

Interview of Pov Yan

A: Interviewer: Cheang Sieav

B: Interviewee: Pov Yan

A: Ok so today is the 4th of March, 2016, and so my name is Cheang Sieav and I will have an interview today with this lady. What is your full name? What's your name?

B: My name is Pov Yan.

A: Pov Yan?

B: Yes.

A: And do you happen to know your birthday?

B: I know the year, the year I was born was 1953.

A: 1953.

B: Yes.

A: Now about how old are you?

B: Now I'm 73.

A: 73 already

B: Yes

A: And where were you born?

B: I was born in Preak Village, Preak T'e Commune, Preak T'e Village as well

A: And the province?

B: Mondul District, Svay Rieng Province.

A: Svay Rieng Province.

B: Yes.

A: And for you, how many kids do you have?

B: I have 3 kids.

A: And what are your kids' names?

B: Their names are Vong Channy, Vong Sinat, and Vong Loch

A: Thank you. And they were all born in the village and commune with each other?

B: The same, yeah, the same.

A: And for your husband, what is his name?

B: My husband is Vong San.

A: And what does he do ma'am?

B: He was a soldier back in the time of Lon Nol.

A: Back in Lon Nol's time, he was a soldier.

B: Yes.

A: And now he—

B: He's been dead for a long time already, since '75.

A: Why did he die ma'am?

B: I don't know, he was hit by a bullet or something. He was a soldier, and we've lost his name and his voice from that day until now.

A: Yes ma'am. And ma'am, did you learn at school?

B: I learned from the beginning, they called it kindergarten, grammar school, primary school. I only learned up to that point, yeah, just that much.

A: And kindergarten, grammar school, primary school—what exactly did you learn in these classes? Do you remember?

B: Those classes are just like first grade, second grade, third grade—but back then we called them names like that! Yeah. They called them kindergarten, grammar school, primary school—

A: Back then was the French Period correct? What time period was it ma'am?

B: It was back with the former King Sihanouk

A: And about what year was that? Do you remember?

B: I began learning maybe around '68 or '69.

A: And for your studies, did you have any problems arise in your life?

B: I was very poor. When it was time for me to go on to the next grade, I didn't have a bike to ride, yeah, I didn't have a bike to ride, and so I stopped learning. My teacher was so sad because of me. I registered to learn at the school in this Preak T'e village, but then I had to go to the school in Pisaomu. It was so far and nothing, but forest and my parents wouldn't let me go, they were scared, scared of me walking there, and so I stopped at that point.

A: And this school, was it far?

B: Very far, that school.

A: About how many kilometers?

B: 3, 4, 5 kilometers through the country, which was just forest back then, with wild animals along the road.

A: And were there a lot of students?

B: The students were few.

A: How many students per class?

B: One class had 30 people, 20 people, back in that time

A: So were you successful in your learning ma'am?

B: I read back then, could learn really well, I always passed, always passed to the next grade, until I got to the class where I had to go to the other district's school, and I stopped being able to go. The teacher let those who passed go on but I was too poor, I had nothing to ride, and one more thing, was in that time, girls weren't allowed by their mom and dad to go.

A: Yes ma'am. And so after you stopped learning, what did you do instead?

B: I farmed until the age of 60 years. '69 I got married.

A: So you were married in the year '69.

B: Yes, the year '69

A: And once you were married, what did your husband start to do?

B: Back then he hadn't started to do anything yet. We all still farmed rice, and I had a kid, then two kids, then three, and they saw their father's face just once, and I was pregnant with our last kid and then he went to be a soldier.

A: Okay. Back when Pol Pot first came, what problems did you have happen?

B: Oh, I was so miserable, bullets were flying because I was near the border. There were bullets flying day and night. During the day at 3 or 4 o'clock, I would take my kids to quickly hide in a hole, but I would hear "bang!". There were caterpillars and worms in the ditch. We were like rats, we would just prepare rice to eat, whenever it was quiet, I would leave and make rice for my children to eat, eat and then sit on the table at the mouth of the ditch.

A: Oh, back then what did you do for work?

B: I was still watching those kids, watching my kids.

A: You still watched your kids. And what did your husband do?

B: My husband went to go be a soldier.

A: Oh, he went to be a soldier.

B: Yes, he went to be a soldier.

A: And what about for your kids, what did they do?

B: What?

A: What did your kids do?

B: They didn't do anything. They couldn't farm rice yet, back then they were still very small, they had entered the collective already.

A: What about for when like—when Pol Pot had come for a couple years already, what did they have you do?

B: We farmed rice, they used us to farm rice.

A: What kind of rice did you say you farmed?

B: We farmed pure rice, planted it, cut it, lifted it, farmed rice.

A: Oh, and they had your husband be a soldier.

B: Yes, my husband was still a soldier.

A: But then were you with each other?

B: No we were split up the whole time, he came and visited and said he had just one kid, our last boy [Laughs].

A: So that means that from the Pol Pot period all the way until now you've farmed—

B: Yes, I farmed rice.

A: Farmed rice since then.

B: Yes, all the way until now.

A: Oh all the way until now. When Pol Pot ended, you still farmed rice.

B: Yes, I still farmed rice.

A: And so when—back then, how old were your children?

B: Age, let's see—let's see, '73 I had a kid and—no, '80— '83!

A: Oh, in '83 you had a kid.

B: No, they married.

A: Oh, one of your kids was married.

B: Yes, yes.

A: So that means that during Pol Pot's time you didn't have people force you to flee anywhere then?

B: We had already fled. They relocated me here, back in '75, they relocated me to here, here in Svaay Ptear. It was so hard coming here. I only ate roots. I went and would find snails. I went and pulled morning glory. They call it "enduring the dry rice season". I picked morning glory, and I collected snails to eat, living off just snails, roots, and tamarind, and

they would give us a few plates worth of porridge and potatoes. When the morning came, they would hand out rice with potatoes mixed-in. Even two or three spoonfuls were inedible. I was so overwhelmed, so miserable, and my children were just skin and bones, and I was likewise. I would go and do very intensive work for them, they had me dig up tree stumps that were already planted. They had me go dig up these trees' roots in order to make a canal going somewhere. A canal for redirecting water to enter the rice fields.

A: So they had you work like that?

B: We did that and we would harvest and harvest again. I would harvest and cut down those trees again. I was very overwhelmed and very miserable in the Svaay Ptear District. They called it East Little Creek.

A: Yes ma'am, so that means that the regime had you do this every single day.

B: Yes we did this every day, because they had put me in a special unit, with my mother, in a special unit. There were 40 of us—

A: So you still didn't have free time, correct?

B: No free time! We came to our houses at night, and when dawn came at 3am, we would leave to work.

A: Oh, but did they let you rest then?

B: No, we'd rest for just a moment. We would eat a few slurps of porridge then we would go work more.

A: So from there did they relocate you to anywhere else?

B: No, I was in Svaay Ptear until the Vietnamese entered.

A: Oh so you were there the whole time, and you did this job the whole time too.

B: Yes, I was there the whole time. I did that job the whole time. I would thresh rice and take a fistful of it and they would have us weave it. They would have us weave it and make house roofs out of it.

A: Yes ma'am, ok good. When the Vietnamese came and liberated Cambodia, where did they relocate you to?

B: The Vietnamese told us to go back to our homelands. Whatever county you're from, go back. Whichever province you're from, go back. So I ran around to collect my things. I ran to those harvesting rice and I milled and ground a bag of rice, one of those sackcloth bags where you can tie the opening. And I pushed my cart—my father was sick and I still pushed the cart. A couple of my kids still breastfed. Those two would walk and cry. They just slowly walked along, because there were no men there. I was so pitiful. I walked back to my homeland, and I was so miserable. I would go and dig up wild potatoes and bring them back to boil and make porridge to eat, and I would also eat the stump of banana trees and papaya trees and I would go and pick rambutan to eat as well. Oh, I was so pitiful.

A: So in that time did you have like—like, did you work or what exactly?

B: I went and worked until I had to go and beg—until I couldn't even go and find leaves to eat. I came and begged in S'ang county—they call it what county? [Pauses] What county is it? In Prey Veng province—Mesang county. I walked around begging—at first they gave me stuff, gave me enough, but I got 2 or 3 baskets of milled rice and after going already I'd go out and beg some more, until I received more stuff, and eventually they stopped giving me a lot. They would give me a handful here and there. And I from there went to work cutting more wood. We cut Vietnamese trees, cut the wood to take and sell, cut until it was all logs and we'd take it and sell it in the market. I sold to take care of my kids and mother. And it wasn't just my kids, but my 5 younger siblings and my mother, and the four of us, me and my kids, as well.

A: So all together it was 10 people then.

B: Yes, I worked to take care of them, my younger sibling was the one who went to sell and I was the one who carried the wood, these very big, very long logs which we would drag along the water; we'd swim in the water and pull them.

A: And how did you do this? Did they like allow you to go and chop the wood or you—

B: We stole it from them!

A: Oh, you stole it from them.

B: We went and stole! Yes, all of us! We went and stole from them so that we could chop it and take it to sell at the market so we could buy rice to eat. We'd buy the corn rice, you know the rice with big old grains like corn, and we'd do that until the rainy season, then we'd go begging for seeds, and then we'd take and plant those seeds. We were so poor those two or three years. For the rice seeds, if we could make a lot we would eat in plenty.

A: What about for the people who went with you, did they ever have—like have problems with the Vietnamese at all?

B: Yes there were! There were always Vietnamese who would chase us to prevent us from stealing their wood.

A: But they didn't want to hit you?

B: No not yet, they would just take a knife and ax and they'd say, "Don't take this wood or else all you Cambodians will die." Yeah, so we'd go to work, stealing from them and we'd bring it back and make firewood, tie it into bundles, then transport it to sell to people. I'd carry on my head the wood or anything really, and we'd take it and sell it to them. The buyers would come and they'd buy, and they'd sell and trade and buy as well, they would buy it and build a shack or a house or whatever. Yeah, from my hometown I would walk a day to go and cut this wood, then walk a day back, clean the wood until it was pretty, about this size [Demonstrates with Hands], and then sell it, a length of wood would get me just two dollars! But back then they had just issued the new coins, and one coin, two coins would get you just 2 or 3 dollars, and I'd carry this wood on my shoulder for a night and a day until I arrived back at my house.

A: Ok, so what year was your daughter married?

B: She was married— '86, '87—

A: And so what did your kid do once she was married?

B: They farmed rice, just the same

A: Oh farmed rice, and what did her husband do?

B: He farmed rice too, they did it with each other, yeah, with each other.

A: And for your other children?

B: The same as well! We just farmed rice, we had very little education.

A: So what about when you—so you did this all the way until what year? What year did you stop?

B: Farming?

A: No, doing—like carrying the firewood and stuff.

B: Oh, I just stopped! I just stopped back in '92, '93! I stopped! Until we could farm rice. A little into the '90s I stopped.

A: And so when you stopped doing that what did you do then?

B: Made more rice!

A: Made more rice.

B: Yes, we don't give rice up, as long as there's rice we'll farm rice.

A: You had a lot of farmland, didn't you ma'am?

B: I've split it all up amongst my kids already! This farmland, I split up amongst my kids, 20 square meters a person, and I shared with their husbands as well.

A: Immediately after the Pol Pot era ended, did they divvy up the rice fields for you or did you have to go and claim rice fields by yourself?

B: We went and claimed it ourselves, but afterwards they—but they shared in what year? I forgot as well—I haven't thought of it. They split up the land and it was less than our square meterage which we had before, our inheritance.

A: It was more than this—

B: Yes. Before it was so much that we couldn't farm it all, 5 or 6 hectares, but afterwards we received just one and a half hectares. We took what they gave us; they split it according to families, they split it according to people—five people, so we got just 1.5 hectares.

A: So for you, you farmed rice and you—like you got rice to take and sell where exactly?

B: We'd sell it to people—back then they did—now we sell to Vietnamese. The Vietnamese come transporting whatever and they want to buy one ton of rice, and we mill it and take whatever we don't eat to sell, to speak directly.

A: Yes, so when you—like when you milled and sold the rice like that would you go and sell at, did they come to your house and buy it or did you walk around, selling it on the road?

B: They'd come and buy it at my house.

A: They'd come and buy it at your house, so that means that you had to spend how much time in order to be able to do that? Like for a couple armfuls worth of rice—

B: We'd mill one ton, if we had a lot we'd have to sun-dry a lot too. We'd mill 10 sacks, 10 bags, and go!

A: Ok, good. So ever since you farmed rice until now, you've done that.

B: I've done that ever since, yes.

A: And for what about your kids?

B: My kids produce from their own property, they're like me, they farm too. I farm my kid's rice as well, at this house. My kids will come and help me and they'll hire people to harvest, my two kids here, they'll go and rent a tractor. I only call them to come and help harvest, like to help lift sacks and help collect the harvest here.

A: Yes, good. So up to this point in time, when did your kids leave and separate from you? They—

B: I'm with a kid here!

A: No, I mean for you, you have three kids—

B: You want to ask about my kids before? Oh, they'd marry and leave, marry and go to the house of their husband's kin. Nowadays I live with one of my kids here.

A: But for them, what did they do? In—

B: They farmed rice too.

A: They farmed rice, but in a different village.

B: Yes, a different village, a different house.

A: And for your other kid? The other one that—

B: They're the same.

A: So for all of them, their way of life, both husband and wife, is farming rice?

B: Yes, farming rice.

A: And for the kid which you live with? They farm rice as well?

B: They come here and farm rice and I'm here and try and find jobs there, yeah.

A: So what year did your child come to Phnom Penh?

B: My kid has been here for a long time, more than 10 years already. At first it was just my

child-in-law, but after being here a long time they saw it was tough on their kids, they had to go too far to learn. My kids had their kids come here, to learn over here.

A: And so when they came here, they like—they were in a rental house or—?

B: They were in a rental house, yeah, even now.

A: And for them, like what problems do they have in their lives, both for your children and for you personally?

B: I've never had a problem with my kids or grandchildren at all!

A: No, I mean have you ever had a problem, for you do you remember anything before in terms of problems that happened in your life, like do you remember what problems you've had happen to you, not about your kids, but about something that you remember in yourself, in your own life?

B: My life has been so difficult! Now it's just began to ease up a little, with my kids and grandkids getting married and leaving, it's helped ease my burden a bit. I've had so much misery sir.

A: And nowadays how many people are there with you? In your homeland?

B: I'm in my homeland by myself, and my grandkids will come and sleep, come and go—sleep in the evenings, sometimes I go over and sleep at my kid's house.

A: Yes, and—you here, do you have any rice fields or orchards or what do you have ma'am?

B: I farm my kid's rice.

A: Farm your kid's rice.

B: Yes, I've split up all my farmland amongst my kids already.

A: Yes, good.

B: Nowadays I farm rice even with my age. Yes—

A: Yes, and so everyday that you're here in your homeland, for your diet what do you do? Do you make food by yourself or do you have someone—

B: I make it myself! Sometimes my kids call me over to eat, sometimes I make my own food.

A: Oh, but their homes are close together or—?

B: They're far, maybe a kilo, or 1.5 kilos. Yeah—

A: But your children come visit you every week or—?

B: Yes, they come visit every two or three days, every two or three days I go over there.

A: Oh ok, so your kids farm rice as well here.

B: Yes, we all farm rice.

A: But in which village ma'am?

B: In Preang T'e Village, the same as each other.

A: So now, how many grandchildren do you have in total?

B: My grandkids, let's see— 2, 3, 5 —and 5 more—10—and two great-grandkids as well, so 12—I have 12 grandkids and great-grandkids.

A: Oh 12, that's a lot.

B: They didn't have a lot of kids, they each had just two or three— [Laughs]

A: Oh, so for you, do you think that you will go to be with your kids or will you be, like, on your own?

B: I'm with my kids, when I go to my homeland I go, and when I come, I come here.

A: Oh, but like—for you, when you're on your own like this, do you feel lonely or anything?

B: Feeling lonely, it's normal. I miss my kids and worry that they'll become poor, I feel compassion for my kids, my grandkids!

A: Oh, yes. And one more thing, I want to ask you if you've ever thought about preparing something for them, when your grandkids grow up more—have you ever thought that you wanted to do something more for them?

B: I want my kids and grandkids to learn until they have deep knowledges, yes.

A: Yes, and so one more thing, for you in this house—in your home it's just you—in your house you're by yourself, right?

B: I live by myself.

A: You live by yourself.

B: Yes.

A: And so how many often do you come visit Phnom Penh, visit your grandkids?

B: I come once a month, sometimes two months pass—whenever we still have farming to do I go and farm. I don't organize it though, my kids are the ones who do it, who give me money to come whichever day—

A: Ok, and so when you do this every day, for like—you have a lifestyle which is simple every day, don't you ma'am?

B: Yes, it's simple being by yourself, lonely— [Laughs] Whatever I want to do I do it—I want to rest, I rest. Yeah, like taking naps in the middle of the day.

A: Yes, and I have one more question. You believe in the Church's scriptures, right?

B: I believe, yes.

A: Why did you decide to—

B: I believe firmly that the Lord created the land and sea, the woods, the animals too, every species of animal.

A: Yes.

B: Yeah, and the people of our world too, yes, I understand.

A: Yes, but there's—like what point is there which made you believe that you should go to church? And do you believe that God is a true God? Why—what points are there which indicated to you that this is something that you could believe in?

B: I've recognized this, yes. I've recognized just that we need to do good, that the Lord will take care of us. I believe firmly in doing good, the Lord has instructed us to do good, and overcome evil. Our kids, our grandkids, I believe that we need to know how to love our kids, love our grandkids, help educate them. I firmly believe that much.

A: Yes, so maybe I just have those few questions for you ma'am. So one more thing I want to ask you, have you ever thought your life story, have you ever thought that you would save your life story for your children and grandchildren and onto the next generation in order for them to understand or what has happened for you?

B: Yes, I'll give it to them so it will continue onwards, so that they can learn from my example and listen to God, yes, because I believe.

A: Yes, because you will be an example and your example will be preserved for your kids and will be like a school for us, for us to take your story and save it for your children for them to know that you have had what events happen in your life, from the time you were small all the way until you—until now. Yes, so maybe those are all the questions I have for you, I'm all out. Thank you so much for giving me this opportunity, for telling your knowledge and life story to me.

*Translated by Mitch Neuberger