

# Interview of Tum Tevy

**A: Interviewer: Heng Sovannorin**

**B: Interviewee: Tum Tevy**

## Summary of the Interview

*Tum Tevy was born in 1977 in Siem Reap province and is the youngest of five siblings. She was raised amidst the chaos of the Khmer Rouge regime, having been born just after her second brother was killed by Pol Pot's soldiers. After her father and brother were thrown into prison, her mother escaped to the Thai border with the rest of the family, heeding the advice of her now-imprisoned husband. In this interview, Tum Tevy recalls fleeing from one camp to another, witnessing the constant threat of violence and instability and paints a vivid image of living in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge.*

A: First of all, I would like to thank you for allowing me to interview you about your history, this interview has been prepared by a university called Brigham Young University, which is in the United States. The aim of the university is to interview the Cambodian people to keep their history so that future generations may know the history of her grandparents and learn about their history. When I finish your interview, I will post it on a website of the school called [www.cambodianoralhistoryproject.byu.edu](http://www.cambodianoralhistoryproject.byu.edu). Do you agree to let me put your interview on this website?

B: Yes.

A: The date of the interview is May 6, 2021, and this interview took place over the phone. You are in Krang Angkrang village, Krang Thnong commune, Sen Sok district, Phnom Penh, and I am in Thlok Angdoug village, Sla Kram commune, Siem Reap province. I would like to ask, what is your full name?

B: My full name is Tum Tevy.

A: Tum Tevy, right?

B: Yes.

A: Did you have any nicknames as a kid?

B: I didn't.

A: How old are you this year?

B: When I was really young, old people sometimes called me curly-haired little girl or black little girl, things like that.

A: Right, and how old are you this year?

B: 46 years old.

A: Do you know what your date of birth is?

B: June 17, 1977.

A: Oh, so you were born during the reign of Pol Pot?

B: Yes.

A: So, do you remember the Khmer year?

B: I do not remember the Khmer year, I only remember the date I told you. It was Friday, but I don't remember which Khmer year it was.

A: Where is your hometown?

B: My hometown I told you is in Siem Reap, but I was born in the middle of the Kampong Khleang River.

A: How many siblings do you have?

B: I have four siblings altogether, but one has passed away.

A: Which child are you?

B: The fifth child.

A: The youngest?

B: Yes.

A: Could you tell us your siblings' names? From the oldest down to you?

B: The eldest's name is Tum Savon, the second brother only had the name Phat.

A: Phat?

B: Yes, but he has passed away.

A: I see.

B: I never saw his face. The third brother is named Tum Sambol, and the fourth sister, Tum Sophany.

A: And then you?

B: Yes.

A: So what stories do you remember from when you were young? When Pol Pot's reign ended you were probably three or four years old, right?

B: About 3 or 4 years old, but I don't remember much. When I got older, I knew what had happened. I only remember that I was in camps.

A: Yes, in the camps.

B: I remember I was in the Ta Tum camp—I still remember that one, and I am starting to remember some things. I ran from one camp to another, when they would shoot at each other, you know? We would flee from place to place. When I left Ta Tum, I was at a camp [called] David, and then after leaving David, I went to Say By camp for a long while. They shot each other at Say By as well, but we were close to the Thai border. On one side we could see the Thai [soldiers], and on the other side, we could see the Khmer [soldiers]. When we were at Ta Tum camp, we were very young, and all we knew was gunfire and fleeing by our mother's hand or being carried on our father's back. We didn't know the specifics of the situation or anything, we were too young.

A: So you were in Ta Tum, David, and Say By, which are in Khmer territory, right?

B: Those are in Khmer territory—Say By is really in Thailand, they had dug a dirt barrier [in the middle of the camp] to separate the Thailand side from the Khmer side where we were. Ta Tum was Khmer territory, but we ran whenever they shot each other—they were always shooting at each other, the Khmer Rouge with the camouflaged [troops], and also Cambodian state soldiers as well. We were always running to the citizens [of that area].

A: So when did you go to Khav Dang [camp]?

B: I went from Khav Dang to Ta Tum, but back then I was too little to remember anything from Khav Dang. I remember up to Ta Tum, after Ta Tum, David, Ou Smach. Those I remember, but not Khav Dang. I only remember Khav Dang from when we were brought back to Cambodia, they had us go to Khav Dang to sleep for several nights. That's how I know it, but not from when we were running from camp to camp; I was too young, I don't remember.

A: I see.

B: When we were repatriated, we slept at Khav Dang for about a week—it probably was about a week or around 5 days.

A: Do you remember what daily life was like in the camps, what did you do every day?

B: In the camp, there wasn't much to do [...], the United Nations rationed out rice and distributed food so that we could eat, but it was not as difficult as the [Pol] Pot era, the older people say that the Pol Pot era was difficult. But we were in Samdach Oav camp—in Samdach Oav camp, they looked after us very well except for when there were droughts. Two of my brothers went very far to find water and brought back a couple of buckets of water for us to drink during the months of drought. But sometimes when we went to the United Nations, they had a machine to distribute [water] to us. But even with that, there was not enough because there were too many people. Any time there is a warring country it is never easy.

A: I see.

B: Yes, and when the times were peaceful again, you could tell! When I was at the Say By camp, they stopped shooting and [bombing] and it was tranquil.

A: How many years were you at that camp, do you remember? Were you at that same camp for a while?

B: I left Cambodia when I was 2 or 3 years old, and it wasn't until I was 14 that I came back to Cambodia.

A: Wow, so about ten years? That's a long time!

B: Yes! When I was little, about 2 or 3, and then age 14, 14 or 15, I came back to Cambodia. In 1992, I returned to Cambodia. A few months after my father died, they picked out my name and they brought me back to Cambodia. When we came back, we were repatriated to Siem Reap, because my mother said that her hometown was in Siem Reap. We went to Siem Reap from Say By camp, and we were put into the Khav Dang camp [for a few days in between], and I've forgotten how many days we slept there, whether it was five or three

days at that time. We didn't travel anywhere, we were put into that area. They built a fence surrounding us at the foot of the mountain in that area, we didn't go anywhere, we were only in that area for however many days until they brought cars to take us from Khav Dang to Siem Reap.

A: I see. So, did you receive any education at the camps at that time?

B: At Say By camp, I did learn, but I didn't go through many grades, I only went up to fourth or fifth grade. When I came back to Cambodia, I didn't learn anymore, I looked after my sick mother and relatives. My siblings didn't come back together, all of them left to work and only my sick mother and several of my nieces and nephews [were left behind]—Mum, Alech, Avin, and Srey Neang, those four. My mother was sick, and in Siem Reap, the land that they gave out wasn't yet cultivated, it was all forest and full of thieves. It was quiet during the nighttime in that area.

A: This distribution of land, it occurred in Thlok Angdoun, right?

B: That's right, they divided the Thlok Angdoun land between around twenty to forty families. They fed us for a few months, about half a year after the regime was wiped out and we returned from the camps.

A: So at the time when you were in the camps, did they teach you the Khmer alphabet, English, or Thai, or anything?

B: They taught us, they taught us English, Khmer, Thai, all those things. But we didn't learn very well, however much we understood is what we learned. I only was able to understand a bit of Thai. There wasn't any way for me to learn English, [the teachers] didn't really know it either.

A: Why didn't you understand English?

B: I don't know, I learned but couldn't retain anything. When the teachers taught me they would always hit me, and whenever my siblings taught me they would also hit me, but I still wouldn't understand.

A: I see. So nowadays, where do your siblings all live?

B: Nowadays, I have one sibling in Phnom Penh, one in Kampong Speu, one in Siem Reap, and I'm also in Phnom Penh. There are two of us in Phnom Penh, one in Kampong Speu, and one in Siem Reap.

A: Could you talk about some unforgettable memories that you had with your siblings when you were younger, including happy and sad [memories]?

B: The only memories I have with my siblings are from the camps. We never traveled anywhere, we only ate meals together. Fish soup or whatever we had to eat. A sad memory, a couple of my siblings and I were told to go to school, and we didn't, we grew and sold beans [instead]. When they found out, they beat us—they told us to go learn and instead we grew and sold beans. We did this in Ta Thum, I remember that it was in Ta Thum. I saw my older siblings working hard by themselves and they were too tired. In the camp, my oldest brother and my third oldest brother worked to take care of us. They were bigger than [me and my younger relatives], so they went and bought rice to sell at a profit, which they

brought back and gave to us. We were at home, looking after the children. We split up the money and gave it out to let them go buy something to eat, you know? At the camps, all of the memories we had were sad memories, what is there that is sadder than being at a camp? Coming to Phnom Penh, it started to be a little bit better, our older siblings [had less of a workload] so we younger kids felt better also.

A: I see, so how many years were you in Siem Reap before going back to Phnom Penh?

B: I arrived in Siem Reap in 1992, and was there for a few years—1992, 1993, we voted and the Khmer Rouge was still at large, 1994, and then in 1995 my siblings took me to Phnom Penh, and I haven't ever gone back to Siem Reap to live, only to visit for a bit.

A: I see.

B: After voting, it was 1993 and the Khmer Rouge was still fighting in Siem Reap, invading and shooting. My mother was sick also, and my oldest sister went to go work at the border as well as my brother who went to Phnom Penh. It was only me, my older sister, and my mother in Siem Reap. So the Khmer Rouge kept on fighting, and there were only women left, so my older siblings took us to Phnom Penh. We have been here ever since and haven't gone anywhere, I met my husband and had children here in Phnom Penh.

A: What about your mother, what's her name?

B: My mother's name is Khoem Savath, and my father's name is Phoem Tum.

A: Phoem Tum?

B: Yes, Phoem Tum, and my mother is Khoem Savath.

A: So do you know where they both were born?

B: My mother is from Siem Reap and my father—I heard my mother say that he was from Kampong Chhnang. But I don't really know if his hometown was in Kampong Chhnang or what, she just said he was from Kampong Chhnang, but he stayed in Phnom Krom. Yet she said that he was from Kampong Chhnang, but he was in Phnom Krom. I don't know why his parents and grandparents came to Phnom Krom, I just don't know.

A: Right.

B: Because when my father died, I was 13 years old.

A: So do you know your mother's birthday?

B: I don't know my mother's birthday, I also don't know my father's.

A: I see. Do you remember how old either your mother or father were when they died?

B: My mother died when she was 65. But my father died in 1992, so he was probably around 60 also, probably either 62 or 65, that's what my mother told me. Because, at that time I was only 12 or 13, so I didn't know what my father's age was when he died, you know? I only know that he died in 1992.

A: So what kind of person was your mother, was she mean or kind?

B: She could be mean, sometimes she could be easy on me, but she would beat me a lot. She [actually was] really mean.

A: I heard that she beat you a lot, always with a pestle?

B: She always used a pestle, except I got hit once in Siem Reap before coming to Phnom Penh. I got hit with a wooden lath on my wrists. When I was young, I remember running and escaping through the window to run away from my mother who was chasing me so she could beat me. She was mean.

A: I see.

B: My father was also mean, but he never beat us, he would just yell at us. I never saw him hit anyone, but maybe he did when we were young and we didn't know. But we do know that he never hit our mom.

A: So what stories or memories do you have with your mom that you remember still today?

B: There are a lot of memories with my mom, from the time she was sick in Siem Reap. In the morning I remember grilling fish which we ate with [ground rice], watered our crops, [my mother] would sit and laugh, she would laugh and make fun of us. It was very fun in Siem Reap. It was fun in Phnom Penh, but [life] wasn't simple like it was in Siem Reap. One memory with my mother in Siem Reap during the cold season—I am starting to miss her already. During the cold months at 5 am, we would kindle the firewood so she could grill fish, she would sit and eat fish with ground rice, and we would water the crops. She would always tell us how they planted the seeds when she had small kids and a husband. When we grew up, we ate the fruit of the trees just like she told us. When we grew up, there really was fruit, there were mangoes. Now the trees are all gone.

A: So do you remember what your mother did for a living?

B: From the time that I was old enough to know what was going on, I never saw my mother work. She was always at home looking after her children, because my oldest two sisters and my oldest brother, the one who died, were the laborers. My mother and I were the ones who looked after the younger ones. I looked after my younger siblings for her. When she was sick, she couldn't go to work, her children went out and worked.

A: I see, so what did your father do to make a living?

B: When I was a kid and my father was still alive, he drove an ambulance, a military ambulance. He was a soldier, but he drove a military ambulance. If there was a shooting and someone was wounded, I would go with him and we would bring people back. They had broken hands and legs.

A: Do you have any memories of your father?

B: Yes. My father drove to get someone who was shot, and I went with him. Whenever my father had been gone for a few days, I would get sick, and only when he came back would I be better. And so this one time he took me along with him, I had never gone. I went because my father didn't hit me—my mother hit me a lot.

A: Yes, so you'd rather go with your dad.

B: I'd rather go with my dad, he never hit me. Whenever my mother hit me I didn't want to stay. When my father went to drive in Tha Tum, he would wait until they started fighting and then I would go too. Oh, all the broken arms and legs and the war wounds I would see.

When my father started to get sick he stopped. When we went to Say Bey he stopped. After he stopped working he got really tired. When I started to understand what was going on, I saw that my dad was tired, he couldn't do anything—he was at home and all he could do was take medicine. He took medicine for a few years and then died.

A: Did he die from a disease?

B: Yes, he had asthma. We were told to go back to Cambodia, that they had some medicine at the border of Cambodia. We went to their place where we heard that there was a cure for asthma, but it was too late, they didn't have it anymore.

A: I see. So do you remember your grandparents?

B: I don't know my grandparents, I only know that my grandfather was the leader of the Wat Po commune, they called him Loek, the leader of the commune. And my grandmother's name was Grandma Yorn, and that's it. My grandparents on my dad's side, I don't know.

A: Oh, they lived far away in Kampong Chhnang?

B: Yes, I don't know.

A: When you were born, were your grandparents still alive?

B: I was born after they died. During the Khmer Rouge, they evacuated us. My mother told me that they evacuated us to Kampong Khleang in the middle of the river, and my oldest sister was also separated. I was still with my brother, the third sibling and my sister, the fourth sibling every day. They separated my oldest sister from us, and they took my second brother to be killed, and then my mother had me—she was pregnant with me. I was born in the middle of the river, in a floating house.

A: Have your parents ever told you any stories about their history or their lives?

B: What?

A: Have your parents ever told you any stories from the Pol Pot era or their youth?

B: I've never heard them say any, they only talked about stories from the Pol Pot era, that it was hard. But my mother said that it wasn't so hard for her because my older brother had lots of friends who loved him and who would help us get food. When they were in a floating house it was easy, they had dishes and things to rice properly. They could also fish, and whenever they needed food they could be satisfied with that. They had a net that we put in the water, and whenever they wanted food, they took it out. Whenever they wanted food, we would drop it in the water. They hid it so they would never know. But in other places, people had a very hard time. But my mother said the place that she was in wasn't so hard. Because they were on a floating house they could fish and search for food, and some friends helped too, and they hid their food. That's what my mother said, but I'm not completely sure, because when I was about 2 or 3 we ran away from that place and went to the camps. They took my father and my oldest brother and threw them in prison. When my brother was released, my father had my family leave without him and said that he would catch up. That's the story of us running to the camp that he told us. It was because they took my second oldest brother and killed him, whereas in the past he would have just been a soldier. They captured him and they found out that he was a First or Second Lieutenant, so

they took him to work in construction. And so when they took my other brother and my father, who were also soldiers, my father had my mother take me, my brothers and sisters, and escape so that we may live. We escaped and went to the camps.

A: I see. So that's the reason you went to the camps.

B: Yes, even though we had never been to the camps before.

A: Do you have any relatives or relatives who live abroad?

B: Yes, my mother's sibling and her family, but [her sibling] died about one or two years ago. We didn't really have communication with each other, because in the camps we talked a lot and wrote each other letters to check in on each other, but since the time we were repatriated, we fell out of contact. But probably one or two years ago they came to visit with my cousins.

A: Do you remember their names, and what country they live in?

B: They live in America, but I'm not sure exactly where or what state. Only my oldest sister knows. She knows them, she helped them come to visit Cambodia. The cousins that came to visit recently, one's name was Bros, and the other's name was too long, I don't remember it.

A: I see. What's your husband's name?

B: His name is Sarin Nirat.

A: What year did you get married, and where?

B: I married him in Phnom Penh at Muoy Roy Khnang in 1997.

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

B: My parents arranged it, but we loved each other.

A: Can you tell us where you met and how you first started falling in love with each other?

B: I met him at my house, he would always ride a motorcycle past my house every day, and eventually we started spending time together and fell in love.

A: Do you remember how much you received as a dowry from your husband?

B: I got 1000 in the price of a house, that was it.

A: Did you get any cows or anything else?

B: Nope, nothing. They just gave us 1000 in the value of a house, and when we got married they wrapped Num Ansom and gave us fruit and other things.

A: So why did you decide to get married at that time to him? Why did you choose to marry him, did you have a reason or anything specific?

B: Well, the reason was that we loved each other.

A: [Laughs] I see. So when you left the camps you stopped learning at fourth grade and didn't go to school anymore, even though you were at Siem Reap?

B: When I went to Siem Reap, I didn't learn anymore, because my older sister had her children go to school in the province, but I looked after two of their children, another one of



my nieces, and my mother, so I didn't go learn anymore. We had to wait to build a house to live in—it wasn't immediate, we had to wait about a year to have a house to live in but I still worked and cut trees and whatnot. At that time, my mother was sick and I had to look after my mother and my sibling's children. One of my sisters went to Siem Reap, they worked selling ice and ingredients while I watched their children and made food, cut firewood, and did other work—I didn't have time to go to school.

A: Do you know how to read and write?

B: I can read, write, and understand Khmer.

A: Do you have a best friend that you grew up with that you still are friends with?

B: I had one, but I can't find her ever since we separated at the camps. I looked for her in Battambang once but couldn't find her, I'm not sure where she was repatriated to.

A: What was her name?

B: Her name was My Chhoen. We went to school together ever since first grade and then were separated during repatriation. Now, I went to try and find her, and even back in the '90s I went looking for her once but I couldn't find her.

A: What memories do you have with this close friend?

B: I remember sneaking off to bathe in the stream, and when we got back my mom would hit me, and then the next day we would run off again, and mother would hit me again. In the evenings, we would finish learning, go to the pagoda, carry water, and put it in the water storage jars for the monks and the elderly to keep and use. It was just us two close friends, if there was something to eat, we wouldn't eat unless both of us [ate together]. I looked for her but couldn't find her, I don't know where she went. She also had 2 siblings and her mother was a widow. Ever since then, I haven't had another close friend.

A: I see. So from when you were a kid to today, have you ever had a job to make a living and support a family?

B: I worked in a factory, from when I was a little kid, I worked in a factory with everyone else. I stopped when I got married. When I had a child, I returned to work. When I became pregnant with my second child, my husband had me stop. Then when I had my fifth child, I started back up again. Right now I have stopped working for over one year. I never did any work outside of a factory, I don't know how to do anything else.

A: I see. Can you tell us the biggest difficulty or obstacle you have ever had in your life from the time you were a child to now?

B: I haven't had a massive trial or anything yet in my life, nothing huge. From the time I was a kid and growing up, I had been with my mother—there wasn't really anything super hard. Not having enough to eat was a burden for my mother and older siblings. Then when I got married, it also wasn't difficult. It was hard, but nothing so difficult to be considered a big deal, just normal stuff like having a large family and not having enough money—making a little and spending a lot. But anything really difficult, I haven't yet experienced that.

A: I see. So they were all minor difficulties?

B: Yes, bearable things. We think we are struggling whenever we go through things—like,

our kids are sick and we take them to the hospital, but we see someone sleeping under a bridge who is struggling more than us. We have a house to sleep in together, it is really hard to not have a house to sleep in. But we think we are struggling when we have some problems in our lives too. We think we are struggling when we wake up in the middle of the night at one or two in the morning and our child is sick and we take them to the hospital on a motorcycle, but we see those who are struggling more than us. That means that we are in a more comfortable position than they are.

A: So from the time you were a kid to now, how has your life changed?

B: It has changed a lot. When we are young, things are so easy because we are with our mother and father. When we get married and have kids, we have real responsibility over all those things, it changes one step at a time. We watch over and take responsibility for our kids, we advise them in everything. It has changed a lot from when I was with my Mom and Dad to being with my husband and kids.

A: So in your life, what do you think the happiest time was since your childhood?

B: The happiest was when I was with my mother and father, when my father had not yet passed away. We were so happy then! We could do anything. When my father died, I started to think, if I [acted immature] like before I would get beaten, and there wouldn't be anyone to help me. I started to change myself and corrected my demeanor bit by bit after my father died. When he was still alive, I wasn't afraid of anyone, not even my older siblings.

A: You didn't have [someone to] support you?

B: Yes, I didn't have a support anymore. During the night I would sit and think that if I kept misbehaving, I would be beaten and no one could help me.

A: So when you were a kid, did you ever imagine what you wanted to be in the future?

B: Ever since I was a kid, I imagined I would grow up and be a journalist. When I stopped going to school and I didn't know anything, that dream was stifled. I didn't want to be anything but a journalist.

A: So what was the reason that encouraged you to want to go into journalism?

B: Seeing good journalists take information from different sources to help society have a lot. I had a passion for it as a kid. I imagined growing up and finishing school, taking a test for journalism. Then when I stopped going to school and started looking after my relatives and [doing housework], I stopped thinking about my goal of being a journalist.

A: We are almost done, now we will talk about your favorite things—what is your favorite food of all, what do you like the most?

B: Favorite food, huh?

A: Yes.

B: Only chopped prahok and samlar machu [sour soup], those two.

A: You like those the most?!

B: Yes.

A: What about if there was a beef dish, you wouldn't choose that?

B: Oh, once in a while I would. If we are talking about [fish paste], I could eat that by the cupful. I only eat beef every once in a while—every day is too much, you know?

A: I see. So what food do you not like?

B: That I don't like?

A: Yes.

B: I really don't like shrimp. Whenever my uncle comes, we always have shrimp. Also, I don't like the dish where they stew pumpkin or make Samlar Machu with pumpkin and grilled fish. Ugh.

A: I've never heard of that.

B: Both my children and husband really like those, but whenever I make those, I fry some duck eggs or make a plate of fish paste and eat that.

A: When you were young, did you like to listen to music?

B: Yes, even now I like to listen.

A: What musician do you like to listen to?

B: I listen to them all, whatever is new, I listen to it. But most of the time I listen to Thai songs, I don't really listen to Khmer songs.

A: When you were a kid, did you play any popular games during Khmer New Year or anything?

B: Nope, never.

A: You've never gone played [those games]?

B: Never. I went to the pagodas, but I never learned to play them.

A: Were you afraid of your mom beating you, or what?

B: Ever since I was kid, I saw others offering the sticky rice balls to the monks, but I wouldn't join them, I just watched them. And if they were throwing powder at each other at the pagoda, I wouldn't join in. I just stood and watched them from afar, watched them dance to Ak Keh music, but I just watched them play, I didn't know how to.

A: So how many kids and grandkids do you have right now?

B: I have five children.

A: How many boys and girls?

B: Four boys and one girl.

A: Do you have any grandkids yet?

B: I almost have one, probably in another year or so I will have a grandchild.

A: Okay, we are to the end. Is there anything you would like to say to your posterity about what they should do or how they should live? Or what kind of people they should be, or

how they should act in society?

B: I do, I would like to speak to my kids and my grandkids. I want them to do good in society, not get addicted to drugs or walk down the wrong path, and study hard so that they may have a good future. If you don't study hard, your future holds nothing but working in the factory. I have done it before, and it is really hard—they just insult and make fun of you there. I don't want my kids or grandkids to do that like I did. I want my kids to do good deeds only—to interact with society and help others do good too. Don't follow the example of those that aren't good. That's it.

A: That's it, thank you for spending your time interviewing with me! I extend my best wishes to have good health, good luck, and happiness in your family.

B: Yes, you as well.

A: Yes, thank you.

*Translated by Ethan Arkell and edited by Thomas Barrett.*