We then set up the next meeting, its location and time. We exchanged the items in hand and the location. Then they dropped me back on the side of the road. For longer meetings, they used a safe house."

In December 1980, I was a student in Los Angeles when I received a telegram from my sister. It said: "PALA RELEASED 28TH DECEMBER ARRIVED DELHI 29TH MET HIM AND AMALA". Reading that telegram in the azure, unreal light of a Californian winter, alone, far from home, I imagined the excitement and relief of my family, especially of my mother, who had worked so hard to support us during my father's long incarceration. My father was now free. He and his five compatriots had been granted amnesty by the Nepalese king, their life sentences reprieved after serving nearly seven years in prison. Following his release, my father served as a minister in the Tibetan Government-in-exile and became a respected elder statesman in the community. He began work on writing an account of the resistance, drawing upon the material he had diligently archived over the years. The eight-volume history, entitled simply 'Resistance' in Tibetan, was edited by the scholar Tashi Tsering who worked closely with him, and was published by Amnye Machen Institute.

My father died in a New Delhi hospital in January 1999. I think about his long journey from the borderlands of northeastern Tibet where, even in his childhood, Tibetans were already swamped by Chinese settlers, to his unlikely transformation as a freedom fighter in exile, a cause to which he devoted his entire adult life. He had last seen his village in the late 40s but even five decades later, its contours remained so sharply etched in his memory that he could map it perfectly. Like many Tibetans of his generation, his lifelong dream of returning to a free homeland remained unfulfilled, but his legacy – and that of the thousands of Tibetans who took up arms and fought for independence – remains an integral and indelible part of Tibet's continuing freedom struggle.