

TESTIMONY OF SOVA NIEV, on July 30, 1992, at the Cable Access Studio, St. Paul, Minnesota. The testimony of Sova Niev was interpreted by Thaly Chhour. The examination was conducted by Mark Frey.

VIDEO OPERATOR: Ok we're rolling. Go ahead, Mark, and give us an introduction.

MARK FREY: Hello my name is Mark Frey. I'm a volunteer lawyer-interviewer for the Khmer Archives Project organized by the Minnesota Lawyers International Human Rights Committee. Today is July 30, 1992. I'm interviewing Sova Niev on my far left with Thaly Chhour as the interpreter. We are located at the Cable Access Studio in St. Paul, Minnesota.

VIDEO OPERATOR: Ok Mark.

MF: Hello, okay. First, I would like to know when you were born. What date were you born? What year?

SOVA NIEV: In Cambodia, I don't celebrate the birthdays so I don't remember the dates and the month, but I remember the year. I was born in 1968, but then I come to Khao I Dang I had to have the dates and the months so I was assigned for on the tenth of October.

MF: Where were you born?

SN: I was born in Takeo Province in Tramkok village.

MF: Where is that province located in Cambodia? What part of Cambodia?

SN: It's not far from the border of Vietnam and Cambodia.

MF: Okay. How many people were in your family before the Khmer Rouge came to power?

SN: My whole family had seven people. Five daughters and two sons and my parents.

MF: Your...the village that you were born and raised in, did you live in that village the whole time? Up to the point the Khmer Rouge took power?

SN: I was there and the Pol Pot exists over there. My father's father told, he came from China. At that time it was communist in China and he came and my father told me that Khmer Rouge become a communist the same as China, communist And then we escaped from there to stay from that place to another place until the Khmer Rouge came in 1975.

INTERPRETER I think we should make it shorter.

MF: What village or town did you go to after the Khmer Rouge came to power?

SN: When the Pol Pot came in, I went to live in Kampong Som city until then they told us to go live in the village.

MF: What village was that?

SN: That village they call O'Nha Hang, near Kampong Som.

MF: What happened when the Khmer Rouge came to power in April of 1975?

SN: I was there and the Pol Pot already exists over there.

MF: Was that a village in existence before the Khmer Rouge came to power, or did the Khmer Rouge create that village?

SN: From what I know, it was there before the Khmer Rouge.

MF: Did the Khmer Rouge physically take you to that village or did you just go there on your own?

SN: Khmer Rouge told us just to keep going, keep moving, until they decided to find place for us to settle.

MF: How many people were living in O'Nha Hang? How many people lived in O'Nha Hang? Once you all got there, how many were there?

SN: In that group, when we got there, it was about fifty groups. Then they divided into small groups.

MF: The Khmer Rouge were in the village as guards or soldiers?

SN: There were some over there and some had to divide our groups.

MF: Were all of the members of your family with you at O'Nha Hang?

SN: The first time I got there, we were together only for about five or six months and then they let me go to the teenager groups.

MF: Was this a teenager group that was in O'Nha Hang? The teenager group that she was in, was that based in O'Nha Hang?

SN: It was in another village, it called O'Tatat. It's about three miles from where she lived.

MF: Now, did you share a living space with this teenage group? There was like one house for all of the teenagers in that group?

SN: They made a shelter for the teenager groups and we just stayed there together and cooked and ate together and we were allowed to come to the village.

MF: You were around seven or eight years old?

SN: At that time, I remember I was seven or eight years old. After that, I don't know how old I was. And the time passed by, I don't know.

MF: While you were there, did you work during the day? Or what would you do during the day?

SN: I was in the teenager group and I was asked to cut kantreang khet and sometimes pick the waste from cows and sometimes I was asked to pick some rice.

MF: How long did you work during the day? What was a typical workday for you?

SN: At that time, we did not have the clock, so we based on when the sun raised, we left. And when the sun went down, kind of dark, a little bit, we come back.

MF: What were the working conditions like?

SN: It was very hard, sometimes it's too hot, sometimes it's rain, it's very chilly. Sometimes we had to go to cut the kantreang khet and there was some wild on the move. It's just like in hell.

MF: How many people belonged in the teenage group? How large was it?

SN: The whole group it was about 300 hundred people and the small group was about twelve people.

MF: How were people treated in terms of...let me rephrase that. Did you personally witness abuse on the part of Khmer Rouge soldiers mistreating people? Did you personally witness that or experience that yourself?

SN: I was witness for some people else, and I also experienced it myself. When I did the job, they even still told me that you did nothing. You want to eat a lot.

MF: Were you ever mistreated by the Khmer Rouge soldiers? Did anything happen to you?

SN: When we worked they would tell us the same thing. That we did it less and we wanted to eat more. Sometimes when I got sick, I got chilly and they still wanted me to go to work. They just let me rest for a little bit and then kept pushing me to go.

MF: Were your other family members living with you at this village or were they at the other village?

SN: Like I said earlier, I never see my family, my sisters, my parents. They were sent to another village, I never got to see them. They were brought into like parent groups, adult groups, and teenager groups.

MF: Were they in the village that was nearby, about three miles?

SN: My sister, she was far from me. It's about seven to eight miles. And my mother was in the village. Sometimes it was far from where she worked and so they decided to let her stay where she worked so she doesn't have to come back to the village.

MF: Can we stop just a moment? Ok.

MF: Now, Sova, you stated that you lived in one village with a teenage group and then there were also other family members who lived in another village. What family members lived in the other village?

SN: The village that I was there, it was called O'Tatat and the village that my mother lived there it's called O'Taheng and my sister was in another place.

MF: Now, what family members lived in O'Nha Hang Where did your mother live?

SN: During the rice season, she went to stay in the rice field. And after that she came back to live in the village called O'Nha Hang.

MF: Was that near the village that you lived in?

SN: That is about three miles from where I lived.

MF: Did you have any brothers or sisters that lived with your mother?

SN: My two brothers, my two younger brothers and my sister lived with my mom. After they all got older they asked them to move to live with where I stayed.

MF: Did you have a chance or opportunity to see your mother and siblings while you were in one village and they were in the other village?

SN: The first time they let the teenager go back to see the parents. After that everybody keep asking and it was too many people want to go back to see their parents so they stopped. And then they start to have some guards. After they had done that, I tried to sneak at night while they were asleep. It was about a year later I got very sick and I kind of missed my mother and thought about how she used to take care of me. And so I just tried to sneak anytime to go back and see her.

MF: How often was that, that you saw her? How many times a week would you go and see her?

SN: Since, I know the way to go back to see her, I go back every night. I walked across the cemetery and the forest.

MF: How long did you do this? Was it a year or two years?

SN: I did this about a year and after that they moved us to a farther place.

MF: You mention that you were sick often. Were you ever hospitalized? Were you ever so sick that you had to be hospitalized?

SN: At one time I was so sick and I could not go back to where I stayed, so I decided to tell my mother to come to tell my leader. The leader was very upset and the leader also made my mom, he wanted to beat my mom when she wanted to bring food to me. After that they took me to the hospital.

MF: How long were you in the hospital?

SN: I was in the hospital about two months and during that time they didn't have any medicine for me.

MF: You were hospitalized in the village that you were living in, or did they send you back to the village that your mom lived in?

SN: In my mom's village.

MF: After you got out of the hospital, did you remain in your mom's village or go back to the one that you were working in?

SN: She says she wants to talk about something that happened in the hospital.

MF: What happened in the hospital?

SN: While I was in the hospital the teenager brought the needle they came to me and if I don't want to have a shot, they don't believe that I was sick. I had a friend who stayed over there too and they gave her a little rice soup and it was not enough and she died.

MF: She was in the hospital?

SN: Yes, she was next to me. They said that when you are sick you wouldn't be able to eat so they give you less.

MF: When you got out of the hospital, did you go back to work?

SN: After I got out I waited and they didn't come to get me to work right away. I didn't have a chance to go back to the village.

MF: Did you see people dying daily?

SN: At that time there were a lot of very sick people and people dying. Two people died each day. They just carried them with no coffin.

MF: Did you find people being beaten or abused or disappearing regularly?

SN: When I was in the hospital they told everybody to get up early in the morning. If somebody didn't get up, they'd beat them to get up.

MF: Where educational seminars held regularly, daily or once a week? Were classes teaching Pol Pot's philosophy held regularly?

SN: The seminars were every evening.

MF: Is there anything that you remember especially well that serves to remind you of that whole experience with Khmer Rouge? That you remember vividly?

SN: During the seminars they told us to answer, that if we did something bad we should say it. If we didn't say it and the third person who knew about it. If the third person knew that you did something bad, you did not tell, they would reprimand.

MF: Overall that whole period while the Khmer Rouge was in power, is there something that you really remember? A memory that really sticks with you?

SN: The first thing I remember is when my parents told me when I went and got chilly and they tried to force me to work. The second thing that I remember was my brother. He had planted some root by himself (a root that he could eat), and he was so hungry, my mother was not at home, and he tried to dig it and eat it and they caught him and they tortured him. After they caught him they told him to hold it up and they told him to run and they rode a bicycle to hit him.

MF: How old was your brother?

SN: At that time my brother was four or five years old. After they chased my brother to where they wanted him to be then they dig the ground and put him half under the ground and they burned the steak and stuff on his body. Then they let him under the sun and they told him if he could get up he could go home. After that, in the evening, my brother couldn't climb up so they let him go home.

MF: He survived all of that?

SN: He had a lot of infections and bruises on his face. When he came home he did not see his mother so he decided to go to find his sister and then on the way there he found some money on the street and he tried to grab it and they saw him and they caught him again. After they caught him they sent him to another person and that person threw him in the water and he swam back and they threw him in again and he swam back. Then they put a brick around his neck and tried to let him swim again. He choked in the water, but they just laughed. That's what he told me. After that my mother went to try to get him and they just laughed at my mother and they pushed her back and forth and laughed. In the end they let him to come with my mother.

MF: You stated that they wrapped a brick around your brother's neck and then eventually released him. What happened? Did he get sick from all of this abuse?

SN: After that he got sick. His body was swollen and his face bruised. My mom when to ask to take him back home, she had to kneel down to ask to take my brother. At that time he was swollen and not that bad, it's about a year and he swelled up really big. He was a small boy but when he swelled up he was really big. His feet were like this big. After he swelled up like that and there were no medicines, he passed away. But my mother passed away before he died.

MF: That was from an illness?

SN: My mother was diarrhea and of some kind of infection on the knee. Before my mother died, she went to work and then she picked up some potatoes and they saw my mother and they just 1 beat her up and they let some kind of ants bite her. During when my mother passed away, I also saw the other people. That they tortured them.

MF: Do you recall a specific incident of people being tortured?

SN: There were a few eggs missing and they just caught the whole family. I wasn't sure who that family was, but they caught the whole family. Then they tied the mother to the roof. When they lost the eggs they did not know who took it, but they blamed it on that family. At first they just beat them up with some kind of stick and then they told that family to say that they did. And that family said that they didn't, so they tied them up. They tied that lady to the roof all day until they took her down. And then she could not move. And I saw another family, she said that the other village gave more food. Then they caught her and they just let her and her family and took off all of their clothes and they beat them all. At that time I remember she was screaming because her voice, she had a good voice. She used to be a translator and then she screamed to her child just, "help me." After they beat them up, then they tied them with the ox cart and the cow just pulled them. And then they just disappeared after that.

MF: The Khmer Rouge lost power in 1979, and following that the Vietnamese came to power. As I understand it, a large number of people fled Cambodia. Some went initially into Vietnam and some went to Thailand. Now as I understand it you went to Vietnam, and then, eventually, you went to Thailand. Where did you go in Thailand?

SN: When I went to Thailand I went by feet and then I went to the old camp and to the new camp and then to Khao I Dang Camp.

MF: How long were you in Khao I Dang?

SN: It's about one year.

MF: Where did you go after Khao I Dang?

SN: After I had the name to come to the United States they sent me to Ruth and then they sent me to Kol Kalang, then I came to Minnesota.

MF: What year did you come to Minnesota?

SN: I came in September, 1982.

MF: You've been here almost ten years now. You've had a chance to adjust a bit to Minnesota, and have seen other people come into Minnesota. What problems or concerns do you have after having been in the United States for ten years, for yourself and also for other Cambodians?

SN: The first time I came, I did not know the language so I just stayed at home. And I did not get out. That was the first time I came. So now I found out there was some Khmer people came and have the same feeling so I decided to help them. I decided to work in the Cambodian community.

MF: What kind of work do you do in the Cambodian community?

SN: Right now I work as an office manager. And after the hours I work with the young people and I teach them.

MF: You are an office manager where?

SN: At the Khmer Association.

MF: If you had the chance to return to Cambodia, would you?

SN: If I have a chance I really want to go, but I just want to go and help, but not to stay.

MF: Do you think you will be returning to Cambodia to visit soon?

SN: I just went in February to visit.

MF: You will be visiting in February of 1993? Oh, you already went? Oh. You returned this past February?

SN: Yes I went in February and then I came back in April.

MF: Did you have a chance to tour the country to see what the conditions were like?

SN: I got to go to Phnom Penh, Kampong Som, and Takeo. From what I saw, they had freedom but there was no support from the government. It's a lot of oppression.

MF: Those are all of the questions I have. Is there anything you would like to add?

SN: Yeah, I came here. I want to let the Khmer people and the American people to know about this situation. I need them to help the Khmer people. And the American people to help the Khmer people. Another thing that I want to see is for the Khmer people to remember what they went through and not to have it happen again.

MF Thank you.

SN: At the end I just want the people who stayed alive to know and the people who died satisfied because I am here to speak out. So the people who stayed alive should find the right way. Find justice for them. Thank you.

MF Thank you.

Khmer Oral History Project
Minnesota Historical Society