

Interview with Khun Soeun

A: Interviewer: Heng Sovannarin

B: Interviewee: Khun Soeun

Summary of the Interview

Khun Soeun was born in the Year of the Rooster in Kampuchea Krom. She begins her interview by recounting her family history, childhood memories, and how she met her husband before launching into her experiences during the Khmer Rouge. She recounts being relocated over and over after the Pol Pot regime took over the country and shares how she survived the conditions and horrors of a notorious “reeducation” camp. Despite her hardships—as she puts it—she refused “to give up,” and her tenacity helped her survive the Khmer Rouge and the chaotic aftermath of the Vietnamese invasion.

A: Yes! Right, thank you today for allowing me to interview you about some of your history, regarding your life that happened in the past, and you can say that you went through the Pol Pot era, right? So, this is a program of a university in the United States, they interview others to save and share this record for the next generation. So, do you agree to letting us put this recording on our website, yes?

B: You may, whatever you want to do, do it.

A: So, today is February 20, 2020, my name is Heng Sovannarin and this is Khun Soeun who is being interviewed in Phnom Krom, Siem Reap province. Can you tell me your full name?

B: My name is Khun Soeun.

A: Do you have any nicknames?

B: They call me Soeur, that's right. Ask the grandchildren, they know already.

A: Yes! How old are you this year?

B: 78 years old.

A: And if you are thinking in lunar years, what year were you?

B: The Year of the Rooster.

A: Where is your birthplace?

B: It is very far away in Kampuchea Krom, but I've been here for a long time, since I was young.

A: How many siblings do you have?

B: I don't have any siblings here—that is, any birth siblings. There are only siblings-in-law, cousins, grandchildren, and a sibling's child.

A: What about the siblings you do have?

B: There are five of them, they are in Phnom Penh, in Battambang, and in Kampuchea Krom.

A: And which child were you?

B: The fourth child.

A: And do you remember the names of your siblings, can you tell me their names? Starting from the oldest?

B: The oldest was Ouy, then Chouy, then Amik, then Kry Hangy, myself, and then the youngest one, Teak.

A: Oh, in all, five people. But, six people including you, right?

B: Yes!

A: So, do you have any stories with your siblings?

B: I didn't have any. We would separate from each other, and we didn't have any stories when we argued or were each other's enemies. We would meet up again, and we were still just siblings, it was just good.

A: Do you have any experiences or memories, or did you like to play with them when you were young?

B: There was nothing outside of playing jump rope, that's right.

A: So, for those of in Siem Reap, you're the only one? The others are in Kampuchea Krom?

B: In Kampuchea Krom, in Phnom Penh as well, in Battambang as well, but I am the only one here.

A: So, what about your parents, what were their names?

B: My mother was named Chean, my father was named Khun.

A: And how old are they?

B: They both died when I was still small, I don't know how old they were.

A: Where were their birthplaces?

B: In Kampuchea Krom. But I always have my relatives guide me there, I always go with them, you know? Every once in a while, we meet each other and whatnot.

A: So, you don't remember how old they were?

B: No! I came ever since Pon Phim Chan, which is why I remember.

A: So, do you remember their occupations?

B: They didn't do anything, we were just in the fields. We had cows and buffaloes—we had the fields to work in and whatnot.

A: And your mother worked in the field too?

B: Yes! When we came here, we came and didn't have anything to do. We sold goods and other small things to nourish our bellies. My siblings in Battambang, they grow crops, they grow cabbages, and they also grow mushrooms. We go to visit on occasion—that's all that the gardeners and those that work in the fields have.

A: So, what stories do you remember with your parents, did you ever play with them, or were you by their side when you were small?

B: My older siblings, they were here. They always took us with them, to do this work, to find this, do this, help watch the other children and grandchildren—I was small back then, and when I grew up, I always looked for this and that, and eventually we split away far from each other.

A: Do you remember your grandparents?

B: I don't remember them.

A: You don't remember anything on both sides?

B: So, how could I remember? We came from Pon Phim Chan when I was small. If there was anyone near us, it would be them.

A: What is the name of your husband?

B: His name is Chhom, he is here.

A: What year did you get married?

B: I don't know which year, I didn't get married, but back then we both loved each other.

A: So, that means you performed an offering, and do you remember that year that was?

B: In the Lon Nol era.

A: What year was that?

B: That was in the 1960's, I've forgotten already.

A: So, your marriage was arranged by the elders, is that right?

B: Yes! The elders married us here.

A: And how did you and your husband meet each other?

B: We went to take a walk and whatnot, we met each other and he teased me over and over, and then we loved each other.

A: What type of person is he?

B: He is very gentle, the relatives—they all love him. He works on the ferry, he is friendly with others, and anyone that comes by can come in our house.

A: Do you know any other language besides Khmer?

B: Only Chinese and Vietnamese, that's it.

A: Can you use it to speak with others?

B: It's been a long time, my tongue has changed. But when I was young, I could use it.

A: And you learned until you reached what grade?

B: I didn't learn, our generation didn't learn, there was nothing to do with learning. If we went to learn the Vietnamese alphabet, we would go for four or five days and then be busy with siblings, or with our relatives, which is why we didn't go. That is why we didn't come up anymore at all.

A: How do you know that language?

B: I learned in my hometown, they used to talk back and forth, I would just listen, and then I knew it as well. It wasn't hard to learn, the Vietnamese language. Chinese was also very easy, as long as we focused.

A: Do you have any close friends who came together?

B: No, they've separated from each other already.

A: Do you remember their names?

B: I don't remember! If we never called each other, or talked with each other, if we saw each other, we would call out and say, "Ah! [...] It has been fourteen years and we haven't seen each other once!" We haven't seen each other's faces, and would only feel shy.

[Laughs]

A: So, do you have any memories with them?

B: Yes, but after a long time we forget, but if we see each other again, we would talk about this and that.

A: Do you have any memories of harvesting rice?

B: No, I have never harvested anything, except for the Pol Pot generation, I harvested with the others, but while harvesting, someone got their hand cut off so they had us stop harvesting.

A: So, from your childhood until now, what has changed in your life?

B: Oh, it's changed a lot. It has changed because we don't work in the fields or anything with others. I have a husband and things like that. When Pol Pot came, we were always just drifting along, around mother, grandmother, aunt or uncle, and all of them. We were like those children.

A: Ever since you were a child until now, what do you like to eat the most?

B: What I like the most—fried fish, grilled fish, prahok, crushed prahok, and roasted prahok, I like those.

A: And what about some popular games, what have you liked to play ever since you were a child until now?

B: We play cards! For that, we would get together every day, every night. [Laughs]

A: Do you like to listen to music?

B: I don't really like it.

A: And in your family, is there anyone that knows how to play music?

B: Nobody knows how to.

A: And what was your house like before? How has it changed?

B: Change, we didn't have—the son was a little bit troublesome. We only had the grandson, it would go to learn, it would go to earn what it could. And the mother had a persistent sickness, and that is hard too. And for me, for two full years I've walked everywhere. But I never was familiar with Siem Reap, I only knew it when I got married, I went there for a

few days.

A: So, you're saying that your house from before, in the era before until now—

B: This is someone else's house, they let us stay here to watch it for them. Our house was over there, but they sold it already.

A: So, what skills did you have when you were a child or when you were a young woman?

B: I used to sell goods, only in recent years have I stopped. A few years ago, I sold clothing, sarong, embroidered fabric, and other fabric. But then I fell into hardship, and I didn't have anything. I tried everything but nothing worked. The mother always comes to visit, to watch the grandchild and whatnot, and cook rice to eat. They don't have us do anything—we are always in want. Like, when I am sick, they make us mango fruit leather, they don't have us do it. Looking at it, the father is moving the whole house—no regrets, we must make an effort. They gave a little to the nephew to let the grandchild go.

A: Can you tell me about the hardships and difficulties you have had ever since you were a child, until now? Can you recount anything?

B: Ever since I was young, I didn't really have many difficulties, it has only been when I've gotten older and when I am sick, that it has begun to do bother me. It comes and goes, but that is why they help with the medicine, we had our relatives buy the small medicine, medicine for diabetes, medicine for the nerves, any medicine. That's why I don't know what to do to heal properly. The youngest sent money, and the girl came once to give 10-20 dollars and whatnot—their money is their good deed.

A: Can you tell us about some of the hardships you had during the Pol Pot era? Can you recount a little about it, so that the youth in future generations may know [about it]?

B: Before they came in—before Pol Pot came in, I worked on a farm on vacant land. It was a bean and watermelon farm, I worked there and saw that the fruit was about this big—and with the fruit that size, we kept them to sell them at a high price. And when they came in, [...] they came to pick the fruit at first, they came and they didn't ask for it—they bought from us. One was 3000—3000 riel, and I made an effort to carry it. After carrying it, I fell once, which left a bruise on my shoulder. After that, I took it to be sold and when I saw the money, I was so happy because I had a lot of money. I didn't think about gold and silver, I only thought about selling the watermelons at a high price. And then suddenly, when 5 days had passed, they evacuated us from there to the mountain. Once we got to the mountain, they had us stay there. Back then, my husband had another wife. [He] was always with— [Audio Cuts Out] —neither [his] first nor second wife remembered that it wasn't just the women that were in the wrong, but it was wrong for the men as well. But I didn't say anything - I just stayed there. We were there for 10 days, and they evacuated us again. We were evacuated and went to Sout Nikom. We always walked—we didn't have anything to ride on. [We] saw the military troops pull out money, tear it, and roll cigarettes to smoke. I carried my pillow and remembered that I had gotten a lot of money, which I put in my pillow. I carried it on my head, thinking that I would spend it, but when I saw them do that, I threw it away - I chose the money that had the picture of the [...] and the one with the lady carrying the pot on her head and I just threw them away, little but little. I didn't dare let them see it, so I hid it in my pillow. And then, when we got to Sout Nikom, they had

us go live in Thlat. Oh, I walked and carried my children too—I carried Phal and held the hand of my other child Pheap, and they put my belongings on a cart. I always just went with them. And at the establishment, I was with an older lady, she had a good heart. She had a good heart, and she said, “What are you doing? Child, stay here, don’t go anywhere else. It is like I have a connection with you”. I didn’t know how to crush or winnow the rice. They would give us the rice plant, and we would dry it, not crush it - I couldn’t do it, and she said to bring it to her, and she would do it for me. I went there for 2 days, and they set a plan for us to go dry and crush the rice, to hull the rice. It was just us there. [We would] hull the rice, they would give us a woven basket, a rattan basket. They said to winnow the rice and whatnot, then they put the rice husk under the rice. They did that, and then they put the rice that we eat in the middle, and they put the husk on top too. [I said], “Oh! I don’t dare to take it, friend, I don’t dare to carry it on my head.” They said, “Friend, do you want to starve? Carry it on your head, nobody is going to do it for you!” They gave it to everyone working in the rice fields. And I had a friend, they took it to—they took by the road they would walk—and they brought it to their house. And I didn’t know how to winnow. [...] She said to bring it to her, she would do it and keep it. When I had her eat it, she said, “No, I have [some] already, you make the food and eat it.” When night came, they came and inquired underneath our house. After that, the rice and porridge and fruit went to the place [they sent people] to “improve themselves.” At the cooperative there, once the children had finished eating and night came, they would bring some to the house to give [us]. But for our rice porridge, they would mix it with the water lily, and when they would mix it with the water lily, [we] saw that it was just water and the leftover lily pieces, and only a few grains of rice. When we went at first, they beat us into suppression. Whatever we could [eat], we would eat, we didn’t say anything. And then, after two months, they took us to “improve ourselves”. They said that we were—what was it? [They said that we were] spies and would be taken to “improve ourselves”. The owner of the house had a good heart, and was old, and had] a child that was a soldier. And when [the owner] saw that, [the owner] said, “If you go, go by yourself. Keep your child here for me to watch.” I replied, “No, if I’m going to die, then let us all die, so as to not let the mother go and have the child live and suffer.” They took us, and [we] went until nine o’clock at night, and at twelve o’clock, we got rice porridge to eat. We went to sleep until three o’clock when we got up and they had us meet, they called a meeting at the rice field they had for the dry season. And our field was at the mouth of the riverside. [...] Oh, we saw water leeches and other things too. We closed our eyes to feel comfortable when we weeded. [...] And we brought ropes, afraid the leeches would come up. We tried [not] to cry, we weeded little by little and saw snails, but we didn’t dare to gather them, because the older women would take it. The youth soldiers said that they would split our heads open, and [asked] whether we were scared of leeches or scared of bombs. [We] didn’t dare speak, they just said to work. And we didn’t dare sit down, didn’t dare stop—which is why we had pain in our side, it was a ridiculous pain. When it came time for food, I would walk home and when I got to the house, my back would bother me. Then, they rang the bell again. Which is why I didn’t dare— [coughs] Eventually, after about a month, they promoted me to be in charge of the management, to be in charge of the rice at the cooperative and at the jungle location. They said, “stop going into the water!” They had me distribute the rice and whatnot for them, and make rice for them—I had a skill in making rice. I would make rice in a portable mess kit on a stick and put firewood [underneath] to cook it. They said, “You don’t give up, nothing we do works”

because whatever they did, I kept going. I never said, “Oh, I am sick with this, or sick with that”. I wasn’t sick, as long as I lived to watch my children. And when we went to the dry season rice field, they didn’t make us huts to stay comfortably, they just put wood up, they brought walls of rice stalks, and put that on top and had us stay there. If it rained, then it rained. If it was windy, it was windy, and if it was hot, it stayed hot—we just endured it, I wasn’t willing to give up and die. And then after that, came and said, “Do you want to go to the cooperative?” I said, “I am afraid, don’t make me go”. They said, “Come, I will escort you there”. When the people of the cooperative saw, they said that there were ten that went, [but] nobody ever came back. They killed all of them. So, they said, “friend, you are so lucky!” When I came back, they brought a cart full of rice back as well, because there was nothing to be found there. They gave me rice to make pastries, like Nom Kontrom for them. I would make it and bring it to give to them once a week. Occasionally, they would take and send them. They said I was so lucky. [...] They said that it had never happened before—they had killed all the wives and everyone there, except for me and two or three families that were alright. I pitied the Vietnamese and Chinese. [...] They caught them and took them to be killed. [...] And anyone who gathered [things]—they died, they didn’t survive. And we worked until we were finished in the dry rice field. They didn’t have us come back up, [we] carried dirt to put on the dams. Oh, we would carry dirt and put it on the dam—and any long necklaces [were taken] to be used as lantern wicks, they repossessed them. [If] they forgot, they threw it away, and we’d gather it, but we wouldn’t let them see us take it. Whatever you did, you could do it—if you walked too far or carried anything, you could do it—just don’t let them find out. After a while, they came to visit and made it easy [for us], because whatever we did, we didn’t know or hear anything. [In fact], we didn’t want [to know] anything—as long as we could live. That is why I have survived until nowadays and I am grateful already. But now, I have been sicker, and want to die and I can’t go anywhere, I only can sit, [...] and watch them.

A: How did you get through that difficulty?

B: I got through it because they had me be in charge of cutting where the rice was. There were more than a hundred people, including Chinese, including Vietnamese, including Khmer. All of them, when night came, [...] they would go, and the group of friends would go on top of the mountain range, and they only rode bikes. For me, they had me oversee the house, watching it was my responsibility. The people we were with, sometimes they wanted to visit another person’s house, and they didn’t dare to ask the others. They would come and say, “Sister, may I please go to visit [their] house for a night?” If they went, they would have to come back, and not let them know. Then, that happened back and forth for half a month before the Vietnamese came in, they rode in a car and cried out and called, sang, and danced. They didn’t dare to come where we were, but we were still in charge of cutting their [rice]. We saw the owner come and say, “Hey! There are cows and buffaloes, come and take them for yourself by cart.” The month we had harvested the rice, we came to take it. And when I had them go to take it, they said, “You are foolish, there are so many that you couldn’t count them all—not a single yoke or two yokes. Don’t try and take their property.” But for rice, I took some of that. They criticized and whatnot, and I only took three small packages. I didn’t dare to take a lot, I was scared of [taking] their things. We did [...] and came back to the establishment house. They helped bring us by cart, they didn’t have us walk any longer—they escorted our cart, chickens, and [tools to work the land] on

the road. They brought three more people as well. Some people rented from others, they didn't escort me. They said, "No", and that they were busy. But they were busy bringing the rice from that location. And whoever dared to take it, I was the only one that took charge, so I let them take it, it was theirs, not mine. That is why every day, I just needed to tell them to go and get rice for themselves and bring it back to eat.

A: So, I want to know about the really good stories from your life. What story do you remember the most?

B: I remember a story when my relatives, they sent [things], I was sick and they sent things to me. I was so happy, because I got better, and I lived for the benefit of my children and grandchildren. I am amazed every day, the youngest—I miss her every day because I used to live with her. It's not because they sent money that they are good, no. They said that we used to live together, when they came back, they were happy for us too. The relatives still work in the fields there too. The people I used to live with, they went to be in the commune, they said that they will come back soon, just a little longer and they will share the land and whatnot. They go every day, and they still give rice and fish to eat.

A: When you were younger, what did you want to become when you grew up?

B: I didn't really want anything. I just wanted to live, I saw people sell things and wanted to sell like them. We could climb the guava and mango trees, pick [the fruit], soak it, and then sell it. [I just] didn't want to have to ask others for stuff.

A: Do you have any message you want to send to the youth in the next generation?

B: I want the younger generation to not have any more difficulties. That's it, to only have happiness, not to have any more suffering. I just [want them] to think about what we can do to guide each other. If we are wrong, we can talk and correct each other to be right. Don't be wrong and urge others to do accordingly. Only do good to [your] children and nephews, so that they don't do bad things. Our lives are very valuable. I've gone through this much, I'm very pleased.

A: Thank you very much for doing this interview with me. I am happy to learn from your history. As I said before, I will save this interview on our website. In the future your children can go and listen to your experience, so thank you very much.

B: Have a long life, all together. Please carry and save all my words.

Partially translated by several COHP volunteers, retranslated by Thomas Barrett in August 2022.