

Interview of Sok Hen

A: Interviewer: Nhem Sokunthea

B: Interview: Sok Hen

Summary of the Interview

Sok Hen was born in 1965 in Boeng Pruol commune, Tboung Khmum province. Sok Hen spends the majority of this interview describing her family history and upbringing, as well as her limited education. She also shares unique stories about being a youth in the Khmer Rouge, from the loyalty of her father to stay by his family's side to surviving a life-threatening sickness. Despite her difficulties, she concludes her interview by expressing her passionate devotion to her faith, having converted to Christianity in previous years.

A: First, I would like to thank you for giving me an interview about your life history. I am Nhem Sokunthea, an interviewer. What is your full name?

B: My full name is Sok Hen.

A: Today I am interviewing on August 13, 2016. This interview is organized by a university in the United States called Brigham Young University, there is a program to interview about the life and history of you and other Khmer people. In the future, your descendants and future generations will be able to know the history and life story of their ancestors. Will you allow me to post this interview on the BYU website?

B: Yes, sure.

A: Yes, this website is called www.cambodianoralhistoryproject.byu.edu and I will begin interviewing you now, please tell me your full name again?

B: My full name is Sok Hen.

A: Yes, do you have a nickname?

B: Lots of people call me Sat.

A: Sat. And, you have uh—and from the time you were young did they call you anything else?

B: No, only this one.

A: Okay, so do you remember the date you were born?

B: I was born in 1965.

A: In what month?

B: Maybe in the third month.

A: The third month?

B: Of course!

A: Do you remember the day?

B: I do not remember the day.

A: Okay, what year was it—the Khmer year of what animal?

B: I am a horse, in the lunar year of the horse.

A: Okay. Where were you born?

B: Where I was born—my commune is in Boeng Pruol.

A: What district, and what province?

B: I was in Tboung Khmum province next to Beung Proung.

A: I see.

B: Tbong Khmum district.

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

B: Ho—I mean, I have 11 siblings.

A: Oh—a lot.

B: Of course!

A: Are they alive or dead now?

B: One of them passed away, and 10 more are still alive.

A: 10 people? Where do they all live?

B: They all live in a separate villages.

A: Yes, in which provinces?

B: It seems that some of them are actually in Kampong Cham province, but some more just live in different villages and communes.

A: Okay! What about your father, what is his name?

B: My father's name was Sok. My mother's name was Pok.

A: Right, Sok what? For your father?

B: Father's name was Long Sok. Mother's name was Oun Pok.

A: Okay. So, is your father still alive, or has he passed away already?

B: They are both alive, both my mother and my father.

A: I see. So, do you remember your father's birthdate?

B: I can't remember either of them.

A: I see. And your dad, what era was he born in?

B: What?

A: Do you remember what era he was born in?

B: The place he was born in was Boeung Prol.

A: The place he was born in was Boeung Prol right?

B: Yes, in Boeung Prol, both my mother and my father.

A: In Tbong Khmum Province?

B: Yes, Kampong Cham Province.

A: I see. Now are they in Tbong Khmum Province, or in Kampong Cham?

B: The direction he's on is—

A: On this side of the river, or on the other side of the river?

B: On the other side of the river. So perhaps they are on the Tbong Khmum side.

A: Right, now they have already gone to Tbong Khmum, but before they were in Kampong Cham Province?

B: They were in Kampong Cham Province before.

A: Right, okay. Yeah, so do you know about your father, the year he was born was which animal?

B: He is a cow, er, ox.

A: Right, so, do you know how old your dad is now?

B: He is probably 80 or more by now.

A: Approximately 80 what?

B: I don't know.

A: So probably 84 or so, right?

B: Of course!

A: So if you want to know the year he was born we can just subtract back from there, like this right?

B: Right.

A: So for your mother?

B: She's the year of the Rooster.

A: The year of the Rooster. And so, how old is she now?

B: Probably 70 or more by now.

A: Yes, okay. 70 or more, 73? 74?

B: Yes, about that because she is the oldest in her family.

A: Yes, so your grandpa is oldest?

B: Grandma.

A: She is youngest among your dad's generation?

B: Of course!

A: Yes, so grandpa is 74, grandma, er—so grandpa is 84, grandma is 74, is that right?

B: Of course!

A: Right, okay. So for this instead—if your siblings or children wanted, uh—wanted to know the year you were born, or like the year their grandpa or grandma were born, they can subtract from this and they can know. So, for your father, do you remember that, like, your mother was born where as well?

B: I already said she was born in Boeung Prol, both of them.

A: So both of them?

B: Of course!

A: Right. So, about your father, what do you remember about him?

B: From the very beginning he liked to work in the groves. Yeah, yeah and his face was made to work in a grove as a farmer.

A: Right. And you, like, from the upbringing that he gave you, what do you remember most with your dad? What do you remember about him? Was he a good person?

B: He advised me very well, I am still living.

A: I see.

B: On this earth.

A: Right. No worries, I know that you love your father a lot.

B: My parents are now having a very difficult time, but they have kids that can help.

A: I see.

B: Always providing their food for them to eat every day.

A: Right, that's okay.

B: And to speak honestly, he instructed all of his children not to do anything between good or evil at all, but to do whatever is good. He taught us that.

A: I see.

B: And I always listened to him.

A: Right.

B: He taught from, uh—speaking about the chastity of God; he said those words and I listened to his words all the time from then. Like, he diligently instructed me, he persistently said that—

A: Yes.

B: "Child, maintain poverty like a skirt tied from the outside."

A: Yeah?

B: So I remember those words very clearly.

A: Of course.

B: No matter if I am poor or rich, I won't allow myself to become prideful.

A: I see.

B: I am still poor.

A: I see. For your mother, what do you remember about your mother?

B: For my mom it is the same. She always told me not to do anything bad.

A: Yeah?

B: She wanted me to always do good.

A: Of course.

B: And my siblings all listened to my mother and father.

A: Right.

B: They didn't have any kids that were bad. Even now back home others are frankly admit that the Grandma Pok's kids are really good.

A: Yeah?

B: Not like other people's kids.

A: I see.

B: My younger siblings used to work in factory too because my younger sibling brought money back. Honestly, from me all the way to my youngest brother of all, we make money to support our parents and all our family.

A: Yes. Your mother, her name is Pok what?

B: Her name is grandma Pok.

A: What?

B: Oun Pok.

A: And in what animal year was she born?

B: She was born in the year of the Rooster, the Chicken.

A: Yes, of course. So, your grandfather on your mother's side, what was his name?

B: Mother's grandpa?

A: Yes.

B: Not just my mom mother, but her grandfather as well?

A: No, let's see. Like, you have a mother right? But the father of your mother, that would be your grandfather right?

B: That's right, my grandfather.

A: Yes, what was his name?

B: My grandfather, his name was Grandpa An.

A: On what?

B: Grandpa On's wife? Her name was Grandma Poch.

A: Grandma Poch. Do you remember their first given names?

B: No, I can't remember.

A: Do you know if they are still living or if they have died, both your grandma and grandpa?

B: Grandma and grandpa both died already, ever since the time—Grandma, she died in '82.

A: I see.

B: For Grandfather, he's been dead since the time of Lon Nol.

A: I see. Do you know, during the Lon Nol era, your grandfather died in 70 what?

B: To be honest I can't remember. He's been dead since before I was born.

A: I see. So when he died, how old was he? He was how old, your grandpa?

B: Probably when he died he was 40 or older.

A: I see. And your grandma? She died at what age in 1982? How old was she when she died?

B: When grandma died she was over 80 already.

A: I see.

B: She was 80 years old already. Maybe 88 or 89 or something like that.

A: Born in '82—when she died it was that year, correct?

B: The Pol Pot era you mean?

A: Right. For, like, that means that your grandpa is younger than your grandma, is that right?

B: He is younger; they're both dead.

A: I see.

B: And grandma, she's been raising the kids ever since.

A: I see.

B: Until the kids have a husband or a wife and they go their separate ways.

A: Right.

B: Then she died.

A: I see. So, do you remember where your grandma and grandpa were born?

B: My grandparents were born in—honestly when I was born, I saw them when my mother was still there.

A: In Bambiae?

B: In Boeung Prol Commune.

A: Boeung Prol?

B: In Boeung Prol, in Kampong Cham Province.

A: Right.

B: Before they were in Kampong Cham Province, now they've moved to Tbong Khmum Province.

A: So, do you remember anything about your grandparents? After you were born and saw them and such?

B: No, I can't remember.

A: I see.

B: I can't remember.

A: So the grandparents we were just talking about are from your mother's side right?

B: Of course!

A: So for your grandparents on your father's side instead; what were their names?

B: Grandparents on my fathers side? My grandfather's name is Long.

A: I see.

B: His wife's name is Grandma Heang.

A: I see. And where were they born?

B: They were all there together.

A: All of them were born in the same village together?

B: Yes, in that place. Absolutely nothing changes.

A: I see. So were you born in time to meet both of them?

B: Honestly, I was born in time to meet them. I was little, I was maybe 3 or 4 years old. I was born in time to meet my grandfather, but for my grandmother I was maybe—I was much older and maybe 17 or 18 and then she died.

A: I see.

B: She died in the time of Pol Pot, but I don't remember the date.

A: I see.

B: Maybe in the 70's, '78 or something (1978).

A: I see.

B: The year '78 is all. I remember '78 (1978) because at that time the water had risen a lot.

A: I see.

B: I remember that but she had already turned 82 years old.

A: Your grandpa? Or your grandma?

B: My grandma.

A: So she died at that time?

B: And that was the time of Pol Pot already. For my grandpa though, I don't remember how old he was because, well, I was little.

A: I see. So what memories do you have with your grandparents on your father's side?

B: I don't remember anything.

A: I see.

B: I was too little.

A: Right, that's okay.

B: Of course!

A: So, for your siblings, like, parents or relatives, do you have anyone who has gone to live in other countries?

B: Honestly, my mother's cousin; she went to live in America, but I don't know about how she is.

A: Yes, but your parents and relatives didn't go there?

B: Of course!

A: So, let's talk about your education for a change. What grade did you learn to?

B: I learned until 3rd grade during the time of Pol Pot.

A: I see.

B: I learned, and watched cows as well until they went to others so I could go pick beans for a while or move dirt or other things like that, and then came and studied for a moment.

A: I understand. So, you where did you study?

B: For studies I was told to go to the district by Phnom—what's it called? Phnom Chuon or something? They sent me to Phnom Pich.

A: I see.

B: I watched the cows among other things.

A: So, what about, uh—about your dreams for the future, what did you want to become when you were young? You studied, so when you grew up, what did you want to do?

B: At that time, I did not want to do anything; I just wanted to when I grew up. I just wished that when I had a husband, I would meet a good husband and he would be a little older than me.

A: I see.

B: That he would have compassion toward me, and even now I really have received what I'd hoped for, and my husband is a little older than me.

A: I see.

B: He is older in my generation.

A: Right, of course. So, do you work in the fields, or do you have a business?

B: I work in the fields.

A: What do you grow?

B: From that time, I have grown corn and tobacco.

A: Okay. So, do you remember what day you were married?

B: I forgot the day, but the year was 1995.

A: Yes, so, where did you get married?

B: I was married in Boeung Proul district.

A: Yes, alright. Yes, so, for your wedding, uh—

Were you married by your parent's arrangement, or did you love each other for yourselves?

B: Yes, I was married by my parents who arranged it for me.

A: I see. So, where did you first meet your husband?

B: We first met each other in Kampong Cham.

A: I see.

B: Yes, like, my mom brought me to my uncle's house there.

A: I see.

B: When we got there, my husband was working there as well, so he saw me, and it was like he was in love from then on.

A: I see.

B: He kept in touch with me for 1 year.

A: I see.

B: Then we married.

A: Yes, of course. It is great that you understood each other first.

B: Yes, but I still didn't want to love him yet.

A: I see.

B: Because I thought I was getting married to someone older and mature, uh—he said it was nonsense.

A: I see.

B: I do not want to.

A: So, when you married were there wedding gifts that you gave to the man's side?

B: The man's side?

A: Yes.

B: Uh—they were given by my mother, I don't know how many or what they were. I don't know.

A: You didn't ask?

B: I didn't ask.

A: But you know that there were gifts?

B: There was then.

A: I see. So, in your life comparing the past to the present, what differences are there?

B: Yes, that time was very difficult, so I, I can't speak of it.

A: I see.

B: Because I got married and had my first and second child, I was very poor.

A: I see.

B: And I was very tired; more tired than I am now.

A: I see.

B: But before, it was just me providing. I provided like that and did everything to get even a small house. The house was 4 meters deep and 5 meters wide; when it was made that big that's all we had to live in. There wasn't enough to eat. We couldn't find food.

A: I see.

B: Even money, we didn't even have 100 riel.

A: What about now? How are you doing?

B: But now, in the present time I have come to know the gospel, I am very happy.

A: I see.

B: Even though I don't have more than I did before I am happy.

A: I see.

B: I have more to eat than I did before.

A: Yes, very good.

B: It is much better than before.

A: Yes, the present is better than the past.

B: Yes, the situation is also better than before.

A: Yes, of course. So, what kind of food do you like to eat?

B: Speaking of food, I like simple food, such as spicy soup, sour soup and stuff like that.

A: Yes, you know how to cook all those foods?

B: Yes, I know how to make them.

A: Yes, so from the beginning, who did you learn from?

B: Learn; I learned from my mother.

A: Oh!

B: She told me how.

A: I see.

B: Actually, I am the oldest, so I worked very hard to cook and carry water for all my younger siblings, so I know how to do those things.

A: Of course. Yes, so, what do you like to do in your free time?

B: Free time now, in the present?

A: Yes.

B: In my spare time, I enjoy reading the scriptures.

A: I see.

B: Because I want to know the story and history of the prophets.

A: I see.

B: And the word of God.

A: Yes, what did you do before when you did not know the gospel?

B: When I didn't know the gospel, I liked to stay at home and clean the house. If I was free, then I'd go carry water and such and fill any jars that weren't full.

A: I see.

B: I'd keep it so the kids could bathe.

A: Yes, that is very good. You are a very good mother. What about the entertainment that you like to go to when you are free from your job or occupation? Where do you like to go the most?

B: Yes, to be honest, I do not want to go anywhere. If there was anything happening, I'd go to the neighbor's house, but that's it.

A: I see.

B: And I'd come home, and I do not like to talk about this or that about others.

A: Yes, so you'd go visit your neighbor's house. So do you like listening to music?

B: Oh—I don't like listening to music now.

A: From the previous generation then?

B: I like the previous generation.

A: What kind of music do you like to listen to?

B: The kind that they call older music.

A: I see.

B: I like that.

A: Yes, which singer do you like the most?

B: Like uh—I don't really know names. I know Sinn Sisamouth the best, and Pen Ron.

A: Right.

B: I just like things like that.

A: Do you know how to sing or play a musical instrument?

B: I never have, but I like it.

A: I see.

B: I like to listen to others.

A: Of course. So, you were born before the war, weren't you?

B: Yes.

A: So, during the war, what problems did you face in life? Can you describe them?

B: Oh, at that time, it was very difficult for me. I ducked down and crawled from one village to another.

A: In what time period?

B: In the time of, uh—

A: Lon Nol?

B: That's it, the time of Lon Nol and the generation of the bombings.

A: I see.

B: I have never recalled anything from then.

A: Yes, so what about your ducking and crawling?

B: Yes, dig a pit straight and fast for us to enter so that we wouldn't be hit by anything when the dropped bombs.

A: I see.

B: Yes. When it was over one had struck near my house as well. It fell, one of those bombs.

A: I see.

B: After they fell it was like the bombs had some sort of oozing sap; I don't know. If they were tossed at us, that is to say they would stick to our skin, the whole thing.

A: I see.

B: Our skin would be completely scorched.

A: Oh!

B: And I saw someone hit by a bomb they dropped, and it exploded the dishes, which flew all over.

A: I see.

B: The person fell when they dropped the bomb, then they dropped more bombs, like, that sap stuff fell down on us all of a sudden—that sap.

A: Oh, was it that awful?

B: It was.

A: I see.

B: It was terrifying.

A: I see.

B: I trembled when the bombs fell. Those bombs, to be honest it was after the time the planes took off, then more fell.

A: I see.

B: The airplanes dropped them first, then one by one the bombs came down on my Kampong Cham. I lived through that time.

A: I see.

B: But I was still young at that time.

A: So, about the Pol Pot era. What kinds of things did you encounter in your life at that time?

B: It really was increasingly difficult at that time.

A: Like what? Can you describe it a little bit?

B: In the Pol Pot era I lived in suffering and misery, my family did. My father was called to be a soldier in the kitchen, but he did not bring anything for his children. My father was very honest. My father never brought anything back for his kids. Even though he worked in the kitchen, his kids had to find things to eat like rice, or porridge or other dried out things.

A: He was afraid they would find him out, right?

B: Yes, he gave everyone equal amounts of food. My father was very good.

A: I see.

B: And one day they arrested my father and killed him.

A: I see.

B: But an old relative came running to my home and told my father "You need to run! They are already coming to take you away!" My father replied "I'm not running because my mother is old and in this house. I'm not running anywhere. If they kill all of us together, then so be it."

A: I see.

B: My father was truly loyal.

A: Yes, what about you, what did you do at that time?

B: At that time, I was told to go move dirt and move other things. Sister, it was very difficult, and I didn't have muscle or anything. I was thin. I lifted the ground back and forth. I fell and was subject to whatever happened, and I had a fever. So, at that time, I'll tell you—they made me move earth for maybe half a month more. They ordered me around more than anyone.

A: I see.

B: They had me go transplant rice.

A: I see.

B: When transplanting rice my mom told me "Child, I don't have a problem; you take this bunch of bananas." And I wrapped the banana on the edge of the krama; it wasn't yet time to stop working Sister. I broke up the bananas to share with the other children, two per person, and I ate the remaining two.

A: I see.

B: I do not know if Satan is watching me or not, I only know that much. I shared the food, I had two left, and I ate them. Suddenly, Sister, you know what happened? I became very hot.

A: I see.

B: Whatever we tried was not effective, so they transported me to the hospital, at that time they called it the community hospital—

A: I see.

B: Then I was taken to the commune hospital and they went to tell my mother. My mother came running. I passed out there. They wanted to take my life. I grew up there, uh—there; at the hospital. I wasn't aware of anything at all, to the point that the next day they sent me to the province hospital in Peam Chiling.

A: I see.

B: We went to Peam Chiling commune. My mother said, "My child surely must be dead" and my father cried, all of them; they thought I must be dead already. At that time, I was taken at 7 in the evening to the hospital. At that hospital they were kind and compassionate.

A: I see.

B: They also injected me with an IV of serum, and then they told my mother, "They have given your child a different kind of medicine." That's what they said.

A: I see.

B: "Around 12am she woke up, your child, she has life again. She has life again.

A: I see.

B: At that time, Sister, uh—at that time, I woke up and really was alive. But when I woke up, I only moved my arms and legs. I have not eaten anything until that time. I kicked my legs, I apologized to everyone, I kicked my legs like an infant—child.

A: Oh—!

B: Like an infant. We came into the green forest, and nothing entered my stomach.

A: Like poison?

B: Yes, I didn't have anything like that at all the whole time in the green forest. My mom was heartbroken; it had been maybe half a month before I could open my eyes.

A: I see.

B: When I could open my eyes, I couldn't see anything at all.

A: I see.

B: My arms and legs could only flail around.

A: Oh—!

B: Eventually my older sibling came and talked to me, but I couldn't speak.

A: I see.

B: And I couldn't see either. I could just open my eyes is all, but I couldn't see.

A: I see.

B: It had been about 3 months after that that the doctor came and gave me shots. They always gave me shots until 3 months later I, uh—I could lay there and look around. I opened my eyes and I could see their cat. They hung dried fish in a basket in the corner.

A: I see.

B: The cat ran to eat it, and when it did I yelled at the cat. The people in the hospital were shocked—they said "That kid knows how to talk again; that kid can talk again" and such.

A: I see.

B: After that they taught me to call them aunt, uncle, mom, and such—

A: This was during the time of Pol Pot, right?

B: Yes, during that time.

A: And what about, during that time, how was the food? Was there enough?

B: The food in the hospital?

A: Everywhere during the time of Pol Pot.

B: At that time it wasn't a problem. They let us eat as much rice as we wanted at the hospital there.

A: I see.

B: They had rice to eat, but at our house we ate porridge or whatever at the cooperative.

A: I see.

B: At the kitchens they made us eat porridge all together.

A: I see, after the Pol Pot era ended, did you live in Kampong Cham, or what?

B: In Boeung Proul still.

A: So, at that time; after that did you have lots of siblings left? When the Pol Pot era ended?

B: To be honest, my family only had a few siblings left.

My cousin had 7 siblings. 4 died and there were three left then.

A: I see.

B: They died in Pol Pot's time, but as for my family during the Pol Pot era, we didn't die. I thought it was good when I came to know about the gospel. I think that God surely knows clearly about our hearts.

A: I see.

B: God allowed me to live and to know the gospel.

A: I see.

B: I am very sad because my parents, they refuse to believe.

A: I see.

B: So I told her, "If the people of the Earth were skilled enough to save themselves, Christ wouldn't have been crucified."

A: Right. So, in the time you were married, how many kids did you have?

B: When I married I had 3 children.

A: Three kids?

B: But the first child was born in the year 1996.

A: Of course!

B: In April.

A: I see.

B: What day was it? Like the 12th or something; I don't know.

A: Right. What about the second child? What was their name?

B: The second child is named Kun Heng.

A: And what was the first one, from before called?

B: That's Kun Heang, the first child, but their little brother, the second child is called Kun Heng. He was baptized with me.

A: Yes that is great. What about the third child? What was their name?

B: The third child is called Theany. She was born in March, 2001.

A: I see.

B: On the 13th. As for the middle child, he was born in 1997.

A: I see.

B: He was born in April too, like the oldest.

A: I see, about your husband; what is his name for a change?

B: My husband's name is Leang Huot.

A: Leang Huot. What kind of man is he?

B: Uh, honestly my husband is a very gentle, honest person. But he; I called him and told him that he should come join this church. He wasn't excited.

A: I see.

B: To speak honestly, I looked at, uh—read the scriptures in Nephi.

A: I see.

B: His heart was hard like Nephi's older brothers Laman and Lemuel.

A: God will prepare for you, in a later time because of the timing of God.

B: But I just know to pray for God to help prepare the way, you know?

A: So, for your children, did you have all of them go study?

B: I had all my kids go study, but the oldest learned all the way to 12 grade then failed. They have to keep learning in order to take the final exams this year, but he refuses and says that he is done with school.

A: So, for you, what do you do to bring your family happiness?

B: In order to bring my family happiness? I don't know what to do. I already pray to God to help prepare my heart and mind to be good in my family and help us have enough food to eat.

A: I see.

B: And to help us have peace.

A: So, when you have a problem, do you solve it peacefully if the family has a problem?

B: Of course!

A: How do you educate and advise your children in your life?

B: I educate my children not to hang out all the time.

A: Oh, yes.

B: I don't let my children do illegal drugs.

A: Yes, okay.

B: And don't let children speak about bad things. Let them speak about good things until they're old.

A: Yes.

B: When we talk, what we should not say, we don't.

A: Oh yes I agree, well, this one is one of the last questions. What good things do you want to share to your grandchildren and future generations from this interview? Do you have

anything that wants to share with them?

B: I want to share, and finish. I wanted to talk—I gave the people he refused to—listen to the gospel refusing to receive the gospel in the past, now I want him to receive the good news. I want him to be happy and let him be cleansed from since as I have.

A: Yes, that's right.

B: I want them to come to know Heavenly Father like I did.

A: Yes, so you want your children and posterity to walk the path that you have?

B: Of course!

A: Yes, of course. So thank you. I know that your children will take your example in everything because you are gentle and very good. Well, thank you so much.

B: Of course!

A: I will put this interview on the internet through the website that I told you about before. So, thank you so very much.

B: Yes, thank you very much; goodbye.

A: Yes.

Interview translated by Sivmey Hout and Madison Blanchard in 2021.