

## **Sek San's Interview**

**A: Interviewer Thorn Reatha**

**B: Interviewee Sek San**

A: Yes! Today is February 13, 2020. And my name is [Thorn Reatha]. I am with the team of the Cambodian Oral History Project. This project is supported by a university called BYU in the United States. And this project's website is *cambodianoralhistories.byu.edu*. And if your children and wife want, they can visit this site.

They will see the interview of you today. Yes! The purpose of this interview is to keep your personal biography, from your childhood until now, and your dreams and aspirations. Oh! All that you have we save for your descendants to learn. Yes! To let them know and to preserve your personal history.

Yes! So, if they want to get this interview, they just go to the website I mentioned above, that's it. They will see the interview and today I came to see [Sek San]. He is 57 years old. Currently, he lives in [Tuol Ta Aek] village, [Ou Char] District, [Battambang] city, and [Battambang] province. Yes! So, the first question I want to tell you is to ask you to tell me your name again, what is your name?

B: My name is [Sek San].

A: Yes! [Sek San], do you have a nickname?

B: From the beginning, they've always called me by my last name.

A: Since childhood?

B: From young to old.

A: What was your name as a child?

B: [Sek San].

A: Yes!

B: My father is named [Sek], and the son is named [San].

A: Yes!

B: And my grandfather's name was [Ros].

A: Grandfather [Ros]?

B: Grandfather [Ros], the surname was [San].

A: Thank you. Please tell me your age again. How old are you?

B: I am 57 years old.

A: If we think of it in Khmer years - what year were you born?

B: Oh, I only know it was before the [Lon Nol] coup d'etat of the King (Sihanouk).

A: Yes!

B: I was of age at that time, old enough. Old enough, but not well educated.

A: Yes!

B: At that time, we ran away.

A: At that time, did you know what year you were born?

B: That time was in '62.

A: '62, yes.

B: '62, a long time ago!

A: Do you remember the month?

B: No! I don't remember.

A: Do you remember the day?

B: I also don't know the day, but it was before '62.

A: Yes! Before '62, that was a long time ago. So where is your birthplace, where were you born?

B: My birthplace, where I was born, is [Phnom Touch].

A: [Phnom Touch].

A: [Phnom Touch], [Phnom Thom].

A: [Battambang] province, right?

B: [Battambang] province.

A: And can you tell me why you moved from [Phnom Touch] to [Phnom Toul Ek]?

B: That time my mother stopped living in her hometown.

A: Yes!

B: I was with my father's side. My father's district also had children and grandchildren come to [Battambang] province.

B: Yes! And [Phnom Touch], I never went there. I had so many siblings there, so much, they came and went so it was as if we did not have all the brothers and sisters. Only one cousin was left. I couldn't go, I was not rich, they were all rich, they had siblings in America. I couldn't ask for money like that.

A: Yes! You said there are many relatives in [Phnom Touch], [Phnom Thom], can you tell me why it is called [Phnom Touch], [Phnom Thom]?

B: Oh! [Phnom Touch], [Phnom Thom], if we talk about the history from the old days, it is called [Bong Touch], [Bong Thom].

A: Yes!

A: [Phnom Touch], [Phnom Thom].

A: Yes!

B: [Bong Touch], [Bong Thom]. [Bong Touch], [Bong Thom].

A: [Bong Touch], [Bong Thom]. [Bong Touch] is [Phnom Touch], and [Bong Thom] is called [Phnom Thom], right?

B: Yes! That's all I can remember.

A: Yes! Thank you, and in regards to languages, besides Khmer, do you know any language?

B: No! I don't know. Back in that time, I was always driving.

A: Yes!

B: Driving ox carts. My father drove for [Bopha Devi].

A: Oh! Who did he drive for?

B: [Bopha Devi].

A: [Bopha Devi] was whose wife?

B: The child of the king. [Bopha Devi], my father drove for her personally.

A: She was the child of the king.

B: He drove cars as service.

A: [Bopha Devi] was the child of the king?

B: Yes! Of the king.

A: So [Bopha Devi] was the child of the king?

B: Child of the king.

A: King [Sihanouk]?

B: King [Sihanouk].

A: Yes!

B: And I say, others do not believe, but if myself, I believe.

A: Because you were there yourself.

B: Yes! I met her in person.

A: In relation to marriage. How many years did you know your wife before you married her?

B: I know three, two children, just after the Vietnamese left the district.

A: Yes! How many years did you know your wife before you married? Did you know immediately and love her immediately, or did you love her for a long time?

B: Oh! A long time.

A: And why did you decide to take your wife as a partner?

B: At that time, I was driving cars, until I drove them all. My father said that [business] driving a car was all dried up, it wouldn't work. There were many cars for women. So, I also stopped driving cars, and I came to drive a Remorque, a four-wheeled tuk-tuk, then I stopped driving to dig wells. Wells, 2 meters with 4 corners. [I would get] one thousand, on thousand Khmer riel. I saw her clearing wells, and loved her from then on, and just built that, I tried hard to endure, that's all.

A: So, when preparing as a couple, who prepared you?

B: We got together voluntarily.

A: At that time, was there a wedding fee?

B: No!

A: So why did you decide to take your wife as a partner, is there a reason?

B: Before, I realized that she was good, she loved me and I decided to take her as a future partner.

A: Because she was kind to you.

B: Yes!

A: Have you eaten yet?

B: No! A little later I'll eat.

A: What do you have to eat today?

B: It's prahok, vegetables and sauce.

A: It smells very good.

B: It does smell good; they boil the cow intestines and save it for the evening.

A: Not midday, right?

B: No.

A: Yes! When you got married, you had children, right? So how many children do you have now?

B: I have 4 children, 2 girls, 2 boys.

A: Could you tell me the name of your first child?

B: The first child is named [Sek Sokha].

A: And what is the name of the child's family?

B: The family of that child, I don't know much about that child's family. On my side of [...], that child is a monk at the pagoda.

A: So how many children do they have?

B: The eldest child has two children, both girls.

A: Do you remember their names?

B: No!

A: No, right? Because they are too far?

B: They are in this corner. The grandchildren come here.

A: But you do not remember their names?

B: I do not remember their names.

A: What is the name of your second child?

B: [Sek Sith].

A: Does he already have a wife?

B: Yes!

A: Yes! What is his wife's name?

B: I do not know! They are in the hometown; I don't know their background.

A: Does he have any children?

B: He has a child.

A: Yes! What is that child's name?

B: That child, I don't know the name. I do not remember!

A: And for them, where did they both go?

B: They went to the factory. It is close to the workplace.

A: What is the name of the third child?

B: [Samnang]!

A: Does he have a family yet?

B: No.

A: Yes! How old is he?

B: Twenty-six, or twenty-seven.

A: Yes! And he does not have a partner yet?

B: Not yet.

A: Yes! What does he do every day?

B: He works in construction with his father.

A: What about after [Samnang], the sibling of [Samnang], what is their name?

B: [Sek]!

A: What is the name of the youngest child?

B: The youngest is [Sek Nhanh].

A: [Nhanh]! Are they a girl or boy?

B: Girl!

A: A girl, does she already have a family?

B: Yes!

A: How many children does she have?

B: She has one child.

A: And what is [Nhanh]'s family name?

B: [Chamroeun].

A: [Chamroeun]? What is the name of her child?

B: That child. I don't know the name. I don't not know their wife either.

A: Yes!

B: I don't know what their name is. They are named after some of the French.

A: Yes! So, your relatives? Yes! So, you have children and grandchildren? Yes! Can you tell me how many siblings you have?

B: There are 5 siblings. Two are dead. There are three left.

A: Could you please tell us about each of them, what are their names?

B: The first is named [Sek Soeun], the second is named [Sek Sean], and then [Sek San], which is me, then [Sek Sol], who drives the car for [Hun] every day, [Hun] every day. Another, [Sek Oun], is in [Banan].

A: Yes!

B: Only 5 people.

A: Do they all have families already?

B: They already all have families.

A: Do you remember their families?

B: Their families, of the ones that died are still here now.

A: Yes! They have children?

B: They have children, they all suffer every day, it's very difficult.

A: Yes!

B: They have their husbands and wives. Their husbands and wives haven't died yet. They can take care of each other, watch each other every day.

A: Do you have siblings that live in other countries?

B: Yes!

A: What are their names?

B: My grandfather's name is [Ros]. My birth father's name is [Sek]. The mother was with – there is one father but with a different mother. They don't like us.

A: Yes!

B: They only listen to their wife.

A: Yes!

B: Their home is big, I don't have much, just this.

A: Which country do they live in?

B: [Australia].

A: [Australia]? How many years have they been there?

B: Since the Vietnamese came.

A: So, you have siblings, you remember, do you remember the names of those in [Australia]?

B: I remember! The older brother's name is [Ros Sovannky].

A: Does he have children outside the country?

B: He has children outside the country, his children work as doctors.

A: Yes! He is there, husband and wife together. Sorry, what are your parent's names?

B: My father's name is [Sek].

A: Yes!

B: The father of my father was named [Ros].

A: Yes! And your mother on your father's side?

B: I don't know.

A: Yes!

B: I don't know. I don't know where she is.

A: Yes! And what is your mother's name?

B: My mother's name is [Koem].

A: Yes!

B: My birth mother.

A: Yes! And your non-birth mother?

B: Mother, mother-in-law?

A: Yes!

B: My mother-in-law's name is [Hang].

A: [Hang], right?

B: [Ta Pheach].

A: [Ta Pheach]?

B: Yes!

A: So, your birth mother? What are your mother's parent's names?

B: My mother's name is [Koem]. My father's name is [Sek], he is already dead.

A: Oh, the father of your mother, what is his name? Your grandfather on your mother's side, do you remember?

B: I remember!

A: What is his name?

B: My birth grandmother's name is Grandmother [Pok], my birth grandfather's name is Grandfather [Ros]. [Ros Sek]. *(editor's note: in this section, the interviewee misunderstands the questions and restates his paternal genealogy)*

A: Yes!

B: [Ros Sek]. [Ros] from, from the beginning they call him [Ros], [Ros] from his surname, that's all.

A: Yes! So, you grandparents on your mother's side, are Grandfather [Ros], and Grandmother [Sek]?

B: Yes!

A: Your grandparents on your father's side, names?

B: Name is [Sek].

A: Oh, that is your grandparent on your mother's side.

B: Oh, the grandparent on the mother's side, on my wife's side, I don't know them.

A: Oh! So, you're talking about your mother on your father's side?

B: Yes!

A: So, there are paternal grandparents and maternal grandparents, right?

B: You mean, my wife's mother?

A: No! On your mother's side?

B: Oh! I don't know them.

A: You don't know them?

B: I only know my father's side. I don't know my mother's side.

A: Yes! No problem, I understand. So, in relation to your mother, how many siblings did she have?

B: My mother, my birth mother?

A: Yes!

B: She had siblings, let's see -- my mother, aunt, uncle -- oh, 4 people.

A: What are their names?

B: Oh! [One of] my mother's siblings, he was a soldier, during the American era. If he did not have four tattoos, he had five.

A: Yes!

B: Yes! He came to the airport. His wife is at [Wat Sangke]. Then came my mother's sister, my birth mother.

A: Yes!

B: [First], that brother, my mother was second.

A: Yes!

B: Next was my youngest aunt. My aunt, she was older than the youngest! After that was the youngest of them all, so there were four people. 2 girls and 2 boys.

A: Do you remember their names?

B: I remember!

A: Yes! Will you tell me a bit?

B: Yes! First, my mother's older brother is named [Meakeov].

B: Yes! He was a soldier for [Lon Nol]. In the [Lon Nol] era.

A: Yes! And the second?

B: Second, is my mother.

A: And third?

B: Third, is my aunt.

A: What is her name?

B: Her name is [Hum].

A: And the fourth? What is their name?

B: The fourth is the youngest of us, their name is [Mas].

A: Can you tell us more about your father? How many siblings did he have?

B: How many siblings he had? Give me a second -- I only heard of two children.

A: Two children!

B: Yes, my father and his younger brother.

A: I see, and what are their names?

B: My father's name is [Sek], and his younger brother's name is [Sarika]. [Sek] and [Sarika].

A: Yes, and back to you, when you were a child where did you study?

B: I studied at [Po Knong] temple.

A: Ok.

B: [Po Knong] as in, this [Po Knong].

A: Ah, yes.

B: I studied for perhaps a little less than a half a year.

A: Yes.

B: During that time, I saw people being executed by the government. We were always running, and I never got to learn the alphabet. No, I never learned. I didn't learn much at all.

A: Because everyone was running?

B: Running constantly. Running and cowering. And during the time of Pol Pot, they had us carry guns around.

A: So, what is your health like now on a daily basis?

B: My health it isn't very good. I don't know what exactly is wrong. Some days I'm sick and some days I'm not. I'm already this old.

A: Yes.

B: My health's not good.

A: In your opinion, are things different now than they were in the past?

B: Yes, it's different. Very different, yes, very different.

A: Different, how?

B: Right now, this new government of ours is improving a lot.

A: Yes.

B: There are bridges and other things like that. A lot of good things.

A: Yes.

B: That's all I have to say.

A: What about in relation to the economy? Between before and now, which one do you see as being more prosperous?

B: The economy before, before the economy was ridiculous. It was easy to earn money but spending was ridiculous. Now it's hard to earn money but easy to spend it. It's easy to spend now.

A: Back to when you were young, did you ever learn how to cook food from your parents, grandparents, or relatives?

B: Oh! I did, actually. If you're talking about old traditional food, it's very different from food nowadays.

A: Yes.

B: But I don't like the food that's popular right now. Boil water, add some cabbage and other things; that I'll eat. That's very traditional.

A: So, what are some of your favorite foods?

B: My favorites are cabbage soup and bland luffa gourd soup. I like bland foods; I don't eat salty things.

A: So, relating to music, what kind of songs do you like?

B: I like songs by [Sinn Sisamouth].

A: Ah, [Sinn Sisamouth]?

B: [Sinn Sisamouth] and [Meas Samon] and musicians like them, it accompanies feelings. Their time period was such a happy one, [Sinn Sisamouth], [Meas Samon] -- musicians like them.

A: What about movies? What kind of movies do you like?

B: I like [Pao Chen] Chinese movies.

A: Yes, and from when you were younger until now, what kind of work have you enjoyed doing?

B: I liked doing construction work, but now I'm old and would like to stop.

A: You want to stop?

B: Yes, I wasn't to stop because I've done this work since when they were only paying 3,000 riel a day. Nowadays in one day, you make 150,000 riel. I'm stopping I'm too old now.

A: That's a lot of money to stop now.

B: I couldn't go for much longer; my eyesight is also getting darker.

A: What do you like to do in your free time?

B: Free time? Like at night time?

A: Yes, day or night, either way.

B: I like listening to Buddhist chanting and whatnot.

A: So, from the time you were young until now, how many provinces have you visited?

B: Oh! I've been to many provinces. [Siem Reap], [Phnom Penh], [Kampong Thom]. And [Battambang] where I've stayed since.

A: Yes!

B: I loved someone so I stayed here.

A: Oh, you stole the love of someone in [Battambang]!

B: I've been to many provinces like [Siem Reap] and [Battambang] yet I never abandoned [Battambang].

A: Have you ever gone sightseeing? Which places have you gone to?

B: I've never been sightseeing. Nope, never even been.

A: Not even to [Angkor Wat]?

B: I've been to [Angkor Wat]. [Angkor Thom] as well as [Angkor Touch].

A: Yes!

B: I was there 5 years. I was in [Siem Reap] Province for 5 years.

A: What places have you visited in [Battambang]?

B: In Battambang I've been to [Sampov] mountain, [Banan] district, seen the crocodiles, but that's about it.

A: What about [Sek Sak]?

B: Nope! I've never heard of [Sek Sak], I wouldn't know where to go.

A: Then what about [Khiev Mountain]?

B: Not there either. If I rode in a car then I could, but otherwise it's too far to go there and back.

A: Is there anyone in your family that knows how to play music?

B: Oh! In my family no one knows how to play music.

A: No one?

B: No one.

A: Then is there anyone who knows how to make musical instruments. Like the [tro] (cambodian fiddle), drum, piano, and whatnot?

B: Yeah.

A: There aren't any?

B: There aren't any.

A: Ok. Moving on to previous houses. Did you have a house before?

B: Before I did have a house. It had grass thatching, there were palm trees. We moved some soil in, put some hollow bricks in, and slept in it.

A: So, was it made completely out of brick and cement, or did you use wood?

B: The house was made of wood and grass.

A: What were the house's supporting posts made from?

B: The stilts were made from eucalyptus trees. Yes! Eucalyptus wood!

A: And what about the roof?

B: The roof was made from palm fronds.

A: What about the walls?

B: The wall touches the floorboards, the pressed floorboards, [we'd] just put that down, you'd stick a post under the floorboards, [we'd] just attach it. What we needed was a worker to dig the hole just the same.

A: Did you have a window?

B: Yes.

A: The house's fence, what was it made of?

B: House fences, back in that time, were made of prickly American barbwire, with needles that could poke you.

A: For your first house, did you build it yourself or hire a craftsman to do it?

B: Oh! I've been a craftsman from the beginning, yes.

A: Yes! And that house, how long did it take you to build it?

B: If we consider the labor of one person on a house, one day a worker mixes the lime plaster.

A: Ah, yes.

B: For one day, [he'd make] 25,000 [riel]. For us master craftsmen, in a day [we'd make] 10 [dollars]. Some days we don't make money.

A: Oh, I wanted to ask, how long does it take to build the house? How many days?

B: Oh, from the story before?

A: Yes!

B: 10 days.

A: That's it?

B: 10 days, the roof was attached with rubber that had to settle first.

A: Regarding skills, what skills or things did you learn that you didn't know before?

B: Oh! Originally, [it was driving] a cow cart.

A: Yes!

B: My father was a cow cart craftsman.

A: Oh! Okay!

B: A cow cart craftsman and a house builder. I learned from my father.

A: Learned from your father.

B: Yes! I learned from my father.

A: Yes, yes!

B: Only my father drove cars. I was a car driver but I didn't have a future as a driver. I only know houses, construction, and carpentry.

A: Okay! So, you know about carpentry?

B: Carpentry, houses, construction, and concrete too.

A: So, you know how to do concrete, then?

B: I know how do to concrete.

A: What about the weaving industry, do you know how to do that?

B: No! I do not know how.

A: You don't know how?

B: I don't know how.

A: What about planting, do you know how to grow anything?

B: For farming, as a worker, they have us dig in the dirt.

A: Yes!

B: But I haven't applied it much.

A: Right! Have you ever climbed a palm tree to get palm juice to make sugar?

B: Yes!

A: Oh, where did you do it?

B: I did it here. In [Prey Narin].

A: Which province?

B: [Battambang] province, [Sangke] district. In this region.

A: Yes! And how many years did you climb trees to make palm juice into palm sugar?

B: It was probably for 7 years.

A: How many kilos of sugar did you collect per day?

B: In one day, I would climb 37 palm trees, collecting about 10 kilos worth.

A: 10 kilos, that much?

B: Yes! 37 trees, 10 kilos.

A: After you got the sugar, what did you do with it?

B: I'd take it to the clients in the market.

A: Okay! Did you ever make a basket for selling in?

B: No!

A: No?

B: Nope.

A: Have you ever raised animals?

B: I used to raise them, but they keep dying.

A: Yes! What animals?

B: Like chickens and such, dogs too, but they're all gone now.

A: What about the wild animals, did you ever raise them?

B: No!

A: Any birds?

B: No!

A: Squirrels?

B: Squirrels, I love them, I want to raise them but there's not a clear way to raise them.

A: Did you ever raise silkworms?

B: No!

A: Have you ever raised bees?

B: No, no.

A: No?

B: Nope.

A: From a young age until now, what do you think were some hard difficulties that you faced and when did you face them?

B: The first problem that I had, the hardest thing I had to do was to find a place, right teacher?

A: Yes! That is especially difficult to solve.

B: Back in that time, I carried dirt on my shoulders.

A: Yes!

B: I had to carry dirt on my shoulders to raise my children. Raising children and enduring while also building, it was very difficult.

A: Yes! How many years was it?

B: It was hard for nearly 20 years.

A: Nearly 20 years.

B: Yes! Carrying dirt, carrying their waste, their sewage that they flush out with their baskets. We would carry that waste and throw it out in the jungle somewhere.

A: Right.

B: Yes.

A: So, you'd earn those funds to support your family. For close to twenty years?

B: Nearly 20 years.

A: That seems like it's more difficult than construction.

B: Even more difficult than construction, but it made me money. Nowadays, they have machines to pump sewage. Only a single click and it's gone.

A: If that was still a thing, would you still do it?

B: I'd still do it, but now I'm a good craftsman and have become too lazy.

A: Right!

B: Do away with it.

A: Do you have any good experiences to remember from your childhood?

B: Since I was young, I wanted to drive a car. Driving wasn't possible; it wasn't possible to [become] a driver. My father advised me, "child, don't be a driver, drivers have many wives, you do away with your wife and whatnot. Be a craftsman or something, and do it forever.

A: Yes!

B: My siblings are all gone.

A: Yes!

B: I am the only one left. The oldest is the third.

A: Yes! So, which village do you think that all of your relatives are in, the one with the most?

B: Oh, most of the relatives are in [Peng Narin] village, [Aek Phnom] district.

A: Are there a lot?

B: Lots!

A: How many families?

B: Ho! A lot. Great-grandchildren, great-grandchildren, a lot of that line.

A: Yes! But on this other side, are there not many?

B: There are some on this side as well, in [Dang Bey] village.

A: Yes!

B: We have, we have railways.

A: Yes!

B: They come to visit [Ou Dambang Muoy] and [Ou Dambang Pir].

A: Oh! So if you visit them, do they remember to call you?

B: They remember!

A: They remember.

B: But the nephews, they are all [Pek Oem] police. They see us, they don't talk to us much.

A: They don't know you well?

B: They don't know me well, like [Ros Sovannaki], they only support him. But they don't help me, they only help their side [of the family].

A: Yes!

B: They come from the same father but come from a different mother, which is why they don't help us.

A: The same father?

B: Same father.

A: Yes! Thank you for giving the interview from the beginning until now. Well, the interview has come to an end, but before concluding the interview, I would like to tell you a little bit about the purpose of the interview. The purpose of this interview is to keep your personal history to allow the next generation learn from you, so that they will know how easy or difficult it is in our time. Well, before the end of the interview, did you have any ideas or suggestions for the next generation to learn from you?

B: Yes!

B: First, when I was not very literate, first, we understood our knowledge, things were very clear.

A: Yes!

B: [We] had the knowledge that – hey son, we are not, we cannot be like them, they have money. They have money, they just let their children go to school. In those days, we used to walk around carrying land and sewage, to get money to raise our children. My posterity was not very literate. By the fourth or fifth grade, they were done. Yes! I just want to say that the present time period, they are prosperous, their parents are well off, they support them.

A: Yes!

B: I do not know the alphabet, I also don't know numbers, but I urge you child, know that your father is uneducated. And I encourage you, child, to grow up sufficiently to know how to add numbers, measure meters, so you can do houses.

A: Yes!

B: Every day, I have a child.

A: Yes!

B: Because that child, I push him to get education.

A: Yes!

B: I am very uneducated.

A: Yes!

B: Uneducated.

A: So, what do you want your children to do in the future? Your posterity?

B: Yes! Oh, I just want to tell my children to strive to learn to understand the concept of letters and numbers clearly. Do not be like your me, from that time I always ran and crawled, very uneducated.

A: You didn't really learn?

B: I did not study, I only studied for a year. The [Lon Nol] coup d'etat of the king happened immediately, [I] ran until the [Pol Pot era], Pol Pot [for] 3 years.

A: Speaking of which, you just started working when you finished, once the war was over. So, you started working, you did not study?

B: I didn't learn. I always just worked, yes.

A: Yes!

B: Dug the land, plowed the fields. I didn't have mother and father, because I was the older brother. We needed to raise the younger siblings. I raised them, drove a tractor, I just knew how to go [to work]. I did anything to get money to raise my younger siblings. I took that money to raise my younger siblings.

A: As long as you received an income, right?

B: As long as I received an income, I always worked.

A: Yes!

B: I didn't think about if I had knowledge or not. I just did anything to have income for our wives, children. We didn't have a mother; we also didn't have a father.

A: There were nobody to take care of them?

B: There was nobody to take care of them. This brother supported the younger siblings.

A: Yes! And I thank you for giving the interview, and before concluding, I wish you good health, to have strength and wisdom to be able to help lead your posterity in order to have further growth. Yes! Goodbye.