

Interview of Samath An

A: Interviewer: Thomas Barrett

B: Interviewee: Samath An

Summary of the Interview

Samath An was born in 1952 in Kouk Mon village, Oddar Meanchey province, and is the fourth of seven children. In this interview, he shares his entire life story from his childhood to the present day, particularly highlighting his military service during the Lon Nol era and enduring the brutality of the Khmer Rouge regime. Samath An also describes his successful escape from his own execution and fleeing to the Thai border to safety. He likewise recounts his experiences of starting a new life in the United States, where he surmounted many difficulties and forged a successful career as a skilled machinist. He concludes his interview by attributing his success to his faith in God and emphasizes the importance of following Jesus Christ.

A: To begin, I would like to formally greet you!

B: Yes, hello!

A: Thank you for allowing us to interview you. Our purpose today is to preserve your personal experiences and stories, from the time you were born in Cambodia, until the present day. My name is Thomas Barrett, and I am a student at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. Dana Bourgerie, Debra Williams, and I represent the Cambodian Oral History Project, a project that is through BYU. So to begin, I would like to ask an important question. After we record this interview, we want to put it on our website at BYU. We would like to ask if we have permission to put this interview on our website?

B: Yes, I allow it to be put on the website.

A: OK, thank you very much. So, to start this interview, our most important question is what is your name? Your full name?

B: Yes, my name is An Samath. My family name is An; my first name is Samath.

A: Does your family name come from your dad or mom's side?

B: From my dad's family.

A: From your dad's side, good. Okay, great. When you were growing up were there any other names you were known by?

B: They called me Soem too.

A: Soem? Why did they call you Soem?

B: It was my nickname.

A: A nickname—okay, good. Have you had it since your childhood, or just recently?

B: I've had it since my childhood.

A: Since your childhood—

B: Yes.

A: And how old are you now?

B: 72 years old.

A: Ok 72 years old. And what year were you born?

B: I was born September 18. Tomorrow, actually—

A: Tomorrow, oh! Really?

B: 1952.

A: Okay, you remember very well. Where were you born? In Cambodia?

B: I am originally from Cambodia. I was born in Kouk Mon village, Sangkat Kouk Mon [commune], Ampil district, Oddar Meanchey province.

A: Oh, Oddar Meanchey! Just to the north.

B: North. Near the Thai border.

A: Are your parents from Oddar Meanchey as well?

B: Yes. My parents were born in Oddar Meanchey province, grew up there, lived there, got married there, and died in that same place.

A: Okay.

B: Yes.

A: Great. I've heard that you know Khmer and can speak English as well?

B: I know some English. I know Khmer and can speak some Thai and Lao.

A: You know Lao, so in total four languages?

B: Yes, four. But have forgotten some because I haven't used them in a long time.

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

B: Yes.

A: You know it well!

B: Yes, I do.

A: What about English? Do you know how to read it?

B: English I can read and write, a little bit.

A: Okay, good! Let's change the topic and talk a bit about your family. So your parents were born in Oddar Meanchey, do you know the village where they lived?

B: They were born in Oddar Meanchey, Kouk Mon village, Sangkat Kouk Mon, Ampil district, Oddar Meanchey province.

A: The same district?

B: The same district.

A: And what are your parents' names?

B: My father's name is An, but he took his father's name as his surname, so his name is Preum An.

A: Preum?

B: Yes, Preum An.

A: Preum An.

B: My mother's name is Han, and her surname is Sat.

A: Sat.

B: Yes.

A: How did she write her name? Your mother's name?

B: Name—?

A: Mhm, if you were to spell it out—

B: Oh, spelling in English or Khmer?

A: Khmer.

B: Oh, in Khmer it's Sat Han. [Interviewee spells it out.]

A: Okay. And do you know what year they were born?

B: I don't know.

A: You don't know?

B: I don't know, I can't remember.

A: You can't remember.

B: They never really told me. Especially in that generation—they were very poor and many didn't know their own birth dates. The village I was in was very remote and rural too, it wasn't near the city.

A: Do you know the Khmer birth year, such as the year of the Ox or Rabbit?

B: They did, but I—they told me but I can't remember.

A: You can't remember?

B: Yes.

A: Okay, that's alright, it's been a long time. You said that they died in Oddar Meanchey as well, right?

B: Yes. My father died first, and my mother died two years later.

A: Okay, I understand. Do you remember the year your father died?

B: The year? Oh, my father died maybe—I can't remember—maybe in 1968 or 1969.

A: Before Pol Pot then?

B: Yes, before Pol Pot, maybe a year or two before that, about then.

A: Okay, good. And were they fully Khmer or mixed?

B: They were Cambodian.

A: They were both Cambodian?

B: Both were Khmer.

A: Okay. So you are fully Khmer.

B: That's right.

A: Fully Khmer. And do you have any brothers and sisters?

B: Yes, my parents had six—seven kids. Three boys, two girls. [Interviewee forgets to count his 6th sister.]

A: Okay, seven kids including you right?

B: Yes. Seven including me.

A: Okay. Do you remember all seven of their names?

B: The eldest's name is An Soeun. Right now, they live in Paris, France.

A: They live in Paris? Are they male or female?

B: He was a son. And then after him is An Sakeal.

A: An Sakeal.

B: They are in the state of Iowa.

A: In Iowa—are they male or female?

B: Female. And after her is An Saot.

A: An Saot.

B: Male. He died five years ago in Tacoma.

A: In Tacoma.

B: Yes, and after An Saot is me.

A: Okay—you're the fourth.

B: Yes, the fourth. And then I have another sister named An Huon.

A: An Huon.

B: But they called her An Kimhuan.

A: An Kimhuan.

B: Yes. She is female. Today she lives in Montreal, Quebec.

A: Oh is that right? In Canada.

B: Yes, in Canada. [Then, there is another sister, the sixth, named An Kimhean.] The youngest was named An Piset [male] who has passed away. He died in 1977.

A: In '77—okay. Where did he die? In Cambodia?

B: In Cambodia. The Khmer Rouge took him and killed him.

A: Okay, I understand.

B: Yes.

A: Okay. Do you have any fond memories with your siblings or with your parents in Cambodia?

B: I have many memories, especially in the countryside—the forests and mountains, in the farms, finding food to eat from nature. That time was very happy, and there were plenty of animals and fruits—everything was plentiful. Even though we had no machines, we had enough; it was never a problem. It was easy living. And memories of my parents—they worked as farmers, and us kids—we had many memories with them. As I've grown up, I've always remembered those memories, and they have taught me well. They've taught me to be a man of kindness like they were.

A: That's good—you learned after your family's example. Do you have any memories—like, I've heard that in each village there were some people that knew how to weave, or would climb sugar palm trees, or people that had different skills. Did you ever learn a skill or trade from your family?

B: Uh no, we didn't have any. We just worked in the farms and the fields.

A: You worked in the fields and on the farm.

B: And hunting animals, and fishing. That was it.

A: Okay, and so you had the life of a farmer.

B: Yes.

A: Okay, that sounds happy. And was it mostly your dad in the fields, and did your mother help him, or did she mostly work at home?

B: Uh, they would help each other, with the work that needed to be done. Sometimes my father would help with my mother's work, and sometimes my mother would help with my father's work. They helped each other out.

A: Great. Okay, I'd like to ask about your grandparents on both sides of your family. What were their names? Do you remember them? Did you ever meet them?

B: I've met my grandmother. My grandfather I've never met, but I remember their names mostly. And I've done their family history on a website.

A: On FamilySearch right? Or a different site?

B: It was through the Church.

A: And what are their names?

B: On my father's side, my grandpa's name is Grandpa Preum. But I didn't know Grandpa Preum, I can't remember him. But my grandmother's name is Man. They were the parents of my father. We called them Grandpa Preum and Grandma Man. That's all I remember; I

don't know what their last names were. I didn't know any of that at that time. And on my mother's side, his name was Grandpa Sat—Grandpa Sat was the father of my mother. And his wife's name, uh—Grandma Nem! I almost forgot. Grandma Nem.

A: Okay. And do you remember what years they were born?

B: Oh!

A: You don't know? it's been a long time!

B: I can't remember back that far. I can't remember, because they never told us. That generation never told us. What month or year they were born—their parents never even told their children.

A: Okay, I understand. I just want to ask. Okay—I'd also like to ask more about your marriage. You were married, correct? Who were you married to? And what are their names?

B: Yes. I was originally married to a Cambodian in a village very remote from my house, but in the same province. Yes. But she has passed away. We had one child together, that was it.

A: Okay. What was her name?

B: Her name was Prem Saophorn.

A: And what year did she pass away?

B: She died about four or five years later.

A: Okay. And you've had just one wife, or—?

B: Yes, I was separated from her during the Khmer Rouge. In '70, when the war broke out in the country, I decided to stop learning. I had started college, but it hadn't been a full year. After that period of time, they needed soldiers to help protect the nation. I became a soldier from that time onward.

A: You were a soldier under Lon Nol?

B: Under Lon Nol.

A: Lon Nol, okay. And had you already graduated?

B: What?

A: Had you already graduated? From twelfth grade?

B: Yes, I had finished. After I finished, I went to college for half a year.

A: Okay, I understand. How long were you a soldier under Lon Nol?

B: Five years. 1970 to 1975.

A: Then Pol Pot came in—

B: Pol Pot came in and invaded, and I stopped going [left the army].

A: Okay. And where did you serve as a soldier?

B: I was a soldier in Oddar Meanchey, the same area.

A: Oddar Meanchey.

B: That's right.

A: And when Pol Pot came in—I want to ask more about Pol Pot because we've talked about that topic already. When they invaded in '75, were you still in Oddar Meanchey?

B: Yes, that's right.

A: Okay. And did they evacuate you to a different place or did you stay in Oddar Meanchey?

B: At the beginning, when we lost to the Communist Cambodians, I threw my weapons, ammunition, and clothing [uniform] into a river. I threw it all away and put on civilian clothes to blend in with the normal civilians, and I walked back to my village.

A: You didn't want them to know that you were a soldier?

B: I didn't let them know.

A: Okay I understand well. What village did you go to?

B: Yeah. I went back to my hometown.

A: Okay. And when Pol Pot came into power, how old were you?

B: I can't remember. Maybe about twenty-five or twenty-six.

A: In your mid-twenties.

B: Twenty-five or twenty-six, about there.

A: Okay, maybe we can go back to the Khmer Rouge—to the experiences you went through during that era.

B: Okay. At the beginning of it, I was in school. In 1970, I became a soldier. I was a soldier for five years. I don't need to talk about what life was like as a soldier, right? Or do you want me to tell you about that?

A: You can say anything you'd like. If you want to talk about it, that's all right.

B: Okay. Being a soldier was very difficult at that time. We had help from America, like weapons and all that, because we were on the side of freedom—on the side that received help from America. And during those five years, I had a lot of friends, who were soldiers, that died every day. And they were replaced every day. Someone was killed every day, but they were replaced by a new soldier. Each person understood that today we lived, and tomorrow we would die, because there were deaths every day, and nobody knew if they would live or die. We had come to terms with that. We would wake up and see the sunrise, and think, "Oh! I lived! [In English] I survived." Every day we assumed, "Tomorrow, we will die." That was it. There were so many who died. They died in every way imaginable in the war, it was so difficult for Cambodia. In 1975, the Communists invaded too strongly, and we were defeated. It was at that time that I pretended to be a civilian by blending in and walking with the civilians down the road to my hometown where I was born. But I lived there with the Khmer Rouge for two years, until 1977. During the time I lived there, I saw so many people die, from starvation and especially from them being taken and killed. There was one village close to me called Kampong Tuk—

A: Kampong Tuk?

B: Kampong Tuk village. The entire village was taken and murdered—the entire village. They separated the children, the men, and the women, and killed them all. All the people in Kampong Tuk. The soldiers lied to the village and said they were moving to work somewhere else, and then they just killed them all. I had learned very much at that point because I'd been a soldier and a commander. I had overseen 100 soldiers at one point. I didn't dare tell them that I'd been a commander or a teacher, or that I had worked for anything related to the government—I didn't dare tell them. Because I'd seen them take many others, those who had admitted honestly to that, and kill them. So I hid myself so that I could live. During that time, they would ask me, "Do you know how to read?" And I would answer that I didn't. "Do you know how to write?" And I again told them, "No, I don't." I acted like a mentally handicapped person—retarded [in English]—so that they would think I was ignorant and stupid, and they would have no reason to suspect I could resist or threaten them. I ripped my shirt and pants and then sewed them back together so I looked uneducated. I pretended like I didn't know anything—to read, to write, anything. But while I did that, I only acted dumb on the outside, but inside I watched them. Figuring out what they liked to do, studying what their weak points were, so that when they were going to take me to be killed I knew what to do to escape from them. I studied all of them, learning in my mind.

A: You learned by watching them.

B: Yes, I learned to watch. But just like the Americans say, [speaks in English] you act stupid, you act retarded, but you watch them and study them, yeah. And then, you know, to get away from them to kill you. [In Khmer] Yeah. For those two years, I saw many people being taken to be killed—tied from behind and walked in a row behind my house. They were all tied like this [puts his arms to his side]. They were all taken to be killed, and the hoe I kept at the back of my house, they took with them too. When they had killed all of the people, they put the hoe back where they had taken it from. In the morning it was covered in blood. The hoe was still covered in blood. Yeah. At night times, when I was with my wife, we wouldn't dare say anything. We didn't dare to talk! During the nighttime, there were people underneath our house. They waited there to listen and spy on us. If they heard anything bad, they would take us. In the mornings we looked below our house and saw the footprints of the people that waited below our house. We knew after that. We knew. Living with the Khmer Rouge was difficult. It was hell. There was no charity, no religion. There was no help from that. They trained children to kill their parents. They loved little children, but once they were too big, they took them to be trained. Brainwashed. The kids were like white paper that could be colored any color. They colored them red and trained them to kill their own parents. They had those. So at that time, there was no trust—wives didn't trust their husbands, and husbands didn't trust their wives. Children, parents, all of them! They were all afraid of each other. Afraid. They didn't dare say anything bad. They didn't dare say anything at all. It was difficult; that time was extremely difficult. One day in '77, I went to transplant rice seedlings and saw two Khmer Rouge soldiers walking towards me. They asked and wanted me to help repair houses in a village where the storm had been too strong the previous night— [they wanted] me to go help repair them. I wondered, why was it that they needed only one person? Why didn't they need two? I started to go, and they

told me not to go alone, that we would all go together to talk and joke around together on the road. I knew in my mind—I knew. This was the way they took people.

A: Oh!

B: Yes. I said "Okay," and then I told them, "I want to go get some things from my house, at the edge of the forest over there." I didn't speak frightenedly, I just spoke normally so they wouldn't take me. "Go ahead and grab it," they said, "but when you come back we'll walk together back to our village." But when I got there, I escaped. I escaped into the forest.

A: You ran away.

B: I ran away into the jungle. Yes.

A: Wow.

B: And when I escaped, it was about seven days—six days. Six days and I reached the refugee camp in Thailand. And I encountered those who died on the road who had stepped on landmines, there were so many. As we walked, we saw people that they had taken to be killed, we saw their bones along the wayside. But the normal civilians, the normal townspeople, they didn't know. And I used to be a soldier, I had been educated. Before I went from place to place, I would watch for at least two hours in silence. If there was any sign, like a scream or anything like that, I would stop. If not, I traveled a little further, I walked a little bit further. [At one point], there were three small ropes, like rails for walking. You could walk over them. We could walk past them. But before I crossed over, I sat there and waited to see when the [soldiers] crossed. Every two hours they would patrol once. Every two hours. After they had crossed, I ran across immediately. That way when they came back after two hours I would be far away. After that, the second road I came across was a little bit bigger, and we couldn't cross it. So, I sat and waited there. I saw [a soldier] walking, and he walked with a tree branch behind his back to brush the ground so that if anyone crossed the road, you could see their footprints. He was smart! They were walking and didn't even talk to each other. They just walked in silence—it was very impressive! I only heard the sound of their guns going, "click, click, click, click." They didn't say anything, they didn't talk to each other at all. When I went to cross—when I crossed, [I knew that] maybe they would see my tracks. So I walked on the wood, only on the wood, and I got past, I got past that place. But the third [crossing] was massive! It was huge! The third was very large. You couldn't jump over it, there was nothing you could do to get past it. I sat there for two hours or more. I saw them walk towards me, and I decided that I would try some trickery to confuse them. Before they realized I had tricked them I would have gone far away. So, I walked after them—I walked behind them. I faced forward, but I walked backward. Do you understand?

A: Yes, I understand.

B: I walked backward. If he saw my footprints, it would look like I was walking the other way. Yeah. I walked away from that place. If I hadn't done it that way, then they would have seen my footprints, and they might have followed me. And when I crossed the forest and mountains there was nothing to eat. I ate leaves, fresh leaves. I ate those fresh leaves and climbed up the tree to sleep. I climbed up the vines into the top part and tied myself to the tree with a cloth. I couldn't sleep well, it rained until the sun came up. Sleep never came. It

was bitter cold in those mountains. Sleep didn't come easily. I tied myself because I was scared that while I was asleep, I would fall. Six—it took almost six nights until I crossed the Thai border. Once I got into Thailand, I came to a Thai farm. I hadn't eaten anything for a long time, and I saw corn and watermelon. Oh! I was so hungry! I hadn't eaten food in many days, and I was so skinny—I was just skin and bones then.

A: Right.

B: I went in and stole a watermelon to eat. I stole corn to eat, and I ate until I was stuffed. My stomach bulged out and I fell asleep. I completely passed out! [Laughs] I was asleep in someone else's farm! And my stomach was swollen like a balloon. I woke up and said, "Oh! I've been asleep so long. I was too full. I hadn't eaten in so long." I went and showed myself to the farmers. The farmers came out and saw me and pointed their rifles at me. The people there had soldier's rifles. They took me up to their hut and gave me more rice and water. After that, they called the authorities there in Thailand and they took me away. When they took me away, they put me in a dark prison cell. They asked me questions and then threw me in a dark cell. There were no lights, it was pitch black, and it was very small. [I was there for] almost three months. They asked me questions, and I answered that I had been a soldier, all of it. I told them everything, I was honest, and they didn't believe me. They asked, "If you were a soldier, why didn't you leave in '75? What were you doing there?" They suspected me of being a spy for the Khmer Rouge. So they put me in a jail cell for two or three months, in that dark cell. Whenever I went outside—they had a small bucket that I used to relieve myself, and whenever it was full, I had to take it to dump outside. Do you understand? Every time it was full, I took it dump outside. And every time I went outside, whenever the sunlight came on my face, I fainted. I hadn't seen the light in so long, I hadn't seen light. I fell and they lifted me back up and woke me up. It was almost three months, and every time I came out the same thing happened. Then they sent me to a bigger jail, like a prison. The prison held over one thousand people, and they put me in there. And the people who interrogated me, maybe they sent my case to a U.S. ambassador in Bangkok because I told them that I was an American soldier. Maybe it was at the time I was sent to the prison there for a few months. I was there for a few months, I can't remember how long, but it was a decent amount of time. And then I saw an American diplomat—I didn't know if he was American or French, I just saw he had white skin and a sharp nose and was very tall. He came to visit me and asked questions. I thought to myself, "Don't be afraid, they'll help." After they left, a few weeks later, they took me out and put me into the refugee camp at Surin.

A: Surin.

B: Yes.

A: In Thailand?

B: Yes. While I was in the camp in Thailand, I wrote more letters to the American Ambassador in Bangkok, that I wanted to go to a third country [America]. They agreed to let me come to America because they knew that I had been a soldier for America, during that time. I came out of that country and stayed in the Philippines for 3 months. When I left the Philippines, I came to Iowa State.

A: Iowa.

B: Mechanicsville, Iowa—I was there by '80. Oh! I came in '80. That's the year I came, in '80, to America. Just before Mt. St. Helens erupted, that's right. Before that happened— Oh, after! After, because I came in '77, I came—oh that's not right. I came in July. In July. I came two or three months after [the eruption]. At that time, my sponsor was [in English] a housebuilder, he's a builder. He was my sponsor, [in Khmer] and he brought me over to work for him.

A: Yes. In Washington or Iowa?

B: In Iowa State.

A: Iowa. Okay, your sponsor was in Iowa.

B: Yes. At that time, I worked an hour for three dollars and twenty-five cents (\$3.25) then. At that time, stuff was cheap—gas was 80 cents a kilogram then. It wasn't expensive. And I went to school—at night I went to school. During the day I worked, to take care of my family. When I first got there, it was very difficult. I spent a lot of time thinking because I was in a foreign country, and I didn't know their language.

A: Right.

B: I thought a lot. I didn't know their language. When they spoke to me, I didn't know what they were saying. I wanted to speak with them, but I didn't know what to say. So how could I take care of my family? Whenever they took me to work, it was difficult. That time was extremely difficult. It was difficult to live. I stressed over the future of my family. But I tried hard both to learn and work. I learned through the television, through PBS, the kids' programs. I learned to talk—sometimes I walked outside and learned to talk. I learned to write by myself and educated myself while working too. I did that until I worked at another factory, where I made a little more money. That place they called Nissin Corporation Company, and they did sports things.

A: Sports—

B: College sports. That they do at school. Maybe you've heard of it—Nissin, Nissin.

A: Nissin.

B: I did that for a while and made a little money. In '84, I became an American citizen and had a family. I became an American citizen.

A: Yes.

B: After that, in '87, I had my brother who died here [in Washington], and I came to visit with him. I visited him and saw that this place had many forests and trees. There were no fields like in Iowa, there were nothing but fields wherever you were there. Wherever you went there were cows, buffalos, pigs, all that. It was smelly everywhere. When I came here, I saw forests and trees, and I remembered the time when I was young and surrounded by trees. I loved it. I saw that I loved it and came to live here. After I had been here a few years, there were two men—in the beginning of '90, 1990, two fairly handsome men came and knocked on my door. I opened the door and they spoke Khmer like me, so I invited them in! [Laughs] I invited them into my house, and they started to teach me about God. And I became a member. [Laughs]

A: You became a member of our Church!

B: Yes, yes, and I have been ever since. And I got a decent job and saved up. I did that, and now I've been retired for four or five years. Nowadays I'm free.

A: Thank you so much for sharing your experiences so eloquently! Thank you! I have a few more questions I'd like to ask you. During the time of Pol Pot, what kind of work did they make you do?

B: Worked in the fields.

A: You worked in the fields?

B: I was a farmer like normal, yes.

A: Okay. One more—how did you feel when you were in the refugee camp in Thailand?

B: I thought a lot about my family in my hometown. I would think about them and then I would grow homesick. It was very difficult living, but I still remembered and missed the places I grew up in, from when I was a child until I was big. Yes, I missed those places.

A: Yes, I understand. I want to ask another question, about your marriage—where were you married? I haven't caught that yet.

B: The woman I married was my bride in Cambodia.

A: In Cambodia. Before Pol Pot, right?

B: Before. Back when I was a soldier, while I was still a soldier.

A: Oh! That's right. Because you became separated during the time of Pol Pot.

B: Yes. I was still a soldier [back then]. It was before Pol Pot invaded.

A: And then you became separated from her.

B: Yes. When I came to Thailand, I just came by myself. My wife couldn't follow me in time because I had to escape. My wife and child I had to leave there. I didn't dare tell my wife; I didn't have the time! I had to escape.

A: Right.

B: [After that], the Khmer Rouge evacuated her to the Siem Reap area, in Kampong Thkov commune, with our child. She had a second marriage with a Khmer Rouge soldier.

A: Okay.

B: She was married to a member of the Khmer Rouge. When I met her later, I asked her, "Why did you take a husband who was a Khmer Rouge soldier?" She said, "To survive!"

A: To survive.

B: And our child lived. That's what she told me.

A: And where were you reunited with her?

B: We met again at the refugee camp. She came up later, after the Vietnamese came and chased the Khmer Rouge out.

A: Oh okay.

B: She came up after me, after some time. She came to the camp too, and we met again there. It was at that time that she told me, and I asked her the question and she responded. I felt sorry for her, but she did it to survive, and so that our child could live too.

A: Yes—

B: She was the wife of an official, [her husband] was a military chief. And so, he took good care of her and her child. I made her stay in the camp because I wasn't staying in the camp, I was serving on the borders as a soldier once again. I became a soldier again to fight against the Khmer Rouge once more—to go down and fight against the Khmer Rouge, to chase them out again. So, I made my wife stay in the camp. And while I was serving as a soldier to fight the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese, my wife had another husband because there were only men in the camp! There were just men, too many men! And so she got another husband. Yes, another husband.

A: Okay.

B: Yes, and so we separated again, and I knew that she had another husband, so I asked to take her child with me. When I came to America, I took that child with me. I asked her if I could.

A: Okay.

B: She let them come, because uh—she was afraid of me at the time. She was afraid I was going to do something wrong to her. She asked me to go. Yes, and I've had my child with me until the present day.

A: And by the time you came to America, it was just you and your child, right? You both traveled to America together?

B: Yes. When I came to America, I only had my son—and once I had separated from my first wife, I had another wife from Laos. She was a Laotian living in Thailand, and we had two children together.

A: Okay.

B: And I brought them all to America too. I took them all here, and we lived in SIRHA. A few years later we had some problems come up, and we divorced. I took custody of all our children because she didn't— we went to court, and all our kids came with me.

A: Okay, all of them.

B: Yes.

A: And what was her name? Your second wife?

B: Uh, her name was Prom Yan. But her real name from Thailand was Nit Ky Yan Vong.

A: Okay. And she was Thai?

B: She was Laotian but was living in Thailand.

A: Laotian but in Thailand. Okay, I understand.

B: Yes. She lives in Tacoma too.

A: In Tacoma as well—

B: Yes. Because we were living with each other when we separated, we had two children. We divorced because she did too many wrong things. We went to court to settle, and I got all the children! I'm a man but I've taken care of the kids the whole time! [Laughs] Yes.

A: And what are all the names of your kids? Could you list them out for me?

B: Okay—the child I had with my first wife is named An Somalay.

A: An Somalay.

B: Yes, and the child I had with my Laotian wife is named An Chantevy.

A: An Chantevy.

B: Yes, and the other daughter is named An Meana.

A: An Meana.

B: Yes. An Meana. She's in Iowa too.

A: She's in Iowa now?

B: Yes, in Iowa.

A: And your first child was a son or daughter? Sorry, I didn't hear.

B: A boy. My son, yes.

A: Boy. Okay. And do you remember his birthyear?

B: Oh! I can't remember. [Laughs] He's fifty years old or more already.

A: Over 50. Okay, was he born before Pol Pot?

B: He was born in '75, the year Pol Pot invaded.

A: '75. Oh okay, he was born in the year Pol Pot invaded.

B: Yes.

A: Okay, and your second child with your second wife, are they male or female?

B: A girl. Chantevy was born in '79.

A: Okay, and your third was a girl as well?

B: My third was a girl too. She was born in Iowa state.

A: Okay, great. And you've only got those three?

B: Yes, there are only three. But when I separated from [second] wife, I came to live here in Washington. I took all my kids here because I had won custody in the courts. I took care of them, and we lived in an apartment. When I got here, I had another family. I remarried and had a few more kids, three more kids.

A: Three more kids?

B: Yes.

A: Okay, and what are their names?

B: Their name is Ren, but their real name is Pou Sarony.

A: Sarony?

B: Yes.

A: And your second child?

B: Who?

A: You said you had another family, right?

B: Yes, her name was Sarony.

A: Sarony, oh! Was she your wife?

B: My third wife.

A: Your third wife was named—?

B: Sarony.

A: Oh! Okay. I understand better. I'm sorry, I misunderstood you.

B: Yes, Sarony. And we had three kids.

A: Three kids—what are their names?

B: The oldest was named Apilynn. An Apilynn. Yes, she was born in April so I named her Apilynn! And Meana was born in March [Khmer word for March is Minea]. [Laughs]

A: [Laughs] And the third?

B: Uh, after Apilynn is Elizabeth. Elizabeth An.

A: Oh Apilynn. And was she the second or the third?

B: She is the second. Elisabeth is second.

A: Okay, and the third?

B: The third is Joseph.

A: Joseph.

B: Joseph An.

A: Joseph An.

B: Yes. I named him Joseph after our prophet. [Laughs]

A: After you found the church.

B: Yeah. [In English] I like—I want his name after the prophet. [Laughs]

A: Good! Okay, I want to say it again to confirm that I got it right. You've had three wives—

B: Yes, three.

A: With your first wife you had one child. With the second you had two, and with the third, you had three. One, two, three—okay!

B: Yes.

A: Good. Okay, I've got it.

B: And at the time, she made a lot of mistakes and got in trouble with the law. She made a lot of mistakes and so we separated.

A: Your third wife?

B: Yes, we separated. She made a lot of mistakes; she doesn't dare to come back to America, she went back to Cambodia. She was put in jail. She's in Cambodia now, and she hasn't dared to come back. She was an American citizen too.

A: Oh okay.

B: And when we went to court, all her kids came with me too! All of them, the two or three of them. [Laughs] Yes. She's in Cambodia to this day.

A: Okay, she's still in Cambodia nowadays?

B: Yes, in Phnom Penh.

A: Okay. I want to ask, because you've described so much from your experiences from your childhood until the present. I want to ask, what has the hardest time in your life been?

B: I didn't catch that, what did you ask?

A: Oh, I wanted to ask, if you think back to the earliest times, from when you were born until now, what experience has been the hardest?

B: The hardest was living [without] freedom, and everything I wanted to do in Cambodia was the hardest.

A: It was the hardest in Cambodia.

B: Yes.

A: I remember you saying that during the time of Pol Pot, you learned to watch others and learn about them. I want to ask that during those difficult experiences, what did you learn that helped you?

B: Uh, I learned—the things that they did, I took and pondered that. I learned how to solve my own problems, and I took those things and used them to survive.

A: To survive.

B: Yes, to survive, that was how I learned. We didn't act like—it's like the Khmer say, there are no potatoes that come up clean and shiny. But we would do things, like [in English] acting, yeah like that. [In English] You know, but you study and look at them and—study about them, yeah.

A: [In Khmer] And going back to the best experience in your life. I want to ask, what experience or time has been the best in your life?

B: The best experience in my life was when I became a member of the Church of [Jesus Christ] of Latter-day Saints. It was at that time that I learned very much from the scriptures, and I knew much more about leading my family and finding peace in my family. I have

peace in my feelings, in my body, everywhere. I feel very lucky, very fortunate, to have been able to come to America and meet and know about God. I still think every day that I didn't come to America, I didn't come to this place by accident. I didn't come by random chance. I came by God leading me to—like, what they call the promised land.

A: Right!

B: I came— [in English] it's not an accident, [it was] on purpose. God's purpose brought me here. [In Khmer] And when I came, I learned about God, everything about our Church, and especially about the members of our church. I've learned a lot. I've studied about when members of our church had to flee from New York to Utah, they were called pioneers. I [began to] think I was a pioneer too because I left Cambodia too. I think that I'm a Cambodian pioneer. And I also learned about [in English] Lehi's family that fled Jerusalem.

A: Right!

B: Pretty much the same thing, like that, like my life. Yeah, I said, "Oh! I am a pioneer!" [Laughs, continues in Khmer] Yeah, I learned a lot, I know a lot, and I think that I am very lucky, especially because God has blessed me, and has given me happiness the whole time. And I married the best woman, too. My wife is the kindest and most beautiful woman I know. Everything is good about her, my wife now. My wife actually was a member before, but her husband died. Her husband had a heart attack. When he had his heart attack, he had a stroke for how long—uh, [asks his wife] for 10 years or more, right? For ten years she watched and took care of him while he was bed-ridden. They put a tube down to feed him. He couldn't wake or get up. He could open his eyes but that's all. He was like that for ten years before he died. And I met her at Church. I went to church and met her, and we started talking with each other and both decided that we would have a future together. That's how I met her. And she has three or four children as well.

A: And what is her name? Sorry, I haven't met her yet.

C: Me? In America, they call me Lanay.

A: Lanay?

B: That's the name she took when she gained her citizenship, she put the name Lanay. But her Khmer name before was Chhun Leng.

A: Chhun Leng.

B: Chhun Leng, yes.

A: Okay, and she is your fourth wife?

B: My fourth, yes.

A: Okay, and do you have any kids with her?

B: No, I don't.

A: You don't?

B: No, I don't.

A: Okay, you are just married together. What year were you married to her?

B: In 2000.

A: 2000—

B: Yes, in 2000.

A: Okay, so you've been with each other for 22 years! Congratulations!

B: Yes. [Laughs]

A: Good, and you met in Tacoma, right?

B: Yes, in Tacoma at our Church building! [Laughs]

A: Great. And what year did you join the church?

B: Join as a member?

A: Right!

B: I can't remember exactly, possibly in the early '90s.

A: Early '90s?

B: Yes, about the beginning of the '90s. Maybe '89 at the earliest or thereabouts.

A: And do you remember the name of the Elder that baptized you, or do you not remember?

B: Uh, the name of the Elder who taught and baptized me was Elder David Landward.

A: Landward?

B: He lives in Utah.

A: In Utah.

B: And his companion's name was Kaev Tara.

A: Kaev Tara. Oh, was he Cambodian?

B: He was Laotian.

A: Really?

B: Laotian, yes. But when I search him up, I never find anything. I can never find him. He was good! He knew how to converse and how to talk. He baptized a lot of Cambodians, maybe 200 or 300 people. Very many—he was very famous [or well-known].

A: That's a lot! [Laughs] He was the most famous.

B: Yes.

A: Okay, I just have a few small questions to ask. Did you ever have a game or pastime that you enjoyed playing with your family when you were young, or nowadays? This is just a small question I want to add.

B: Uh, we didn't really have any. We just did work in the house with each other, we helped each other do housework. And I know how to play some instruments—I know how to play the tro [traditional Cambodian spike fiddle], look! [Points]

A: Oh, is that right? You know how to play the tro!

B: Yes. [Laughs]

A: Oh, I have a tro at home, but I can't play it! [Laughs] Do you know how to play any other instruments?

B: I only know how to play the tro and the drums.

A: The drums too!

B: I learned—

A: Can you sing?

B: I've always been able to sing, before my voice was very good! [Others laugh] Yes, but now not really, my throat is broken.

A: What do you like to sing?

C: You broke your voice? [Others Laugh]

B: I sang—no! I loved to tend cattle and sing Lakhon Bassak songs [a classical Khmer theater performance with improvisation]. Lakhon Bassak, like the Surin people! Yes, I liked to sing that. I would climb trees and pluck the fruit while singing. While I was climbing trees to get fruit I would sing! It was beautiful, and the older people loved to listen to me. Yes, Lakhon Bassak, back then.

A: Yes, and did you ever like the music stars like Sinn Sisamouth, or was there anyone else you really enjoyed listening to?

B: Like what? Can you say that again?

A: Uh, I wanted to ask if there was a music star or someone you liked to listen to—?

B: Oh! I liked two more than anyone else—just two. Ros Serey Sothea and Sinn Sisamouth were both in my generation. My same generation, maybe a little older than me. But they were singing in the days I was a soldier.

A: Yes.

B: And the very most beautiful voice was Sou Savoeun.

A: Sou Savoeun.

B: Yes, Sou Savoeun. She lives in France now.

A: Yes, great. I remember when you got to Iowa—when you arrived in America and got to Iowa, you said that you studied [at school]. Where did you learn? And was that a difficult experience, or—?

B: Yes, I learned at night. I learned until I received my LE—uh, until my—uh, ED—

A: GED?

B: GED, yes!

A: And you learned English right?

B: Yes! I learned English.

A: Wow!

B: Yeah. I took classes at night. I worked and at night attended school, and on Sunday and Saturday, I tried to watch PBS on television. [Laughs]

A: PBS, like for kids!

B: Right!

A: Okay very good. I've maybe run out of questions. Thank you so much for this great interview!

B: Yes! And I came here to work, in Tacoma, and the last factory I worked at was called General Plastic Company.

A: Oh okay!

B: At the beginning, I worked as a normal production worker. After a while my supervisor was happy with the work I did, he saw that I did good work. And he saw that I had a good mind, that I was smart and wise, and he asked me to go to school. And he paid for my schooling, he asked me to go learn to become a machinist.

A: Really?

B: Yes, I learned to be a machinist, and they paid for my schooling for me, and I went to work for him and became a machinist, yeah.

A: Oh good!

B: I made parts for Boeing, Lockheed Martin, I made the parts for drones too. I did a lot of parts for the government, it was secret.

A: It was secret, whoa!

B: Yeah, it was secret. [In English] Every time you make a part, done, and the blueprint—you got to shred it out, throw it away. You can't leave it around because it was so secret. If someone needs that blueprint, they can go out and print it again. So yeah, it was very secret.

A: Wow!

B: And I have a pin from NASA because I make floor for them. After their explode one time, last time, they—they let us make a floor out of foam, high density foam. Yeah, make a floor for them. And they came to visit us, they gave us each machinists a pin, so I have—

A: That's amazing!

B: And then, uh—every time I wear it people ask, "How did you get that pin?" and I say, "Well, it's a long story." And then I'll tell them, and they'll say, "Wow!" But yeah, I don't know. I'm lucky!

A: That's amazing! [Both resume speaking in Khmer] Okay, and the final question I want to ask relates to anything you want to share with the next generation. I want to ask, "What words of advice do you want to share with the next generation, such as your descendants or people who will listen to your interview later?"

B: Yes. I just want to tell them that in the beginning, when I did not yet know our church, I never thought that my life would be as good as it is today. I want my siblings, nieces and nephews, any friends, or anyone else who hears my voice—I would just ask you to pay attention and understand that there is only one road to find our future and to find happiness in our family, which is to follow our Lord, Jesus Christ. Whenever you see a missionary walking the streets, I invite you to call them over and allow them to come to your house so that they can teach the gospel to you. It will be good for us [then], and we will find success at that time. And we will have good luck and be able to return to God when we leave this mortal life. That's all.

A: Okay, thank you so much for describing so clearly and sharing your experiences. I'm very happy, and it has encouraged me too.

B: Yes, of course.

A: Well, for us, what we will do after we complete this audio recording of the interview, is to give you a copy of it so that you can listen. If there is anything you want to add or remove, you can tell us, and we will after we upload it to our website.

B: Yes.

A: I will send a link to the website to you later so that you can go back and listen. So that's the end, thank you very much!

B: Yes, thank you for coming and visiting my home!

Samath An's interview has been made accessible through the collaborative efforts of multiple individuals. Initially conducted and transcribed by Thomas Barrett, the interview was translated by Devon Crane, Klora Thueson, Sam Peterson, and Kylee Groves—the latter three of which were personal friends of Samath An. We express gratitude to all of them for making this translation possible!