

# Interview of Srun Kumsroy

**A: Interviewer: Koy Sophy**

**B: Interviewee: Srun Kumsroy**

## Summary of the Interview

*Srun Kumsroy was born in Prey Toteung village, Kandal province, and is the second living sibling in a family of six children. In this insightful interview, she shares her family history and launches into personal stories of industry and sickness during the Khmer Rouge era. Having traversed life in the aftermath and raised eight children alone, she now lives in Sansom Kosal Pagoda and is taken care of by her nephew and others around her.*

A: Hello, good afternoon!

B: Hello!

A: How are you doing today?

B: I'm doing fine! I'm alright.

A: I'm meeting you because I would like to ask permission to interview you about your personal history. Would you allow me to interview you?

B: Yes, you may.

A: Thank you.

B: Of course!

A: Do you mind if I ask you where you were born? What village, and commune?

B: It was in Prey Toteung village, Kandal Steung district, Kandal province!

A: And what is your name?

B: My name is Srun Kumsroy.

A: And how long have you gone by that name?

B: My father gave it to me at birth.

A: Do you go by any other names?

B: I don't, I only have that one.

C: Did you have any nicknames?

B: I've never had any nicknames, no.

A: And when were you born?

B: I was born on Friday, in the month of Shravana [late July to early August], in the year of the mouse.

A: After you were born, you lived with her parents. Did your mother and father ever tell you their life histories? Like what that era was like?

B: They didn't tell me anything.

A: Okay. Which village did your father live in?

B: Here in Prey Toteung village.

A: How about your mother?

B: My mother also lived in Prey Toteung village because they were cousins.

A: So when they were married, they were already blood relatives?

B: Yes, they were related.

A: And how many years of schooling did your father have?

B: I don't know how many years he had, I never asked him. But he was a monk—he was a monk at Luang Kokir Pagoda.

A: What about your mother?

B: My mother—I don't know how many years she studied at school either.

A: And are your parents still alive now, or—?

B: They've both passed away already.

A: What did they pass away from?

B: They got sick, they were old.

A: They both died of sickness then?

B: Yes.

A: Oh. And how many children did your parents have?

B: They had six kids, but only five are still living.

A: Could you recount each of them—their names, if they were a boy or girl, and what year they were born in?

B: Yes. The first was a boy, born in the year of the dog. The second was me, in the year of the mouse. The third was in the year of the monkey. The fourth was in the year of the tiger, and the fifth was in the year of the rabbit. That's it.

A: And did your parents have you all attend school?

B: Yes, they had all of us attend school.

A: And by the time they died, they had prepared all of you?

B: They had prepared all of us. They just passed away a few years ago.

A: And what kind of work did their children go into?

B: My oldest brother—right now he's stopped working. He graduated high school, and then became a teacher. After Pol Pot ended, he stopped working. I only learned to the sixth grade, and I haven't been able to have my own business, I've just worked [for others].

A: And after you?

B: After me is another boy born the year of the monkey. He never had a business, just worked [for others]. The girl right after him, born the year of the tiger, works too. The youngest, from the year of the rabbit, became a teacher.

A: Where does he teach?

B: He's stopped teaching already, he works in business now. He said teachers are too underpaid—they don't have enough to spend.

A: So, what year were you married in?

B: I was—I was 17 years old. I was 17 years old, but after being married and having eight children, I got divorced.

A: Where does your old spouse live now?

B: He lives in Deurm Angrong, along National Road 3.

A: Okay. What commune is it?

B: The commune—it's on this side, on the Kampong Speu side. Prey Ang commune—?

A: What province is it in?

B: In Kampong Speu province!

A: Oh. And what's his name?

B: His name is Kri.

A: What about his family name?

B: His family name is Han.

A: So, Han Kri?

B: Yes.

A: And when you were married, you were—

B: I was 15 years old!

A: 15 years.

B: But he—

A: And what did you do for a living?

B: I worked as a rice miller.

A: Oh!

B: I never had any other business.

A: What years did you work as a rice miller?

B: Ever since I got married! I did it from the time I was married until Pol Pot.

A: When the Pol Pot regime came in?

B: Yes, when the Pol Pot regime came in, they took away all my rice milling machines—all three of them. They took away both of my cars too. I lost everything I had, so from '79 to now, I've been working, but it's never enough. I make sweets to sell, but it's not like before.

A: So, when the Pol Pot regime came in, where did they move you to?

B: They didn't move me anywhere.

A: You stayed in the same village.

B: I was in Battambang, because I had been transporting my rice milling machines to work in Battambang. When Pol Pot entered, I was stuck there, but they never harmed me.

A: So, what did they have you do during the Pot Pot era?

B: I planted rice—I worked as a farmer. I planted rice the whole time.

A: So during the regime, what kind of food did they give you to eat?

B: Oh, rice porridge and plain rice, which were very similar. We didn't get anything else.

A: When you ate did you have enough? Did they give you enough to fill your stomach? Or what was it like?

B: No! But because I was a farmer, I could pick some of the oranges when I got hungry! Where we were, the groves were full of oranges.

A: The Pursat kind?

B: Pursat oranges, yes. When I went to work, I picked a few oranges and put them in my sack. When I came back, if I wasn't full from the rice, I ate those oranges.

A: Huh! They didn't say anything to you then?

B: They did not say anything! They didn't, because when I was working the rice mills there, when anyone lacked anything, I always gave them what they needed. Because of that, they had pity on me. The leaders felt sorry for me and never did anything to me—they never wronged me. And when I was sick, it was like that too. When I was sick, they let me stop, they didn't make me work. They had pity on me.

A: What about your husband, what did they have him do?

B: They made him go to the mountains somewhere, to cut wood.

A: When the Pol Pot regime fell from power, what did you do?

B: When the Pol Pot regime ended, we were divorced. I would have preferred not to, but I was angry. During Pol Pot I was very sick and had really bad diarrhea, but I didn't yet know that it was dysentery. It flowed out from me, and I didn't know when it would stop. I almost died a few times. And my husband would sleep on the opposite side of the house from me. I was dying of dysentery, but he never took care of me! He wouldn't take care of me, so I was angry. When the neighbors found out—I was moaning, and they heard the sound and came to see what was going on. When they heard the noise, they lit a fire in a rubber car tire and then came and asked what was wrong. I told them I was sick, that I had dysentery. They all gathered to help me. In the morning, they performed “Kaoh Khshal” [Khmer medicinal practice called “coining”]. They changed the skirt I was wearing, and they coined my skin until it turned as black as charcoal. They had planted—back then we didn't have any medicine. They took some tamarind—you know, the tamarind that we eat? They took water, tamarind seeds, and turmeric—those three things and made something for me to drink. It wasn't bitter, it wasn't bad when I drank it. The next morning, I had recovered, and my symptoms had lessened. I could walk around the house and walk around. I sat down next to my husband and told him that we couldn't be divorced now, because the regime wouldn't allow it. But when the day came that I could, I would divorce him—I wouldn't have him. I had taken care of him every time he was sick, I did everything I could. But when I was sick instead, he didn't take care of me. In fifteen years, I hadn't been sick once where he had taken care of me. And now when I was very sick, he still wasn't taking care of me. The people of the village all chastised him saying, “Because he had said he didn't know how to care for me.” They said, “If you didn't know what to do, why didn't you call us?” He didn't say anything back, he was just silent. I divorced him in 1979. We divorced when I was still seven months pregnant. I gave birth to my youngest all by myself. It was very difficult. I had all six of my children depending on just me after that.

A: Okay, so you have six kids?

B: I had eight but two of them passed away, so I only have six left.

A: So, eight children—would you please describe all eight of your children, starting with the first? What their name was, when were they born, and so on.

B: My first child's name is Son Ly and was born in the year of the snake, on a Wednesday. My second child was born in the year of the goat, on a Monday. My third child died. My fourth child was a girl, and she just passed away. Her name was Lim, and she was born in the year of dog. My fifth child's name is Leang and is still alive today, born in the year of the rat.

A: And the sixth child?

B: My sixth child's name is Leang Sim, a girl. She was born in the year of the tiger. My seventh child died as well, and the eighth child is named Sun Lang, born in the year of the

goat.

A: And how many are still alive today?

B: There are four of them still alive.

A: Okay. And have you arranged for all their marriages?

B: Yes, they have all married, there are none left single.

A: What kinds of work do they do?

B: The youngest buys goods from Thailand and resells them—he sells fruits.

A: Where at?

B: In Pailin, but on border, at Prum market.

A: At Prum market. Did he take a Thai wife then?

B: No! He took a Khmer wife.

A: Oh really?

B: Yes! And my daughter, whose name I said was Leang Sim, she lives [under our] roof [with us].

A: What does she do?

B: She takes care of her children. She's been a widow since her twins were born—when they were born her husband died.

A: She's been taking care of her kids from then all the way until now?

B: Yes, until now. She's been a widow since she was 23.

A: How old is she now?

B: 45 years old.

A: And her twins, did they go to school?

B: They've finished their schooling already! They both have husbands already.

A: Were those twins boys or girls?

B: They are both girls. They take care of their kids now.

A: Okay. Who's next?

B: After that is the one born the year of the rat. They live in Battambang.

A: What is their occupation?

B: They sell sparrows. There's still the first one that's still—

A: They're single?

B: No, he has a wife and three or four children.

A: Is that right?

B: Yes.

A: What do they do for work?

B: They work in construction.

A: How old were you when you came to stay in the pagoda? And what is this pagoda called?

B: I—this pagoda is called Sansom Kosal Pagoda.

A: I see. So—

B: I wasn't here when the Pol Pot regime ended. I worked but couldn't make any money. Because I couldn't make any money, I got sick. I thought I was going to die. In the year 2017, I was gravely ill. I knew I might not live, so I went and asked for some money from my nephew, because he works as a doctor—he works in that field. I asked them, and he told me that if I went to Pailin, I'd die—I'd be there all alone. He told me not to make it harder than it should be, especially because of my poverty. He cried out and didn't let me go back home. He was already there and could take care of me and help me get better. He gave me a blood infusion—I had a severe intestinal infection, and severe gastritis. He took care of me, and I got better. When I was healed, he didn't let me go back, but instead let me stay here at the pagoda.

A: What year was this?

B: In 2017.

A: And you haven't been to any other pagodas since then?

B: No, I haven't, I haven't even been back home.

A: Do your children and grandchildren come to visit you often?

B: They come and visit, yes.

A: So, is this your home, or—?

B: This is the home of the monks, but my nephew works downstairs.

A: Is it your money or—?

B: No, it's my nephew's! I don't have any money.

A: Your nephew pays for everything?

B: My nephew paid for this place to be made for his mother. He didn't want his mother to have difficulty getting up and down. His mother didn't agree to live here though, their house is near here, near the school—across from the school. And so, I live here alone.

A: So how are you related to her? Your nephew made it for his mother, right?

B: Yes!

A: And did he plan on having other relatives here too?

B: Yes!

A: Oh.

B: And now, she didn't agree to live here, so she lives at his house. It's a nice house.

A: How much did it cost him to build this house?

B: It was over \$3,000.

A: When you first came to the pagoda, did you study the Dharma every night?

B: Yes, I learned it.

A: And do you still remember it?

B: Yes, I remember!

A: And how many precepts did they ask you to follow?

B: They didn't, that's our decision. Some adhere to all eight precepts, others only respect five—if we decide to follow the eight precepts, we follow all eight. But my nephew says not to try too hard to follow all eight precepts because I'm sick and still weak. He's afraid if I try to follow all eight, I won't have any strength.

A: Yes. Your health doesn't allow you to do all of them.

B: Yes!

A: So right now, you keep the first five precepts, nowadays?

B: Yes, I keep the first five.

A: Okay. And for the five precepts, what are they like? How do you follow them?

B: The five precepts require you to do good. To not be greedy or anything like that. When we take on the precepts, we promise not to be greedy, not to insult others. But I have never been one to insult others, from when I was young to now.

A: And for eating, do eat in the morning and evening?

B: Yes! The five precepts allow morning and evening meals.

A: Yes.

B: That's why my nephew told me not to do all eight precepts, because they don't allow you to eat in the evenings. It would be too hard on me since I often get sick.

A: And at night, you do your worship?

B: Yes!

A: So what chants do you recite? What do they say in the beginning?

B: It's called sarophen.

A: Sarophen!

B: They also recite sarophen on the radio.

A: Could you recite a few sentences for me? Of the sarophen chant—?

B: Oh, I can only recite the prayer when someone else starts it, and I say it after them.

A: Oh, so someone else starts off and you pray following them?

B: Yes, someone begins, and then we accompany them. I've only learned for a bit over a year, almost two years, but if I follow them, we can all recite the prayers together.

A: If they ever have ceremonies near the pagoda, do they ever invite you to the ceremonies?

B: Yes, they've invited me.

A: And when you went, did they ask you to chant for the "Bay Sey" ceremony? [A Khmer ceremonial offering of cooked rice.]

B: No, that chant is only for the monks.

A: Oh, is that right?

B: Yes!

A: And while you've been here, have the monks in the pagoda assigned you to do anything?

B: No!

A: They haven't?

B: No!

A: And so, for your food in the morning and evening, do you go to the market to buy things?

B: No, my nephew buys food and brings it to me. I can't cook for myself. And sometimes the monks have extra food and share it with me.

A: Your kids live far away, so they haven't brought you anything?

B: Yes.

A: Only your nephew—

B: Just my nephew, and the monks.

A: And do you have any money to spend?

B: None of my kids give me anything, but sometimes my relatives will give me 4000 or 5000 riel because they pity me.

A: Your kids never give you anything?

B: No, not at all! They don't have any care in their hearts.

A: Do you buy your own clothes?

B: My relatives gave them to me. They gave my sarong to me as well. [A long patterned Khmer skirt.] And they sent white fabric to me and I had it cut for myself.

A: And your children, do they ever send anything to your nephew who built this house? Do they ever send anything to help take care of you?

B: They've never sent anything. My nephew is the person who takes care of me. When I'm sick, he takes care of me. Even if I'm just not feeling well, he'll watch over me. He doesn't want to let it get serious, because then it's hard to help with.

A: Is he a nephew on your husband's side or—?

B: No! He's my own nephew.

A: So, he's a blood relative then?

B: His mother is my cousin.

A: And he's male right?

B: Yes, he's a man, but his wife is kind too.

A: And what is his job?

B: He's a doctor here.

A: What's his name?

B: His name is Phalla.

A: What hospital does he work at?

B: I've never asked him. He was— [Audio Cuts]

*Interview originally translated through the collective efforts of Madison Blanchard, Abby Murri, and Thomas Barrett. Retranslated and edited in 2024 by Devon Crane and Thomas Barrett.*