

Several pages of the original transcription of the Testimony of Samphoun Em have been corrected. They were corrected on 3/14/02 by Beatriz Menanteau, at the University of Minnesota Law School. The corrected pages are the following: 4; 9; 17; 18. Testimony of Samphoun Em, on July 31, 1992, at the Cable Access Studio, Saint Paul, Minnesota. The testimony of Samphoun Em was interpreted by Chantha Koy. The examination was conducted by Ms. Paula Richey.

MS. RICHEY: Today is Friday, July 31, 1992, and my name is Paula Richey. I'm a volunteer attorney interviewer with the Khmer Archives Project. That project is sponsored by the Minnesota Lawyers International Human Rights Committee. Today I'm going to be interviewing our narrator, Mr. Samphoun Em. He's on my extreme left here, and our interpreter today is Mr. Chantha Koy. We are located at the Cable Access Studio in Saint Paul, Minnesota.

EXAMINATION BY MS. RICHEY:

PR: Mr. Em, do you have any family members that are still in Cambodia or in other places in southeast Asia?

SE: Yes, I have a lot of family in Cambodia.

PR: Could you tell us who you have back there?

SE: My sister, my younger brother, and my aunt.

PR: And where are they located? Are they in Cambodia?

SE: Yes, they live in Cambodia.

PR: What province are they in?

SE: In Battambang Province.

PR: And where is your home? Where was your home when you were a child in Cambodia?

SE: When I was young I used to live in Thmorkol Village, section Tameurn, Province of Battambang.

PR: What is your ethnic origin? What people do you belong to?

SE: Khmer.

PR: Well, in April of 1975 when the Khmer Rouge took over power in Cambodia, where were you living then?

SE: I was evacuated from my village to go far away.

PR: Okay. But what village was he in in 1975?

SE: Wealtrear Village. It's in Battambang Province.

PR: How old were you in 1975?

SE: I was 19 years old at that time.

PR: Were you working then or were you a student then?

SE: Are you asking me before the Khmer Rouge or after the Khmer Rouge?

PR: At that time, in 1975 when the Khmer Rouge came in power.

SE: I was a student at our high school, Thmorkol High School.

PR: And who were the people in your family at that time? Who did he live with then?

SE: I lived together with my family, my parent and six together sibling. All six together.

PR: When the Khmer Rouge came into power in April of 1975 what happened at the very beginning of that period? What happened to his family? What did the Khmer Rouge do to his family?

SE: The first things they did to my family was evacuate us out from the village, to get out from the village.

PR: Okay. Where did they take them?

SE: They didn't take us. They forced us to live, which means just live there, wherever you can go.

PR: They didn't send him to a particular place then?

SE: No, except to use what destination we can go.

PR: Okay. Did the Khmer Rouge make Mr. Em do any kind of work?

SE: When we was away from our village and we settle in another village, and we was forced to - - separated. For the single people we have been forced to separate from our parent to work in what they call the Korngchalat which means a small youth group.

PR: Were any of his brothers and sisters with him in the youth group?

SE: My sister living in the youth group with me.

PR: Okay. Let me back up for just a minute. When the Khmer Rouge initially sent his family out of their home village, how did they survive out in the countryside?

SE: During the escape, evacuation, yes, we carried some rice with us to find the right place to settle. When we find a place to settle so we form - - well, of course there was a form called a union, a kind of co-op.

PR: Did the Khmer Rouge organize the union or the co-op?

SE: Yes, the Khmer Rouge the one who create that co-op, and they have the leader of the co-op, yeah, assigned by the Khmer Rouge.

PR: I'm sorry. Go ahead. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt. How far away from his home village was the village where the co-op was run? How far away from his original home village.

SE: About 50 kilometer from my original village.

PR: Now, let me reorient you to the place where you were working in a work camp or a work group. He said it was for single people. Was it for all young people, old people, all different ages or just young people?

SE: The group is from 16 to 32 years old. Single people from 16 to 32.

PR: Were they both men –

(Interruption.)

Were there all men in this group or men and women together?

SE: Mix of mens and women.

PR: What kind of work was done by the work team, I'll call it?

SE: The Khmer Rouge classified Kromchapat a working group, as a special strong force, a working force, and they forced to work hard. For example, to build a darn, working on the farm, working at night. Any hard work that they want us to do. That is a special working force.

PR: And the women and the men both did the same kind of work?

SE: Yes.

PR: You said that you were separated from your family. Did you ever get to see your family? Were you allowed to go home to visit or not?

SE: About once a month, sometime once a month I can, yeah, try to get out. They don't allow, but I have to run away to see my family which means illegal to do that.

PR: How many times did he do that? In your work team group you had a sister and a brother, is that correct, Mr. Em?

SE: Yes.

PR: How old was the sister and how old was the brother when they started the work?

SE: My sister was 22 years old. My brother was 16 years old.

PR: You were telling us about the kind of work you did. Tell us about the hours of work. That is, when did you start in the morning and when did you finish, and how much time, how many times during the day did you get to rest?

SE: I worked from 7 o'clock in the morning until 12 o'clock at night. 12 p.m. Sorry. From seven to 12 noon. Rest for lunch. From one to five, and sometime we have to work at night, too.

PR: When he ran away to visit his family, which he said was illegal, did his brother or his sister go with him?

SE: Usually myself.

PR: Now, you said you built a dam. Could you describe what the work was like building the dam? What exactly did you do when you were building the dam?

SE: In the chalat group a working team they divided into a small team. One team is ten people in that team. The dam that we was forced to build was in the Battambang Province, in the Section of Kampingpouy. The dam was -- the size of the dam we was forced to build, to work on the dam. It's about four kilometers square, and most of the working team are from the Battambang Province, the people from Battambang Province.

PR: But what I want to know is what was the actual work? What did they actually physically do to build the dam?

SE: Yes. Each team was assigned like a five meter cubic area to work with, and we work with hand with the tool, and try to get all the dirt and to build the dam with the five meters square.

PR: So they carried the dirt, carried dirt to the place?

SE: Yes, yeah.

PR: What were the general conditions? Let's start with the food that they were fed in this work team. What kind of food were they fed, and how much of it were they fed?

SE: At first it looked like okay. The food they provided seemed to be okay, enough to eat, but later on the food had been cut because they said our camp doesn't have enough food to provide so they cut step by step, yeah, little by little.

PR: Tell me who Anka is.

SE: All I know of Anka is it's a government, the province committee, the section committee people.

PR: This committee and these people were Khmer Rouge?

SE: Yes.

PR: So when he says Anka he's referring to the Khmer Rouge power, the structure?

SE: Yes.

PR: And getting back to the food. Anka said that they didn't have enough food to continue to feed them properly, is that correct?

SE: Yes. We was told that Anka doesn't have enough food for us.

PR: At the worst times what was their ration per day? How much did they eat per day?

SE: First we have two time a day. Yeah, first we have rice which is a solid, steam rice, which is okay, yeah.

PR: How much was there? How much rice?

SE: They gave us three can of rice, not cook, uncooked rice, three can of milk, milk can. Three can per day for one person.

PR: Was this at the beginning?

SE: Yes.

PR: And then when the conditions worsened and there wasn't enough food, how far down did the food supply go? How much was he given to eat when the food supply was dried up?

SE: When they say okay, Anka don't have enough food, and then they gave us one can of milk and cooked rice for one person for one day, so we could not cook - - we could not make steam rice anymore. We have to make kind of soup rice, a watery, a lot more water.

PR: Were they expected to work the same amount of hours on that reduced ration of food? Did they have to work the same amount of time?

SE: Yeah, yes. We still were forced to work at the same amount of work even though there was not enough food. If you don't do then we no longer have the rice to eat.

PR: During the time that he was on this work team did he become ill?

SE: No.

PR: Did his brother or sister become ill?

SE: I didn't really get sick, but because there is not enough food to eat, and so we don't have any energy to work.

PR: What did the leaders of the work team do when he wasn't able to work?

SE: They forced us they keep forcing us to work hard. If we resist not to go to work, if we stay at the place, at the co-op place, and don't go to work, we will not get the same amount of rice to eat as the people who go to work.

PR: Okay. Did he ever try to do anything to supplement the food? Did he ever try to get food on his own, something to eat on his own?

SE: Yes. During the working hour we tried to get some supplements, vegetable, crab in the field, farm field and so on to eat.

PR: Did he ever go out into the forest and try to find food there?

SE: No.

PR: Did he ever go hunting?

SE: No. There is no animals to hunt.

PR: There were no animals to hunt?

SE: I don't think any animal we can hunt.

PR: Was he ever punished by the leaders of the work team?

SE: No, I never been punished by them, but I saw people have been punished, but my brother has been punished by them.

PR: How was his brother punished?

SE: There was a wintertime my brother was sitting in front of the fire, and that day my brother took the rice from the field. It's ready to harvest, picked it up from the field and kind of put it in the fire so to make it like burst like a popcorn and eat. That way we can eat. That's a supplement, and by that time he was called by the group leader to go to work. Usually before they go to the dam they used to whistle to get people together and lined up, so he was late to go to the line because he was busy eating that rice. So when the leader saw he was cooking those rice he was beaten. My brother was beaten by that leader. They used kind of a stick that is used for animal, for bull.

PR: How long did they beat him?

SE: I don't know how much time he was beaten, but I know that time I tried to get into the line, so I know that he had been beaten very badly, and it's kind of long.

PR: Was his brother able to work after the beating?

SE: Yeah. He was forced to work. He got to work.

PR: Where was he beaten? What part of his body?

SE: All over the back, the body.

PR: Ask Mr. Em what was the hardest part of what happened to him when he was under the control of the Khmer Rouge. What is the very worst thing about his experience?

SE: I want to rest, take a rest.

(Recess taken.)

BY MS. RICHEY:

Mr. Em, I was asking you what was the worst part about your experience under the control of the Khmer Rouge. Can you tell me, you know, if you think back to that time, what was the hardest part for you?

SE: The worst part is that I was separated from the family, forced to work hard without medication, without enough food to eat.

PR: What did he need medication for?

SE: For common cold, for common sickness.

PR: What happened to Mr. Em's father in 1978?

SE: In 1978 the people in the village, it's just the condition is just as bad as the people in the working team group, they don't have enough food to eat. I know my parent was so

skinny, and in that co-op they don't have enough food to provide for them to eat so they were so skinny. Because of not enough food to eat, so he tried to find some supplement food to eat by climbing the coconut tree, and he fell down from coconut tree.

PR: And what happened to him? We can stop if he wants to stop.

SE: Yes.

PR: Okay. We will stop for a minute.

SE: He died.

PR: Mr. Em, did you ever try to get coconuts to eat?

SE: Yes.

PR: The way your father did?

SE: Yes.

PR: And what happened to you when you tried to do that?

SE: I fell down, too.

PR: He fell out of the tree?

SE: Yes, fell out the tree.

PR: Do you have any effects from that fall that are with you still today?

SE: Yes.

PR: And what are those?

SE: I have asthma.

PR: As a result of the fall?

SE: Yes. And I have a broken rib on the right side.

PR: Could you tell me, Mr. Em, what happened to your sister, the sister who had a baby during the period of the Khmer Rouge control? Did something happen to your sister or to her baby?

SE: That sister was the oldest, my older sister. Yeah, they married before the Khmer Rouge took over. She had the baby during the starvation, during the Khmer Rouge

regime. Because of the starvation she doesn't have enough milk for the baby, so she had to cook rice which is cook it real -- overcook it to make the rice so soft so it can feed the baby, and the baby was eight months, and when she was cooking that rice soup for the baby and she stand up and she collapsed and she died.

PR: Mr. Em, what year did you leave Cambodia?

SE: I left Cambodia in 1982.

PR: And when you left Cambodia where did you go first?

SE: I came to the camp in the border.

PR: What was the name of that camp?

SE: Rithysen camp. The Thai language call Mount Summit Camp.

PR: What were the conditions in that camp?

SE: We live under we got some food from the UN, distributor from the UN, but very small, so we have to have some money to buy some outside food.

PR: And were they able to get outside food?

SE: Yeah. The Thai people smuggle all of those food to sell in the border.

PR: And what did they live in? What kind of housing did they have?

SE: We live like -- it would be like a pen or we build a shelter from the leave of the tree. It's not a house. It's a shelter made up from the tree like a pen.

PR: Did they sleep on the ground or did they sleep on cots?

SE: Yeah. We sleep right on the ground with a plastic mat.

PR: How long were they in that camp?

SE: About two years from '82 to '84 when the Vietnamese invaded the camp.

(Interruption.)

BY MS. RICHEY:

PR: Mr. Em, I'm sorry. I want to back up just a, little bit in time. I wanted to ask you how you escaped from the Khmer Rouge. How did you get out from underneath the control of the Khmer Rouge, and when did that happen?

SE: No, I did not escape from the Khmer Rouge. The Khmer Rouge was in -- Cambodia was invaded by the Vietnamese, so when the Vietnamese took over Cambodia, at that time we returned back to our original village.

PR: That would have been in 1979?

SE: Yes.

PR: And so you returned to your original village?

SE: Yes.

PR: Were the Khmer Rouge still in control of that village?

SE: No. At that time that place was controlled by the Heng Samrin Government and the Vietnamese government.

PR: Okay. Then what prompted him to leave Cambodia in 1982? Why did he leave in 1982?

The bad thing, the worst thing for me, even though it's during the Heng Samrin regime, is that we still don't have enough medication, and, of course, it's very bad for me because I have that asthma and I need medication for that type of disease, sickness, and they don't have it in the country, and I was told that in the border camp there is European people over there, that they have medication for me.

PR: When you go to Mount Summit Camp did they have medication for him?

SE: In Nong Summit Camp, yes, there is some medication provided by the French or European people, and the medication is also available through the black market, the Thai people smuggled out from Thailand to sell in the camp.

PR: Now, I want to take him forward in time again. Sorry to jump around like this. When did you leave Mount Summit Camp?

SE: We was kind of run away or escaped again during 1984 because of the Vietnamese invasion to Mount Summit Camp, so we have to run away from that camp.

PR: Where did you go?

SE: I went to one camp called Red Hill inside Thailand. It's just a temporary place for one month, and then we was transported by the UN to Bangphoo Camp and the number of that camp is called site seven. It's close to Khao I Dang. Next to Khao I Dang.

PR: Did this happen in 1984, 1985?

SE: Yes. The Vietnam invasion to the Nong Summit Camp was about late 1984, December, so when I was inside Thailand, so it was 1985.

PR: Did he eventually go to site two?

SE: After six months in site seven I was transported to site two.

PR: Was any of his family with him at this point when he got to site two?

SE: Yes. I had my wife and my child.

PR: But none of his brothers or sisters?

SE: No.

PR: When did he get separated from his mother and his sisters and brother?

SE: About 1982. Let's go back a little bit. When Viet Nam took over Cambodia in '79 and we all together, we reunited and living together in a family. My father dead and my mom died in 1981, and '82 the living condition was very bad so I escaped.

PR: With his wife and his son?

SE: Yes.

PR: How did you end up in saint Paul, Minnesota?

SE: I can get here through what they call Human Parole or something like that.

PR: Humanitarian?

SE: Humanitarian. Humanitarian, yes.

PR: Was the Humanitarian Parole based upon his medical condition?

SE: Yes, yeah, because of the medical condition.

PR: How do you like life in Saint Paul, Minnesota?

SE: It's a little bit cold for me, for asthma, but I have a chance to go to school and I have medication. The most important thing that I need is medication.

PR: What kind of schooling is he having?

SE: I'm going to Central High School.

PR: Just the last question. Mr. Em, how do you feel about the situation in Cambodia? Do you think that the situation in Cambodia is hopeful, or what are your thoughts about it?

SE: Only 40 percent of hope that I -- of only 40 percent that I hope that Cambodia can get peace because of the Khmer Rouge, and the Khmer Rouge is still a very strong force and the killing is still continuing.

PR: I want to thank you very much, Mr. Em, for being part of the Khmer Archives Project.

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