

Interview of En Song

A: Interviewer: Heng Sovannorin

B: Interviewee: En Song

Summary of the Interview

En Song was born in Kampong Phlok, Siem Reap province, during the Year of the Rooster. In this thrilling interview, En Song describes encountering Khmer Rouge soldiers after being liberated by the incoming Vietnamese army. Thwarting an attempt to kidnap their newborn child, her husband fended off the Khmer Rouge soldiers and allowed En Song to escape through the forest. After reuniting, they made it to a Vietnamese-controlled liberated area but due to their limited resources, her husband was forced to try to retrieve their abandoned belongings. Despite another tense encounter with the Khmer Rouge soldiers, her husband and several others were able to recover some belongings and make a break for the village in their cow cart. Following her story, En Song shares her family history and describes her childhood and living through several historic eras in her life. She concludes with her husband by giving sound advice to her descendants and future generations.

A: First of all, I'd like to thank you for allowing us to interview you about your life. This interview is organized through a university in America called Brigham Young University. The aim of the university is to interview the Khmer people, to preserve their history for future generations; so that they can learn about it. When I finish interviewing you, I will put the recording on the website of the university, www.cambodianoralhistory.byu.edu. Do you give me permission to put it on the website?

B: You can put it up, I agree.

A: The date of this interview is December 13th, 2020 and it is being conducted in Chong Kneas village, Chong Kneas commune, Siem Reap city, Siem Reap province. I am the interviewer, and my name is Heng Sovannorin. What is your full name?

B: My full name is En Song.

A: Do you have any nicknames?

B: No, just the one.

A: How old are you?

B: I am 64 years old.

A: Do you remember your birthday?

B: Yes, I remember.

A: When was it?

B: I was born in the month of Magha of the Khmer calendar—wait, did you want to say the Khmer month, or the Western calendar month?

A: You could tell me the Khmer first, and the Western second, no problem.

B: I don't remember the Western calendar month. I only remember the Khmer month, it

was in the month of Magha, on a Monday, on the ninth day of the waning—oh! The ninth day of the waxing moon.

A: What Khmer year were you born? Like was it the Year of the Rabbit or the Dragon, or—?

B: I was born in the Year of the Rooster.

A: Yes. Where were you born?

B: I was born in Kampong Phlok, Kampong Phlok commune.

A: So why did you move here to Chong Kneas?

B: I fled from there during the Khmer Rouge. I was relocated from Kampong Phlok to Phnom Kulen, that's where I was relocated to. I was relocated to Phnom Kulen. After that, we were liberated [by the Vietnamese], and I came here to Chong Kneas. I didn't go back to my hometown.

A: I see. So how many siblings do you have?

B: My siblings—there are eight of us.

A: How many brothers and sisters? And where do you fall?

B: I am the youngest.

A: I see. And how many brothers and sisters do you have?

B: There are four brothers and four sisters [in my family].

A: That's good, it's an equal split. Right, could you tell us all their names, starting with the oldest down to you?

B: Yes. My oldest sister is named En Ngang. My second sibling is named En Phao—my brother. After that was my third sibling, my sister, who is named En An. After her, my fourth sibling is named En Un. After En Un is En Lay—wait, En Khon is next. After En Khon is my brother En Lay. Next, I have another brother who is dead, so I don't need to say his name.

A: I see. What's his name, though?

B: I don't know his name because I was the youngest of them all. After that brother, I have another brother named En Soem. Then, there is me, En Song.

A: The youngest, and the prettiest.

B: Pretty? No way, I have no teeth left! [Laughs]

A: So, what sort of things did you do with your siblings when you were young? Did you work with them or anything?

B: When I was a kid, my older siblings all had spouses. I lived with my mother and father and went to school. When the Khmer Rouge relocated us, I worked with people we would refer to as "friends." The Pol Pot generation was the generation that we were required to call one another "friends." They made us work as laborers, we carried dirt that we measured out and dug up—that's how the Pol Pot era was. By the time I returned, my father had died, so I lived with my mother. One of my sisters had died where they had

relocated her to. Now, I am married to my husband, he was born in Kampong Phlok just like me. We were born in the same place, but we were relocated to different villages. I was in Trapeang Khnar village, and he was in Chob Leu village, but they called that village—what again? Oh! Svay Leu district, Svay Leu sangkat back then. In the [Pol Pot] generation, my husband came and asked for permission to marry me, he went and got permission from my family, and I [didn't] have a say in the matter. After he got permission from my parents, the [Khmer Rouge leadership] organized the wedding for us. There were twenty-two couples! They would follow up with us and make sure that we both "loved" each other. If we didn't, then they would take us to be "re-educated" and if we didn't change our minds after that, they would take us to be killed. We didn't love each other at first, but my mother and father gave their permission to him, and I respected the tradition.

A: Right.

B: So, I agreed to marry him, and the government stopped checking on us from then on.

A: Yes.

B: Then I was relocated to Khleang [a warehouse, also Khmer placename], and once I got there, I heard that my older sibling had died. After that, I returned. Once I got back, I found out that I was pregnant with my husband. I heard that we had been liberated, and I didn't go back [to my hometown].

A: Right.

B: I headed back, but there was a Khmer Rouge leader named Sabon there in Kantuot district, in Kantuot village. They stopped my cart while I was holding my newborn baby in my arms and nursing it, and they said that I had taken someone else's baby as if it was my own. Remember, at the time I was still a young woman, they did this to intimidate me—my baby looked like me. They tried to intimidate me, and I told them that this was my actual child by birth. This happened to everyone that went by, they were stopped by [the Khmer Rouge], and even though they told them [the truth, the soldiers] wouldn't believe it. They wanted to take away my child from me, take me to Kantuot village, and make me work there. When I wouldn't go and when my husband heard the news, he immediately pulled the front of the cart ahead, saying that whatever happened, happened. He said that if the soldiers were going to take his wife away, he was content to fight them all right there and then until they were all dead. My uncle and aunt also spoke up and said that it was true, the child was mine. They said that if the child wasn't mine, then how could I even breastfeed my newborn? We only had one yoke of oxen and three cans of rice in a pot at that point. My husband had me get out and then drove the oxen forward, with me [shielded] to the side as I ran away. They started shooting at us to kill us—I saw it with my own eyes! Once we got away to a certain point, my husband told me to go on without him. I was to take the child and run away and hide. Once I made it into the underbrush of the jungle, my husband drove our oxen away, [throwing our pursuers off the trail]. After abandoning the oxen, he hurried after us and we ran away together to—oh, what was it called?

C: [Husband Speaks] Rohal and Trapeang Tuem.

B: Oh! Rohal and Trapeang Tuem! [In Ta Siem commune, Svay Leu District] By the evening, my child had become too sick with diarrhea to travel further, so we slept in the hay of

someone's rice field. My history is so miserable! In the morning, I went with my husband, and we kept traveling. We had no rice to eat. We had no rice, so we asked the president of Chob Leu village for some—he was being evacuated too, he was running away like us. He scooped out some rice for us and gave it to my husband, and I told him, "Thank you, that's plenty already! Don't give us too much, or we won't be able to carry it over our shoulders." So we departed, and remember, all our belongings and clothes and everything had been left behind with the cart! The only thing we took [when we ran away] was what we were wearing.

A: Yes.

B: We walked all the way to Chan Hear, and my baby had gone silent because it was sick and had bad diarrhea. We thought that this would be its burial place. I spoke with my husband through my tears, I couldn't stop crying. I couldn't bring myself to do that, so I carried it all the way until we made it to the area that had been liberated [by the Vietnamese]. Once we made it to Beng Mealea, I met my older brother there. We asked them for some medicine for [my baby], after which my child got better. After that, they asked us where our carts and oxen were, and they went to go retrieve them. When they left, they had my husband go back with them to drive the oxen, and all I could do was watch the road for him [to return]. I wouldn't eat any rice or food, I just watched the road and waited for him to return. The locals there gave us some food to eat. Once my husband got back and hitched the cart up again, he heard gunshots firing at them, firing at the ox cart drivers.

A: Oh!

B: So they just got on and took off! They ran the oxen as fast as they would go—they didn't know where to go, they just got out of there! Once they got back to us, where we had been liberated, they began to ask us about what happened, about what sort of difficulties we had gone through. At that point—the Vietnamese were there already, right? [Speaking to her husband.] Because the [Khmer Rouge] was over, and the Vietnamese—

C: [Husband Speaks] Yes, we were liberated in '79.

B: Oh, in '79! After that, they asked us [about how we got there], and they gave us aid and whatnot. They asked us where we were coming from, and where we were planning on going. I thought, "If I go back to Kampong Phlok, I won't have any of my parents or siblings there with me." I was content to stay there with my family, with my father-in-law and mother-in-law. But now my father-in-law and mother-in-law have passed away already, we already had the almsgiving ceremony with the monks!

A: Oh!

B: Yes, we had the almsgiving ceremony already, and after two days, we came back. Each one of us ran to one another and embraced and cried, it wasn't happy at all, we all mourned together. My family and my husband are all virtuous, strong people. And until the present day, in our old age, we've worked hard to contribute alms to the monks, so our children will be blessed. All my children have either passed away or gotten married. All the way up until now, I have had twelve children—I have had twelve children and some of them only lived to see a single birthday. Some of them were sick and only lived a year, some only lived to be nine months old. Now, I only have six children alive—three boys and three girls. That's it.

And now, they are all married. I have some grandchildren, and they take care of them—some of my grandchildren live together, but all my children have gone their separate ways. That's all I have, that's my story.

A: Yes! Right, so you said that when you were a child, you went to school, is that right?

B: Yes! When I was young, I was a student.

A: What grade did you get to?

B: I got to ninth grade. My father died when I was in ninth grade.

C: [Husband Speaks] That's ninth grade [according to the French system], during the Sangkum era.

A: Right!

B: Yes, ninth grade back in that era! He died because he had high blood pressure. I figured that if I continued my education, it wouldn't do any good, I felt bad for my mother. So, I stopped going to school to help my siblings. Every month, we would get fish in cylindrical fishing traps, and I would help weave bamboo barrier nets and whatnot. We also raised Pangas catfish and looked for water spinach to cut up and eat. That's what my life history has entailed.

A: So, do you know how to read and write Khmer?

B: I've forgotten a lot—I only know a little bit. Back then, I learned French and a lot of other things, and I knew how to read, but I have forgotten it all.

A: [Chuckles] I see. So, what is your mother's name?

B: My mother's name is Snguon Luy.

A: Snguon Luy.

B: Yes.

A: Was she born in Kampong Phlok?

B: She was from Kampong Phlok, yes.

A: I see. So what was your mother like, was she mean or kind?

B: No, my mother was kind. My father was very strict, but he was only that way towards people who did wrong things. He was never mean to people who did good things.

A: What was your father's name?

B: My father's name was—uh, his last name was—his name was Soeun, but his surname was my grandfather's last name. I don't know the name of my—oh! Grandfather En!

A: En! So, his name was En Soeun?

B: Yes, En Soeun!

A: What jobs did your parents have when they were raising you?

B: My father was a net fisherman by trade, but he caught fish with cylindrical traps and raised catfish.

A: And they never worked on a farm?

B: No, they didn't work on the farm like most people, they worked jobs involving the lake.

A: Right. And did your parents ever tell you stories about when they were young? Like their own personal histories?

B: They told me about their history during the Issarak era once, but I don't remember anymore. I've forgotten, it was a long time ago, and they told me when I was young, when I was about 14 years old.

A: Oh, right. Do you remember your grandparents on your mother's side?

B: On my mother's side?

A: Yes.

B: I do remember on my mother's side. [Interviewee gets confused.] On my mother's side—oh, on my father's—uh, Grandfather Snguon, and Grandmother Eam. And on my mother's side—oh, what were their names? I forgot already. Grandma Pum and Grandfather Snguon! Oh, Grandfather En—no wait, on my father's side, my grandfather's name was En, and my grandmother's name was Pum. But on the other side, that was Grandfather Snguon and Grandmother Eam.

A: Oh—that was your mother's side, right?

B: Yes! On my mother's side.

A: And all four of them were from Kampong Phlok as well, right?

B: Yes, all of them were from Kampong Phlok.

A: Were they all or some of them alive when you were born?

B: No, I wasn't born before [they died].

A: Not for any of them?

B: Not for any of them.

A: Oh!

B: I just heard my parents tell me their names.

A: Right. Do you have any siblings or relatives that live in foreign countries?

B: No, I've never had anyone.

A: So, what's your husband's name?

B: My husband's name is Khlok Doeun.

A: And what year did you get married? Or how many years have you been married for?

B: We got married sometime in the '70s, maybe between 1960 and 1970? My husband remembers.

C: [Husband Speaks] In 1966. [Misspeaks, likely means 1976.]

A: In 1966?

C: Yes. During the Khmer Rouge.

A: Right. Oh, so your marriage was arranged by the Khmer Rouge?

B: Yes, by Pol Pot.

A: Right. So, did you know your husband before you got married?

B: I did. We both lived in Kampong Phlok, but he was in the north village, and I was in the middle village.

A: I see. So why were you content to get married to him at that time?

B: Yes, back then, as I shared in my history, the Khmer Rouge rigorously regulated everything—Pol Pot's Angkar. We had to follow Pol Pot—we had to obey Khmer tradition and follow the strict regulations of the Khmer Rouge. They asked my husband which girl he loved the most, and he said that he loved me the most—he told them my name, he answered, "My friend Song!"

A: Right.

B: So they did according to what he said. But my mother and father—they hadn't been part of making that decision, so my husband still went and asked them for my hand in marriage, according to Khmer custom.

A: Was there ever anyone back then who proposed to someone else, and they didn't agree to it, and did the Khmer Rouge ever take any disciplinary actions because of that?

B: Yes, there were consequences. If we didn't obey the Khmer Rouge, they would kill us. If they disciplined us not once, but two or three times, then they would take us to be killed. They wouldn't tell us that we were being taken away to be killed, no. They would tell us, "Friend, you are being taken to be re-educated." But then they would take us to the place they were going to kill us. Once we got close, they would blindfold us.

A: Oh!

B: Once, my husband went to bore a hole in a resin tree to extract the sap—and I'm telling you a true story! He was far away from people, not close at all, but he found fragments of people's legs and arms.

A: So during the Khmer Rouge, do you remember where they relocated you to at first, and where you went from there?

B: Yes, I remember. At first, they relocated me from Kampong Phlok to Kampong Thkov.

C: [Husband Speaks] That was in 1970. In 1971 we were relocated to Kampong Thkov, out to Roluos.

A: Right.

C: But in '72, they relocated us from Kampong Thkov to Phnom Kulen.

A: So, when they relocated you there, what kind of work did they make you do?

B: When they first, relocated us, they didn't have us do anything, they just put us into groups. Each group had a certain amount of people, and then they had us work in the rice

fields. We transplanted seedlings, chopped down the brush, and planted rice. They had us build dams too. That's about all they had us do. And regarding the dams, it wasn't like we dug up the dirt and then helped carry it away, they measured out plots of land by the meter. Whoever finished their plot first was done with their work.

A: Oh!

C: [Husband Speaks] At least, that was how it was for the young men and women.

A: Oh, right. And whoever finished first got to go eat?

B: Yes.

C: According to their plans, they would have us do six square meters every day. The people who finished first were allowed to rest.

A: Oh.

B: We would work hard—we didn't dare to eat until we were finished.

C: We endured it all so that we would survive.

B: After they had us stop working at this dam, we'd work at another.

A: Right.

B: They moved us around everywhere! We worked at the dam in Odar, at the dam in Kralanh—the one on the top of the mountain range. I worked so hard, my hair started to fall out, back then when I was a young woman. Some [people] had to carry me down in a hammock, suspended from two poles they were carrying so that I could get back down. I fell unconscious for a full day about three different times, I was so sick.

A: So, how well did you eat back in that era?

B: There was so very little to eat, but it was different in other villages. Some villages had plenty—they had plenty of rice, so they weren't so stingy about their food. Where I was, we only had a little bit to eat. We had rice porridge, mixed with cassava sprouts—you know, like the cassava we grow here.

A: Yes.

B: We sliced the sprouts and water spinach into small pieces and mixed it in [with the rice porridge]—we did whatever we could so that we could feel full for at least one more meal.

A: Right. So do you have any close friends that you grew up with, that you still keep in contact with today?

B: I do, but they all got married and now one of them lives in Phnom Kulen. But they're in—oh, what is it called? They call it Chuor, oh they're in Snuol village! But I'm not sure if they are all still alive or if they've passed away because we've been apart for a long time and haven't kept in contact with one another.

A: And what are some of your friends' names?

B: There are a lot of them, too many to count. I can't remember them all, it's easy to forget things now.

A: Right, but you can—

B: I remember my friend Ran, my friend Ton, Hun, and one more friend in Chob Leu. I've forgotten so many of their names.

A: I see. So, do you remember any memories with any of them that you just mentioned?

B: Yes, I have memories of taking and transplanting rice seedlings together as a group. We also always met up and ate together—that's all that I can remember.

A: I see. So did you do any rice farming during the Khmer Rouge? Did you ever transplant or harvest rice, or anything like that?

B: I did! I worked in the rice field.

C: [Husband Speaks] We all worked as farmers in the rice fields.

B: We also did some farming, there was a farm behind my house. That's what we did. My husband would come back from plowing and—well, back then they gave us pieces of land for rice farming, they would give us a hectare—is that how much it was?

C: [Husband Responds] Generally speaking, they did that sort of thing after the Pol Pot era was over. Before, everyone worked together.

A: Right.

C: There were no individual jobs back then.

A: Everything was shared too, right?

B: Yes.

C: Yes, everything was shared.

A: So, what kind of jobs have you worked to take care of your family, ever since you were young until now?

B: I didn't do anything when I was a young woman outside of fishing. I used to help cast nets until my husband came along, now I help by preparing the fish and prahok. Sometimes, I took things to be sold, so that I could raise my children.

A: Right. And you've never raised cattle, pigs, chickens, or anything like that?

B: No. It was only when I came back here that I started raising chickens.

A: Oh! [Laughs]

B: I raise chickens, I'm getting old.

A: I see. So, could you tell us about the time of your life that was the hardest? Was it during the Khmer Rouge, or was there another time?

B: Just the Khmer Rouge. That was the hardest time of all.

A: And what about the time when you were happiest?

B: The time that I was happiest was when we were liberated, and we came home. It was because we could rebuild our lifestyle and work and do as we please. We were just happy that we had enough food to fill ourselves.

A: So in what ways has your life changed then? If you think about back then until now?

B: My life nowadays—the most change has been in getting old. I can't work for myself as well, now I rely on my grandchildren's strength. They work and every month, they send some money to me. But ever since the COVID pandemic began, they haven't been able to help as much because of their struggles.

A: Right. So when you were in school, did you ever think about what you wanted to be when you grew up? That is, when you were a student?

B: Back when I was still in school, I wanted to become a teacher if I finished school.

A: [Chuckles] Right. But you couldn't because of the war?

B: Yes, that's right.

A: I see. So, I'd like to ask you about some of your favorite things. What is your favorite kind of food? That is, ever since you were a kid and until now, what's your favorite food?

B: [Laughs] I like any food, as long as it's made by my own hands! Yes.

A: Right, but if someone had you choose a type of food you could eat, what food would you choose? Like, which soup, or which—

B: Now, or when I was young?

A: When you were young.

B: Yes. When I was young, I loved stir-fries.

A: Stir-fries?

B: That's right.

A: And when you were young, what type of music did you like to listen to?

B: Oh, about music—I only liked the #1 music. As long as it came from Sinn Sisamouth, or music stars like Pan Ron, I liked it.

A: Do you remember which song you liked the most from Sinn Sisamouth, or—?

B: Oh, I don't remember. Back then, whenever Sinn Sisamouth or Pan Ron released a new song, I liked to listen to it over and over until I knew the words. But now I've forgotten all of them. I don't remember.

A: Right. So do you know how to play any instruments?

B: I don't.

A: Is there anyone in your family who knows how to play a musical instrument?

B: My family doesn't, but my husband's family did—his father did.

A: I see.

B: But on my side, nobody does—not even my children or grandchildren.

A: Right. So, when you were a child or a young lady, did you ever celebrate Khmer New Year or Pchum Ben with traditional games at the pagoda?

B: No, I never joined in with any of the dancing or anything, I just visited like normal.

A: I see, yes. So how many kids and grandkids do you have now?

B: I have lots of grandkids!

C: [Husband Speaks] We have six children.

B: We have six children and so many grandchildren. So many that I can't count.

A: Do you think you have close to twenty?

B: Yeah, we even have a great-grandchild.

A: Really, a great-grandchild already?

B: Yes! The smallest of them all are great-grandchildren. I have two great-grandchildren.

A: I see. So last of all, do you have any advice that you'd like to give your kids and grandkids, on how they should live their lives and what kind of people they should become?

B: I do. I want to encourage them—do whatever you can to strive to work hard! Don't just watch everyone else around you work, you need to work up the strength to get to work yourselves so that your families can thrive and have plenty to eat.

C: [Husband Speaks] Also, it's important to be good citizens—don't let society be the one to dictate your worth!

B: Yes! I want my children and grandchildren to strive in every way they can.

C: You need to conduct yourselves uprightly and honestly. Do all you can to be good and build yourselves up to be good citizens in our society.

A: Right! Do you have any other advice you'd like to share?

B: Yes, that's all the advice I would like to share—that's it.

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

B: Yes!

Translated by Ethan Arkell and edited by Thomas Barrett in April 2024.