

Interview of Hem Sokten

A: Interviewer: Kosal Vattanak Nimol

B: Interviewee: Hem Sokten

Summary of the Interview

Hem Sokten was born in 1953 in Tuek L'ak, Phnom Penh and is the fifth of fourteen siblings. In this interview, Hem Sokten reminisces about her family and the hardships endured during different periods of her life. Despite the difficulties, she emphasizes the importance of family, education, and kindness.

A: So first, I would like to thank you for allowing me to interview you today. My name is Kosal Vattanak Nimol, and I will be interviewing you. Today is December 2, 2017 and this interview is taking place in Svay Chek Thmey village, Prek Pnov commune, Sangkat Sen Sok, Phnom Penh. This interview was prepared by a university in America, named BYU, and the purpose of this interview is to help the Khmer people and all the Khmer members have the opportunity to preserve their personal family histories, and to give your children and grandchildren in the next generation the opportunity to know about your personal history.

B: Right.

A: Yes, so first of all, I want to ask you, what is your full name, the one on your ID?

B: Hem Sokten.

A: Hem Sokten?

B: Yes.

A: Yes. And do you have a nickname?

B: Oh, my nickname is Oun.

A: You are called Oun?

B: Yes.

A: Yes, and have you been called Oun since you were young, or just when you got older?

B: Yes, I have been called that since I was little.

A: Right.

B: Ever since I was born, my parents gave me that nickname.

A: Yes, yes. And how old are you?

B: Yes, I was born, to be exact, on the 9th day—

A: Okay.

B: In October—

A: Okay.

B: 1953.

A: Oh, then how old are you about?

B: A little over 60.

A: A little over 60, okay.

B: Yes.

A: Yes. And if you think in Khmer Zodiac years, what year were you born in?

B: I'm the year of the snake.

A: The year of the snake, right?

B: Yes.

A: Yes, yes. And do you know where you were born? Like, in what village? What district? What province?

B: Yes, I know. Uh, I was born in Tuek L'ak, Sangkat [District] Number 3, Phnom Penh.

A: Right, so you have lived in Phnom Penh ever since you were young?

B: Yes.

A: Yes, yes. And how many siblings do you have?

B: I have 14 siblings.

A: Whoa, 14?!

B: Yes.

A: That's so many!

B: Birth siblings.

A: Whoa, that is so many!

B: [Laughs]

A: And all 14 of those siblings, are they all still alive?

B: Some died in the Pol Pot generation.

A: Oh, okay.

B: And some died in this generation.

A: In this generation?

B: Yes.

A: Yes, and how many are still alive today?

B: [Pauses] Uh, six of us.

A: There are six left?

B: Yes.

A: Yes, yes. And where do you fall in the order of your siblings?

B: Uh, I am the fifth child.

A: Oh, you are the fifth child?

B: Yes.

A: And can you tell me your siblings' names, from the first to the fourteenth child?

B: Yes, I can. My oldest sister is named Hem Tep Kanika, she was called Hem Thon.

A: Yes.

B: The second was my brother named Meak, but I don't know what the name on his birth certificate was, he died at a young age.

A: Yes.

B: And the third brother was named Hem Sothon.

A: Yes!

B: Uh, my third brother is named Hem Sothon.

A: Yes!

B: And the fourth brother, Hem Sothet.

A: Yes!

B: And the fifth is me, Hem Sokten.

A: Yes!

B: And the sister younger than me is named Hem Sothy.

A: Yes!

B: And the next is named Hem Sokhoeun.

A: Yes!

B: And another younger brother named Hem Sothou.

A: Yes!

B: And another sister is Hem Mouyly.

A: Yes!

B: And another younger brother named Hem Sothean.

A: Yes!

B: And another sister named Hem Sotheary.

A: Yes!

B: [She pauses and repeats herself] Another brother named Hem Sothean.

A: Yes!

B: And another sister, Hem Sotheary.

A: Yes!

B: And after them, there was— [Pauses] Another younger brother, named Hem Biseth.

A: Yes!

B: And another sister, Hem Keumsey.

A: Yes!

B: And then the youngest, named Hem Sotheavy.

A: Yes.

B: He's a younger brother.

A: Yes, wow, you remember them all. [Laughs]

B: Yes.

A: That is cool! So do you still remember any stories from when you were younger with your siblings? Like, did you like to play together? What memories do you have together?

B: In the past, my father worked in the public sector, as a gardener, so when he was free from work, he would work on a garden in front of our house.

A: Yes!

B: Our lot was 20 meters wide by 30 meters long, so it was very big.

A: Yes!

B: My dad made a garden for us to play in front of our house. He wouldn't let us go far from our house to play, so we would gather together as siblings to play jump rope and hide and seek.

A: Yes.

B: We would play Chaol Chhoun [a traditional Khmer game] and play ball and other things.

A: Okay.

B: Yes.

A: You have good memories with your family. And what is your mother's name?

B: Yes, my mother is Hong Boul.

A: Hong Boul?

B: Yes.

A: What about your father?

B: My father is Hem Khon.

A: Hem Khon?

B: Yes.

A: And for them both, how old are they?

B: My dad is probably a little over 80, because he was born in the year of the Ox.

A: So, he is pretty old?

B: Yes.

A: And what about your mother?

B: My mother was born in the year of the Dragon, but when she died, she was over eighty years old.

A: Yes. And do you remember what year they were born?

B: I don't.

A: You don't remember?

B: Yes.

A: Yes, do you know where they were born? Like in what village?

B: My mother was born in Svay village—

A: Yes!

B: Prey Sralet district—

A: Yes!

B: Pea Reang district, Prey Veng province.

A: What about your dad?

B: My dad was born in Kor village.

A: Yes!

B: And in the same district and the province as my mother.

A: They were both from Prey Veng province?

B: Yes, just different villages.

A: Yes, do you know what your father did for a living?

B: Yes, my dad worked at the Ministry of Agricultural Development.

A: Oh, so he worked for the government?

B: Yes, he worked for the state, but as a gardener.

A: Yes!

B: Because in the Phnom Penh Society of Gardeners, my father was the head administrator.

A: Yes, yes. And what type of person was your father? Like, was he mean or gentle?

B: Yes, my dad was a gentle person who loved his children very much.

A: Oh! Yes, yes.

B: Because of that, we all are learned, he has no children that aren't well-educated.

A: Yes!

B: Except for the youngest, he grew up during the war period, so he wasn't able to learn.

A: Okay.

B: Yes.

A: Yes. What about your mother, did she ever have any type of employment?

B: My mother was the housewife, because she had to manage all 14 of her children.

A: Was she tired?

B: Yes. She didn't have time to have a job, because she had to take care of her children.

A: Yes, and what type of person was your mother?

B: My mother was gentle, but she was also strict.

A: Yes, yes.

B: She didn't know how to read, but she would make sure we were studying at night. If we weren't holding a book, she would knock on our doors and make sure we were reading.

A: Yes, yes.

B: And even if we wanted to read a story book, and we put our story book inside the reading textbooks we got from school, she would still know that we weren't studying.

A: Yes!

B: Even though she didn't know how to read.

A: Yes, but she was smart.

B: Yes.

A: She was smart in the way she raised her children. And what stories do you still remember about your mother and father? Like, what memories do you have with them? Did you like to go anywhere with them?

B: Yes, my mother and father loved their children very much. Sometimes my father would go dig grass on Sundays from the foot of Bokor Mountain to plant in the gardens.

A: Yes!

B: The garden in front of the palace, along the riverside, and other places like that. He would always take big cars with him.

A: Yes!

B: He would take his children with, as well as his workers to dig up the grass.

A: Yes.

B: He would take it from the foot of Bokor Mountain to go plant it.

A: Yes, yes. You have very good memories with him!

B: Yes.

A: Yes, and have your parents ever told you anything about their lives when they were younger?

B: My father didn't, but all I know is my grandfather's name, Hem.

A: Yes.

B: And my grandmother's name is Tep.

A: Yes.

B: That's the grandmother on my father's side.

A: Yes, yes. What about your mother's parents?

B: Oh, my mother's parents are named Grandpa Hong and Grandma Mao.

A: You still remember!

B: But my mother was an orphan since she was small. Her siblings—I don't know how many there were, she said there were a lot. But, aside from her, I only know of three others because they have all passed away.

A: Yes.

B: There are only three of her younger sisters left.

A: Yes, right. And do you remember when your grandparents were born? What month? What year?

B: I do not know.

A: Okay—do you know their birthplace?

B: I do know. On my mother's side, they were born in Svay village, Prey Sralet Commune, Pearang District, Prey Veng Province.

A: Yes, and what about your father's side?

B: On my father's side, they were born in Kor Village. They were in the same commune, just a different village.

A: Yes. So, do you know any stories about your grandparents? Like what things they went through in their lives?

B: Yes, my grandfather was originally a Khmer teacher.

A: And what about your grandmother?

B: My grandmother did not work, she would stay at home, she observed Buddhist moral practices.

A: Yes, and what kind of person was she?

B: She was very gentle.

A: Yes!

B: My grandfather was also very gentle, but we weren't with him very long, because he died when I was just eight years old.

A: Oh, right. And how many years have you lived in Phnom Penh?

B: The truth is, I've lived here since I was born.

A: If you think about it, you've lived here since you were born?

B: Yes.

A: So, you have been here a very long time. Do you have any relatives who live abroad, somewhere other than Cambodia? Like in another country?

B: No, I don't.

A: No one at all?

B: Yes.

A: Okay. And what is your husband's name?

B: During the Pol Pot era, I was forced to relocate, and they had me marry a local man named Sam Bunthoeun.

A: Sam Bunthoeun?

B: Yes.

A: Yes, what year did you get married?

B: Oh, 1977.

A: 1977?

B: Yes.

A: Yes, and was your marriage organized by your parents or did you organize it yourself?

B: Yes, it was prepared by the organization, by Pol Pot.

A: Is that so?

B: With those marriages, they had a lot of couples get married. When I was married, there were 50 couples.

A: That's a lot!

B: Yes.

A: And once you were married, did you stay married until now?

B: No, only until just before the [Vietnamese] took over Phnom Penh, when he joined the Kampuchean United Front for National Salvation.

A: Yes!

B: We were separated from that point on.

A: You were separated from then on?

B: Yes.

A: Yes. And when you were married—when he became your fiancé, did you receive a dowry?

B: I did not—um, my second family—they gave me a dowry of—how much? An amount of \$200, but only to prepare a normal marriage offering.

A: Yes, yes. And can you tell me, how did you meet your husband? Where did you meet? When? And why did you love each other?

B: Uh, my second husband?

A: Yes.

B: We met when I stopped working for the Sangkat and started sewing clothes to sell. He was a motorcycle taxi driver.

A: Yes!

B: I would call him to help deliver fabric for me, or to buy fabric and other things.

A: Yes!

B: Because of that, we eventually got engaged.

A: Yes.

B: I've been married to him ever since the year 2000, or thereabouts.

A: 2000?

B: Yes.

A: 2000. So, 17 years ago?

B: Yes.

A: Yes. And for you, how well do you know how to write and speak and read Khmer?

B: Yes, for Khmer, I have learned a lot, because during the Sangkum period [the People's Socialist Community set up by Prince Norodom Sihanouk] I learned at a high level [in school].

A: Oh, you learned a lot!

B: Yes.

A: Yes. Do you know other languages other than Khmer?

B: I don't know any others; I didn't learn anything other than that.

A: Yes.

B: I know how to read some other languages, but when it comes to speaking—

A: You can't?

B: I can't.

A: What languages?

B: English and French.

A: Yes.

B: Yes.

A: That's cool, you know two languages—French and English!

B: Yes, because during the Sangkum period, they would have kids learn French from Kindergarten to the 7th grade.

A: Oh, yes, that's very cool!

B: Yes.

A: And what grade did you learn through?

B: Yeah, I learned until—I don't know what grade it would be nowadays. During the Sangkum period, it was called "Peak Danal" which was the final class. We would take the

exam after one more year. We would take the exam—uh wait, we took the diploma exam already. We took the test to begin university studies.

A: Oh, so you finished your high school diploma? We can think about it that way, right?

B: Yes.

A: Yes, yes. And what school did you learn at?

B: At first, I learned at Lycée Indradevi.

A: Yes. And after that?

B: After that I went to school at Lycée Sisowath.

A: You only learned at famous schools! [Laughs]

B: [Laughs] Yes.

A: Both of those schools are still around today, right? They're still open?

B: Yes, they still are.

A: Yes, did you have any friends that you were really close with, that you grew up with?

B: Yes, I did, but we are all separated now.

A: Yes!

B: Because when the Pol Pot generation came, we were all separated from each other.

A: You don't communicate with each other anymore?

B: Yes, I don't know if they if they are dead or still alive.

A: Yes. Do you remember any of their names?

B: Of all the names, I remember the name of Kuy Lang, who was at my house.

A: Yes, is that the only one?

B: Yes.

A: Yes. Do you remember any stories, things you would do with your friends when you were young? Like, good memories from when you played together?

B: Yes, we would play together, we would play hide and seek and jump rope.

A: Oh, right.

B: Yes.

A: And have you ever worked in the fields or on the farm before?

B: I haven't ever done that, except during the Pol Pot era, when we were relocated.

A: You knew how to do it?

B: Yes, I did.

A: Yes, yes.

B: Before, I didn't even know what a rice plant was like.

A: Right, because you were born in Phnom Penh.

B: Yes.

A: Yes. So for you, what different types of work have you done to make a living and support your family?

B: When the Pol Pot era was over and we entered the Republic of Kampuchea, I sold dried fish in Chbar Ampov. But at first, I didn't come into Phnom Penh.

A: Yes.

B: But in 1980, I moved close to the Pediatric Hospital.

A: Yes!

B: And I was given a responsibility as a group president.

A: Yes.

B: But when they organized my Sangkat, on my side, on Kampuchea Krom Road to the television antennae—

A: Yes.

B: They organized it into Sangkat 7 instead.

A: Yes.

B: At that point, the Sangkat chief called me to work with him. At first, I worked as the vice president of the Sangkat Women's Association.

A: Yes.

B: Later, in 1981, I was the district president of District 7, where Psar Moan Ang is.

A: Yes.

B: Near Lycée Indradevi.

A: Yes.

B: It was at that time that the government gave me a house that I could live in with my mother and my siblings.

A: Okay.

B: And when they prepared the Sangkat, they also asked me to come and be the Vice President of the Tuol Kork District.

A: Oh, yes.

B: At this point, there were some difficult problems, because the public organizations—many of them would come and visit. It was then that my eyes were softened.

A: Oh.

B: All it took was for me to see other's difficult problems. Sometimes they had me visit disabled soldiers in the Kien Svay area back then.

A: Yes.

B: And when I saw how hard it was for them, all I could do was cry. At that point back then, the families of the laborers working on the K5 plan—because back then, the soldiers were caught—

A: Yes.

B: At that point in time, I saw—I just felt miserable. At any given day, I would see all the people that were injured and destitute. So, they had the public organizations go down and visit them.

A: Yes, yes.

B: And when I saw that, it was difficult. When I saw that all the families were crying, I always cried with them.

A: Yes.

B: So, I became super skinny, like a prisoner.

A: Yes, because you pitied them.

B: Because of that, I couldn't bear it anymore, so I stopped doing that work.

A: Yes!

B: The truth is that no one fired me, I decided to quit myself.

A: Yes, yes. Sometimes we have pity for others.

B: Yes, because we didn't have anything or know how to help them.

A: Yes, yes. You have a ton of work experience! So, from when you were younger until now, what changes have you seen in your life?

B: Yes, I have seen many changes.

A: Yes!

B: Before, when I was younger, I lived in a family, and it was comfortable.

A: Yes.

B: All I did was study.

A: Yes.

B: And I didn't really know how to do anything else.

A: Right, and what about now?

B: When the Pol Pot generation came, we were farmers, we farmed rice, we learned how to go through the difficulties of being poor and hungry, we learned all those things during the Pol Pot [regime].

A: Yes!

B: After that, when the State of Cambodia was formed, the biggest difficulty was in helping to take care of my siblings and mother.

A: Yes. And what about life today?

B: Up until nowadays, because I can't work anymore, I feel sad and think, "why was I that way back then?" I didn't think ahead and stopped working.

A: Yes, yes.

B: And my life used to be easy—

A: Yes!

B: But it got difficult and has stayed that way, all the way up until today.

A: Yes, but do you think that it's better now than before, or is it more difficult?

B: My way of life is still hard, but I am happy as well, because whatever I do to make a living, I can do it with my own strength, sweat, and blood.

A: Yes!

B: Before, all you had to do was put your signature, and then you would get paid.

A: Yes!

B: But now I have to work hard with my strength and energy, and the money comes. And when we get that money, it came to us honestly.

A: Yes, and it makes you happy inside.

B: Yes.

A: Because it came by your abilities and effort.

B: Yes.

A: Yes, and for you, what food do you like to eat?

B: Normally, I'll eat anything.

A: Soup? Simple foods, or what?

B: Yes, sometimes I have soup, and sometimes fried pork.

A: You change it up.

B: Yes. [Laughs]

A: When you were younger, what games did you like to play?

B: I like to play hide and seek and jump rope.

A: Yes, and anything else? Is that all?

B: Yes, that's all.

A: Yes, yes. And for music, do you have any songs that you learned how to sing when you were younger that you still remember and like? Or what type of music do you like? Like the modern or traditional?

B: Yes, I like music from generations before.

A: Songs from which artist?

B: Yes, I like Ros Sereysothea's music.

A: Yes!

B: Pen Ron.

A: Yes!

B: And Houy Meas as well.

A: They sing beautifully, I like their music as well.

B: Yes.

A: Yes, so is there anyone in your family who knows how to play a musical instrument?

B: No, there isn't.

A: No one at all?

B: Yes.

A: Yes, and now I want to talk about your house. What was your house like before? When you were younger, like, was it a stone house, or a wooden house? Or a leaf house, or what was it like?

B: The house that I live in now?

A: In the past.

B: When I was all together with my family, it was a wooden house on top of stone. My father also made a rowhouse with two connected apartments to rent to others.

A: Yes, yes. And who built that house? Or did you help build it?

B: My father did, at that time I was still very young.

A: Oh, so your father was the one who built it?

B: Yes.

A: Yes. Do you know what materials were used to build that house?

B: At that time, when my older brother was free from school, my father would have him help make bricks at the house.

A: Yes.

B: The bricks back then were not like the bricks today.

A: Right.

B: He would have his mold, and then get some cement and mix it with sand.

A: Okay.

B: He would put water on it as well, just like you were mixing a mortar normally.

A: Yes.

B: Then he would pour it in the mold.

A: Yes, and what materials were there? Like, was there iron?

B: Yes, there was.

A: And there was wood on top?

B: The iron was iron made by someone else.

A: Yes.

B: After the bricks—one brick length was about one decimeter.

A: Yes. So, for your house, did your father usually hire workers, or build it himself?

B: He would hire workers, except for the part involving bricks.

A: He would do that himself?

B: Yes, he would do it himself.

A: Yes, yes. And how did he know how to do that?

B: I don't know.

A: Okay. And for you, do you have any skills that have been passed on to you from your family?

B: If you're asking if I had any when I was younger, I didn't, I had to learn [at school].

A: Yes.

B: Because my mother was always at home, only my father would go work.

A: Yes, so the best skill you have is studying?

B: Yes.

A: And can you tell me why—? Uh, I mean, when was a time that your life was the most difficult?

B: The most difficult time was when my family was separated during the Pol Pot era.

A: Oh, right, yes.

B: Because my father—uh, during the Lon Nol generation, I was separated from—uh, on the 17th of April, we entered the Pol Pot era, and I was separated from one of my older brothers and one of my older sisters.

A: Yes.

B: During that time, in the Pol Pot era, I was separated from my father and some of my younger siblings, they lived in—two younger siblings died.

A: Oh, so it was difficult when you were separated from your family?

B: Yes.

A: But even though it was difficult, you were able to get through it until today. How were you able to get through that? Like, how did you strive to endure it?

B: Yes, I was able to make it all the way to today, like I said before. Back then, I used to work for the state, I helped support all my siblings, and one of my younger sisters worked at a factory.

A: Yes!

B: Only two of us siblings worked when the Pol Pot era ended, because there weren't any jobs to work. My younger sibling would carry smoked fish from— [Pauses]

A: From where?

B: From Prek Kmeng.

A: Yes.

B: From Prek Kmeng to Chbar Ampov.

A: Okay.

B: I would carry the smoked fish from Chbar Ampov to sell in Ta Khmau and took rice from Ta Khmau back to Chbar Ampov to sell, it was very miserable at that time.

A: Yes.

B: Because it was just after the Pol Pot era.

A: Yes.

B: But in 1980, I came to live near the Pediatrics Hospital, and I became the president of a welfare group. That made it a little bit better for me, because at that time, they would give us wheat, rice, powdered milk, soap, and other things.

A: Okay.

B: I was able to help support my siblings, and later, I came to Sangkat 7, and the president of the Sangkat, Mr. Chamraun, he called me to work in the Sangkat. My family lived with my uncle, but the state gave us a place to stay in—near Psar Moan Ang.

A: Yes!

B: So, I could help my siblings a little more at that time.

A: Yes, so you were able to get through it well?

B: Yes.

A: Yes, yes. And can you tell me when you think your life was the happiest? Do you have any fun experiences?

B: I was happiest when I was together with my family, with my younger siblings and my mother. But my mother passed away a little while ago, and now a lot of my younger siblings have split apart, we all have our own families.

A: Yes.

B: We are far from each other, so it is difficult. We didn't know how fun it was to be together like we were when we were younger.

A: Yes, that's right, but our lives change.

B: Yes.

A: Yes, and for you, ever since you were young and up until now, have you ever had any goals or dreams that you wanted to achieve when you grew up?

B: My greatest desire was to be a doctor.

A: Yes!

B: And my father helped train me, because he also wanted me to become a doctor, but in the end, it didn't turn out.

A: Because of the problems in our country?

B: Yes.

A: Yes, and now, finally, if you had the chance to send a message to your descendants in later generations, what would you say to them? What kind of person do you want them to be? What kind of success do you want them to have in life? And what do you want them to learn from your life?

B: For me personally, I want all the Khmer children to do what they can to love and serve their parents. Our parents are the people in our lives that are the most kind and important for each of us.

A: Yes, yes.

B: And try to study hard. Do what you can to make your lives dignified and have a mindset to love others and be kind.

A: Yes, and that's all?

B: Yes.

A: Thank you very much. I have no more questions, and I would like to put this interview on the website of BYU which is in the United States.

B: Yes.

A: The name of the website is www.cambodianoralhistoryproject.byu.edu. So, will you allow me to put this interview on that school website? Do you agree?

B: Yes, that is up to you. When I think about it, it may have a few problems that could be very difficult. You don't need to if you don't want to.

A: It's alright!

B: Okay.

A: Yes, so you allow me to put this on there, right?

B: Yes.

A: Yes, well, thank you very much!

B: Yes.

A: And I know that what you shared, what you discussed with me about your personal history will help your descendants in future generations. When they look at this, they will be able to see what you went through in your life, and they will know what type of people you want them to be, and they will learn a little about you.

B: Yes.

A: Yes, thank you very much!

A Note from the Interviewer: "The thing I liked most about her life was that she loves her family very much. Almost every word she said was about her siblings and her whole family!"

Interview translated by Edmund Ellsworth and Thomas Barrett.