

Interview of Sem Meas

A: Interviewer: Nhem Sopheap

B: Interviewee: Sem Meas

Interview Summary

Sem Meas was born in Ampov Prey village, Kandal province. In this interview, she recalls a harrowing escape from a Khmer Rouge mobile unit with five companions, two of whom died from starvation. During her escape, she chronicles life on the run, from stealing food to satisfy her hunger, witnessing mass killings, and narrowly avoiding being caught by pursuing Khmer Rouge soldiers. Despite her circumstances, her tenacity and resilience allowed her to be reunited with her family and gave her the strength to provide for her family in the aftermath of the war. She also recounts a recent story of losing her home in a housefire and finding hope through community support, enabling her to rebuild and continue to provide for her seven children. Though she still faces challenges in her life today, Sem Meas finds solace in her family and faith in Jesus Christ while accepting her life's journey as a necessary stepping stone to get where she is now.

A: Hello Meas! I'm happy to have the chance to interview you today, so thank you very much. My name is Nhem Sopheap. This interview is being held on June 2, 2018, in Tumnob 94 village, Toul Ta Mok Pagoda, [Ampov Prey commune,] Kandal province. What is your full name?

B: My name is Sem Meas.

A: Sem Meas?

B: Yes.

A: And that's including your last name, right?

B: Yes, yes. Sem Meas is my full name.

A: Okay. And do you go by any other names? Is there a title they've give you?

B: No, I don't. That's the only name I'm known by.

A: Okay great. And do you remember your birth date?

B: It was August 10, 1968.

A: Okay. And where is your birthplace?

B: My hometown in Ampov Prey village, Kandaok commune, Kandal Steung district, Kandal province.

A: Okay, thank you. And where do you live nowadays?

B: I live in Tumnob 94, Toul Ta Mok Pagoda.

A: Okay. Tumnob 94 right?

B: Yes.

A: And in Kandal Province right?

B: Yes, Kandal Province.

A: Okay. And what do you do for work right now?

B: Right now, I work as a laborer, like washing dishes at weddings. My husband and some of my children work in construction.

A: Yes, yes.

B: We are trying to make a living for our children's education. That's why we're working.

A: How old are you now?

B: I'm 50 years old.

A: 50. What lunar year were you born in?

B: I was born in the lunar year—

A: Like the year of the dog, or tiger—

B: Yes, I'm the year of the rooster. [The year of the rooster was from February 1969 to February 1970.]

A: Oh, the year of the rooster.

B: Yes.

A: And do you know what month of the Cambodian Lunar calendar you were born in?

B: Uh, yes. I was born in the month of "Meak." [The third month of the lunar calendar from mid-January to mid-February].

A: Okay! Thank you. And how many kids do you have now?

B: I have seven that are alive. I had eight but one passed away, so only seven left.

A: Oh, one passed away. And how many sons, how many daughters?

B: I have four daughters and three sons.

A: How old is your oldest, and where do they live?

B: My oldest is 28 years old and she is married, but she doesn't have a home, so she lives with me here.

A: Okay—

B: She is here with me.

A: And does she have any children yet?

B: Yes, she has four kids already.

A: Oh, she has quite a few already!

B: Yes she does!

A: And are all her children in school already?

B: No, her first two—her first husband and her were married, but afterwards they divorced. He followed what his mother wanted him to do.

A: Oh.

B: He left my daughter and took their son with him but left their daughter with her mother. And so that daughter has lived here with me for the last six months. But now my daughter has remarried and has had two more children, and none of them are old enough to start school yet.

A: Right.

B: Yes.

A: And how about your second child, how old is he?

B: My second is 23—no 24!

A: Okay.

B: 24 this year.

A: Is he still learning in school?

B: No he's not. He stopped in 8th grade because he saw that I needed help earning enough money to take care of ourselves. So he works to help support me.

A: Oh.

B: Yeah.

A: And what is his name?

B: His name is Sek Pisal.

A: Sek Pisal. Okay, and after him?

B: After him is Sek Srey Leak—Sek Leakena. [Her Full Name] This is her right here!

A: Okay! She's very pretty, your daughter.

B: Yes!

A: And does she stay at home with you, and does she work right now?

B: Yes, she lives at home with me, and she works at the factory, but right now she's sick.

A: Oh.

B: Sometimes she can work, sometimes not.

A: And who is next after her?

B: My next one is 20 years old this year—he's the year of the tiger. He's in 12th grade.

A: Okay, some are still in school then?

B: Yes. The one after is the year of the rooster. Oh! I forgot, there is another daughter in between them. She was the year of the goat! But she is still working in houses in Phnom Penh.

A: Oh, okay.

B: Yes. She is working to help me. And after her is this one, the year of the rooster.

A: Okay.

B: —who is still in school.

A: Yes.

B: And afterwards is this one who is 11 years old, the youngest and still in school too.

A: And what about your parents, what are their names?

B: Oh, my father's name is Sem, and my mother's name is Chak.

A: Sem, and Chak.

B: Yes.

A: Sem is your father, right?

B: Yes, my father.

A: What is his full name?

B: Sot Sem.

A: Okay, and what about your mother?

B: My mother's name is Kaeb Chak.

A: Kaeb Chak—

B: Yes.

A: And how old is she?

B: My father has passed away already.

A: What about your mother?

B: My mother is 77 or 78 now.

A: Okay. And she's still alive right?

B: She's still alive, my mother.

A: Where does she live?

B: She lives here in Ampov Prey.

A: Okay. And is she still healthy?

B: She has high blood pressure and a few other things—

A: Oh—she can't leave home then?

B: Yes, that's right.

A: Who does she live with?

B: She lives with my younger sibling—

A: Okay.

B: There's four people there total.

A: And your father has already passed away?

B: Yes, he passed away over three months ago.

A: How old was he when he died?

B: When he died, he was in his late 70's, because he just a year older than my mother.

A: What did he die of?

B: He had a lung disease.

A: Oh.

B: Yes.

A: And where was he born?

B: He was born near Spean Bak [Bak Bridge], here in Srei Snam.

A: Yes.

B: But my mother is down in S'ang District.

A: Okay. And right now, your mother is stuck at home?

B: Yes, she can't do very much anymore.

A: And when your father was still alive, what did he do for work?

B: He had always climbed sugar palm trees—

A: Right—

B: —ever since '79. Once he got sick, he couldn't do much anymore, and he could only wander around the house after that.

A: Okay. And where did he die?

B: He died here in Ampov Prey.

A: Okay, in Ampov Prey. And did he ever tell you some of his history, such as experiences he had had in his youth?

B: Uh, he never really told me. But when I was young, I went fishing with him—

A: Right—

B: I would cut up bait and stuff for him and helped him with his work. He was a laborer too.

A: Okay. And did he ever do other kinds of work besides that?

B: He worked in the rice fields, climbed sugar palm trees, he fished—

A: Right—

B: That was it.

A: He never worked for the government or that kind of thing?

B: No, he never did.

A: And did he ever talk to you about the time of Pol Pot?

B: No because I was alive then.

A: Oh okay.

B: I was alive during the Pol Pot era.

A: Okay. Could you briefly describe what you went through during the time of Pol Pot?

B: Yes, I can tell you about it. My life during Pol Pot—a lot of the younger generations have never seen or experienced it. They don't really know much about it!

A: Okay.

B: But I know, because I've had more than enough experience with it. At the time of Pol Pot, I was 12 years old, and I was part of the young women's unit. They put me in the unit when I was very young.

A: When you were young?

B: Yes, just a little older than this one here. They made me carry dirt on Khsach Chonlea Island.

A: Where is Khsach Chonlea Island?

B: Khsach Chonlea Island is on the far side of the river, where the river bends.

A: Okay.

B: When I tried to carry the dirt, I would fall over, I'd fall from the dam and roll over the edge.

A: Oh.

B: When they saw that I couldn't carry the dirt, they made me pick up grass. After the plowed the fields, we would go gather the grass into bunches.

A: Right—

B: They made us work in the heat of the day—until 12 or 1 o'clock. When the island bell rang, they would only give us a tiny bowl of porridge to eat. There were hundreds of those tiny bowls, and the porridge they gave us had some water lily stalk mixed in too. When they would serve us, each ladle-full would only have a dozen or so rice kernels.

A: Okay.

B: I had a cousin that was only a year old, and his mother had to leave him at home when she went to go work.

A: Yeah—

B: He was always crying at home alone, and I felt so bad for him that I would only eat the waterlily stalk from my bowl and took the porridge part home to feed him. I gave him part of my portion. I kept running home during lunch, and they eventually noticed—

A: Yes.

B: They followed me home and caught me with my mother. They said “Samak, friend, you’re following your mother too much! You never think about working for the organization!” Then they put handcuffs on me and made me run behind their bike while they rode. I couldn’t keep up! He was pedaling, so how could I keep up by walking? And it was so hot outside. Eventually I fell! If you don’t believe me, ask my mom, she’s still alive!

A: Yeah—

B: After I fell, they just kept pedaling, and dragged me behind them. My hand was still stuck in the handcuffs, and they cut my wrists. I called out to my mother, “Mom help! Come help!” She told me to just go with them, and they took me to discipline me. They told me, “Samak, if you ever run home like that again, your parents will be taken to be disciplined [killed].”

A: Oh.

B: I was so afraid that my parents would be killed, and I never went back [to my parent’s] home. I stopped living at the young woman’s group area after that. I left and went to live where the rice seedlings grew—I slept on the dikes in the field! I had nothing to eat, I could only pluck the rice kernels from the stalks. When they found out what I was doing, they took me to be disciplined for hiding from them.

A: Oh.

B: After that I didn’t dare take any rice, but when I found a field snail or two, I would pull it out of its shell by its head, and then take some rice leaves—

A: Okay.

B: I would shred it until it was slimy, and then I would eat that.

A: Oh!

B: I ate it bland.

A: You didn’t cook it or anything?

B: Yes, raw! After they caught me though, I had nothing to eat at all. All I knew to do was to wander around. One day we found a big cooperative [group of people]. I saw that at night they would cook a huge pot of rice, and they had salted fish and other things too!

A: Okay!

B: At the beginning there were five of us in a group. They put the pot of rice on a rope in their house, and we went to go steal it. We had to climb to get it. If they had caught us, they would have killed us all. We all climbed on top of each other, on their shoulders. The four of them climbed on top of each other and couldn’t reach it, but I climbed up and grabbed the rope, and got the pot of rice. I ate for a full week!

A: What did you climb on?

B: We just climbed on top of each other.

A: You climbed up to their house?

B: Yes! In their window they had put a pot of rice hanging from a rope. [The houses are on stilts, and usually at least six feet off the ground to prevent flooding.]

A: Wasn't there anyone in the house?

B: There were, but they didn't see us steal it. It was early evening and starting to get dark. We stole it from outside of their house!

A: Yes.

B: We were too hungry.

A: Yes.

B: In that one pot there were probably three cups of rice. We kept it and ate for a whole week. All five of us! But when we ran out of rice, I was so hungry. I lead my friends and found a chicken coop, and found some chicken poop for them to eat. One of my friends died, and we didn't know what to do, so we just kept going. Another one of my friends died, and then there were just three of us left. All we knew to do was just keep going, and we drank the water we could find. One day we found a sapodilla farm [fruit similar to a plum], and stayed there for half a month. We would only stay at one side of the farm, only eating the fruit we plucked from the trees, and drinking water from ditches. One day at around 5 o'clock, a line of people came out of the house.

A: Okay.

B: They took that line of people to be beaten, in those ditches. I was hiding a little way away.

A: And you saw them being beaten?

B: Yes, I saw them being beaten. After they were beaten some were still alive, but were crippled and bleeding, and they tried to go back to the house. But some just died there. It was only when I was so parched and thirsty that I came out of where I was hiding and drank from the water in that ditch with the dead bodies.

A: Oh no—

B: I went to the ditch and drank from it.

A: You drank from it?

B: That was all I could do. It rained and filled in the ditch more, so I drank. I tried to stay far away from where they were beaten.

A: Oh.

B: I also drank from the cow hoof prints in the mud, where water collected.

A: Okay.

B: I drank, and then walked away from there. I walked until I got to my grandmother in Chamkar Mon. I begged to stay with her. The officials were telling people that if they saw a young woman [me] they had to report it.

A: Right—

B: My grandmother hid me, and my mother told them that Semak Meas was dead. That was what she told them—

A: Right—

B: I only had silkworms to eat. When the silkworms were old, they took them and boiled them [for the silk], and then threw them away.

A: Right—

B: I only ate silkworms, and I couldn't digest them; they came out the same. I detest them to this day. On April 8th in '79, a very bright moon rose in its fullness. My grandma told me that tomorrow we didn't have to work! They gave us clothes to wear the next day, she said they would give us Num banhchok [Cambodian rice noodles] and Khmer curry to eat the next day.

A: Okay.

B: She said there would be three cars full of Num banhchok, and twenty-five pans of Khmer curry.

A: Did they make it there, or do you know where it came from?

B: Yes, they gave us the noodles, but I don't know where it came from. But the curry was made right there.

A: Okay.

B: They brought the noodles a car full at a time—three cars full! I went out with my grandmother to eat. They told me, "Semak, tomorrow they're throwing us a party. They're giving us enough food to eat until you are full." But I heard the old people say that the truth was—

A: Yes.

B: That if we ate, we would all be dead by tomorrow.

A: They would kill all of them?

B: Maybe they would put poison in it.

A: Oh!

B: [They said that] if we ate, we would die. Before I ate anything they made me sing, and I sang near the place they punished people, while they beat their drums and barrels and crates to the music.

A: Okay.

B: I sang near the place they punished people—

A: Okay.

B: They made me sing near that place.

A: Right—

B: I'd forgotten so much; I only remembered a little bit! At 7:30 pm, the moonlight shone so brightly, and my grandmother said that the Pol Pot [era] was over. I asked, "What do you mean Pol Pot is over, Grandma? Who is that?" She told me that I should go home. I only had a blanket, and I walked all night long until the sun rose looking for my mother. I didn't

know where my mother's house was, I couldn't find it. I wandered around and tried all the roads I could think of, but I didn't know where it was. Think about that! I couldn't find my own mother's house. After '79, my father came from across the river to evacuate me. I had nothing—only a [inaudible] and some rice wrapped up in a scarf.

A: Okay.

B: We would cook the rice from the scarf to make soups. That was in '79.

A: Yes

B: At the end of 1979, when 1980 started, I started to cut firewood from the forest near Phnom Khsak, to sell in Preaek Hour [near Ta Kmau].

A: Okay.

B: I exchanged it for rice—at the time they didn't have money yet. So I took it to exchange for rice in Preaek. Starting in '81 they started to have money come out in tenths of riel.

A: Round money, like coins?

B: No, it was paper.

A: Paper money?

B: Yes, each was only worth a tenth of a riel.

A: Was it very small?

B: Each piece of paper was only about this big. Each one was only worth a tenth of a riel.

A: Oh.

B: Yes!

A: I hadn't been born at that time.

B: Yes, that was before you were born. I had to carry the firewood I cut on my head to the place I could trade it. The money started to inflate in price, and then one bundle of wood was 5 riel.

A: Okay—

B: I bundled it into a round bundle, and then carried it on my head to the market.

A: And did you have to carry it far?

B: Yes, I had to carry it from the sugar cane forest all the way to Preaek Hour!

A: There wasn't anything transport it?

B: No! At the time there was nothing to take it.

A: Oh.

B: I would carry it down the road. My life was miserable. That's why I ask the young kids these days, "How many tastes are there?" There are five, including sour, bitter, and sweet. Our lives are the same!

A: Right—

B: Kids these days don't know! It's easy [for them]. And all they have to do is learn what's given to them in school, but they don't want to. All they want to do is play!

A: Yeah—

B: They don't think about avoiding the things that society disapproves of. They do whatever they want.

A: You've had a lot of difficult things in your life—

B: Yes, I've gone through a lot of difficult things!

A: Yes!

B: And I've endured—I've been married, and I've raised seven children. I worked planting rice seedlings. Sometimes I would get a sack full of snails, and when I got home, I would pound flour and then soak it.

A: Rice, right?

B: Yes, I soaked the rice, and pounded it into a flour slurry for my kids to eat. As I came home, I gathered Katuk leaves as I walked along the dams and took them to make stew.

A: I've never done it like that, how do you make it?

B: I pound up all the ingredients—

A: Do you pound up lemon grass stems?

B: Yes! I pound the lemongrass with garlic and a root until it's all ground up to my liking—

A: Okay.

B: And for the flour, we pound that until its finely ground up.

A: Okay.

B: Once the water is boiling, we take add fish paste, and we add the rice powder, and then toss in the snails until they are cooked through. I toss in vegetables and the other seasonings, and it's done!

A: Okay.

B: Yes.

A: You just use that rice powder?

B: Yes! It's real Khmer soup. It doesn't have any chemicals!

A: I've never made that before!

B: Yeah. You want it to thicken—

A: Right—

B: And then call your children to eat!

A: Can you make it with fish?

B: No you can't. Only snails and shellfish.

A: Oh is that so?

B: Yes. And you can add [mushrooms] too.

A: You add those too?

B: Yes. Life has been so difficult for me. I had to carry wood and sell it to make enough money for my kids. I still had to work just three months after giving birth to my first child. My father-in-law got angry with my husband and took away the land he was going to give us. He didn't share anything! I had to work to survive. After giving birth to my daughter just three months before, I started working again. I got 300,000 riel and borrowed 100,000 riel to buy this land. Back then, five meters was 50,000 riel!

A: Did you buy it a long time ago?

B: Yes, I bought it a long time ago! These five square meters were 50,000 riel!

A: Okay.

B: I borrowed money and built a house here. I bought the land. I had hard a hard time, having patience with my children with only that.

A: Yes.

B: This is my child right here too—

A: Yes.

B: We did the construction here. It was so difficult when I had nothing.

A: Yeah. I'm sorry that when you were young you didn't have the chance to go to school or anything.

B: Yes, I wasn't able to learn! I had to do a lot, because I was the child that took care of the siblings. Before I could go to school, I had to give my younger siblings a shower, tie up the cows, and make rice ahead of time because my mom was sick.

A: Okay.

B: And then I would run to school! I would only carry my books, and I learned until the third grade.

A: Third grade?

B: Yes.

A: And now do you know how to read?

B: I know a little bit. But the other siblings were taught first, before me.

A: Okay! And where did you go to school?

B: I learned at Kouk Romiet—the Kouk Romiet school.

A: Is Kouk Romiet in our province?

B: Yes.

A: Kandal Province?

B: Yes, in Kandal province.

A: Yes.

B: My life has been a bitter one. It's been difficult to endure. I've had enough of it—I've experienced all five of those flavors, and I've learned enough for a lifetime.

A: Okay. But were you ever able to learn another language?

B: No, I've only learned Khmer.

A: Only Khmer?

B: Yes, she does!

A: I heard that a while ago they used to make the students learn French in school.

B: I never learned it no, only Khmer. Some of my friends learned in that program though.

A: Yes.

B: But I only learned Khmer. I only got to third grade! I wasn't able to learn any after that. [My mother] didn't let me go to school after that; she would hit me.

A: Were you with your birth mother or with a foster mother then?

B: With my foster mother.

A: Why weren't you with your birth mother?

B: My birth mother left me behind.

A: Oh!

B: My father found another wife, and he left too.

A: Oh.

B: My grandmother told me about it. She didn't want to take care of me, so she abandoned me.

A: And your foster mother is still alive?

B: Yes.

A: And what about your birth mother, did you know much about her?

B: My birth mother was at Bak Bridge too, but she was always very busy. I don't know what really happened.

A: Oh—and so you don't know what happened to her?

B: I've heard a little, but I never went to see her.

A: Oh.

B: Yes.

A: Because she abandoned you?

B: Yes, because she abandoned me. They always asked why I didn't go and visit her when she was sick, but I said that I didn't have a connection with her—I said put it to them

straight. My foster mother took care of me when I was sick, and if she hadn't, I wouldn't be here.

A: Yeah—

B: She was angry, my father took me to the pagoda and left me. He never took care of me. My grandma told me all about it.

A: Oh.

B: And my father took my older sister to live with him.

A: Oh.

B: So the two of us were separated.

A: So your father that just died was your birth father?

B: No, he was my foster father.

A: Oh, your foster father?

B: Yes! I don't know about my real father, but my grandmother said that he was killed during the Pol Pot [era].

A: Oh!

B: My father was a school principal, from what my grandmother told me.

A: Okay.

B: That was my birth father.

At the end of '79 she took me aside and told me all of this.

A: Okay.

B: They said he had been killed during Pol Pot. I've never even seen his face.

A: Oh, you've never met him?

B: No, not even once.

A: But your mother knew him—

B: Yes, my mother knew him.

A: When you talk to her, does she talk normally, or—?

B: At the beginning she talked to me normally, but once I was married and poor, I visited her. I only had 2000 riel to give her, and she ridiculed me. At the beginning, I still considered her my family, but after she just started seeing people for their money—

A: Right—

B: I didn't count her as family anymore.

A: Oh.

B: She said I had traveled all this way to just give her 2000 riel, and I felt so ashamed that I never went back.

A: You were poor too—

B: Yes. I haven't talked to her for almost 30 years now.

A: Yeah—

B: And I've been married for 28, 29 years now.

A: Is she still alive now?

B: Yes, she's still alive.

A: What is her name?

B: Her name is—she lives here at Bak Bridge. Her name is Yay Moeun.

A: Yay Moeun?

B: Yes. I never think about her anymore.

A: And you've never met your father?

B: No, never.

A: And your birth mother took and gave you to your foster mother?

B: [My foster mother] asked to have me, but my mother wouldn't give me away! She eventually just left me to die, and my foster father stole me.

A: Oh.

B: Yes. She said she wanted me to die, so she wouldn't have any descendants.

A: Oh.

B: Yes.

A: And you don't have any siblings, do you?

B: My birth sibling never considered me one of their own.

A: But they are still alive?

B: She is still alive. She lives at Kromuon Market. She won't recognize me. She is rich, we're poor. And so she has never counted me as a sibling.

A: Okay.

B: I'm telling the truth, you can ask any of my kids.

A: Okay.

B: I don't dare go near her. I don't want her to say that we are begging from her.

A: Yes.

B: Because I've gone a time or two to visit, but she has a big house and a car—

A: Yeah—

B: When I went, she said, "Oh what are you coming for? You must be sick or coming to ask for money." I never went to ask for anything, I only went because my father only had two

children, and I want her to know that she has more relatives.

A: Yeah—

B: But when she said that to me, I decided to never go again. If she wants to be alone for her whole life, she can be lonely.

A: So there are only two of you?

B: Yes.

A: Are they male or female?

B: Female.

A: Okay. And she's your older sister, right?

B: Yes, my older sister, by birth. But it's all I can do.

A: Yes.

B: I'm tired of trying with her! I don't want her to say I came to beg.

A: Right—

B: Even if we have nothing, if I went to them, they'd say we went to ask for money from them.

A: Yeah—

B: So I don't go close to them. I just say I don't have any relatives now.

A: Yes. And what about your husband? What does he do for work?

B: I don't have any secrets about it, and I don't want to slander him or anything, but before, when we just had two kids, he used to work to help take care of them a little bit.

A: Oh.

B: But by the time we had our fourth child he had stopped working completely. He just ate all day and didn't do anything. He didn't ever go to work, and it was just me and the children. I woke up every morning at 12 o'clock to set up nets to make enough money to buy rice for my children. I raised seven children by myself! Even now, he still eats all day. He just recently went back to work, two weeks ago. I've been fighting with him. I just want to have peace now. When one of our children was sick, he would never help watch them. When I took them to the doctor, he never knew that they were even sick! He's like a stranger.

A: Oh.

B: It was just me! I took on debt and borrowed everything I could, so I could take them to the doctor, so that they could live until now. I'm so full of it; I'm miserable.

A: Yes.

B: My life—it's hard to talk about. I've raised my children all by myself. I've tried so hard—and even after all of that, he doesn't think he loves his wife or kids, and doesn't go to work for us. He wants a different wife, different kids. He doesn't think! Last week we had an

argument, because I had put some of his things on the water barrel. He was angry at me, and he walked around the neighborhood telling everyone that I had burned his shirts and pants—that I had burned his things! But in reality, he had burned them—

A: Oh.

B: After that, I haven't spoken to him. He is by himself, and I am by myself. We've been like this for almost a year now.

A: But he lives here, right?

B: He lives here, but he sleeps under the house. I sleep on the top level with the kids.

A: Oh.

B: He doesn't have much to eat. He walks around drunk and looking for trouble. He got a job cleaning pots and plates, but he doesn't mess with me. I'm strong enough to take care of myself.

A: Yeah—

B: I'm strong because I spend my own money. I work and I make my own money, so when my children want something to eat, I can buy it for them. It's just me alone, working and saving for when one of us is sick or something happens. I watch the children, and I work, and I'm often sick at the same time.

A: How many years have you been married for?

B: I've been married since '89.

A: '89. Over 30 years then—

B: Yes.

A: About 33 years! You've been married to him a long time. How old were you when you were married?

B: I was 22 years old.

A: 22 years old—

B: Yes.

A: And you've had seven children?

B: My adopted father arranged our marriage. I was not happy with it, but he said that in the past, they were always told, "The cake is never bigger than it's container."¹

A: Oh.

B: And so, I followed his wishes. I couldn't argue with him. Just two weeks after our marriage—not even that, just twelve days, he chased me out of the house.

A: Who chased you?

¹ Editor's Note: This is an old Khmer saying meaning that children should always follow their parent's wishes. The cake is the child; the container is the parent. Parental authority over children is a foundational part of Khmer society. Essentially, "Father or Mother knows best!"

B: My father!

A: Oh!

B: He chased me out of the house. He didn't want me to be married to my husband!

A: What?

B: He wanted me to divorce!

A: But at the start he was the one who organized it?

B: Yes, he was the one who made me marry him. When I argued with him and didn't want to, he told me that "the cake is never bigger than its container." After I was married just twelve days, my husband was playing ball with him, and my father got angry and cursed at him, and chased me from home saying that I had to divorce him and marry someone else. And I said, "Dad, why are you so hard to please? I don't want another one. You were the one who arranged the marriage! I wasn't the one who decided. If you want me to divorce him I won't, because you're impossible to please. I'll just go with my husband." That's what I told him. After that, my father chased me out of the house. He wouldn't even give me my shoes, not even my hair clip. I just had one old skirt on me—just one thing to wear. I left with my husband to go stay with my mother-in-law. There were four of us that had to sleep in one bed. I didn't even have a plate or a fork for myself, I had to use my mother-in-law's!

A: Oh!

B: After that my husband left to be a soldier. All I had was a mosquito net and a pillow.

A: Oh.

B: After that, I promised my husband that I would never take another husband, even though we didn't have kids yet. And so I told my father that I wouldn't marry a different man. I told him to remember my words, that I had said I would only marry once in my life. I had told my husband that—when he asked if I would take another husband. I told him, "Remember what I told you? Who would it be? I don't have anyone else!" It's hard to be single. But we have to be careful, because if I remarried, I wouldn't know about their character!

A: Yeah—

B: The most difficult would be how they would treat my kids! Would they insult and ridicule them?

A: Yes.

B: My husband insults our children, but if I remarried who knows? He might abuse them! And we wouldn't know. If I remarried, you know?

A: Yeah—

B: And so I'm happy to just raise them myself. I still work and take care of them. They stay with me, sleep with me, eat with me. I work washing dishes at weddings! I've only just had a break from that because they've stopped for a period. After one wedding is over, I pay my bills and I pay for food. My children are starting to work now too to help pay off the debt. I'm almost done!

A: Oh!

B: I still owe the organization a last \$300, and I'll have paid it all off. I have been paying off that debt for so long. I've stopped borrowing. My sweat and blood—I only eat what I've worked for now. And my kids are working too, and they've been sending some of their salary to help me pay it off.

A: Oh, that's great.

B: Yes.

A: Your daughter is far away from you right? In Phnom Penh?

B: Yes. In Boeng Salang.

A: What does she do for work?

B: She works at a guesthouse.

A: Okay.

B: She says she helps with the food, putting things away and helping out.

A: Yeah—

B: But the owner is good. They're nice.

A: How did she get started there?

B: I used to know [the owner's] brother when I was at Daum Mean Market. We were both friends back then—

A: Yes.

B: He hired me to watch his mother, and after a while we became friends. So when he needed someone to work they asked me and my child was able to go work for them.

A: Okay.

B: He said if it was a difficult job he wouldn't hire my daughter. But if it wasn't too bad he would hire her. He's been very kind to me—

A: Yeah—

B: At first she made \$100 a month; now she makes \$120!

A: Okay.

B: The owner really appreciates her.

A: And is there anyone else that's helping to support you?

B: No, just my children.

A: Okay.

B: I don't have a husband to rely on. He's basically a stranger.

A: Right—

B: I don't have a husband to rely on. He's no one to me, I just have my children.

A: When you were married was there a dowry?

B: Yes, there was one. At the time of our wedding, it was 500 riel.

A: And when you were in school, did you have any close friends?

B: I did yes, but now we're not friends anymore. I'm poor! She's stopped counting me as a friend.

A: She's wealthy now?

B: Yes, very! I'm poor, and she's stopped counting me as a friend already.

A: Okay—

B: I don't have much—

A: Yes.

B: She is very wealthy now, and so how could we be friends, if she is so rich? She would think I'm coming to ask for money.

A: Okay. And where is she now?

B: She was in Siem Reap, on the west side. But now she has a husband and lives in Phnom Penh already.

A: Okay. When you were young did you ever play together?

B: We never played together, just were friends at school.

A: Okay.

B: Just when we went to school. When I was young and went to school, I never went to any of my friend's houses.

A: Okay.

B: I always had a hundred things to do every day.

A: Yes.

B: I took care of my younger siblings, watched the cows; I harvested rice too! I had to carry the rice to the market! I took care of the pigs as well; I never had time to spend with friends.

A: Yeah—

B: I could never go with any of my friends; I never had the time to. If I wanted to see a show my parents would never let me!

A: Oh.

B: Every day I was stuck at home.

A: Okay.

B: I looked after and took care of their children, and they would still beat me! ² But I don't forget about the good they did for me, because they took care of me from when I was still

² Here, the interviewee is ambiguous about which parent she is referring to.

young until I stopped living with them.

A: Yes.

B: I'm still alive because they took care of me—

A: Right—

B: I try to pay them back for that—I can't forget what they did for me. They abused me, yes, but they also took care of me.

A: Oh.

B: From when I was young until I left home. I'm still alive because of them.

A: Yes.

B: And so, I'm grateful to them.

A: And when you were young you never got to play with any other kids your age?

B: No, I never did. If you don't believe me, go ask grandmother—ask her how difficult my life was then! She'll tell you everything.

A: So you never got to have fun as a kid?

B: No! I never got to go to festivals or ceremonies at all!

A: So you've never been able to go to like a show at the pagoda before?

B: No, I've never been able to go! I'll tell you about the work I did—at three when the sun came up, I carried the cow manure to the fields. At five I helped plow the fields.

A: Okay.

B: I helped clean and organize it all! At 11 o'clock I made rice and watched my younger siblings.

A: Okay.

B: At 11 o'clock, I cooked food and took care of my siblings, and then I went to tend the cows. After that, I fed the pigs. Then I took care of my siblings more. And my foster mother just slept on her mat at home the whole time.

A: Oh.

B: When it was time to eat, at 7 or 8 o'clock, I threshed rice. I did that until 12, and then I slept.

A: You didn't have any time to rest?

B: No! I threshed the rice until the sun came up; I could only sleep two hours! That's really how it was. I'm not trying to brag! I've had enough of life! I was so done with it, with my life as a young woman. But I believe in God. I believe in Jesus!

A: Oh, you do?

B: Yes. When I go to seminary, there is an old man there that says I am a woman of character because my life story has been so full of bad things. He praised me for raising

seven children with a husband that drinks all the time. Other people haven't done that! This one here [her son], broke two ribs. I went to the hospital to find him with only 5000 riel in my pocket. I had been sick in the hospital for a month. But right as I got out one of my kids crashed his bike and broke two of his ribs! He hit his knees too, and his head was swollen. I had been in the hospital for a month for a fever and a stomach cramp. I had thought I wouldn't live; I thought my life was over! But once I came home, I had to take my child to get surgery! He wouldn't stop bleeding. Two of his ribs were broken. [The doctors figured out that] he had osteoporosis.

A: He got osteoporosis at so young?

B: They figured it out when he crashed his bike! They don't know when it started. And when I took him to get surgery, the doctor didn't show up! I held him while he shook and shook. I only had 4000 riel, but my neighbors all gave me 10,000 riel, 20000 riel, 30000 riel, and so on. They all helped—

A: Yes.

B: When I got too tired, I gave that money to my child. I only ate rice porridge, just 1000 riel's worth, just a ladle full. I gave all my money to my child for them to get surgery. After a few days my child ran out of money. The money my neighbors had given us lasted him four days for surgery and in the hospital. They did the surgery immediately, but afterwards the doctor called looking for a blood donor for him. I told him that I didn't have any relatives, that there was only me. There was no one to help. The hospital couldn't find a donor for him, but there was a charity organization that helped find one for my son. They helped me out!

A: Yeah—

B: And after they helped, I was able to eat for three days! That day I only had 7000 riel, and I had to pay for my child. I didn't know where to go or do; I was in trouble. I left my kids at home at 6 pm and started walking to the east to the Kantha Bopha hospital—I walked up three stories into the building, thinking that maybe I would never see my child again. When I got to the pharmacy area I fainted—

A: Who was taking care of your children?

B: They were asleep, I sent them over to the neighbors. When I fainted there, the pharmacists ran over to take care of me. They asked me, "What happened?" and I said that I came to buy medicine, and that I had fallen. They gave me food and water, and when I felt better, they gave me the medicine which cost 30,000 riel for free. Once I had that medicine, I had enough energy to take care of my kids again. My son had run out of money that morning, and I just had 7000 riel left. I didn't know what to do! I just thought that I should buy food for my kids before anything else.

A: Yes.

B: So, I bought food for them first—and after I got to the doctor's office—it was like karma! They had pity on me.

A: Right!

B: When I got to the hospital, I sat down and cried, and they came and saw that I was crying. The doctor called out to me, and he asked why I was crying. I told him that I didn't have money to buy food for my children to eat, and that they were hungry. After that I don't know how, but there was a charity foundation that helped me. They gave me 70,000 riel a week!

A: Oh!

B: They sent it to me week after week! I was so happy; it was like I had been born again! After a month, while taking care of my kids, I had over 100,000 riel left—no, I had 140,000 riel! I kept it at home.

A: Yes.

B: I went and bought rice for my children and told them that we would be okay.

A: Was there anyone at home?

B: My youngest was only four months old!

A: Oh. Was there was no one to watch her?

B: Her older siblings watched her!

A: Okay.

B: They had teachers that taught my kids for only 40 riel—

A: Yes.

B: A month! Only 40 riel.

A: Yes.

B: Each day my child learned twice, who would learn at school, and then run home to go take care of the younger siblings.

A: Where did they teach?

B: Here! At the Palm Tree School organization east of here!

A: Right—

B: They enrolled my kids to learn there—

A: What organization was it?

B: New Humanity. They would help feed kids—

A: Oh!

B: And they would teach them and give them things to color and that sort of thing.

A: Yes.

B: That child would always watch over the younger siblings while I stayed at the hospital watching my son.

A: Oh!

B: It was miserable!

A: What organization helped you?

B: I'm not sure what organization it was—

A: They just came and helped?

B: Yes, they took my thumb print, and gave me money! I don't know.

A: Oh!

B: And they also told me to not tell my neighbors about it, that I shouldn't let them know. They were all poor too, but not as bad as I was.

A: Right—

B: And so they helped me out—

A: And how long did they help you for? A few years or a few months?

B: No! They only helped until we were out of the hospital.

A: Oh!

B: That has helped—that's it!

A: It's good they were able to help—

B: Yes. And they gave blood for my son too. I don't know how, but I never saw them ask for any payment.

A: Yes.

B: But they gave blood for my son!

A: At Kantha Bopha Hospital, right?

B: Yes.

A: Okay. And the hospital didn't charge you?

B: I do not know—I don't know who paid for it at all.

A: Okay.

B: The doctor just came in and said that there was a blood donor for my son, and that I didn't have to worry.

A: Oh, that's lucky!

B: I was so grateful! Afterwards I was okay. And that's why I say that my story has been bitter. When I ask young kids how many flavors there are, they don't know! I always say that in life there is bitter, there is sour, there is sweet; there is hot and there is cold.

A: Yes.

B: I want them to think about it. The kids now, some of their parents have the money for their kids to learn at school, but the kids don't try! They just waste time and wander around.

A: Your kids aren't too bad, right? Are they difficult?

B: No! They're good. My kids are good to me. They work, and when I'm sick they'll always buy things for me so that I can get better.

A: Yes.

B: My 12th grader, I saw him the other day sitting and wiping his brother's tears. Things are easier for me now.

A: What does he ride to school?

B: He's been riding his bike since 7th grade.

A: Okay.

B: When he was in 6th grade, his brother-in-law gave him a bike, and he's ridden that from 7th grade all the way until 12th grade.

A: Oh.

B: He has only ridden his bike—

A: And he's about to graduate?

B: Yes!

A: Almost time for his final exams!

B: He only rides that bike! When he got sick and couldn't go, the principal sent a letter to me. They were skeptical of the situation.

A: Okay.

B: He looks thin, and they were afraid that he was doing drugs, and so they were skeptical. But he actually had typhoid fever.

A: Oh.

B: I told them that no, his bike was broken, and he had typhoid. And that I didn't have the money to fix the bike.

A: Okay.

B: So his principal said that he knew it was difficult to get to school from Tumnob 94, especially if it was raining.

A: Right—

B: And so his teacher excused him from class; he said that it was okay to miss. My son was the only one he did that for!

A: Oh good.

B: My son has been so helpful to me. They allowed him to stay home, and said that we would have to teach him, but that he would help give us some food and water.

A: They helped you?

B: Yes, that teacher helped. He said that he could only help him until the tenth grade; after

that he was on his own. In his eleventh grade I worked at a customs house, near Ta Khon Saron and right next to Prek Russey Pagoda north of here. I worked there and gave what I earned for my son to study at school. When he got into eleventh grade, every week on Sunday, I would give him money to go to school.

A: Okay.

B: Every week I gave him 60000 riel. He ate there at school.

A: Okay.

B: Sometimes he would only eat a single piece of bread a day. He had to spend money to fix his bike and other things. Life was hard then.

A: And since you were young, has there been anything that worked out very well for you? Like a have you ever had success?

B: Oh yes! I've had that before. When I worked, it was difficult, but I had some success.

A: Okay.

B: My kids were all small, and I had to go to work and leave them at home. I left them to go and work at other people's houses in Ta Khmau. I stayed at their houses; I couldn't afford to come home every night.

A: Okay.

B: And if I didn't work, my kids would have nothing to eat.

A: Right—

B: So I was willing to leave my children. At that time, I just had a small house with a thatched roof and sides. My daughter made rice, and didn't extinguish the fire completely, and my house burned down!

A: Oh no—

B: My house burned completely to the ground!

A: Yes.

B: All of it burned! And I had nothing left, just my children. Right after that—I believe in God—I believe in Jesus.

A: Right—

B: After my house burned down, I cried. I had no hope left. I didn't have any shelter. Every day was a struggle, and I was living hand to mouth.

A: Yeah—

B: After that, my cousin, a teacher, told me that I didn't need to worry. He said that my possessions had burned, but I could always get more of those. He said that the Lord had something for us. He was very kind, and he said just to wait there at the house!

A: Oh, they rebuilt it for you?

B: Yes. He told me just to wait there, and they hired people to come and rebuild it for me!

And so I am so grateful for the Lord, and that my cousin brought that miracle into my life.

A: Yes.

B: Yes. The Lord helped me, and I wouldn't have a roof over my head without Him.

A: That's good that you came to know Jesus Christ. I myself am a believer in Jesus Christ.

B: Okay.

A: I believe very strongly, because before I believed my family was struggling very badly. Ever since I joined Christ's church my family has progressed and grown so much.

B: My son in school believes in the Lord too!

A: Yes. And so that's why I feel so happy and grateful that I know!

B: Yes.

A: Before, my family was miserable! And after I joined the church, my family has flourished, and they are happy now!

B: Yes! That's why I'm so grateful to the Lord; one of the blessings from Him has been this very house.

A: Yes!

B: I used to pray when it rained, in my old house. The house was made of leaves, and it would flood and leak. I had to buy bags to wrap everything in so it wouldn't be destroyed!

A: Yes!

B: Every night I would lie awake praying, saying, "Oh God, someday I hope I can have a metal roof instead of this one, so that my children can sleep when it rains. I hope that they will be more prosperous than me, so that they won't have to be in the same situation." I just kept praying night after night, until one day I slept, and I had a dream of my cousin. He called out to me, saying "Don't stay over there. Come over here towards me! Over here there is peace and happiness, it's not like where you are." I looked over and I saw a tall house with a tile roof. It rose up high on a hill. He told me, "Just come! You don't have to bring anything, just your kids!" And so I brought all of my kids with me to meet him. At the time I washed clothes for a living. I would stay up until 11 pm every night, sitting and washing people's clothes.

A: Yeah—

B: I would wash them and then put them away. That very same night my cousin called [the people I was working for] and said that my house had caught on fire. Right as I had that dream, my house burned down to the ground. It was incredible—

A: Wow—

B: Then—the landlord of my house didn't tell me that it had burned! Him and his three kids, they didn't let me know. And I kept wondering why they were glancing over at me so much but didn't say anything to me. Their son Naet just told me, "Just keep washing the clothes." That's all he told me! It was only the next morning when I got up—I stayed at their house to wash all their clothes, and the next morning I was going to my own home, because

I went home once a week—

A: Right—

B: That next morning they told me, “All your things are ready.” They gave me a bunch of stuff, but I didn't know what was happening, because they hadn't told me that my house had burned down. They gave me a sack of rice, fish paste, salt, other ingredients, cooking oil, plates, a pot, a knife, and clothes until the remorque was completely filled up. The driver asked, “Naet, why are you giving her so much?” He said just to take it to my house, and even gave me 50000 riel too! I didn't know what was going on, but they sent me home and told me, “All your stuff is ready! Don't worry about it, just go!” I didn't know what to say! I just got up on the remorque and told the driver to go to [Tumnob] 94 [a dam]. Once we got to Preaek Hour I asked him to stop a second so I could buy some food for my kids. I went to buy some fish to make a stew, but before I could buy it the man cried out to me and said “Hey! Your house just burned down!” I thought he was just joking, but he said, “You don't believe me? It burned down to the ground! Look at my foot, I cut it on a nail as I was putting the fire out last night! You were lucky your kids weren't home. If they had been there they would have been burned.”

A: Oh. Where had your kids gone?

B: They had started the rice and then gone to see the music show! They went to go play!

A: Yes.

B: It was almost Khmer New Year, and they wanted to practice dancing.

A: Oh.

B: My littlest one was asleep with her older sibling. I looked at the man's feet and they were covered in soot, and one had a cut on it. I felt totally overwhelmed; I wanted to faint on that remorque. When I got home all there was left was the frame of the house; everything else had completely burned.

A: Seeing that must have been painful—

B: Yes! My tears wouldn't even come out. I didn't know what to think. I felt ruined; I didn't know where to go, or where to take my kids! In my heart I could only think to beg my siblings or friends for a place for my kids to stay. My friend [who I worked for] offered me a place to stay at this gas station here—

A: Yes.

B: The next day I went to work, and he asked the men who delivered the gas to his station, and all the other owners and people he could for money—

A: Yes.

B: He said that his cook's house had burned down, and he asked each of them for 10 or 20 dollars. Each of them gave a little! They heard that my house had burned and gave a few dollars to my friend. He called me from his gas station and told me that people had donated \$800. I had \$800, which was enough to buy the wood. People had donated to me through him.

A: Through who?

B: Through my cousin. He's a teacher. He gave me \$1200 [in total].

A: Oh—it was lucky that you had someone to help.

B: They gave me so much rice that even after a year there was still some left over.

A: Wow—

B: They bought clothing too. After he bought the supplies to rebuild the house, there was enough money left to buy a water tank, mats, and other things—my cousin even bought a water filter for me!

A: Yes.

B: And I am also grateful to God. That kind of thing only happens when we pray and ask Him!

A: Yes.

B: And so God took away the evil that had happened—

A: Right—

B: And replaced it with good instead. That was the one miracle I've seen in my life. And now [my cousin] has joined seminary, and I have too! Before, I didn't know how to dance. When I was young, I never did. Now I'm old, but I know how to!

A: Yes.

B: I even take fun trips!

A: Yes, that's fun!

B: Yes! I don't worry anymore because my kids have all grown up!

A: Yes.

B: I eat as much as I can earn. I need to be happy, especially as I'm getting older. I've stopped worrying!

A: Yes!

B: My older sibling believes in God too. They live in Aural, but they have come and visited me here.

A: Yes. Thank you very much. Do you have any last things that you'd like to say to your future descendants that will listen to this?

B: Yes! I would like to tell my descendants that if you end up having a life like mine, it will be a very difficult one for you. So please, I would ask you to do everything you can to make your life good and right. Don't do things that are abhorrent, because now is the time in which we can choose!

A: So, do you have any words of advice you would like to send to later generations, like things you want to tell those that will listen to your voice later?

B: Yes, for my children in future generations that are listening to my voice, pay attention,

and know what I did to care for you! And be careful in each of your lives!

A: Yes, thank you very much for allowing me to interview you. This interview will be posted on Brigham Young University's website. If you want your children to listen to it, you can access it there and listen. Thank you!

Translated by Devon Crane and edited by Thomas Barrett.