

# Interview of Kov Vongdy

**A: Interviewer: Chung Seyha**

**B: Interviewee: Kov Vongdy**

## Summary of the Interview

*Kov Vongdy was born in 1972 and currently lives in Ampil Thom village, Kampong Cham province. Originally from Phnom Penh, his family fled the capital during the Lon Nol era to evade the escalating violence, seeking refuge in his mother's home village in Kampong Cham. However, upon their arrival, they faced accusations of treason and were ostracized from the community due to the political turmoil in Kampong Cham. He recounts many experiences from the Pol Pot era, from scavenging for scraps like fish bones or crabs to rare moments of kindness when his mother and others provided food for him. Today, Kov Vongdy lives with his wife and children and is a respected doctor in his community. When concluding his interview, he expresses gratitude for the gospel of Jesus Christ and knows that it has blessed his family with peace.*

A: I am so grateful to be able to interview Dy today. Thank you Dy for allowing me to come interview you about your life and past experiences. I know that recording these stories will bless your family and descendants. And I know that [your family] will be able to study and understand your experiences, and hopefully rely on them later in life. This interview is being held on September 5th, 2016, and my name is Chung Seyha. Could you please tell us your full name?

B: My full name is Kov Vongdy. On my birth certificate it was Kov Rongdy, but later on, I changed it to Kov Vongdy.

A: So, in the church records it is officially Kov Vongdy, right?

B: Yes, Kov Vongdy as well.

A: Okay. Are you known by any nicknames?

B: No, I don't have any.

A: Okay. Have you ever learned any language other than Khmer?

B: I've learned French before.

A: What years of school did you learn French in?

B: I had no formal schooling, but I was able to study and learn it for two years.

A: Two years, right?

B: Yes, I learned to read, and I learned to write a good amount as well. I also know a little bit of English and Thai as well, but that's it.

A: Great. Could you tell me your birthplace and date?

B: Ah, yes. I was born in Phnom Penh in December of 1972.

A: Do you remember which day?

B: Yes, on a Friday.

A: So, we Cambodians use the Khmer lunar calendar, right?

B: The month of Kartika! [Twelfth month of the Cambodian lunar calendar corresponding to mid-October to mid-November.]

A: Which of the twelve years were you born in, what animal?

B: I was born in the year of the mouse.

A: Oh, the mouse!

B: Yes!

A: Okay thank you. Can you tell me more about where you are living currently?

B: I live in Ampil Thom village, Kvut Thom commune, Prey Chhor district, Kampong Cham province.

A: How long have you been here?

B: I've been here since 1998 or '99.

A: 1999?

B: Yes.

A: So a fairly long time.

B: Yes, I've been here a while.

A: I would like to ask more about your family, especially your parents. Do you remember much about them?

B: Yes, I remember.

A: Could you tell me their names, and how old they would be if they were still living?

B: My father's name is Kov Ret, and I don't remember how old he is, but I do know he was born in the year of the dog. If he was still living, he would be close to 90. My mother's name is Lot Saroem, and from what I remember she was born in the 1940's. My mother was born in the year of the snake, now she is about 76. She's old already!

A: So, she is still living then?

B: Yes, she's still alive. She lives near my hometown, in the village of Preah Theat. She lives with her younger sister.

A: Ah I see. How about your own family then? What is your wife's name?

B: My wife's name is Mov Sophoas.

A: And how old is she?

B: She is 40 now.

A: Do you remember her birth year or date?

B: No I don't remember.

A: But she is 40, correct?

B: Yes.

A: And how many children do you have?

B: I have three children.

A: What are their names?

B: My first child is named Reth Mony, and we call him Kdaeng. My second is named Reth Soknim, but his nickname is Vit. My third is named Reth Hanna, but we call her Srey Mao.

A: And how old are each of them?

B: Mony was born in 1999. Soknim is about 13 years old now, and Hanna is about 4 years old now.

A: Thank you for telling me that. Could you tell me about your education from the time you were young until now?

B: For my education—at the time Pol Pot ended, 1979, I went to learn for school in the pagoda. After I received my diploma, I couldn't afford any higher education. I wanted to learn but I didn't have the ability to because of my poverty. So in 1985, I tested and received my diploma. Because of our poverty, my parents decided to enroll me to become a Buddhist monk. So, I became a monk and began learning in Pali school [the language of Buddhist scripture]. I graduated from that school in 1993 and went to Phnom Penh to keep learning. After a little while, my health began to fail, and I released my position as a monk. I also began learning to become a doctor at that time. I wanted to become a doctor to be able to help heal those in my village and those around me.

A: Thank you, that's a great story. Could you tell me more about the different jobs and work you have done in your life?

B: My parents have been farmers since my birth, and after Pol Pot finished, we had nothing. Before that time most people had enough land and property they could live off of, but after Pol Pot ended, we all had nothing of what we once did. When I was growing up all I knew was hardship and hunger and farming. Because my parents were farmers I had the duties of cow herding, gathering grass for our cows to eat, and gathering wood and logs to burn. I fished to help feed my family and helped to plant the rice crop every year. It was exhausting work. It was tiring and we were very hot and exposed to the elements. We had very little to eat and very little to wear. But my health was good, and I almost never got sick. Even so, our conditions were awful, almost beyond imagination. It was exhausting and has been from when I was little until I became an adult. Only now that I am getting older has it lessened a little bit.

A: So how long have you been working as a doctor here?

B: It's been about 17 or 18 years.

A: 18 years.

B: Yes, I help the people in our village who have urgent needs or emergencies. We do what we can to help them, and if they need it, we send them to the bigger hospitals to treat the

more serious diseases. I do what I can to keep people alive and from dying of accidents. I can't cure serious diseases, but because we know a little more than them, we can help. We know what to do. Primary and emergency care is absolutely necessary.

A: Thank you very much for describing your work experience. I would like to know a little more about your experience meeting your wife for the first time, and how you got married. Could you tell me about that?

B: It was a different time then. The culture at that time didn't allow us to have any relationships, and of course, we couldn't hold hands or talk to each other on the phone—they didn't exist!

A: Yes—

B: Like I said before, the culture was very strict. For my wife's family, they would not allow us to even speak to each other before we were married. If we saw each other, we couldn't even smile at one another. When they took me to see her the first time, all that happened was I saw her, and they took me back home. There was no talking, no relationship, no chance for any of that. The tradition of the time was strict, not like it is now. Now people get to know each other well and are able to talk and understand each other before they are married. For me, it was nothing like that. All it entailed was for her side of the family to ensure that my parents agreed to the marriage, and if they agreed, then they would proceed to arrange a wedding date for us.

A: So, does that mean that your marriage was organized by the parents on both sides?

B: That's right, on both sides.

A: And this was because of our Khmer tradition of the time.

B: Exactly. I never went to try to talk with her even once before we were married, and she was the same. Only once we were married did we first speak to each other. It was difficult! Not even a word to her. I only ever saw her at the tailor shop sewing a few times, because that was where she worked.

A: So, as you said before, your marriage was organized by parents on both sides, so both parents recognized and accepted it. Do you remember the date, or the year you were married?

B: It was in 1999.

A: In 1999, okay. Do you remember which month it was?

B: It was in the fourth month [of the lunar calendar] because it was just before the Khmer New Year.

A: Yes, just before Khmer New Year would be about the fourth month.

B: So, the fourth month. [About March]

A: And in those days you gave a dowry, right? How was that done?

B: Yes, there was. At the time we gave gold coins, not money. And for my wife we gave the most expensive gold—6 chi [about 22.5 grams] of gold. It's extremely expensive. Most people only give 1 or 2 chi [3.75 or 7.5 grams] of gold, but my wife's family required 6 chi.

So, it was extremely difficult to get, in order to satisfy her family's dowry requirements.

A: Okay that's cool! I'm curious, have you ever traveled outside of the country?

B: Yes, I've been to Hong Kong to travel to the temple.

A: When you went how many people came with you?

B: All four of us went. At the time Hannah hadn't been born yet.

A: And what year was this?

B: 2011.

A: 2011. And you've only been able to go once, right?

B: Yes.

A: So, as you said before, you didn't have a lot of work when you were younger because of your education, and now you've been a doctor for over ten years now.

B: Yes.

A: You also mentioned that you were born in 1972, so perhaps you have some experiences from the time of Pol Pot. Could you share some of your experiences from that?

B: Yes. I was born in '72. In 1975, Pol Pot captured Phnom Penh and forced them to evacuate. But my family lived in Preaek Lieb [Northern Phnom Penh], and my mother knew what was coming. She knew that I was a twin, and that if she didn't evacuate before Pol Pot entered Phnom Penh, all her children might die. So, she told my father that we had to flee to our hometown in order to survive. But my father didn't want to come to Kampong Cham [my mother's homeland], he wanted to go to Battambang because he had two or three cousins who were teachers there. He wanted my mother to fly from Phnom Penh to Battambang. At that time, there were still domestic flights available from one province to another. My father said not to go because he was afraid that if we went to Kampong Cham we would be seen and treated as enemies and outsiders. My mother knew that she still had siblings here who were teachers and that her relatives were well respected in the community. My family has long held a reputation of enjoying learning and work, and all my mother's family and relatives were here. So, she eventually convinced my father, and instead of going to Battambang, we came here. When we arrived, they really did treat us as their enemies. They sent us away from where we used to be to another place because they thought we were their enemies, traitors to them. In reality, we had only left the countryside in the first place to escape the violence and bombings from the American military. For my family, we never have supported the Soviets or Communism. My family has long been one that loves America—we love democracy and that structure of government, we've liked America since the beginning. So when we came back from Phnom Penh we were seen as traitors, and our neighbors forced us to move to another village. But my mother's older brother went to the village leaders and negotiated with them, saying that we had only left because of the violence, and eventually, they relented and let us back into our village again. But from '75 to '79, those three years, eight months, and twenty days [during the Pol Pot regime], our sorrows and difficulties were beyond imagination. [The Khmer Rouge] treated us as their enemies. They never made it easy for us to live.

A: Right.

B: Instead, they made it torture for my family. Eventually, it ended in my whole family dying. My grandma, grandpa, uncles and aunts, all of my cousins—all of them were killed. The only ones left were my parents, me, and my siblings. Only the six of us survived. Outside of that, all of them were taken to be killed. We were shocked and horrified, and it depressed us to the core. They deprived us of everything and in every way they could. At the time I was only eight years old. In the mornings there was nothing to eat, so I wandered around the neighborhood looking for fish bones and scraps. We dug in the fields and sometimes found a field crab, which we ate raw. If we could find a frog in the water, we grabbed it and tried to cook it near anything warm until it was hard enough to eat, and then we ripped it up and ate it like animals. We became so skinny, like we had never even tasted anything—we saw coconuts they threw away on the road, it was just absurd. All I remember was just how miserable it was. And to endure for those three years and eight months, it was almost impossible for a young boy to live through. Many people died. My mother said that I was just skin and bones but that I was never sick. If anyone got sick, they died. That's why I feel like I was blessed from God, that God preserved my life and allowed me to stay. I survived that regime and experience and I'm disgusted with the memory of it. In the end, I survived somehow. Besides us, all of them died. After '79 we were free from Pol Pot but during the regime, every day we were allowed only a single scoop of rice porridge per person—they wouldn't let us take any more. In the rainy season, sometimes they would let us eat only a single potato for one meal. I cried so hard because of how hungry I was. We often didn't know when we would get anything else to eat. Sometimes our parents would be able to sneak in to visit us during the night. At 11 or 12 o'clock, they would come in and hug us, and sometimes they would bring a bunch of bananas or a papaya stem for us. The top part of the stem you could take and boil and then eat. Sometimes they would be able to get part of a buffalo skin from somewhere, and they boiled it and pounded it until it was soft enough for us to chew on for the whole night. They gave us the buffalo skin to chew on to keep our stomachs from hurting as bad. Our parents only had time to come and meet us during the night—they were too busy during the day. It was so difficult to connect with them because it was almost impossible to meet them—from the beginning of [the regime] until the very end. It wasn't at all what it is like to care for children today. Now we can give much more love and care for our children, much more than I received. So, my life was difficult beyond measure. I never expected that I would live until now, because of how extremely difficult it was on every side for us. It was only that I never fell ill—that was it. No matter how skinny I became or how weak I became I just never got sick. If I got sick, I almost surely would have died. So, I was able to endure all the way until Pol Pot ended, and afterward, I have been learning and educating myself until now.

A: So, during the time of Pol Pot, who did you live with?

B: I had a few others living with me. I have five siblings, and the ones older than me already had been enlisted as soldiers to attack the Vietnamese troops on the eastern border. Everyone who was about 20 or so years old they sent to be soldiers, and none of them ever came back. They were all killed by the Vietnamese troops. My second oldest brother died of a dog bite. My third oldest brother was put to work in the fields with the old people. I

stayed at home and took care of my younger siblings. I had a younger sibling born in 1976, and there was no one else to take care of them. Afterward, they took my younger brother away from me for the elderly to look after. So, I only had the two of us—me and my sister. My sister and I stayed together because we were twins. So just the two of us stayed together. Sometimes it was a full month between visits from my mother. Sometimes she would take me to follow her to where she was working because there was a chance that they would give us enough rice to be full. At lunchtime they gave each of us a scoop of rice, but at home in the village, there was nothing to eat at all, and I always went hungry. The people giving the rice sometimes complained and just told her to send me home, but the people around us pitied me, and I heard them say, “Just let him eat, he’s small and doesn’t get much anyways.” They gave me a full scoop of rice and I ate until I was full. But at home in the village, there was nothing to eat at all, and I always went hungry. So we often had to go after our parents, but it wasn’t truly like living with them. Our parents didn’t raise us, they never taught or trained us, they didn’t encourage or have a relationship with us. We lived as animals, in the elements. Not even equal to animals. Animals are taken care of and bathed, you know? They’re taken to the doctor when sick and watched over. But the children at the time of Pol Pot never ate as well as the animals do today. Animals have feeding bowls—they have things to eat. We were starved. There was nothing. When we walked our legs looked like the legs of animals because of how bony we were. We had no human food. We only had animal food, and it was truly miserable.

A: Thank you very much for sharing about your experience during the Pol Pot regime.

B: Of course.

A: I want to ask about the best time in your life, a time that makes you happy and that you remember to this day. Could you share a time in your life that was like that?

B: What kind of time?

A: A good time in your life that made you the happiest.

B: The best experiences of my life—I've had many good memories and experiences, and I have had different types of them. But the best time that I've had in my life so far was when I learned about the gospel. When I began to learn about God's path, I began to realize that this time was a chance for my family to receive the greatest blessings. Even though I don't have a car, and I don't have a lot of money or expensive things for my family, I know that God has prepared my family to be able to live in peace. Life is much different than it was before I knew the gospel. Because we know the way of God—it is different from the way of the world—we know how to understand and communicate with each other and we know how to forgive each other, even when we find it difficult to be patient. We can forgive others around us and be kind towards them, and we know how to love our children a lot and encourage them. Since the time we learned about the gospel God has truly taught us a great deal, and so I remember this as the most amazing time in the lives of my family.

A: Thank you. I actually forgot to ask about your siblings when we were talking about the Pol Pot regime. Could you tell them to me please?

B: My oldest brother is named Kov Dara, the second was my sister, Kov Neary, the third was my brother Kov Darit, and then after him is me, Kov Vongdy. And after me is Kov Srey

Touch. After her is Kov Rotanak, and then Kov Sirat. Seven total, and one died, so six left.

A: So, six left. So now where do they live?

B: Right now, they've broken up far away from each other. In my mother's hometown, there are three of us. Two moved to Stueng Trang district, and I am in a different village but in the same commune as the three others. My village is called Ampil Thom, but my three siblings are in Preah Theat. But it is the same commune of Kvut, the district of Prey Chhor. And my two brothers went over to Stueng Trang, and they have wives there now.

A: Oh cool. Before you told us you were a twin right?

B: Yes, I am a twin!

A: Really?

B: Yes! She is a member of the Church too but now she is inactive.

A: Twins as two boys, or a boy and a girl?

B: One girl and one boy. Right now, she works as a teacher at Lvea Primary School in Prey Chhor.

A: Wow! I didn't know that at all!

B: Yes! She's my twin.

A: Oh, that's awesome!

B: Yes, one girl one boy.

A: Well, I am truly grateful that Dy has been willing to share some of his life experience and has told us about the time of Pol Pot and his family as well. I know what we've done today will be a record that will always be kept. It is a record for your descendants so that they will be able to know about your life and the difficulties and sorrows you have faced. It will be a family history record that will truly bless your family. So, after our interview, our conversation will be uploaded to the Brigham Young University website. Is that okay with you, and do you agree to the interview being uploaded to our website?

B: Yes, you can put it anywhere you want. I have no problem with that.

A: Then, thank you so much for the chance to interview today!

B: Yes, of course.

*Translated by Devon Crane and edited by Thomas Barrett.*