

Interview of Em Sopheap

A: Interviewer: Nhem Sokunthea

B: Interviewee: Em Sopheap

Summary of the Interview

Em Sopheap was born in Svay Tbong village, Kampong Cham province. He is one of three surviving siblings in his family, although he heard from his parents that he was one of eight children before many of his siblings died in the Khmer Rouge. In this interview, he shares his family history and personal stories from his life before concluding with sound advice for future generations.

A: Okay, so I would like to thank you for allowing me to interview you about your life. My name is Nhem Sokunthea, I will be your interviewer today. So, what is your full name?

B: Em Sopheap.

A: So, today is August 18, 2016, and I will interview you. This interview was organized by a university in the United States of America called BYU. The university has an organization to interview about your and the Cambodian people's history for the future and for your descendants. And the next generation can know about history as well as the story of your life. So, do you allow me to post this interview on BYU's website?

B: Yes.

A: Yes, this website is called www.cambodiaoralhistory.byu.edu. And now I would like to begin the interview, will you please tell me your full name again?

B: Em Sopheap.

A: So, do you have any nicknames?

B: Yes, I do.

A: What do they call you?

B: Previously, the name was Yean.

A: Yean, okay so, when were you born?

B: July 28, 1972.

A: So, where were you born?

B: Svay Tbong village.

A: Okay!

B: Svay Ek Phnom Commune, Srey Santhor District, Kampong Cham Province.

A: Okay so, do you remember what the year of the Khmer lunar cycle was? Like the rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, and so on?

B: The rat.

A: Year of the rat?

B: Yes!

A: So how many brothers and sisters do you have?

B: There are three of us.

A: How many girls, how many boys?

B: Two girls, and one boy.

A: Ok, so which child are you?

B: I am the second child.

A: The second child. So, do you have siblings that are still alive or are some of them dead?

B: They're alive.

A: All of them, and are they living with you or do they live somewhere else?

B: They're far away, one in our hometown and one in Kampong Som.

A: Alright, so what's your father's name?

B: My father is Net Kong.

A: Yes, do you know where he was born as well as when he was born?

B: He was born in Svay Tbong village, Svay Ek Phnom commune, Srey Santhor district, Kampong Cham province.

A: Okay and when was he born?

B: I don't remember his birthday.

A: What about in the birth certificate?

B: On February 3, 1932.

A: Alright, so uncle, Khmer year, what year in the Khmer lunar cycle was your father born?

B: The Khmer year—I don't remember.

A: You don't remember, that's okay.

B: Yes!

A: So, for your life with your father, do you have any memories with him, what kind of person was he?

B: Gentle, diligent, hardworking.

A: Did he take care of you well?

B: He focused on his children.

A: Okay!

B: Having love for his children and wife.

A: Yes!

B: Family.

A: Alright, as for your mother, what's her name?

B: Em Nuon.

A: Okay, when was she born?

B: The August 6, 1942.

A: In what village and commune?

B: In Svay Tbong village, Svay Ek Phnom commune, Srey Santhor district, Kampong Cham province.

A: Yes, alright, do you remember which Khmer lunar year cycle your mom was born?

B: I don't remember her Khmer year.

A: Okay, do you have any memories with your mother?

B: My mother loved me.

A: Yes!

B: She nurtured and took care of me.

A: Yes, very good, so you came here, uh—actually, your grandparents on your father's side, what were their names?

B: On my father's side, his name was uh—Grandfather Net.

A: And your grandmother?

B: Grandmother Duk.

A: Are they still alive or have they passed away?

B: They passed away a long time ago.

A: Do you know when they died?

B: I don't know.

A: And were you born then?

B: Not yet.

A: And did you ever hear your father say anything about your grandparents?

B: I only heard from him that he lived in his village as a kind and polite man.

A: Yeah!

B: Diligent worker, love his family, his children and wife.

A: Right!

B: Like parents.

A: Yeah, so uncle, for your grandparents on your mother's side, what were their names?

B: Grandpa Em.

A: Ok!

B: Grandma Chim.

A: Yes, do you remember what generation they were born?

B: I don't know, I don't know their generation.

A: You weren't born during their time, huh?

B: Not yet.

A: So, what do you remember about them, like stories your mother passed on from them?

B: She just said that when he lived, he was happy, he loved his family, wife, and children.

A: Yeah!

B: Took care of them since before the Pol Pot era.

A: Yes, that's right. So, did your family, as well as your parents and grandparents, ever go live in a foreign country or just Cambodia?

B: Just Cambodia.

A: In Cambodia the whole time. Now, back to your education again. Up to what grade did you study?

B: I learned up through 10th grade.

A: 10th—which primary school did you study at?

B: Srey Santhor.

A: Ok, what about middle school?

B: Uh—Russey Srok.

A: Did you go to high school?

B: Srey Santhor High School.

A: Yes, right. So, when you were in school, in your dreams of the future, what did you want to do?

B: My education was never finished, from the beginning I would study diligently all the way to 10th grade, at which time, my father died.

A: Right!

B: At that time, I stopped going to school and began working in place of my parents.

A: Right, so, have you ever worked in the fields or anything?

B: I farmed with my parents.

A: What did you grow?

B: We grew beans, sesame, rice.

A: Yeah, you farmed all that?

B: And potatoes.

A: Right, so, when did you get married?

B: Married in 1998.

A: In '98? Married on Monday?

B: Yes!

A: Do you remember what month?

B: March.

A: March. Right, where did you get married?

B: In Srey Santhor district.

A: Right, so, when you got married, did your parents arrange the marriage or was it your choice?

B: My parents arranged it.

A: Yes, right, so, where did you first meet your wife?

B: In a picture, my siblings gave me to look at.

A: Huh—really, and at that time, where did you guys meet?

B: There at her house.

A: At her house then, a proper marriage.

B: Yes!

A: So, at that wedding, were there any gifts that were given to the bride's side?

B: It was prepared according to tradition, we gave treats, food, like what is normal.

A: Yes, that's right. So, comparing your life from then to now, how is it different?

B: Uh—that time and now are completely different because back then I was in the fields and farms.

A: Right!

B: Now, I've reached the city.

A: Right!

B: So, there are differences, like work issues.

A: Right!

B: Occupation.

A: Yes, and so, for your likes and interests, what food do you like to eat?

B: Foods such as stir-fry or curry.

A: Right and do you know how to cook all of that?

B: Yep, I know how.

A: And who did you learn from?

B: These dishes I learned from my parents when they would make it and from friends that they knew.

A: Right.

B: I worked hard to prepare food like a chef. Like they say, we work to be in the kitchen.

A: Right!

B: Preparing food for the family and thus I learned.

A: Right, so, in your free time, what do you like to do?

B: In my spare time, I like to read books, like even up to today I read scripture stories.

A: Right, so uncle, when you have free time from all your work, when you go out with your family, where do you go?

B: Relax by the river or in a resort like in our city.

A: Okay!

B: Newly made.

A: Yes, that's right, so, do you like to listen to music?

B: I don't like music very much.

A: Not really, huh, and you don't know how to sing?

B: Yeah, I don't.

A: Right, so, you were born during the Lon Nol regime, right?

B: Yes, then and during the Pol Pot regime.

A: Yes, so, do you remember anything from the Pol Pot era or did you hear anything about the Pol Pot era? How was your life at that time?

B: It was difficult then.

A: How so? Like, can you describe in detail your life then?

B: As a child, they wouldn't let us go to school.

A: Right!

B: With parents, eating was difficult.

A: Right!

B: During the Pol Pot era, the mortar era.

A: Right!

B: I do not remember much of the history because we were escaping the warfare.

A: Right!

B: Lots of it, but there wasn't much happiness.

A: Yes, that's right, so, at that time, did you ever hear of people being taken to be killed when you were young?

B: I heard the older people say that they were taking whole groups of people to be killed.

A: Right, but you never saw it personally, right?

B: I never saw it in person.

A: Right, so, when you were young, did they only have you scooping cow poop?

B: Little kids would walk around picking up cow poop in the embankments between rice fields.

A: Right!

B: They would fertilize the fields with it for good rice.

A: Right!

B: That's it.

A: Right!

B: After that, [...].

A: Ok!

B: There was nothing to do when I was little.

A: Yeah!

B: Just starting when I was 6 or 7 years old.

A: Right, so, did you do anything bad during that time?

B: No, I didn't do anything bad, because I was always with my mother.

A: Right, so was it easier to be a kid than an adult?

B: Yes, at that time it was easy to be a kid but there were difficulties too.

A: Right!

B: I was with my mother, she was the chef in my family.

A: Ok!

B: My parents were chefs in a kitchen, so I didn't have to go hungry like other kids who had to share everything.

A: Yeah!

B: I ate enough.

A: Okay, did you ever share food with others at that time?

B: At that time, I didn't deal with the food until my mother gave it to me to eat.

A: Right, so, when you grew up, how did you feel knowing that you survived the Pol Pot era?

B: Like I was lucky then, like escaping the wrath of death.

A: Yeah!

B: How sad, my family at that time was large, but then there are only three left from that period. I say only three and, back then, I had eight siblings.

A: Yeah!

B: A lot died, so I don't remember when they died.

A: Right.

B: I only know about the three of us still alive.

A: Okay.

B: But I heard my parents say that there were eight of us and now there's only three left.

A: Okay, they took them to be killed, huh?

B: Right, I do not know.

A: Yes, so, after you escaped from the Pol Pot era, what did your family do for a living?

B: Farmers.

A: Farmers. Did you do anything else besides that?

B: No.

A: No, okay, so, what do you remember most in your life, something that you can never forget?

B: During the Pol Pot era?

A: Yes.

B: Cruelty that abused people, killed people indiscriminately.

A: Right.

B: That is a memory in the lives of us Cambodians who lived during the war.

A: Right, so, after you got married, how many sons and daughters did you have?

B: I had five children.

A: Right, what are their names? Can you recount them with their surnames?

B: Sopheap Navin.

A: Okay.

B: Sopheap Narin, Sopheap Narun, Sopheap Narak, Sopheap Narang.

A: Okay, so, did you have an adopted child?

B: I had one adopted child, but they have returned to live with their parents.

A: Right, so, what's your wife's name?

B: My wife's name is Leang Sopheak.

A: Okay, so, what kind of characteristics does your wife have, what kind of wife is she?

B: Gentle natured.

A: Okay.

B: Yes, diligent.

A: Yes, and, before you married Sopheak, had you fallen in love with her?

B: I had never seen her before, never.

A: Right.

B: I first saw her at the wedding when her siblings introduced me to her.

A: Right, so, what do you do for a living now?

B: Nowadays, outside of my work as civil servants, after having finished my work there, I help out as a worker at city hall when I'm called in.

A: Yes, so, how did you raise, educate, and take care of your children?

B: Raising them—there are many difficulties in raising our children. We are responsible for and take care of everything from them sickness to their clothes, learning, support—it's very difficult for our children.

A: Right.

B: As we have seen in the past, it is very difficult because there are so many children, there's a lack of livelihood.

A: Yes, so, do you have all your children go to school?

B: Yes, today, 3 of them are going to school.

A: Right, so, why do you have your children go to school?

B: With the intent that they study to have knowledge in the future.

A: Right.

B: So that they can have a job to work to support themselves.

A: Right, so that they can like—

B: Improve going forward.

A: Yes, to escape ignorance.

B: In the future, yes, to escape from ignorance.

A: Yes, so, what value does education have in your life?

B: Education is a good value in our Cambodian society. It's such a big problem, we need to have it in all of us individually, we can't go without it.

A: Right.

B: It's of the utmost important.

A: Yes, so, what do you need to do to make your family happy?

B: We have to work hard to expand our work and business every day, we must first, if we are poor, we have to save and be frugal.

A: Yes.

B: We've been improving like others, so we have difficulties.

A: Yes.

B: There is a lot of thinking.

A: Yes, so, when your family has a problem, what are some ways you go about solving them?

B: Uh, the way to solve family problems is to have a series of solutions, but that it is difficult. Yes, unlike those who are rich and have money left over, it is difficult for us to get a loan to solve the problem one by one.

A: Yes, so, what does family mean in your life?

B: Family has big meaning in our society. Without a family, it is difficult.

A: Yes.

B: If we have a family, it's like we have two hands to support or help each other with.

A: I see.

B: Every day as a family, what do we do?

We need to help each other because of our love for each other.

A: Right.

B: That is an important task for the family we have.

A: Yes, what good experiences have you had in life that you want to share with your future generations?

B: In the final stage of human life, we must educate our children to learn, learn a trade or skill, to have knowledge, a knowledge of how to work, to apply themselves to everything that they are doing, we have to guide them so they know how to do this.

A: Right.

B: Let them learn about the current society, what to do to make life better in the future, and we must encourage our children to go to school to get a higher education.

A: Yes!

B: For their future.

A: Yes, so, this is the last question. What advice do you have to send to your future generation, because from our today, they will hear the words and speech that you shared. What advice do you have? What do you want them to avoid?

B: Uh, a parent's advice for their children's future is to have them avoid drugs.

A: Right!

B: Poverty, ignorance, bad deeds in our society, we must avoid what brings hardships and suffering like we see today in our multifaceted society. The last thing I want to share is to encourage our children to study, to learn a lot, and to be wise so that they may do a lot of work in society and will understand society. We want them to have knowledge for the future so that they can build their own life without having to depend on others. Learn to work to find enough to eat, to do better than their parents who have difficulties.

A: Yes, so, today I would like to thank you very much for joining us letting us interview you about your life and everything, your descendants will hear about your history. Thank you, and we will put this interview onto the website that I told you earlier, okay?

B: Okay!

A: Alright, thank you very much.

This interview was translated through the collaborative efforts of several volunteer translators.