

## **“The minute I open my eyes my workday starts.”**

### **A visit to the Tibet Bureau-Geneva**

I am standing in front of the Tibet Bureau-Geneva (or Office of Tibet OoT). It lays in a bustling area of the city, surrounded by restaurants and shops. At the door, I tap the code to enter the building and then take the elevator to the 3rd floor. Around the corner of the elevator, I see a very narrow door and a sign on which I recognize the endless knot. Before I can read the lettering on the sign, the door opens. A team member of the OoT greets me warmly, introduces herself as Kalden and invites me in. I follow Kalden to the upper floor of the office and sit down at the conference table where tea, water and croissants are provided.

Already for fifteen years the OoT Geneva is based in these premises. Temporarily, the Geneva location was abandoned in favour of Zurich until the office was moved back again to Geneva in the 1990s. Founded back in 1964, the representative office was one of the first OoTs ever. Only the offices in New Delhi and Kathmandu were established before in 1960. Today, there are twelve Offices of Tibet worldwide, spread across six continents. The OoTs are the official agencies of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the Government in Exile (Central Tibetan Administration - CTA), based in Dharamsala, India. The Tibet Bureau-Geneva represents the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Government in over 20 countries in Central and Eastern Europe and is thus the office with the largest jurisdiction in terms of the number of countries.

Meanwhile, the team of three – Kalden Tsomo, Tenzin Choesang and Thinlay Chukki – has gathered at the table ready for our talk. In the beginning, I am introduced to the main tasks the team fulfils. And this in advance, there are many of them: They organize the visits and travels of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and representatives of the CTA in the countries under their jurisdiction. They provide administrative assistance to the Tibetan communities, by helping to provide any sort of certification of Tibetan origin or by facilitating the receipt of visas for India. Furthermore, they support the preservation and promotion of Tibetan culture, religion, and language: For example, through the established weekend classes “*Sanjug lapta*” (which literally means weekend school) where Tibetan language and basic human values of Buddhism are taught, or through the handwriting competition that takes place once a year in Zurich for the Tibetan Community of Switzerland and Lichtenstein. Another important task is to raise awareness for the Tibet issue. The OoT Geneva informs and seeks support from governments, parliamentarians, international institutions, and NGOs. Especially, they liaise with the United Nations, to place the Tibet issues in UN Human Rights Council sessions, for instance to make sure that specific cases of torture and disappearance are filed. As a general mandate, they also seek funds for education, health and other social developmental projects for Tibetans in India, such as for hospitals and Tibetan schools. In all these tasks, the relationship and welfare of the Tibetan community in Europe is always in the foreground for them. “Currently we have strong ties with the five major Tibetan communities under our jurisdiction, the ones from Switzerland-Liechtenstein, Germany, Italy, Austria, and Czech Republic. But our main aim is to have good connections with all the countries under our jurisdiction. Through that we can also deepen the communities’ ties with the CTA.” Thinlay Chukki elaborates.

In individual conversations, the three then tell me about the professional paths they took before taking the job in Geneva, and what motivated them to choose this path. After high school, both Kalden Tsomo and Tenzin Choesang directly entered the CTA as civil servants. To enter the CTA this way, demands sitting through an exam; the written and oral tests the knowledge of the political history of Tibet, Tibetan and English language skills and much more are tested. After passing the test, one is then assigned to a post based on the test results. Kalden explains eagerly: “Already when I was

a child, my motive from the advice and the guidance of my parents was always to join the CTA. But I was not sure which position to pursue, all I wanted, was to be a part of the Central Tibetan Administration, because this is our main body, bringing all the Tibetans together.” From her first day at the CTA Kalden has been heavily involved in monitoring human rights violations inside Tibet. Working closely with former political prisoners and reading the testimonies of victims of torture helped her to have a broad understanding of the situation inside Tibet. At the Tibet Bureau Geneva she is, thus, responsible for everything that has to do with advocacy work for Tibet in the UN and across Central and Eastern Europe. “When a new year starts, it is very important to us that we have a look through the UN calendar, to check when China is sitting for the next review, which committee will be reviewing the China report – this is an important task and responsibility of mine.”, says Kalden.

In Choesang's case, too, it was her parents who had moved and inspired her to take up this profession; they themselves were also civil servants. “It is already my 17th year working for the CTA.”, says Choesang with a smile on her lips. As an accountant and auditor, she has been working for many departments of the CTA – in the office of audit general, in the department of home, in the department of education. Choesang explains: “The CTA has all the departments that regular national state governments have under them, too, you know?” I nod attentively, another piece of information I was not aware of. For one year now, Choesang is the account officer of the Tibet Bureau-Geneva, she prepares the budget for the upcoming year, keeps track of all the accounts, and besides that she handles all the India visas.

Thinlay Chukki, today the Representative of His Holiness the Dalai Lama in Geneva, has taken a bit of a different path. A landmark decision for her early career was made when she was still a child. “When I was little, my father would always get these special audiences whenever His Holiness came to town, because when he was still in Tibet, *Pala* (Tibetan word for father) was part of the personal security guards of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. During these audiences, His Holiness would give the advice to build good relations with the local Indians and to build a supportive community. Therefore, my father decided to send me to an Indian school, instead of a Tibetan school.” In school she learned the local language and was thus able to act as a translator for the Dalai Lama on several occasions. After receiving her masters degree from National Law School of India University in Bangalore, she worked with the largest automobile manufacturing company in India (TATA Motors), and headed their legal department for South India for almost five years. Throughout, she was translating and giving *pro bono* legal advice to the Tibetan community and would always be there for protest marches. “Hand on the heart, I always thought I was doing my due. But then in 2016 – it was the time when there were so many self-immolations in Tibet – on the 29<sup>th</sup> February there was this 16 year old boy who self-immolated in India, and that really shook me. I was sitting there in my airconditioned office, working on my corporate matters, and thinking that I am doing enough for the Tibetan movement. I could not grasp why a young teenager living in a free country, who had his future ahead, would self-immolate. That sort of really questioned my entire existence.” So, she decided not to sit back anymore, applied for a scholarship to study at Harvard Law School, where she focused on international law. After Harvard, Thinlay joined the CTA. From 2019 to 2021, she was the Special Appointee for Human Rights at OoT in Geneva and once back in India she received the calling for her present job. During our conversation, Thinlay seems to travel far back into her past; for her, as well, her parents' approaches to life and ethical values were highly formative. “My parents never went to school; they never had any sort of formal education. But, they were very particular in ensuring that I attended all the classes in school. In their eyes, the aim of education was never to

earn money or have a better life, but always to get educated and learn enough to then serve the Tibetans and most importantly His Holiness.”

### **A matter of service, passion, and commitment**

During our conversations, cell phones ring constantly, the postman brings parcels and letters, I let my eyes wander over the office desks and see how files are piled up there. So, I am very curious to know what a normal working day looks like at Tibet Bureau-Geneva. “For me the office starts the minute I open my eyes in the morning.” This is a sentence that I get from all the three of them. Since the day in Dharamsala starts ahead, 3 hours and 30 minutes in advance to be exact during summer, the first thing they do after waking up is check their phones for important e-mails from the Central Administration that need urgent response. The office phone starts ringing at 8 o’clock in the morning, because someone needs a document or wants help for the visa to India. When the three sit down at their office desks around 9 o’clock, they first organize their thoughts, run through their work list, and look through all the things that have been pending from the day before. Then they check the news about Tibet, perhaps a new report has been released. Afterwards, the whole team meets and discusses where decisions need to be made together, tasks can be managed within the team, and where intervention from Thinlay is needed. In the morning the urgent business is done and, in the afternoon, Thinlay and Kalden sit down to draft either reports, briefings, or advocacy papers or attend advocacy meetings while Choesang devotes herself to the account figures. The office should close at 5 o’clock in the evening, but it rarely comes to that, typically it gets closed around 7 pm. Briefly summarized: Weekdays are spent in the office in Geneva. But that is not the end of the story; Saturdays and Sundays are mostly also occupied as they visit Tibetan Communities all over Europe and attend programs for the Tibetan community.

“After the office closing hour, I have a small supper and get back to work again. Because we have very limited capacity the day does not end at 5, sometimes it ends at 12 o’clock in the night.” summarizes Thinlay in an unagitated manner. I could already guess the long working hours, but here my jaw definitely dropped. “I often get the question, ‘don’t you feel burnt out from your workload?’”, Thinlay continues. “My usual answer is, this is not work for us, if it was only a work for livelihood, then of course nine to five would be more than enough. But this is service, our contribution to the Tibetan movement. Had it not been for our passion and our total commitment we have for our work, we would have burnt out long ago.” Kalden agrees with Thinlay’s work ethic and besides does not see the big challenges of her everyday work in the long office hours either: “The challenge with working in this position is the content with which one is confronted. For example, when I have to read the testimonies of former prisoners and victims of torture. Going through many painful reports makes me somehow convicted to this issue. That is why I tell myself every day, as soon as I start looking at my pending list, I am fortunate for being alive today and I am able to complete my pending list – that makes my day a little lighter.”

### **The Green and the Blue Book**

"What else?" I ask toward the end of a three-hour long conversation. “We would like the readers to know about the Green and especially the Blue Book” says Kalden. This is what you need to know: The governing members of the Tibetan Freedom Movement convened their preliminary General Assembly in Dharamsala on July 30, 1972. One of the landmark decisions was the tabling and passage of a resolution pertaining to the procedures for payment of Chatrel, a monthly voluntary contribution to the Central Tibetan Administration by all Tibetans. Tibetans contributing Chatrel are issued a Green Book. This book has over the years in effect become the identity pass of the exiled

Tibetans to claim their rights from the CTA. Today, it is used for school admission, school or university scholarship, and employment within the exiled community. Next to that, the Blue Book was introduced as an aim of garnering support and solidarity for the just cause of Tibet from people of all walks of life. This initiative enables friends of Tibet to make annual financial contributions to help support the various educational, cultural, developmental and humanitarian activities of the CTA. Blue Book holders receive regular updates on Tibetan issues. Anyone who is interested, can download the application forms on the website of the OoT Geneva<sup>1</sup>.

After such long and intense conversations, our stomachs growl. Back in the busy alleys outside the office, we head around the corner to an Italian restaurant. "It's our favourite one" Thinlay tells me and walks ahead with a quick step. During lunch, a casual conversational ping-pong sets in: We talk about their (then still upcoming) travel plans to the Czech Republic – a visit to meet with local Tibetans as well as Czech parliamentarians, and a ground preparer before the visit of the Sykong. But we also exchange ideas about Italian food and French cheeses, and finally end up with a reading suggestion about Tibetan literature. "Have you read 'The Dalai Lama's Cat' or 'The Power of Moew'?" – These will go directly on my book list.

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*Boxes with profile pic, name, position, and statement*

THINLAY CHUKKI

Representative of His Holiness the Dalai Lama (started this post in July 2022)

*"At 13 years of age, I took part in my first protest. I still remember those elderly Tibetans; they barely could walk and still they marched the rally with so much passion. This left a lasting impression within me: If they could go to the protest with their walking sticks, I should do everything in my possibility to contribute to the Tibetan struggle. When I am standing in front of the UN these days, glancing at the broken chair, I always get flashbacks to this rally. This memory gives me the strengths to say "YES TO TIBET!", yes to the Tibetan movement!*

*And to You, dear readers, of all the movements and causes that you could support – the world is groaning under its burdens at present – you chose Tibet and for that I am extremely grateful. The Tibetan movement symbolises, a quest for justice, a quest for freedom and for being recognized as human beings. We have many more miles to go, but with your support we will reach our collective goals, and surely, we will be able to breathe the free air of Tibet."*

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KALDEN TSOMO

UN Advocacy Officer (will complete her fourth year of service in September 2022)

*"It is really challenging to see the expansions of China, its economic interest in Tibet, its repression of our people. This perspective can easily feel overwhelming. But living in a country where I have the right to speak out about the Tibet issue, I feel it is my duty to do so. What would be the use of a voice, if one does not speak up for the once that cannot use their voice? I say, "YES TO TIBET!" because I have a voice and I use it to raise awareness for the struggles of our fellow Tibetans in Tibet. The teachings by His Holiness the Dalai Lama guide my way of thinking and how I navigate through these challenging times."*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.tibetoffice.ch/green-book-form/> and <https://www.tibetoffice.ch/290-2/>

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TENZIN CHOESANG

Accountant Officer (one year in position)

*“Committing to “YES TO TIBET!” means doing something good, something good for your own karma.”*