

Interview of Khuan Sareaun

A: Interviewer: Leng Theavy

B: Interviewee: Khuan Sareaun

Summary of the Interview

Khuan Sareaun was born in Batheay district, Kampong Cham province, and is the youngest of eight siblings. In this compelling interview, she recounts a harrowing childhood incident where her father rescued her from their burning home after an American military bombardment on their village.

Seeking refuge in a nearby pagoda, their respite was short-lived as her father was tragically apprehended, torn from his family, and executed before his family was able to say goodbye. In this interview, she describes enduring the horrors of the Khmer Rouge and assuming the role of caregiver for her ailing mother after witnessing her siblings being taken away and murdered. Despite her dark childhood, she reflects on the life she has painstakingly built after Pol Pot's reign of terror, finding solace and joy in her newfound faith in Jesus Christ.

A: Okay! Thank you for allowing me to come and interview you here today. The date of our interview is September 3rd, 2019, and we are interviewing here in—could you tell us what village and commune you live in?

B: I live in Boeng Snay Village.

A: And commune?

B: Boeng Snay commune, Kampong Cham province.

A: Okay. Could you please tell me your name?

B: My name is Khuan Sareaun.

A: And from the time you were little, have you ever had any nicknames?

B: I'm also called Sareun. [With no 'ua' sound, and just an 'eun' sound]

A: Sareun?

B: Yes, but my name on the official lists is Sareaun.

A: And how old are you now?

B: I am sixty years old.

A: Sixty years old—and do you remember your birthday?

B: I—I don't remember the exact date, but it was the year 1959.

A: And where is your hometown?

B: My hometown was Batheay district, Kampong Cham province. [About 30 miles due west of the city of Kampong Cham.]

A: And when you started a family you moved closer to the city right?

B: I've only been here 18 or 19 years this year. But before, I lived right in the middle of the

city of Kampong Cham, just north of Kizuna bridge.

A: Yes.

B: That was before. Afterwards that they made me move from Kampong Cham to Batheay district, where my ancestors are from.

A: Yes.

B: Yes. I was in Batheay district until the Khmer Rouge, and from then until Pol Pot ended in '79 I was still in Batheay. I just came back in 2003 to Kampong Cham.

A: Yes.

B: And when I came to Kampong Cham, I joined the church, and I've attended ever since.

A: And how many siblings do you have?

B: I have quite a few siblings. I have eight, but during Pol Pot they took and killed four of them, as well as some of my in-laws and my father. They also killed sixteen of my nieces and nephews—in total twenty-five people.

A: And when those four of your siblings died, how old were they?

B: I don't know, maybe 50, or 60—they were fairly old.

A: Yes.

B: I don't know the year they were born, but now those four would be in their 80's. My oldest brother would be around eighty-six, and my second brother about eighty, my third brother would be about seventy-nine, the fourth maybe seventy-five, or maybe about seventy-three.

A: And so, your siblings who died, Pol Pot killed them right?

B: Pol Pot took them to be killed. For one family a single car was enough. There were still four siblings left, but they separated us from each other. Some of them were taken to work in a mobile unit at Phnom Chi, one of my older brothers fled to a different country, while my older sister went to Chamkar Leu [30 miles northwest]. I was alone, just my mother and me. And at the time I was not very old—just a little more than ten years old.

A: And so, what number child are you?

B: I was the youngest.

A: Oh—the youngest?

B: That's right, I was the youngest child.

A: Would you be able to give the names of your siblings, starting with the oldest until you?

B: Yes, I can do that. The first sibling's husband is named Chum Chhan, and her name is Lao Khon.

A: Yes.

B: The second sibling's husband is named Ley Lim, and her name is Khuon Khem. The third sibling's husband was named Douv Ngear, and her name was Khuon Khim.

A: Yes.

B: The fourth sibling's husband is Nit Saroeun, and her name is Khuon Khean. In total 4 people—or including both husbands and wives all together is 8 people.

A: And what about the fifth child?

B: And also, my father—his name is Khuon Lao.

A: Yes.

B: That's all that of them, except for my nieces and nephews. My first nephew—
[Interrupted by a child, audio cuts out and restarts.]

A: So, before you said that you had eight siblings—could you tell me all their names?

B: Oh, before I only told you those that died.

A: No, could you tell me the names of all of them?

B: You want all of them?

A: Yes, all of your siblings.

B: My first and oldest sibling was Khuon Khon; the second, Khuon Khem; the third, Khuon Khim; the fourth, Khuon Khean; the fifth, Khoun Leang; the sixth, Khuon La; the seventh, Khuon Sarun, in Siem Reap; and the eighth is me, Khuon Sareaun.

A: And so, what do you remember from your childhood? Like what kinds of memories do you have with your siblings?

B: I just remember that during the time of Pol Pot, we were destitute. I was with my siblings and we harvested crops. One time I went to herd cows, and when I came back, they had already taken my siblings away to be killed. After that I only lived with my mother—just the two of us. Once, during the Pol Pot [era] I fainted at 7 o'clock at night, and it wasn't until 7 o'clock in the morning before I came to myself.

A: Why was it that you fainted?

B: Because I had nothing to eat.

A: Oh!

B: I only had a single piece of potato, and I didn't dare eat it myself—I left it for my mother. So, I didn't have any food to eat, I just drank water. Sometimes I was able to have some "chrach" [a plant similar to watercress]. I chewed it until I could eventually swallow it. Some days I ate, some I didn't. My district was so tight on food, during Pol Pot. Only one piece of potato, about this long [gestures with her thumb]—that was all they gave us.

A: Yes.

B: So I gave it to my mother, and let myself faint.

A: Oh!

B: After that, in '79, it was a little bit better. It wasn't exactly easier, but it was just that my brothers and sisters came back together and reunited again. I only had four of them left. Right now, I have one older sister left and myself, so two sisters and two brothers, but my

brother became a monk and is still doing that.

A: Yes.

B: He is very old—almost 80 now.

A: Yes.

B: I've just kept working until the end 1989, when I was married at 16 years old. [sic]

A: Oh!

B: Yeah. After I was married, I kept working all the way until 2002 or 2003, when Doxey came from the United States, talking about faith and such. So, I moved here, left behind my house, and sold everything I had and my old house to pay back my debts, and then moved here. I joined the church and have been here ever since.

A: Yes.

B: And I lost any support when I moved here, I had nothing. It was hard to find enough food to eat. When I sold my house, I only had a few thousand left, maybe \$3000, to pay back my debts. We had borrowed a lot. And we had to take care of my mother and mother-in-law. When she got sick, we had to borrow from others, a little from this side, a little from that side, and after a while my debt just kept growing.

A: Oh—

B: And when it just continued to increase, I sold the house, paid everyone that I owed, and was left with empty hands. I had 8,000 left after all my expenses.

A: Yes!

B: Not \$8,000 you know! It was 8,000 in Khmer money! [Laughs] And after that I've been here ever since. I never missed my old home or anything, I only thought about that on Sunday, I went to church. I no longer cared about wealth because I had none left—it was all gone.

A: Yes.

B: And so, I've always just kept moving forward, and now the Lord has blessed us. I have a home, and so my faith in Him is still firm. It hasn't declined because He has given me so much.

A: I'd like to ask you about your childhood—what kind of games or things did you like to do with your siblings when you were younger?

B: My siblings were all much older than me except for my one older sister, so we usually played just the two of us. We only played dice! [Laughs] We played dice until late in the evening, and then we went and herded the cows and came back to play again. The two of us never fought or argued, and now all my sisters have died except for us two. And now—do you know the mother of [Sister] Roth?

A: Um, no.

B: Right now she's in Siem Reap. The Lord has blessed her quite a bit now.

A: And so for the four of your siblings who are still alive, which provinces do they live in?

B: They are all in Kampong Cham.

A: They are all in Kampong Cham—all four of them, right?

B: All four of them. But it's just that the fourth sibling, who is now the oldest one alive, he's a monk right now.

A: Yes.

B: Right. And the second, he is crippled. He's inside on the other side of this wall of my house here.

A: Okay.

B: And the third is in Siem Reap, the mother of Sister Roth. After that it's me, the fourth one.

A: Okay great. I also want to ask your parents. What were your mother and father's names?

B: My father's name is Khuon Lao, and my mother's name is Mov Chan.

A: And so when—and your father, is he still alive or—?

B: He died during Pol Pot—actually, even before Pol Pot.

A: And when he died, how old was he? Do you remember?

B: When he died, he was maybe about 70 years old, and if not, maybe a little older than 60. At the time he was arrested and taken to be killed. I don't know exactly what happened because they came to arrest him in 1970. When they bombed Cheung Prey village, I was alone in the house—my father and mother had gone to harvest in the fields. I don't know where he came from, but it seemed like he ran from Kampong Cham. He ran from where he was to get me from the burning fire. I didn't have a shirt on, just a pair of underpants—I was very young then, not even 5 years old. My father ran to get me and hugged me while he ran to another village—they called it Phnom Vihear village. After we got there, my father slept at the temple and put me on his chest. When I woke up, they had taken him—I still don't know what happened to him.

A: Yes.

B: I was laying on his chest and fell asleep. We've been separated ever since.

A: So, no one knows how he was arrested or what happened?

B: Only that he was taken. When I woke up, I could only cry out for him.

A: Yes.

B: I kept crying out, "Daddy where did you go?" I had never been separated from my father before—everywhere I went, my father had gone with me. Even if he traveled to different provinces, he never left me behind. When I realized that my father was gone, I cried out and my mother fainted.

A: Yes.

B: My mother kept saying to me, "Child, don't cry. They've taken your dad, don't cry. We have to keep going." After that, I walked from Phnom Vihear and rode on a car back to

Kampong Cham, in the year 1970. When we got to 88th street they started to shoot at our car. My mother yelled at me, "Get down!" [and then yelled at] the driver, "Don't stop driving the car. If we stop, we'll die!" But when we arrived in Kampong Cham, they evacuated us from Kampong Cham anyway. [At this point in the interview, Sareaun is very emotional.] I've been separated from my father for so long it's hard to talk about him now. I didn't even get five years—I know so little about him. I remember that when I went to sleep, he asked, "Little girl, what are you hungry for?" I said, "I'm not hungry for anything, dad!" and I poked his nose, and then poked his eyes. He said, "You only play by poking my eyes! Stop that, you're so fussy. Be careful or I'll swat you." I was so quick-tempered, I was angry with him. And when I woke up, I lost him, from then until today.

A: And so how old is your mother? Is she still living?

B: She passed away already. If she were still alive, she would be over 100 years old.

A: Yes.

B: And I'm the youngest, 60 years old right now—

A: And so how old was she when she died?

B: She died in '87—no, she died when she was 81.

A: She was 81?

B: That's right, she died at 81.

A: And so, do you remember what year she died in?

B: She died in '97.

A: 1997, right?

B: Yes, that's right. In '97.

A: And do you know where your father's hometown was?

B: It was the same district, there was only one. All [my family] are from Batheay district.

A: What about your mother?

B: My mother was also from Batheay district.

A: And could you tell me a little more about your father, like what kind of person he was—was he mean or was he kind and gentle?

B: He was very kind and gentle. He knew wrong and right, and when he talked, he sounded like a man from ancient times, like from the time of Jayavarman [an ancient powerful king from the 13th century]. He was also very tall—he was a true Cambodian, but his nose was long and he was 2.2 meters [about 7 feet, 3 inches] tall.

A: Oh wow, that's very tall.

B: His height in the country was only surpassed by [Charles] de Gaulle, who was only a bit taller than him. [My father] was taller than everyone else.

A: Oh—he was very tall!

B: And when I say my father was so tall while I am so short myself, they don't believe me. Our heights are so different. I'm much shorter than him.

A: So maybe your height came from your mother's side then?

B: No, my mother was also tall, but I probably get it from her siblings, who were all shorter.

A: Oh!

B: But my father's siblings were all very tall.

A: And what about your mother—what kind of person was she?

B: I was the youngest sibling, and so she had been old as long as I can remember. She would always meditate, that's all I saw her do. I never saw her labor, but she often attended the pagoda and she also acted as a midwife. She had been a midwife from the beginning but had never had any other jobs. At the end of Pol Pot, about '79, when I lived near 7 Makara, I just took care of my mother. I had to look after her, it was almost impossible to do anything. After the Pol Pot [era] she was always crying and wandering around. She had one husband and four children die, and including their spouses it was eight children. She had 16 grandchildren pass away too, and so 25 people in total, but she didn't even have their bones to keep. So she would always wander around, weeping and crying.

A: Yes.

B: So, I watched over my mother, all the way until she died in '97. We were destitute—we were so poor. When I talk about it, I still hold back a little. It seems like I've been in poverty all my life, but I've never wanted to have property or wealth. [She says looking towards heaven] Oh please don't let me suffer this again, if there really is a life before and after this, please don't make me suffer being separated from my father, separated from my mother and all my siblings.

A: I would like to ask you more about your parents—do you have any more stories you remember, or any more memories you would like to share about them?

B: I only have the story of when they separated us all and my father was taken. My mother and I worked in the fields and cut the forests the whole time during Pol Pot. They took my older brothers and sisters to be killed, and I was left alone, just my mother and me. And my mom was old, maybe seventy years old, or maybe even eighty. She was very old, and I was alone and still very young, not even fourteen years old. After I came back from working, I went out to herd cows and dig for potatoes. After I had four or five of them I would boil them, and I would keep three for her, and only two for myself. I didn't let myself have too many because my mother was crippled and couldn't walk. For all of the Pol Pot [era] she was crippled and stuck at home. It was only when the Pol Pot [era] ended that I was able to go and buy cow fat and other ingredients to boil into a soup and give her some to eat. I put some salve [from the cow fat] on her head and on her knees, and after that she was able to walk.

A: And do you remember the names of your grandparents? Your grandfather and grandmothers?

B: Yes, I remember.

A: So, what was your grandfather's name?

B: My grandfather on my father's side was named Khuon, and my grandmother's name was Phaeng, Khuon and Phaeng. On my mother's side, my grandfather's name was Mov, and my grandmother was Leak, Mov and Leak.

A: And do you know what years they were born?

B: I don't know, I hadn't been born yet. If I try to think about their ages, my father's father would have been born two hundred and fifty years ago [sic]. I can't be sure, because even my older siblings hadn't born yet, and they are already in their 70's.

A: So what do you know about your ancestors? Have you heard any of their stories?

B: I don't think I've ever heard anything. The older generations, like my ancestors, were all from the time of Jayavarman, and they weren't the same as we are. They were very tall and large, all of them 2 meters or 1.9 meters or so.

A: Oh—that's tall.

B: Very tall. But I am not nearly so tall, and so when I tell people they don't believe me.

A: And do you have any relatives living outside the country?

B: Yes, I do. They live in America, in Los Angeles, California.

A: How are they related to you?

B: She is a cousin of mine. She was an only child—one of my mother's younger siblings had a child named Srey Heng. Her birth name was Pen Serik, but during the Pol Pot [era] she fled from Cambodia to Thailand. As she was fleeing, her whole ship sunk, and she was the only survivor. Her name was Pen Serik, but she goes by Sarik Heng now in America, because she's lucky to have survived. [Heng is a Khmer word meaning "lucky."] So she goes by that name now.

A: And I would like to ask about your husband—what is his name?

B: His name is Ul Savan.

A: And do you remember when you were married?

B: Oh—what year was it? I only remember Khmer years [the Cambodian lunar calendar].

A: [Pauses] Do you remember? When you were married—

B: No, I don't remember.

A: Oh okay. And so—

B: I was married 1979—yes, '79. But I don't remember what month. What month was it? Maybe April, or May?

A: I don't know either!

B: Right now, what month is it? August?

A: Right now is September.

B: Month nine is September, ten is October, eleven is November, twelve is December—

A: It's okay, if you don't remember the month that's okay.

B: April!

A: April?

B: Oh, that's the New Year, that's right.

A: And when you got married, did your parents arrange it, or did you love him before?

B: Oh—no, I don't know how to love. [Chuckles] Our mothers, on both sides agreed and set it up. At the time, in 1979, they didn't have weddings like they do now. We all ate rice together, tied hands, and had music. [During the time of Pol Pot] they didn't have any music. But my wedding was very well done, because the brother on my husband's side was an Ayai singer [Cambodian call and response style of music] named Smean Chheang.

A: Right.

B: And Smean Chheang, the Ayai singer, and my uncle were old friends. My uncle's name was Smean Saroem— [Speaks to the Interviewer] Ask your father, he knows of him.

A: Yes.

B: And Smean Saroem was the number one singer in Kampong Cham province. And when it was time for my wedding, he took Smean Chheang along to sing with him and his friends, who were musicians. And so Smean Chheang the singer was born [as an artist] the day of my wedding.

A: Yes.

B: The dowry at my wedding wasn't given in [money] it was given in rice.

A: Ah—so your dowry was actually given in rice?

B: Yes, it was rice. They gave us 100 kilos of rice—the most expensive kind! When my siblings and cousins were married, they also gave rice for the dowry, but they only gave 20 kilos! [Laughs] For them, it was only 20 or 30 kilos, but we were all surprised at 100 kilos of the most expensive kind!

A: And before you were married, had you ever met your husband?

B: Even though we were in the same district, he had just come back from being a soldier. He had only been back maybe—half a month before he was married to me.

A: Oh!

B: But we had known each a bit when we were little. When we were older, we didn't know each other at all, and got to know each other on our wedding day.

A: I'd like to ask you another question, what languages do you know?

B: I only know Khmer! [Laughs]

A: And so how far did you learn in school? To what grade?

B: When I was little, I only learned for three grades, to 10th grade. At that time, they counted down from 12th, 11th, 10th. After you finished 1st grade you became a teacher yourself.

A: And which school did you go to?

B: I learned at Dey Doh school.

A: Oh—Dey Doh.

B: That's right.

A: And how has your life changed from when you were young until now? What changes have you seen?

B: It has always been changing. Before, we were children, and now we are mothers ourselves, and even grandmothers, and so the changes have become bigger and bigger. My thinking, how I manage my family—they've all changed. I've learned what I have to do to keep my children from clashing, what I have to do to keep food on the table for my children, so that we can all have peace and happiness. We have to have the knowledge and foresight to warn them to do certain things, so that we can take care of ourselves. As mothers and grandmothers, we have to be responsible for everything. And so we need to guide our children, and to persuade them to walk in correct and righteous paths.

A: Yes. And do you like to sing, or like to dance?

B: Oh! Before, when Pol Pot ended, I danced so much I never stopped! And back then there were no drums, they beat on barrels!

A: Right!

B: There were no drums like they have now! [Laughs]

A: And do you know how to play any instruments?

B: No, I don't know any.

A: And when you were young, what was your home like?

B: It was very difficult when I was young. We lived in many different places. When I was very little, I lived in Cheung Prey, and my house was very small, maybe only 5 meters to the front, and about 7 meters to the back. But my house in Kampong Cham was different, and the house in Phnom Penh was different.

A: And what religion do you adhere to now?

B: I am Christian.

A: And after you started to believe, what changes have you seen in your life?

B: I've seen the blessings that God has given me, especially good health and happiness. I don't overthink things now. Ever since God has become my support, I only rely on Him, nothing else. If I desire to have something, and if He wants to give it to me, I see blessings. But if He does not, I see that I'll never get it. My hope is in Him who prepares the way for me.

A: Could you tell me about the most difficult time of your life?

B: The most difficult was during the time of Pol Pot. I was separated from my siblings, separated from my beloved father. I was sleeping on his chest, and they plucked me off of

him and set me to the side, and they took my father away without a trace. The most bitter and disappointing thing was what happened to my father. My mother died too, but she died because she was sick. This was different—a father and daughter hugging each other as they slept, and they came and took him away from me. I cried and yelled and tried to find him, but I still don't know where he is to this day.

A: And so, in your life what do you think has been your happiest time?

B: Inside of me I never feel happy, I just keep reflecting on the bitter history that I've had. I'm never happy like others.

A: So, moving forward—what different periods or generations of time have you lived through?

B: I was alive at the time before Pol Pot. And before that time there were the soldiers of Pol Pot. And even before that, the soldiers weren't Pol Pot's, they were Khmer "Sar" [meaning white], even before Pol Pot.

A: Yes.

B: After those soldiers were defeated, then we had Pol Pot. Pol Pot was another period, and after he was overthrown in '79 has been another period. So there have been three periods or generations.

A: And as a child, did you ever dream of what you wanted to become?

B: I only imagined. When I was little, my father would always ask me, "In your future, what do you want to do? I love you, and I want you to finish all your studies, and you could become a professor." But that was only an idea—it was never successful. My father always said that if he was still there, he would help me to learn, and keep me from being married. But if he wasn't there maybe my mother would force me to get married. If my father had been there, he would have made me learn more in school. And I love grammar and the letters—I truly do love them. But when I was young, they didn't allow me to attend school—at five years old they wouldn't accept you, and I was too short. And I cried because I couldn't go to learn. They eventually pitied me because I was an orphan [by her father]. And so they sent me to learn at Boeng Snay School, near the edge of this lake here. It was a rural school—there were no cars or motorbikes to take you there. They put me in 12th grade, and I learned from the beginning. You started at the top and went down. After half a year of school, I tested out into the 11th grade. After I started learning in 11th grade, my teacher said to me, "You're learning extremely well, studying here won't work, go back to study at Dey Doh School. Even though you are small, I just want you to see the other students and get used to them. Honestly, everything you have done, you have done correctly." So, he sent me to learn at Dey Doh. I only learned there half a year, but I was the top student the whole time.

A: And do you have any experiences that you would like to share with your descendants?

B: What experiences do I have? I am bitter and old, they learn much more extensively now. Now the kids learn in much higher classes than we did. I only learned for three grades!

A: Yes.

B: Even you must have already finished 12th grade, right?

A: I've already finished my fourth year—

B: Oh! You've finished fourth year, if I have only studied for three years, how could I ever become a teacher! [Laughs]

A: Because you've had such a long life, you have a lot of experiences to share with your children and descendants!

B: Oh, the experience comes—we learn to be patient, how to endure in our life. No matter how difficult it is, we endure.

A: Right.

B: We endure until we succeed. Right now, I am successful again because I have a house. And in the past, I had a job, even though I am retired right now. Because I had a salary, I could raise children who are still alive now. Right now, it's different, I don't work anymore, I only look after the grandkids. My kids provide for me to live now.

A: And finally, do you have anything you want to say to the next generation?

B: I don't have much, I only have the advice that you have to endure in life and endure with God. That's because I have followed the path of God and found success. And when God gives us wealth it can't come with us, it is outside of us. And so, we can only have faith in Him and know that He has prepared the way for us.

A: Thank you so much for giving me a chance to interview you today. I just have one more question for you, would you allow me to take your recording and photo and put it on Brigham Young University's website?

B: Yes, that's okay.

A: Okay yes, thank you very much.

Interview translated by Devon Crane and edited by Thomas Barrett.