

Interview of Thang Pheak

A: Interviewer: Heng Sovannarin

B: Interviewee: Thang Pheak

Summary of the Interview

Thang Pheak, born in 1965 in Chi Kraeng district, Siem Reap province, is the third of seven siblings. In his interview, he delves into his family's vibrant history and recounts his experience serving in the army as a youth after the conclusion of the Khmer Rouge era. Now mainly working as a day laborer, he dedicates much of the conversation to reflecting on how the war shaped his life and the lives of the Khmer people. He additionally closes by encouraging those in future generations to be empathetic and engage in educational pursuits.

A: First of all, I would like to express my gratitude for allowing me to come and interview you about your background. This interview was organized by a university named BYU in America. The reason the university wants to interview the Khmer people is to preserve the history of the Khmer people so that the next generation can know the history of their ancestors and learn about their own history. After I interview you, I will post your interview on the school's website called www.cambodianoralhistoryproject.byu.edu. So, do you agree for me to put your interview on the school's website?

B: No problem, you can post it. Back in my day, I did not learn [at school], the war was constantly going on. I was born in 1965 and in 1979 I went to serve in the army when I was 13-14 years old.

A: Yes! So, this interview was conducted on the 23rd day of February 2020. This interview took place in Thlok Andong village, Slor Kram commune, Siem Reap district, Siem Reap province. And I am the interviewer, my name is Heng Sovannarin. So, I want to ask, what is your full name?

B: My name is Thang Pheak.

A: Yes! Do you have a nickname?

B: I have a nickname Phai, they call me a lot of things.

A: What else do they call you? Tell me all of them!

B: Another name is Hai Nam, another is Phai, another name is Pheak, another name is Mab, as a soldier they called me those names.

A: How old are you this year?

B: 55 years old.

A: What day, month, and year were you born?

B: My birth year is 1965.

A: What about your birth year according to the Khmer [lunar] calendar?

B: The year of the monkey.

A: And where is your birthplace?

B: My hometown is far away, in Chi Kraeng, but I've been a soldier ever since '79, from a young age until now. In that district, they took all the land and there is nothing left.

A: Yes. And how many siblings do you have?

B: There are seven of us siblings, two are dead.

A: And which child are you?

B: I am the third child.

A: Can you tell me all the names of your siblings, uncle?

B: Yes! The oldest was Yong, and the other older sibling was Mab, who already died. And then me—the third child was me, Pheak. The fourth is Poe, the fifth is Phal, the sixth is Pheap, the seventh was Pich, who died as well. My father, he died as well.

A: Yes, and do you remember any stories that you had with your siblings?

B: I remember some.

A: Can you tell me some?

B: I remember the stories of being a soldier. Nowadays, they run a motor dope here at Psar Leu, but that's all. We were all soldiers.

A: Can you tell me about any stories you have with your siblings, including any happy or sad stories?

B: Oh! There was no time to have fun, we separated many years ago at the mountain.

C: Their parents thought they had died.

A: What did you do with your siblings when you were little?

B: At that time, when I was small, I worked in the mobile unit. I used to carry dirt in the fields during the Pol Pot era. I would clear the fields 1 meter deep—in one morning they would have us do 10 meters, 1 meter in height, 1 meter in width. During the Pol Pot era and after the Pol Pot era ended in 1979, in 1981 or 1982 I began serving in the army and have until today. I just stopped in 2016 because they took the land.

A: So, when you were young, you never studied or had fun with your siblings? You just worked?

B: No, we were born during wartime, there was fighting all day and night. I wanted to have free time, but we were never free.

A: So, where are your siblings now? And what do they do?

B: Some are in Damdek, some are in Psar Leu—in Siem Reap, at the waterway near Psar Leu, on the state's land. One more is in Damdek, he retired from being a soldier, he wasn't unemployed.

A: What about your mother, what is her name?

B: Her name is Sin Yout.

A: What about your father?

B: My father's name was Song, he died during the Pol Pot era.

A: If he was still here now, how old would your father be?

B: If we thought about it now, he would be more than 90 years old already. During the Sangkum [Popular Socialist Community] era, he worked as a teacher, as a teacher of monks, and as a school manager from that era until that era ended—in the Sangkum era. After that, we were split from my Dad, I wasn't born yet, but my siblings and grandparents said he was a teacher. He was the manager of the school, he taught students and taught Pali.

C: What about your mother?

B: She is over 80 years old.

A: And where is she now?

B: Now, she is in Chi Kraeng.

A: So, do you know where your father was born?

B: In Lbaeuk village, Anlong Samnar commune, Chi Kraeng district, Siem Reap province.

A: And do you remember the Khmer year that he was born?

B: I do not know.

A: Oh, you don't know.

B: Honestly speaking, I just know that all the family names on the records are wrong. All our documents from the Pol Pot era say that our family name is Soy, I'm the only one that has the family name of "Thang." My sibling and family's name has been Thang since the Pol Pot era ended because we lost all our records during the Pol Pot era. After we lost the records, they took the name Tompeas. But Thang was the name of my grandfather, but they [originally] took the name of my great-grandfather Soy.

A: Do you know what your parents did to earn a living?

B: My mother was a farmer as well, she didn't find any other job. She worked in the fields, it was difficult, they had very little. She is struggling nowadays, she's old and she is staying with her children, her children are sick.

A: What kind of people were your parents?

B: They were educated during the Sangkum era. Honestly speaking, back then, after the [Sangkum] era ended as I said before, they had them go to the mobile unit [when the Khmer Rouge began]. When the time came that they would ring the bell, and if you didn't run back fast enough, you wouldn't have any rice porridge to eat. And they would scoop the rice porridge into a plate, we would get one plate per person, so the [rice porridge] would be watered down. We had to burn the stems of the coconut leaves to make salt. We would steal the salt from the coconut leaves and keep them in our pockets—when we'd burn [the stem], it would become salty. When we got very hungry at night, we would go and steal mussel shells and dig up banana tree stumps for us to eat. But if they found out, they would go and kill you. Back then, they claimed that we had betrayed the organization.

A: So, what was your mother like?

B: Oh, we were separated.

A: Yes, but what I mean is, what kind of a person was your mother?

B: Oh, she was gentle. She was a student and was very learned, she studied during the Sangkum era. She has lost all her knowledge since the Pol Pot era though.

A: What stories do you remember the most about your parents?

B: My parents—oh, my mother—uh, remember that I was born, but after I grew up and began to understand what was going on, the Pol Pot era was coming to a close in '77, '78, and '79. At that point, I was about 12, 13, maybe 14 years old and I had already left my parents. They didn't let children stay with their parents [during the Pol Pot regime]. Even children as young as 3 years old were taken away from their parents and told to carry water, their parents had no idea where [their children] were taken. Nowadays, when we tell this to the youth, they don't believe us—only people like you who care enough to go around and learn [what it was like]. If you went back to your family, they would take you to be killed—even if you lifted your head and looked at people in the face—you weren't allowed to do that either. Even if you made a tiny mistake here or there, you knew it was over for you—you just knew that you'd be taken to be killed.

A: So, you never had any comfortable experiences being close to your parents?

B: Right. After the regime ended, they captured us and made us become soldiers from that point on. Ever since '79, I've been a soldier.

A: So, do you remember the names of your grandparents on your mother's and father's sides of the family?

B: On my father's side, I remember. On my mother's side, I can remember them as well. My grandfather's surname was Sin, and his given name was Sun. My mother's grandfather was named Sin.

A: Oh, their names are so similar!

B: Yes.

A: Yes, and what about your grandmother?

B: My grandmother's name was Sot. So, [my grandparents were named] Grandma Sot and Grandpa Sun—and that's on my mother's side, you know? But even before that, his grandfather's name was Grandpa Sin, and I don't know [his wife's] name, we lost all the documents. It was so long ago, many generations ago if you think about it. On my mother's side, we lost the records of their surname, but the surname came from Grandpa Soy, but Grandpa Soy died about 120 years ago. He's been interred in the stupa until the present day.

A: Yes! That is why we are doing this program, to preserve and save this information for your kids and grandkids of future generations so that they can know about their ancestors. So, do you know where they were born? That is, your grandparents?

C: They came from China.

B: No—

C: One of your grandfathers on your side—

B: Oh, but he's been dead a long time already, like 120 years already. But they were all Khmer, they came from here and there—

A: So, do you know the province they were born in?

B: To put it simply, they were born in Siem Reap province, in Lbaeuk village and Anlong Samnar commune as well, and in Chi Kraeng district.

A: And did your parents ever tell you stories about your grandparents to you?

B: No, they never told me any. Sometimes they would share small details here and there, but I don't remember any of those.

A: Can you tell me what you remember?

B: Oh, I really don't remember much at all. I just remember things about my parents and my grandfather when they were living in my time, and that I have taken the name of Thang as my own surname. Some [members of the family] have taken Soy as their surname, but I use the surname of my grandfather, which is Thang. Grandpa Soy was our great-great-grandfather. But their hometown was in Lbaeuk village, Anlong Samnar commune, Chi Kraeng district, Siem Reap province.

A: So, do you have any siblings or other relatives living abroad or outside of the country?

B: No! I've lost contact with some of my cousins, I've lost contact with 3 or 4 of them. There's no one [outside of the country]. When they were soldiers, they all died—back then, they went to fight the Vietnamese forces, but when they returned from Vietnam, it was because their forces routed. You may understand why now, but in '79 they didn't understand what was going on. They have all died already; even though the hospital took care of all the troops, they all died. They were rather skinny, just like yourself, so they all died. Nowadays, I still have an older brother still working as a soldier in his unit, but my cousins are all dead, I don't know where they all went.

A: So, what about your wife—what is her full name?

B: Her name is Phai.

A: What about her full name?

B: Phai—Ung Phai.

A: Ung Phai?

B: Right.

A: And when did you get married to her?

B: When I was just over 40 years old. I now have a child that is 14 years old already, which means we received each other 20 years—wait, not quite 20 years—about 18 or 19 years already—just 18 years.

A: So, do you know the date that you were married?

B: I don't recall. We received each other by our own choice [the marriage was not arranged by the parents], we met by accident. We got married because we loved each other. My parents usually arranged the marriages and have us get married to people not far away from our hometown. But when I became a soldier, I had to come and go with the army. When I came back home, it was because I got married when I was over 40 years old, I was on the tail end of being 40 years old.

A: What year was that? 2000-what?

B: Uh, 2005. In 2005 I came back here. If it was in 2005—if you think about it, how many years is that?

A: 15 years.

B: 15 years, that's right. Yeah, we've been married just over 15 years already.

A: Can you tell me about when you first met your wife? And how was it that you fell in love? What was it like the first time you fell in love, could you tell me so that your descendants could know a little bit [about that]?

B: It happened because we loved each other, because we asked about each other's feelings for one another, that's all. If we love each other it could work, if we didn't love each other, then how could that work out? And if we were to get married, how could you get married if you didn't love each other?

A: Yes. But I want to know, how did you get to know each other?

B: We went back to our hometown—when we came back, I went to the elders—the elders that make matches for people—the elders told us to go ahead and get married. [We were told] that if we took each other, then we were to go to the village leader's house, and the village leader would summon the parents on both sides to come to the marriage.

C: He was my younger brother-in-law.

A: Oh, okay! So, I want to ask you—do you know any languages other than Khmer?

B: I don't know any other languages.

A: Do you know the Khmer alphabet?

B: I don't know the alphabet at all.

A: Can you read or write at all?

B: I don't know how to write either. When it comes to numbers, I do know some of those, but I don't know any letters. How was I supposed to? I was born in the generation that didn't go and learn [at school]. And after we left that [era], I was a soldier, so it was difficult. My 7th and 8th siblings got to learn, and I try to send my children to school because I am illiterate. But just because I am uneducated doesn't mean that I have little [to say]. I only know a mouthful of things to say, but because I have little to say, it means that I don't know how to lie like other people. I am not arrogant and can't show off my unfurled wings [Khmer proverb]. I speak according to what I see; I don't just believe what I can read or what someone claims in a book. What's most important to me is to go and see it for myself—just like what you are doing, you have come down to see for yourself. I don't know

how to lie. The liars and the thieves and the cheaters, for example, will eventually become the killers. This year, they won't come out, but in later years it will come out and we will know who the thieves and the evil people are.

A: Right. So, did you have any close friends who you grew up with, how many did you have?

B: Oh! All my friends are separated. Some are scattered throughout Bakan, some are in Pursat. Honestly speaking, I had a lot of friends but now they are all grown up already.

A: So, could you tell me the names of your close friends?

B: Uh, Phalla is still in the army. Nowadays, some of the old soldiers I was with have stopped, and some have passed away. My commander is still alive nowadays, Det Sokhon, he was shot in the eye. He was my hero; he got a bullet to the eye.

C: All the soldiers he knew, he calls them his friends.

A: Oh, that's right! So, can you tell me what occupations have you had to support your family?

B: My family nowadays?

A: Yes.

B: Oh, I work as a day laborer for others, I worked as a farmer for others until there were problems with the land—I worked as a day laborer, I had land that I couldn't give up—what I'm trying to say is that we were stuck. Even though my little children had to eat, I couldn't do anything, nothing would work out. I'm not saying that everything was falling apart, but I am telling the truth. I don't speak deceitfully—there are people—like I say, it's not worth being greedy for what others have, we just have to live in society with them. Accepting that allows you to sleep well at night.

A: So, have you ever worked on the farm or in the rice fields?

B: I've worked in the fields. Originally, I worked in the fields, but during the period I served as a soldier, I never worked in the fields. That generation ended a number of years ago—more than ten years ago—ever since the early '90s when the electoral debates began to occur. In the years '94 to '95, when UNTAC directed the election—oh, in '93, FUNCINPEC won and in '94 they began to prepare all the soldiers. And now, honestly speaking, now that it already happened, all we can do is say that it happened. Nowadays, others see that we [soldiers] just smile at each other, [because only we] knew [what it was like]. Others call it—they don't really know the story of the land, but it happened already—as they say, they stand from behind. [Khmer phrase meaning that people don't know what goes on behind the scenes, in this case, what the soldiers did for them.]

A: Yes. So, since your childhood until now, how has your life changed?

B: Oh! We were so poor, it was miserable for all of us, we weren't happy at all. It's been miserable for me all the way to the present day and to my present age. We never knew what it was like for life to have a rich flavor, we only knew the flavor of being poor, it hasn't been easy. For me, it has only been the last few years since the war ended that I can finally sleep comfortably—we were always going here and there. Back then, we were always living in the jungle, to put it simply, we lived in the jungle. You know this already, and so

does anyone that was born after the '80s. In the '90s, the Khmer Rouge was still around, there still was fighting.

A: I see that you have gone through a lot of difficulties, how did you get through those difficulties?

B: In the Pol Pot era, like I was saying earlier, they would let you dig up banana stumps, but if you stole even a single grain of rice, they would take you to be killed. We would burn coconut stalks to make salt and would sweep it all up so they didn't see, but if they saw, they would take you to be killed. You couldn't do that—that's what it was like during the Pol Pot regime.

A: They would do that even if you were young?

B: Even if you were young, they wouldn't let you live. Just like we've been saying, all we knew was that they would take us to be killed, and they would claim that we had betrayed the organization. For example, if they saw any rice stuck to your mouth, if you had eaten even a single cricket—I know someone alive now [that did this]—they beat her back with a hoe. If you were extremely hungry and you even ate a cricket, they would lead you to be beaten. The organization wouldn't even let you eat a cricket, not even the ones in your field. She ate it raw—some girl—and beat her until she was unconscious and began to have convulsions. They threw her body away and the next morning when she came to herself, she didn't know where to run. She survived until now, she lives in Phnom Penh.

A: Oh wow, that's lucky for her. So, I want to ask you a little bit about your favorite things. What is your favorite food?

B: Oh! I'm not choosy.

A: Oh, you can tell me, which one is your favorite?

B: What I like the most—I like fish soup like normal, but I like everything.

A: Anything specific, like roasted prahok—?

B: Oh, I like roasted prahok as well. I don't think much about what to eat, if I have something to eat, then I eat it but if I don't have anything then I don't care. I make do with what I have—if I can find anything then I'll eat it, like fish. When it comes to other kinds of meat, I buy it, but if I can't then I don't care. Honestly speaking, I've met so many difficulties, in my whole life there hasn't been time to look for happy times, not like others.

A: So, what about your free time, do you like to play ball or any traditional Khmer games when you were young?

B: I didn't play back then.

A: You didn't play anything at all?

B: We were allowed to, during the month of Khmer New Year, we asked for permission but as soldiers, you couldn't go, they wouldn't even let you meet your parents. We were always in the trenches; we would go to fight every single day. We were just foot soldiers. Honestly speaking—if we are talking about death, I'm tired of it, I've seen enough. You let go of fear, you let go of worries because you were prepared to die, it wasn't too long or too soon for you to die. If you said that you were afraid of corpses, we would tell you to be afraid of

yourself, that would be better for you.

A: So, what about songs—do you remember any songs that you have learned from your youth until now?

B: Oh, there are plenty of songs.

A: Like, what song do you like the most, you know?

B: I don't have a favorite, no.

A: Right, so what about your family, does anyone in your family know how to play a musical instrument?

B: I don't have any.

A: You don't have any artists in your family?

B: No, all the artists from before have died already.

A: So, what about skills—are there any skills that have been passed along in your family?

B: Oh, I don't have any skills outside of working as a laborer and whatnot. Nothing outside of being a laborer or a farmer. We are hired workers for others, we were born with nothing so all we can do is to work for others. What I want to say is, that we as farmers eat and live from day to day. For example, we work for a kilo in the morning and that's it. We don't have anything at all.

A: So, could you tell me about a time that you think was the happiest time? Could you tell me when?

B: The happiest times come if you have money, and if you don't have money, you aren't happy. There are times that we are happy during the week, for example, but most of the time we aren't. Occasionally, we will have a month of festivals that we will go to. The smaller festivals that are on whatever day—a Sunday or Saturday—we don't usually go because we are poor. But on the months of large festivals, like Pchum Ben or Khmer New Year, we go and find our parents. Sometimes we go, sometimes we don't because we are poor. Because we are talking about being poor—what I want to say is that throughout my life, I have persisted through a lot of things, and I am growing tired which is why I live here, it has been miserable. And it is still miserable because not even the best nations help us out. They just think about taking care of themselves, they don't see or even think about us.

A: So, when you were young, did you ever have any dreams about what you wanted to be once you grew up?

B: Honestly speaking, I was only ever a soldier. Even if I didn't want to be a soldier, they caught me and made me become a soldier. They put a path for me to go down.

A: So, you never had any dreams to be anything, like a doctor or anything else?

B: I wanted to, but I didn't know how to. I was illiterate, so how could that have ever worked out?

A: Right. So, if you had anything you wanted to say to your descendants of future generations, what would you say? Do you have anything you'd like to tell them?

B: I would urge them to study hard, to obtain knowledge. Being born in my generation was miserable because of the war. I just want to tell them to study hard, take whatever learning they can get, so that they can do whatever. That's all I want to say. I'd advise them to study hard so that they can become smart, if you aren't smart then what can you do?

A: Is there anything else, like, what kind of person do you want them to be?

B: Be a good person, don't be a bad person. Don't be envious or jealous of other people, we are not insignificant, we must not make problems for ourselves. In short, just be good. Don't hurt other people, don't walk all over them; what's most important is that we do good deeds for others. If we are all poor and miserable, we must work to save each other first, don't drown others from time to time, but instead save each other. That's what makes people good—if we see people abuse each other, then we don't know what to do. It is just the same for us Khmer people. What's important is to have our children and grandchildren learn and acquire knowledge, every day, that's all I want—what's important is that they have knowledge because their parents are poor and there is little they can do about it. We were born this way and will carry it with us, that's it, that's just how the journey goes. If you were born around a fire, it burns—it burns like a continuing war. This never-ending war has hurt all of us, those of us who have died have died, and those of us have lived. That's all I want to say.

A: Yes! I want to thank you for spending your time to do an interview with me, I wish you good health and happiness in your family!

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