

Interview of Toun Yon

A: Interviewer: Heng Sovannarin

B: Interviewee: Toun Yon

Summary of the Interview

At the time of her interview, Tuon Yon was 64 years old, residing in the floating village of Chong Khneas, Siem Reap province. She is the fifth of six children in her family, two of whom are still alive. In this stunning interview, she launches into her account of loss, survival, and resilience amidst the horrors of the Khmer Rouge period. She recounts several experiences, from witnessing atrocities committed under Pol Pot's reign to escaping her village with a few friends to find her mother. She also shares candid memories of sacrificing what little she had to keep her younger brother alive amidst their hardships. Despite the innumerable difficulties she faced, she was reunified with her mother and siblings after the Vietnamese army invaded, leaving her to start a new life in the aftermath of the war.

A: To begin, I'd like to say thank you for allowing me to come and interview about your experience. This interview has been prepared by a university called Brigham Young in the United States. The aim of this university is to interview the Cambodian people about their lives to preserve their history, so your descendants and future generations may know your experiences and learn about your history. When I finish your interview, I will put the interview on the university's website, which is called www.cambodiaoralhistory.byu.edu. Do you give me permission to put it on the website?

B: I do.

A: Yes. The date of this interview is December 19, 2020, and it is being conducted in Chong Khneas village, Chong Khneas commune, Siem Reap district, Siem Reap province. I am the interviewer, and my name is Heng Sovannarin. I'd like to ask, what is your full name?

B: My name is Tuon Yon.

A: Do you have a nickname?

B: That's the only name I have.

A: So how old are you this year?

B: 64 years old.

A: Do you remember your birthdate?

B: I don't, I just remember my age.

A: What about the Khmer year, which Khmer year were you born in?

B: I don't remember anything, I'm too old nowadays to remember.

A: So where were you born?

B: Chong Khneas village, I was born right here in Phnom Krom commune, Chong Khneas village.

A: You've lived here since you were little?

B: I've been here since I was young—since I was born.

A: How many siblings do you have?

B: Pol Pot killed my siblings. I only have two left.

A: So in total, including the ones that were killed and the ones that are living, how many people are there?

B: Including the ones that were killed, there are six of us—Chheut, Chhab, Chhom, Lai, me, and Van Heng is the youngest.

A: So where do you sit in that order?

B: I am the second youngest, the fifth child.

A: So where do your living siblings live nowadays?

B: They all live here.

A: What sort of things did you do with your siblings when you were young? Could you tell me a little bit about that?

B: When we were young and all together, we worked on a bean farm. That was when I was really young. I was still young—I was about 16 years old. Once the war entered [the land], I turned 17 and they had me carry bamboo fishing nets and whatnot. I did that for about a year, and then they sent me to the factory. I was there for about a year and then they evacuated—the Khmer Rouge soldiers took my dad and siblings and said they were going to take them to be "reeducated." But in truth, they didn't take them to be "reeducated," they took them and killed them. So I've been separated from them ever since that day. My three older brothers—they took two of them and killed them. Another one had gone to school, and they took him and killed him. He had just finished the first grade in that generation. [Cambodia followed the French system back then, and students began in twelfth grade, eventually graduating after first grade.] He had just passed the test to get his diploma. Then they relocated me, my siblings, my mother, and my elderly grandparents to Kampong Kdei. We walked all the way there at that time—we didn't have a car, they made us walk. One of my grandparents couldn't walk that far, so we made a stretcher for them. We walked along the edge of the forest to Prek Braos Pagoda. Once we got there, it was raining really hard. We went looking for water to boil to make rice, but there wasn't any. My grandmother went to beg for water to make food, she begged from some older people from the area.

A: Right.

B: They had a bit of water, but there were thousands of us that had walked there, and there wasn't enough for all of us. Of everyone that came to try and get water, they denied them all entrance. Only my grandmother was allowed to enter and go to the well at Prek Braos Pagoda because she went and respectfully begged them for water to cook food. It was by the goodness of a monk who helped her that she was able to get water, and when she had walked halfway there, it started raining and we had water to make food. The next morning, they moved us away from Prek Braos onto the national highway. We traveled along the highway to Kampong Kdei—oh, actually to Thnal Kaeng. No! It wasn't at Thnal Kaeng—

[Pauses] Yes, it was after we got to Thnal Kaeng already. Once we got to Thnal Kaeng, they had us dig an irrigation system for the rice field—the young women and mothers. We didn't have anything to eat. In the morning, they would give us a single ladle of rice porridge. Because of that, my mother went to climb some trees and pick fruit called—oh what was it called? Sindora fruit! The sindora fruit we have here in Cambodia. Sindora fruit—not the actual plant but the seed inside, that's what they called—oh, it was called the trabuk or the divine jasmine fruit or something. She brought the fruit back to us and would keep it and let it ripen for a day so that we could eat it. After we left our work behind there, we didn't have anything to eat besides a scoop of rice porridge with water lilies and other tough vegetables mixed in. We'd put a mouthful in our mouths and then put some salt in our mouths. Just a bit of rice porridge from a small spoon—we were so destitute. Just a small spoonful of rice porridge to eat. When my mother saw that, she felt pity for us. She would find fruit trees, pick the fruit, let it ripen, and then give it to us in the morning. She would give one to my younger brother Van Heng, and one to me. After that, we had enough food to scrape by. After another month, they relocated us again to Vihear Phrom Pagoda. There were a lot of us—hundreds, even thousands of people.

A: Right!

B: After they put us at Vihear Phrom Pagoda, they had us build a dam and other irrigation systems and work in the rice fields. We worked until we finished. If anybody didn't work, they killed them. If they found anyone walking away from the work, they would catch them and kill them. At this time, I was very young and didn't really know what was going on. I would cut rice in the fields, and while I was there, I would do some digging for water chestnuts—you know, the little red ones about this big? [Gestures] I would put them in the folds of my skirt and save them to eat later. When we returned from the fields, they gave us rice porridge and I had picked—at the beginning of the day, I had plucked some fruit, some bright red fruit that was as tough as firewood. I went and washed it with water to clean it, and I put it in the folds of my skirt. After that, I went and they gave us each a plate of rice porridge, one plate with just one ladle full of food and a small spoonful of salt on it. After that, I picked some leaves from a tamarind tree that had fallen to the ground—I took them and put them in my mouth, and [when that didn't fill me] I picked some grass and shoved it in my mouth so that my mouth would be full. I would also scrape the excess rice off the rice paddle and eat it so that my stomach would feel a little heavier. That's how I ate every day.

One day—I'm just going to share it all. One day—oh! It made me want to pass out—I saw them beating a child. They were beating a child against a palm tree trunk—it was probably eight months old. They claimed that its mother was a traitor, so they took her child. They separated them, and then they took the child by its legs and bashed it against a palm trunk. I almost passed out! My vision got dark, and I collapsed—I felt so bad for that child. After I collapsed, a soldier asked me, "Why is it that you fell over friend? Are you scared?" I told them, "I'm not feeling so good." I didn't dare tell them the real reason, I was scared that they would take me away and kill me too. I told them, "I'm a little dizzy, I'm not feeling so well." They responded, "If you're not feeling good, you better get up and keep digging dirt!" I was terrified that they were going to take me away and kill me, so I stood and kept going. I kept digging, and when I went back home, I had to stand guard that night—they had young women take turns standing guard and watching the people that they put in prison.

A: Right.

B: The prison was so small! They had them all sit together, bent over. It was full of people who had [done something wrong], some of them had stolen some uncooked rice, so they had taken them and were going to kill them. Some of them had stolen the leftover cooked rice and they were going to take and kill them too—there were so many who died at Vihear Phrom, there were so many killed. So many people wouldn't dare to walk or go anywhere [for fear of being killed], they would rather go without, they would rather endure starvation. This went on for about a month where they would take people and kill them. Anyone who disobeyed, they would exterminate. There were only about 200 people left, just the elderly and the children, and they had split us apart—they had separated the mothers from everyone else. My mother went to one place, I went to another, and my younger sibling went to still another place. I pitied my younger sibling so much—they sent my mother to Lveaeng Ruessei [a place name that means "Bitter Bamboo" in Khmer], my younger sibling went to Thnal Kaeng, my older sibling went to Kampong Kdei—at the school in Kampong Kdei. I was with three hundred other young women. There were three hundred of us but after a while, they had murdered so many of us that there were only seventy of us left. And there were about two hundred youth total, but there were only six or seven still there. When night came though, you could hear a low, penetrating sound of crying because they missed their mothers who were far away in Lveaeng Ruessei. From Kampong Kdei to Lveaeng Ruessei, it was very far, child.

A: Right.

B: One night, I escaped. I escaped with [two] others—there was a girl named Thea, myself, and another girl named Luom, just us three. We escaped at 1 o'clock at night and we did it without anyone else knowing—we were afraid that they would catch and kill us. We escaped and looked for our mothers. We didn't know where our mothers were. We walked to find them anyway, and we actually went too far—we made it all the way to Stoung. We didn't know where Lveaeng Ruessei was, so we passed it and went all the way to Stoung. Once we got there, we asked some people from that area—they had good hearts, they were really nice. They asked, "Where are you young ladies going?" I answered, "I'm looking for Lveaeng Ruessei, they relocated my mother here to Lveaeng Ruessei." After that, they said [to one another], "Oh, these are kids from the river." We answered, "Yes!" and they told us, "The kids from the river are good people!" They told us, "Oh, you've already gone too far! Go back past the bridge and go down a little farther and you'll get to the place they call Lveaeng Ruessei." So, we went back and as we walked, I asked people who I knew exactly where we should go because they all had been relocated together. They all began to ask, "Yon! Are you looking for your mother?" and I responded, "Yes! Where's my mother?" I went quietly and whispered to people, "Where is my mother?" and they answered, "Your mother is in that house over there."

Once I got there, I saw my mother making a fire under a house. She was grilling something over the fire because my grandmother was sick. She was making a fire, and I began to sob. [Interviewee Starts Crying] I sprinted over to her, and clutched my mother in a tight embrace, all while crying. My mother ran over to me and hugged me to herself. After that, she told me, "Don't come back here child, I'm scared they're going to take you and kill you!" "I'm terrified to see you come here," she said, "I'm so very scared." I responded, "I'll go back

now Mom." But she said, "You don't need to go back yet. Just wait, I'll go ask for permission from the cooperative. I'll ask the president, he has a good heart. I'll ask if you can stay for one night first, and then in the morning you can go back." Then she took me and hid me in her room and didn't let them see me. In the morning, she went and told them about me, and later in the morning they came and looked at me. But when they saw me, they claimed that I was Vietnamese. My mother said, "No, that's my child!" and they retorted, "Then why does your child look like a Vietnamese girl?" She said, "No, my child has fair skin, she's the only one that way." The cooperative president knew Lai—he knew my older brother who used to be there. He went and asked my older brother, who said, "That's my younger sister, she has fair skin, she's the only one that way." Then they allowed me to stay for one night. I yearned for my mother so much—I didn't dare to eat any rice. They gave us rice, half a can of rice every morning and evening for the two of them—my grandmother and my mother.

A: Yes.

B: My mother hid her food—she would only eat one spoonful of rice porridge. She went and picked some pigweed and morning glory and looked for snails in the nooks and crannies in front of other houses. She brought them back and made a soup for my grandmother to eat and gave the rice to her two kids. When I left, I got about three kilograms of rice. They had given my mother a half can of rice, and she had saved it for her kids bit by bit until she had accumulated enough. After that, my mother told me, "Child, you can go whenever but don't leave when it is nighttime, I am so scared of animals." The monkeys were violent and would shriek back then. The monkeys there would rip humans apart and eat them. When I heard them shriek, I would get the others and we would run for the trees together.

Anyway, after my mother had spent all that time saving up her rice, she had about three kilograms of rice in total. After that, I didn't dare to eat it myself, I saved it for my younger brother. I was afraid that my younger brother was going around and asking for food, and that they would take and kill him, so I saved the food for him. He was at the place they kept the youth, and everyone there was trying to get in, but no one was allowed to enter. They would hit and kick [whoever tried to get in]. But my grandmother—it was like she had destiny on her side, just like when she got help from the monk earlier, do you remember? She was able to go in, and the people there asked her, "Hey friend, aren't you scared of Sam who's in the army?" [But my grandmother ignored them and said], "Sam, Heng's older sister is here." They said, "Oh? Heng's older sister?" She answered in the affirmative and they said, "Well, if you're here for Heng, then you can come in." Then they let me come in because I hadn't seen my brother yet. Once I got there, I met someone sleeping in a hammock, so I squatted down, respectfully greeted the individual, and asked, "Could I meet my younger sibling?" They said, "If you want to meet him, go meet him." I expressed my gratitude and went to meet my brother. When I saw him, he started to cry. I gave him the three kilos of rice, but they took it right away from him. He cried—Van Heng did, and I began to cry too. I was afraid that they were going to take him away and kill him. I said, "Why are you crying, they're going to take you away and kill you!" That's what I told him. "Don't be so sad, it hurts me to see you keep crying. Don't cry, it makes me want to die!" That's what I told my brother. "I just want to die," he told me, and I asked, "Why, what's going on?" We both just cried, we both cried, face to face.

A: Yes.

B: I told him, "There isn't going to be anyone who will come and kill you, the soldiers like you. You haven't ever done anything wrong, why are you crying over the rice Mom sent?" There was some rice, some fish paste, and some dried fish that I had brought, but they stole and ate it. After that, I told him, "Stop crying, I'll save you some more rice and give it to you. Wait for the morning, you can come to me." That's what I told him. "Don't walk on the main road, I'm afraid that they'll catch you after you leave your work. Walk on the road and pick some water lilies and some water spinach, walk on the road the cow carts take because it's closer. Wait for me to get some rice porridge, and I'll put it by the road for you. When you see it, grab it so that you can eat from it. Go ahead and save the container [this Khmer word refers to a 19th-century European mess kit common in that era], and when you come by again, wait for me, and I'll get the container from you." I was so worried about him, that he had no food. He told me there was nothing to eat, and I told him, "Look, I'm a girl—I can't stand to see a boy like you going around and begging. I'm afraid that they're going to catch and kill you.

A: Right.

B: So every day, he would walk by, looking for me. I got some rice porridge for him, about half of the container's worth. I didn't scrub it very much, I saved about half the container's worth to give to him in secret every day. I would sneakily give it to him every day, and I would pick some pigweed to put in with the rice porridge. We ate whatever we could, but we were never really full—we endured it day by day. But I never dared to switch it up—I was content to have nothing, to become as skinny as a reed [so long as he wasn't hungry]. After that, there was a day that they had me go hoe dirt. My brother went looking for me, but he couldn't find me. So he turned around and went down to the water and found some fish—there were some baby catfish that he caught with his hands. After I had [finished my work and] waited for my brother for a while—I hadn't saved any rice porridge for him, but they had given me a potato about this big, about as big as my hand [gestures]. So, I put it on a guava tree next to the forest to save for my younger brother, right with my container. I busied myself by picking whatever I could find to eat so that my belly would feel full. I picked some rattan to eat.

After that, my brother came walking by. "I'm here!" he said, to which I responded, "I ate all the porridge already, I didn't see you come! And now it's time to go to work." After that, he said, "No, it's nothing! I got some water lilies and star lotus to eat with the rice porridge, and I caught some catfish with my hands." [I told him], "Go ahead and take it, keep it with the leftover rice porridge," to which he responded, "No, go ahead and take it. Just wait, I can catch some more." After that, I ran over to get my potato and bring it back for him, but someone else had taken it and eaten it all. After that, we both sat down and cried. I cried, and my brother told me, "Don't cry!" [but I responded], "I'm crying because I feel bad for you, because you've come by and eaten here before." But he still told me, "Oh, don't cry. I brought some fish and water lily already, and I didn't work at all today. Look, now we're even." I said, "Brother, you should get going, you should go where you need to go so that others don't start saying anything bad about you behind your back."

So my brother went back, and I went and caught a catfish for my brother, but when I sat down with it, it stung me—oh, it cut my hand open! It started to drizzle, and my hand began to throb. I cried over that catfish—I cried all day and all night until I had to go to work.

When I was there, I kept crying until the president finally came over and asked, "Yon, friend, why are you crying?" I didn't dare to tell them that it was because of a catfish sting. I told them that a scorpion had stung me when I was working. If I had told them that it was a catfish that stung me, I would have been taken away to be punished or killed.

A: Right.

B: I said that a scorpion in the dirt stung me, and they told me, "Well, if a scorpion stung you, then you had better hurry with your work because you are going to start swelling up." I kept on crying, so they told me, "Go and get some rest if you are feeling pain already." When they had you rest, they didn't have a specific place, they had us stay there out in the open—out in the rain. I cried myself to sleep, and slept until someone woke me up saying, "Friend, night has come, are you over your sickness already?" I said, "Yes, it's over." It was just us—me and the president that had been pardoned of some previous punishment.

A: Yes.

B: After that, we went back. They had us in a place with three hundred other people, but there were only seventy of us left—not even that many! Probably more like thirty people. They took people to be killed every day. Oh, I was so anxious. I was so scared—why do I say that I was so scared? Because a cadre, a group of soldiers would come by. One day, I was taking a shower, and I got so lucky—I was older by then. I had just showered and tied my clothes around my chest when the soldiers came. When they saw me, they started following me. They followed me, getting closer and closer so I ran into the schoolhouse. Once I ran into the school, they called out, "Which one of you girls just finished showering?" They were mean! If any pretty girls caught the eye of a soldier, they would catch that person and do bad things to them before murdering them. So I ran away and hid, and some others helped hide me. I could've died that day!

A: Yes.

B: When they got there, they asked where I was and the others responded, "Oh we don't know!" That's what they said. After they stopped following me, they went to—where was it? Area three! Once they got there, they asked, "Friend, do you have a president here?" and they said, "Yes, we have one here in Aranh, but he is old." So, they called him over. Once he got there, they wouldn't take him. They called a different president, they called him—they called him Lum. He was a very handsome man—he was a student. They took him—after they beat him, they severed his head by the neck and put it aside, and then chopped up his body and put it aside. When people heard of it, they told me— [Pauses, Begins to Whisper] "Yon, you got so lucky. Did you see what they did to him? You're lucky, Yon. You should be dead and gone by now. They called Lum over and took him away." That's what they said. I asked, "What did Lum do?" "We don't know," they said back, "go outside of the house."

When morning came, a rumor started going around—the people from the old area there said, "Oh, they just had the village president go—" [Pauses] Back then, they were called cooperative presidents, you know? They said, "The cooperative president went to bury the bodies of some girls that were taken to be killed." They would whisper this to one another, but after a while, he never came back—we never saw him. Then one day, we went to go harvest the rice in some fields, in the fields close to the national road. Then, my friend Chhay asked to use the toilet for a moment—we had to ask for permission back then.

A: Right.

B: When Chhay went to go use the toilet, Chhay stumbled on the corpses they had chopped to pieces. The wild dogs had gotten to them, they had dug up the bodies. But Chhay wasn't scared, Chhay grabbed a stick to dig up some dirt to use the toilet and then ran back here. After that, Chhay ran back here and said, "Don't say anything, but when it's mealtime, let's go and look at these dead bodies. I have no doubt that it is Lum's body!" Remember, Lum was a student, he had learned until the last grade.

A: Yes.

B: We went to see Lum's corpse, I was doubtful if it was Lum. So, as soon as it was time to eat, we told them that we were going to pick some palm leaves and some other things, you understand? We couldn't have told them that we were going to look at the corpse, we were scared that it would cause a disturbance, and that they would take us to be killed too.

A: Right.

B: So, we went to go look at the corpse. When we got there, we dug up the body a little more and we could tell that it really was Lum. We dug around but we couldn't find his head, it had been cut off and set aside from his body—his body was severed from his head. I remember that he was wearing a white robe—the white robes they would have us wear back in that generation. He had sewed it so about this much was white, and about this much was black, they were sewn together. After I saw his corpse, we got everyone together—I felt so afraid. As we were walking, I held one of the girl's hands because I was the smallest of them all. I walked with them, all of the other girls were older than me.

A: Right.

B: So I held onto their hands. They asked, "What are you scared of?" and I responded, "I'm scared of corpses." I held their hand and even after we went back and night fell, I couldn't fall asleep. And when night came, they [the Khmer Rouge] would sneak around our house, around our place at Kampong Kdei, you know? They would look for any pretty girls, and then they would take them and do bad things to them, then kill them. The president there—what was his name? I've forgotten. He [did this] to about three hundred girls. A couple of girls a day—one or two girls every day. Once I got back from work and night fell, I never dared to go outside. If I went outside—our president told us to not walk outside or we'd die, so I would never walk outside at night. [Scoffs] I never dared to go outside, so as soon as we finished eating, I'd grab my blanket, throw it over my head, and promptly fall asleep. And for me and the girls with me, my friends—my president told us, "If they call for you at night, don't leave the house at all!" That's what they said. If they saw that we were pretty, they would take us away and do bad things to us, and then they would kill us. This happened every day, maybe for about three whole months. Three whole months went by, and then the Khmer Rouge was scattered. Oh! No, that didn't happen quite yet, after three months is when they evacuated us again, child.

A: Yes.

B: They evacuated us to Pou Brahoung village—I was with my mother!

A: Right!

B: Once we got there, it got even worse. They had us work in the fields, we worked transplanting rice seedlings. After that, they had us dig a long ditch around the area so that they would be prepared to kill us.

A: Oh!

B: Just three days later, they killed us and dumped our bodies in that very ditch. And for us—at that time, they took my mother away. When they took her away, they told me that they didn't have enough people in the youth groups to harvest in the rice fields.

A: Right.

B: And for me—my mother told me, "Don't go, don't you know? Once the organization places you somewhere, you can't leave!" My mother said, "If you go, then your youngest sibling will be the only one left with me." But they came and took me away to harvest rice in Kampong Kdei. We harvested there for about a month, after which the Vietnamese came and liberated us. When the Vietnamese came to liberate us, I didn't dare to leave anymore. Everyone else was leaving and scattering to and fro, but they wouldn't let me go home. The officers wouldn't let me go home.

A: Right.

B: After which Ruon Chun—the older sibling of Uon said to them, "Oh friend, please let Yon go," to which one of them responded, "No, I won't let her go!" I wondered why they were arguing about letting me go or not. They said to me, "Friend, you need to go with me to my own house first." But I responded, "No, I won't go, I want to go to my mother's house so that I can meet up with her." But they wouldn't let me go—they had been sitting right outside my front door to block me in. It was only at that point that Ruon Chun came and told them to let me go, saying, "Oh, let her go, her mother is waiting for her. And look, it's already 3 or 4 o'clock." They responded, "No, if she wants to go, Yon will need to come with me first." I responded, "No! I won't go, I want to go back to my mother!" That's what I told them!

A: Yes.

B: Suddenly, the officers that were in charge of overseeing the young women's group ran over saying to the others, "Friend Pheng! Why aren't you running away? What are you doing, just sitting there? The Vietnamese have made it to Stoung already!" They called them the enemy.

A: Right.

B: Their enemy had crashed through our territory, all the way to Stoung. They didn't want to leave—it was only after they left that I dared to come here. They wouldn't let me leave, they kept saying that I needed to go to their house with them first. What house was I going to go to? I knew that if I went with them, I'd never make it back to my mother. Why would I do that? After that, I walked until it was night—I walked until about 4 o'clock when I found my mother. I walked all the way by the road near Vihear Prohm pagoda.

A: Yes.

B: I went looking for my mother, and when I found her, she was just waiting for me. Everyone else had fled from there, and my mother was alone, just the three of them. Just

my mother and her children, the three of us. She [didn't know where to go] but she made up her mind to go to—oh, what was it called? Oh! They called it—Spean Tnaot! She had made the decision to look for her kids at Spean Tnaot. Everyone had left the area, every single person had left.

A: Right.

B: Everyone else had said to her, "Where are you going? Why aren't you leaving?" They were afraid that they were going to be killed. After that, she responded, "I'm waiting for my children!" "Where have my children gone?" they asked. She responded, "They've been relocated to Spean Tnaot." So my mother walked there with Chai Lan. She walked over, and on her way, she found her children, after which we turned and headed back towards Spean Tnaot. After that, we went looking for my older sibling who was at Lveaeng Ruessei. After that, we left everything behind and came back together—we walked back together on the road leading back to our house, our homeland.

A: Yes. So, what is your mother's name?

B: Moeun.

A: What about your father, what's his name?

B: My father's name is Voan.

A: Where were they both born?

B: They were born here.

A: Was your mother a strict or a kind person?

B: She was all right.

A: [Laughs] Was she strict?

B: She was strict, just ask Vat and she'll tell you.

A: What about your father?

B: He was also strict, but he was a worker back in the Sangkum era. He was strict, but he was considerate of his relatives. He wasn't excessively mean, he was considerate of his family.

A: What sort of work did your parents do to support you?

B: From back then?

A: Yes.

B: From back then, he was a bean and watermelon farmer here.

A: Did you ever have animals?

B: Nope, we didn't know how to take care of them.

A: Do you remember your grandparents on your mother's side?

B: I do.

A: What are their names?

B: My grandmother's name is Mamol. My grandfather's name is Kong Chheng. On my father's side, my grandmother's name is Mor, and my grandfather's name is Tuon.

A: Are they also from here?

B: Yes.

A: Were your grandparents alive when you were born?

B: They weren't, only one of my grandmothers on my mother's side. She's the grandmother who we had to carry when we walked through Prek Broas, she was crippled.

A: So do you have any siblings or relatives who live abroad?

B: I do not. Well, I do, but they've never reached out to us. I do have one, my cousin, but we don't really keep in touch with each other.

A: What is your husband's name?

B: His name is Seng Hay—oh, Seng Hong! His last name is Hong.

A: And what year did you get married to him? And how many years have you been married?

B: It was about a year after coming back to our hometown.

A: So it was in 1980?

B: Yes.

A: So it has been 40 years.

B: Yes, 40 years.

A: How old were you when you got married?

B: I was 20 years old.

A: Was that marriage arranged by your parents, or of your own choosing?

B: I don't want to say, I don't want to be embarrassed. [Laughs] It was rough. He proposed to me, and I rejected his proposal, that's all I'll say, you'll understand.

A: Do you know how to read and write Khmer?

B: I don't know how to write, just how to read.

A: So, did you go to school when you were young?

B: When I was young, I learned until I was 10 years old, and then my father was killed. From then on, I stopped going to school.

A: And what grade did you get to when you went to school?

B: At that time, we called it third grade. But they counted from the top down—twelfth, eleventh, tenth. [I learned all the way until] third grade.

A: What school did you attend when you went to school?

B: I went to school in Phnom Krom.

A: Do you know any languages besides Khmer?

B: No, I only know Khmer.

A: Do you have any good friends from when you grew up all the way until now?

B: I do, they all live in the district.

A: I see.

B: I have close friends from the Khmer Rouge too, we loved each other and were friendly to on another—there were a lot of them. Like the wife of the commune president—there was a lot of them.

A: Can you tell me some of their names?

B: Prek, Prom, Ret, Muon. Outside of them, all the others are just normal acquaintances.

A: Yes. What memories do you have with your friends?

B: Memories from the Khmer Rouge. We didn't have any food, so we would split salt and prahok amongst ourselves—we would steal and hide food. I didn't know how—I would come home from work and see that there was some food to eat, they would bring us some salt. We would tell each other that we had food to eat, and that we got some salt. We were never full. Back then, they would call us to eat, and we were never full, so we would bring some salt with us. Some people would say, "Yon! Friend, do you eat dog meat?" And I would say, "I can't eat it." You never know where they come from. It was very sad. We were poor, we would sleep all together and tease each other. We were all very scared and worried at that time. The only happiness came from those friends, from playing with and teasing each other. I am still friends with them to this very day. If I see them, I give them what I can. And every time I don't have anything [to eat], they'll ask, "Do you have any food?" [If I respond] "No, I don't have any prahok to eat," then they'll give me a kilo. On the days when we don't have anything, we'll give each other fermented fish paste.

A: Have you ever done farm work?

B: Nowadays?

A: No, ever since you were a child.

B: When I was a child, I did it with my father and mother. We had a bean farm and a watermelon farm. Nowadays, I don't.

A: Did they have you do it during the Khmer Rouge?

B: They did, they had us farm rice when they relocated us. They did after they relocated us—it's like I told you earlier, it was miserable.

A: Yes. So what kinds of work have you done since you were a kid?

B: I don't know what to do nowadays, I'm not lying. Ever since I was a kid and up until now, I've never lived a comfortable life. My husband used to work for the commune—before he passed away, that is. He worked for the commune, and I walked around and sold fermented sticky rice and corn. I was able to buy one or two kilograms of rice after a full day of work for my husband and kids. Nowadays it's a bit easier—we've gotten on top of things, and we

have better occupations now that my kids are older. I can eat because some of my kids have left, and I do a bit of rice farming. I haven't done any this year, though. [Laughs] I've been sick every day, and I never get better, I'm just sick. I sell corn every day—just ask my nieces and nephews, they know. I walk around and sell corn every day. I make about 5000 riel every day, I'm not lying. I get 5000 riel and my house is full of grandkids—Thea's kids, Sela's kids, Kapol's kids, and Thik's kids—all their parents don't have enough, so they brought them all here while their fathers go looking for work above us. This morning—and I'm not lying to you—I only had 1000 riel left. [Worth about 25 cents when the interview took place.] 1000 riel for real, I'm not lying to you! We only had 1000 riel left—look, I had 3000, 4000 riel and then I gave 1000 riel to the monks at the pagoda, and when I came back, I gave Thai—those two siblings 1000 riel. Then I gave another 1000 riel to the girl Bopha, so I only had 1000 riel left. I didn't know what to do, so I gave it to the youngest girl. "Mom, what are you making for food?" she asked, and I responded, "Mom doesn't know what to do, I only have 1000 riel. Crush some chili peppers and put some soy sauce with it child, give it to the others to eat." After that, they said, "Oh, Mom, we can't eat it. We used to eat good food, we can't put this down, Mom." I responded, "Oh child, what am I to do? I only have 1000 riel." They took it and went to buy some vegetables and a duck egg for 1000 riel and they were full for but a single meal.

A: So ever since you were a kid up until now, when were you the happiest?

B: I have been the happiest when my kids are doing well, that's when I'm happiest. If my kids are poor, then I'm not happy. I am happy only when my kids have the things they need, a good job, and things like a house that meets their needs. If my kids need a place to stay, that's why I have a house. If we are all poor, then it is miserable. During COVID, it was miserable. If we don't work hard together, then there isn't anything for the kids to eat.

A: So ever since you were a kid to now, how has your life changed?

B: There has been some change, it's not that I've been suffering my whole life. When I lived at the river, I was active. Coming here, there have been some happy times and happy days, as well as terrible days. It hasn't all been suffering, there have been good and bad days. The days when my husband had a lot of money to spend [were good]. When he got sick for seven months we ran out of money, then we started to suffer. I don't know when we will ever stop suffering. [Laughs]

A: When you were a kid, what did you want to become when you got older?

B: The only thing I wanted was to make money so I could be rich like the people I saw and not be poor, so they wouldn't look down on me. That's why I've worked so hard ever since I got married. When I was with my mother, we were well off. My parents were well off I never had to do anything. When I got older and got married, that's when I started struggling, and have been that way until now. Not constantly, there are ups and downs. There are days that I have nothing and days that I have enough.

A: What kind of food have you liked to eat ever since you were a child, and up until now?

B: If we're talking about food, I don't really like anything especially, I only really like Katang stir-fried noodles. My kids would say that I only like expensive food. [Laughs] You could say that if I had Katang noodles every day, I would be happy. After Thea has clients or guests

and he gets paid, Thea brings packages of Katang noodles to me. In the evenings, he'll buy some Katang noodles and bring them by. But for other food, I don't like to buy it, I don't enjoy it. Num Banhchok and soups and curries are all right, but if my kid has Katang noodles, I will always eat them.

A: Ever since you were a kid, have you enjoyed listening to music?

B: I love listening to music.

A: Which artists do you like to listen to?

B: I like Ros Sereysothea, Sinn Sisamouth, Pan Ron, In Yeng.

A: Do you have a favorite song? What's your favorite genre?

B: I'm not so sure about genre, but if someone sings, I know every song. I know them all, any popular song from the Sangkum era, I know it.

A: Did you ever play any traditional games during Khmer New Year when you were young?

B: I didn't know how to play, and I didn't know how to dance. I only learned how to dance when I got older, but I stopped dancing after my child died and I was left brokenhearted.

A: So we are at the end, do you have anything that you would like to say to your kids and grandkids? Things about how they should live, and what kind of people they should be?

B: I would like to say something to my kids and descendants. Please be good people. Don't commit crimes, don't steal, don't do drugs, and don't drink alcohol. Be good kids—I'd like to tell the whole of Cambodia to be good kids—to be happy and healthy and to avoid drugs especially. I really hate drugs. I'd like to tell the organizations to help the children in Cambodia avoid doing what is wrong and participating in corruption and drugs. It has no worth—it only destroys your life and your health. Some people go insane, some people get sick. They forget their mothers and fathers. That's it.

A: Okay, thank you for spending your time interviewing with me. I wish you good health, good luck, and happiness in your family.

B: Yes, thank you, thank you, well done. I wish you a long life.

A: Yes.

Translated and edited by Ethan Arkell and Thomas Barrett.